Scapegoat

by Maggiemay (Maggiemaynot)

Summary

Seto has lost his focus - his reason to exist - Mokuba. What happens when Jounouchi finds him at his lowest point? Come along and enjoy the ride as Jounouchi takes Seto from despair to love with the help of a large cat, a tiny hummingbird, and of course the beloved Scapegoat!
Chapter 1

Title: Scapegoat
Author: Maggiemay
Muse: Mofaf1 as always
Beta – Jazzy, Barbara, Fluffy, Serena, Sarina, and any number of others.
Rating: NC-17
Warnings: Ah well mentions of suicide and sex – some insanity – oh and uber cuteness.
Spoilers: None that I can think of.
Summary: Seto Kaiba’s first vacation… You knew it would never be normal right? Seto has lost his focus and Jounouchi finds him… Kidnapping, cat-dogs, hummingbirds and… well anyway you’ll see.

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Jounouchi laughed and threw back his head joyously. There was nothing better than the hot sun beating down on him as the breeze whipped through his hair, while he sped down the Pacific Coast Highway in the brand new Lexus LF-A convertible. Powerful and sleek, the red rocket-on-wheels hugged every corner like a lover, the low purr of the engine vibrating in almost carnal pleasure.

He was on top of the world. The Malibu Finals had ended the day before and he’d actually beaten Kaiba- after years of trying he’d defeated Kaiba Seto. It was a banner day for Jounouchi Katsuya. And as icing on the cake he was starting on his annual vacation today. Okay to most people it wasn’t a true vacation, and he liked to call it, his ‘hobo’ getaway, but to Jounouchi it truly was a vacation. There was no time line or set travel plans beyond a starting point and ending point. When he got to the end it was time to pick up his life again. He left his laptop, credit cards and everything but identification and a few hundred dollars in cash at his home. He’d drive until he got tired or hungry, stop and pick up an odd job or two to pay for more gas or food, then move on to his next stop, wherever that may be.

Sure sometimes he was recognized and treated like a celebrity, but when he explained he was on vacation most people were nice enough to leave him be. Of course this annual vacation hadn’t started out as a vacation. Six years ago he’d had a run of bad luck that left him completely broke. Hat in hand, he’d contacted Kaiba Mokuba.

Mokuba had worked some magic and Kaiba Seto had given in to Mokuba’s requests that Jounouchi be allowed to fly home with them – or so the blond had thought. But when he showed up at the airport at the time Mokuba specified, he’d ended up stranded and watching the Kaiba jet fade away in the distance. Instead of calling his friends, he’d simply put his thumb out and hitched a ride.

It had led to a hand-to-mouth existence that lasted for several months - months that had taught Jounouchi about the open, caring, and warm hearted people of America and more importantly about accepting himself. He loved America as much as he loved his native home, Japan. He’d taken a trip every year, and every year he’d learned more and more about his father’s homeland – his new home.

He’d only seen Kaiba at tournaments and dueling events since that time. At first he had been angry at the jerk for leaving him, but later he’d been grateful and he wanted to share that with the tall brunet. During that first meeting, Jounouchi had genuinely thanked Kaiba for leaving him at the airport and smiled warmly, to show no hard feelings.

Kaiba had obviously expected an attack because for just a moment he’d looked shocked, but then
he’d quickly rallied, grunting, “Don’t mention it... ever.”

Of course the blonde hadn’t been able to resist smiling and agreeing “Okay.”

During the duel Kaiba had watched him oddly, as if he didn’t recognize him. Jounouchi, thinking the brunet felt bad about the incident, had started to tell him about the kind trucker who’d stopped to pick him up.

Seto stopped him after a few words, snapping “Shut up and duel. Don’t expect me to give a shit about you or anything you do. I can’t control what Mokuba does, but I won’t let you use him. If I never have to look at your ugly face or hear your braying again I’ll be the happiest man on earth.”

That had startled him, and hurt badly. Despite their bickering he’d always felt a connection between them. It was no surprise that he lost the duel. Since then Jounouchi had taken care that not a single word beyond dueling passed between them. Not even greetings at the obligatory parties or social situations they’d been thrown in together as top duelists. The blond always turned away as if distracted by a call of his name, simply waving his hand vaguely in the CEO’s general direction.

For Jounouchi it was simple. He’d been wrong in thinking that even though he and Kaiba were abrasive and competitive, Kaiba was someone he could count on, a kind of secret friend. During his first vacation he’d learned there was more; had accepted there was more. But, now that he knew Kaiba couldn’t be counted on as any kind of friend much less more; that the man hated him enough to leave him stranded, knowing he didn’t even have soda money after agreeing to take him home, didn’t want to hear how he survived, then he wasn’t going to waste his time and emotions on someone who obviously couldn’t care less if he lived or died.

He’d cut the other man out of his life except as a duelist to beat. The ‘more’ was put away, hidden from sight. The feeling of connection was pushed down and ignored. He wouldn’t waste a moment on more pain. He made the hurtful decision to break away cleanly.

The break was so final that when Mokuba tried to contact him Jounouchi had sent a message via the ‘friend-of-a-friend’ network that he wanted nothing to do with either of them. Mokuba had made several attempts throughout the years that Jounouchi met with a stone wall and the black-haired Kaiba had finally subsided in the last several months. Kaiba Seto was simply a memory and a duelist to defeat. When the ‘more’ haunted him, Jounouchi simply accepted it as the ghost of what could have been.

Shelving the melancholy, he reveled in the knowledge that he had finally defeated Kaiba. It had been easier than expected. He hadn’t even had to use his secret strategy. He was now the second ranked duelist in the world. After years of being third rate, he was moving up. Yugi had better watch his ass.

With another laugh full of happiness, Jounouchi hit the gas and unleashed more of the six hundred ponies sleeping in the engine of his car. Music pounding from the twelve speakers, he roared through the California sun, a streak of red, black and gold.

As the ribbon of road unfurled before him, the sea waves crashing on his left, and the coastal towns flashed past on the right, his laughter faded and he could feel the tension and vague sense of letdown living inside him since he’d defeated Kaiba the day before.

He’d had many fantasies about Kaiba’s reaction to losing to him. They ranged from the tall brunet cursing Jounouchi for being better than him to the other kneeling at his feet in worship of his greatness, and almost everything in between.

What he’d gotten was a cool handshake and empty “Good game.” Then his nemesis had turned and,
with a wave to the roaring crowd, strode calmly off the podium. Jounouchi turned immediately to his friends, laughing and shaking hands. Yugi had mopped the floor with him in the next duel, but that was expected. He was Moutou Yugi.

A gleam in the distance, silvery white, caught his attention. Automatically he slowed his car. The highway was a winding two lane road and he didn’t want to scare anyone who might be out for a slow coastal drive.

But as he drove he saw that the gleam wasn’t moving, and the closer he got the more he could make out. It was a car, a silver-white Volvo sedan. The closer he got the more concerned he became. It was on the road at a dead stop. He was still half a mile from it when he realized it wasn’t in the center of the road, but pulled to the side. In just a few seconds he was able to see that the fender was buried against a guardrail protecting a long sheer drop.

He slowed to a crawl, his breath catching as he took in the details. A blown front tire, nose crumpled into the rail, and what looked like a deployed airbag with bright red droplets on the metallic white material. Someone was hurt. Instinctively the blond pulled to a stop in front of the car. As he climbed out of his car he pulled out his prepaid cell phone and dialed nine-one-one. When the operator answered he said “Hi, I’m up on Pacific Coast Highway mile marker one-nine-three. There is a wrecked car and blood. I think someone’s hurt but...” Jounouchi continued to give details as he scanned the area for the owner of the car – and the blood.

A streak of black on the beach across the highway caught his attention. He followed the moving blur with his eyes for a moment, letting them stop on a figure sitting upright in the sand. Said blur was jumping around the figure seated in the distance. Interrupting the emergency operator’s request for his name he said “I think I see the driver. I’m gonna go check him out. He’s sittin’ in the sand wearin’ a suit. I think he might be hurt.”

Ignoring the cautionary words from the operator he crossed the highway, hopped the guard rail and trotted towards the seated figure. The man didn’t seem to see the black streak that darted around him. “Hey! Hey guy! Is that your car? Are you okay?” He called. His breath faltered and his heartbeat picked up as details of the man’s appearance got clearer with each step he took. Brunet hair, body too skinny, and unnaturally still were all traits of someone he had just been thinking about. The blond recognized his defeated opponent in just a second. “Shit, it’s Kaiba.” Without thinking about it he closed his cell, dropped it into his pocket and ran as fast as he could to reach the still figure.

“Kaiba! Yo! Kaiba...” Worry made his voice harsh.

The brunet turned to look at him with empty eyes. Their barren expression was made more chilling by the blood smeared across his face. “What do you want?”

More worried by the absence of ice, or any other recognizable emotion, than the blood, he continued his forward rush. “Man, you’re hurt. You got blood all over you.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Quiet, stoic, it sent chills racing through Jounouchi. Just because he didn’t talk to Kaiba any more didn’t mean he wanted the man dead.

“Damn man, you must be more hurt than you look, ‘cause you...” He broke off when the black blur – now identified as some kind of small animal, cat, dog, rabbit or something, sniffed at his shoes and squatted on the tips. “Eww... Disgusting thing.” He jumped back hastily to avoid getting pissed on.

“Marking his territory.” A touch of bitterness in the calm voice brought Jou’s eyes back to Seto. Critically he eyed the other man. When all he saw was a superficial cut on his forehead and a bloody nose, he breathed a sigh of relief.
“Shit, you better get up before the... whatever the hell it is... decides to piss on you too.” Jou reached down to help the other man to his feet. Now that he looked at the brunet he could see he appeared physically fine.

“It’s a dog. A black Pomeranian with bloodlines that can be traced for two hundred years.” Seto ignored the offered hand and reached for the animal. “His name is Scapegoat.” In the first show of tenderness Jounouchi had ever seen him make, the brunet stroked the black hairball gently. “He’s five months old.”

“It... He’s yours? You have a pet?” Jou gaped at the brunet in amazement. He couldn’t picture the cold-hearted man with any kind of pet. A guard dog sure, but this little ball of fuzz was far from that. He looked like a black cotton ball with eyes and stubby little feet.

“He was a gift from a friend.” As if that explained everything. And perhaps it did.

“Oh.” Jou knelt beside the brunet and took the handkerchief folded neatly in the pocket of Kaiba’s suit, dabbing at the blood still smeared on the other man’s face. He was shocked when the normally prickly CEO didn’t take it from him or move away. “Yer a mess. I guess the ambulance will clean you up though. Wonder what’s takin’ them.”

“We are about twenty minutes from the nearest emergency services.”

“Yeah? How did you know that?”

“My GPS service informed me after the crash. It’s only been about ten minutes.”

“Oh. Well... uh... I...” Jounouchi was stuck for what else to say. He continued to dab at the blood.

“Don’t strain yourself talking to me. You’ve had nothing to say to me for years. I don’t need your pseudo-concerned platitudes.” If it had been said angrily Jounouchi would have simply left. But again the other man had used a voice empty of all expression.

“Kaiba did you hurt yourself? Maybe hit you head hard? ‘Cause you ain’t talkin’ like yerself.” Jounouchi shifted closer, running his free hand through Seto’s thick silky hair.

“How could you know anything about me? You never bothered to find out.” More emotion this time, a stronger hint of bitterness. But he didn’t pull away, much to the blond’s surprise.

Satisfied that there were no lumps or dents hidden in the brunet locks, he asked “Are you feelin’ okay? I mean...”

He blinked slightly when the other man leaned his head slightly into his touch and laughed. But the sound made his stomach clench and his throat tighten. There was no real humor in the sound. In fact if he hadn’t known it for a laugh he would have thought it a sob. “Kaiba...do you feel...”

Abruptly he was cut off. “Feel... no I don’t feel, okay? That’s the problem. I don’t feel good, bad, okay or anything else. I don’t feel anything at all. I haven’t in so long I’ve begun to doubt I ever did.” If it had been anyone else Jounouchi would have written them off as emo. But Kaiba – the Kaiba he knew – was the least emo person he’d ever known. Dramatic as hell, but no true emotion in it.

“Kaiba...” Jounouchi didn’t know what to say. He was sure that the CEO wasn’t talking about physical pain.

“Tell me...” The brunet hesitated for a moment then whispered softly. “Tell me what it’s like.”
"What's what like Kaiba?" He was confused and growing more alarmed each time the brunet spoke. This was not the Kaiba he knew.

"What's it like to be... happy?"

Jounouchi was completely stunned. What the hell was going on? Was Kaiba doing drugs? "Whaaaat? Kaiba, you're not makin' sense. You... you gotta know happy. You win at stuff all the time, you're a genius, and you own half the world." This wasn’t a joke, but it couldn’t be real either... could it?

"I know success, achievement, and ambition. But... you smiled at me once and you... you radiated something I don't think I've ever felt. I've analyzed it and... it's happiness. So answer me. What's it like to feel that... to feel happy?" The question was almost pathetic sounding and yet it was spoken in such a flat voice it stunned the blond speechless for a few seconds.

Then he said tentatively "Kaiba... happiness ain't something I can tell you about. You gotta feel it on your own. You must have somethin' that makes you happy. What about Mokuba?"

"Once, before time and misunderstanding got in the way, I loved him and he loved me. I cared for him as I would my own child. Some things brought me happiness I’m sure, but all I remember is responsibility and constant fear of losing him, the one thing I loved. Now I feel... resentment and anger. I gave him everything and asked for nothing in return. Then I... a And then he asked for the one thing I ever wanted for myself. I gave it to him of course." The brunet sighed wearily even as his lips twisted in a mockery of a smile. "Never mind Jounouchi-san. The emergency vehicles will be here soon. Please go on your way. I... wish you happiness."

Jou stood from crouched position and shifted as if to leave but something – that 'more' – was eating at him, pushing him to stay. Bending to pet Scapegoat he hid his concern and confusion. Kaiba couldn't have been serious could he? Jounouchi-san? What the fuck was that? He would have sworn to his dying day Kaiba would never address him with an honorific.

"Yeah well, my hobo vacation makes me happy. I just let it all go. I keep my cell for emergencies, a couple hundred in cash, and I just bum my way around the country, earning as I go. No route or nothin'. Just takin' whatever road I like. Nobody to answer to but myself. True freedom. Makes me happier than anything." Jou turned to smile at the brunet, knowing he'd probably make some comment about his lack of plans or set itinerary. But his smile died as he caught a glimpse of yearning in the previously empty blue eyes.

"Sounds wonderful." Was all the Kaiba said. The yearning flickered strongly before being ruthlessly crushed by returning emptiness. Absently Seto patted his puppy as it sniffed at a few scattered drops of blood on his shirt.

Jounouchi was caught by the way Seto reassured the little dog. Yes there’d been tenderness, even affection, but it had been absent, almost mechanical. Like caring for the little pup was a routine, something he didn’t even notice any longer, offering comfort without accepting any in return. It was an odd moment for the blond, one of those seconds when everything became perfectly clear. Jounouchi had learned to take divinely inspired epiphany whenever given.

Kaiba was used to giving comfort and taking care of everything. The company, Mokuba, employee messes, and now a puppy. He did it on autopilot, taking nothing from it. As he’d said he didn’t feel anything... because in order to meet his responsibilities to everyone, he’d had to give all of himself.

Down to his bones Jounouchi knew he was right – and he knew that Kaiba was at the end of his rope. He’d spent so long taking care of everyone and everything else that he didn’t have any more to
give. And he didn’t have anyone to care for him either. If he had, the brunet would not have been alone on the beach with just a dog for company. Compassion and determination lit Jounouchi as he came to a decision. Epiphanies were given for a reason and he wouldn’t doubt this reason. Kaiba needed... needed something he could give.

"It is..." Before he could stop himself he blurted, "Come with me! You’re not hurt and... And you need a vacation. We'll cruise the country together for a while. Maybe you’ll remember how to feel happy."

Slowly, with genuine regret, the brunet head moved from side to side. "I can't..."

"Sure you can..." Not taking no for an answer the blond tugged at him until they were standing face to face. With quick hands he snatched the black fuzz ball from the sand and took off at a trot. "You gotta come get your dog."

Seto proved no match for Jou running on sand. The fact that he was hampered by dress shoes and injuries only made it easier for the fleet-footed blond to have the car purring as the brunet finally dashed across the highway and reach down to snatch the pup off Jou's lap.

When Seto bent over to reach the little black fuzz ball Jou moved Scapegoat to the passenger seat, forcing the brunet to reach across him. Quick as a wink Jou grabbed the off balance man and tugged him into the car and released the brake. In a cloud of black smoke and a blur of red the Lexus let go all six hundred horses.

Jounouchi expected his 'victim' to struggle and put up a fight. Instead the brunet calmly crawled off his lap and slid into the passenger seat, placing the furball carefully on his lap and reached into his jacket pocket for his cell phone.

“I’ll just let them know you will be dropping me off at the next town.” Cool and brisk, Seto didn’t bother to glance at him. If he had he would have seen the look of determination and something like regret flash across Jounouchi’s face before the blonde snatched the phone from his hand and chucked it out of the car. The last they saw of it was it glinting in the sunlight as it tumbled towards the waves.

That didn’t even cause the cool CEO to lift a brow. He simply gripped his collar and twisted the emergency satellite backup. Jounouchi caught his move and recognized the distinctive collar pin as an upgrade to the device he'd seen Seto wear on several occasions – occasions where that device had saved Seto’s ass. Before the brunet could do more than touch it Jounouchi grabbed it and ripped it out of the collar, tearing the expensive white material at the same time.

“What did that prove? When we stop, and we must stop, I will simply call my office.”

Jounouchi sighed and frowned slightly. That was true. He hadn’t thought this out well. He’d always been impulsive, and this was the worst yet. He’d fucking kidnapped Kaiba Seto. Not only was he rich and famous but the guy loathed him. At one time it might have been more but since then he’d made sure Jou knew of his disdain. Damn he hated being stupid. He pulled the car over to the side of the road and turned to face the impassive brunet. In the distance the wail of sirens could be heard.

“Kaiba...” He could curse his stupidity for the rest of his life, but he wasn't going to give up on the epiphany he’d received. He would do his best to work this out. After a second to reflect he tried to placate, only to break off and start again. “Seto... yeah I said Seto, get that look offa your face. We’ve known each other for years. I thought once that we were... well I was wrong but... well look, I know you hate me. You made sure I got it when I saw you after the airport incident – you made it plain you didn’t want me to talk to you ever again – so I didn’t. But damn it...” He broke off and snarled under his breath before continuing on recklessly. “Damn it I care about you. Dunno why but
I do. And to be honest you scared me to death back there on the beach. You... you’re not right. This trip always fixes me up. Come with me... give it a chance. If... If you really want to go home after a week I’ll... I’ll never bother you again.”

“You don’t bother me now.” Seto turned his chillingly empty gaze on the blond. For a second a spark of desperation gleamed in their blue depths. “But I won’t argue.” A humorless smile touched his lips for an instant. “A day? A week? What does it matter? It all ends the same.”

Of everything Kaiba had said that day, that one statement told Jounouchi more than anything else about the other man’s mental state. The Kaiba Seto he knew didn’t believe in fate, would never allow anyone to take charge, and he sure as hell wouldn’t just ‘agree’ to leave Kaiba Corporation and Mokuba. Swallowing hard as the emergency vehicles roared past, he couldn’t help but wonder what they would have found if he hadn’t stopped. Would Kaiba still be sitting quietly on the beach while his puppy danced around him? Or would he be floating in the Pacific Ocean, his soulless eyes forever staring sightlessly into deep blue?

Forcefully shoving the haunting image to the back of his mind he put the car in gear and hit the gas. They had to get away, far away from the temptation of the ocean. Kaiba might change his mind again.

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Matashi looked up from his paperwork as a dark amber light on his desk phone started to flash. With a gasp he stood, grabbing the jacket he’d shed off the back of his chair. As he rounded the corner of his desk at a trot, Aishira burst into his office.

“GPS says airbag deployed. Satellite images are being downloaded. Emergency vehicles are twenty minutes from scene. They’ve already been alerted are en route.”

“Now the hard part. Let’s go tell Mokuba.” Apprehension for their friend made his voice a cool snap.

When they reached Mokuba’s office they found it deserted. A quick investigation told them that the black-haired vice-president had taken the day off and given his staff the day off as well. “Damn it!” Matashi snarled “What a day to take off.”

“He probably thought since Seto wasn’t here he could take a break. He knew we could handle it.” Aishira attempted to calm him down. He opened his cell phone and dialed Mokuba’s number. He huffed a breath and closed it again when it rolled to voicemail. He rushed back to his office and punched up the GPS on Kaiba Mokuba.

“He’s in the park at the roller coaster.” Matashi identified over his shoulder. “We’ll have Security bring him to us...”

Aishira nodded. “We’ll get the information he’ll need while we wait. Not a word though, not to anyone. This is not something strangers should tell him.” He checked the status of the download. “Download’s at eighty-seven percent. We’ll know more in about a minute.

It was the longest minute either of them had ever lived through. When the download finally completed Aishira loaded it into the viewer. The timeline picked up as of two minutes prior to the warning light set off by the vehicle monitoring system. The slow streaming video showed Seto’s silvery car as a shining speck on a black ribbon. Automatically he zoomed in for a better view. The best he could do though was a grainy, slightly out of focus image from about two hundred yards.

“Fuck! It was at the wrong angle for close up.”
“We can see though. We should be able to tell what happened and if he is all right.” Matashi soothed.

They didn’t have long to wait. The car suddenly veered to the right, heading straight for a guard rail that protected a hilly drop. Even as they caught their breath in fright the car impacted with enough force to make the metal rail ripple like water, but the barrier held and the vehicle stopped. The airbag deployed exactly as advertised, protecting the blurry occupant from hitting the steering wheel.

As one they let out their breaths as the blurry driver sat for a few seconds, obviously gathering his wits before opening the door and stepping out. Something in the car caught his attention and he reached back into the vehicle. They watched as he pulled out a small tan box. They recognized it immediately. Scapegoat’s carrier. Even as Seto released the door and pulled out the black blob they knew was an energetic little pup, they were exchanging relieved looks. Seto was fine. Watching, still caring but a lot less worried they observed Seto crossing the street and climbing over the other guardrail, and stepping onto the small sandy beach. When he was far enough from the road, he set the black blob on the ground and sat down beside it. The download played for another three or four minutes before ending. There was another download in progress. It would take a few minutes.

Mokuba burst into the office in three. “What’s going on? I was...” He broke off with a pained gasp when he saw the amber light flashing. “What the fuck? Seto’s...”

“He had a car accident Mokuba. Not serious. We already have the satellite images. He was fine, sitting on the beach waiting for the emergency vehicles.”

Weak-kneed, Mokuba sank into the nearest chair. “He’s okay?”

“Yes, he...” But another light flashing on his small control board, blue this time cut him off. “His cell...”

“He probably dropped it in the water on accident.” Matashi reassured. “He was fine. We’ll play the download in...” Another gasp, this one more urgent as the emergency satellite beacon lit up all lights, then a single red one winked out. The satellite tracker had been lost.

Matashi was already opening the file while Aishira called the emergency services number. The video was reassuring. The blurry figure that was Kaiba Seto sat still and upright, occasionally moving his arm as the black blob ran around him.

Suddenly, from an angle just out of view another person, someone with light hair, entered the screen, running towards their boss. Tensely they watched the exchange, and the subsequent chase. As Seto left their angle of view Matashi eased back on the zoom. From far above they watched as the light haired person dragged Seto into his car and took off. The satellite continued to focus on the CEO from a distance. Matashi cursed as something tiny, not even discernible except for a metallic flash, flicked out of the car.

“Heir cell phone.” Mokuba snapped. Then horrified “And the link.”

In the next second, the Satellite focused downward, staying on the spot where they knew Seto’s kidnapper had thrown the satellite link device. Quickly he zoomed out, trying to keep the vehicle in sight. But the angle of the satellite changed to fixate and no amount of zooming would show more of the car that had disappeared around a mountainous bend.

“Aishira...” Mokuba’s voice was a thread of rage and fear. “Let them know that Kaiba Seto has been kidnapped.”
Matashi protested “They may not know who he is...”

Aishira hung up the phone slowly. “The police and FBI will be here as soon as possible. And according to the emergency operator the person who called in to report the accident identified Seto before hanging up on her. Also, emergency personnel are on scene. The car is empty and they reported blood in the car. Seto is hurt.”

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Jounouchi glanced at his reluctant passenger every thirty seconds, unsure if he should make conversation or simply drive on. After a few attempts at conversation that netted him no more than a few grunts, the blond gave up.

Flipping on the music again, he tried to lose himself in the freedom of the road. A movement on the seat next to him. The pup was sniffing at the drops of drying blood on Kaiba’s shirt.

Ah Geez. Some caretaker he was. Jounouchi scolded himself. “Yer a mess. I’ll stop at the next station and get somethin’ to clean you up with. You can change into some of my clothes. You have to be roasting in that suit.” All he got for his trouble was a faint shrug.

A few miles up the road Jou pulled into a deliberately quaint, nostalgic gas station. He popped the small trunk and motioned for Seto to hop out. “Bathroom’s are on the outside of the building, follow the signs. Wear whatever you want. There are some sandals and shorts in there. One size fits all so you should be okay. The shirts are cotton size large. I like ‘em roomy so I can move around.” He slid out to go prepay for the gas. “I’ll get a first aid kit and some food. What’cha want?”

A grunt was his answer as his reluctant guest grabbed the bag from the trunk and walked to the side of the building. Jounouchi watched him for a second then smiled slightly. Kaiba wasn’t going to take off. He’d left Scapegoat on the floorboard.

Inside the station Jou glanced around. Typical tourist kitsch. Retro neon decorations and icons from the nineteen fifties decorated a relatively modern gas station. A retro console television played an old black and white show. Along one wall was gallery of pictures of movie stars. All of them were taken right at this station. After a cursory glance Jou moved on.

He did some fast shopping, a first aid kit, wet wipes, sandwiches, macadamia nuts, bottled water, chips, suntan lotion, mosquito repellent, dry puppy chow, a small doggie bowl and on impulse, a small stuffed animal, perfect for a restless puppy to chew on.

Mentally groaning at the extra expenses he brought his purchases to the counter. A kid of about sixteen crouched down beside the counter fiddling with some kind of computer. “Be right with ya.” With a disgusted sigh the boy stood up. “Stupid piece of shit.”

“What?” Jou was used to the rudeness of American kids, but this was a little excessive.

The boy gave an apologetic laugh “Not you man. If you stopped for the bathroom, use the girl’s on the other side. Men’s is gutted for remodel. Some drunk drove through it.” He frowned down at the box at his feet. “This stupid computer. Gramps bought it to run the security cameras. He had to go to the doctor today so I thought I’d hook it up and play Warcraft. The processor’s too slow and not enough memory. Now it won’t talk to the cameras. Gramps is gonna be pissed. He likes to watch people come and go at the pumps. He gets famous actors who stop in all the time. They don’t come inside like they used to because they pay at the pump but he still gets their picture.”

“Ah that sucks. Add thirty in gas will you?” While the boy rang up his purchases Jou considered
asking Seto to help. The techno-genius billionaire could probably have the system up and running in about two minutes. A reflection in the window behind the counter made him think the other man had come in behind him. He turned to explain when he saw that it wasn’t Kaiba himself, instead it was Kaiba’s image on the black and white screen of the console television. Whatever had been playing was preempted by a late breaking news story. The image of Seto was replaced by the scene he’d left just a few minutes before. Except that Seto’s car was surrounded by rescue and emergency vehicles and in the background several uniformed people were poring over both sides of the road.

Stifling a curse he turned to pay the boy. “Thanks.” The teen mumbled as he slid the cash into the drawer and knelt back to the computer.

The blond rushed back to the car, anxious speak to Seto. His passenger had just closed the trunk of the car. For a second Jou almost didn’t recognize him. The uber-cool business look was gone. The brunet locks were slicked back, obviously wet from where Seto had washed the blood from his cut out of his hair. Who knows maybe he’d been hot and needed to soak his head? A green and white striped t-shirt, faded and threadbare, hung loosely on his too thin frame, and a frayed pair of khaki shorts dipped low on his hips, clinging desperately, before skimming down to end about three inches above his knees. Scuffed leather-mesh sandals completed the picture of sartorial disarray. Blinding white skin told it’s own story. Too much fluorescent light and not enough sunshine. If Jou hadn’t known he was Kaiba Seto, he would have assumed the man standing beside his car to be a bum... One who hadn’t had a decent meal in a while.

Then the empty eyes fixed on him, a spark kindling in their depths, as if daring him to comment, and the image shifted from beach bum to Kaiba Seto. “Something?” The brunet asked in a not-quite-neutral tone.

“Nah, I was just thinkin’ you need to call Mokuba.” Jou explained awkwardly, sliding in the car and tossing the bag of supplies into Seto lap, accidentally squishing the puppy that had jumped up onto his master.

A yip, more startled than hurt, and the little black ball of fuzz wriggled out from under the bag and climbed up to perch on Seto’s shoulder.

“Oh, sorry Scapegoat.” Jou gave the dog an apologetic scratch behind the ear. “Seto, the... Damn get that look off your face. Get used to it. I’m calling you Seto. When I’m in the U.S. people call me Joey.” His passenger looked like he’d sooner suck a lemon then call him by that name, but damn it they’d known each other for years, at one time almost been friends, or so he’d thought. He was damned if he was going to call him Kaiba.

When there was no reply Jou dropped his cell phone on top of the bag of supplies and got out to pump the gas. “Call your brother and tell him you are fine and going on a road trip. Tell him you’ll call again in a week. There are only thirty minutes on the phone so be quick about it. Then fix your face while I pump the gas.”

Without a word Seto took the phone and dialed Aishira’s number. Mokuba wasn’t really an option. Things were too strained and he didn’t want to deal with another round of “Seto I want...” Aishira would get the message and he and Matashi would care for the business.

It was answered on the second ring. “Hello?” Ashira’s voice sounded so clear that it was as if he were right next to him.

“Aishira.” Seto didn’t bother with a greeting.

“Seto! Seto where are you?”
“I am fine. I am going on a road trip and will call again in a week.” He repeated mechanically. Without another word he disconnected the call. Dropping the cell into the center console, Seto patted his little Scapegoat with one hand and reached for the first aid kit. Judiciously he applied antiseptic cream to the open cut, and in his first thought of vanity in months, applied a two inch bandage across his nose. Sun exposure always gave him a crop of freckles across his nose. He had hated them for years. Who ever heard of a badass CEO with ‘cute’ freckles?

Shaking off the thought he closed the first aid kit and settled comfortably against the seat and closed his eyes. Scapegoat was a pleasant weight on his shoulder, the sun was pouring down on him, warming him even through his inadequate clothes. And his driver, he refused to think of him as anything else, was blissfully silent, even refraining from playing music. The only sounds he heard were the purr of the powerful engine, the whine of the tires on cement, the call of seabirds and the rhythm of waves crashing to shore. In a very short amount of time he was sound asleep.

Jou glanced over at his passenger. He’d made himself keep both eyes on the road for over half an hour. But it was killing him. Why didn’t Kaiba talk? Why... His thought was derailed when he saw that Kaiba was almost melted into the seat, his head lolling gently with the sway of the road. Dark lashes rested against pink cheeks. He was too pretty for words and Jou reluctantly put his eyes back to the road, only to jerk them back even as he was pulling over. White skin and pink cheeks? Anxiously Jou examined the sleeping brunet. With a sigh of relief he saw that the brunet was only slightly pink. There hadn’t been enough time to get a real burn. With a twinge of regret Jou hit the button to bring the convertible top up. While he was stopped he poured a bowl of water for the pup and gently picked him up off Seto’s shoulder.

The little dog all but dove into the bowl, drinking one full bowl dry and begging for more. Jou filled it again. The pup took a few laps then dunked his face and paws in as if to cool off. “Poor pup, I thought you were panting in Seto’s ear because...” Jou broke off as he realized what he was about to say. He wasn’t going to go there – wasn’t going to admit that he’d always wanted to pant in Seto’s ear. “You ain’t used to being out in the sun any more than he is.” Compassion wrenched his heart for the pair of them.

The pup looked up at him, water dripping from his fur, a comical look of ecstasy on his face. The look faded and pleading sparkled up at Jou. The fluffy, curly tail wagged for a few times. “I know... cold feet and water... you gotta pee.” Jou climbed out of the car and picked the little creature up. After the little dog took care of necessities, they were on their way again.

****

Aishira, Mokuba and Matashi were greeting the police and federal people when Aishira’s phone rang. He automatically reached to silence it, but froze at the unfamiliar exchange. “I don’t know who this is, but...”

“Answer it.” A dark suited agent ordered briskly. “Put it on speaker.”

Aishira nodded and hit both buttons simultaneously. “Hello?” His knees went weak and he would have fallen if Matashi hadn’t caught him, when Seto’s voice came over clearly.

“Aishira?” He sounded so close Aishira couldn’t help blurting “Seto! Seto where are you?”

His question was ignored though. Cool and unemotional, tones they had heard too often lately, Seto clipped “I am fine. I am going on a road trip and will call again in a week.” The call ended. Time elapsed seven seconds.

“Call him back!” Mokuba yelped, reaching for the phone.
Aishira gave it to him with shaking hands. In just a few seconds the mechanical recording of ‘this number is not in service’ came through the small speaker.

“What? But we just spoke to him.” Matashi shook his head in confusion.

“It’s a prepaid and only makes outgoing. Incoming is a second option, one obviously not turned on.”

“What? But...” Matashi stared down at the phone.

Mokuba interrupted “Wait, but you can trace where he was right? I mean...”

“To the nearest tower. But a seven second transmission... it will take days to get the proper subpoenas for all of the parties involved. And then it will take more time to sift through the hundreds of calls made at those exact second intervals.”

“What about where he bought it.” Mokuba wasn’t ready to let the cell phone angle go. There had to be a way to talk to his brother.

“We can trace the number to the company who bought it, then trace it to the phone and where it was purchased, if it was purchased and not stolen. And we will do that if necessary, however...” The agent paused for a moment, glancing at his partner. “I don’t think it’s necessary at this point. Seto Kaiba definitely called, he said he was alright and that he’d call in a week. He said he was going on a road trip.”

“My brother wouldn’t just take off like that.” Mokuba argued fiercely. “Besides we saw him get dragged into a car. It’s in the satellite images. We can show you...”

The officers and agents glanced at each other then the agent who’d spoken earlier nodded. “All right. Let’s view the images.” His tone made it obvious he was humoring Mokuba.

Aishira, after a fuming glance at the agent, led them to his office. “Seto Kaiba would never just leave for a ‘road trip.’” He snapped. “He has never taken a single unscheduled day off. He is never without his satellite locator. He didn’t choose to do so now. The images show his phone and locator being tossed away by whoever has kidnapped him. He was forced to say that.” He’d begun the playback as he railed at the official idiots.

As they watched the playback they had to agree. It certainly looked like the billionaire CEO may have been snatched. Agent Green sighed and took out his recorder. “We will need a copy of these downloads, and we need to take statements.”

Calmer, the three executives nodded. Matashi sighed and asked “What do you need to know?”

“Everything. Based on the nine-one-one recording, the person who is with your brother called in to report an accident, then when discovering that the victim was your brother, ended all communication. Do you recognize the person on the satellite pictures?”

Mokuba gave the man an incredulous look. “I can’t even tell if it’s a man. The images are black and white and grainy. This satellite dates back to my father’s time. When we stopped making weapons your country refused to let us update the satellite we have in orbit here.”

“The person is obviously male by his voice on the nine-one-one recording, also his carriage as he walks is masculine.” One of the officers pointed out.

“And someone who is familiar enough with your brother to recognize him at a distance.” Another agent pointed out as he continued to pore over the satellite images.
“My brother is internationally famous. He...”

“Knows him. Your brother knows him.” The only female in the room interrupted.

“What? Wh...”

“I am Special Agent Clark. I am a psychologist. I specialize in kidnaping and murder cases. My role is to support the family and uncover information that will aid in the successful return of the hostage, or the recovery of remains.” She said it bluntly, hoping to shock the younger Kaiba. There had been something, panic, guilt, something in the way the boy reacted. She just wasn’t sure what it was.

“Remains...?” Mokuba turned chalk white and sank slowly to a chair. “N... no... Seto...”

There were a few moments while Matashi and Aishira fluttered around Mokuba, trying to reassure him, all the while sending hate-filled glances at Agent Clark. She ignored them all and focused on the images, playing each part through two and three times.

When Mokuba focused on her with dark, desperate eyes, she reiterated. “Your brother knows him.” Before anyone could deny the assertion she started reciting her proof. “Not only does the suspect identify him at a distance where recognition would be very difficult if he was not familiar with your brother, your brother’s shoulders tense. It is hard to see, but I think he clenches his hands too. A stranger wouldn’t evoke that reaction.”

“So you’re saying whoever took Seto is someone my brother doesn’t like?” Mokuba didn’t see it, at least not clearly, but she was right there was something in the way Seto held himself.

“But...” She corrected as she forwarded the images slightly. “He is annoyed or angry with him but... well see how our mystery man kneels down and touches him? It’s familiar. Strangers wouldn’t do that. And it would be instinctive for your brother to move away from this person if it was someone he disliked or didn’t know. Instead he is passive, accepting the touch.”

“Not at all.” She continued to study the replay frame by frame. “See how, when the assailant touches him, examining his head for injuries would be my guess, his shoulders relax slightly and shift forward. He was enjoying that touch. When the other moved away he went rigid again.”

“I don’t see it.” Mokuba growled. “The picture is too bad. How could you possibly...”

“Not at all. But watch.” She replayed the small segment. “See how, when the assailant touches him, examining his head for injuries would be my guess, his shoulders relax slightly and shift forward. He was enjoying that touch. When the other moved away he went rigid again.”

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“You are paying attention to the blur that is your brother. Pay attention to the shadows on the sand. Light and shadow do not lie or confuse. I use the shadows on the sand as a measure of movement.”

Matashi studied the images closely, his eyes narrowing with concentration. The third time she ran through the sequence she saw it. “You’re right. Seto is very reserved and guarded of his personal
space. He does not allow strangers to touch him. But I see what you mean. And he does seem to shift
towards the touch. Also, the casual way the other man reaches out - it’s as if he knows of the
boundaries and doesn’t care. He is too concerned.”

“That’s bull shit! Matashi you’re seeing stuff not there. My brother has been kidnapped and you are
trying to tell me he met up with an old friend? A boyfriend? What are the odds of that?” Mokuba
saw what they were talking about, but it was impossible. There was no way. They were chasing
shadows. Seto had nobody he’d be that relaxed around. If he did Mokuba would know it.

Aishira sighed, he just couldn’t see what Matashi saw. “Minimal. It is a good theory but Seto’s taste
in men and women has never ran to blondes. He’s never been interested in anyone with light colored
hair. All of his previous involvements were Asian with black hair.”

“Hair colors can be changed.” Agent Clark shrugged, but observed Mokuba carefully. There was
something stricken, as if that statement hurt some part of him. “Do you know something different?”

Mokuba shifted and looked away. “N... no. I just... I don’t... I don’t know...” There had been a
blond, one they both wanted and neither had gotten. But Jounouchi had written them both out of his
life, refusing all contact. That particular blond wouldn't stop to help Seto ever.

“All right, so, Agent Clark, do you think Seto Kaiba has been kidnapped?” this from the team leader.

“Honestly I don’t know. It could go either way. The tape shows Kaiba shaking his head, denying the
other man something, and then the other man hauling him up, snatching the dog, and taking off.
Kaiba was in clear pursuit and was yanked into the vehicle without his permission. But was it
something playful between friends? I can’t tell. At this point I’d call it a suspicious disappearance and
put out bulletins asking for Mr. Kaiba to call home and clear up the misunderstanding.”

“Good enough.” The older agent nodded and turned to go.

“Wait, you’re not going to do anything?” Mokuba wailed.

“Of course we are. We are putting out bulletins and news casts.” The officer said patiently.

“You have it wrong. There is no way my brother would just take off like this. No way he’d ever...”
Tears were welling as anger and denial contorted his face. “I can prove it. He’d never, ever just leave
me or the company for more than a weekend. He never has.”

“Never?” that caught the psychologist’s attention.

“Never. He’s never taken vacation; he works six days a week. He... he... is always here. Even when
he goes to duel it’s work. He doesn’t just leave... this is his life! Even his best friends are here, part of
the business. He’s worked at this for over fifteen years. He started when he was twelve. Middle
school, high school, even college, he worked full time after classes.”

The woman felt a shock run through her. Didn’t the young man know what he was saying? “Is this
true? Not an exaggeration or dramatics?” She turned to the two older men. It was apparent that the
words and their impact were sinking in.

Aishira, voice thin with realization whispered “Yes it's true that he’s never taken a vacation and he
worked for years.” He swallowed the lump in his throat and, uncaring of their audience, buried his
face in Matashi’s shoulder. “Seto...”

Matashi wrapped his arm around Aishira and nodded, “Yes. He’s never been interested in anything
beyond the company. It represented security after being orphaned. His long term goal was to to
become the largest entertainment company on earth.”

Showing that she was up on current events the agent nodded “So didn’t he accomplish that with the takeover of Disney?” She let that sink in for a moment then asked gently “Never been interested in anything else? Or never let himself be interested in anything else?” In an abrupt change of attitude she demanded “Let me see his office. If he expected to be back there would be something to show that.”

The room was meticulously tidy. Not a paper was out of place. The pens were perfectly aligned in the drawer. The wood desk gleamed with tidiness. Besides a bookcase, desk and two chairs there was no other furniture in the large room. No plants, sculptures, paintings, or pictures graced the area. “Not big on office decoration?”

“Seto considers it a waste of time and money.” Mokuba explained, wincing slightly. His brother sounded so cold.

“He doesn’t have a computer?” That surprised Agent Clark.

“Of course, it’s built into the desk. He looks down through the glass.” The agent was already at the desk, booting the computer. When the power button only flashed she looked up in question. Matashi hurried around the desk. “It is fingerprint scan protected.” The computer hummed for a moment then the in-desk monitor lit the clear glass top of the desk. Agent Clark, a dedicated techno-geek, couldn’t help but be impressed. She started to compliment Matashi when his expression made her glance down. A document had opened on the desktop. The first page was titled “Kaiba Corporation, Five Year Plan.”

“What’s wrong? Is it abnormal to leave a document open?” Rhetorical question because the man’s expression said everything for him.

“Very abnormal. The security of this computer is such that when it scanned my fingerprints it didn’t boot into Seto’s desktop. It booted into the desktop he designed for me. I’ve never seen this document but the date/time stamp on it is just a few hours before he left for the competition. I’m seeing a document he prepared for me just before he left.” He explained difficulty.

That was interesting, very. “Is it unusual for him to leave a document for you?”

“Not exactly unusual, but not normal. The problem is that we just finished our five year plan about six months ago. We defined projects, goals and our differing roles in the company.”

“I see. Then what disturbs you about this document?” But she was quickly scanning it. It was an easy to follow spreadsheet that laid out each step in the plan, with contingency and backup plans at the ready.

“It...” Matashi shook his head but not soon enough to hide a sheen of dawning panic in his eyes.

“What is it?” This was vital, she just knew it.

In a whisper that seemed to echo around the room Matashi rasped, his voice breaking. “He’s taken himself out of the plan. His duties are.... sp...split between the three of us.”

Mokuba and Aishira gasped. The police and federal officials shifted restlessly. Agent Clark nodded slowly and turned to Mokuba. “Log in to this computer.”

Matashi signed off and Mokuba pushed the button. This desktop was different. A mosaic of Kaibaland parks with a simple banner underneath. “Promises Kept.” Nothing further, no letter, no
document, nothing but that simple statement. Whatever the meaning, Agent Clark knew it was painful. Mokuba Kaiba had flinched as if receiving a great blow. “What does it mean? Mister Kaiba what does it mean?”

“He promised me long ago, when we were at the orphanage, that we’d make the biggest amusement parks in the world and make them free for orphans. This desktop is telling me he kept his promise.” This time it was Mokuba's voice that broke.

“That’s it? There is no letter, no note, nothing? That seems strange to me.” Strange yes, and very telling.

“I...” Mokuba turned his head, burying it in Matashi’s shoulder. “We have been distant for over a year. We... we argued about my girlfriend...Now my fiancé. We announced our engagement four months ago.”

“I see. All right.” She gestured to Aishira. “Log in please.”

Mokuba, after a pained look at the image, shutdown the computer. Aishira placed a trembling finger on the button. The machine booted to a blank screen that loaded a video player. The camera played over a perfectly decorated Christmas tree. Under the tree were dozens of gifts. A beautiful woman, classically dressed in traditional Kimono and made up exquisitely came on screen. “Kaiba Seto! Put that camera down and open your gift!”

“Hnnn...” The deep voice of their victim reverberated around the room. “I like taking pictures and videos.”

“Yeah right.” A man snorted off screen. “You just like to make Peaches uncomfortable. Go open your present.” The voice was Matashi’s.

There was a barely audible sigh, then the camera was placed carefully on a table, left running as a figure crossed to the tree. The officers got their first look at their victim. Tall and slim, with meticulously styled brunet hair and pale elegant features, he would have drawn eyes anywhere. But when coupled with deep, cobalt blue eyes, he was riveting. The finely tailored business suit he wore only enhanced the feeling of fascination.

Matashi’s breath caught as he saw what he’d missed that Christmas morning. Seto looked over all of the gifts, all that they brought for Mokuba, and the one they brought for him. He hadn’t considered it odd at the time, they always splurged and spoiled Mokie, even though he’d chosen to spend the day with his fiancé. There was no disappointment in Seto’s eyes, nothing in his expression at all, except gratitude as he picked up their single gift and opened it slowly, as if savoring the experience.

The gratitude changed in a blink when a tiny ball of fuzz bounced out of the box and straight into his chest. Shock, dismay and something strange, almost like anger, flashed across Seto’s face in that split second, then his face smoothed into a smiling mask as Aishira squealed and clapped happily. “Isn’t he adorable? We thought he’d be perfect for you. He’s only four weeks old but is already weaned. They weaned him early just so we could give him to you today.” Another flash of anger, barely there, then gone. Then Seto was cradling the puppy, smiling tenderly down at the teacup sized animal cradled in his long, elegant hands. “Thank you, he’s beautiful. Perfect. I’ve always wanted a puppy.” More clips followed, Seto and the pup playing in the yard, house training attempts, and the most heart wrenching of all, Seto curled up on his bed, the puppy sleeping across his neck.

“He really loves Scapegoat.” Aishira offered huskily. He was becoming scared for Seto. This was
very odd. He had never considered Seto as lonely or isolated, but looking at the clips he could almost feel the pain and loneliness rolling off his friend. And now this kidnapping. He was snatched, they saw him taken. Yet the paperwork, the document, everything that they’d seen so far said that Seto had been preparing to leave them. He didn’t know what to think but he was worried and hurting for his dear friend. Seeking some kind of support he glanced at his lover, only to see Matashi’s eyes riveted to the screen, the same kind of sick realization dawning in his eyes. Instinctively he turned to Mokuba only to find the young man glaring angrily at the officers.

Mokuba cleared his throat, shame and guilt battling with righteous anger. They were all mixed with fear for his brother. The videos were a revelation too disturbing to deal with right now. “None of this means anything more than he was planning a vacation. We saw him kidnapped. I insist you find him.”

Agent Clark looked at her team leader, nodding slightly. She’d read the situation and had an analysis. “I think it would be more prudent to stick with our original plan of broadcasting that your brother has disappeared and may be disoriented due to an accident. Ask anyone seeing your brother to call in.”

“But...” The three protested as one.

“Until he calls again, or there is a ransom demand, he stated specifically that he was all right and on a road trip. This is the best we can do.” With a curt nod the team leader signaled for everyone to leave.

Outside the building the federal Agent nodded to the local officers. “We will handle this. Thank you for your time.”

“Yeah, tough for us in Florida to investigate in California.”

“Too right. Thank you for coming. We will send a report and keep you updated.” They shook hands cordially and the teams parted ways. As the three federal officers drove away, the team leader glanced over at Agent Clark. “Okay Jillian, I know that look. What the hell is going through your head?” When she opened her mouth to speak he shot her another look. “Keep it simple, don’t psychobabble me.”

“Okay then. Given what I know of our victim - and I know quite a lot as my brother used to be one of the top duelists in the world, went by the name of Bandit Keith before he got his head blown off in a bar fight - Kibou Seto was a miracle child. A true genius in technology and in games. His parents were killed when he was eight. His parent’s family took the inheritance and stuffed him and his brother in an orphanage. He didn’t stay there long. Accounts of this vary, some people say that Kaiba Gozoburo went to the orphanage specifically to find the boy because his achievements were remarkable and highly discussed even then. He adopted them and began molding Kibou Seto into Kaiba Seto, a businessman of unequaled intelligence and power.”

She cleared her throat slightly, “Another version of the story is that Kaiba Gozoburo went to the orphanage as a publicity and good will stunt and the child, Seto, challenged him to a game of chess. If Seto won then Kaiba Gozoburo would adopt him and his brother.”

There was a muffled gasp from her supervisor but she plowed on. “Whatever the truth, Kibou Seto and Kibou Mokuba came to live with Kaiba Gozoburo, taking his name.”

“Why are you telling us this?” He knew his subordinate well, and there had to be a point.

“Because I believe the second story is true. You should remember the file on Kaiba Gozoburo. He never did anything altruistic in his life, but he was a master chess player. If a child defeated him he would have wanted that child in his control. Remember, his own child mysteriously disappeared.
Rumors were rampant that the child didn’t live up to his father’s expectations so he ceased to live.”

“Well fuck.” Her fellow agent grunted.

“Yes. Now, if the second story is true, you see the beginning of a pattern. He promised his brother he would give him the biggest amusement parks in the world. Kaiba Gozoburo was a stepping stone.”

“He was just a kid.”

“A kid with an I.Q. larger than all but maybe two other people on the planet – and he knew it.” She shrugged. “From what we know the boy took to the new environment like a starving man to a feast. In four years he went from a scary smart kid to a terrifying twelve year old who could and did manipulate his adopted father’s board into a coup, getting rid of the old man and stepping into his shoes. There are different stories about what happened. The first is that the old man committed suicide. The second is that the apprentice succeeded the master by right of battle succession – he killed the old man.”

“Shit, do you think he did?”

“I don’t know. It could go either way.” She glanced over at her team leader, “If Seto saw him as a threat to himself or his brother he could have.”

“How the hell do you know all this stuff?” The most junior member of their team burst out.

“Kaiba Corporation has been on the federal watch list since the seventies. When the company took over Disney last year it piqued some interest. I was asked for an assessment.”

“Oh.”

“Could you just cut to the chase Jillian?”

“The chase. All right, based on my observations and studies I believe Kaiba Seto has lost his purpose, his focus. He’d completed his promise to his brother. It was the one thing that he’d ever allowed himself to see. With the promise complete he was without a direction. An intellect like his needs to be channeled. His boredom threshold is lower than a two year old’s. I think he started to go into a depression. The distance from his brother and the lack of understanding from his friends deepened it. Kaiba has always been alone. He’s never seen himself as important except as a way to fulfill that one promise. I think if he didn’t go on vacation, he was planning on committing suicide.”

“But... but he’s rich, good looking, he’s got everything.”

“His office is Spartan saying he has no use for material things. He has no long term relationships, and even friends are kept from his true emotions. Without his focus he feels he has nothing.”

“Well fuck.”

“I don’t believe he was kidnapped. Oh coerced certainly, but I believe our kidnapper may have actually saved his life. I also think this trip will either give him a new purpose or cement his desire to end a life without purpose.”

“Well fuck.”

“I just hope our kidnapper realizes what’s going on.” Jillian mused.

“Why do you say that?” The team leader couldn’t help asking.
“Because of the way Kaiba responded. The tells were visible even on a shitty satellite image. Kaiba responded to the caring the other man gave him. I’m not entirely sure he’d leave that behind if he decided to go. He’s had precious little of it from what I can ascertain.”

“Well fuck.”

“So what do you suggest?” This was her supervisor, asking for a plan.

“Just what I said. Put out a missing persons on him, list him as possibly injured. Anyone seeing him contact the hotline. He will either come home or he won’t, but forcing him before he’s had time to direct that brain of his might just kill him.”

Showing once again his grasp of the English language her boss sighed “Well fuck.”

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A change in rhythm woke Seto from his sound sleep. For a nanosecond he was confused, then the memories came with perfect recall, just as they had every day of his life. He was in a car with Jounouchi Katsuya, driving who knew where. It was dark and they were traveling on a two lane road that seemed buried in a dense wilderness. Unease crawled through him. He was used to the city. The passing landscape reminded him of the nightmare on Pegasus’s island. The too lush forests presssing in on him, his ever present panic and fear for Mokuba, his sense of failure at protecting his brother causing him to see monsters jumping out at him at every corner, real and imagined. He’d never been so frightened in his life as he had at that time. His fear had caused him to lose control and do the one thing he despised above all others. He’d cheated... he’d played a card that even now he cringed from. The Death Card... forcing Moutou Yugi to choose between losing the match or taking his life. The shame of that lived deep inside him today.

Before the uneasy feeling could morph to full blown fear he crushed it ruthlessly. That was over, there was no threat here. He could handle this. As he reassured himself he pushed the memory of that time, his failure, fear, and self-disgust at that failure back into it’s hidden corner. Practically, he reminded himself that he’d agreed to spend a week with the other man and irrational fears would not make him break his word. He was still Kaiba Seto. He didn’t know why he’d agreed except that it had been easier to agree than to fight. It hadn’t really mattered and now he’d given his word and was committed. But for that one slip, long ago, he was a man of honor.

What did matter was his pressing need to urinate. Calmly, as if he’d been awake all along and been silent only a few minutes he, ordered “Stop at the next station.” He could tell his companion was startled by Jounouchi’s quick indrawn breath. He felt a vague sort of amusement about that. A soft whimper in his ear reminded him that his Scapegoat was perched on his shoulder and probably in need of a break as well. “Scapegoat needs a break.”

A chuckle, so much deeper and richer than the boisterous laugh Seto remembered from high school, but still undeniably Jounouchi, answered him. “He’s had four breaks. One every two hours. He just had one about fifteen minutes ago. You slept through the last eight hours. If you gotta piss say so.”

“I have to piss.” Seto parroted mechanically. Oddly caught out at his prevarication he could feel a light heat rising on his cheeks. Defensively he scolded. “Don’t you know it is impolite to speak like that? Bathroom habits are not discussed in polite company.”

“Oh can it, Miss Manners. Since when am I ‘polite’ or ‘company’? We are a couple of guys out on a long drive. Bathroom habits are gonna get discussed. You’re gonna rip one and so am I. If you need to go just say so.” Joey grinned over at him as he slowed the car, pulling it as close to the edge of the road as possible.
Seto sniffed. “Bonkotsu.”

“Yeah middle class all the way and proud of it. I might not be high-class like you but I know when to keep my mouth shut. Now go tinkle.”

“I’ll wait until we get to a station or rest stop.” Seto curled his lip at the blonde. As if he’d ever relieve himself on the side of the road like some... some... ill-bred dog.

“Suit yourself then.” Jou agreed with suspicious good nature. Seeming to hit every bump, Jou pulled back onto the road. “So, now that you’re awake, you mind filling the CD rack? There’s a CD case in the glove box.”

Obligingly Seto opened the box and pulled out the surprisingly large case. “What do you want to hear?”

“I like ‘em all so why don’t you pick a something you like. The player holds up to ten CD’s.”

A quick glance at Jou confirmed the man wasn’t joking. Seto opened the case and flipped through slowly as if considering the choices. In reality he was uncertain of what to choose. When he listened to music it was usually either of Mokuba’s choosing or based on his environment, to set a mood or please his companion. He couldn’t remember a time when he’d listened to music simply for the pleasure of it.

As he perused the contents of the case carefully he was surprised by not only the amount but the variety. He’d expected top forty pop, if he had expectations at all. But he found that the CD’s, some commercial and some obviously home cut, were meticulously labeled and organized into types such as American Blues, Pop, Humor, Zydecog, Rock, Metal, Instrumental, Classical, Be Bop and Japanese music of the same types. Then there was another section entirely, labeled simply “Friends.” It was larger than the other sections combined. Stifling a pang of something, he decided to leave that section alone. As he had never had to choose before he’d simply removed a disk randomly from each section and loaded the CD tray.

Only years of control stopped him from flinching when a discordant, rude, and vulgar note reverberated through the speakers. Then a squeaky voice began singing, if one could call it that. Before he could make sense of the jumble of nonsense words Jounouchi’s laughing voice broke over the ‘music.’ “Weird Al! Seto I never woulda guessed you were a Yankovic fan. Man that’s great. You do have a sense of humor.”

A tingle of pleasure sparked in Seto’s chest. He’d chosen well, and if it fostered a good impression on his host so much the better. Jounouchi didn’t need to know he hadn’t known ‘Weird Al’. Besides, now that he knew that the song was meant to be humorous he could follow it. A tiny curve touched his lips. He could appreciate good humor, or at least appreciate the genuine smile of pleasure on his driver’s lips.

Two hours later Seto wasn’t appreciating anything. His bladder was screaming and for the first time in longer than he cared to admit he was aware of his body’s need for fuel. With an inward sigh he adjusted the volume for the music. Before he could say anything Jounouchi slowed and pulled to the side of the small dirt track they’d turned on an hour before. “Okay last stop. Everyone out.” His smile flashed white in the dashboard lights, as he turned to look at Seto.”

“Last stop? Does that mean we are near the hotel? Is it hidden somewhere behind this...” He waved his hand “foliage?”

The gleaming smile faded and the blonde’s expression became quizzical. “What part of ‘hobo’ don’t
you understand? We aren’t going to a hotel. We’re spending the night here. I got a hammock in the back I’ll string up between trees. You can sleep in your seat. The pup can sleep with you since the car is prolly safer for him. He’s small enough that some of the critters out here might eat him.”

“You’re joking.” Seto was sure this was some kind of trick or trap to humiliate him. Nobody would willingly spend the night out in some god-forsaken wilderness.

“Nah. I’ve done it every trip. See I like to take a night or two and shake off everything. Just camp out and get the feel of the road and the land.”

“If it’s money…”

“Don’t. Seto – damn how long’s it gonna take for you not to look like a screw-face when I call you that? - This ain’t about money or anything like that. It’s about reflectin’ on what’s inside me, what I need and don’t need, and appreciating everything I have. I don’t need a hotel with a bed and Jacuzzi, serving breakfast and offering laundry service. Nobody does. I can sleep on a hammock under the stars and be just as comfortable. I can get my own food and I can wash my own clothes. That stuff is nice, but I don’t need them... and for now I don’t want them either.”

Losing the fight against showing discomfort, he squirmed as his bladder threatened to revolt Seto snapped “What about my needs?” The night shrouded trees and plants were giving him flashbacks he didn’t like.

“Everyone has the same needs, it’s just how we prioritize them. And right now your biggest priority is findin’ a tree or bush to piss behind. Lose a little of your pride for once and go piss. It’s been at least twelve hours, maybe more. Just go.”

Reigning in his irrational emotions, unwilling to lose face he clenched his teeth until they squeaked and gritted. “I pissed at the gas station when I changed.”

“Nah, you didn’t. It’s gutted. Stop being stubborn. We are at least four hours from a bathroom. Just go. I promise I won’t peek.”

Without another word Seto flung open the door and stalked towards the nearest bush. He wasn’t going to argue any longer. If he did he would really lose his pride. He barely noticed the how loud his zipper sounded in the hush of the night, and it was only after his bladder stopped it’s agonized shriek that he realized Scapegoat was dancing around his feet, sniffing his ankles.

Not wanting the dog to step in his waste, he hurriedly tucked and zipped, then bent down to scoop up the fuzz ball. When he felt a warm wetness on the side of his hand where it gripped the pup’s belly he grimaced. Now he had his own and Scapegoat’s piss on his hands, and not a sink in sight. Pretending not to notice the shifting shadows around him, he cradled his pet to his chest and made his way back to the car.

Jou, no longer in the car, but several yards away, was humming to himself as he strung a rope hammock. Seto glared angrily and stalked towards him. “Hey, it sounded like you were releasing Niagara falls. Glad to see everything came out alright. Wet wipes are next to your seat. Trash bag is behind the center console.”

“Hnn…” He spun around to get the items. When he’d finished wiping Scapegoat’s belly and his hands with the ‘wet wipes’ he neatly threw away the lemon-scented, moist towelette.

Jounouchi was finished stringing the hammock and was kneeling on the ground digging a hole. “What are you doing?”
“Huh? Oh, this is a rock oven. It’s filled in until it’s needed. This is where our campfire goes and where we will cook our meals tomorrow.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Yeah, you don’t find a perfect camping spot like this by accident. A Native American Shaman, from the Miwok tribe, showed me this place.” A sad smile flitted across Jou’s lips. “He was a great guy. He died last year.”

“Oh.” Seto didn’t know what to say. He normally didn’t waste time on platitudes and believed polite phrases were meaningless. The sadness on the other man’s face seemed to warrant more than that, so he stayed silent, petting Scapegoat gently. After a moment the sadness faded and Jounouchi bent back to cleaning out their ‘oven.’ Jou finished cleaning the rock lined hole and started a fire, he was humming again as the flames sparked to life.

Once the fire was going Seto relaxed slightly. The light from the fire drove the encroaching shadows away. Even in the moonlight, Seto found them disturbing. Now that he relaxed he remembered his body’s need for fuel. With a slight cough he asked, stated, “You mentioned meals. What’s for dinner?”

“Gut bombs.”

Seto shook his head slightly. “Excuse me?” Whatever it was, maybe he’d give it a pass and wait. Anything called bomb couldn’t be good.

“Meals Ready to Explode. MRE’s.”

Seto continued to shake his head. It didn’t sound any better the more Jounouchi spoke. Coming to a decision he declined “I’ll wait until tomorrow.”

“Don’t be an...” Jounouchi broke off and sighed, picking up a packet that he’d laid on one of the warming stones. “Look just try it. You should know me enough to know I don’t eat crappy food.” Seeing his dubious look, Jou stood and brought the pack to him. “It’s freeze-dried pasta primavera. I made both packages for you because you didn’t eat your sandwich and you since weren’t awake I ate it. You eat while I feed fur... Scapegoat.” Quick as a wink Seto found himself holding two warm bags of re-hydrated food and Jounouchi was walking back to the car with the little dog carried in his hands.

Deciding to trust the blond he opened one of the packs, finding a small wooden spork inside. The first bite was a tentative nibble, the second a full bite, and by the third he was wolfing down the food like he hadn’t eaten in days. He devoured the packets where he stood, then sighed and wadded the foil bags together. Remembering where the trash bag was he turned back to the car.

When he got there he was amused to hear Jounouchi mumbling curses and Scapegoat’s distinctive growl. The blond was so intent on trying to feed the little dog he literally jumped a foot when Seto reached across and threw his empties in the trash. “Give it up.”

“What? Whatcha talking about?”

“He has been trained since the first day I got him not to take food from anyone but me.” Seto explained calmly, as he took the small bowl of kibble from Jounouchi’s hand and then carefully set in front of the tiny puppy. Proving his words, the little black fuzzball dove head first into the food. “See?”

“Yeah, but hey he took water from me.”
“One thing at a time. We are going to start training on water next.”

“Goddamn Seto that’s... that’s... I know you have control issues but fuck that’s wrong. What if you are home late or something. He’ll starve to death.”

“If something happens to me there are instructions to have him put down quickly and humanely. He would not starve.”

“Holy fuck that’s cold.” It was obvious Jounouchi was horrified.

Seto shrugged and leaned down to pet his little friend. He wasn’t going to explain to Jounouchi that the training had been necessary, that as the pet of a wealthy public figure, someone that had as many enemies as fans, the little puppy was in danger of being the target of someone’s hate. That eating from a seemingly friendly hand could lead to poisoning for no other reason than spite or jealousy.

The blond must have seen he wasn’t going to answer because he shrugged and stepped back towards the camp, pausing to invite, “When he’s done why don’tcha come back by the fire and we’ll talk a while before hittin’ the hay.”

“Talk? What do you think we need to talk about?” Seto could feel his defenses rising as they hadn’t all day. In his life when someone wanted to talk it meant they wanted to borrow money or ask a favor.

“Geez Seto, are you bein’ difficult on purpose or are you that clueless? Talkin’ is what people do for companionship, entertainment, and to get to know each other better.” He glowered over his shoulder, “And if you don’t quit screwing up your face, it’s gonna freeze like that. Then they’ll stick me in jail for ruining a piece of art. So cut it out already.” He stomped off, calling back “And come over here and talk to me.”

Seto was tempted to ignore the blond, after all they didn’t have anything in common and making casual conversation was a complete waste of time. But a rapid movement in the shadows, high in the trees, made him glance up into the shifting darkness above him. With a shiver he picked up his now full pup and hurried back to the clearing. Maybe a little conversation wouldn’t hurt.

Jounouchi had constructed a bench out of a fallen log and medium size stones. It wasn’t much but it wasn’t sitting on the dirt. Seto sat on one end, placing Scapegoat on his usual perch.

“Man he is well trained. Did you send him to a school or somethin’?”

Seto didn’t take offense. Most people would assume that. “No. I’ve trained him personally. I... enjoy spending time with him.”

“Oh, well it had to take a lot of time. Unless he’s a genius too?” Jounouchi joked.

“Above average but not a genius.” Seto smiled fondly and nuzzled his chin into the fuzzy ball under his chin. “But he makes up for it.”

“Yeah I can see that. You said a friend gave him to you. I’ve never heard you mention friends before. In school you said you didn’t need ‘em.”

“Everyone needs people, it just took me longer to realize it.” Seto admitted quietly. “I have two friends, Matashi and Aishira. Matashi is my Vice President in charge of marketing and Aishira is my costume designer.”

“Costume designer? You have someone design your coats?” Jounouchi’s eyes were wide, shining
with shock in the flickering firelight.

“No, that is my clothing designer. Aishira designs costumes for the park staff and special events.” He rolled his eyes at the blond’s idiocy.

A chuckle surprised him. “I knew that. I was yankin’ your chain. You gave up those long trench coats about six years ago. Can’t say I was sorry to see them go. But I was always curious, how come they floated, and how come they had them hip things that stuck out like handles. you don’t know how many times I wanted to reach out and grab one just to see what you’d do.”

It was Seto’s turn to chuckle. It surprised even him to hear the laugh roll out of his mouth. “The ‘floating’ was cause by a negative static field. I had to wear a satellite tracker even then and the technology for smaller, solar powered devices didn’t exist yet. The coats had charged energy that fed the transmitter. To keep from getting shocked my clothes were charged in the same way – they pushed against each other.”

“No way, you’re kidding?” Golden eyes widened with laughter. “You're not. So you got rid of the coats as soon as the smaller batteries came out then?”

“Of course. I’d started to loathe the things.” Where that came from he didn’t know, but it was true. He’d never admitted it before, but he’d started hating the overly dramatic, flaring coats with a passion. When the small collar device had been perfected he’d had a personal bonfire with the stupid things. Before he could think the better of that he confided “I burned them all when I could.”

“I don’t blame you. Okay so tell me about the handles.”

“They weren’t handles. They were emergency disconnects. If something went wrong with the power source then I only had to pull one down and it would disconnect and shut down.”

“Wow. So did you ever have to use one?”

“No. The technology didn’t fail once.”

“Shit, if I’d known I’d have probably done something just to make you use it. You were way too uptight.”

“That was one of the main reasons security about my jackets was so tight.”

“No shit, you thought I’d do something to them?”

“No, I thought you’d try and end up fried. I hate the smell of singed dog hair.” Abruptly Seto broke off, horrified by what he’d said. He’d been enjoying this conversation with Jounouchi and he’d just ruined it.

Instead of taking offense the blonde laughed “Yeah probably. Electronics weren’t my thing unless it was video games. You always knew such cool stuff.” Seto was blown away by the admiration in the other man’s voice.

Curious and wary of a complimentary Jounouchi, Seto turned his head to assess the blond. He was surprised to see the man’s cheeks glowing pink in the firelight. A pink that deepened when Jounouchi caught him looking. Not resisting the urge to tease Seto quirked an eyebrow. “Really. What other stuff do you think I know that’s ‘cool?’”

“I’ll bet you know the stars. I tried to learn but I just can’t see the constellations. I even get Mars mixed up with the North Star.”
“I can triangulate my position from anywhere I can see the stars.” Seto agreed, casually leaning back to look up into the moonlit night sky. As he mapped the points he needed he sat up abruptly. “We... We were north of here. I thought we were headed north.”

“We were, but... well I didn’t want to take the coast highway. I decided to go through the mountains instead. I turned around and went inland, then decided to spend some time here. We only went about three hours north before I backtracked. We are about two hours south and east from where you joined me.”

“I know that.” Seto frowned slightly. “But backtracking is a waste of time.”

“Why? We don’t have to be anywhere, nobody is waiting and we have no set plan. This is a nice place Seto. Relax and enjoy it. When we want to we’ll move on.” He gave the brunet a pat on the shoulder and tweaked Scapegoat’s curled tail. “Let’s hit the hay. I’m tired and you’re looking kinda grumpy.”

The brunet watched intently as Jou banked the fire, making sure the active flames were too low to leap out of the ‘oven’ and that there was enough heavy wood in it to keep it going until morning. As the light from the fire died Seto rose, and turned to the car. Just as he slid into the seat, Jounouchi called softly “Sleep well Seto.”

He didn’t respond, simply glanced back at the now dim glow. A fast moving shadow at the front of the car made him jerk back sharply, his breath catching in his throat, as for one second a single blazing eye seemed to stare at him from deep in the recesses of the night. Stifling his fright, he gripped Scapegoat tight and continued to look around at the shadows and moonlight circling his haven. His eyes didn’t close until the rising sun chased away the vestiges of darkness.

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Scapegoat’s whimper directly into his ear woke Seto from his uneasy sleep. Automatically he reached up to soothe the pup as he pulled himself into an upright position. “That time already?” Another whimper confirmed that it was indeed time to take the little pooch out for a morning walk.

He found Jounouchi seated on the log bench, grinding something on a long flat stone. “What are you doing?” There was a pleasant, toasty scent in the air. He glanced at the fire pit expecting to see something cooking. Instead all he saw was glowing rocks covering the hole. “And what’s up with that?”

“I’m grinding soap root. When I’m done we’ll be able to go to the little inlet and bathe without polluting the stream with man-made shampoo and soap.” He gestured to the rock oven, “That’s breakfast. They’re tubers, kinda like sweet potatoes, but chewier. I dug them this morning while you were snoring.”

“You expect me to eat...”

“Yes I do. Look Seto, I ain’t gonna lie to ya. I got more of the MRE’s but... well this place is special to me. By doing this, living the way my friend taught me, I’m honoring his memory and our friendship. I promise, I know what I’m doing. I won’t poison you and I won’t... look nothing I feed you is gonna be nasty. The natives in this area lived on this stuff for thousands of years. The tubers fed them when there was famine everywhere else. Just... just trust me okay?”

He hesitated then nodded shortly. It wouldn’t hurt, besides when in Rome... “All right, but if I get sick I expect you to take care of me.”
“Deal!” The blonde beamed a smile at him and laid down the stone he was crushing the root with. Holding the flat rock like a plate he jerked his head towards a thicket of tall grass. “Let’s go. We’ll use some of the soap to wash our clothes.”

“Wash our clothes? What are you talking about? With what water?” Seto knew that there were several bottles of water but not enough to wash their clothes or bathe.

“In the stream. Didn’t you look around last night?”

Feeling dumb was not something Seto liked. “Of course not. It was dark when we arrived. Even I know better to go wandering around in the woods after dark.”

“Oh... Yeah. I forgot. Okay follow me.” The blond took off like a sure-footed gazelle. Seto had to stretch his long legs to catch up. Scapegoat scampered along happily, tumbling over his feet and yipping at the new smells.

About ten yards from the campsite the grasses gave way to rocky downward slope. The slope gave way to a few feet of pebbled beach. “What is this?”

“It’s a small creek that comes off Vail Lake. The creek is actually U-shaped and turns around to go back to the lake but we are on the furthest curve of the creek. The lake is about two miles east. The resort area is another five miles down dirt roads.”

“So not four hours like you said last night.” Seto observed neutrally. But anger sparked slightly.

The blonde laughed at him. “Have you ever driven on strange dirt roads in the dark? No street lights or signs? Half the time the roads around here are little more than tire tracks. Four hours was a good guess assuming we didn’t run into the lake, a tree or any animals.”

He could see the point. His spark of anger flickered out. Grudgingly he nodded. “Fine. Where do I... I have to...” He fumbled to a stop and sighed in frustration.

“To?” Then Jounouchi chuckled in comprehension. “Take a dump? Gotcha covered. Go down behind those tall reeds. There is a kind of current that moves stuff away from here and there is a hot spring that bubbles through the rocks that acts like a bidet. You want to be on the left side of the rocks – aim over them to the right. Everything will be pushed away on the stream.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope. Go check it out. If it ain’t what you’re lookin’ for I’ll show you were you can dig a pit and what leaves to use.” A reminiscent smile, tinged with pain touched his lips. “Trust my you don’t want to use Poison Oak.”

“Leaves? I’ll use the wet...”

“No, you won’t. The chemicals on the wipes are not part of this environment and I won’t have your shit stinkin’ up my car. Use the stream or use the leaves.”

Seto could see the blond was uncompromising on this. Part of him respected the stance, but another part growled. “You were the one who brought me along. Deal with it.”

“I am. I’m going to teach you what you need to know. Now go check the stream. I think you will... okay maybe not like but damn it just go before I say something mean.”

Still growling, he turned down to check out the facilities. No matter what the idiot said he was not
going to stand in his own waste. Hearing a soft yip, he belatedly turned back to catch Scapegoat, only to shake his head slightly. Jounouchi was kneeling on the bank of the stream, his shirt spread out on the rocks as he worked some of the crushed soap root into the fabric. Scapegoat was dancing around him yipping playfully as he tugged at the blonde’s shorts.

Leaving them to it he turned to examine the ‘facilities.’ Grudgingly he saw it would work very well. When he returned Jounouchi was stripped to the skin, his shirt and shorts hanging on an overhanging branch while he scrubbed out his underwear. Scapegoat was sitting back staring at the blond as if in shock. In his world humans didn’t run around without their second skins.

Seto was shocked too, and for the first time in more time than he cared to remember his breath caught slightly and his heart picked up a few beats. He must have made a noise, because Jounouchi glanced at him over his shoulder.

“Hey, did you need me to show you where to dig a hole?” A hint of mischief danced in his golden eyes.

“No.” He coughed slightly. “It was quite impressive. A stone age, primitive bidet. Crude but effective.”

“Yeah, well you gotta remember that the natives of America lived here for thousands of years without damaging their environment. It’s taken the ‘advanced’ Europeans just over two hundred years to fuck it up.” Jounouchi shrugged angrily. “They had all they needed; food, clean water, clothes, shelter. They had social structure and respected family. It’s too damn bad their ways are nearly gone. They could help with the mess our planet’s in now.” Efficiently he hung his now clean underwear next to the rest of his drying clothes.

“You sound like a tree-hugger.” Seto couldn’t resist teasing as he padded up to the blond. “But you just rinsed your clothes in the stream; the area is coated with the soap.”

“You don’t know what’s what so I won’t hold it against you. Strip and I’ll explain. Gimme your shirt. You watch and then you can do your own.” The golden blond regarded him thoughtfully. "You saw I only have one more set of clothes in the trunk. I'm okay running around Au Natural if you want to wear the third set while you're washing what you have on."

Seto hesitated for a second and received a quick eye roll. With a sigh he pulled the threadbare shirt off and tossed it to the other man. "If you're okay with it then I am too. As soon as we can though, we are getting a few more shirts and shorts."

“See your point. Slip outta the rest. You can do as you learn.” With a quick grin, the blond dunked the shirt in the water and wrung it out slightly.

Seto slithered out of his shorts and boxers before common sense could change his mind. Without a word he dunked the shorts and twisted the excess moisture out of them exactly as the other had done.

“That made Seto blink slightly. Very sophisticated multi-purpose plant. Perhaps it should be studied. Before he could question further Jou moved on.
“Okay, you don’t need a lot. Just a couple fingers full. Rub it into the center of whatever you’re washing then take the sides and scrub the cloth in on itself. See it makes a great lather. When you get the lather nice and thick work it through the whole thing. Rinse and hang it up to dry on the branch.”

They worked in silence a few moments, then Jounouchi jumped and yelp. “Holy fuck.”

“What’s wrong?” Seto glanced over to find the blond holding Scapegoat in his soapy hands, glaring. “What did he do?”

“He sniffed my balls and ass. His nose is damn cold.”

Seto couldn’t stop the laugh that broke from his throat, nor the instinctive comment. “Isn’t that how dogs greet each other? Sniff ass?”

Instead of getting angry, the blond gave him a smiling look, full of teasing menace. “Laugh it up, Jerk. I ain’t the one with a pervy dog. One day you’re gonna wake up and find him humpin’ that cute ass of yours, you just wait.”

Seto felt his heart start to trip again. Jounouchi thought he had a cute ass and last night he’d said something about his face. Maybe... “Jounouchi, I... You...”

Smiling brown eyes met his confused, questioning blue gaze. “You need to get the suds out. Rinse them where I do and let’s get cleaned up. And to answer the question you don’t know you’re asking; ask me again when you decide if you’re staying for more than a week.”

The pup still in one hand Jounouchi stepped into the creek, bringing the sudsy shirt with him. Seto, after a moment to gather his thoughts and admire the golden beauty of the blond’s skin in dappled sunlight, stood and followed. Copying his movements exactly, he rinsed his shorts and boxers and hung them on the branch. One part of him wanted to push ahead and ask, but another part wasn’t sure what to ask, and what he really wanted the answer to be.

His companion’s approving grin was his reward. He decided that if relaxing and going with the flow earned him that open smile, he’d do it more often. There were worse things in life than being smiled on with uncomplicated warmth.

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"Damn Seto! Why does he have to be so stiff about everything? First he won’t accept Rebecca, and now I can’t even get on to our estate.” Mokuba railed inwardly. "Why the hell would he change the voice and hand print access?” Pacing impatiently, tugging at his hair in frustration, he waited for a servant to let him into his once-home.

Matashi glanced questioningly at Aishira as they drove up to the gates and pulled to a smooth stop in front of the obviously fuming young man. “Mokuba, you didn’t have to wait for us. Where is your car?”

“Rebecca had an errand. I told her I’d wait for her inside.” He mumbled. No way was he going to explain that Rebecca had left him here after an argument about Seto’s security changes. She didn’t get it. Seto was his brother. He would never lock him out. And her argument that Seto didn’t have keys to their apartment was just stupid. She’d left in a huff saying she’d be back when she’d cooled off. “I didn’t wait deliberately. My voice and hand prints won’t open the gates. I think it’s malfunctioning.”

“What? When was the last time you used them?” Aishira was shocked. Only one person could change those settings and, unlike Mokuba, he believed the changes were deliberate. Seto’s security
The memory of that evening was painfully vivid to Mokuba. "The last time I came here ..." he paused a moment to reflect on the scene, "was when Rebecca and I told him about our engagement. He... he didn't... he wasn't... He was very cold about it. Bitter and angry. He treated Rebecca like she was dirt. We left and I swore I wouldn't come back until he accepted that I was an adult and could choose my own wife."

The younger man shifted uneasily under Aishira's disapproving gaze. That dark-eyed look made him feel ashamed. He had nothing to be guilty about. He was a man, not some misbehaving child. And Seto was even older. He wasn't going to take responsibility when it was his brother who caused the rift.

Matashi bit back a gasp of shock and horror. That had been four months ago! He hadn't been to see Seto since? "It's been that long?" When the other man nodded slightly he flinched and reached for Ashira, needing his support to absorb the blow of how they had failed their friend. They hadn't known! But Mokuba... There was no excuse for Mokuba. He knew he was the cornerstone of Seto's heart. How could he be so careless about his brother's feelings? So heedless of the damage that kind of isolation would do to Seto? Gods! Was this blow, this isolation why Seto had been so distant? Why he was missing now? Swallowing back his pain Matashi gripped Aishira's hand tightly and looked away from Mokuba, unable to face the confirmation of his worst fears.

Seeing Matashi look away, Mokuba frowned and scuffed his feet as guilt welled up. That guilt, the way they were manipulating him, made his temper flare. He stormed hotly, "What did he expect after the way he treated Rebecca? I barely speak to him anymore unless its business related. I thought he'd pull his head out of his ass and come around once he saw how happy we were together."

The frown became deeper and the anger faded. Softly he confessed. "I had hope for when he came back. Before he left he spoke to me for the first time since then. He said he... he wanted me to be happy."

"We have to find him. We have to get him back from whoever took him. Doesn't he know I can't be happy without him?"

Too bad you couldn’t have told him that four months ago, or any time since.” Aishira snapped, as he laid his palm on the glass and announced his name. The gate opened readily. “The security is working fine.” He couldn’t resist that dig at the younger man. “Hop in and let’s go.” He said without holding back the harshness in his voice.

Mokuba winced and clenched his fists but didn’t answer. The other man was entitled to his opinion. He wasn’t right, but Mokuba had too much respect for Aishira to argue with him. Everyone was under a lot of stress. He could make allowances. They’d understand how wrong they were once they had time to think about it and Seto was safely back home. He climbed into the open convertible and settled on the back seat. Deliberately he changed the subject. Straining for a conciliatory tone he asked, “Why did you guys call me here? Have you heard something? A ransom note perhaps? Do you think Seto came home?"

Hearing the unconscious condescension below the surface of Mokuba's voice, Matashi nearly choked on his anger and disappointment with the boy he'd helped raise. Neutrally he explained, “No, but if he really did go on a road trip he would have a plan somewhere, sites visited researching his travels. He kept an emergency supply of cash in the safe. If he’s taken any we’ll know. He kept a ledger with the cash.” Surprise added to the anger and disappointment. Mokuba was far from dumb, but the way he was acting made him seem a simpleton. This should have already occurred to him. They should have been the one to receive the call to come to the mansion. Instead they had called Mokuba to find he hadn’t done a single thing to further the search for Seto.
Despite the neutral tone Mokuba felt the whip of censure. “Oh I knew that.” He just hadn’t thought of it. He hadn’t slept at all, was worried out of his mind, guilty as hell and simply hadn’t thought of it. Sighing he murmured “I’m just... I can’t think right now. I haven’t eaten or slept since yesterday when Seto’s com-link died. Everything is so hazy. I... I’ve never dealt with something like this before. I... I’m sorry guys. I’m just so worried about Seto. And now Rebecca and I are fighting. I’m sorry. I’ll try to get it together.” Genuine contrition filled his voice.

Aishira grunted slightly to show he’d heard. Matashi gave no response. They drove to the house in silence. The first place they checked was the safe. The money was gone. The ledger clearly noted the cash being deposited in a bank account labeled ‘Staff’ the morning Seto left.

“What the fuck?” Mokuba couldn’t hold his exclamation of shock. “He never took the money out of here, never put it in the bank. He said he never knew when it might be needed!”

Matashi and Aishira shared a grim look. They weren’t surprised as much as horrified at this further proof. Seto would have only removed the cash if he was certain he’d never need it. “Let’s check his computer.” Matashi turned from the safe.

As they walked through the large home Mokuba looked around, assessing it for the first time ever. Comparing it to the comfortable apartment he shared with Rebecca. “It’s empty.”

“What?” Startled, Aishira paused at the bottom of the stairs to look back at the young man.

Mokuba shifted his shoulders uncomfortably. “The house. I never noticed before, but it’s empty. I mean... the furniture is beautiful. The paintings and art fantastic. It’s all perfect. But...” He bit his lip. “But it could be a museum. There is no life. Seto isn’t here.”

Aishira nodded his agreement. He’d always felt that way about the house. That’s why he’d made sure to invite his friend over as much as possible. “Seto spends a lot of time at our place.”

“Oh.” Mokuba didn’t know what to say. Deep inside regret bloomed that he hadn’t invited his brother to his new home with Rebecca even once. How was Seto ever going to change his mind about Rebecca and him if he didn’t see that they belonged together?

At the foot of the stairs a beep from the intercom sounded. Aishira answered before he could. “Yes?”

“It’s me, Rebecca.” The woman’s voice was breathless and slightly impatient.

Aishira crossed and hit the button to allow her in, underlining the fact that Mokuba no longer had access to the gates. “We’ll meet you in the front hall.”

“Thanks.” More bad temper. Aishira glanced at Mokuba then Matashi with raised brows.

They waited in silence for the blond woman to join them. Mokuba greeted her with a quick kiss on the cheek. “We are going up to Seto’s room to see if he left an itinerary or anything on his personal computer.”

“Good idea.” She gave her fiancé a strained look before turning to greet the other men. “Matashi, Aishira.” She nodded slightly. It was very obvious she was uncomfortable around them.

Used to her attitude they mumbled polite greetings as they turned to mount the stairs. They didn’t owe her an explanation or apology of their lifestyle and love. Rebecca’s hang-ups about homosexuals were her own issue.

They ignored her talk about the paintings and furnishings as they went to Seto’s room. At first glance
it was as beautiful as the rest of the house. Then the coldness of it, the stark barrenness sank in. Antiques and artwork, yes, but a total lack of personal items. It could have been in a hotel or museum. The one personal item, if it could be called such, was a silvery laptop computer sitting closed on a small desk.

Without hesitation Matashi and Aishira booted it up. A desktop loaded immediately. A series of icons dotted the plain blue screen. Curious, Aishira double clicked one that looked like a daisy. A colorful login screen loaded.

“Garden Party?” Mokuba read aloud. “What’s that?”

“It looks like a RP game.” Aishira hit the login button, glad to see that the username and password were auto-saved. Instantly the game loaded to a virtual lagoon with a large tree house and caves. Signs pointed to different areas. Before they could explore a chat scrolled on the screen. “Nosleep, I thought you quit. You gave all your stuff away.” Tigertuff greeted.

Matashi glanced at Aishira and typed “Not Nosleep. His brother.”

“Oh. Didn’t know Nosleep had a bro. Where he?”

“He went on a trip.” Brief and to the point.

“Oh ya. He said he was quitting the game cuz he was going away. Gave his stuff away. He coming back soon? I got something to tell him.”

“Maybe. But I’ll pass a message if you want.” Aishira responded, not sure if he would or not.

“Tell him my dad got a job at that place he told me about. At first my dad was kind doubting that a kid online would know about a job but he checked it out anyway. He got the job after the first interview. My dad is happy and mom hasn’t yelled in a couple days.”

“That’s great! What job was it? My brother always knows about stuff like that.” Aishira wanted to hear more. Maybe there was a clue here. Maybe Seto decided to visit his online friends.

“Yeah he always listened when I talked about my mom and dad fighting cuz dad lost his job. I talked to him, told him that most of my town was out of work. He asked what town and I told him. Nosleep said he heard about a plant coming in our area for a new game maker. A lot of people have jobs now. They bought the old Reisig building and had it all done in a month. Dad starts Monday.”

“Lucky! So how long you known Nosleep?” Matashi questioned. Aishira had pulled out a notebook and started taking notes.

“I met him here about a year ago. I am too old for this game now. It’s for kids under twelve. I’m twelve. But I came back to talk to him. I just hang here to talk to him.”

Wanting to encourage more conversation Matashi typed “?...?”

“He’s cool. And he is nice to everyone. Teaches the little kids how to play, gives them tips and stuff. Everyone thinks he’s a really cool big brother.”

As he read the gushing praise Mokuba couldn’t stifle his slight flinch. It was true. He had forgotten it, pushed it away, but Seto was just like this kid said. Always making time to talk, help out, and just listen. How could he have forgotten? Turning away from the group he crossed to stare out the window, images of the past playing in his mind. He barely noticed when Rebecca placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.
Matashi and Aishira continued to investigate the computer. They found four games, all with varying themes and age ranges, but their reception, when they logged on, was glad greetings, kids expressing joy that ‘Nosleep’ had returned and disappointed surprise to learn it was a brother on the other end of the keyboard.

Satisfied they’d gathered what they needed from the obvious games, Matashi turned to a folder simply named ‘History.’ Ostensibly a system file, History did not belong on the desktop, which drew their attention. A double click later and a list of album folders filled the screen.

With a quick shared look they opened the top album with a creation date over a year past. Thumbnails of blurred images and old looking photos filled the screen. A man and a woman, both bearing obvious resemblance to the Kaiba brother’s were dominant. Mokuba’s breath caught. “My mom and dad... our real parents. See there’s even a picture of me as a baby.” Shaking his head slightly he whispered “I didn’t know he had these.”

The next album was more old pictures, but more somber. The parents were gone and an odd utilitarian place was the backdrop for all pictures. Another album and the mansion in Japan, images of Gozoburo, a child Mokuba, servants and the lush gardens played across the screen.

The next album opened to a picture of Domino High School. The gap of years between was painfully obvious. Thumbnails of classmates, teachers, even cafeteria food, displayed perfectly. “Wow, nobody saw him take pictures?” Mokuba wondered. If they had it had never been mentioned.

“He once told me that he’d perfected a spycam in the spine of a book. Perhaps he...” Matashi shrugged. “He took a lot of pictures of one group friends. Jounouchi Katsuya, Moutou Yugi, Otogi Ryugi and...He seems fixated.”

“They were rivals back then. Of course he watched them. He wanted to discover Moutou Yugi’s weaknesses.” It made perfect sense to Mokuba.

Matashi, assessing the pictures, wanted to point out that Moutou Yugi wasn’t in most of the pictures. In fact there was only one constant. The blond duelist he recognized as Jounouchi Katsuya. “Lets move on.”

More albums and pictures. The images detailed Seto’s rise to the CEO of the world’s largest entertainment corporation. Scattered throughout the corporate pictures, the cityscapes at sunrise and sunset, the pictures of himself and Aishira, images of the blond duelist popped up constantly for years, then abruptly they stopped. If he hadn’t been paying close attention to any blond’s in hopes of finding an old friend or acquaintance who Seto might have gone with, he wouldn’t have noticed.

“Jounouchi Katsuya. What happened to him five - six years ago?”

Mokuba started, his eyes going wide before he controlled himself. “H... Happened? Nothing. In fact Seto lost to him the other day.”

“Did they argue or something?” Aishira caught the flash of something in Mokuba’s eyes. There was a story here.

“A... Argue? They fought all the time. Nothing new that I know of. Why are you guys asking about Jounouchi? He hasn’t spoken to us in years. When I tried to contact him he sent back a message not to talk to him again.” But Mokuba avoided their eyes, leaning over the computer as if to look at more pictures.
“He was a constant in all of the albums since high school. Then suddenly he’s gone.” Matashi pointed out. The knowledge that Mokuba knew more than he let on about Jounouchi Katsuya took root. “And Mokuba, you know something, I can see it. Why don’t you just tell us. It may help Seto now. If Jounouchi is the one who took him and it’s bad... Well the police should be told.”

Mokuba moistened his lips and sent Rebecca a quick glance. “I... I doubt it was Jounouchi. He made it plain he didn’t want contact from us years ago. He... he was angry about something, a harmless prank.”

“A prank? If it was harmless why would he stay angry for years? That’s not the Jounouchi I remember. What happened?” Rebecca asked, her eyes steady on her fiancé. She knew him very well and the look in his eyes was panicked. There was something going on here that made her stomach, already churning, clench hard with dread.

“Ah...” Mokuba forced a laugh. “He... uhm... he asked for a lift home. Hadn’t won enough for airfare and knew we were heading back to Japan. He believes Seto agreed, then took off without him.”

“Seto wouldn’t have done that. Not if he agreed.” Aishira pointed out the obvious, glaring in demand. “What really happened?”

“I uh...” Dark color washed up his features. “I... Seto told me that... Look do I have to go into this? I mean, it’s not important.” He definitely didn’t want to discuss this with Rebecca in the room.

“It’s apparent that something is going on. As the only blond we’ve seen in your brother’s pictures he is the obvious place to start.” Matashi snapped, frustrated at the younger man’s evasive attitude. He wouldn’t let Mokuba get away with it. Any little detail could be important. Besides Jounouchi Katsuya was the only blond to show up with any regularity in the photos. That had meaning.

Seeing the logic and no way out he decided to give them a half-truth. “I...” For another moment he hesitated, then with a gusting sigh lowered his head. “Seto said he wanted me to leave him alone with Jounouchi. He wanted to talk to him privately. I... I had a crush on Jounouchi and didn’t want my brother to... ruin my chances. I told Seto I wanted Jou for my boyfriend, that I loved him and thought Jou felt the same. Seto... nodded and suggested I take a different plane so Jou and I could be alone. Jou had checked out of his hotel and didn’t have a cell phone. He didn’t get the message to go to a different terminal and I had to hurry to the terminal where Seto was taking off. I got there just in time to see Jou rush out the door. Seto left early. Jou must have seen the plane take off because one minute he was ahead of me at the airport and the next he was gone. He thinks we left him stranded.”

Mokuba squared his shoulders. “I tried to tell Jou what really happened, to tell him... well that I liked him. But he wouldn’t speak to me again. He hasn’t since that day.” He gave his fiancé a quick look. Her white face and pinched lips told their own story.

“I can understand him being angry but not for years.” Ashira noted.

Mokuba swallowed hard. “It was worse than just a lift. Jou confided that he didn’t have a penny. Not even enough for a phone call. He... He barely had enough to pay the bill at the hotel. He... He was basically homeless and penniless.”

“A... see.” Aishira had never been in that position but he could well understand the helplessness and fear that the younger man had felt.

Matashi sighed and tugged at his long hair. “Why didn’t Seto send a plane back for him? Or buy him a commercial ticket? Why didn’t you?”
Defensively Mokuba crossed his arms over his chest. “Jou disappeared. We had no way to get in touch. And Seto didn’t know. Still doesn’t. When I landed I went to talk to him about it and he told me never to mention Jounouchi Katsuya or my love life to him again – ever. And he’s stuck by it. Whenever I’ve tried to talk to him about anything related to Jou or my dating he’s told me to shut up or walked out of the room.”

Pieces of the puzzle were coming together. “There’s more isn’t there Mokuba?” Rebecca stepped forward aggressively. “And whatever it is caused what happened when we went to tell him we were engaged, didn’t it?” A picture was forming and it made her want to throw up. She was a genius and knew more about the Kaiba’s than anyone on earth – including them. She’d devoted herself to the study when she found herself in love with Mokuba.

“He... that doesn’t mean anything. He was confused.” But Mokuba looked away guiltily.

“Oh it means something. He called you a cheat, accused you of breaking a loyal heart to be with a slut like me. I was there remember? You told him you guys got together didn’t you? He thought you were with Jounouchi and you’d left him for me. Didn’t he?” She glared at him demanding the truth. “Didn’t he?”

“What? Where the hell do you get that from?” Mokuba’s was stunned at her weird, huge, leap of logic.

To Rebecca it was perfectly clear. “You told him you loved Jounouchi remember? If there is one thing I know about your brother and about Jounouchi; they are both loyal and give their hearts forever. I have seen it too many times in their actions. Jounouchi towards his friends, and Seto towards you. It would never occur to him that you didn’t really love Jounouchi.” It was a positive statement. She knew it as well as she knew her own name.

“That’s crazy. No way could he have thought, all this time, that Jou and I were together. No fucking way.” Mokuba shook his head adamantly.

Rebecca also knew her fiancé. There was ‘no way’ Mokuba was this dense. “How would he know otherwise? He refused to discuss Jou with you; you never told him Jou wasn’t speaking to you. To him love is forever. What did he want to talk to Jou about that day? Do you know?” Rebecca was merciless. She was seeing a very damning picture and it infuriated her even as it destroyed her shaky illusions of love. Mokuba may have ruined his brother’s one chance at love and was acting completely clueless. It was an act she’d seen several times and wasn’t sure she believed any longer.

“He didn’t say. Just wanted to be alone with him. I thought he was going to bawl him out, maybe make fun of him for losing so badly. I didn’t want Jou to get angry so I...”

“Since when has your brother hesitated to do that to Jou in front of the world? This was different. And based on the pictures I see up to the point where you stepped in, I’d say very fucking private.” God why was Mokuba blind to what had happened? Couldn’t he see that he’d ripped apart something very precious to his brother? Was he really still such a child? Had she been wrong to get involved with him after all?

“You... you can’t be serious. There is no way Seto... and Jounouchi?” Mokuba’s voice was completely disbelieving.

Aishira had reached the end of his patience. He’d seen the innocent act all through Mokuba’s growing years. It was something that the boy had perfected and his brother had never seen through. “That’s bull shit. You are lying. You knew very well that Seto was interested in him. He probably told you. For whatever reason, you are trying to act like you didn’t know. But you can’t fool me. I
know you too well. You are lying. Tell the truth or so help me I’ll knock it out of you.”

Matashi gasped, Rebecca choked, and Mokuba stared wide-eyed, moistening his lips again. “I... I... I’m not.”

Aishira stood up; for once the soft face looked hard and menacing. “Just because I dress like a woman doesn’t mean I can’t kick your ass like a man.”

Matashi knew better than to interfere with his lover in this mood. Besides something in Mokuba’s expression told him that Aishira was right. “Look, you want Seto back you need to tell us everything.”

“It doesn’t pertain...”

“We don’t know that. Jounouchi is the only blond in these pictures. If he has cause to hate Seto – to hurt him – we need to know.” Aishira argued flatly. “Tell us.” The normally gentle man’s hands clenched.

Unable to meet that demanding glare Mokuba lowered his eyes again. “Fine. I knew what Seto wanted to discuss with Jounouchi. He said he was going to ask him out. It was so strange and improbable. I... I didn’t think it really mattered to Seto. I thought it was just an impulse. I... I told him I wanted Jounouchi too. That we were close... I... I... Anyway I told Seto I’d give Jounouchi the choice between coming with me or going with him. Seto agreed. I...” He shoved his hands into his pockets and turned to stare out the window. “I never got the chance. Jounouchi left before I could talk to him. The rest is true.”

The hard crack of Rebecca’s hand as it hit his face echoed loudly in the room. Mokuba’s eyes widened even as he stumbled back against the window. “Re...”

“You asshole. You’ve lied to me so many times! I told you when you asked me out I didn’t date guys who swung in both directions. It never ends well for someone. You always act so hurt by your brother’s attitude towards me, his attitude towards you. You have said it several times, he doesn’t date seriously. You had to know it back then. The one person he shows interest in and you decide you want him? You are a selfish prick Mokuba.”

“It wasn’t like that. I... I really liked Jou and I didn’t...” he tried to excuse what he’d done.

“Like isn’t love Mokuba. I thought you knew that.” Rebecca gave him a furious glare. “Love for your brother should have put your hormones in check. You should have told him the truth.”

“I tried! He wouldn’t let me. He refused...”

“Bullshit, just bullshit. If you had opened with ‘Jou never got the message about the planes.’ He would have listened. You know that.” Giving the black-haired man a furious look she jerked off her ring and threw it in his face. “I’ve lived with you for months. I’ve had doubts several times because you are a selfish ass at times. But this! What you did to your brother, Jounouchi, then and now combined with lies when your brother’s life may be at stake, just to save your pride. I’m out of here. Pick up your stuff tomorrow. If you don’t, I’ll throw it in the street. My apartment is still in my name.” With a flaming gaze she turned and stalked away, leaving a stunned group in her wake. With one more look over her shoulder she snarled, “Don’t bother to try to get in. The electronic locks will be changed in just a few minutes.”

Mokuba stared after Rebecca, his mind completely blank with shock. The slamming of the front door brought him out of his stupor. With a cry he raced after her, stopping long enough to scoop up the
ring where it had fallen on the floor.

Aishira watched out the window as Rebecca peeled down the drive, Mokuba racing after her. “I like her now. She’s got guts and she knows both of them very well.”

“She’s too good for Mokuba though.” Matashi agreed. “He needs his ass spanked like the spoiled brat he is.”

“He’s not staying with us tonight. I can’t handle being around him.” Aishira was emphatic. He loved Mokuba but he couldn’t stand what he’d done to Seto. He needed time away from the selfish little snot.

“He’ll ask for a lift to a hotel.” Matashi didn’t agree or disagree. There had been too much drama and pain. He would follow Aishira’s lead in this.

“He can stay here. I’ll reset all the security. It will do him good to feel the solitude, the loneliness that Seto felt here the last few months. Let’s go. We won’t find anything here. You knew that when we found the ledger. He wasn’t planning a road trip, he wasn’t planning to return ever again. We both know it. Now we can only hope that whoever he’s with can help him get past that.” Matashi stood and took the laptop. “I have an urge to play RPG’s tonight.” He smiled crookedly. “Who knows, maybe an old friend will log on.”

Aishira nodded and turned to the door. “Let’s go.”

Mokuba was waiting for them on the steps. Tears streaked his face as sobs shook his slender body. He turned to Aishira automatically for comfort only to find his target evaded his touch. He faltered, his eyes widening in shock. “Aishira...” He husked in disbelief.

The man ignored him, brushing past him without a word. Matashi hesitated, then nodded shortly. “We’re leaving. I suggest you stay here. You might learn something about Seto here.” Not saying another word he climbed into the convertible and with a roar of the motor, they left Mokuba standing on the steps of his brother’s home.

****

Seto had never really ‘just gone with it’ and found himself oddly uncomfortable. He always had a plan or agenda, always moved from one task to the next. He’d never simply chosen to rest on his laurels. He was rested, fed, bored and completely nonplussed on what to do next. They’d caught the floating fish and Jounouchi had shown him how to clean them. Then the hot rocks in their oven had cooked them to perfection. It had been one of the best meals his gourmand spoiled tongue had ever encountered. Even the nutty, chewy roots had been delicious. But since eating they had simply sat quietly, Jounouchi smothering the fire, he playing with Scapegoat and a stick. His little pup was sitting in the shade and he was getting restless. Logically he asked the man in charge. “What needs to be done?”

Jounouchi, in the act of stretching and popping his back, gave him a quick look. “Done? Nothin’ really. We got enough food for today and tomorrow, we’re clean and our clothes are drying. I’m gonna get dressed and go pick some flowers and stuff to feed the fire later for prayers. But you don’t have to help me.” Perhaps the blond saw the hint of disappointment he felt, or maybe he was just being nice, but whatever the reason he added casually “Yer welcome to come though. But as nice as it is seen’ you run around naked, you’re going to have to put clothes back on. There might be resort people out this far. Not likely, but why take the chance? I’ma wear my damp clothes. It’s hot today so the water will keep me cool.” The blond shifted and stood easily. “The fire's out. Want to wear the stuff we washed or get somethin’ fresh?”
When in Rome... Seto thought. But he didn’t really mind. “Toss those to me.” He was taken aback when the shorts hit him in the face, followed by the shirt and boxers. “Hey! What do you think you’re...”

“Please and thanks go a long way.” The blond had the audacity to remind him as he turned away to dress. Seto shot him an evil glare and dressed hastily. Scapegoat, seeing their activity, bounced to his feet and trotted over, dancing eagerly. He loved going for adventures.

Seto grinned down at his little pup; the enthusiasm shown by the exuberant creature was catching. Heart lifting he followed the blond as he started down a faint trail. “You know plants Seto?”

Seto found he barely flinched at the casual use of his name. “No.” He kept his answer brief. When would he have had time to study the botany of any place? Not that he’d ever had the inclination. But really when would he have time? He had been busy.

“Okay, look most of these plants are harmless to touch but a few can make you itch and give you a rash so I’m gonna show you the ones to avoid.” He caught the half-serious, half-teasing look the blond sent him over his shoulder. “You get a rash I’ll have to put lotion on you. I know you’ll hate that.” He paused and all teasing faded from his eyes. “And please Seto don’t eat anything, not berries, not anything. Don’t even chew on a stick. There are a lot of plants out here that can make you sick, even kill you if you reat them.” Seeing the spark of interest the blond turned to face him fully. “I will not tell you which, just don’t eat any of the plants and you’ll be fine.”

Seto faltered for a second. That statement caught his attention. Jounouchi couldn’t possibly know... could he? “As if.” But he looked away from the too-knowing gaze.

“So...” Jou broke off and gripped his neck in agitation. Seto could see this was very important to him. “I... Look I’ve... I’ve been where you are. I know what you’re feeling, what you were feeling on the beach. You don’t have to talk about it right now. you’re probably gonna deny it, so save your breath. Just... Just know that I’ve been there okay? And no matter what you think, I’m here for you. Always was ‘til you pushed me away. When you’re ready to talk we’ll talk. Until then take one minute at a time ‘kay?”

Seto kept his face averted, he didn’t want to look at the blond, didn’t want to see the pity he was sure he’d see. Jounouchi knew he’d reached the end and for some reason, pity or whatever, had stepped in. It should have made him angry, should have shamed him, but somewhere buried within the darkness at his core a tiny light flickered to life. Someone knew, someone noticed - cared enough to notice. Something not even his friends or brother had not done. That flicker of light fanned a small spark of his lagging spirit.

“Hmph. Don’t compare us. You know nothing.” He couldn’t resist a small peek at the blond. A tiny grin crossed the expressively mobile features in response to his rebuff. His tiny spark had amused Jounouchi. Seto found himself torn between wanting to smile in return or turn away, and snarl. He settled for gesturing to a brightly colored blooming plant. “What are these flowers?”

There was silence for a moment, and if Seto had looked up he would have seen the tiny smile change to an understanding softness. “Salvia pachyphylla – rose sage– beautiful ne?”

Seto blinked, surprised to hear the Latin name. “Hnnn... You can read.” He deliberately needled.

“Read and write.” Jounouchi agreed cheerfully. “Stop picking at me. You got no need. I’m not going to let you get me mad. I told you, I’ve been there and that means I know what you’re doing. Stop being afraid or whatever. Look for a purple flower growing on a stalk. Kinda looks like an iris, but not. I’m gonna get a few of these so when you find the purple flower let me know. I got a bunch of ‘em I want to use.” A sad smile crossed his face. “Oli meant a lot to me so I want to honor him right.
He was the closest thing to a dad I ever had. There is a lot I want to express. I know he'll hear me and understand.”

“You had a father.”

“Yeah, in Japan. Still do. But he's not my Dad. There's more to being a dad than donating some cum.”

Seto didn't know what to say to that so he wisely changed the subject. “Purple, looks like an iris but not. Got it.” He nodded and turned to look around.

“Yeah, and don’t go wandering too far. I don’t want to have to find you. It gets dark fast here and even in California it can get cool.”

Seto rolled his eyes at the blond. He couldn’t help it. He was not an idiot. “What else besides the purple flower?”

Still giving him a cautious look that would have made a rambunctious toddler’s mother proud, Jounouchi nodded, “Look for a tree that has clusters of yellow and white flowers. The flowers are usually pretty high up because deer like to eat them. And a small bush, no higher than your knee with bright red blooms. Then there is a pretty pink and white stalk of flowers. Whatever you do don’t pick any orange flowers okay?”

“Got it. How many of each do you want?” He glanced down at Scapegoat as he danced around, nipping his shoes. The pup was anxious to explore. Seto found he was as well, much to his surprise. He loathed his fear of this place. He wanted to see it all. When night fell he would know there was nothing to steal his feeling of safety. Deliberately he turned his back on the concerned blond and strode off towards... whatever... his faithful puppy bounding through the plants beside him.

“Hey Seto! Two each should do it!” The blond called after him. Lifting his hand, Seto waved to signal that he’d heard. Eyes peeled for flashes of the required colors and plants, he went looking, completely unaware of the golden-eyed man who waited only long enough for him to crest the rise before ambling in the same direction.

Seto stalked along, glaring at the calm world of nature with eyes that challenged as they hunted. After a time though, the absence of sound - well, sound he considered normal - the absence of threats, and the simplicity of his surroundings soothed him. The sighing of the wind as it moved across the land, rustling the leaves and bushes, the occasional flutter of wings as he startled a bird, and even the low buzz of insects that flew around were noise, but a quiet kind of noise that he found strangely calming. Without thinking about it, he slowed his march to a relaxed stroll, and as time and the winds blew away his fear and anxiety, he slowed further, to a gentle meander. Beside him Scapegoat kept pace, only occasionally darting off to explore something that caught his attention.

Even the meander came to a halt under a tall spreading tree. Seto leaned there for a few minutes, breathing in the fresh air, perfumed by the plants around him. It was so gentle, so relaxed, and he was tired. He hadn’t slept the night before and with the peace and quiet around him, he decided to rest. Sitting down, he leaned against the scratchy tree trunk, called Scapegoat to him, and cradling the pup in his lap, closed his eyes and let the whisper of the wind take him away.

Scapegoat lay quietly in his master’s hands exactly as he’d been trained. It was hard, so very hard to lay still and not go looking around. He loved to play and explore, loved to feel the grass on his paws and smell the new scents on the air. This whole big open was so different. It called to him, making him want to forget what master taught him and run off, following scents he’d never encountered.
Bored and too excited to nap he watched as the other human, the one his master’s scent changed so strangely for, moved out of sight. Lucky human to get to go exploring. With a cross between a huff and a sniff he turned his back on the not-master human. It was too tempting to chase after him.

The birds chirped, the bees buzzed, and the bushes made all sorts of interesting rattles. Scapegoat couldn’t resist turning to look. Eager for adventure, his eyes scanned the low bushes for something fun to watch. A low snap, and a scent similar to the one he remembered from before master, from the time of warmth and softness, drifted across his nose. Instinctively he turned towards the sound and scent. Another like him crouched on the ground watching him with bright eyes.

Scapegoat was entranced. He’d hadn’t seen another like him since the before time. He’d smelled a few but never seen them. And this one was small, smaller than him, with a light fur that was a color almost the same as the master. The little other one rolled around, whining softly, inviting him to come play. Scapegoat whined back sadly. He couldn’t. Master trained him not to leave him.

For a while the other continued to wriggle and jump around, inviting him to play, but Scapegoat didn’t break his training. He knew his master would be unhappy. After a time the other gave up and wandered away. Scapegoat whimpered and lowered his muzzle to his paws, closing his eyes to the temptation around him. He wanted to play so much.

He was successful for about two minutes, then a yelp, far in the distance, but easily recognizable as the other from before reached his ears. Scapegoat stood quickly, his ears pricked forward alertly. He whimpered slightly when the yelp sounded again. Anxiously he turned to his master, nuzzling to wake him as he’d been taught. When his human simply sighed and patted him, and a third, longer, more pained yelp reached him; Scapegoat took off in a streak toward the sound.

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Jounouchi checked the flowers and plants he’d picked. Perfect, exactly what he wanted. Carefully he tied them in the bundle he’d made of his shirt and tied the shirt to his belt loop. Glancing up at the sun he saw it was setting. It was time to wake sleeping beauty and head back to camp. Resisting the urge to wake his ‘princess’ in the time honored tradition, Jou decided to call out to the slumbering brunet. “Yo! Seto! Wake up man!”

When he didn’t stir he tried again. “Seto!”

Not a flutter of a lash. An idea struck and he yelled, “Kaiba, get your butt up.”

Instant wakefulness. Seto wasn’t used to someone using his first name to wake him up. Interesting and kind of sad but once Jounouchi thought about it, not really unexpected. “I was... sleeping.” Seto was more than a little surprised. Judging by the setting sun he’d been out for most of the day. It was odd Scapegoat hadn’t woken him to go to the bathroom. That’s when he realized. Abruptly he sat up, looking around sharply. “Where’s Scapegoat?” He stood and called “Scapegoat!”

“Last I saw he was sittin’ on your lap. That was a couple hours ago.” Jou started to look around too. A domestic dog in this area, especially a tiny ball of fluff like Scapegoat was prime eats for some of the larger local animals.

“Shit.” Worried now he started to walk around only to freeze when Jou snapped “Stop! Don’t move. I don’t know a lot about tracking but I know some. If you move around too much I won’t be able to see what way he went.” The blond knelt next to where Seto had snoozed the day away.

Careful golden eyes took in every print and track. “Okay, he kinda jumped off you, you can see where he landed. The way his tracks are tearing the ground up I’d say he took off at a run. Somethin’
scared him I think.”

Seto knelt beside the tracks Jounouci indicated. Now that he was looking, he could see what the blond was referring to. “How do you know these are his?”

“They’re fresh dog tracks. How many squirrel-sized dogs you think been around here in the last few hours?”

Nodding to show understanding, focusing on the ground, following the distinctive prints, easy to see now that he knew what to look for, he turned to follow the trail.

Jounouchi keeping a wary eye around them as well as checking to make sure Seto stayed on the right course, kept pace.

One part of Seto focused on the tracks while another paid close attention to the encroaching shadows as the sun dipped lower on the horizon. He hated himself for his weakness, but the falling darkness, with its shifting shadows and strange, unidentifiable sounds were pulling at his psyche, fear rising as the darkness continued to fall. Desperate to find his friend and seek the dubious shelter of the car, he started calling out with every other step, walking faster and faster.

Jounouchi must have picked up his increased urgency, because his pace increased as well. Seto barely noticed. Full dark was descending when he found his way blocked by a huge bush with long dark thorns. “What the fuck now?”

“Now we stop until sunrise.” Jou’s voice was calm and quiet. “There’s a tree a few yards back. I’ll make a fire and we’ll rest.”

“Fuck that I’ve got to find him.” Seto wasn’t leaving Scapegoat out in the dark alone.

“We don’t have a flashlight. He is black, Seto. We could walk right by him and not know it.”

“He’d bark if he could hear us.” Seto pointed out coldly.

“Yeah? What if he can’t? What if he’s hurt? Look...” Jou couldn’t see in the faded light, but he could tell that Seto didn’t want to admit that Scapegoat could be hurt or worse. “This ain’t... You’re not stupid. You know damn well that your little pup is like bait around here. There’s stuff out here that would eat him in a heartbeat. Hawks, eagles, even owls. And if the birds don’t get him then the ground predators might. Coyotes, foxes, wolves, and mountain lions. His best bet is to stick with the dog he hooked up with and hope they avoid the big ones.”

“Dog? What are you talking about?” Seto wanted to punch the blond for daring to suggest his Scapegoat was harmed or but shooting the messenger never helped anything.

“You’ve been concentrating on your pup’s tracks. You haven’t noticed the other tracks going with him? They’re dog tracks, probably a pup by the size.” Weird that he’d have to explain to the normally observant Seto but Jou wouldn’t quibble about it. The brunet was under serious stress.

“Where would a pup come from around here?” Reasonable question for a man like Seto but Jounouchi shook his head as if Seto should have known the answer.

“Resort is only a mile away. The pup could be a from there; abandoned, stray or lost. Or it could be feral – a pup of a stray. Either case he’s leadinh your pup to wherever ‘cause you can see where Scapegoat stops and a couple times turns around and the other pup circles around him.”

“Shit.” Seto couldn’t believe he missed that. He must be going blind. “Probably some bitch in heat. I
never got him fixed.”

“Uh... might be a bitch... but probably too young for heat. She’s maybe his size even though his feet are smaller.”

“How could you know that?”

“The tracks are closer together by ‘bout half an inch. Smaller body than Scapegoat but bigger feet means she’s got some growin’ to do.” He turned away from the wall of bush and thorn. “Let’s get back to that tree. I’ll start a fire. Since we didn’t eat lunch we still got that food and water.”

“I’m not...” Before he could snarl his denial Jounouchi rounded on him and grabbed him by the arm.

“You are! You ain’t ate or drank all day. Best case would be if the pup is from the resort. They might be curled up in some nice camper or even at the hotel. If the pup is stray or wild then it probaably belongs to a pack and they’re at the pack’s den. Either way they aren't going to be possible to find in the dark. So come on.” Unable to fight the logic or his own impending panic at the darkness around them Seto allowed himself to be half-dragged back to a tree he didn’t remember passing.

Pretending to glare in the distance, wrapping his arms around himself in a pose he hoped looked angry instead of terrified, Seto sat by the tree while Jounouchi dug a pit. He ignored the blond’s request that he gather fire wood. He knew his limits and wasn’t moving an inch away from the hard security of wood at his back. When it became obvious he wasn’t going to move the other man growled and stomped off into the starlit twilight.

Once Jounouchi was gone, the night descended fully. Darkness enveloped Seto, shadows of pitch black in the newly fallen-dark danced around him, strange noises, like scurrying steps of thousands of tiny animals surrounded him, twigs and branches snapped in a wind that suddenly seemed full of strange, dangerous smells, overhead he could hear the cries of night birds as they hunted for their prey, stuck helpless on the ground, and flickers of light darted randomly around him.

Clutching his arms tighter around him, he closed his eyes to shut out the sights and mentally told himself how weak, pathetic and stupid he was being. Afraid of the dark like a child, no control or intellect, cringing like an infant afraid to sleep without a nightlight. There was nothing to be frightened of. The noises were the wind, the smells were the grass, trees and flowers mixed with animal musk. He had nothing to fear. There was no predator out here who could harm him. He was being ridiculous.

Despite his inward litany of self-castigation his fear continued to rise. His heart began to hammer, his breath started coming in short rasping pants, and a fine tremor breaking his iron control began to course through his long limbs. The physical betrayal of his own body was too much for his tenuous control. Even while the rational part of his brain shrieked warnings he sprang to his feet, ready to run, to take flight to anywhere to outrun the demons besetting him.

Before he could take a step Jounouchi’s voice, sounding blessedly normal, grumbled “Don’t bother! I got plenty. Just sit down. I’ll build the fire.”

Only the first instant of paralyzing fear stopped him from whirling on the blond and bolting into the shelter his arms. But after a few frantic heartbeats he assumed a modicum of control and slowly sank to the ground. In just a minute a flicker of light sparked, then blazed. As it gave off a comforting glow the shadows retreated to the fringes of his mind. Unconsciously he crept closer to the light, driving the darkness back.

Jounouchi was aware that Seto had crept closer to the fire, but he withheld his comments. The man
was worried and upset. Jou knew how that could be. Just because keeping busy helped him keep his mind off stuff didn’t mean it would help Seto. Plus, even in that worried state of mind and not knowing the area at all, hell not having been in a familiar habitat, the brunet had been coming to help so he had no reason to grumble. Carefully he warmed the wild yams he’d cooked earlier that morning.

Seto sat rigidly, staring at the flames as Jou warmed their dinner. He wasn’t hungry or thirsty. He terrified and mortified that the blond would see through the infamous Kaiba ‘stoic’ façade that was more the media and Jounouchi’s memories than in today’s reality. When Jounouchi offered him a warm tuber, he ignored the gesture and continued to stare at the flames. If he took his eyes away from the light he would lose himself in the darkness again, he knew it. Worse, the blond would know it and pity him. He couldn’t live with Jounouchi’s pity.

Jou sighed and set Seto’s dinner aside. He’d try to coax him to eat later. Savoring every bite, knowing it would probably have to last him through a long day of searching tomorrow, Jounouchi slowly devoured what should have been his lunch. During his entire meal Seto didn’t say a word.

The only way he knew the brunet was still alive was the slow even breaths and flicker of eyelashes. Girding himself for the blast of ice he was about to receive, he turned and gently placed his hand on the brunet’s shoulder.

“Seto you gotta eat something. You’ll need the energy tomorrow when we look for him.” Only the chirp of crickets answered him. Growling under his breath he shook the broad shoulder lightly. His touch was shrugged off roughly. “C’mon, you aren't doing anyone any good this way.” More cricket song. With a harsh sigh he snapped “Fine, but I’m going say my prayers and make my offerings. I refuse baby you any more today. For a grown-up genius you're acting like a stupid kid.”

With a huff Jou stood and stepped away from the fire, settling on an open patch of earth to center himself with the wind, sky, stars and earth. He needed to focus and open himself to the world around him and Seto’s pissy attitude would ruin this if Jou let it. He owed his friend more and he’d give it. In his frustration he missed the other man’s startled movement and Seto’s quickly controlled grab for Jou as he stepped away.

Seto barely stopped himself from jumping out of his skin when Jounouchi touched him. He hadn’t allowed himself to enjoy the warmth and slight comfort of that touch for more than a second before brushing it aside. It wouldn’t be good if Jounouchi felt the fine tremors of fear that were shaking his body. Using his peripheral vision, Seto watched the starlight-gilded blond sink down, crossing his legs and relaxing his arms, obviously focusing inward. A crackle in the fire sent shadows dancing and Seto’s heart racing.

Desperately he brought all his attention back to the flames. His focus was so intense he barely noticed when Jou began to sing in a low whisper as he fed the plants he’d gathered earlier into the devouring flames. Seto couldn’t distinguish Jou’s words, but the song’s basic rhythm matched the dance of the fire. As Jounouchi slowly enriched the swaying flames with symbolic plants and herbs the flames seemed to take on life of their own, faces and forms dancing in time to the low chant. Pungent smoke began to swirl perfect synch with the fire-captive beings before circling them both, tugging at Seto’s senses, pulling his mind into the beckoning flames, away from his fear and memories.

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The flame creatures welcomed him with a heat that didn't burn, dancing around him joyfully, somehow lighting the inner darkness that seemed to weigh him down, allow him to float free and move among them, to feel their passion, their rhythm, closer than he could feel his own heartbeat. For the first time ever, his controlled mind relaxed its barriers and he felt and saw a whole new realm. Dancing within the flames he tried to recognize the shifting shapes and faces. But they eluded him, changing from one beat to the next, shifting from something or someone familiar to something or
someone strange and exotic. Deep inside, a voice he recognized as that of the fire whispered 'Let them come. Only when you are truly free will they come.'

He didn't know what it meant, but he stopped trying to analyze and recognize everything around him. He was safe and warm, bathed in golden light. The dance of life surrounded him. He would simply accept it. Time and space had no meaning. Only the rhythm, the dance, mattered.

When the flames grew weary and began to wane, he cried with loss. His tears hissed as they hit the coals, and more of his companions disappeared. Pain and regret caused more tears, until they flowed like a rain from his eyes, snuffing out the flame, and still more tears flowed. He could see them now, falling to the ground, joining and merging, forming first a stream and then a river that raced forward, unfurling across the land under a dawn-lit sky. Low in the sky, flying over the river, was a great bird, it's wings spread in flight. Recognition poured through him - a Great Blue Heron, beautiful, regal and majestic. Somehow he knew the creature, knew the curve of it's wing and the way it would turn and look at him. It was as if he'd seen it before in a dream.

Far below where he hovered, on the river of tears, a speck floated, bobbing gently in the waves created as his tears continued to fall. As he watched the bobbing speck it became clearer, as if it were coming closer... or he were moving towards it... his breath caught as he recognized the second creature, another bird, a goose. Not a plain, brown and white goose, but one that was pure white with a black crest; a Snow Goose. He didn't question that knowledge any more than he questioned his knowing the heron.

Both birds were untamed, unfettered by anything or anyone. He could see their wild, unbroken spirit in the way they held their heads, the proud arches of their necks. These birds were strong and free.

A yearning rose from deep within, to fly as these creatures did, with no tethers to bind him. He wanted, needed, to know how they felt, to fly with them, unbound by anyone or anything.

Before he could stop himself he called out to them, asking them to show him their freedom, their strength. There was a hush in the world, even the winds blowing around him, supporting him aloft seemed to still. Then the majestic Heron turned and flew to him and the powerful goose rose from the water, coming at his call. He was stunned by their power and their strength as they flew to him, the heron flying on his left and the goose on his right. He tried to tell them why he called them, and his humility that they had come when he called. As they flew beside him he could feel a tingle of anxiety. For the first time it occurred to him that he couldn't fly as they did.

Touches softer than down and stronger than the wind told him he could fly as free as they and that they understood him. Words were not necessary. They would show him what he needed.

Following their lead, feeling wildness inside that he'd never acknowledged take hold, he dove forward, flying with the same reckless power he could feel emanating from his companions. Winds buffeted and clouds scuttled past. Far below the river of his tears flowed steadily onward, following his journey. Across the landscape he saw other animals, equally wild and free, watching him as he soared past. None joined them, but they all acknowledged him.

On and on he swooped through the sky, his companions keeping pace, sometimes guiding, sometimes following, but never taking his choice from him. More tears fell into the river. This time not tears of sadness, but tears of joy.

As if his tears were a sign, the great birds slowly began to descend, spiraling down to the ground to land gracefully. Seto knew, without words being said, that his time of flight had ended. Even as he fought the knowledge the Great Heron nudged him forward into a circle of dim golden light.

Remorse pierced Seto, because he recognized it as the fire that had led him on his journey. He'd
forgotten the joyful dancers in his quest for freedom. Now only a dim ember remained. Without thinking he reached for the glowing warmth, sighing contentedly as it embraced him tenderly. As the gentle warmth cradled him in safety he could feel exhaustion dragging him down. Trusting the warmth with the innocence of a child, he slipped into a deep sleep.

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Jounouchi breathed deep, drawing in the last of the lingering scents in the air. The smoke had cleared and with it his pleasantly relaxed trance. He was vaguely disappointed at being unable to go further into the state that would allow him to see his animal totems, but he knew it was not necessarily his fault. Sometimes his guides were mischievous, sometimes shy, and sometimes they didn’t come when they weren’t needed. He took their absence as a sign that he was on the right path and not in need of guidance. His journey this time had been a trip through the past. Visions of Kaiba Seto had poured through him. On the surface Kaiba had been the same as he’d been in high school, but Jounouchi had learned from his own animal spirits, Eagle and Platypus, to read beneath the surface.

The sharp eyes of Eagle Spirit had shown him the chains, hidden and disguised, that bound the other man. The echolocation of Platypus had shown him the fears buried beneath the chains and strength. When he’d recognized the fear the vision shifted and he flew beside his eagle, a hummingbird dancing ahead of him. Joyous welcome poured through him as he recognized his spiritual father’s totem.

The tiny bird flitted around him, greeting him like an old friend and Jou knew that this wasn’t just his friend’s totem any longer. His friend had assumed the form of his strongest messenger totem. Eagerly he embraced the message the small bird was sending. Care for the spirit... the spirit must heal...

Jounouchi heard his friend’s deep voice whispering all around him, directing him to watch Seto, to see everything, to help the pain of the other man. On both planes Seto began to cry and he felt the pain to his soul. A great river of tears formed in the spiritual plane. Jounouchi knew that the river represented the tears, not just of Seto, but of all mankind. Far below him he could see a great Heron and a Snow Goose flying beside an ephemeral spirit light. He knew down to his own soul that it was Seto. His friend and guides were giving him a gift – the gift of understanding – Kaiba Seto. Not just his heart and mind, but his very spirit and soul. He knew he couldn’t interfere, only watch and wait.

While Seto’s spirit soared free, Jounouchi watched over him, rejoicing in the wild beauty that he was seeing. Seto was completely unaware of his presence. His own spirit guides told him that was how it must be, less Jounouchi himself become a chain to bind the awakening spirit. And he knew they were right. He’d learned his life lessons well. He would bide, watch carefully and guide gently, just as his own friend had done for him. Sadness pierced him when he saw the newly-freed spirit begin to descend. He’d wanted Seto to soar free for so much longer, to have that joy. But it was not to be. Gradually he returned to himself, for just a moment disoriented to find himself weighed down by his own body before reality kicked in and the spirit dream faded.

Tenderly he cared for Seto’s body, wiping the tears from his face, offering him sips of water to ease his transition back to earth. He was surprised and moved when the tall body lurched forward into his arms, obviously seeking comfort and acceptance as he fell into a heavy slumber. Heart aching with too many emotions to name, Jounouchi wrapped him in his arms, cradling him to his chest, letting the soothing sound of his heartbeat sink into Seto’s unconscious, knowing that the first return from the spirit realm was disorienting and filled with conflicting emotions.

With a sigh that was part pleasure, part pain and a bittersweet smile in his heart, he closed his eyes, leaned back against the tree and slept.
Seto awoke to a pounding in his skull and the annoying twitter of birds. As instant recall of the night before filled his mind he shook his head slightly. What the hell had happened? He knew full well he hadn’t flown with birds. A heron? A goose? It was ridiculous. Whatever that idiot had burned in the fire had... With a gasp he realized he was sitting against something warm and soft, worse, something – someone – was holding him in a firm embrace. As there was only one other human around... Abruptly he scooted back, falling out of the warm lap he was sitting in and onto the morning-damp earth in an ungainly sprawl.

An amused, familiar voice drawled, “Take it easy there Seto. I know my morning wood is impressive but it’s nothing to be afraid of unless you want it to be?”

That brought his gaze up to the blond in a hurry. The teasing grin and twinkling eyes made him snarl “What the fuck did you put in the fire last night?” He ignored the throbbing in his head and the teasing and stood quickly, resolutely ignoring Jounouchi’s prominently displayed ‘wood’ and his own suddenly tighter pants.

“Genius brains are showing again. I found some Peyote and some poppies. Not a lot, just a few seeds but it was enough to relax us both. Some other stuff too, but nothing else as potent. Some of the other stuff explains our wood though. They are sometimes used as aphrodisiacs. I only used a little bit of each though so the effects won’t last long. In the meantime, you go north and I’ll go south.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Seto figured his mind must still be fogged with ‘stuff’ because he just didn’t understand what the blond was saying.

“Hellooo? Wood? Aphrodisiac? I don’t know about you but I’m feeling really uncomfortable. I need to take care of it, ’cause I am not around with blue balls all day. I’m going south and take the issue in hand. Unless you want to watch or help, you go north and do the same.”

Somehow the blond made it seem completely reasonable to discuss masturbating out in the open. Seto almost nodded in agreement before he growled and shook his head. “Fuck that!” When Jounouchi looked surprised and interested, Seto snarled as his face heated. That shit was really messing with his head. “God damn it not fuck me! Fuck that! Your dick can wait until we find Scapegoat. Then you can ‘go south’ all you want. Hell! Spend the day there. Whatever! Just... ugh! I’m going to look for Scapegoat.” Seto stalked off leaving a bemused, amused, and very interested blond staring after him.

Seto examined the wall of thorns where his pup’s tracks disappeared. There had to be a way through or around, but on one side was a sheer cliff and on the other several large rocks. He simply didn’t see a way around the huge thorn-laden bush.

Jounouchi watched Seto gather himself, obviously planning to step into the sharp edges despite his shorts and minimal shoes. “Seto wait. Come this way. There’s a wildlife trail going up through the rocks. We’ll follow it around to the other side.”

The brunet hesitated, then turned to where he’d indicated. Without a hesitation he stepped onto the faint path. “Scapegoat! Come!” He called sharply with every third step. Jounouchi, with a wary eye, followed him. The path hadn’t looked quite like a deer path. The grass had barely been disturbed, and he hadn’t found any cloven prints. He’d have to keep a lookout. He did not have a good feeling about this path.

They followed the path for several minutes before coming to a wide flat area. It was surprisingly
clear of plants except for the ever present thorny bush. And clearly crossing the expanse were two sets of small dog prints. Seto didn’t waste a moment, simply continued calling, as he followed the clear tracks.

The open land gave way to long grasses, but still the pup’s passage was clear. For Seto it was a relief, but for Jounouchi, he was seeing a disturbing pattern in the path they were taking. It exactly paralleled the path of the pups as if something - something large enough to leave a trail - was following the pups, stalking them. Mentally he began to send up prayers for the safety of Scapegoat. If something happened to that puppy, he truly didn’t know what Seto would do.

Seto continued to walk briskly, calling for his pup. They were getting closer, he could feel it. He was expecting his companion to bound out of the bushes at any minute. Tail wagging, panting and probably filthy, but totally exhilarated and overjoyed to see him. Heart lifting at the mental image, eager to see the bright, shining eyes of his friend, he called out “Scapegoat! Heel Boy! Let’s go home.” Ahead of him he could see what looked like the perfect spot for a pup to hide. Thick grass and bushes surrounding several large rocks. He’d bet his clever little pup had hidden down in the rocks the night before.

When the little fuzz ball didn’t appear he picked up his pace from a walk to almost a jog. It was just like his friend to want to play hide and seek this morning. He just knew when he broke through the bushes the pup would bound out at him, barking in almost a laugh.

His anticipation and happiness died abruptly as he pushed through the shrubs. The reek hit him like a fist, stopping him from taking another step as icy recognition poured through him; blood. Distinctive, hanging in the air thickly like an invisible shroud. Seto swallowed back bile as the taste of death coated his tongue on each breath and made himself look for details. The scent was old, not putrid, and drying rust covered the torn ground where a battle had obviously taken place. Short and vicious, between Scapegoat - the dog's marks were clear - and another, larger animal. The tracks it left were larger than the palm of his hand, and heavy, dug deep into the earth. They told a story that Seto read as easily as he read programming code. His puppy had entered this clearing but had not left it. No small dog tracks leading away. The end of the story was clear.

Still he had to ask, had to know. “Jounouchi...” He asked in a thin voice. “What is it?”

“Mountain Lion. The M shape of the print and the size. They... Seto... the tracks end here. The cat weighs about seventy pounds. They’re fast and deadly. Alpha predators. If he didn’t eat them here he would have cached them somewhere. Seto we have to get out of here! It ain’t safe for us. This is his front yard, his hunting grounds. We’re like pizza delivery to him only we’re the pizza too. They’re man-eaters, Seto! We have to go now.” Jounouchi’s tone was urgent, almost panicked. A mountain lion was nothing to mess with.

“No.” Seto could see the evidence, see the blood and the tracks, but something in him wouldn’t let him stop. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He and Scapegoat were to be together. This shouldn’t have happened. He’d failed his friend and broken the promise he’d made to always protect him. “No. I have to see... I have to... we’re supposed to be together.” Without blinking, never realizing the tears falling from his eyes, Seto stepped back onto the trail of the great cat.

Jounouchi couldn’t keep back his sharp “Are you fucking nuts? Didn’t you just hear me? They kill men! They clamp on their necks and suffocate ‘em. Then they stick ‘em on the ground and eat off ‘em ‘til there’s nothing left. I ain’t no fucking catnip and neither are you.”

Repeating himself was something normally Seto hated but this time he didn’t notice when he did so.
“We were supposed to go together.” Tears falling faster, Seto kept moving. If that wasn’t enough to freak the blond out, the flat, empty tone was back in Seto’s voice. This time the chills it gave him started at the top of his head and reached down to the soles of his feet. He knew absolutely that Kaiba Seto wanted to die, fully intended to find the lion and die like his little black dog, his friend – his Scapegoat.

Panic and pain crashed inside him. He couldn’t let that happen. He had to find something, anything to pull Seto out of his self-destructive cycle. But he’d never been able to influence the brunet before and he wasn’t sure where to start now. Going with what he knew of the past he asked “What is Mokuba doing these days?”

For several seconds Jou thought he wouldn’t answer, and then in that bone chillingly empty voice, the brunet said “I wouldn’t know. Since he and Rebecca got engaged we don’t speak.”

“Huh?” Okay he could work with that. It was probably one of the triggers. “Why not? Don’t you like Rebecca?”

“I couldn’t care less about her. He is a faithless cheat and...” Abruptly he broke off. Perhaps he heard what Jounouchi heard, a note of anger that corroded the emptiness. It buoyed him slightly. If Seto could get angry then somewhere he still cared. It was a link worth following.

“Hard words. What...” But his gambit stuck in his throat as the tall brunet came to a sudden stop, sending Jou crashing into his back.

Ignoring the other man, Seto gazed around him with dark recognition. He wasn’t any kind of specialist, but he didn’t need to be to recognize a killing ground. They stood in the predator’s kitchen. Bones from various animals, small and large, littered the area in random heaps. Mounds of earth rested side-by-side with pits where other bones and were half buried in the dirt. His stomach churned as he caught sight of a fresh mound. Scapegoat and his new friend were buried in that small mound. He knew it as surely as he knew his own name. Pain tore through him and he took a deep breath to control his immediate desire to go to that pathetic little bump in the earth. Unconsciously he wrinkled his nose at the scent of dirt, old death and rotting carcasses, no longer blown away on the morning breeze, assaulted him. Insects buzzed and from far away, almost in a dream, he heard the birds that had annoyed him earlier chirping in the distance. But here the air was heavy, stagnant with death and decay. It felt like he’d never take another clean breath again.

Breathing as shallowly as possible, Seto looked around for signs of two-legged victims. He was half relieved, half disappointed when he didn’t see any obvious human remains, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. Some of the mounds were large enough to hold a man. Whatever was in those mounds were not going anywhere. The gnawed and broken bones told him that the animals that had come here were dead or very near dead, and would be consumed by what he could only assume was the large cat Jounouchi had described earlier.

“Seto...” He felt Jounouchi step beside him, rubbing against him shoulder-to-shoulder. With a frown he turned to warn the other man away only to bite back his words. Jounouchi hadn’t ever deliberately hurt him, hadn’t ever done more than try to be his friend. Tenderness welled up inside as Seto realized this would likely be the last words he ever spoke to the blond. Did he really want them to be harsh when for years he’d regretted cutting the man off?

Tenderly he reached out and pushed the tumbled blond hair from Jounouchi’s forehead. “Sh... You understand right? I can see it in your eyes. You have to go now, go back the way we came. I don’t blame you for anything and I want to say thank you for what you tried to do. After everything that
happened, you cared enough to try to help me when nobody else did. That means more to me than anything else. I thought... never mind what I thought. Go! I led you here, but I don’t want you hurt.”

Jounouchi stared up at the tall, proud man for a moment, his mind working furiously. Yeah he was scared shitless, but not just of the cat. He couldn’t let this happen. He wouldn’t let it happen. It wasn’t fair or right. Seto had been responsible, caring and yes, damn it loving, all of his life and he didn’t deserve to die like this. There was no way... Then an idea struck. Yeah it was dirty, but there were no rules in a fight like this. Ignoring what the brunet said, Jounouchi snarled, “You selfish, murderous asshole. You’re sending me off as bait? What the fuck? It’s out there right now, watching and waiting for one of us to be alone. I head off by myself and I’m cat-chow. You might want to die but I don’t. If we split up we both die. It’ll kill us both and we’ll have matching holes in the ground.” It was true – probably. But it was also a power play because Jounouchi knew Seto’s sense of responsibility would force him to see him to safety. Once they were back at the car Jou would grab Seto and bring him to the nearest psych ward. Screw holistic medicine and self-help, Seto needed some serious drugs if he was considering becoming walking cat-chow.

Horror and shock poured through Seto. Jounouchi was absolutely correct. There was no safe way for them to split up. They would both end up dead and that was not his goal. He was amazed he hadn’t seen it before. With a hard sigh at the delay of his plans, he nodded sharply “Fine we’ll both go back, but if the cat attacks you take off. I’ll distract it.”

Jounouchi wanted to argue, but decided against it. It was a huge concession and if they stayed together they would probably get out of this alive – both of them. If a mountain lion was going to attack an adult human it would usually wait until they were alone. “The resort is closer. We gotta tell them about the mountain lion. They usually aren't this close to humans so we have let ‘them know. It looks like he’s been here a while but they might not know about him.” Jounouchi turned back to the path they’d followed. “We’ll go this way. Not a chance in hell I’m gonna go into the trees. I want a lot of time to see it coming.”

Seto fell in step behind him, scanning the surrounding area closely. He had to get Jounouchi back to safety. As he stepped forward he kicked something that tinkled as it landed. He bit back a cry as he recognized a leather collar. It was filthy, stained with something he didn’t want to identify, but clearly a dog collar – with part of a leash attached as well as a set of tags. He bent and scooped it up, tucking them in his pocket. Perhaps the owner of dog who’d worn those tags would need answers. It wasn’t much, but it was the least he could do.

The trek to the campgrounds was silent. Both men were on the lookout for any sign of attack. Seto, to protect Jounouchi, and Jounouchi to protect them both. As soon as they reached the edges of the resort area they breathed twin sighs of relief. Seto gripped Jounouchi’s shoulder, spinning him around. “Take this.” He held out the collar with its jingling tags. “Make sure the owner knows... knows. I’m going back to look for Scapegoat.” It was a weak excuse and they both knew it, but when asked Jounouchi would relay it with absolute honesty.

Jounouchi stared at the brunet fiercely. Damn it Seto hadn’t changed his mind. The freaking idiot was going to see a shrink ASAP, even if he got there unconscious. “Do it your damn self if it’s so fuckin’ important to you.” Without giving the other man a chance to protest, he grabbed Seto’s arm and dragged him toward the building with the ‘Office’ sign. No way was he letting the depressed psycho go without a fight.

A pretty blonde girl at the desk smiled politely, just the way a hospitality worker does when confronted with potential guests. “Hi! Welcome to Lake Vail Resort! My name is Stephanie Arnault. What can I do for you?”
Jounouchi returned the smile for an instant before explaining “You have a mountain lion less than a mile from here. It took out our dog yesterday.”

The girl’s smile faded and she reached for the phone. “We’ve had a couple of potential sightings, nothing confirmed. What makes you think it’s a mountain lion?”

“The tracks are big cat tracks, distinctive ‘M’ shapes.” Jounouchi sent Seto a sidelong glance. “Found his cache area. Lots of mounds and bones scattered. Most are gnawed and chewed down. It’s a big one.”

The girl nodded to show she heard even as she spoke to someone on the phone. "Could you come to the office please? Customer needs to speak to you. You need to call Randy as well." A moment of silence, then "Okay thanks. See you in a minute. I'll bring them in to the office." She replaced the receiver in the cradle and nodded towards a door behind the desk. "Come sit in the office 'til my mom gets down here please? She's gonna call Randy, the Fish and Game Ranger to come over. My mom and me run it since my dad left." The girl shrugged and ushered them into an air-conditioned, distinctly feminine office. "Have a seat. It won't be but a couple minutes." The girl paused and glanced at them over her shoulder “Can I get you guys something to drink? Soda? Water?”

Seto started to murmur a polite negative when he realized just how thirsty he was and reversed his response. “Yes please. Water.”

Jounouchi concealed his surprise. Dying men didn’t have water as a last meal. “I’d like a glass of water too. We’ve walked a lot in the last couple days.”

“I’ll get you some room temp bottled then. You don’t want to puke. Too much cold on an empty stomach, after being in the heat can do that. At least that’s what my dad used to say.” With a quick nod she left them.

They were sipping appreciatively on their bottled water when a blonde woman surgically enhanced to resemble the girl at the desk’s older sister, strode through the door. Her bottle green eyes skimmed over them with lightning fast assessment, seeing their dusty, threadbare clothes and uncombed hair. Although she smiled politely, Seto could see the disdain in her gaze. It wasn’t an expression he was used to seeing on any face. Unconsciously his face assumed it’s most haughty mask, his lips twisting in a disgusted sneer as his blue-ice eyes bore into hers with absolute contempt.

The woman faltered, her face losing it’s disdainful mask, eyes flickering with something that could have been apology. Seto didn’t care. He kept his merciless gaze on her as she fumbled for a greeting. "Uh... Hello, so... sorry to uh... to keep you waiting. I um... I am Trish Arnault, the owner of the resort. How may I help you gentlemen?"" Still faltering, she stepped behind the desk, her movements jerky and out of sync.

When Seto would have lambasted her with a comment doubting everything from her ability to help to her ability to breathe, Jou stepped in. “There is a mountain lion in the area. Its cache is less than a mile from here. Our pup went missing yesterday afternoon. We followed his tracks until nightfall, and then camped out overnight to get an early start. We followed his tracks until we found where he was attacked. The mountain lion... the ground was torn up and blood was... well we tracked the lion hoping our pup was only hurt or ... something. The trail led us to the lion’s cache. He’s been here a while and is active.”

“You know mountain lion tracks from say a bobcats?” It was obvious she was skeptical that a mountain lion could be that close.

“Yeah, size is a biggie. A bobcat’s track is no more than two inches. These were four and a half to
five inches. Front and rear. Also weight. The depth of the prints... They were made by a heavy cat.” Jou explained patiently. He’d expected this. Mountain lions are rare and endangered, plus man-shy. They did not generally make their home near humans when there was a wilderness they could hide in.

A light knock at the door interrupted them. An older man in a pale green and khaki uniform stood holding his hat, looking at them curiously. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt. I heard what you said. I’m Randy Arnault, the ranger here and Trish’s brother-in-law. Can you guys show me the areas you found?”

Jounouchi hesitated, glancing at Seto. Seeing the icy glare still directed at ‘Trish’ he figured it was safe enough. “Yeah, but I gotta tell you, bring a couple more guys with guns. This thing has a lot more mounds than is normal. From what I read they eat a big kill once every ten days. Bury it and eat off it. There were three large mounds. Two were freshly dug.”

“Large? How large?” Concern darkened the hazel brown eyes of the other man.

“Big enough to put a man in. And we know our pup wasn’t the only dog he’s gotten.” Jounouchi turned to the gimlet-eyed brunet. “Show him the collar you found.”

Without saying a word he took out the collar with it’s cheerful jingle of tags and laid it, with the chewed leash on the table. Their response was electric. The hotel owner gasped “Phoebe!” Her face turned bone white as she desperately grabbed it off the desk, her hands shaking so hard she almost dropped it. The ranger made a harsh, choked cry as the woman turned to him. “Oh god! Randy! It’s Phoebe’s collar and leash. It... he... Mountain Lion! Randy!” She babbled incoherently.

The ranger was dead pale too as he examined the collar and tags. “Yes, it’s Phoebe’s.” Without a word to either of the men he pulled out his radio and ordered people named Bill and Alex to bring ATV’s and to load them for large cat.

Just then the girl from the desk popped her head in. “Hey you guys want anything to eat...” Her voice broke off abruptly and she shrieked, “Phoebe’s collar! Mom where did you get it?”

The older woman was obviously beyond words. She simply gestured to Seto. The girl turned on him with wide begging eyes and frantic hands. “You found Phoebe. Where is she? And Dad – where is he? Why didn’t he come with you? Where is he? Tell me please?” She was gripping Seto’s shirt in white-knuckled fists yanking him half up out of his chair.

“I...” Seto frankly didn’t know what was going on or what to say, so he stuck to the truth. “I don’t know anything about your father or Phoebe. I found that collar at the mountain lion cache site. I brought it back thinking the owner might want to know what happened to their pet.” Too late he caught sight of Jou’s frantically shaking head. Sick with the realization of what may be going on he reached out to the girl only to find she had backed away from him, holding her hands to her mouth and shaking her head.

“No.... Daddy would have never left Phoebe out there alone. She was pregnant and he... He... He wouldn’t have left her.” Then the full import of what she said, of what she knew of her father and mountain lions hit her and she began to choke as she fought the gagging sobs of horror at what may have happened. Her mother’s wails joined in a cacophony of grief.

Seto mentally kicked himself for being an idiot then took matters in hand. “Shut up!” He ordered sharply to the keening women. “Right now you know that a mountain lion had hold of the collar and leash. That’s all you know. Save the tears and hysterics until they’re needed.” And hopefully he was long gone. Damn women were annoying with their screeching dramas. Deliberately he ignored his...
own choked and smothered grief for his little friend.

His hard tone silenced mother and daughter, terrified them too if the way they moved together and
clung was an indicator. Seeing they were under control he turned to the ranger. “How long until your
men get here?”

“The ATV’s are ready, they just had to grab the feline kits and get here. They are about three miles
away. So they should be here in about ten minutes.” Though still pale, the man was holding it
together. Seto could respect that. And right now he had other needs. Ten minutes would be plenty of
time. “Fine. Where is the bathroom? I’d like to use the facilities.”

Surprisingly the girl spoke up. “I’ll show you guys.” She shot her mother and uncle a quick look, her
eyes lingering on the collar still clutched in her mother’s hand. “Follow me.”

Seto and Jou both stood and hurried after the girl. Once they were clear Jou said “Thanks for
showing us the way.”

“No prob. I hate pissing in the woods too.” She hesitated a second, her step faltering. “It really was a
mountain lion?”

“Yeah.” Jou wouldn’t lie about it. He knew false hope would be crueler in the long run. “But that
don’t mean...”

“I know but it’s likely. I... Phoebe was my dad’s dog. A pure blood Sheltie. When he disappeared
we thought he ran off and took her with him. He... he and mom were fighting. He had a Hog with a
sidecar and... And he jumped on it after the fight and took off. Phoebe jumped in the sidecar with
him. She was pregnant and dad was as proud of that litter as anything.” She shrugged uneasily.

“That was almost five months ago. We did a missing person’s report and there were tips from all
over the state. Mom figured he took off and would come back when he cooled off. But he... he
didn’t come back. She told me she was filing for divorce if he wasn’t back by six months.” Tears
shimmered in her eyes. “Now he may never come back.”

“Touching. I need to use the facilities.” Seto intoned dryly. He didn’t know how to deal with her
drama, nor did he have the emotional resources to take on anyone else’s pain.

That made her blink and look at him with a kind of hurt bewilderment. “Uh... yeah. The blue door
on the left.” She said blankly.

With a brisk nod the brunet left the dumbfounded girl in the hall. Needing some kind of reassurance,
maybe just that the brunet was human, the girl turned to the blond standing in the hall. She was
further stunned when she saw the blond was staring after the man with a small smile on his face, as if
he approved of his actions. She couldn’t contain her tiny squeak.

Jounouchi looked back to her with apologetic eyes, but still wearing that same smile. “Forgive my
friend. He just lost his pup and...” Abruptly he broke off and shook his head, smile fading. “Nah, I
ain’t gonna lie to ya. He’s a jerk and an asshole. He don’t deal with emotions and gets cranky when
he’s around drama...” The smile peeped out again. “I’m so glad to see him bitchy.” Without
explaining that remark, he followed the brunet into the bathroom.

Completely lost, Stephanie shrugged to herself and went back to her duties. Guys were so weird –
even gay ones like those two. No wonder she preferred girls.

Seto was taking care of business when Jounouchi joined him at the urinals. The brunet braced
himself for a session on being nice to girls whose fathers had been eaten. He was surprised when no
lecture was forthcoming. The only sound he heard was the tinkle of piss on porcelain and a long sigh of relief. While washing up he peeked at Jou in the mirror. “You got a comment?” He didn’t care what the idiot had to say, not really. He’d just rather get it over with.

“Nope.” Jou tucked and zipped, then moved across to wash his hands.

Seto found that hard to believe. Jounouchi had always been a soft touch for women’s tears. Everyone knew it. He wasn’t going to believe that the second-rate duelist had changed that much. “Hnnn... Just spit it out so I can ignore it.”

“Nah, I haven’t got anything to say about it.” He waited a second then added “But if I was gonna say something it’d be, ‘Damn it’s good to see you again, Kaiba Seto.’”

“What are you babbling on about?” That baffled Seto.

“Just that I miss your asshole attitude sometimes. I mean, I like that you’re all nice and polite and you’re not all fussy and shit. But it ain’t the Kaiba Seto I know, if you see what I mean? I’m kinda glad to see somewhere down deep you’re still an asshole ‘cause it means you haven’t changed too much.” Casually he reached out and ruffled Seto’s hair. “Besides, I know why you did it. Tears and hysterics bug you and you felt bad for not pulling your punches. You may not have comforted them but you gave them what they needed to see this through. That’s more important than mopping up their tears.”

Seto grabbed the hand ruffling his hair, jerking it away and holding it tight. “Who said you could touch me?” If the idiot wanted an asshole he’d get one.

“I did.” Understanding lit the depths of his golden eyes. “Don’t force it. I want what you want to give. No more and no less. You don’t have to be anything but who you are for me. I like the guy I see in you. All of him, the asshole, the lonely man on the beach, and the person you’re not even aware of yet that looks at me like I’m someone he cares about.” Tenderly he ran his free hand through the tangled locks, finger combing them into a semblance of order. “And don’t snarl at me either ‘cause it’ll just prove I’m right. You hate it when I’m right and it’ll make you mad.” He grinned wryly. “And don’t look so confused either. You’re too cute that way and I’ll do somethin’ you’ll punch me for.” Still grinning he reversed Seto’s grip on his hand and tugged him towards the door. “If you gotta take a dump say so now. We won’t see a toilet for a while.”

“I’m fine.” But he wasn’t. Inside there was a mix of confusion, fear, and just a touch of amusement. It felt wrong when his best friend, his Scapegoat, had just been killed. There was something wrong with him to feel anything close to laughter. Despite his misgivings, he didn’t remove his hand from Jou’s hold, allowing the blond to pull him along. He didn’t return the clasp, but he didn’t pull away either. Something that he was sure Jounouchi, the surprisingly perceptive and caring Jounouchi, had noticed.

Seto had expected two men with vehicles. What he found was four vehicles and six men, all of whom wore green uniforms and big hats. He couldn’t help but notice three of them carried pistols.

Ranger Arnault was all business as he explained why he’d called the men and relayed Jounouchi’s story. To emphasize his point he held up the stained collar with it’s frayed leash. The men looked at them with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. One of the other rangers nodded briefly and asked “Have you called the sheriff? And animal relocation?”

Randy’s expression was stricken as he realized how short he’d fallen on performing his duties. “Not yet. I thought we’d handle it.”
The other ranger shook his head. “Nah, best if we call the sheriff. He can record the area and any evidence. Relocation is a last resort but in this case it’ll be necessary. Too many kids come here. They can take possession when or if we tranquilize it.” He didn’t wait for the disturbed man’s nod. He called the sheriff right away. They milled around impatiently. A potential man-eating mountain lion was a lethal threat. They were anxious to get started.

“Alright guys check your gear and get back here. Make sure the rifles are loaded and make sure the tranqs are not expired.” The man’s gaze gained focus as he looked at the two civilians. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your names.”

Jounouchi smiled. “Understandable. I’m Joey Wheeler and this is Seto Kaiba. Our wallets are back with the car. We’re camping out about four miles from here on the bend at Horseshoe Creek.”

“So Kaiba? There was a broadcast about you on the police scanners. You’d had an accident and your family is worried.” Randy’s eyes widened in surprise, his gaze reassessing the brunet. He could clearly see the resemblance now that he knew what to look for.

“I called my family and told them I’d decided to take a road trip.” He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal for the head of a multi-billion dollar company to take off on a moment’s notice. “I would rather they not find out where I am. I don’t want to be bothered. I’m on vacation.”

“Still weren’t you in some kind of accident?” The ranger suggested as he turned to the blond. “Joey Wheeler from Hot Wheels and Cool Country Roads?”

A blush covered the younger man’s face. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“Your camp over on the Horseshoe. It’s described perfectly. We didn’t think you’d come back this year. Oli died didn’t he?” There was sympathy and admiration in the other man’s expression.


“I see. Number six isn’t it?” Randy smiled faintly, but it didn’t lift the darkness in his eyes.

“Yeah. I uhm... I’d appreciate you not telling anyone please. My identification is in the car, like Seto’s. I... It would...” He broke off to gesture expressively.

“Got it. You’ll have to tell the Sheriff but I’ll just call you Joey and him Seth.” Seeing the move of rejection by the brunet he explained “Seto is not common and it’s being splashed around a lot right now.”

“Hnnn I will definitely call home. Call me Kai. I am originally from Japan and hold to that societal norm. Only close friends and family may use my first name and I despise the name Seth.” Seto corrected firmly. He didn’t appear to notice that he’d just implied he and Joey were close friends or family.

Joey did and a deep glow lit his eyes as tender smile flickered across his lips. Seto didn’t realize it, but he’d confirmed a long held hope for the blond. Even though the brunet had made a screw face at the use of his name, he’d never once protested Jou’s use of it. Kaiba Seto cared for Jounouchi Katsuya. He either didn’t realize it or was in deep denial. Jou could live with that – for now.
“Kai...” The ranger nodded slightly, caught by Joey’s suddenly luminescent gaze. “All right. I’ll introduce you guys by Joey and Kai.”

Seto turned to look at Joey and wanted to curse for the first time in who knew how long. With his golden eyes brilliant with some undefined emotion and the tiny smile tugging at his mobile lips, he was too beautiful for Seto’s vulnerable state of mind. The brunet fought the urge to step close and curl into the arms he was almost positive would lift to embrace him, public or not. If he was right then his need to be held would mean more to Joey than other people’s opinions. He didn’t know why the other man cared but he was beginning to believe that he did. More confusion and tiny sparks of something he didn’t recognize danced through him. With a mumbled “Facilities.” He dashed back to the dubious calm behind the blue door.

Jounouchi watched him go, his smile growing wider. How had he ever thought Seto was impossible to read? The yearning and panic in those deep blue eyes had been as clear as a neon sign. Heart lifting like a helium balloon, he turned to the cluster of rangers to get names and ask questions.

Seto hadn’t returned when the sheriff arrived about ten minutes later. Jounouchi was just going after him when the brunet came out of the bathroom. “Hey the sheriff’s here. You okay? You don’t have to go. I can show them.”

“I’m fine. I decided to ‘take a dump’ as you so elegantly put it. I don’t want to have to relieve myself outdoors while a killer cat is on the loose.” Seto snapped, confusion and yearning firmly under control. Not looking at the blond he stalked back into the lobby.

Jounouchi controlled his urge to grab the other man and hug the stuffing out of him. That was the first time Seto said something that indicated a willingness to live of his own will. It wasn’t much but it was a damn sight better than a few hours before when the suicidal idiot wanted to be left for cat-chow. Jounouchi gladly followed, standing quietly next to him as they waited for the Sheriff to speak to them.

After a few minutes private conversation with Randy he nodded briefly and walked over to Seto and Jounouchi. “I’m Sheriff Travis. Ranger Arnault has already told me who you guys are. I’ll call you Joey and Kai as well. You two are riding with me. You two are riding with me. I’m in a heavy duty all terrain vehicle. It has an enclosed cab and is the safest. It also seats four comfortably. Randy will be joining us. The other rangers along with two of my deputies will follow us while you guys point the way. Under no circumstances are you to leave the cab of the vehicle. If there is trouble use the radio for help.”

“What about Relocation?” Randy asked as he joined their group. The other men had cleared out.

“They will be here within two hours. Deputy Campbell is an expert with animal restraint. He did four years with Relocation before coming to the Sheriff’s department.” With a curt jerk of his head, he motioned them to follow.

“Buckle up.” As the vehicle that was a cross between a tank and a four-wheeler rumbled to life, he reminded them with a grim look and keyed his microphone so all vehicles could hear. “Which way?”

“We came in from the west following a dry creek about half a mile down. No dense brush for several yards so we figured it was safe. There’s a shallow bank that you will be able to go up and you’ll catch the cat’s trail. It’s faint but there.”

“Lawson’s Gully. Okay, you heard him. Let’s head out.” The sheriff may have ordered them to head out but no vehicle moved until his rolled forward. As their convoy slowly crawled into the arroyo the attitude in the vehicle was so heavy Joey was startled when the Sheriff spoke, “Mister Kaiba, do you want to use my phone to call your family?” He picked up the small device and offered it over his
shoulder. Couched as a question, it was clearly a demand.

Seto, reminded of what the ranger said about police broadcasts, took the phone and dialed in the call blocking code then Aishira’s private office line. It would roll to his cell if he wasn’t in the office. It was answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

Unexpectedly Seto felt a slight lump in his throat at the familiar voice. He truly cared for his friends. He didn’t want to tell them about Scapegoat. “Hello Aishira.” His voice was soft and vaguely unsteady.

“So!” The shriek was clearly audible to everyone in the ATV cab. “Where are you? What’s going on?”

“I thought I was clear about where I am. I’m on a road trip, taking a vacation. What is this about the police? Since when is a vacation a legal matter?” He wanted to sound sharp but instead it came out low, almost sad.

“So, you didn’t say! You never have before. We didn’t know! And... The satellite feed showed... it looked like you were kidnapped.” In the background he could hear Matashi murmuring urgently, then Mokuba’s loud voice demanding to speak to him.

“I wasn’t kidnapped. An old friend stopped to see if I was all right and invited me on his road trip. I was planning to be gone for a while, so I decided to go along. I... I need time to reevaluate.” Seto’s voice firmed and became resolved.

“So... I am... glad your old friend stopped to see you. If you need time for yourself then take it just come home to us.” Underlying knowledge and remorse shaded every word. Seto knew his perceptive friend had put together what he’d planned.

“I will enjoy my trip.” He promised softly. “And I’m glad he stopped too.” The loud voice of Mokuba intruded again.

“So...” Aishira’s voice was tentative. “Mokuba wants to speak to you. Do you want to speak to him?”

The question told him that his friends had figured out that he and Mokuba were not close any longer. “No. No, I don’t want to talk to him.”

“All right.” To the listening Seto there was a note of almost glee in Aishira’s voice when he told Mokuba that Seto didn’t want to speak to him. Then the loud voice turned to a shriek as Mokuba demanded the phone. He needed to talk to his brother. Seto didn’t understand, didn’t know that Rebecca had left him.

A clutch of panic and hard surge of anger ripped through Seto. Mokuba was free? Did that mean... Unconsciously he turned his eyes to the blond sitting next to him. Would Mokuba want Jou back? He immediately rejected that. He’d given up without a fight before, but hadn’t Mokuba proven he didn’t deserve Jou’s heart? Damn it, he wouldn’t give him up without a fight again. Jounouchi cared for him, he was almost positive. Given time and patience... His thoughts came to a screeching halt.

Time... If he carried through with his original plan then Jounouchi would never be his. He had no right to interfere with his life or finding happiness with anyone. In that instant he saw his two paths. The first led to an eternal rest, freedom from the empty loneliness that plagued him and a surcease of the heavy weights that dragged him down. The second path was rocky and filled with shadows and pitfalls, but at the end of it, shining through the shadows were glimpses of golden light and warmth.
that beckoned irresistibly. Without hesitation he took his first step on rocky ground. “Tell Mokuba I’m with my boyfriend. We don’t want to be bothered with his issues. Tell him to leave me and Jounouchi alone. He wanted the entertainment parks, they’re his. He can run them. He wanted Rebecca – she’s his as well. He can take care of her. She’s not my problem.”

His new boyfriend’s blond head swiveled so fast his neck gave an audible crack that nearly drowned out the three gasps from inside the cab. Seto watched Jounouchi’s stunned look and pink cheeks with interest. He took the lack of protest as a good sign. “Now I’m going to help capture a mountain lion. Aishira, take care of Matashi for me.” Decisively he clicked the phone shut and handed it back to the sheriff. He didn’t take his eyes off his ‘boyfriend’ for a second. When Jounouchi’s mouth worked several times without uttering a sound he lifted a brow and asked coolly, “Comment?”

Dark color flooded Jou’s cheeks and his lips thinned before he shook his head and turned away. Seto fixed his gaze on the two men in front. He was interested to see an amused, smug smile pass between them. “You have something you want to say?” He challenged the older men.

Randy grinned wryly. “Not really. It’s just that now I owe my husband five bucks. I bet him you guys weren’t together.”

Sheriff Travis chuckled. “I’ll collect too.”

“Husband?” Seto asked softly. “You were married when it was legal here?”

“The first day. We weren’t taking any chances that they’d reverse the decision. Which they did.” Randy admitted.

“You guys been together long?” Joey asked.

“We got together our second year high school, almost twenty-five years ago. We fought like cats and dogs in elementary and junior high though. It was all the hormones. We didn’t know what to do with them all.” The sheriff bragged unashamedly.

Joey let out a low whistle. “Some record. How do you do it?”

“It helps that we both carry guns.” Randy chuckled. His laughter was cut short when a crackle on the radio and a man’s voice reported “Sheriff, this is Mason. Traner says he thinks he sees some scat on the bank. Don’t go up until we check it out.”

Immediately the vehicle slowed from a crawl to a stop. All other vehicles behind them stopped as well. Randy pulled out his binoculars and scanned the area they were to go up. “Right in the middle. You guys came down that way, did you notice any scat?”

“Nah, I didn’t see any. Lots of tracks though.” Jounouchi held out his hand for the binoculars. “May I?”

“Yes sure. It’s the black dot about fifty feet away. It...” But Jounouchi had gasped and sat back. Nimble hands plucked them from his eyes. He’d seen the pile of cylindrical-shaped waste as if it were just a few feet in front of him.

“Here you go.” As he handed them back to the ranger, he couldn’t stop his quick, apprehensive glance at Seto. Nimble hands plucked them from his hand. When the brunet paled and clenched a fist, Jou knew he’d seen what Jou had. Seen and recognized the black fur and tiny bones mixed with fecal matter that was all that was left of Scapegoat.

Without a word Seto handed the binoculars back to the sheriff. Jounouchi, equally silent, reached
over and took his clenched fist in both palms, surrounding the bloodless, icy hand in supporting warmth. As they slowly crawled up out of the creek bed Jounouchi felt the flinch as the ATV passed over the small mound of refuse.

The sheriff, after a quick look in the mirror at their pale features, glanced at his husband for some guidance. One of the benefits of having been together so long was that a quick look said a thousand words. Randy didn’t know what was wrong but he was too focused on what lay ahead to worry about the scat.

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Mokuba snatched at the phone as Aishira laid it in the cradle. When he heard the dial tone he slammed the receiver back down. “What the fuck? Why did you do that? I need to speak to him. I need to tell him...”

“He heard you.” Aishira said softly. “But Seto’s decided to take care of what he needs right now. And right now that isn’t you. He said to tell you that the parks are yours, you take care of them. Also Rebecca is yours as well – you take care of her too. Seto needs time for himself.” A cool, malicious smile curved Aishira’s generous lips. “He needs his boyfriend, Jounouchi. Get over yourself Mokuba. It seems Seto has.”

“Jounouchi? His boyfriend?” Mokuba’s voice cracked with disbelief. Then, clear as daylight, jealousy flashed across his features. In a blink, it disappeared and regret took its place. “Rebecca was right. He has liked Jounouchi all this time. I never knew but I...” He took a deep breath. “Call him back please? I want to tell him how sorry I am, not just about what I let happen with Jounouchi, but the last few months. I... I have learned a lot staying out at our mansion. It... I need to speak to my big brother.”

“I can’t call him back. The number was blocked.” Aishira knew some of the remorse he was seeing was genuine, but the use of the word ‘our’ and that flash of jealousy stuck in his mind. If Seto was taking time to heal instead of ending his life he could have all the time in the universe. Aishira would help in any way he could.

“Did he say where he was? What he was doing?” The black-haired boy was dogged in his attempts to get more information.

Aishira grinned at the absurdity that Seto had spouted. “He said he was going to capture a mountain lion.”

“Capture a mountain lion?” There was a moment of silence then Mokuba demanded, “What the hell does that mean. He can’t be seriously hunting big game? He’s never hunted in his life.”

“It could mean anything.” Aishira pointed out. “He could be laying a false trail, playing a new VR hunting game, or even a sexual game with Jounouchi – after all he is tawny, is he not? As are mountain lions. I have no idea at all.” Aishira glanced at the clock then at the silently amused Matashi. “I think it’s quitting time for us. I’ve got my own wildcat to tame tonight. Sakura is feeling restless.” Grinning at the anger and concern on the younger man’s face he ruffled the black hair affectionately. Yes he was pissed at the selfish, blind, immature little snot, but he still loved him. “I’ll call the authorities and let them know Seto contacted us. Why don’t you call Rebecca and see if she wants to play a game of cat and mouse.” Tugging his lover out the door, they left the baffled and confused young man alone... just as his brother had been alone too many times to count.

As Mokuba stood in the now empty room the silence closed around him. He could almost feel the weight of it pressing in on him. It had been the same at the mansion. So empty and silent. How did
his brother stand it all the time? Pulling out his cell phone he automatically selected Rebecca’s number from his address book. A name and number a few lines below it made him pause. Moutou Yugi.

Yugi would know where Jounouchi is. The two were in constant contact. Two button clicks and three rings later a mellow, soft voice he recognized as the other man’s answered “Moshi, Moshi.”

“Yugi! It’s Mokuba! How are you?” He was careful to keep his voice upbeat and positive.

“Mokuba. It’s good to hear from you. I’m fine and how are you doing?” Courteous and friendly with a slight hint of reserve. A subtle difference from the attitude of the past four years.

“I’m doing fine. Congratulations on the win. How was your flight home?” Mokuba frowned slightly at the change.

A small hesitation then “Thank you very much. I have not returned home. I’m staying at Otogi Ryugi’s home in Malibu.”

“Really? That’s great. I didn’t know he had a home in Malibu. Maybe I could stop out and visit him sometime.” Still upbeat and positive, Mokuba didn’t quite know what to make of the reserve from Yugi. In the past the other man had always been warm and friendly.

“No, that would not be a good idea.” Yugi told him apologetically. “He lives with Jounouchi and Jounouchi made his desire to not have you around him quite clear.”

“Jounouchi lives with Ryugi?” That stunned Mokuba. When had they gotten together? Why hadn’t he heard it. The last he’d heard Otogi was with Honda Hiroto. Hadn’t he attended their marriage a while ago? What had happened? Then another thought made him clench the phone tightly in his fist. Seto must not know that they were together. He knew Seto very well. Seto did not share.

“They’ve lived together for three years.” Completely unaware of the shock coursing through his listener he confided “I was worried it wouldn’t work for them but it does.”

Mokuba’s mind lit with fury. He controlled it with an iron will his brother would have recognized. With calculation partly earned and partly innate he began to gather information. “Three years. That’s a long time. So you are staying with them now. If you’ll let me speak to Jounouchi maybe we can have a talk, iron out our differences.” He forced a cajoling note to his voice.

“I can’t. He’s not here. He goes off once a year for a vacation; a road trip. During his trip he is completely inaccessible. I don’t know when he’ll be back but when he returns I’ll ask him to give you a call.”

The words ‘road trip’ made his hair bristle. “Inaccessible? I find that hard to believe. Surely Otogi Ryugi knows...”

“Not at all, Mokuba. He only knows the starting point – here at their home in Malibu and the end point – Key West Florida.” Yugi explained. “But Mokuba, Jou doesn’t want... Well it just wouldn’t be right to invite you to his home when he’s not here.”

“It’s okay Yugi.” The anger that raged through him was controlled with a steel leash, another trait his brother would have recognized. Mokuba forced himself to be friendly, polite. He might need more information and Yugi is a valuable source. “Thanks anyway. Well it was good to talk to you and congratulations on the win.”

“Thank you. Good to hear...” But Yugi was talking to dead air. Slowly he closed his flip phone.
Honda Hiroto looked over at him from the stove. “Mokuba. Damn! What did he want?”

Yugi forced a smile. “What he always wants. For me to help him talk to Jounouchi.”

“Damn he’s blind. Why can’t he see...?” But he was talking to the wall. Yugi had simply turned and walked away, unwilling and unable to hear criticism of the young man he’d fallen in love with almost four years prior.

Otogi Ryugi met his husband’s dark brown gaze with worried jade eyes. “Why? Just when Yugi was moving past that.”

“I don’t know. I know Jounouchi is almost over Seto and it’s taken him a lot longer. The Kaiba brothers pack a vicious punch.” Honda sighed and rubbed his hand down Otogi’s back. He couldn’t hold back the question. “Regrets?”

“That you stopped me from dating Seto? Or that you knocked some sense into me when I went after Jounouchi while he was on the rebound?” Green eyes twinkled up at him playfully.

“Both.” They’d been over this many time and Honda knew Otogi wanted to be with him, chose him. But sometimes... just sometimes... he wondered. He knew Jou didn’t want Otogi and outside of one drunken night, had never even considered sex much less a deeper relationship with his husband but... Otogi was beautiful, hot, exotic and everything Honda was not. He knew it.... relished it... and sometimes worried.

“Never.” The black-haired man pulled him into a deep kiss. “I may have considered screwing Kaiba and Jounouchi – but I only ever considered marrying you.” Otogi knew that Honda was insecure of him at times. He was more experienced, had more of a history, and had briefly considered liaisons with Kaiba Seto and with Jounouchi. That knowledge was enough to make the normally secure husband and lover twitchy. Otogi couldn’t change his past but he could reassure Honda that while he’d been with others temporarily, he’d chosen Honda forever.

Across the country Mokuba was mobilizing a private army of detectives to find his brother. No damn way was he going to let his big brother be hurt by a two-timing, scheming blond. Once he was sure his minions would do his bidding, bring both Seto and Jounouchi to him, he called Rebecca. She was a genius and she cared for him and Seto. He’d ask for her help in infiltrating the enemy camp and gathering more information.

Half an hour later he called for his private jet. Rebecca had been surprisingly difficult to convince and only after he’d bent the truth a bit had she agreed to help. Not a true lie, but an exaggeration. After all Jounouchi had hated his brother and in Seto’s vulnerable state of mind, he could very well be dangerous to Seto.

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The puma’s caching ground was just as fetid and putrid smelling as they remembered. Even with the air conditioning Seto, already pale, turned grey and Joey could feel his gorge rising. One moment they were closing in, no real discernible smell, then as they broke through the bushes the malevolent odor of death and decay closed around them, choking out the fresh air, leaving them to gasp as revulsion crawled through them.

Randy’s breath caught at the distinctive smell of death and he shot his husband a quick, apprehensive glance. Sheriff Travis brought the ATV to an abrupt stop and keyed his microphone. “I want one shooter each ATV. The rest of you meet me in front of my vehicle – and be damn careful.” The cat, if there was one, should be gone, but he wasn’t taking any chances with his men. The rank smell in
the air was death, but more, it was human death. Animals stank as they rotted, but humans, because of all the chemicals and toxins they put in their bodies, smelled worse, with a distinctive odor that permeated the area. They would find human remains. He was certain of that, but was the death caused by a mountain lion or something – someone - else remained to be proven.

Sheriff Travis looked over at his husband knowing exactly what he was thinking. “Randy, I want you to take these guys back to the resort. Stay with them until someone arrives to take their official statement.” It wasn’t much, but it was all he could do to protect his husband from seeing the remains if they turned out to be his brother.

The ranger knew exactly what his husband was doing and inside he was torn. He had seen what wild animals did to bodies. He didn’t want to see his brother like that. But at the same time he had to know. “I...”

But their blond passenger spoke up. “We aren't going back to the resort. We have go get the car and break camp. We’ll do our statements when...”

“You aren’t going to your camp. As of right now you are officially people of interest. If a puma is killing out here then it isn’t safe. And if a puma isn’t what’s killing... we have a few more questions for you.” The Sheriff didn’t elaborate.

“Wait a minute, you can’t...” Joey argued, but the sheriff simply shrugged. “I can do as I must to keep everyone safe.” He opened his door and slid out. “Randy, make sure that they are comfortable. They will need clothes and toiletries for tonight. Handle it.” Giving his husband a caring look, his face losing it’s official mask for a moment he said softly, “I’ll call you when I know something.”

Wordlessly Randy moved to the driver’s seat and pulled the door closed. With a violent spin of the tires he reversed and then spun around. Jounouchi, ignoring Seto for the moment, snarled, “What the fuck? We found the site and we are some kind of suspects? We ain’t criminals. We need to get...” His mouth was suddenly muffled by Seto’s hand.

“Shut it.” The brunet ordered briskly as he took his hand away. “They are doing what they have to. A day at a resort won’t be bad for either of us. A shower is a good idea. We both stink and I would enjoy a bed to sleep in.”

“But Seto we can’t afford...”

“The Sheriff’s department will take care of it. Now shut up.” Dark blue eyes turned to him with a strange intensity. “I...” But Seto didn’t say another word. He didn’t have to. Joey could see it in his eyes. Seto was hurting too badly and couldn’t take any more.

Taking the hurting man’s hand in a gentle clasp, Joey nodded. Softly he whispered, “It’s gonna be okay Seto.”

“Liar. I despise liars. It won’t be ‘okay.’” Roughly he withdrew his hand. “Shut the fuck up if you’re going to lie to me.”

Jounouchi blinked in shock at the change in attitude. “Huh?” Then fury lit him. “You damn jerk, I was being nice. I ain’t no liar. If you say that again I’ll kick your ass into the next decade.”

The ride back passed in rigid silence. When they reached the resort, for the first time since they’d met on the beach, Jounouchi stalked away from Seto.
The rest of the day passed in a haze to Seto. He knew that to most of the people around him he seemed to function normally, but it was all automatic. In his mind’s eye he kept seeing the pile of refuse with its black hair and tiny bones. No matter how many times he tried to close the image out it came back to haunt him. When it did, the same sense of failure that he experienced in the dark rose to choke him, threatening to cut off his breathing and causing a stinging in his eyes.

At some point he became aware of Jounouchi watching him with eyes dark with concern and understanding. In the past it would have pissed him off but he was too overwhelmed with the loss of his companion to be angry. It helped that nobody else seemed to notice his... distraction.

They gave their statements individually, Seto first then Jounouchi. Seto was too wrapped up in his loss to notice that the officer merely took down their accounts, typed them on a laptop, printed them and asked for their signatures. But Jounouchi knew, by the brevity of the interviews, that they were no longer suspects. That could only mean they had found definitive evidence of the large cat being the killer of whatever – whoever - they had uncovered.

The resort was closed to the public and roads blocked. All other guests had been asked to leave. The only people who were left at the resort was a live-in cook-cum-waitress, Ranger Arnault, two sheriffs, the resort owner and her daughter. About an hour before sundown three trucks rumbled into the parking lot. One was conspicuously marked ‘Coroner.’ The other two were equipped with huge spotlights, each one large and bright enough to light up a city block.

Jounouchi watched them drive slowly past, his heart aching with sadness even as he took note of everything. A movement out of the corner of his eye and he turned to see Randy, his sister-in-law, and his niece huddled together in front of the office window, watching through the glass. From the expressions on their faces, the blurred tears and splotchy appearances, Jou knew that the missing Arnault had been found. It seemed to him that they clung together like survivors of a shipwreck, tossed about and battered, but still hanging on.

The woman employed to clean rooms and lend a hand cooking saw to their meal. It was simple, a sandwich and some fries, but it sufficed. Jounouchi inhaled his food eagerly while Seto picked at his, sipping water and staring down at his plate. He’d been silent, only speaking when spoken to, and for the most part Jou left him to his thoughts. He did all he could to reassure the blue-eyed man he was there for him, silent touches and caring looks, but he didn’t intrude. Seto was reserved and emotionally distant at the best of times, and it was going to be worse now. At least he wasn’t talking or acting suicidal. But that could and probably would change. Jou wanted to be ready for anything and he didn’t want to drive Seto further away so he watched and waited for the opening that would let him do more than just silently support.

It was full dark, almost nine o’clock, when Jounouchi stood abruptly. He was tired of waiting. Seto wasn’t coming out of it. If anything he was slipping further away. “I’m tired and we both still need showers. Let’s go to bed.” Blue eyes flickered to him for a moment then away. Wordlessly Seto scraped back his chair and stood to leave.

“I got clothes and stuff for us at the shop here while you were giving your statement. Randy told me to have them put it on the tab of the sheriff’s office.” Jou watched carefully for any sign of anger that Seto might give at him picking out his pajamas and toothbrush. He was out of luck. The only response the brunet gave was to stride away as if he hadn’t spoken.

“Well shit.’ Jounouchi bit back his curse and hurried after the disappearing figure. Even though he rushed to catch up Seto was at the top of the stairs when Jounouchi reached the bottom. The door to the room they shared, with it’s two full sized beds, slammed closed when Jou reached the top of the stairs. “Well fuck. He is in full asshole mode.” The blond mumbled under his breath. “He has to be
really hurtin’.’’ Grumbling, he fished around in his pocket for the swipe-card for the auto-locking door. It took him three tries to get the door open.

He charged in ready to snap Seto’s head off for being an asshole only to find the bedroom empty and the bathroom door closed. Even as he stepped to the door the commode flushed and a few seconds later the shower turned on. Anger dying, after all if Seto needed to use the bathroom it explained his hurry, Jou stepped back and turned to the bags of stuff he had laid on the bed earlier.

He took out the t-shirts and shorts he’d chosen for them tomorrow, made sure all the tags and stuff were off, then folded them neatly in the drawer. The shop hadn’t had true pajama’s, but they’d carried a selection of t-shirts and boxers that had kitschy sayings on them. For Seto he chose t-shirt that said ‘Somebody in California Loves Me’ with matching boxers. For himself he chose one with the slogan ‘My Governor can beat up your Governor’, again with matching boxers.

He laid the ‘pajamas’ out on each of their beds, then decided to put the toothbrushes, floss, paste, deodorant and razors in the bathroom. There was a shower curtain, besides they’d played together naked not too long ago. Seto could just suck it up if he had an issue. Even though his thoughts were full of bravado, Jounouchi opened the door silently, not wanting to intrude or upset Seto further.

He placed the hygiene items on the small countertop and backed out of the room, only to freeze in dismay as a hoarse, choked sob, barely audible over the shower, reached him. For a moment he stood there, suspended by indecision, and then another sob, quickly strangled off, made his decision for him. Without conscious thought he was shedding his clothes and climbing into the shower.

Seto didn’t remember leaving the dining room or his hurried flight. He only knew he had to get out of there before he vomited what little food he’d eaten. He’d barely made it to the commode before his stomach had emptied itself in massive heaves. A few choking gasps and dry heaves later and he heard the door open. To buy himself time, not wanting Jounouchi to see him like this, he’d turned on the shower full blast.

Once he was sure his body had finished its purging, he turned and stepped into the shower, not caring that he hadn’t removed his clothes, or the icy blast of water raining down on him. Tilting his head he caught some of the cold water in his mouth and rinsed the foul taste away and leaned weakly against the back wall of the shower. He wished he had the strength to push the mental pictures away. He had always had the strength and discipline in the past. But now... Now he just couldn’t seem to find the core of titanium he’d always relied on. There just seemed to be no strength left in him. All he could see or feel, think about, was the graphic image of black fur mixed with bones and... Desperately he tried to close it out, but his grief was stronger, and a sob broke free. Pressing his fist to his lips he tried to stop the rest of them that welled up, demanding release. He held it for perhaps a second, then it burst free, to be followed by another almost immediately.

He was too busy trying to stifle the sobs to do more than look up in shock when Jounouchi joined him in the shower. He was stopped from protesting by the blond’s sharp curse. “Fuck! What the hell? The water’s ice cold, and you still have your clothes on.” He must have flinched or something, because the tone softened instantly “Ah man, Seto when are you gonna let me in?” Warmth, shocking and sudden, enveloped him as he was wrapped in strong golden arms and spun under the now steaming shower spray. It lifted his lethargy slightly and he shifted in protest when Jou pulled his shirt over his head and went to work on the wet fastenings of his shorts. In just a few seconds Seto found himself completely naked. He couldn’t find more than mild concern in himself at his state.

His breath shuddered out of him as the slightly shorter man wrapped his arms around him, folding him into a tight bear hug. “Damn it Seto, put your head on my shoulder and let me hold you when
you cry. And don’t try to push me away ‘cause the way I’m feelin’ right now if you try to show me how much you don’t need me I’m gonna show you that you do.”

The idea was absurd, ridiculous, and so tempting that Seto actually lowered his head slightly, and pressed against the offered shoulder. His sobs were muffled, and he didn’t hold on to Jou, but he did lean against him for support when the sobs grew so violent that his whole body shuddered and shook. He stopped fighting the desperate outpouring, his will battered by the pain. Grief poured from him in a torrent of tears. With the buckling of his barriers, a kind of euphoria poured through him, he could cry, he could hurt, Jounouchi would hold him. He didn’t have to be strong, he could let go. Finally he could let go. Tears and pain he’d repressed for years burst through, intensifying his sobs, and he didn’t fight the feeling, he didn’t care. He let it take him away, cleaning him from the inside out, rinsing away the darkness that had started to form when his mother had died, just days before his eighth birthday.

As his pain was released, the darkness receded slowly, fading with every teardrop. For what seemed like hours he continued to cry, but gradually the pain faded and his soul lightened. His tears and sobs slowed, becoming infrequent and less wrenching.

When he calmed, regained a semblance of control, he stepped away from the welcoming body and turned to face the spray, washing away the traces of tears. Even though he was relieved, his pain and darkness lighter than they’d been in years, his brain and conditioning were taking over again.

Ignoring the soft question “Seto, are you okay?” He stepped over the side of the tub-shower combo and reached for a towel. Without bothering to do more than wrap it around his head, he bolted from the bathroom.

He was confused, completely humiliated and enraged that he’d been so weak. He had no clue what to do or say. He’d lost it in front of Jounouchi... Jounouchi... The person he wanted for his own. He couldn’t believe his loss of control and dignity. Where was his pride? Jounouchi would think he was a pathetic loser crying over a dumb dog and feel obligated to be nice to him. Seto didn’t want pity or obligation. With a low moan he dove onto his bed and wrapped the comforter around him, pulling it over his head to hide from Jounouchi and from his own loss of control.

When Jou stalked from the bathroom and crossed to stare out the window, Seto hunched deeper into the quilt, expecting some sort of outburst or physical assault. He couldn’t deny a vague sense of disappointment when the steps passed in front of him and continued across the room.

Silence ruled for long moments. Seto continued to wait for Jounouchi to do something, anything to break the tension between them. And still nothing. Steeling his courage he peeked out of his comforter-cocoon fully expecting to find Jou’s pitying gaze fixed on him. He was disappointed and peed to find that the gaze he needed was fixed out the window. Anger spurted through him. Seto was humiliated and weak. Why didn’t the blond throw that at him, or look at him with that gaze that said he felt sorry for him. Didn’t Jou feel sorry for him? Didn’t he care that Seto had emptied his soul in those tears? Frustrated, the cocooned man shifted and glared harder.

But the blond continued to look out the window, ignoring him.

Angrily, Seto began to mentally rail. How dare he ignore him? Wasn’t he the one to always say he cared? To say he wanted to be there? Hadn’t he been the one to climb into the shower and insist that he cry on his shoulder? Hadn’t he caused the breakdown? He wouldn’t have fallen apart if Jou hadn’t been there. Jou was the one who kept pushing. and now... Why did Jou think he could stop? Just because he’d left? So what? The blond claimed to know him, so he would have to know that even though Seto had ran he needed...
His thoughts came to a screeching halt. Of course Jou knew he needed him. But... Wait, Jou couldn’t seriously expect him to admit it could he? He couldn’t really expect him to... actually... own up to the feelings he barely understood? He was Kaiba Seto, not some weak woman. Jounouchi would have to understand. Again his thoughts derailed because he knew that the other man did understand him, better than anyone else on the planet.

If that was true then why the hell was he looking out the window instead of cuddling with him like he should be? Furious that the jerk had lied about understanding him, caring about him, Seto shed his cocoon and stalked across to the cheat. “Bastard. You don’t care about me.”

Mild golden eyes looked at him with silent inquiry. Seto blinked because just for a second the moonlight had given Jou’s eyes a strange appearance, almost like that of a patiently waiting predator. “You know better. I ain’t gonna fight with you about this. We’re both too upset. Go to bed and get some sleep.” It wasn’t a suggestion. It was an order and Seto reacted instantly, lashing out with a punishing fist.

Jou caught it a hair’s breadth from his face. “Uh uh Seto. You touch me right now and things are gonna get physical. I ain’t feeling soft and gentle right now.” But he didn’t release the brunet’s slowly relaxing fist.

Heart thudding with possibilities, and an ache blossoming deep inside, Seto knew, with abrupt suddenness what he needed – what he wanted. Yanking his hand away, he glared at the blond for a moment, and then fast as lightning he cuffed him on the ear and spat “Liar.” The ache deepened to painful need as he rushed back to his bed and slipped back into his cocoon. Breathlessly he waited. This time Jou didn’t disappoint him. Even as he fought the removal of the comforter he breathed a sigh of relief. Jou did know what he needed... and would give it to him.

He fought even more when a blond avalanche landed on him, pinning him to the bed, struggling to hold his arms and body still. “Get off.” He tried to growl, to sound like his normal icy, intimidating self, but it sounded weak, soft, and not in the slightest convincing.

Jounouchi must have heard the desire in his voice, because he settled more firmly, finally catching and holding his arms. “Let me in. Tell me what you’re thinkin’ Seto. Tell me what you’re feelin’. Damn it, let me hold you, let me help you. You’re not alone. I’m right here. You just gotta let me in.” He entreated. And Seto wanted to. He could feel the yearning to open up to Jou deep in his soul. But he’d lost so much already. He’d been abandoned and betrayed by people who should have loved him. He couldn’t open to Jounouchi. He just couldn’t... He didn’t know how even if he could. He was so pathetic he even needed help with that. And damn Jounouchi! He knew it. He probably even knew that Seto was torn between elation and fear that he knew him so well.

The perceptive blond must have seen it, the fear, longing and the confusion that mixed with his pride’s denial, because he leaned down and gently kissed one of the new tear tracks at the corner of his eyes. “Trust me. Let me care for you like I’ve always wanted to.”

That caught Seto on the raw, opening an old, festering wound. That anger sparked an idea, a way to push the blond past his reluctance, past his emotional pleas and all the words. Seto knew words could trap and deceive. He needed more than words. “Liar.” Quick as a snake his head snapped forward, head-bashing Jounouchi in the mouth, splitting his lip. Blood began to flow.

The blow stunned the blond for a moment before anger and determination lit his golden eyes. “Oh fuck no I ain’t no liar. You are. You want me to care for ya. Hell you need me to care for you so bad it’s like a starving man staring at a steak.”

“Liar.” It was the only thing he could think of to get what he needed. Jou was taking too long.
Couldn’t he see that Seto needed him now? It wasn’t a denial of Jou’s words so much as a denial of his claim of caring in the past. Nobody had cared for him – ever. He needed proof of Jou’s caring not just empty words.

“You want me to prove it to you don’t you? That’s why you’re pushing me. You need proof of everything.” More blood dripped, falling onto Seto’s neck before sliding down to his shoulder. Somber consideration joined the anger and determination. “Don’t do it this way. Not... like this. We... Please just let me in Seto... Let me be there for you. Tell me what you need. Give me your feelin’s. Please.”

“I wouldn’t give you the sweat off a gnat’s ass. You. Are. A. Liar.” Blue-eyes fixed on Jou with a mix of demand, rage, pain and yearning so deep it rocked the blond to the core. “I despise liars.”

Anger and understanding lit the golden eyes to a brilliant hue. “You’re making this hard on both of us. Last chance Seto. You push me further and I won’t hold back on ya. You’ve pissed me off too much. Only thing stopping me from tearing your ass up is the tears on your face. They hurt as much as your words.” Jou sighed and leaned down to kiss the brunet gently, smearing blood across his lips. “Just talk to me Seto. You know, deep inside, you know I ain’t lying. Last chance...”

Seto struggled with the words. Goading him wasn't enough. Even hitting him wasn't enough... What did the blonde want from him? "Prove it." he finally rasped, a challenge as much as a plea. Maybe Jou would understand this too, like he seemed to understand everything else.

Half in despair, half in resignation, Jou watched Seto’s lips form the challenge. It echoed hollowly in his ears as his control unraveled. “Ah man Seto... That tears it. Why couldn’t you just say ‘I need you?’” He should fight something he knew was wrong, but how could he fight something that he had wanted for so long? How could he deny the need that was rolling off Seto in waves? Why should he when his body was bow-taut and straining with rage and a matching need?

Slowly, with purpose he shifted to grip both of Seto’s arms with one hand while his other stroked slowly across his cheeks, wiping away the tears and smeared blood. There was an instant of stillness that erupted into a short, hard struggle as Seto’s last defense was breached. It ended with both of them panting, Seto still pinned, and their bodies as closely entwined as possible. “Now... look at me and admit the truth. You need me Kaiba Seto... As much as I need you...”

“You...” Words failed Seto an incredible heat and feeling of rightness filled him. “I... We...” Golden eyes gazed at him intently, watching him with vast tenderness, waiting for his acknowledgment.

Unable to bear the gaze, he turned his head to look away, his gaze caught by their moonlight shadows on the wall. There was something odd about their shadows... Before he could figure it out Jou gripped his chin and turned him back to meet his gaze.

“Yes we... We Seto. You and I...” Jou’s rough voice was faintly breathless and strained. “You wanted this, pushed for it. I gave you what you wanted. Now give me what I want. Let me in Seto. Accept me and admit you need me too.” The anger was gone. All that was left was pain and yearning. Jounouchi wanted to be part of him. Seto was as sure of it as he was the sunrise the next morning. Jounouchi was his. Even as he struggled to find the words, they slipped away. He couldn’t say them yet. But he would show Jounouchi with his actions. And somehow he knew that his lover would understand.

A slight tug on his arms told him that Jou was far from certain of his response to this very unexpected event and was afraid he’d fight. As if he would. He wanted this, needed this, and had consciously pushed for it. Jounouchi, the scarily intuitive, knowing Jounouchi, had somehow managed to give him what he needed, even when he didn't know how to ask.
Giving him the only response he could, he lifted his hips and wrapped his long legs around Jou’s thighs, deepening the possession of his body, silently telling Jou what he needed to know.

A soft sigh and whispered as his arms were released. The ‘Thank you,’ told him that Jou really did understand his wordless communication. His gaze was drawn irresistibly back to the shadows, and Seto realized it wasn’t their individual shadows. but one that was joined, blended, one being.

It was probably a trick of the moonlight, but it closely matched his feeling of oneness deep inside. He tightened his arms and met the subtle rocking motion with one of his own. For now, and hopefully for a long time in the future, they were together. He wasn't naive enough to think that because he'd manipulated Jounouchi into sex that everything would be moonbeams and roses, but he also knew that the act of joining their bodies meant more than simply sex. It was a promise, a commitment, one they were both making.

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Love was damned ironic, Rebecca conceded inwardly as she rode in the limo Mokuba arranged for them. And she should know. She’d been falling in and out of love since she was twelve. Here she was on her way to see Moutou Yugi, her first love, while riding beside Kaiba Mokuba, the man she’d hoped would be her last love. That hope had faded to disappointment though because of Mokuba’s immaturity. No way could she tolerate the selfish crap her ex-fiancé dished without even realizing what he was doing. The egocentric cruelty he’d shown to the person he was supposed to love more than anyone else, his brother Seto, had cemented the nagging feelings of doubt. It had actually been a relief to break it off. She cared for Mokuba, for the person he could be, but until he matured she couldn’t love him. And she knew herself well enough that she knew her heart wouldn’t wait on something that might never happen.

“‘You’re quiet.” Mokuba interrupted her reverie. He reached to take her hand, holding it gently. Blue-grey eyes sincere, he said softly “Thank you for coming. I know you’re still angry and didn’t want to.”

She met the gaze squarely, her eyes cool and distant. “I’m thinking about what you said. Mokuba, the only reason I’m here is because you said you needed my help finding Seto, that you knew he was in danger and that Yugi had information he wouldn’t tell you. Don’t think I’ve changed my mind about us. It’s over.” Briskly she pulled her hand free. “I care for you, but I don’t think I love you any longer. I’m not even sure I like you that much.”

That shocked Mokuba. With a gasp he shook his head. “’Becca love doesn’t die like that. Not true love, not like ours.”

“Mine did. So I guess it wasn’t true love.” Turning her head she saw they had reached their destination. “We’re here.” She observed needlessly.

Mokuba, still reeling under the impact, reached for her. “Becca..”

“Don’t touch me Mokuba.” She ordered coolly. With a brisk nod to the driver as he opened the door, she stepped out of the car. She was at the door when the black-haired man caught up.

Her finger poised on the doorbell, Mokuba pleaded “Wait, Becca please, we have to talk.”

“No, there’s nothing more to say. We are here for your brother remember? His safety is more important than anything. That’s what you told me when you asked for my help.” She reminded Mokuba of their conversation and the reason she agreed to help him. Deliberately she pressed the bell.
The door was answered before she lifted her finger. Honda Hiroto, dressed in a pair of swim trunks and flip-flops stared at them in almost anger. “Rebecca! Mokuba!” He greeted brusquely. The tall man didn’t shift to let them in. There was no welcome in his attitude.

“Hiroto, it’s good to see you.” She smiled and her ‘trouble-antenna’ quivered. There was something very wrong. “Sorry to stop by unexpectedly, but this is urgent. A matter of life and death.”

Hiroto lifted his eyebrows expressively then sighed. “Be right back.” He turned and closed the door in their faces. Rebecca blinked at the blatant rudeness and her sense of wrongness tripled. A quick glance at Mokuba’s face told her he wasn’t nearly as shocked at the man’s behavior as she was.

“Do you know...” But she cut off her question when the door opened and Hiroto stepped back and motioned them inside, his dark eyes glaring. Without a word he spun and led them through the spacious interior outside onto a back deck.

Otogi Ryuugi and Yugi were sitting side-by-side on a lounger, both slathered in sunscreen, wearing shorts, floppy hats and sunglasses. Tall ice-filled drinks, glasses sweating in the heat, sat beside them. Rebecca licked her lips as she realized that she was thirsty. Expectantly she turned her gaze to Hiroto only to gasp slightly in shock as the older man moved to stand behind the pair on the lounger, resting a hand on each of their shoulders in obvious reassurance.

What was going on here?

It was Yugi who broke the uncomfortable silence. In a very un-Yugi manner he addressed Mokuba coldly “You were asked not to come. Why are you here?”

Mokuba flushed dark red but answered steadily. “I need to find Jounouchi.”

Rebecca saw the Yugi’s slight flinch and the tightening of Honda’s hand on the smaller man’s shoulder. That had hurt Yugi. She knew Yugi very well and the tiny move was as clear as a neon sign to her, even if Mokuba didn’t seem to see it. The bad feeling was getting worse. Deliberately she stepped away from Mokuba, angling herself between the factions.

Otogi answered with cutting firmness. “Yugi told you on the phone we don’t know where he is. He goes on a road trip this time of year. He has no set itinerary or plans that we know of. We know where he starts and ends.”

“That’s bull shit.” Mokuba dared to argue. “He doesn’t fall off the face of the earth. You guys live together. You have to know something. Where has he gone in the past?”

“We ‘live together’ in the same house. It doesn’t mean he confides everything to us. He gives us a lot of privacy and we return the favor. He says married people need it and he needs the quiet for his work. He takes care of the house when we travel, which we do a lot. He has an ‘in-law’ suite with his own kitchen and bathroom.” Honda bit out sharply. He didn’t like the way Mokuba said they lived together like they were a couple or something. That kind of crap could cause problems if the lie was repeated. Otogi and Jou were in the public eye a lot. Bad publicity was just that – Bad.

Mokuba swallowed down his harsh retort. He didn’t believe the other man for a second, because who could be around a hottie like Jou and not want to lay him down? But he didn’t argue. Instead he changed tactics. “Fine! Where does he go?”

“He never goes to the same places twice.” Otogi told him. “It’s the new adventures that he’s looking for. Why do you need to find him? What is so important that you came all this way dragging Rebecca along?”

Mokuba tried to word his response properly. He didn’t want to put their backs up, but he couldn’t
think of a way to express his concern without accusing Jounouchi of being dangerous to Seto. When Rebecca spoke he shot her a grateful look.

“Seto has been missing for a few days. We believed he’d been kidnapped at first, but he’s called in twice saying he was on a road trip. The last time he called he said he was with Jounouchi.”

Yugi nodded “I saw that on the news but yesterday they said he was okay and called off the bulletin. So it’s okay now, right? Why are you still looking for him?”

“He... he was injured in the crash. He may need medical attention.” It sounded lame to Mokuba and he knew it.

“Jounouchi will give him all the care he needs.” Otogi’s voice was soft and approving.

It put Mokuba’s back up. “He’s not a doctor. He...”

Otogi and Hiroto chuckled and Yugi explained their amusement. “Not a doctor, but a Holistic Practitioner of Ayurveda. He’s also studied psychology for the last five years. He is more than capable of giving Seto what he needs if he is injured.”

“Aurveda? What the hell is that?” Mokuba scoffed, deliberately mispronouncing the word.

Rebecca angled herself further away from Mokuba. “It is a form of alternative medicine that deals with all aspects of healing. Not just physical, but mental, spiritual, diet, herbs, lifestyle and exercise.” She gave him a pointed look. “It’s been around for over five thousand years. It must hold some validity.”

Yugi sighed and stood up, crossing to Mokuba and gently touching his arm. “I know you’re worried but really, he will be fine with Jounouchi. Jou has... grown a lot in the last few years.”

The black-haired man smiled slightly. Yugi could always be counted on as peacemaker. “I want to believe that but...” He let his voice trail away for a moment, as expected Yugi took the bait.

“But what?”

“It’s just that he cut us off so completely. He never gave us a chance to explain. It’s like he hated us. Seto is very vulnerable right now, perhaps even depressed, so I...” He bit his lip anxiously “I don’t want him hurt. I’m afraid Jou might hurt him out of revenge or anger and it might push my brother further away.” He disclosed anxiously, wanting to regain their trust and sympathy. He had to find his brother no matter what.

The duelist champion nodded in agreement. “I’ve noticed the last few times I’ve dueled him his heart wasn’t in it. And the last time, when Jou beat him, I felt he was hurting terribly. He disappeared before I could talk to him.” A smile lit Yugi’s amethyst eyes. “But you don’t need to worry about it. If he’s with Jou then he is safe. Jou doesn’t want revenge and he isn’t angry either. If you’re talking about the airport incident, he is grateful. You guys leaving him there was the best thing that ever happened to him. He found himself during the time he worked to earn a ticket home.”

“Found himself? What does that mean? And if he’s not pissed about it why did he cut all contact? Why didn’t he want me to call him?” That genuinely confused Mokuba. “Besides, how did you know about that?”

The gentle touch on his arm withdrew and Yugi retreated back to the lounger, sinking slowly down next to Otogi. “How did I know? You told me. Don’t you remember?” Yugi’s voice had a faint tremor. One that he controlled immediately. “Four years ago, after the Maui Invitational.”
Mokuba’s mind drew a blank for a moment, then a fragment of memory dawned. “At the bar. I was still underage, but they let me have a couple supposedly ‘virgin’ Mai Tai’s. The bartender thought it would be funny and profitable if I got drunk in public. I knew someone saved me from that but until just now I didn’t know it was you. Sorry Yugi, I barely remember that night. I don’t even remember getting to my room.” He admitted with an embarrassed laugh.

His laugh died as Yugi turned parchment white and Otogi and Honda both pressed close to him in what looked like comfort. Had he done something wrong? Said something out of line to Yugi? Forcing a light note he asked, “I wasn’t too much trouble was I? It was the first time I’d ever been drunk. I’ve learned to avoid it.”

“No...” Yugi’s voice was thin and cracked. But the next instant it firmed to normal tones. “No not at all. Back to Jou and Seto. I told Jou the truth about that when he mentioned it almost a year ago. He knows that you told your brother that you guys were going to get together and wanted to be alone.”

“He knows?” Mokuba’s voice was the strained one now. “What... was he... I...”

“He laughed Mokuba. It was funny to him. If you had pulled that and he’d gotten on the plane with you that day he’d have kicked the shit out of you. He hadn’t accepted his ‘dual spirit’ at that time. Dual Spirit is his way of describing his bisexuality. He’d just broken up with Mai, his only girlfriend since high school. She dumped him because she said she was too obsessed with defeating your brother and she was tired of it. He was seriously raw over it. That’s why he had such bad luck during that time. He was fighting the knowledge that she was right.”

“He didn’t know he was bi?” the concept was foreign to Mokuba, who’d known of his sexuality from the time he was about ten.

“Knowing and accepting are two different things.” Yugi said softly. “When you guys left him at the airport he... he had to hitch hike and take odd jobs. He met a Native American named Oli who taught him how to accept his feelings and who he was. Jounouchi went on what he called his first Road Trip. It wasn’t just a physical trek from place to place and job to job. It was a spiritual journey. He learned a lot about himself and other people.” Still in that soft voice he explained as best he could. “If Seto is with him, he is safe. And if he is in pain or having issues, Jounouchi is probably the best person for him.”

“What makes you say that? A spiritual journey doesn’t mean he hates my brother less. He has always hated Seto.” Mokuba still didn’t believe it, but he needed more information if he was going to find his brother.

“No.” Yugi corrected with a slow shake of his head, amused knowledge gleaming in his eyes. “He has never hated your brother. He’s always tried to get his attention, his admiration, and he’s always tried to force contact. When he saw that the same desire for contact wasn’t there, he did what he could for Seto. He severed all ties to him – including those with you.”

“That’s bull shit. So you are saying Jounouchi looks up to my brother?” He couldn’t stop the disbelief from coating his voice.

Rebecca sighed at his stupidity. “You aren’t hearing them, or maybe you don’t want to. After all you do want Jou for yourself don’t you? Simple admiration won’t do what Jou’s done. And you aren’t using your brain at all. You still won’t admit what you did was wrong and you still won’t see what’s in front of your face. Jounouchi fought with your brother at the same time he was fighting himself over being bisexual. What do you think that means? I remember Jounouchi from that time. He was not even tempered or self-aware. He was aggressive and pugnacious. He acted impulsively and usually didn’t examine his own motives.” She blew out a frustrated breath at Mokuba’s blank look.
“He was fighting a war on both fronts and taking out his feelings on what he saw as the cause of his frustration. Your brother.”

When his eyes widened with comprehension she continued ruthlessly “And later Jounouchi backed away, severed all ties to Seto, even though it hurt him to do it, because he thought that was what Seto wanted. What does that say to you? Think Mokuba.”

“You guys think he liked my brother?” He glanced at Rebecca. “You’re saying he wanted to be with him?”

The blonde woman rolled her eyes. Mokuba was being deliberately stupid. It was his favorite act and she was damn tired of it. Before she could rip into him she was interrupted.

“We know he loved him. Has been in love with him for years.” Honda corrected sharply. “If Seto gets his head out of his ass long enough he’ll find that out. Now that your questions are answered and you know that your brother is safe, please leave.” The tall brunet glowered at him, eyes glinting with anger and something that looked like disgust.

“Wait but... Where are they? I want to talk to Seto, make sure they are okay. You guys must know where he goes. Or where he’s gone in the past.” It was a good diversion tactic. It didn’t address their delusion about Jounouchi loving Seto and it got to the point. He wasn’t going to be swayed. He had to make sure Seto was safe.

“Of course we know where Jounouchi has gone on his trips. You would too if you bothered to check it out.” Otogi picked up a book laying by the lounger. “Read this series – Start with book one.”

“Hot Wheels and Cool Country Roads?” He frowned slightly “What does that book have to do with anything?”

“Jounouchi writes the series based on his Road Trips under the pseudonym Joey Wheeler. The same Road Trip your brother is taking with him. He never visits the same place twice, but you can get an idea, maybe get lucky. Now it’s time for you to leave” With a nod he turned to usher Mokuba out.

Reluctantly he turned to go, glancing at the blonde woman over his shoulder. “Coming Rebecca?”

“Nah, He said you, not me. I’m going to stay and visit awhile. I’ll cancel my hotel reservation and make one closer. I want to stay on the beach.” She shrugged off her ex-fiance casually. Not watching as Otogi almost muscled him off the deck and back towards the door.

“No hotel necessary Becca.” Honda smiled down at the blond woman. “We have a spare room that faces the ocean. You’re welcome to stay.”

Otogi returned just as the quiet purr of the limo rumbled down the driveway. “Yugi...”

“I’m okay ‘Togi. It was what I needed to know.” The spike-haired man stood, picking up his almost empty glass. “I’ll take another drink – Long Island ice tea this time. Mai Tai’s make me sick.” Otogi gave his husband a speaking glance. Without a word Hiroto followed him back into the house.

Rebecca stared at Yugi for a moment, making a few connections. “Something happened in Maui?”

Yugi shrugged and glanced pointedly at her bare ring finger. “I won’t ask why you aren’t engaged if you won’t ask what happened on Maui.”

“Deal.” Rebecca gave him a small smile. They both knew Yugi had just confirmed her suspicions.
and neither was going to address the issue.

Otogi returned to find the two discussing hieroglyphs that predated all other known writings. He handed them their drinks, both Long Islands, and sat down on a chaise to wait for Hiroto. The tall brunet smiled at them as he offered the quick snacks he’d whipped up. Ignoring their conversation he deliberately interrupted. “What’s up with Mokuba?”

Rebecca sipped from her glass then lowered it to her lap, “He is jealous and immature.”


“Seto, Jou, everything.” She sighed and shook her head. “I assume you guys know about the plane ride fiasco?” Only Yugi nodded. Honda and Otogi shook their heads. She shrugged, “Jou had a run of bad luck and couldn’t afford a flight home. From what Mokuba said he didn’t have money for even a phone call. Seto agreed to give him a ride then asked Mokuba to let them have some privacy to ask Jou out. Mokuba told him that he wanted Jou too and he’d give Jou the choice. He never got the chance to ask but he told Seto that Jou chose him anyway. Seto took off. Jou saw him leave and walked away from them both, not knowing about it.”

Yugi sighed and murmured, “So Mokuba was after Jou even back then.”

“Yes. But I’m not sure…” She hesitated for a second, biting her lip. “I’m not sure it’s Jou he’s jealous of or truly after.”

Yugi blinked at that, recoiling slightly. “He’s jealous of Seto? His own brother?”

“Yes. –His– brother. He is possessive and completely irrational about it. Mokuba lived with me for months but got furious that Seto changed the locks. I know for a fact that he would keep constant check on him. Even though they were not speaking to each other he would make sure he knew what was going on with his brother practically every minute of the day. I thought it was concern, but now that I’ve had a chance to think about everything, I think Mokuba has a very deeply rooted Oedipus Complex.

“What?” Otogi laughed. “Seto is a man and his brother – not his mother.”

“Seto and Gozoburo are the only parental figures he has ever had. Gozoburo was bigger and more dominant for many years. He assumed the ‘father role’ and Seto took on the ‘mother’ characteristics. If you follow that reasoning then it makes sense that Mokuba has developed an Oedipus Complex for Seto despite their being male siblings.” Rebecca rubbed between her eyes. “It also explains why he dabbles with homosexuality and why he ruined the relationship between Seto and Jou. He is jealous.” She nodded and abruptly downed her glass. “Really sucks for me though. When I figured it out I realized why he was with me... Vagina Envy, the reverse of Penis Envy in girls, And... My mind is the only one he has come across that has a comparable I.Q. to Seto’s.”

Yugi downed his as well. “Yeah it explains a lot to me too.” Standing, he held out his hand. “Let’s go get more drinks. I think we need to get drunk and forget about Oedipus.”

“Yeah... Cold drinks in the hot California sun... Let’s party.” Her voice was light but her eyes were somber as she took his hand.

Hiroto glanced at Otogi then sighed and nodded, pulling them both up. “Sounds good.” He grinned wryly “But arrange for your stuff first. No offense but seein’ you naked ain’t something any of us want.”

“Fucking fags.” She quipped playfully, feeling the effects of the alcohol. “I’m over men anyway.
Know any cute lesbians?"

“We do actually. Ishizu is in town for an exhibit...” Honda laughed lightly, and then laughed harder when the blonde woman arched an interested brow.

“I’ve always thought she was hot as either Kaiba. Wonder if she’s a screamer...”

Yugi, surprising everyone including himself, chuckled. “According to Anzu she is.”

Rebecca leaned forward, her eyes glinting with curiosity. “Anzu huh? I thought you two were going to be together forever. What happened?”

Yugi hesitated for a moment, lowering his head, staring at his glass. Then took a deep breath and whispered softly “Maui.”

“Well shit. I hope someone knocks the crap out of that little snot.”

Honda chuckled and lifted his glass “I’ll drink to that.”

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Seto woke to his nose twitching to the smell of coffee. As he opened his eyes he was aware of darkness surrounding him, it wasn’t sunrise yet, and that the place beside him was empty. For an instant uncertainty danced through him, only to be chased away by the bone deep connection he felt from last night. The smell of coffee and a missing Jounouchi meant that his lover was looking out for him again. Warmth flooded him as he realized how much he enjoyed that thought. Jounouchi cared for him.

A shadow on shadow movement caught his attention and he realized Jou was sitting on the window seat looking out, sipping coffee. That made Seto chuckle to himself. Okay so maybe Jou did take care of him, but there were times when he took care of himself too. Even if that meant bringing himself a cup of coffee, a huge on by the look of it.

Feeling playful and slightly cold, he slid out of bed and padded across to the shadowy figure. He was surprised when Jou didn’t turn to look at him but instead leaned forward to open the blinds fully. That’s when Seto saw that the sky wasn’t full dark as he’d thought, but a predawn lightness was creeping across the sky. He stared at the fading darkness for a few minutes silently, then glanced down at the seated blond. Just as he expected the golden eyes were watching him with that same, odd, patient predator look from the last night. This time he knew what the other man wanted. Casually, as if he’d done it every day of his life, he reached for the massive coffee bowl. His fingers skimmed the tingling warmth before Jou moved it away.

“You think you get m’coffee?”

His voice was a low rumble.

Seto did his best to give Jou a begging look, with wide eyes and a pouty lip. He knew he hadn’t pulled it off when golden eyes lit with laughter. “You have to be desperate to imitate Yugi that way.”

The blond smiled and held the cup up for him to take. Nudging the proffered cup aside, Seto inserted himself into Jou’s arms, turning so he sat between the blond’s legs, his back resting against Jou’s slightly fuzzy chest. He couldn’t resist a small sideways glance at his lover, asking permission, “I’m cold.” Guiding the cup held in an obviously surprised grip to his lips he sipped the hot coffee and relaxed into the warmth and welcome of Jou’s body. A strong arm coiled loosely around his waist, telling him that he didn’t need to ask.

“Mmm...” His hum of appreciation was two-fold as he felt a soft kiss dropped on his shoulder and the heat of the coffee. “What are we doing?”
“Watching sunrise. It’s gonna be beautiful.” A soft whisper told him.

Seto couldn’t remember the last time he’d paid attention to the sunrise, if he ever had. Sipping more before guiding the cup back over his shoulder towards Jou’s lips he settled back and prepared to watch it, wondering if he would be able to understand, to see, the beauty Jou did.

Just as the sun lit the morning sky in radiant orange, yellow, and pink in a timeless display, Seto gasped, not from the beauty, but from the soft words his lover mumbled into his neck. “I love you.”

“Jou...” He didn’t quite know what to say. His heart was hammering, his skin shivering, goose flesh rising. “I...”

“Shh... It’s okay. I know you’re not ready to love anyone yet. I wanted to say it out loud, here and now, because... because it’s symbolic. Our first day together as lovers. A new beginning. I want to start out with you knowing that. I love you. I have for a long time and I... I just wanted to tell you...”

Seto knew deep inside that it was true. If love hadn’t been at the base of Jou’s actions he wouldn’t have shown him the caring and respect he had. Pity didn’t respect. It baffled him. If Jou loved him why had he chosen Mokuba? Why had he cut off all contact? And why hadn’t he let Seto know? Jounouchi knew him, as much as he hated to admit it, the blond knew his reactions. He had to have known that Seto was interested, wanted to be with him. Why... Why...?

“Why?” He couldn’t keep the question in. Things would have been so different for both of them if Jounouchi hadn’t chosen Mokuba.

“Why do I love you? Who knows?” He felt the blond shrug behind him. “Might as well ask why the sun rises. It just does. Don’t think too much about it. It’ll rot your brain.” Another soft kiss on his nape. “I don’t want you to feel pressured or tied. No strings or anything. I love you, but you don’t owe me nothing. It isn’t something you control and it’s only your business ‘cause I want you to know that I’m here for you. I don’t want to tie you down. I love watching you soar free.”

Touched and oddly angry, he started to protest. “That’s not...” But Jou was on the move, uncoiling around him and standing. Bereft, he turned his gaze to his lover.

“When I got the coffee Randy was down there. They found his brother’s body. It was in one of the mounds. He wasn’t buried deep and no real evidence that the cat had done more than take a taste. He said that they found the cat prowling around our camp and were trying to tranquilize it.” The deep, loving tones lightened to practical notes.

“Our camp?” Seto’s voice choked in his throat at the thought of the danger he and Jou had been in. “It was stalking us?”

“I gave Randy the keys. He’s having someone drive the car to us. Seems like staying here was a good thing, don’t want to mess that up. We can go as soon as the car gets here. Glad we showered last night.” Jou’s voice was uneasy, rushed, and he kept skipping topics. It made Seto wonder what was going on. But it was also cute, reminding him of the Jou he remembered from high school. At the same time Jou’s lean, toned body brought the new memory of their second shower the night before. It made his heart flutter and his groin tighten. Jou was incredibly beautiful and didn’t have a modest bone in his body.

“The shower was great.” Seto smile widened and became slightly wicked at the thoughts of that intimate time of learning and exploring each other. There had been no awkwardness or shyness. Just
the heartfelt desire to know each other. By the time the shower was through there wasn’t an inch of his body that Jou hadn’t explored, tasted, claimed. He felt completely accepted.

His smile seemed to embarrass Jou because he noticed Jou’s eyes went bright and slightly shy, and his cheeks burned dark red. The picture was so adorable it made his heart clutch just a bit. Before he could say anything the bashful man hurried into the bathroom. Seto was amused. Last night Jou had been lovingly aggressive, not letting him hide anything. This morning’s shyness was charmingly unexpected. He supposed a love confession could do that to anyone.

A feeling, effervescent and buoyant, flooded him. Jou loved him. They were connected, bonded, lovers in every sense of the word. The sunrise was as beautiful as Jounouchi had promised, and deep inside Seto was happy. He was unfamiliar with the emotion, but he recognized it instantly. He was happy and he was loved. Yes the happiness was tinged with grief for his lost friend, Scapegoat, but it didn’t destroy the bubbling joy he was experiencing. It somehow made it more precious.

Movement outside the window caught his eye. A pickup, with a wildlife logo on the door was making it’s way slowly towards the resort leading a small convoy of ATV’s and other vehicles. Hurriedly he found the clothes Jou bought for him and dressed, sliding on the sandal’s he’d kicked off mindlessly the day before. He wanted to see the cat if he could. He wanted to see the creature that had stolen his best friend. Calling out to Jou that he was going downstairs, still tucking his shirt, he bolted from the room.

He was waiting in the parking lot when the truck pulled to a stop just a few yards from him. In the back of the truck he could see the top of a cage but no pacing, prowling mountain lion. Randy hurried by him, rushing to the back of the truck. Seto followed, fully prepared to mow over anyone who said he couldn’t see the beast.

His first glance inside the cage made him gasp. “What the hell?”

“Yeah our thoughts too.” Was the animal relocation's’ specialist’s comment.

“But there is no way. It didn’t kill a man. It’s... and if it has eaten...”

“She, not it. And no. The cause of death of the man found is undetermined yet. She probably found the body, dragged it back, and when she couldn’t eat it, buried it. It looks like she did the same with a couple deer as well.” The man agreed.

“But why is she in this condition?” The mountain lion was literally skin and bones. Emaciated, with her ribs showing clearly through a sparse hide.

“Her canines were removed. She can’t rip and tear food. It has to be small prey, bite sized. And her claws have been removed. Modified exotic turned loose in the wild.” Helpless fury shone from the man’s eyes. “It ought to be a crime.”

“What do you mean?” Seto didn’t know anything about exotics or modified, but...

“Some people keep big cats as pets. But to make them safer they have their claws removed, and their canines - their fangs. They can’t tear up prey, can’t eat anything larger than a bite. And without claws they can’t rip them either. All prey would have to be small enough to bite without tearing. Poor thing, she is used to humans too. She actually was laying in the seat of a car batting at a CD case. The car is torn up, looks like she chased prey into it. Dints and scratches plus she chewed on one of the seats.” Seto ignored that, instead focusing on the cat.

“If she has an owner why is she here?”
“Don’t know who the owner is or was. She could have run away or she could have been dropped. I stopped by here because Randy has a chip scanner. Hopefully we can find the owner – if they had a chip inserted.”

Randy, who’d been silently appraising the animal, handed his hand-held scanner to him. “Let’s see.”

In just a few seconds there was a beep and Randy was calling in the number displayed. Two minutes later he closed his phone. “She is listed as surrendered to J.S. Rescue.” The man’s already gaunt face was grimmer.

“Damn. J.S. This girl just can’t get a break.” Sighing, the man turned to go.

Seto, who’d been watching the cat with narrow eyes, caught his arm. “What do you mean?”

“J.S. Rescue was listed as a big cat rescue haven until a few months ago. A donor wanted to see the facility and drove up to check it out. The people who ran it said they didn’t want anyone there because it upset the cats. But the potential donor went anyway. Said he got a bad vibe. When he got there he found dead cats all over the place, bones, excrement, and most of the cats kept in cages.”

“Wait...” Seto was thinking fast. “I remember that. They closed the place down and pressed charges.”

“Right. Animal cruelty. They got slapped with a few thousand dollar fine. No jail time. There are no laws about the care of exotics. They made millions off donations and from selling the hides and kittens. They packed up and moved to another state. Probably doing the same thing and there is nothing we can do about it.” He looked over his shoulder at the pathetic cat lying in the cage. “Most of their animals had to be put down. She probably will be too.”


“Not enough of them. She is sick and will have to be healthy before she goes to a reserve. We don’t have the funds or facilities to care for her.”

Seto stared at the man for a moment, assessing his honesty. A low rumble, almost like a purr came from the cat, inside the cage. Foggy golden eyes looked up at him with an expression of recognition and yearning. The cat did know humans and wanted to be with them. Drugged out of her mind and near to starvation she still purred at being around them. “Loan me your cell phone. I will take care of this.”

The people standing around him got their first glimpse of the Seto Kaiba who’d single-handedly become the CEO of the world's largest entertainment company. In less than seven minutes he’d arranged for the top exotic veterinarian in the country to come care for the cat. When she was well enough she would be moved to a home in Florida. All bills were to be sent to his attorney, and would be paid promptly.

Jounouchi arrived to see Seto stroking the muzzle of probably the most pathetic animal he’d ever seen through the bars of a cage. It looked like any breath would be it’s last. “That’s the cat?”

“Long story.” Seto replied, not looking up from where he was holding the cat’s eyes, trying to give it reassurance. “She didn’t kill anyone.”

“Uh Seto, that thing ate Scapegoat.”

“She needed a good meal.” It seemed heartless, but it wasn’t. She had been doing what she needed to survive. Seto could understand that. The real culprits were the ones who’d set her loose, or forced
her to run. He would deal with them personally, and with great relish.

“Shit Seto that’s cold.” Jou was obviously aghast.

“No. You haven’t seen cold yet.” He said softly. “I understand her is all. She wanted to survive so she did what she had to. I’ve been there.” Jou didn’t know what to say so he closed his mouth and simply watched.

Randy watched too, surprised by what he’d seen in the last few minutes. At first he had written them off as drifters, then Seto as a ‘rich bitch roughing it’ and Jou an artist living the ‘rough life.’ But now... now he didn’t know what to think. The brunet had shown compassion and empathy not just in flexing financial muscle but in his caring touches to the weak animal. And Jounouchi... he was an interesting mix. While they’d fixed coffee together he’d been impressed by the knowledge and down-to-earth attitude of the other man. But there was a kind of spiritual wisdom as well. Wisdom seldom shown by young people. The young blond had used that wisdom to comfort him when he thought he couldn’t be comforted. Hearing his husband tell him his brother was dead had been a blow and the writer had actually managed to help him.

He had a feeling that wisdom was going to be put to the test as soon as the blond heard the news. No matter how wise, a guy was still a guy, especially when it comes to their toys. “Joey, your car should be here soon.”

“Really? Cool.” But the blond didn’t take his eyes off the brunet and cat.

He cleared his throat slightly. “Yeah. Uhm, hey Joey, the cat was actually captured in your car. The guys mentioned some damage.” They hadn’t just mentioned it. They’d been torn between laughter and tears at the condition of the car.

The blond head turned to him sharply, “Damage? What kind of damage?”

“I haven’t seen it.” Randy evaded carefully. The mix of apprehension and anger in his golden eyes was easily understandable. According to his guys the car was a wet dream and obviously something Joey took pride in, or it had been.

“When will it be here? Why isn’t it here now?”

Randy didn’t want to tell him that one of his men had gone into town to get a couple replacement tires where the cat had flattened them. She may not have her canines but her other teeth were sharp enough to puncture sidewalls and gnaw off valve stems. “Uh... Manpower issues.” He glanced away, towards where the law enforcement men were congregated. “I’ll just go talk to my guys.” He ducked away, making a fast escape.

“Shit, I wanted to leave right away.” Jou grumbled softly even as worry spread through him.

“We can’t.” Seto gave him a cool, challenging look over his shoulder. “The veterinarian team from Los Angeles will arrive here in about two hours.”

“What? How?” Jou knew it was true, Seto didn’t lie. But he didn’t see how because they were hours from L.A.

“Helicopter. The vet is arranging it. They will be in the air as soon as possible. They are coming to assess her. If she is safe for flight they will fly her back, if not they will arrange for suitable care until she can be safely transported.” Seto acted as if it were perfectly normal for him to arrange for the care of a sick mountain lion.
“Oh... Okay. So she’s going to be your new pet?” that boggled Jou’s mind. It made a kind of macabre sense but still.

“Don’t be ridiculous. When she’s well I’m going to give her to Matashi and Aishira or someone I know will care for her. Understanding her is one thing, but forgiving is another subject. I respect her need to survive but I don't forgive her. She killed my friend. She needs a stable, caring environment and I don’t think I could give her what she needs.”

Now that made sense. Nodding slightly he stepped next to Seto and gazed down at the pathetic heap. Golden eyes flicked to him for a second. The power and raw need in those eyes made Jou’s breath catch and falter. Wordlessly he reached through the bars and patted the thin hide.

“Hey Seto...” Jou glanced over at the taller man. “I... I gotta question for ya.”

“Mmm... What’s up?”

“You know what a locavore is?” The question was obviously more than academic based on the blond’s serious tone.

“It’s a new word. Added to the dictionary in two thousand seven I believe. I never read the meaning. Too trendy to be interesting.” Seto turned to watch him, taking his hand from the cat, when the blond stepped away from the truck and took a few steps back. “Why? What does it mean?”

Jou smiled crookedly and tugged at his hair. “It kinda means that you eat stuff that grows within’ a hundred miles of where you are.”

“Okay., so you are a locavore?”

“Yeah and no. This trip, how I decide where to go is kinda like that. I wake up and decide what I want to eat then I... I just drive to where I know they got what I want. Sometimes it takes a couple hours and sometimes it takes a couple days. It depends on what way I navigate and if there are any places I want to stop on the way.”

“I see. So you really don’t use a plan. You let your stomach lead you?” Seto couldn’t help it. He snorted and laughed with amusement. It was so completely ‘Jounouchi.’

Dark red colored Jou’s cheeks. “I... I was on my way to San Francisco Bay Area to get some Dungeness Crab when I bumped into you.”

“Kidnapped me you mean.” Seto grinned as the redness spread from Jou’s cheeks down his neck and up to his forehead. But he didn’t give the totally embarrassed blond a chance to respond. Smiling slightly he leaned forward and brushed his bristly cheek against Jou’s. “Thank you.”

“Uh... welcome. I... Do you want to navigate? I pick the destination and you decide the route? But you gotta allow for some adventure.” Jou had thought about this long and hard this morning. Without Scapegoat to distract him, Seto needed something to occupy his busy mind. Hopefully planning routes and ‘adventure’ would help.

A knowing smirk ghosted the brunet’s mouth. “You’re taking care of me again.”

“You gotta problem with me taking care of my lover?” It should have been playful or mock-belligerent, but it came out soft and just a little uncertain.

Direct, steady look. “No. No problem with it at all.” Then, “Any route as long as it’s interesting and allows for adventure?” Seto clarified his new role.
“Yeah, and try to stay off the interstate highways. We gotta use ‘em sometimes but I like the back roads.” The dark color was fading to pink. It was a real pity that Seto liked Jou tomato red.

To bring back his favored color, Seto, the playful imp he’d always squashed in the past poked his head out and quipped softly. “Mmmm I know – You can take my back road as often as you want. Last night was... great.”

As planned the color flooded back and Jou choked and gasped. “Uh... Th.. Thanks... Uhm... for me too.”

Seto stifled his inward chuckle, ready to tease again when the other man stiffened and started to swear. “What? what’s wrong?”

Jou’s strangled yelp of “My car...” was his answer.

“If your car?” Seto became aware of the low powerful purr of the engine and swung his gaze around to see what had caused that tone. His breath left him in a whoosh at the sight of the once pristine, gorgeous vehicle. Scratches, dents and dings covered the hood. Several large cat prints dotted the surface, the convertible top listed off one hinge, and from his angle he could see one of the headrests was chewed on, the leather gaping open and the filling spilling out. “What the hell happened? She doesn’t have fangs or claws.”

“She has teeth though and she can chew. Also she... is quite heavy despite her emaciated condition.” Randy explained quietly as he joined them.

“My car...” Jou repeated hoarsely. The vehicle rolled closer, coming to a stop just in front of them. More damage became evident. The steering wheel had been gnawed on, the glass was covered in paw prints, gear stick gnawed in half, back of the passenger seat was smudged with unidentifiable, smelly substances. Jou moaned low, sounding almost like he was going to cry. Seto turned to give comfort or something when a blur of movement on the floorboard halted his attention. It had looked like... but...

A sharp bark, dear and familiar made his knees weak and the sight of a small fuzzy black head poking up on the seat made his heart freeze in shock before bounding with joy. “Scapegoat.” He breathed joyously even as he jumped to scoop up his small friend. Ignoring the matted hair and stench permeating the little dog he cradled him close, crooning softly as the small pink tongue darted all over his face in greeting.

“Jounouchi!” He called happily, turning to his lover. “It’s Scape... Oh.” The blond wasn’t paying him any attention. His golden eyes were staring at the car in heartbroken devastation. Shifting his precious friend slightly, he moved back to the blond. “Jounouchi... Jou it’s okay. We’ll call the insurance company and get it fixed. It won’t take more than a couple days. C’mon Jou...”

“My car...” the blond whimpered, tears making his voice wobble in a distinctly unmanly way. Cradling his black-haired precious one against his chest Seto snagged his other arm around Jounouchi’s waist determined to guide him away from the sight of the once gorgeous car.

Several things happened in rapid succession. Scapegoat barked sharply, squirming to get down, a second, shriller bark came from inside the car, and the mountain lion chuffed loudly. The ranger that had driven the car climbed out holding a small reddish-brown bundle of fur. “Your pups were lucky. We found them hiding under the seats. Not sure how they got in the car because we were told they had wandered off but the mountain lion sat on top of the seat and couldn’t get to them. They were safe from the puma and the puma kept the other predators away. If you look at some of the tracks you can see that a few of them tried to get to them. So the cat kept them safe, protecting her food.”
Seto was staring at the squirming bundle of fur in the man’s hand. It was indeed a pup. Not his pup but definitely a pup. He remembered Jou saying that Scapegoat had followed another dog, but he hadn’t given the other animal much thought. Even as he watched the small canine squirmed and fought the Ranger’s hold, straining towards where the cat continued to chuff.

Ignoring Jou’s whimpers he released the blond and stepped forward to take the struggling animal. Immediately Scapegoat barked and whined, licking the other pup. He was ignored as the animal strained to get away. Following the instinct that was seldom wrong he stalked over to the truck where the mountain lion struggled to rid herself of the drugs and lift her head. Ready to snatch the small dog back if he were wrong he set the pup inside the back of the truck. Like a shot it rushed to the cage, whining and yipping. The cat relaxed and shifted, placing her muzzle against the bars.

The ranger gasped and moved to grab the small animal, but it was too late. Amazed, they watched as the pup began to lap at the cat’s face, growling what sounded like greetings. A long, rough tongue flicked out, catching the pup in a long caress, one that it leaned into.

“What the fuck?” The odd sight was enough to bring Jou out of his abstraction. Cats didn’t kiss dogs they considered food... Did they? Was she taking a taste?

Seto’s mind, sharpening by the second, made several connections. “The man who disappeared had a Sheltie that was pregnant. By the look of that pup I’d say it is a purebred Sheltie. The mother may have been injured in the crash, or maybe it precipitated her labor, but whatever happened, this pup survived. Judging by the look of the Puma’s teats, I would say it’s possible she nursed it as well.”

“What? How do you get that? I mean... okay maybe they’re friends but...”

Randy spoke softly “We found Phoebe’s body in the same hole as my brother. There were also four small skeletons. If this is Phoebe’s pup, it was the only one to be born. The other’s died with her.”

Seto nodded “Probably died giving birth, pup lived and the cat found it and raised it. It’s not unheard of for a cat to nurse puppies. You said she’d been given to a place that bred exotics. Perhaps she was pregnant and lost the kittens, which may be why they dumped her. The puppy needed a mother. She needed a kitten.”

“That’s way out there Kai.” Randy mumbled, and then sighed, “But watching them, it’s possible. She is still sick and weak, but she is trying to groom the pup. It also explains why she stayed in the car, not protecting her food, but protecting her young.”

“What? But...” The other ranger was staring in shock. “Are you saying she put them in the car for safety?”

“Yes. To her, domesticated as she is, that car meant security. Especially since it had the scent of a new puppy all over it. Humans, to her, mean safety.” Giving the cat a compassionate look that few on the face of what everyone on the planet had ever witnessed, Seto said softly, “She wanted to go home. She wanted her baby safe.”

Jounouchi was staring at him with a mix of awe and understanding, his agony at the state of his car forgotten for a second. “You... you get her don’t you?”

“I know what it was like to be abandoned in a place where nothing was as it had been. I know the fear and need to return to what was safe. I know what it’s like to have to protect someone you love.” Seto admitted softly. Gently he rubbed Scapegoat. “And I know how it hurts to lose something you care about.” He turned to look at Randy. “What happens to the pup? Will your family want it?”
“No.” Randy didn’t hesitate. “I won’t even mention it to them. We don’t know for certain it’s Phoebe’s pup and… And Phoebe’s litter was one of the reasons they were fighting when he stormed out. It would be too painful.” At Seto’s questioning look he held up his hands in supplication. “I have three pets, the most allowed by law so I can’t take it.”

“I see.” Seto gazed at the pair thoughtfully. “I think it would be best emotionally if the pup stayed with her but I’m not sure if physically it’s a good idea. She was fighting the drugs and wearing herself out to reach the pup. It might be best to separate them. I’ll ask the vet when they get here.” Giving his wide-eyed lover a quick squeeze he turned back to the resort. “Let’s go call your insurance agent.” Before Joey could melt down again, Seto dragged him off. One arm still cradling Scapegoat and the other tethered tightly around the blond’s waist.

They barely made it through the entrance when Randy dashed in after them, holding the other pup and their wallets. “Thought you might need these. They were in the glove box.” He hesitated a second then sighed. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Depends on what it is.” Seto allowed cautiously as he took his own eel skin wallet and handed Jou the battered nylon and Velcro one.

“Keep the pup with you? As soon as you guys left the cat started snarling and snapping at it, trying to drive it away. It’s too hot to keep in the car and I’m sure if I give it to one of the officers or animal control guys it’ll just go to the animal shelter. You said she might be going with the cat so…”

Seto stared at the struggling, growling scrap for a second, then sighed. “Fine, but only for the cat. Jou go make your call. I’ll deal with these two.” Taking a deep breath he wrinkled his nose. “First thing’s first. A bath for both of them – and something for parasites.”

“A bath? Kai… that’s a feral dog. It’s never had a bath and doesn’t know humans. It…”

“We’ll go back to the room from last night. I’ll need shampoo. See what you can do about parasite removal and prevention. I’m not living with a smelly dog or fleas even for a few hours.”

“Uh… okay. I think there is some stuff that my brother used for Phoebe. I’ll send it up to you.”

“Thank you.” Dismissing the other man, he turned to gaze at the blond tucked against his side. “Go make your call. Use the phone at the front desk. I assume you have the number of your insurance agent?”

The dark gold eyes widened and pink colored Jou’s cheeks. “Ah… ah… Yah I know her number. I… uhm … I’ll go call.” He stammered uncomfortably before bolting across to the phone.

Curious, but not unduly alarmed, Seto turned to the stairs, both pups held firmly in his determined grasp. Now that Scapegoat was safe, it was time to get him presentable. He hated smelly dogs and these pups reeked of death, feces and unpleasant things he couldn’t name and didn’t really want to.

When Jounouchi joined him, Seto was turning the air blue with his curses. Scapegoat had obviously picked up a few bad habits because instead of the docile, well behaved pup he’d been, he was a disobedient termagant who charged, growled and barked whenever Seto tried to force a very skittish wild pup into the bath.

Seto had more water on him than either of the pups. His arms and hands bore scratches and bleeding bite marks, and he was ready to strangle both of the little terrorists. Scapegoat was jumping wildly at the side of the tub, trying to get out of the warm water and the feral dog was backed behind the commode growling, snarling and snapping at Seto’s hands.
Jou couldn’t hold back his chuckle. “Shit Seto, you’re letting it kick your ass?”

That pissed the brunet off even more. He shot the laughing blond an aggravated look. “You can do better?”

“Move your ass. I’ll get it. You deal with your baby. He looks like he could take a bite out of your butt.” He didn’t wait for the kneeling man to move; instead he leaned over and plucked the cringing animal up by the scruff of the neck. Instantly the growling, snarling behavior stopped and the pup curled into a half moon shape. “It’s not used to humans picking her up and animals don’t like their bellies touched. Gotta do it like momma does.” Casually he knelt and put the small dog in the tub next to Scapegoat. The little black dog calmed down. “There’s your friend, Bud. Now let’s get you both all clean.” He grinned and handed Seto the bottle Randy had given him. “Here you go sport. It’s got a detangler too. Randy sent up the groomin’ stuff that belonged to Phoebe.”

“I’ll do Scapegoat. You have it.” Seto eyed the wild creature darkly, wondering if he could drown the beast and get away with it.

“Get that killer look outta your eyes. I’ll do it, but you owe me.” Jou grinned at the disgruntled look Seto gave him before reaching for the hand held shower head.

Once the other dog was near Scapegoat calmed to his normal self, much to Seto’s relief. He soaped, rinsed, and repeated three times before he was happy with the look and smell of his pup. In that time Jou managed to coat the pup, the tub, and himself with dingy brown bubbles dotted with dead fleas.

Seto’s smug relief died a swift death when he tried to take his pup from the filthy tub. The wild dog yelped and Scapegoat wriggled from his grasp, falling back in the scummy water. “Shit.”

“Got that all off... I think.” Jou grined and released the drain plug. “Gotta change the water and rinse some more. She’s doing great though. She’s only scared; she’s not trying to hurt me. Just warning me.”

“She?” That made Seto arch a brow slightly.

“Yeah. I checked while I was washin’ her tail. Fleas kinda hang out where it’s warm. We both know ass is hot.” Jou gave him a grin tinged with hentai thoughts even as his cheek pinkened slightly.

That made Seto smile slightly. His lover was a blushing flirt. He’d have to remember that. Such an interesting dichotomy. Jou blushes one time and flirts shamelessly the next. It’ll be fun to discover what he could do to cause both reactions. Smiling slightly in return, he allowed his gaze to drift down the curve of Jou’s back to rest on his meaningfully ass. “Care to prove it?”

The flirty smile faded. “Uh... Seto... About that. I... uhm... I don’t bottom, not ever.”

“Liar.” It came out before he could stop it. He knew for a fact that Mokuba liked to be both top and bottom. Jounouchi had bottomed for Mokuba or the relationship would not have lasted as long as it had. Why Jou would lie he didn’t know but he wouldn’t allow it.

Anger and something like regret blossomed in Jou’s eyes. “I’m not lying. L...” A yelp from the pup he was working soap into brought his gaze back to his task. “We ain’t talked about our pasts, but I’m gonna tell you ‘cause you gotta right to know. When you feel like telling me yours I’ll listen.” He took a deep breath, and paying close attention to his task, opened his history. “Ya know I was with Mai all through high school, even for a while after that. She dumped me ‘cause I was too hung up on you, and it left me raw. I ain’t gonna lie about anything; I loved her like a friend and lusted after her like a dog. I didn’t want to see what she said was right.” He sighed slightly “After you and your
brother left me here that time, I...” At Seto’s sharp breath he glanced at him. “Still don’t know about that do ya? Mokuba never told ya.”

“I know what I need to.” Seto’s breath sawed out unevenly. He wanted to know, but was afraid of what he’d find out.

“Nah, you don’t. I didn’t know it until Yugi told me a while ago. See, I saw your plane leave and thought you left me behind knowing I didn’t have a nickel on me. That was meaner than I knew you could be. If you’d a said no right off, okay. But you don’t go back on your word. I respected that about ya.” He scooped water over the pup almost mindlessly. “But to me, you broke your word. I was mad, and yeah I was hurt. I always thought I could count on you when the chips were down. So I got the hell out of the airport and put my thumb in the air. I didn’t know that Mokuba wanted... well he wanted to get with me and told you we were getting together.”

Suds rinsed and still vaguely brown, he emptied the water and began to soap up the pup again. “It woulda been a bad scene if Mokuba had tried anything with me. I didn’t accept who I was until after I met Oli. He took me on a spirit journey, and he explained that...” A sharp sigh then “Seto do you ever think we were raised to think about things wrong? About sex and gender and roles in society?”

“I’ve thought that for years.” Seto was holding on by a thread. What Jou was saying was that he hadn’t chosen Mokuba? That he hadn’t ever been involved with Mokuba? That wasn’t possible, Mokuba would have told him, wouldn’t have lied to him in the first place.

“Oli explained that his people believe that some of us are born with dual spirits that are both male and female. People like that aren’t bad or sick, they are gifted, blessed. I kinda got that. It fit with what I felt, what I am. I met Oli a few days after you left me here. If some guy had come on to me at that point, when I was still raw over Mai, still confused about my drive to be around you, and my denial about my bisexuality, I’da probably knocked the shit out of him. Mokuba included.”

“I... see.” Seto was confused and wasn’t sure what to say. His conception of the past had been totally skewed. “But you are okay with it now?”

“Yeah, I’m good with thinking both sexes are hot. I’ve had two guy lovers, including you, and four female lovers. Truthfully, I can swing either way, but I am picky about the guys, I like skinny brunets. Girls, well blondes of course. With big chests.”

“Oh.” He thought about it for a minute. “May I ask a couple questions?”

“Yeah, I guess. But you may not like the answers.” Satisfied that the pup was as clean as possible Jou lifted her and wrapped her in a towel, trapping her paws so she couldn’t scratch him. Seto automatically did the same for Scapegoat.

“Where are they now? Your lovers.” It was important to know, but damned if Seto knew why. They were past, history. What mattered was them, now.

“Mai is married to Varon, they live in England. Raymond, my other male lover, is with Eliza, another of my female lovers, the last I knew they were in up north of here. Narcissa is studying at Princeton living with one of the professors, and Rhia ... Rhiannon is on her way here.”

Carefully, Seto stood and walked into the bedroom. With exquisite control he placed his towel dry pup on the floor. Warily, Jou did the same. “Seto...

“I’m waiting patiently, and I am not a patient person.” Not for the world would he admit that fear and betrayal were fighting with his iron control. Had Jou found him so lacking in bed that he’d called for
his other lover?

“She is my insurance agent. I... we dated casually for four months. About a month ago she started talkin’ about taking time off work to come with me on this trip. I... I didn’t want her to come and told her not to bother. That’s how I knew it would never be more than casual. I was going to use the time away to let the relationship die. After I told her not to bother she made a scene and stomped out. I ain’t seen her since.”

“I see.” Relief coiled through him. Jounouchi wouldn’t ever do that to him. He was just as committed as Seto was. They were together. The insurance agent could go to hell. He’d help her get there if she pushed too hard. “Hopefully she will know how to keep her professionalism.”

Jou hid a sigh when Seto’s eyes lost their turbulent cast and became hard and determined. His lover was obviously not threatened by his ex-girlfriend. “She seemed okay on the phone. She’ll be here in about three hours. She was on a call not far from here.”

“Hnnn…” Seto eyed the drying dogs closely. The wild creature was drying out to look almost pretty, if one liked foxes. “Kitsune.”

“Eh? Oh her... Yeah Kit is a good name for her. She’s half kitten and looks kinda like a fox.” Jou knelt and rubbed the pup gently behind the ear, ignoring her flinching half-growl. “What do you think Kit?” When she nipped at his finger without drawing blood he took that as approval. “What about you Scapegoat?” The black-furred pup looked up at him somberly as if considering before yipping. “Okay so Kit it is.”

“Jou... don’t grow attached. It may be leaving when the vet takes her mother.” Seto warned.

The blond shrugged and gave him a speaking glance. “We’ll see each other again no matter what. You’re gonna be takin’ care of her and I plan on stickin’ close to you ‘til you kick me to the curb.”

“Hnn…” His heart, already light, filled with warmth at the affirmation of commitment. They were together. “Okay then. Let’s go downstairs and see if there is anything to eat. I’m sure we could all use a meal.”

***

The distinctive thwomp thwomp of a helicopter brought Seto to his feet just as they finished eating. “The vet made good time. I’ll go speak to them. Will you bring the pups?”

“Yeah. It was nice of them to let us use Phoebe’s pen outside. Not that the dogs appreciated it. They are sure loud.”

“Scapegoat isn’t. That... Kit is howling like a banshee. Perhaps we should change her name to Banshee.”

“Don’t even go there.” Jou glowered, then chuckled, “but she sure is loud ain’t she?” It was a rhetorical question.

Seto nodded and stood, giving him a small grin. “I’ll see you outside.”

Jou waved and pushed back his chair. “Yeah, see you in a few.”

The vets were everything he expected. Competent, caring, dedicated, and knowledgeable. The best
his money could buy. They examined the awake, if not spry, puma with concern and not a little rage while Seto explained about how they’d found her and the pup.

Allen Baxter, the junior vet, a young man of about twenty three, started to speak. “I’ve never heard of...” But was cut off by an older veterinarian, a man in his fifties, with scarred hands and gentle eyes.

“It’s not unheard of actually. There are a few cases of large cats domesticated enough to adopt other domestic animals. If this little girl is one of a line whose ancestors have been born in captivity for generations then she is as domestic as a house cat. It’s rare to find one, most of the old lines have died out because of interbreeding, cruelty and trophy hunting, but it is possible. It’s also possible that she is simply a rare case, a big cat who is sociable and learned to like the society of humans and other domestic animals.” He stared down at the wreck of a once majestic animal. “It doesn’t really matter why, what matters is that she did, and she deserves health and peace. Mr. Kaiba, you will be seeing to her care after she recovers?”

“No... I will give her to the most loving souls I’ve ever met. My best friends, Matashi and Aishira. They have a large home with fenced acreage bordering the Florida Everglades. No neighbors to alarm and almost five miles for her to run.”

“I see. They know about exotic pet care?”

“Not at all. But I’ll give you their number and you can arrange for the best tutelage. Is she strong enough to fly back to Florida?”

“No. She is very run down. I wouldn’t risk such a trip with her in this condition. The flight out of here is probably her limit and she’s only going to be in the air a little while. Perhaps in a month, when she is stronger.”

“I’ll call Matashi and Aishira. I think they will want to be part of her recovery, and it will help with the bonding. What about the pup?”

“You say she snapped at the pup when humans walked away. It may be instinctive then. If she thinks she is going to die, and she very well might, she would drive the pup towards safety... in this case humans.”

“So it’s best to keep the pup away?” Seto needed to be clear on this.

“I’d say... probably for a few weeks, until she’s strong enough to know she’s going to live. Puma kittens stay with their mother for over eighteen months.”

Seto nodded “So, it’s best for her if she sees we are going to take care of the pup but not let it go with her?”

“I think so. If she starts to pine I’ll contact you. I assume you will be taking care of it?” The doctor’s eyes moved to where Jou was standing quietly holding both pups. “I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name.”

“Yeah, she can stay with us. I’m Joey Wheeler. Nice to meet you.” Jou nodded.

The doctor gave him an appraising look, one that filled with recognition. “I’ve enjoyed your travels. So you won’t be going alone this time eh?”

“Nah, Seto, Scapegoat and Kit are going along for the ride.” Jou smiled while Seto gave him a curious look.
“Sounds like a fun time... uhm... If you’ll let me see her?” The vet took the pup and gave a quick exam. “Healthy, a little thin, but I’d rather see thin than fat. Wild...” He chuckled as he removed his scratched and bitten hand. “Feral animals are difficult to train after a certain age, but I think she’ll be okay with the right kind of environment.”

“Yeah, about that...” Jou shifted uncomfortably. “Y’know we’re on a road trip. I... uh... Camping out and stuff. Is that gonna be okay?”

“Just keep your eye on her, use a leash, and don’t let her run off with any packs of dogs and she’ll be fine. It’s not ideal, but as long as Mr. Kaiba, you and the other pup are constant she should develop bonds.” Jou read it as a positive sign when the little pup only growled when he took her from the vet.

The older vet nodded briefly to his protégé. “Let’s get the cat loaded.” He turned his gaze to Seto and Jou. “Take the pup away. We’re going to have to sedate her and put her on an I.V.”

Seto nodded and, cradling Scapegoat close, herded Jou and Kit back to the hotel.

****

The pups were in the kennel the helicopter fading in the distance, and Seto was enjoying a cup of coffee with Jounouchi in front of the large picture window overlooking the parking lot when a red car, an exact duplicate of Jounouchi’s before the puma mauling, pulling small silver a tag-along camper, drove into the lot, parking illegally across four spaces.

A tall blonde woman dressed in a black mini-dress, thigh high leather boots, and gold chains that hung from neckline to hem, climbed out. She didn’t bother to look around; she stalked to the hotel with the grace and purpose of a predator closing in on a helpless victim.

Amusement and mild appreciation for a woman who had the balls to dress like she was going to an L.A. nightclub while out in the wild turned to curiosity when Jounouchi sighed and rose to his feet. “You know her?”

“A premonition crept over him. Why the hell Jounouchi put up with her pathetic attempts at sexual invitations that dissolved into tearful pleadings, he had no idea. But it was getting on his nerves to watch his lover touch the woman’s arm gently, pat her back consolingly, and whisper intimately into her ear. Damn it what did Jou think he was playing at? He’d better get rid of her ass before Seto gave them both reason to cry.

He was glaring down at his cup, mentally envisioning the ways she’d scream in agony, when Jou sat back down, dropping a set of keys on the table. “Sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Seto watched with curiosity and growing impatience as his lover dealt with his ex. Why the hell Jounouchi put up with her pathetic attempts at sexual invitations that dissolved into tearful pleadings, he had no idea. But it was getting on his nerves to watch his lover touch the woman’s arm gently, pat her back consolingly, and whisper intimately into her ear. Damn it what did Jou think he was playing at? He’d better get rid of her ass before Seto gave them both reason to cry.

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Blue eyes snapped up to him with laser-like intensity. “What the hell took so long?”

“Rhiannon... Well when we hooked up her asshole boyfriend had just walked out on her. She was hurting pretty bad. I kinda knew he was back when I turned her down before. I hoped he’d get back with her if I wasn’t in the picture. She is upset ‘cause he invited her to a party last night. She spent the night with him, and this morning he tossed her out, saying thanks for the memories. She... When I called she was looking to run away from that.” He shifted slightly and picked up the keys. “She’s gonna go stay with her sister for a week or two.” A grin that was only partially feigned crossed his lips. “She brought us a fresh car and a camper that sleeps four with a table for meals. You get the
dogs, I’ll get the packs. Let’s hit the road. I’m cravin’ Dungeness Crab.”

***

A pungent odor woke Seto from his sound sleep. He recognized it immediately from the time before Scapegoat had been house trained. An instant later his pup’s distinctive whine snapped his eyes open and he sat up, in a heartbeat groaning and grabbing at his lower back. Damn he was sore and didn’t want to move. But based on the smell inside the camper and Scapegoat’s whine he had to get moving before he had a second mess to deal with.

Dogs handled, and his own personal issues dealt with by way of the small packet of quick dissolve pain reliever Jou had thoughtfully left for him on the table, he looked around the camper in surprise. It was sparse, clean and tidy. Their meager clothes folded neatly in the small place. There was nothing for him to do. Jou had seen to it all. A small note sat beside a bottle of water. Frowning, he picked it up letting his eye linger on a printed map of the town sitting under the water. Where had Jou gotten that?

‘Morning Seto,

Or is it afternoon? You were out hard so I decided to let you sleep in. You drool in your sleep! Just kidding. You looked too tired to wake up, plus you are cute when I’ve worn your ass out.

It’s not quite sunrise and I’m going to see if I can get a job on a fishing boat. Crab for dinner tonight!

Half Moon Bay is a nice place so you shouldn’t have any problem staying out of trouble. Take the dogs to the beach or whatever you want to do. They’re gonna be restless and Kit’s a digger, check the carpet near the door. If you get bored you might want to run out to the farmers market. See if there’s anything you want to stick in the crab boil. If you don’t want to do anything, hang out and rest.

Love Jou.

P.S. Relax and HAVE FUN!!!!’

“Hnnn... idiot. Go for a walk, check out the farmers market. Have fun? Who the hell does he think I am?” He grumbled aloud. Scapegoat barked in agreement. Smiling he knelt to play with the pup. When Kit backed away warily he ignored her and concentrated on his little friend.

That lasted all of ten minutes before the pup went back to play with Kit. With a sigh he tossed himself back down on the bed and willed himself to sleep. It should have been easy. He’d willed himself to do many things in the past, but in just a few moments his eyes popped open. The pups were scrabbling with each other, growling playfully and pouncing. The breeze through the window Jou must have opened earlier, carried a hint of the sea and the sound of people talking in the distance. He simply couldn’t focus.

Abruptly his isolation closed around him. Sadness welled in his throat. He was alone again. He wanted... needed Jou. Where was he? Jou loved him. Why was he alone again? A wave of doubt rose. Jou left him? Had he done something wrong? Disappointed him? They were together weren’t they? So why had his lover left him?

Fighting the doubts he stood and grabbed the note Jou had left like a lifeline. Jou loved him; he said it and showed it. He was being stupid, something he hated. “Have fun? Fuck, I’m not even sure what it means.” And that was pathetic. With a growl of disgust at his own pitiable state, he snapped leashes on the frolicking pups and left the small camper determined to ‘have fun.’
With a sigh of exasperation, Seto flopped down on a bench. He was completely oblivious to the bright blue sky and expansive stretch of ocean spread before him in an endless panorama. ‘Have fun’ he grumbled to himself sarcastically. ‘How the fuck am I supposed to do that?’ He complained under his breath. God knows he’d tried. Playing fetch with the dogs sounded fun, but it had turned into an all out chase as the idiot bitch took off the split second he dropped her leash. He’d been tempted to let her go and claim innocence but his own little Scapegoat had chased after her. He was beginning to doubt the intelligence of his dog. After a hot, sweaty run through the town that had ended on the beach he figured he might as well walk along and relax, maybe look for seashells. He remembered doing that with his parents before Mokuba was born. This time all he got for his search were uncomfortably sandy toes and, with a grimace down at his shirt, seagull vomit all over him.

Growling under his breath he glared at the dogs flopped at his feet. Stupid kids! Thinking that over the counter shit could make birds explode. Anyone with half a brain would know that they’d just vomit the alka seltzer back up if it gave them problems. Too much youtube and television and not enough brains.

He continued to glare at the pups as he remembered the teen’s attitudes. Rude, insolent, disrespectful in a way he’d never experienced. The boy’s father needed to break out the rod because those brats were seriously spoiled. He was too old to kick their asses like they’d deserved. They knew it and got in his face, daring him to lift a hand to them. They’d call the cops and he’d go to jail. He had to settle with giving them the patented Kaiba glare of death. It had bounced off their egotistical, stupid hides like a gnat off elephant hide. Just remembering the twin boys and how they’d run off when he demanded their names made him want to hit something - hard.

Hard – as in the blow that had just hit him upside the head. Snarling he jumped to his feet and turned, ready to beat someone into the ground only to be met with the familiar blue gaze of his own blue-eyes white dragon. For split second he froze, then shook his head in bemusement - the kite version of course.

Picking up the plastic kite by the string he turned his head and followed it back to the owner. A girl of about twelve was spooling up her string as she ran towards him with an expression of apology, desperation and a hint of fear. He just glared as she got closer. When she was still a few yards away she burst into speech. “Oh man! Sorry! Are you hurt? Are you okay? Do you...”

He cut her off brusquely “I’m fine. You should be more careful.” His voice was harsh with the frustrations of the day.

The girl froze at his tone and flinched slightly. “I... I’m sorry.” She bit her lip and sighed. “I really was trying to be careful but... well I suppose you want to talk to my mom now?”

At her quickly hidden fear he gentled his voice. His bad day wasn’t her fault, “You just need to be careful.”

“Yeah. I guess I’ll give up on flying the stupid thing.” She glared at the kite in vexation. “I can’t get it off the ground. My brothers were supposed to help me but they took off.”

Brothers? That brought his sharp gaze back to the girl for an assessing look. Mentally he compared the girl’s bright red hair and dark black eyes to the twins that’d had coated him in seagull vomit. Their hair had been lighter and their eyes darker, more hazel blue, but yeah, they had the same nose and chin. “I would very much like to meet your mother and brothers.”

That made the girl pale, a light dusting of golden freckles stood out on her cheeks. “I...” Her shoulders slumped slightly before squaring as she swallowed hard. “Yeah, I guess. It’s after lunch time anyway so... Yeah, well follow me.” With a pugnacious, defiant set to her shoulder and a proud
Impressed at not only her desire to take responsibility for her actions, but her proud attitude, Seto tugged the dogs to their feet and followed smartly.

He was vaguely intrigued when she led him away from the cluster of houses and down into a lively business area. She bypassed several shops before turning into a small patio restaurant. When he hesitated slightly she glanced over and explained. “Mom owns the place. She’s the cook too. Why don’t you sit down. We don’t have any customers so...” She gestured to a chair.

He sank in the chair just as a tall, curvy woman in her forties, dressed in beachcomber professional chic came through the swinging door. “Hi. Welcome to The Kite and the Heron.” She handed him a menu and smiled. “Can I get you something to drink before you order?”

“I...” He started to explain when the girl interrupted him. “He’s not here to order. Don’t get your hopes up. Ty and Mark took off and I tried to fly the kite alone. I hit him with it and he wanted to talk to you.”

The warmth drained from her eyes replaced with wary apology. “I see. I’m sorry, were you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” Originally his goal had been to tell this woman off, but now, he didn’t have the desire. Maybe it was the obvious concern she had for her daughter, maybe it was the spark of admiration he felt for the girl, or perhaps it was the mural of a Great Blue Heron bringing back the good feelings from his drug induced ‘spirit walk’ but whatever it was, his ire drained away and he smiled cordially. “Actually I wanted to compliment you on your daughter. She took responsibility for what happened and apologized, then offered to bring me to see you. A lot of young people would be...” he broke off as the twin teens from earlier schlepped onto the patio. “Rude and completely disrespectful.” Okay so he’d decided to let them off, but he couldn’t deny the thrill of satisfaction as they paled in recognition and heard his words.

Their mother, completely oblivious, smiled with happiness and relief. “Thank you!”

“Just the truth.” He gave the boys a gloating smirk, amused to see them squirm. “Your daughter is most admirable.

Seeing the direction of his gaze and slightly discomfited by his smile, she turned to see her sons standing behind her. Instantly she flew into ‘bitch’ mode, as they liked to call it. “Boys! I told you to stay with your sister! You owe her and this nice man an apology. If you’d...”

“Not necessary, not for me.” Seto smiled again. The boys squirmed and turned red. Okay so maybe there was something to the old axiom of killing your enemy with kindness. Reaching for his wallet he decided he was hungry enough to eat. He would pay by card as he hadn’t carried any cash and only carried the cards for ease of identification when he’d... abruptly he cut off that thought. That was all behind him and he wouldn’t dwell on it. His future was Jounouchi not a black abyss. “I’m not sure which of these cards will work.” And he wasn’t. His brother may have canceled them or if the police were involved then they may be tracked. The thought gave him pause. He didn’t want to be found. He was where he wanted to be, with his lover.

Ignoring the card carrier he pretended to check for the cash he knew wasn’t there. “Sorry.” Feigning a sigh he shook his head “Left my cash back at the camper today. Otherwise I’d be happy to eat here.” He sniffed lightly. “Whatever you’re cooking smells delicious.”

The woman switched from scolding her sons to beam at him. “I make the best food around.” She boasted proudly. “We had great business until...” She trailed off.
“Until?” He prompted. He didn’t know why but he was curious.

One of the bookends answered, pointing rudely “Until she needed forty thousand in braces. Dad had to go to work in San Francisco at a company with benefits. He’s a java programmer with Puzzle Rings, the online gaming company.”

Seto was confused for a moment. Anger flared when the girl’s hand flew to her mouth and shame colored her features. He glared at the heartless boy for half a second before his mother rounded on him. “It wasn’t her fault! How many times do I have to say this? We needed the insurance for everyone not just her. The restaurant wasn’t making enough to cover it, not with my pre-existing. Now apologize to her again or I swear you won’t see your computer for a month.”

The boy mumbled a forced apology and glared at the floor. Seto broke the tension by asking softly “So, how did his leaving cause you to lose business?”

Hard look fading to melancholy, she smiled at him. “The Kite and the Heron. It’s a play on words. You noticed the stand next door? It’s a kite stand. Everything here is driven by tourists. My husband used to put the kites in the air with the daily special or coupons written on their tails. The street performers are further down, about three blocks. All of the tourists go where the entertainment is. The tourists would come, and the street performers too. He’d fly six to eight kites a day. We have prevailing winds from the ocean so they stay up very well. He’d watch them but for the most part. Well now with no kites we get very few customers.”

Seto turned slightly and looked at the twins. “You guys don’t know how to fly the kites?”

The boy who’d been silent up until then glared sullenly at him. “Of course we do. We just have better things to do than stick around here flying kites.”

“Better? More important?” He allowed disgust to show in his icy gaze. “What’s more important than helping to care for your family?”

“We didn’t ask to be born! If they couldn’t take care of us ~ her ~” he glared at his sister then switched his venomous gaze to his mother. “They shouldn’t have had kids. We aren’t the parents here. It’s their job.”

Seto’s eyes narrowed and he inhaled sharply. It was almost exactly what Mokuba had said to him one time when he’d asked his little brother to take on more responsibilities at Kaiba Corp. He hadn’t replied, had wanted to give his brother the freedom he desired, so he’d bit his tongue and shouldered the responsibilities. But it had festered and many times he’d thought of what he should have said. Now he had the chance. Not with Mokuba, but here with these boys. “Really? Their job? Their job to make sure you have a computer, make sure you have brand name clothes, make sure you have health care? All things a lot of people don’t have. Millions of kids don’t even have parents much less things you take for granted.” Seto was cool, dispassionate, but every word heartfelt. It bounced off them like gnats off a rhinoceros’s hide.

“You don’t know shit. We don’t care about this place! We had a good life, friends, everything we wanted in L.A. And just because she wanted to come here and start this place we had to give it up. We don’t want to be here and we won’t help keep this dump open. We want to go back to L.A.”

Seto glared but their mother waded into the fray. “Boys...” The argument was obviously an old one. The woman sighed and sank into the chair beside Seto. “This is my dream. I want it more than almost anything. Why...”

“This place is a joke. It stinks like fish all the time. The birds shit on you walking down the street and
the people here are so stupid. The teachers are all fucked up hippies from the sixties and don’t know shit. We want to go home.” The aggression died and both boys stepped forward, wearing identical pleading looks. “We know they’ll hire you back at the studio. C’mon Mom, lets go home.”

Instead of the apologetic look he expected the woman to wear her face hardened. “You know that’s not an option. You want to go back to your druggie gangster friends. It’s not happening. And you can’t run away again – if you do I’ll send you to your uncle’s place in Montana. Nothing but cows and tumbleweeds. You…”

“Mooooom…” The boys whined in unison. “It was just a little weed. And we didn’t do any. We just want to go home.”

“Not an option. Now, I’m going to go call your father. Maybe he’ll come get you guys so you can go up to the city for a few days.” When they growled a protest, which she ignored, she nodded to Seto and stalked from the room.

The girl glared at her brothers for a second then turned to Seto. “Well if you’re going to see all that I guess you should know our names. I’m Amy Spiedel. This is Mark and Ty, my brothers. They are identical twins but Mark is the one with the scar above his eyebrow. My mom’s name is Ramona and my dad is Jason Spiedel.”

“Ramona Spiedel…” He mumbled softly. “She worked for a studio. Pixar? With Disney?”

“Yeah. And she gave it up to work here.” The un-scarred twin, Ty, gestured around disparagingly.

“Quite a change. She must have wanted to do this very badly.” He observed mildly. “Why don’t you help her out?”

“Why the fuck should we? When this dump fails we will get the hell out of here. It can’t happen soon enough. That’s why we…” Mark stomped hard on his brother’s foot. He didn’t want Ty to admit that they’d been causing trouble and driving tourists away from this end of the block.

But Seto knew. He’d been in business too long not to see the pattern. “Amy, could you please bring me a glass of ice water? I’m a little thirsty.”

“Sure… uh…”

“Call me Kai.” He smiled as the girl ran off. The smile died as he turned his gaze back to the boys. “I don’t have time to be discreet, and I don’t believe it will work on you. We all know what you were doing on the beach earlier, and I had planned to let it slide. I’ve changed my mind. You both are spoiled jerks. Let me enlighten you – you were feeding that stuff to brown pelicans – endangered brown pelicans. That carries jail time and stiff penalties here. If you don’t help your mother – fly kites – wash dishes – or any fucking thing else she needs I will report you. You are both seventeen, close to eighteen, and based on what your mother said, you have records. You will…”

“Fucking asshole! You can’t prove a goddamn thing…” The second twin snarled, lifting his hand threateningly.

Seto didn’t hesitate; he stood fluidly and in blurred movements sent them both flying back to land on the floor. “Asshole I may be, but I wasn’t the only witness. If I stroll back there I am sure I can convince some of the shop owners to report you, especially after I explain what you were doing and how it affects their potential for customers.”

When they sprang to their feet, Amy walked back into the room. She froze for just a second then turned to look at her brothers. “Dad will be here tomorrow. Mom just got a call from Teri. The whale
trawler will be pulling into port in about an hour. She recommended the watchers eat here. They may not come, but we may get a few. They are a Japanese tour group and mom is going to need our help.”

“No way! I ain’t…” Ty protested only to shut up when Seto moved slightly, just a simple flexing of his arms, but it was clearly a reminder. “Fuck it. I’ll wash dishes. I ain’t speakin’ to no foreigner. I can’t understand them most of the time.” With a huff he stalked off.

Seto, his mind ticking over the possibilities, looked at Mark. “Can you get the kites in the air before sundown? High enough for the trawler to see?”

“Duh.”

He nodded shortly. “Fine, the tails were used for advertisement in the past, and will be again. I will write up a few things in English and in Kanji. That will…”

Amy was staring at him with wide eyes. “You write Kanji?”

“I am Japanese. I was raised in Domino, Japan until I was eighteen. I…”

Amy didn’t let him finish. She just whooped and called for her mom. When the woman came in at a trot, the girl’s words almost tripped over themselves to get out.

Ramona Spiedel gave him a thorough inspection then nodded. “Will you help us tonight? Waiter? You keep tips and I’ll pay you three dollars an hour. Plus you get a free meal.”

“I... uh…” That was beyond what he’d intended. He glanced down at the pups lying at his feet. “I have them. I don’t…”

“I’ll watch them while I watch the kites. It’ll be cool. Besides, you’re kinda skinny. You need to eat and mom’s the best cook around.” Amy smiled winningly, putting all of her charm behind it. It wasn’t enough to sway him, but it told him she would be an almost unstoppable force when she was older.

Making up his mind, he nodded once. “Fine, I’ll stay and help. Let’s get these kites in the air, and then I will go leave a note for my companion. He’s gone to work on a crab boat today. He has a craving for Dungeness Crab.”

“Oh…” Amy bit her lip “Well he’s going to be disappointed. The crab pots are going to be mostly empty today. There was a weird tide last night. They headed for deeper water. They’ll be back tomorrow or the next day.”

“You know a lot of things.” Seto observed as she unrolled a length of cloth and handed it to him.

“Yeah, but you know why too. I can tell. You’re like me. You’re brain is always on, always learning and remembering.”

“I know, but how did you know about me?” Amy was perceptive but he didn’t think it was that.

The girls grin was sharp and surprisingly wicked. “Everyone knows who you are Seto Kaiba. Even if they don’t recognize you dressed like a bum. I knew when I saw you on the beach.”

Seto’s eyes narrowed on her dancing eyes. “You knew me when you hit me with the kite.” The full scope of what she’d done gave him pause.
“Yes.” She admitted it cheerfully. “And I knew you were my mom’s boss before she quit, even if she never met you. Besides I saw you on the news the other day.” She shrugged. “I thought that you’d either offer her a job back or buy a partnership in the restaurant to get her to work for you again. Everyone knows you want only the best and my mom’s the best at cooking and at animation scripts.”

“It was a scam? Even your brothers?” He could clearly see her plot; it amused him and vaguely pissed him off.

“Nope. I just hit you with my kite and let things fall in place. Sometimes things work out great. My brothers messing with the seagulls and pelicans were a lucky coincidence. I wanted to laugh when you knocked them on their butts.” Her bravado died and she met his gaze candidly. “I did what I had to do. My mom needs help and you helped her. Thanks.”

Seto nodded again, uncomfortable with being manipulated but warmed by her gratitude. He understood that the end justified the means, but he didn’t care to be a means. Without another word he bent to write the Kanji invitation to the whale watchers.

***

Joey made it back to the camper just before sunset. He was tired and slightly sore. Dungeness crab fishing had been a bust this day because of some tidal surge. Of course the captain he’d worked for today hadn’t mentioned it until they were out to sea. But that was okay. He’d had a great day fishing and listening to fish stories. Captain Mac had been a treasure trove of tall tales and wisdom all mixed with the smell of bait and the chug-chug of his engine. He’d also been a man of honor. If Joey came back and worked for him the next day he would get his pick of the crab haul. That promise, the stories, and the adventure had been payment enough for Joey, but the fifty bucks the man had slipped him was icing on the cake. He’d use it to take Seto out for dinner, someplace as nice as their limited wardrobes would allow. He had the perfect spot in mind and only needed to clean up and change.

Grinning he opened the door, expecting to see the tall brunet sprawled on the bunk, maybe cuddling a pup or two. What he found was a small note stating Jou was to come to The Kite and The Heron. An X was marked on the map of the city he’d left for Seto earlier. The location made his brows lift in surprise and a grin cross his lips. He’d seen the kites flying as they had chugged in to port. The tails of the kites had streamed out, the words and characters only becoming clear as they tied the ship. Kanji and English had proclaimed specials and wonderful food, welcoming travelers. He’d actually thought of going there if they couldn’t find someplace fancier. Now that he thought about it, of course Seto would want to check it out, but it went to show just how much they had in common. Putting the note carefully in his wallet, he hummed a low tune and grabbed a clean set of clothes, heading for the public showers at the campground. He didn’t want to smell of bait when he saw Seto.

After his shower he felt ten pounds lighter and the ache in his muscles was down to just a twinge. With a jaunty whistle, he sauntered out into the soft California twilight in search of his lover and good food.

He expected to find Seto sitting at a table reading a newspaper or maybe playing with the pups. He was surprised and completely baffled to see his tall, slim, boyfriend decked out in a sky blue cotton shirt, his khaki shorts completely covered by a long, dark gray canvas apron, standing in the middle of a crowded patio restaurant holding a notepad, obviously taking the order for the table.

Grinning slightly, he sat back to watch Seto work, only to sit up straight and stare with wide-eyed admiration as he saw his lover’s exceptionally fine ass framed in khaki and black canvas. The ties of the apron and the border of charcoal were incredibly sexy. He’d thought he was too tired for sex, but
at this moment all he wanted was to drop those loose shorts and see what Seto’s perfect ass looked like highlighted by just the apron and strings. Based on the discreet and not so discreet looks Jou saw on various faces he wasn’t the only one feeling that way and the slight sway to that sexy ass told him that Seto knew as well. Watching with no small amount of possessiveness he enjoyed the look of his lover. His pleasure was brought to an abrupt halt as he caught a small flirty curl of Seto’s lips as he pivoted to speak to one of the men overtly ogling. That smile made his heart contract slightly. For all they had made love, Seto had never given him that little grin.

“Well hell.” He mumbled under his breath as he forced himself to relax back onto the half wall that served as the boundary around the patio restaurant. He knew he had no right to be possessive. Yeah they were lovers, but he knew that Seto didn’t love him, knew it was only going to be temporary, until the sexy brunet found his feet again. Thinking it was real or forever for Seto was a sure way to heartache. No matter what Jou’s personal feelings or needs were, Seto’s were more important. Besides he couldn’t force love. He knew all that, told himself it hourly, but it didn’t stop him for falling deeper and deeper for the man he’d loved for years. And it didn’t stop the twinges of jealousy at seeing his lover smiling flirtatiously at seeing his lover smiling flirtatiously at anyone else.

With a mix of pain and pleasure he watched Seto work the overcrowded area. He didn’t get to watch for long though, because the dark blue gaze lifted and scanned in his direction, picking him out effortlessly. With a quick jerk of Seto’s chin Jou found himself sliding off the wall and wending his way through the crowd. “Hey. Uh... Nice apron.” He couldn’t keep the leer off his face.

Blue eyes shining with amusement met his gaze. “Pervert.” But it was a laughing whisper. Jou barely noticed the young girl stepping up to them until she spoke.

“The pups are sleeping Kai.” Jou turned to find her looking at him critically. Before he could speak she said “I’m Amy. You’re Joey, Kai’s friend. He said you’d help if we needed it when you got here. We need it. I’ll get you a shirt and apron. C’mon.”

Jou ignored his twanging back and shoulders, gave Seto a smile and a nod to say it was okay with him. “’K.” Without another word he followed the girl to a back room.

A sky blue shirt, exactly matching Seto’s, hit him in the chest. “Here’s the shirt. Apron’s on the top shelf. Grab one and put it on.” The girl’s tone was brisk and just a bit bossy.

“Thanks, uh Amy.” He gave her a questioning look. “Where can I change?”

“Here’s okay. I’ll step out.” She shrugged and exited, closing the door firmly behind her.

In less than a minute Jou’d changed shirts and slipped the apron on, tying it in a comfortable knot. Amy was waiting when he stepped out of the small room. “Okay whatcha need?”

“My mom’s in the kitchen, through that door. She’s the chef.” The girl pointed to an open window in the wall that led to an obvious kitchen. A wide ledge with plates full of steaming, delicious food made his stomach growl loudly. Even as he watched, Seto smoothly filled a large tray with four of the plates and carried them to a table. “Kai is our waiter. My brothers are washing dishes. I’ll get you the busing cart. If you could bus the tables and bring the dishes to the kitchen? Kai and I can handle the orders and stuff. Unless you know about waiting on tables and speak Japanese too?” She hesitated a minute, biting her lip and obviously thinking.

“Yeah I speak Japanese. I grew up in Domino. And I’ve worked as a waiter before. I could do more for you if let me wait on tables.”

“Then you take orders and deliver, I’ll do the busing.” She gave him a tiny smile. “Thanks.” She
handed him an order pad.

Seto stopped next to him on his way to pick up another load of plates. “The four tables on the right are yours. Numbers two, four, six, and eight. I have the four on the left. One, three, five, and seven. I’ve taken their orders and water. At least one of their orders should be up, perhaps two. If you’ll go grab a tray, then introduce yourself and...”

“Got it. Go take care of your customers.” Grinning slightly, he allowed his gaze to flutter over the tall brunet. “You owe me big though.”

“Yeah, yeah, and I always pay up. Get to work blondie.” Seto gave him a slight grin.

After that it was full tilt. The eight tables were constantly full. Amy barely had time to trundle the bus cart over before someone else was sliding into an empty seat. Of course she hurriedly cleaned and apologized, but her words were brushed aside with polite phrases of understanding and gratitude. The food tasted better than it smelled, and it smelled heavenly. The glow of the patio lights and the cheerful voices rising and falling in a mix of languages gave the atmosphere the feel of an international garden party. Several street performers, drawn by the activity, came up to play music and give performances, much to the delight of the diners.

Jounouchi kept a weather-eye on Seto. The patrons were friendly, boisterous, and slightly rowdy. The Japanese spoke was a mix of regional accents that shrieked all levels of society. He knew Seto’s snobby attitude when it came to some things, and he wasn’t sure if the brunet could lower himself enough to be a decent servant. After just a few minutes of watching, he saw he had nothing to worry about. Seto was blending as well as any chameleon. Too well in some cases. Jou couldn’t help frowning when he noticed Seto laughing with the same guy he’d been smiling at earlier. Before he could do something stupid, he turned away quickly to take another order.

Seto, still chuckling at the quip his customer made, glanced over at Jou’s sharp move. Seeing the blond smiling at a customer, chatting about the food he gave his customer an absent smile as he let his eyes linger on his sexy lover, he wondered how he was going to pay Jou for the work and had to forcibly pull his mind out of the gutter it immediately slipped into. Through sheer strength of will, the first he’d felt in a long time, he focused on his job. He had the rest of his life to be with his blond.

At ten thirty Jounouchi sighed and looked around the small restaurant. The tables were cleaned, the floor swept, and the lights were low. Seto came through the swinging door with a tray laden with bowls of something that to Jou, who’d last eaten a sandwich aboard the fishing trawler, smelled like ambrosia. “Hey one of them better be for me Kai.” He was careful to use the name Seto had been using all evening.

“You’d be so lucky.” The brunet taunted, but he set the tray on a newly cleaned table and sank into the chair, motioning for Jou to sit as well. “Eat.”

Gratefully he dropped into the offered chair. “Man what a night. I was hopin' to go to a restaurant tonight but...” He grinned slightly “not like this.” Giving his lover a grin he picked up the spoon and dug into the thick seafood stew.

Seto gave him a quick glance. “Thank you for your help.”

Jou didn't bother to do more than grunt. The food was exploding on his taste buds and his belly was almost crying with ecstasy.

Ramona and Amy Spiedel joined them, carrying bowls of their own. The twins Mark and Ty chose to sit at a different table. “Thank you both for your help.” Ramona started formally.
Jou waved his hand, shushing her. He didn't want to hear anything right now. He was eating.

Seto chuckled and shook his head slightly at his lover. “Forgive him. He spent the day fishing. I think he left his manners on the boat.”

Amy slurped her food delicately. “Yeah, you didn't get any Dungeness crab today though. Weird tide.”

Hunger abating slightly, Jou nodded. “Captain Mac told me that – after we were out to sea. But if I go back tomorrow and help out I get my pick of the crab.”

Ramona's spoon hit her bowl with a loud clatter. “You went out with Captain Mac?” She shot her daughter a glance, but the girl was already in motion.

Jou didn't see the problem. “Yeah. Got some good fish too. The nets were pretty full even with the weird tide.”

Amy hurried back in carrying a tray with three more steaming bowls of chowder on it. She placed it on the table and gestured “Have some more.”

“We heard that Captain Mac had a great day. More than double his usual haul.” Ramona commented softly. “How many people were with you guys?”

“Huh? Oh just me and him.” Jou put his empty bowl on the tray and took another. “Man this stuff is great. It's got everything. Shrimp, scallops, potato, onion, fish, cream, and stuff I don't know.”

“Mmm I call it rimasugli.” she grinned sheepishly “Italian for leftovers.”

Jou chuckled richly as he gulped down more of the delicious food. “Whatever you call it, it's fantastic.”

Seto placed his empty bowl on the tray, stacking it under Jou's empty. He was pleasantly full so he ignored the other two steaming bowls. “How much did you guys catch?”

Jou shrugged, but Ramona glanced at Seto with questioning eyes, as if to ask why he didn't know. “Captain Mac sold almost half a ton of fish today. He normally only gets between three hundred and five hundred pounds.” The steady regard grew more intense. “Mac has a bad back, and even with the diesel reels its hard work for one person to haul in the nets. You must have been tired. And now you've spent all evening on your feet here.”

Jou finished his second bowl and eyed a third wistfully. But he controlled his urge to eat more. He didn't want Seto to think he was a pig. Amy caught his look and snorted. “Eat. I got it all for you. Everyone knows Captain Mac don't give his workers lunch except a cheese sandwich and a soda.”

When he hesitated more Seto picked up one of the bowls and plunked it in front of him. “Eat.” He growled. He was furious. Jou hadn't told him about his day, hadn't mentioned being hungry, or even that he'd worked alone. If he'd known he would... His thoughts came to a screaming halt. Jounouchi hadn't had the time or opportunity to tell him. Seto wanted to kick his own ass for his stupidity. He had volunteered Jou without checking with him. He should have known Jounouchi would be tired. Seto wanted to kick himself for being a heartless bastard.

Jou retrieved his spoon and dug in. He wasn't going to argue. He wasn't starving but his body had burned a lot of fuel today and he wanted to stoke up a bit. Eating more slowly, he nodded his thanks to them.
Ty, sitting with his brother Mark, chose that moment to interrupt. “Amy, bring us some too. We're hungry.”

“Get it yourself. You didn't work on Captain Mac's boat and you had to be forced to work here. I ain’t your slave.” Typical sister reply. Ramona backed up her daughter and headed off the impending fight by saying softly “Get your own. She's done twice as much as both of you put together. Your father will be here tomorrow and you can explain to him why you think she is a slave.”

Evil glares and mumbles punctuated their trip back to the kitchen. They were back in just a few minutes with more bowls. Rather than take their own seats they joined the table. Seto, still furious at himself for treating Jou so badly, eyed them suspiciously. They both wore looks that boded ill for someone.

“So... Where did you guys come from?” Ty made it sound like a casual question, but it set off alarm bells to everyone listening. The boys had been by turn sullen and rude throughout the evening and this turnabout was very suspicious.

“We came up from Malibu.” Jou answered, his tone equally casual, but he laid his spoon down as his head came up alertly. Seto was sure he was the only person to see the wariness filling the golden eyes.

“Malibu's a cool place. Great beach and lots of hot babes.” Mark observed, keeping his voice low key.

Jou grunted noncommittally, picked up his spoon and carefully took a bite. Had the boys been watching they would have seen he bit down with slightly more force than needed for the tender food.

“Mark...” Ty mock reproved. “They wouldn't know about hot babes. They're fags.”

His mother gasped “Ty!”

“What?” The boy's look was mockingly innocent. “You didn't know? They were checking out each other's asses all night. Couple of times I thought they were going to go for it right then and there.”

Snarling, she rose from the table. Seto, not up to drama, still caught up in his mistreatment of Jou, motioned her back down. “Please Ramona. Sit down.” Giving the boys a calm look, he asked “So? Fag is not our preferred noun but it is accurate. Jou and I are lovers, life partners. When we can we will be legally joined.” Seeing the sly looks fade to red-faced confusion, he smiled slightly “We don't need your approval to live our lives. Our sexuality is our business and not yours.” Giving Ramona a small smile he said softly “I assure you, Jou and I are discreet and don't indulge in PDA.”

“Like I care about that.” Ramona was still upset. “If you wanted to kiss you were more than welcome to. What pisses me off is their bigotry. They were not raised to be that way. They...”

“Are trying to wound us and you because they are spoiled and selfish. I wasn't going to mention this to you but now I really think I should. Today, before Amy bumped into me, I met your sons down the block. They were feeding seagulls and pelicans alka seltzer. I wasn't the only one to see them do it and you probably know that the brown pelicans are endangered and protected. I believe they were trying to drive customers away. No customers want to be puked on by a sea bird.” He hesitated for a moment then shrugged as the boys erupted into a vicious, top-of-the-lung, cursing match.

Jounouchi, his appetite ruined by the stupidity of the boys and infuriated by the blind cruelty of his lover shoved his bowl away. Before he could follow through with lambasting the brats a sudden rapid fluttering filled his ears and he froze as a story unfolded in his mind. As quickly as the beating
of tiny wings started, it ended and he knew, from the story he'd seen, what he had to do.

With grim purpose he stood suddenly, catching the entire table unaware. Leaning forward, his eyes glowing amber in the night he growled “Enough. You’re a couple of pricks who need to learn to respect your mom and care about your sister. You feed off each other like maggots on rotten meat.” Turning to Ramona he caught her gaze and said softly, compellingly, “You have options – use them. Separate them and let them grow to stand alone. Your brothers, the tragedy will repeat if you don’t.”

Ramona stared at him for a moment, her expression oddly arrested. “You... how did you know...”

“A hummingbird told me.” Grabbing Seto’s wrist he dragged the stunned brunet to his feet. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Seto allowed himself to be towed along behind his lover for several yards before putting on the brakes. Jounouchi simply released him and continued on his way. “Get the pups. I will see you at the campgrounds.” Without another word the blond was swallowed up by the suddenly oppressive darkness.

When he and the pups got back to the camper, a low light was blazing, but Jou was already in bed obviously trying to sleep. Deciding they would talk in the morning, Seto squeezed in tight beside the warm body of his lover and sighed tiredly. The unease he’d felt in the last few minutes faded when Jou instantly spooned around him, mumbling sleepily into his neck. “Love you Seto.”

When he woke Jou was already gone again. He was mildly irritated about that, but a bright spot was to see that there was no smelly mess for him to clean up. Dressing hastily he took the pups for a walk. Maybe it was because he was more familiar with the area, maybe because he was more relaxed in his surroundings, or maybe it was because he knew he had something specific to do, but for whatever reason, Seto found himself actually enjoying the morning necessity walk. After using the bags Jou had insisted they use to dispose of the evidence, Seto decided to wait on his shower and just enjoy the crisp morning air.

He wandered along, okay was dragged along, by his two rambunctious companions for a while as they investigated palm trees and mysterious things only they could smell in the sand, then almost as if they were in tune with Seto's mood, turned towards the street where the Kite and the Heron was. As he reached the end of the block, he saw that the building was dark except for the lights burning upstairs. Not wanting to intrude, he turned back to the bench he'd been sitting on when Amy had hit him with the kite.

He was a bit hesitant about sitting down when he saw an older gentleman sitting on the bench, feeding a small bag of bread crumbs to a flock of seagulls and pelicans... and a large white bird. A small shiver raced through him as he recognized a snow goose. It looked remarkably similar to the drug induced vision he’d had. Unconsciously he drew nearer. “Is... is that a snow goose?” Dumb question but he couldn't help it. It was a snow goose, but what was it doing here?

The elder turned and glanced at him over his shoulder, his expression of annoyance calling him an idiot before he opened his mouth. But surprisingly, the annoyance faded and a small smile of welcome creased the lined face. “Yes, he was injured when he landed here back in January. He wasn't well enough to continue the migration. I... I took him home and patched him up. He has chosen to stay for now. He will probably leave when the migration returns.” There was affection, sadness and acceptance in his face as he explained.

“Oh. Seems ungrateful.”

The old man shrugged slightly. “I love him, but he has to do what makes him happy. He'd be
miserable not able to fly free and I'd be miserable seeing that. I want him happy. If that means flying
away and forgetting me then I'll just look up at the sky as they fly over and enjoy knowing he is there
and happy.” He hesitated a moment then smiled slightly “I'll cherish him while I can and always miss
him when he goes.”

He didn't know what to say response to that so he kept his mouth shut. In a moment the older man
cleared his throat slightly. “Saw you yesterday. You were helping out little ’Mona and her family.”

“Hnn... They needed it.” Pink was creeping into his cheeks. For some reason he was embarrassed
that the older man had noticed him helping out.

“Yeah they did.” The man smiled and stuck out his hand. “I'm Artie James. Retired fisherman.” As
they shook hands, ’Artie' nodded towards the Kite and the Heron. “I've known 'Mona since she was
a little tyke, barely bigger'n that goose. It's good to see she's come back.” He sighed “That girl of
hers is just like she was. Pretty, smart as a whip, and a good worker.” He pursed his lips in
unconscious disapproval. “The boys are a different story.”

Seto grunted noncommittally. The old man shot him a knowing look. “Saw you get puked on so you
know what I'm talking about. Those boys...” He shook his head slightly. “If the people here didn't
care about 'Mona, them boys would find themselves in a cell pronto.”

“I wondered why they weren't reported.” He allowed thoughtfully. “But if everyone cares for her,
why doesn't she have any help?”

The old man was quiet for a moment then answered candidly “Most people tried, but the boy's run
'em off either with rudeness or graffiti and worse. Can't prove it was them, but everyone knows. It
tore a lot of people up so much that we just quit offerin'.”

“I see.” He thought for a moment then nodded and stood. “I think that situation is going to change.
But she will need more help than ever. At least to fly the kites....” He let the words trail off on a half
questioning note.

“Well hell, if things change, I'll fly the kites myself. And my wife is lookin' for somethin' to do. She
never worked outside our house, keeps it spic-and-span, so she is a champion dishwasher.” He
grinned at Seto, approval and hope shining at him. “Only reason we stopped helpin' to begin with
was because the boys spray painted our garage and broke out the window in our car. My wife was
home alone because I had to go out of town for a hearing aid appointment. Scared her half to death
because it was the middle of the night and they were loud.” He shifted uncomfortably. “She called
the cops but they were gone by the time they got there. Know it was them all right, 'cause the one
boy dropped a key chain. When my wife recognized it from when she was visiting with Ramona,
she said it was hers.” He hesitated, and then added “It was Amy's.”

That pissed Seto off. Okay he'd already been pissed at the boys, but this was beyond the scope of
youthful stupidity and spoiled selfishness. This crossed into another realm. Terrorizing an old lady
and framing their little sister for it. “Did your wife return the key chain?”

“Nah. She's been too afraid to go down there.” He tossed the last of the crumbs to the birds. “Those
boys are mean and she's just a little thing. Always has been, and she just had hip surgery so she's not
getting around too fast. Walkin' okay but not....”

“I see.” Seto stood abruptly. “Bring the keychain to the restaurant will you? It may help Ramona to
make a decision about her sons.” Tugging the pups, who had been crouching on the ground staring
at the birds avidly, he stalked off towards the Kite and Heron.
Artie pocketed the empty plastic bag and chuckled as he saw the determined stride of the younger man. Ramona's problems were gonna be fixed whether she liked it or not. Putting some gitty-up in his step, he hurried to speak to Alma. Maybe he could coax her down to watch the fireworks.

The lights were on downstairs in the restaurant so Seto tied the pups in the kite stand and knocked on the kitchen door. In a few moments it was opened by a red-faced, tear-stained Ramona. Ignoring the look he smiled his most winning grin. “Hey, I thought I'd see if you needed any help setting up for lunch today?”

She looked at him blankly for a moment. “Oh Kai...” Suddenly her face crumpled. “I... no...” then she began to sob. “No... We won't be opening today... or any other day...”

“What?” He was honestly surprised, but under it the rage he’d been suppressing began to grow.

“I...my... I have to give it up. My... sons are so unhappy and want to... and my husband won't... I...” Incoherently, she sank into hysteria and threw herself into his arms.

Just then Mark and Ty clattered down the stairs “Yo Mom! What’s for breakfast? We're starved.” Seto looked up from the crying woman and glared at the boys. They were smug, confident, and totally spoiled. When they saw him their look became even more confident, and sly meanness, never far away became pronounced. Mark yelled “Dad, Dad, come quick. Some guy is here making Mom cry.”

A heavy pounding of footsteps sounded and a man dressed in jeans and a designer polo shirt pushed down the stairs. “What the fuck are you doing? Get away from my wife. Mark call the cops.”

Seto stepped back from the crying woman and held up his hands in peace. Ramona straightened and turned to face her brood. “Stop it. Mark you'll do no such thing.” She ordered, her voice firming as her sobs died away. “Kai stopped by to see if I needed help with lunch today. I started crying and he was calming me down.” She glared at them with blood-shot eyes. “Kai wouldn't hurt me ever.”

There was a note in her voice that said that someone else had. “Kai this is my husband Brad Spiedel. Brad meet Kai. He helped us yesterday.”

Brad glowered slightly but offered his hand. “Thanks for all your help.”

Amy rushed down, pushing through her brothers and brushing by her father. “Kai! I'm so glad you're here. You'll never guess what they've done!”

“Guilt tripped your mother into giving up her lifelong dream?” Seto asked rhetorically.

Amy nodded, impressed but not surprised. “Yeah. I thought for a while that it was gonna be okay, but Dad stuck up for them. Says Mom's being hysterical and if she'd just be a parent and show some discipline the boys wouldn't be in trouble all the time.”

Ramona's face turned dark red and Brad's went umber before he snapped angrily, “Amy that's enough. You had no business listening to that conversation and you sure as hell shouldn't repeat it to a stranger.”

“He's not a stranger! He's the one who can fix this mess.” She was unwavering in her conviction.

Ramona sighed, “Honey I know you like him but...”

“Mom you're planning on asking for your old job back aren't you?”

“Yes. I'm sure Pixar would hire me back. I...”
Before Seto could say anything there was a knock on the door. Amy answered it quickly, hoping to avert a full blown shouting match. “Artie! Alma! Hey! How you guys doing?”

“Hey shortie. We're good. Saw your dad was home and came by to talk to him and your mom. Can we come in?”

“Kinda crowded, but okay.” The girl stepped back and let them into the cramped kitchen.

The elder couple stepped into the room, smiling greetings to Brad and Ramona. “Sorry to bother you so early, but we wanted to catch Brad before he left again. He's only been here a couple hours in the last month or so.” Buried deep inside the words was a subtle accusation that had the younger man flushing slightly.

“Busy at work.” He mumbled.

“Arrive Saturday morning leave Saturday afternoon or night. Back in the city all day Sunday.” Alma nodded “You need a day of rest after working all day and caring for your family for a few hours.” The old woman's voice was completely understanding, and yet even Seto flinched under the whip.

Ramona couldn't deal with more stress and she could see a storm brewing in her husband's eyes. “What did you need Alma? Artie?”

“Oh Honey we need to ask you when you're going to pay for the damage to the house and car?” Alma had been inclined to just return the keys, but now, given what they'd heard while standing outside the door, she was going to let the hoodlums have it with both barrels. She felt bad for Ramona, but she was doing it for the girl's own good.

“Damage...” Ramona's face went blank. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh you know! About six weeks ago when my house and car got vandalized. Remember? I had chest pains I was so scared, but the doctor said it was just a panic attack?”

“I... yes but why would we pay for...” Her voice trailed off as realization dawned and horror took it's place. “You can't mean... they did it?”

“Ramona, the only reason they didn't get arrested is because we knew you were having enough troubles.” Artie said softly. “Normally we wouldn't come to ask for the money because... well we know you'll make it right. But, with my hearing aids and Alma's surgery, things are a little tight and we can't afford to wait. Our deductible is seven hundred dollars on the house and five hundred on the car. The glass was just under that and the house took four hundred because it was some oil based stuff that had to be blasted before the paint could be redone. I got the receipts. Comes to seven hundred eighty-two dollars and twenty-two cents.

She hesitated a moment then sighed “My emergency visit I paid for too. We've used a lot of medical with Artie's hearing aids and we don't want our premiums to go up. It's twenty-three hundred forty-one dollars even. the total is three thousand thirty-one dollars and two cents.”

Over three thousand dollars in damages? “I...” It was all too much for Ramona. Her sons hadn't done that, had they? How could they have? They weren't that bad surely? They'd been caught holding drugs, sure. And yes they'd admitted to giving the seagulls alka seltzer in the past, but that was all just boredom and high spirits. They wouldn't hurt Alma and Artie, destroy their property would they? They were friends, good friends, and up until a little while ago, had been helping with the restaurant. “They couldn't have...”

Amy looked at the elderly couple as her sharp brain put it together. “They were pissed you were
helping out and wanted you to stop. They scared you away didn't they? Just like they drive away customers with puking birds and stuff.”

“Shut up!” Mark and Ty yelled in unison. “We didn't do anything to anyone. We were just having fun with the birds.” As a unit they turned to their father. “Dad... We didn't. We swear.”

Alma glared at the punks, ready to peel a strip off their hides but before she could say a single word Brad growled sharply, “You don't have any proof of anything. Don't come here expecting us to pay your bills or thinking you can blame my sons for something some punks did.”

Wordlessly Alma held out the key chain. Amy recognized it instantly. “Mom, that's mine. It came up missing... Mom it came up missing the same time as their house got damaged. Remember? Alma called and said she couldn't come in because of what happened and I had to unlock the pantry, but I didn't have the keys? You were on the phone to Alma when I borrowed yours. Remember you said you'd seen them on the counter the night before and one of the boy's must have borrowed them?” She glowered at the twins “But they denied it. My keys have been missing ever since.”

“I found these in the garage next to my car.” Then Alma corrected “Or rather the police found them and when I saw... well I knew they were Amy's. I told the police they were mine.”

Mark laughed loudly, “Amy broke windows in a car? And painted a gang tag on their house?”

That made Artie glance at him sharply “How did you know it was more than one window? We've only spoken of one. The second was already cracked and we figured it was our responsibility. And how did you know it was a gang tag? We covered it right away with white paint.”

Ramona had had enough. She could see the unrepentant pride in her sons. They had done this and not out of boredom or high jinks but out of a desire to ruin her dream for their own selfish, self-destructive goals. They had hurt their friends and tried to destroy her dreams by injuring innocent people. It was beyond enough.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, steeling herself for what she was about to do, then with resolve, opened them to glare at the three most important men in her life. “Brad, I've changed my mind. I am not closing the restaurant. I'm sending Ty to Montana with his uncle. Mark can go back to San Francisco with you. You both can visit on weekends and Ty will visit for a few weeks in the summer. Amy and I will stay here and run the restaurant.” With a flaming glare that completely silenced the eruptions around her, she ordered harshly, “Get out of my kitchen, I have a restaurant to prepare for lunch. Brad, you go get the kites in the air. Amy get the veggies and start cutting. Kai, go sweep the dining room. Mark, go pack. Ty, go do research on the weather in Montana, I think you are going to need a new wardrobe – we'll go to Goodwill and see what we can find.” Picking up a giant knife, it's blade glinting with a razor sharp edge, she started her work.

When they would have argued she simply looked at her husband, “I'm not changing my mind. You can see it as clearly as I do – I know you too well. Either we do it my way or all three of you can live in the city. That is your choice.” With a precise slice she cut an apple in half. “Don't bother to waste my time with an argument.”

Brad, his expression a mix of rage and disbelief, grabbed his sons and dragged them from the room.

Seto left them to it and hurried out to sweep the dining room. Despite trying to drag it out, he was done in too short of time for his liking. Reluctantly he went back to the kitchen, completely unsurprised to see his employer sobbing on Alma's shoulder while Artie and Amy hovered patting her shoulder.
"Dining room is done. What else?"

Ramona lifted her head and swiped her tears. "Nothing. Lunch won't be for another couple hours. I'll fix us some breakfast." While she cooked she explained why this was so hard for her. "Alma and Artie already know. Amy has heard of her uncles but she doesn't know everything. I... I need to talk about this to get it straight in my head." She blew her nose on a paper napkin then went to wash her hands before continuing.

"I had a set of twin brothers. Mark and Ty are named after them. Brad was their best friend in school. They... they were very high-spirited and spoiled but my family couldn't see it, especially my mother. They started using marijuana when they were twelve and it went downhill from there. Truancy, animal cruelty, disrespect for adults, vandalism, petty theft. It went on for years with my mom and dad 'saving' them from their 'high-spirits', until when they were eighteen, they stole a car. It went off the bridge and they were both killed - drowned. Crack and alcohol were in their systems and probably caused the accident. If they hadn't been high and drunk they would have lived." She dished the plates expertly. "My oldest brother had already moved to Montana, married into a ranching family. My mother died less than six months later of a broken heart. My dad disappeared after her funeral. I was sixteen and he just left me at the cemetery never came home." She smiled sadly and shook her head. "Brad's family took me in but to this day I don't know where he went off to."

"So they are paralleling their uncles." Seto said neutrally. He didn't comment on her father leaving her. There was nothing he could say that would make any difference to her pain, but mentally he made a note to check into it.

"Yes. And like your friend said last night, it will happen again if I don't do something. I won't... I won't let them die like my brothers did."

"Then you are making the best decision." He smiled slightly. "And it saved me the hassle of telling you not to give up your dream to go back to Pixar. They won't hire you. Nobody connected with Disney or Kaiba Corp, will."

She was instantly outraged. How dare he say that? "What? Why would you say that?" That was a little outside the limits of what her professional pride could tolerate.

Seto just smiled slightly. "I know Mokuba Kaiba very well. A phone call would end it. I'd make that call before I'd let you give up your dreams."

"Mokuba... But he isn't running things. The older one is... Starts with an S...Seth? Sam?"

"Check again. Seto is not in charge any longer. He handed it to Mokuba. And I grew up with him; you could say we are close as brothers."

Still wearing that enigmatic smile, he sat down and waited for Alma, Artie, Ramona and Amy to do the same. After a moment Ramona bit off a choked sob as another tear spilled down her cheek. "So I really have no choice."

As Amy slid into her chair she smiled widely "Nope. Told you he was the one to fix it."

Ramona hesitated, biting her lip. "Should I call them in to eat?"

Alma gave her an incredulous look. "Are you nuts? You have to stand firm or they will try to change your mind. They are old enough to know how to feed themselves."

Ramona, small smile breaking through her tears, nodded "Yes they are." She nodded again, more emphatically and used a napkin to blow her nose. "Let's eat. We have a lot to do. Kai the kite tails
are in the dryer. I washed the entire marker out of them – good thing we use washable markers. As Brad hasn't come in to get them I assume he hasn't got the kites in the air yet. After you eat could you make up more tails? I'm doing something special tonight. I'll write it down. ”

Seto nodded, not bothering to answer around the mouthful of apple pancakes he was tucking into with relish. With a slightly guilty thought he wondered what Jou had eaten for breakfast before dismissing it as he took another greedy bite.

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Jounouchi scratched at the vague itch behind his ear and turned to smile at the captain. “Hey Cap'n Mac! How long til the next pot? I want to grab a bite of my breakfast while they’re still fresh.”

The grizzled old seaman gave a dramatic shudder. “Boy, I like my seafood fresh but not still floppin’. You go ahead though; we are about fifteen minutes from the next group of pots.”

Jou sat down next to his bucket of live rock prawns. Pulling out a package of soya sauce he'd learned to keep in a pocket on his adventures, he ripped a tiny tear in the corner and set it on his knee, then pulled out his razor sharp knife. With quick, efficient, obviously practiced moved he grabbed one of the prawns, sliced the head off, peeled the shell, and de-veined it in just a few seconds. Slicing it to transparent thinness, he placed the meat carefully in the plastic bag he'd carried his earlier sandwich in. After repeating the process several times, and filling the plastic bag, he squeezed just a few drops of soya sauce into the meat, and using his fingers, scooped up the thin slivers a few slices at a time. He pretended not to notice the vaguely green look his captain was giving him. Not all Americans knew how to eat good sashimi.

“Hey Capt'n Mac. Tell me about them fish, the ones with teeth?” He asked.

“Sheepshead fish are common but kind of freaky, and hard as hell to catch. Their mouths are very tough so hooks don't work and their teeth... they look like human teeth and they pack a mean bite. Keep your fingers away from them.”

“Yeah, common? We got some halibut and some striped bass. What was the other one?”

“Sturgeon - we threw it back because they were too small to keep. They grow to be huge and the ones we caught, barely three feet long, weren't legal.”

“Yeah? I just thought they were not good sellers or good to eat. What's legal size?”

“Forty-six to sixty-six inches and you have to have a sturgeon license. Which I do.” The old man smiled slightly “Was time when that wasn't so and you could pull out a sturgeon as big as eighteen feet. I remember when my dad and me caught a monster, over seventeen feet. Took both of us to reel 'em in. We was line fishin' too. It was the summer just before he died...” Jounouchi felt the thrill of anticipation and a surge of warmth as the old fisherman went off on a glory-days fish tale and memory of his father. This was why he’d come here, why he'd chosen Capt'n Mac. Not only was he an interesting character but he was a living encyclopedia of the history of fishing in this area. What the man didn't know wasn't worth knowing, and what he did know could probably fill several books. Settling more comfortably as he ate his brunch of prawns, he listened attentively to a story that told more of history and fishing than any book ever could. For just moment he wondered if Seto was enjoying his day, then he resolutely turned the thought away. Seto needed to find himself without Jou tying him down. He would help his lover soar even though he knew that the injured dragon would fly away from him when he was healed.

Enjoying the tang of the ocean breeze and the hard work of hauling pots and casting nets, Jou threw
himself into the experience with joy and enthusiasm, and if somewhere deep inside a corner of him grieved, nobody but he knew it.

At the end of a hard day he glanced up to see the kites flying high. Just as he'd expected, invitations and specials written in kanji and English streamed in waving banners behind the colorful kites. “Looks like the Kite and the Heron tonight.” He observed as he tied the boat at the dock.

“Ramona makes good food, but you need to get those crabs on to boil.” The weather beaten old captain hesitated for a second then asked “Were the guys that helped at the restaurant your friends?”

“Kai is my friend. I helped at the restaurant too.”

That made the man squint at him in shock. “You helped out last night after we got back? And you showed up here before sun up? No wonder you're not as spry today.”

Jou shrugged and blushed slightly, “Yeah, well Kai asked and they needed the help. I wasn't too tired or anything.”

The man gave him a straight look under beetling brows. “You were beat and all you talked about was you friend Kai yesterday. I hope he knows how much you care for him. Not many so-called friends these days would pull a night shift after working the nets all day.”

“Uhn...” Jou didn't quite know what to say to that so he bent back to the rope.

Seeing he'd embarrassed the young man he relented, “You go on now. Take that bucket of crab down to 'Mona's, and take the blue one I set aside too. Use the deep wheelbarrow to cart them through town. Tell 'Mona that Mac's comin' for a crab boil.”

“Uh won't she get mad? I mean...”

“Boy I've known that girl since she was in her momma's belly. I'll bring a third barrow of crabs as soon as I've gotten the rest of our haul in to market. Send one of those twins of hers down here for a second. Just one mind you. Two is askin' for trouble, and you be sure to come with whichever boy you choose.”

“But... the restaurant...” Jou felt he should protest.

“Amy and 'Mona can handle it. Now get on before they get too deep into the dinner hour.” He shooed the other man along.

Jou made quite a sight, pushing a huge, deep, wheelbarrow full of live crabs and rock lobster, some of which were trying valiantly to escape, through the quaint streets, or he assumed he did by the looks he was getting. Then one woman came out of her tackle shop and called, “Where you headed?”

Knowing it was more than where, but who, what, and why as well, he called back “Mac is sendin' crab and lobster up to Ramona's place, three loads.”

Delight lit the serene face. “A boil! Haven't had one in over a year! You tell 'Mona that Sherry's bringin' the spices. I'll have Randy bring a bushel of veggies over.” Still smiling happily the woman spun away.

From then on instead of odd looks, people called out from the doorways and across the street, “Tell Mona I'll bring some fresh bread.” and “Tell her I'ma bring a keg of ale.” A dozen or more people all gave their names and what they would bring by the time Jou made it to the Kite and the Heron he
wasn't sure he'd remember them all.

Seto was just serving their one customer when he noticed Jou pushing a massive cart of some kind up to the patio. “Joey, what…”

The blond held up his hand indicating the need for a moment as he huffed to catch his breath. “One sec.” He rasped as he set the cart down and bent over to rest his hands on his knees. Artie, seeing the strange man, and the kites not needing any further assistance, strolled over to get the scoop. “You bring your own supper?” He asked, not quite joking as he scooped an escapee crab back into the barrel.

Only slightly breathless now Jou shook his head. “I'm Joey, a friend of Kai's. I've been working on Cap’n Mac's boat. He sent these to Ramona, and I'm…” His voice died away as Artie called out “Ramona! Get out here! You got a visitor.”

Ramona stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. “Visitor? What…” Then her eyes fell on Joey and the wheelbarrow. She smiled in genuine welcome. “Joey! You had a good day with a haul like that.”

“Yeah we did. Captain Mac said to have one of your boys come down for a second load and he's bringin' a third. Oh and Sherry is bringing the spices and Randy is bringing veggies. Also Mike is bringing a keg of ale, Billy is bringing a fruit can, someone else, maybe Jack or Robbie? Is bringing fresh bread. There are about four others but I can't remember their names. Tom? Ellen? Rick?”

Joy and laughter lit her face. “A boil. And don't worry about names and what they'll bring. As long as they come it's enough.” She turned to Artie. “Get the kites down; we won't be having those specials tonight! Change of plans. We're having a Crab Boil beach party. I'll start the bonfire and get the pots ready for boiling. Kai, bring several loads of stuff down to the southern edge of the beach, Amy will show you what and where. I'll also call Gwen and let her know what's up.” Yelling as loud as she could, she called “Amy! Ty! Mark! Brad! Get down here now.”

Her husband was the first one down and onto the patio. “What is it?”

“Crab boil beach party. Consider it a sendoff. You head on down with Ty to get the two other barrows of fish off Mac please. The rest of us will be setting stuff up here.” Seeing the wide-eyed look from her sons and the slight look of anticipation on her husband's face, she made a shooing motion with her hands. “Oh and pick up some grilling fronds will you? And stop at the market and pick up a couple dozen stripers or cats. Might as well do it right.”

Knowing from the past what was going on, remembering the happiness and wanting one such memory with his family before it was scattered, Brad nodded and clapped Ty on the shoulder. “Let’s get going.”

“Amy, go print a few signs directing people who come to the restaurant to go to the beach. Also make a few arrow placards so people can follow the signs. Four should do it.” She turned to look at her son, Mark. “You can go up to the attic and get the blankets. Old brown chest in the corner. You can't miss it. There are about eight blankets in there. We'll spread them on the beach for people to sit on. They have been modified with ties so that they can be staked down.” When the boy turned to leave she warned softly “No funny business or I will spank your ass in front of all of them, child abuse laws or not.” The boy stiffened, whether in affront or irritation at being found out was anyone's guess, but he did stalk off to the attic.

Spying Alma who'd just come out of the kitchen to see what the fuss was, Ramona squealed like a little girl, “Crab boil.”
Alma's face, already a maze of wrinkles, became more wizened as she smiled widely. “Great! I'll run and get a couple of cords of driftwood I’ve got set-up at the back of the house.”

Artie, done with the kites, holding Scapegoat and Kit's leashes, joined the group. “We will go get the wood and bring it down to the south point. We'll use the skid and dune buggy. Kai'll be there to help unload.”

Jou smiled and offered “I can help too.”

Ramona stepped up to that. “You'll do no such thing. You've worked all day to catch our meal. You will take it easy.” She hesitated, and then sniffed delicately. “Well take it easy after you shower and change. Most people won't mind the smell of fish but they will draw the line at bait. You go shower and change, then head back here for a nice drink and some of the best food you'll ever taste.”

Blushing, he nodded. “Yes, Ma'am.” He mumbled and cast Seto a quick glance. He'd wanted some alone time with the tall brunet. They really hadn't had a chance to talk, and Seto's declaration of them being life partners had really upset him. Not that he didn't want to be Seto's life partner, it was just that he didn't want the brunet to feel obligated to a relationship that was probably only going to exist until Seto was strong again, strong enough to realize he truly didn't want an unambitious, holistic healer and wanderer like Jou knew himself to be, in his life. They needed to be honest with each other and other people. Seto was a public figure and the brunet claiming openly that they were life partners could bite him in the ass. Seto would normally know this, but he wasn't thinking straight so Jou could cut him some slack.

Kai caught his look and gave him a tiny smile. They hadn't spoken but they had all the time in the world for greetings. “Joey, would you mind taking the dogs? They've been tied up for most of the day.”

“Sure.” Giving everyone a smile he took the leashes from Artie and knelt to greet the ecstatic Scapegoat and wary Kit with gentle pats on the head and scratches behind their ears. “Let’s leave them to it and go shower and change.” He told the dogs. With a wave he strolled off.

Ramona gave Kai an exasperated look. “I told you I don't mind if you are together. Why didn't you give him a hello hug or something?”

That made Seto jump slightly. It had never occurred to him to hug Jou in greeting. “Huh?”

“You guys are together. He just spent all day working to bring us dinner and you didn't even tell him thanks or...” She blushed slightly, “Look when my hubby has been gone for a while I make sure he knows I miss him. I kiss him first thing just to tell him so.”

“Your husband is gone all week.” Seto pointed out, although he could see her point.

“When we lived together he could have been gone just a few hours and he was the same way. Even after all these years...” She broke off and sighed. “Never mind, it's not my business.” With a shrug she waved him towards the side of the restaurant. “The storage shed out back has four large silvery aluminum trash cans. They are only used for beach parties. Go get them please? They stack together and are lined. You will have to wash them out with the hose. When Mark comes down Amy and you two head out. If you could stay and help Artie and Alma with the wood? I'll be down directly.” Bustling, the older woman hurried away. That was that. He turned and sprinted to the storage shed. They had a lot to do it seemed.

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Seto looked around in amused admiration. He'd never been to a spur-of-the-moment party much less involved in the organization of one. He hadn't known what to expect, and he was pleasantly surprised. Everything had flowed together smoothly and in less than an hour two bright bonfires lit the beach, ringed by blankets of chattering, laughing people. Large metal pots were just coming to a boil over the fires, and around the edges of the blankets two large, shining trash cans were full of a mix of fruit and alcohol. Seto took a sip from his own large cup and smiled. The taste could probably never be duplicated, but it was the best drink he'd ever had. Fruity, sweet, with the punch of alcohol nicely muted, only coming out when eating the fruit that floated freely in it.

Across the blankets from the fruit punch were several coolers of bottled water, soda, and other non-alcoholic drinks. Chests of ice held fruit, bread, veggies and other assorted sides, condiments, utensils, cups, plates and bowls. Despite the haphazard organization, everything was there... including a mix of music and entertainment provided by the street performers. Discreetly set next between two chests was a commercial water cooler bottle. Inside Seto could see the glint of coins. Donations weren't asked for and nobody was expected to give, but if you could it was obviously appreciated.

Restless despite the entertainment and the tempting smell of good food, Seto paced to the path where more people, tourists and locals, made their way to the beach. Jounouchi should return any moment and he wanted a few minutes to greet him privately. It had disturbed him that he might have been remiss when he'd seen his love earlier.

He had to wait another fifteen minutes before his lover showed up. Unsure of what Jou would accept in such a public area, he leaned forward and brushed his hand over Jou's fingers in a subtle caress.

Jou smiled up at him. “Hey! You didn't have to wait for me here.”

Blue eyes crinkled slightly in a small smile. “I know that. I wanted to.” His breath caught slightly at what Jou was – or rather was not – wearing. “Going swimming?” Painted-on cut off jeans that were barely legal, flip-flops, and smile were wreaking havoc on his heart. Maybe they should go back to the camper...

“Nah. I'm a little sunburned is all. This is all I could find that didn't bug me.” Jounouchi shrugged and moved past him on the path, brushing against him lightly, making his racing heart skip a few beats. Seto hoped his reaction wasn't too obvious.

Clearing his throat slightly he fell in step beside the blond. “Where are the dogs?” It seemed like a good question.

“Too many people here for Kit to be comfortable. They're inside the camper playing with some of the toys.” Taking a deep breath he changed the subject. “Man that smells good. I'm starving.”

Seto grinned and held up his cup. “This is pretty good too.”

“Yeah?” Quick as a wink Jou snitched his cup and downed it in just a few gulps, slurping down the soft fruit as he drank. Grinning, he handed the empty cup back and chuckled “Yer right. Lets go get some more – and some food. Did I tell you I'm starving?”

Seto took his empty cup back and rolled his eyes. “When aren't you? I swear you eat more now than when you were in high school.”

“Nah, about the same. I got a high metabolism so I gotta keep the calories in.” Jostling his lover playfully he teased “Ya eat more than back then. I've seen you eat more in the last week than I ever did in three years of school”
That made Seto blink. “You saw me eat back then? I usually only ate at home around Mokuba.” No need to explain that with his enemies he'd been a bit paranoid about poison and retaliation from his adoptive father's cronies.

“Just a couple times. Saw you drink a can of hot coffee from a vending machine and saw you eat apples a couple times.” He grinned. “It was one of the things that made you so hot to me. You'd like savor every bite, like you was getting' the most out of it, enjoying the flavors to the fullest.” The grin faded and a slight huskiness took over. “I knew you'd be like that with a lover if you decided you needed one.”

Blushing slightly, although from embarrassment or arousal at Jou's blatant words, Seto wasn't sure. He didn't know what to say and was thankfully was saved from having to answer by Ramona calling out “And here he is! Joey, Cap'n Mac was just telling us about your day. You really made prawn sushi?”

"Sashimi! Sushi is the rice!” Laughing, the blond grabbed his hand and towed him towards the large pots of boiling crab and fronds of roasting fish. “Ya never had sashimi? Man are you missin’ it. I ma get a plate and drink then I'll see about makin' some up. I'm sure I saw some prawns in the barrows.”

Captain Mac chuckled and shook his head. “Nah, you sit down. We got plenty. Them prawns are goin onto skewers so...” The grizzled fisherman turned to Alma “Don’t just stand there woman! Get the working men some food!”

Alma glared at him for a moment before announcing huffily “Yer my cousin, not my...” Then her voice faded away and she stomped off.

Artie gave him a laughing glance. “Never known how you did that.”

“Never will either. Cousin's know where the bodies are buried.” He gestured for Jou to take a seat. “So sit already. Who's this long drink of water?”

“This is Kai.” He said it simply. They hadn't discussed the life partner issue and now wasn't the time to do so.

“Oh yeah? He the one you talked about? The one you've liked for a long time?” The old man snorted derisively. “If you call six years long. When you been at it forty years or more then tell me about long.”

Jou grinned, used to the crusty exterior. “Yeah, Yeah. Well I ain't an old buzzard like you.”

“Disrespectful pup. I oughtta...”

“Food!” Jou shouted, ignoring the bristling sea captain to take the overloaded plates from Alma.

Kai blinked and dropped next to his lover. “You can't eat all that. I'll help”

Jou glanced up, his brows meeting in a pseudo-frown over laughing golden eyes. “Wanna draw back a nubbin? Touch my plate.”

Ignoring the dire threat, Seto picked up a frond and carefully unwrapped the hot fish inside. “Hmmm I need a fork or chopsticks.”

“Thief!” Then proving he didn't mind at all ordered “Use your fingers.” Unconcerned about manners or anything else, Jou fell on his feast like a starving man.
After a second he followed suit. He'd taken a few bites when Ramona's husband walked over and handed them both cups. Chewing quickly he tried to clear his mouth so he could introduce the man, but the other man just grinned slightly, the tension around his eyes fading slightly “I'm Brad Spiedel, Ramona's husband. You met my family yesterday.” With a casual wave he turned back to his wife and daughter. His sons were nowhere to be seen.

The party was still in full swing, the crab pots only emptied once, with plenty more waiting to go in, when Seto looked away from his lover, currently trying to limbo, and glanced down at Amy as she flopped next to him on the blanket. Silently he lifted an eyebrow in query.

She grinned at his expression, perfectly readable in the flickering bonfire light. “Having fun?”

“Yes.” His glance returned to his lover, now waiting in line to limbo again.

“He's funny.” She shrugged. “And nice I guess.”

“You forgot beautiful.” It was true, and Seto was proud of his lover, not to mention frankly turned on by the way he moved and twisted his body. Joey was very flexible, something he wanted to put to good use.

Knowing she was being ignored and not liking it a bit, she snipped “Take a picture, it lasts longer.”

Instead of giving her a set-down that she knew she likely deserved, the genius brunet nodded “I would love to. I don't have a camera, but if I did...” He shrugged slightly.

That made her sit up a bit. Here was something she could do to repay him, plus get some alone time with him. She freely admitted to admiring Kaiba Seto, not just the waiter who'd helped them out, but the genius businessman as well. She knew she was too young for him and that he was involved with Joey, but time would take care of both of those issues – hopefully. “You want a camera? I got an old one that my mom bought me last year. It works okay, but it takes film and has all these lenses and stuff. I wanted a digital camera.”

“I can't take your...”

“Mom said since I didn't use it she was going to sell it at a yard sale this summer. So it's no big deal.” Standing she smiled puckishly, reminding him of a young Mokuba. Heart catching with a mix of fondness for his brother and sadness at the way things were between them now, he stood up and nodded “Okay, but only if your mom agrees first.”

“No problem.” She yelled out “Hey mom! Kai likes to take pictures; can I give him my old camera?”

Without glancing up from her assessment of the Limbo dancers, she called back, “Yeah, go get it. It's in that junk box under the stairs.”

“See.” Amy gave him a smug look. “Let's go.” Grabbing his arm she tugged him towards the restaurant-cum-home.

While they walked she asked about what was uppermost in her mind. “You think she'll really do it? Split the boys up?”

“Seems like it.” He answered noncommittally.

“Dad'll talk her out of it.” Amy shrugged fatalistically. “He always does. They'll work out a 'compromise' that gives the jerks exactly what they want in the end. I see it all the time.” Shaking her head she sighed “It's already started. Dad's mooning all over her, being lovey-dovey. She's a fool for
that kind of stuff.”

“Hnn... Your mother seems like a smart woman. I'm sure she'll do what's best.” This was not a conversation Seto wanted to be having.

“She's like Joey is with you. One look and she caves.” She glanced at him curiously “I kinda thought that would bore you. It would me.”

“My relationship with Joey is not your concern, but you are wrong. Joey doesn't 'cave' at a look. He is one of the strongest men I know.” He corrected firmly.

The girl laughed as if he'd said the funniest thing is the world. “Yeah right! Kai, he came in last night so tired he could hardly stand. He'd been hauling nets that weighed over a hundred and fifty pounds all day yesterday, and the pots were about forty each, empty. Plus doing the lines and cutting the bait. Anyone who wasn't a complete push-over for you would have told you to get bent when you volunteered him to work at the restaurant. He did help but not 'cause he wanted to be nice to us, but because he wanted to do it for you. And tonight! I'll bet all he wanted to do was have a quiet crab boil and some rest because he's probably still tired from yesterday and did an even harder day today. Yeah, he's gone on you, and you didn't even have to ask.” She turned to stare up at him as he came to a sudden stop. “What's wrong?”

“I... nothing.” Sure Seto knew Jou had worked hard, but for some reason the blond's warmth and vibrant personality hid the fact that he was exhausted. He must be, because Amy was right, just listening to Jou's day made his muscles ache with sympathy. “Let's get the camera and head back.”

“Yeah, you wait out here. The boys are in their room, grounded because of what they did to Alma and Artie. If you come in they'll probably get nasty.” With a quick turn she raced the last few yards to the restaurant and dashed inside.

She was gone less than five minutes and when she returned she was breathing hard, having obviously run both ways. “Here you go.” She held it out triumphantly. It was an old leather case about the size of a football. Seto could see several small pockets closed with zippers and ties. A long shoulder strap made for ease of carrying. He reached for it eagerly. Of course he recognized the distinctive logo. A Canon EOS. He'd considered buying one for himself a few years ago only to talk himself out of it, telling himself that the world was moving to digital, there was no need for a film camera any longer.

“I... Are you sure?” He asked even as his hands closed around the worn case.

“Yeah. I don't use it. It works really good, even has batteries and film in it, but I wanted a digital.”

“The cost? I can pay...”

“Don't be stupid. Mom bought it at a yard sale for a couple bucks. You've helped us enough that a two dollar yard-sale special is the least we can do.” She grabbed his arm and tugged him around. “Let’s go! There is a flash and a night lens in there. If we hurry you might be able to catch Joey still doing the limbo.” She dashed off, dragging him behind.

Seto chuckled and allowed himself to be towed, stretching his long legs to keep up. The nostalgic pang returned as he was reminded again of his little brother.

The party was still going on, just as loud, possibly louder. The limbo had reached knee level, but Joey wasn't dancing. Instead Seto found him curled on their blanket, arms pillowing his head, fast asleep. With an arrow of remorse piercing his heart, he knelt down and gently brushed the tumbled
blond hair back. “Hey Jounouchi, lets go back to the camper.”

The blond woke up instantly. “Huh?” Then he saw Seto hovering over him. “Oh hey. Where’dya get to?”

“Amy and Ramona gave me a camera. I went with Amy to pick it up.”

“Camera huh? You like to take pictures?” He squinted curiously at the leather case, obviously still slightly groggy.

“Yes, I do. But that's not important. Let's go back to the camper. You're exhausted.”

Jou sat up quickly, stretching briskly. “Nyam, just a little power nap. You ain't danced yet and you barely ate anything. Lets...”

“I ate more than enough.” Seto thought fast. What Amy said was true. Jou really cared more about him having a good time then getting the rest he needed. One part of him wanted to smack the blond, but another, long ignored and neglected part, rejoiced in knowing that his lover cared that much about him. Not that he’d ever take advantage, but it made him glow inside. He’d examine that feeling later. Right now he had to take care of Jou. Allowing his perfect posture to slump he leaned forward and whispered “Please can we go? I'm tired and I want to rest but...” He glanced furtively over at the party “I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.”

Jou blinked up at him for a second, assessing him, then nodded slowly “Yeah, okay sounds good.” He staggered to his feet and called out “Yo! Everyone! It's been great, but it's time for the great fisherman to hit his rack. We're heading out tomorrow after lunch so...” He waved in a wide arc. “G'night everyone.”

Swaying slightly, whether through the results of alcohol or exhaustion, nobody knew, the blond turned towards the path. Seto, after a quick wave to the mass of people, wrapped his arm around Jou's waist to steady him, and together the staggered down the path.

Scapegoat was ecstatic to see them and Kit simply glared at them from beneath the small table. Seto took thirty seconds to pet his little friend. In that time Jou had simply dropped his jean cutoffs and crawled naked into the bottom bunk, sprawling out limply.

Giving his lover a concerned glance, he checked the door and window, making sure the locks were secure and the screens were in place, before pulling down the blind. With luck they would both sleep late. Seeing how Jou took up every available inch of space on his bunk, Seto crawled into the top bunk and settled down. He didn't expect to fall asleep right away, but his eyelids fell closed within seconds.

He was dreaming, he knew he was, yet it felt so real. He was soaring high above the California coast. Flying just to the right of him was a creature he recognized instantly, his heron, and on his left, his great snow goose. It felt right that he soared between them, swooping and diving before ascending to heights that would make even his blue-eyes white dragon dizzy. He felt so free, so alive; better than he had in... Ever. No chains bound him, no weights dragged him down. He was free, beautifully free.

His flight continued for time uncounted as he explored the world and everything in it. Then, unexpectedly, a tiny creature, a hummingbird, appeared beside him, keeping pace with his dizzying speed and acrobatics. Happiness at the new friend made him throw back his head and laugh in sheer joy. They flew together for a time until, inexplicably, the hummingbird slowed, fell behind him. Missing his little friend, he turned to see where the small creature had gone. For an instant his breath
caught and his flight stalled. The most beautiful creature he'd ever seen flew behind him with his new friend fluttering around him.

Determined, he caught his free fall and zoomed straight toward the shimmering bird. As he approached bright intelligent eyes the color of polished gold watched him with an expression of joy and pain. Completely unreserved because he knew, absolutely knew, that this golden eagle would never harm him. The caring and love in the familiar gaze gave him the confidence to fly close, brush along the softer than-down-feathers. The golden bird returned the caresses tenderly before, with a challenging cry, sped forward in a complicated series of loops and dives that dared him to follow. With a trumpeting laugh, Seto hurtled himself forward into the wide blue, chasing the elusive gold eagle.

It could have been seconds or decades that they flew together. Sometimes side-by-side, sometimes one leading and one following, and sometimes just by keeping each other in sight, but there was no doubt in Seto's mind that they were together. The magnificent creature was his.

They were flying low, enjoying the look and feel of the land and each other when the hummingbird suddenly let out a shrill cry, one echoed by the heron and a deep call from the goose. It was so sudden, so jarring, that it brought Seto out of his dream with an abruptness that had him falling out of the top bunk. Instead of crashing painfully to the floor, he landed on something warm and decidedly softer than the floor, although still firm.

“Oof, fuck! What a wake up. What the hell is going on? My dream was so strange but it woke me!” Seto exclaimed.

Jounouchi was already in motion though, sliding on his cut offs and flip flops. “Strange? I'd call it great but...” Then Jou broke off and started to curse. “Fucking goddamn motherfucker I knew it!” He scooped up the dogs and threw open the door. "Shit Seto take the dogs and hold on tight. I gotta move the camper now.” Without another word beyond a few swear words, Jou dashed out, slamming the door behind him.

In a few seconds the car engine purred to life, and just as Seto realized what was happening the camper started to move. He fell back on the lower bunk, clutching the dogs tightly to his chest. He didn't know what was going on but light filtering into the camper was weird, dancing and moving in a way that was hauntingly familiar. As soon as the idea struck he turned and opened the blinds. He couldn't control his gasp of dismay. The campground was alight with a strange flickering glow. Then he shook his head. No, not lights. Flames. There was a fire at the campground.

Seto put the dogs down and slid on his shoes. As soon as the camper quit moving he jumped out and closed the door behind him. “What the hell?”

A hard plastic square hit him in the chest. Automatically he caught it. “Seto use the phone and dial nine-one-one. I'm goin' back to get people up and out of there.” Jou ran back towards the campground.

Like hell he'd wait there. What was he some kind of wimp? Dialing as he went, he made the connection, gave the information, and then ran for the nearest camper. Jou was already there, rousing the owners. Seto took the next, pounding on the door. There were ten campers total. Jou and Seto managed to get to all but the last one, getting the owners to move them before they could become engulfed.

The tire of the last camper ignited just as they reached it. By mutual agreement, the broke in the door. The small area was rapidly filling with smoke and they didn't waste time. They dropped to the floor and crawled back to where they knew the occupants would be. Seto picked up the woman and slid
her on his back; Jou did the same for man. Both victims were unconscious with labored breathing. Drawing deep breaths from as low as they could get, Jou and Seto crawled out as rapidly as they could.

As they reached the door they hand walked down the steps, breathing harshly, coughing from the smoke, the entire back of the camper lit up. The heat was intense, and even though Seto was in several feet away, he could feel his skin blistering. He didn't want to think about what Jou was going through even closer.

Several fire and rescue personnel rushed to them, taking their burdens and hauling them to safety. A paramedic crew was waiting with oxygen masks and soothing towels to cool their skin. Seto noticed that Jounouchi refused treatment until he saw Seto was being cared for. It wasn't obvious, but it was distinctly there. Again that warmth flooded him even as he fought the urge to smack the blond upside the head for stupidity. The couple they'd rescued were loaded into ambulances that wailed off into the night.

Seto was surprised to find himself separated from Jounouchi and cornered by a very grumpy, obviously pissed-to-be-awake, uniformed man. There were no courtesies at all beyond the asking of his name, which Seto answered automatically. The officer's response to his name was a snarled “What the hell happened?”

He could sympathize with the man even while he glowered at him. “I woke up from a dream-turned-nightmare and accidentally woke my friend up. I was confused by the strange light but he recognized it was a fire and ran to move our car and camper to safety. As soon as we were safe I called nine-one-one and we both ran to the other campers waking everyone up. The last camper we were too late so we went in and got them out.” He kept it to the point. He didn't give courtesy where none was accorded.

“That's it? Just a couple of Samaritans huh?” The cop was deliberately disbelieving. The stenciled gas cans left at the place where the fire had obviously started told him it was arson. Strangers in town were more suspect than locals. “Just happened to have a nightmare and woke up?” A distinct sneer twisted the cops' lips.

“Hnnn, not really. I wouldn't have bothered if Jounouchi hadn't run back.” It wasn't true of course, but this cop was making him feel defensive and angry. His automatic response was to don his cold, ruthless mask. “I've told you what happened. If you have more questions speak to my lawyers.” With a gimlet-eyed stare he dared the idiot officer to attempt to speak to him again.

The cop's eyes widened slightly before his training kicked in. He tried to restore a cooperative atmosphere with a practiced show of humor. Might as well try to keep this on a friendly footing, even if all he wanted was to cuff the arrogant asshole. More flies with honey and all that crap. “Ah man I pissed you off. Let's start again. I'm Trooper Tulman. Nice to meet you Mister Kaiba.” The placating smile deepened. “Your friend, Mister Wheeler, warned me not to push you too hard or I'd find myself dealing with a real prima donna.”

That caught Seto off guard. He hadn't seen Jou since they'd been separated for treatment. He glared harder and spun on his heel stalking away to find his lover. He wanted to tell him just what he thought of being left behind while Jou went to rescue people, and now he had 'prima donna' to discuss. Seto had been nothing but accommodating on this trip and no way was Jou going to get away with labelling him a diva or the like..

The officer mumbled a curse word under his breath and hurried after him. “Okay! Sorry! I took my temper out on you. Will you answer just a few more questions?”
Seto ignored the man and continued to search for Jounouchi in the mass of people milling around the now contained fire. He had nothing to say to the useless person. If the jerk officer wanted to speak to him he could do so through his lawyers. He'd already said so once hadn't he? Seto detested repeating himself.

Trooper Tulman was rapidly losing professional cool. This guy was a real hard ass, ignoring him like he wasn't even there. Most people had some kind of respect or fear for the law but this guy showed neither.

Too late he realized he should have listened when he was warned. The blond who’d asked if he could check on his dogs had actually spun around and told him what to expect when he'd said he was going to speak to the other 'hero.'

Joey Wheeler had seen his bad temper at being woken at three in the morning and tried to head off trouble. “Don't piss off the tall brunet guy, Seto Kaiba, or you're gonna have a real problem getting his statement. He pays a ba-zillion people to handle shit for him so he ain't gonna put up with attitude even from a cop. He almost barbecued his ass rescuing people and he's gonna be in a bad mood.”

That hadn't given the trooper too much concern at the time but now the cop wished he had listened. Ruefully he shook his head. Seto Kaiba was a world famous personality, recognized in households around the globe but he was still subject to the same laws as anyone. Money didn't talk in his town but the guy's attitude and sheer presence, even filthy and bedraggled, did affect things. That and his mention of lawyers.

He had doubted the guy was actually Seto Kaiba and ignored the warning. What the fuck was a guy like that doing in a camper in Half-Moon Bay? His apprehension combined with tiredness from the earlier party, added to the obvious arson of the fire made him curt to a person he recognized belatedly he should have been polite to. A quick thorough look made him sigh. The soot-smudged brunet was the recently missing, now found, fourth richest man on earth. Just as the blond had warned, Seto Kaiba was not cooperating and it was the trooper's own damn fault. He would kick his own ass if he could. Seeing the tall man moving away, obviously searching for something, he scurried after him.

“As Mister Kaiba, wait up! I have a few more questions.” He was, of course, ignored. He had a feeling he would really have to speak to a team of lawyers to get his questions answered. He was about to give up when he saw his quarry stop abruptly. Lengthening his stride he hurried to reach the other man before he changed his mind.

As he neared Kaiba he realized that the brunet hadn't stopped for him. Instead he was staring intently at Joey Wheeler, who was making his way through the crowd towards them. He was still a few feet from Kaiba when the blond reached his friend.

As Kaiba started to speak, the trooper wished he knew Japanese because whatever the brunet was saying, it sure sounded like he was furious.

“What the hell did you think you were doing running into a fire to play hero?” Seto stormed as soon as Jou was in earshot. He deliberately dropped into their native language because of all the people around.

“Kinda obvious.” Jou mumbled as he watched his lover keenly. Seto was pissed but there was more going on. “What's got your panties in a knot?”

For a second the world hazed red around the edges and anger poured through him. Calling on his inner strength he clenched his fists and snarled. “You threw me the phone and expected me to 'stay' like some kind of coward. How dare you treat me as less than a man?”
Jou concentrated for a moment then shook his head slightly, admitting softly, “I didn't expect you to stay. I expected you to help. I threw you the phone so you would have to call. It would buy me a few seconds to get ahead of you so I was first in. Your legs are longer and you run faster so I needed a head start.”

“First in?! Why would you...” He trailed off as he realized it was more of Jou taking care of him. “Oh! You...” His fists uncurled and all but a small spark of his anger died.

Jounouchi smiled slightly. “You're mine now remember? I love you and...”

“Idiot.” But tears of happiness glemmed in his blue eyes. Nobody had cared for him in so long, cared enough to shield him, to care for and protect him. It was vaguely annoying but it still made him glow with warmth. He was genuinely loved.

Jounouchi reached out and gently pulled him into a tender hug, careful of the blisters and raw skin. Seto returned the embrace with arms that clung desperately to the heat and warmth offered so freely. It was a strangely tender moment. One the officer was hesitant to interrupt. He was glad when a woman he recognized as Ramona Spiedel coughed from behind the embracing men.

Joey stepped back and turned to face her, but kept his arm around Seto, although both of Kaiba's arms dropped to his side as he spoke to the woman. “Ramona.”

“Everything okay? I just got here.” Her gaze was flitting over the burned camper, grounds and shower facilities.

“Couple on the end had to go to the hospital. Don't know how they are, but they were unconscious when they rode away.” Joey elaborated.

“Are you guys...” She broke off as her daughter burst into their group.

“Kai! Kai!” Anxiously she grabbed his arm. “Are you okay?” Urgently she tugged him away from Jou and inspected him. “You're not. You have blisters all over and your skin is red.”

“Minor annoyances.” Seto gave her an indulgent look. She was so very like Mokuba it made his heart twist. “I'm fine. We got our camper and car out without any problems.”

She ignored the reassurance and turned to her mother urgently “Mom, they need to shower and rest. Can they come park at our place? Use our shower and stuff?”

Ramona nodded and sent them both warm looks. “Of course you are both welcome.”

Gratefully, Joey nodded. “Thanks a lot.” Seto added a soft thanks as well.

The officer stepped forward to forestall the tall brunet and get his answers when Seto Kaiba turned and met his gaze head on. “Trooper Tulman, I've told you to contact my lawyers. I will not speak to you. Do not attempt to violate my rights further.” Without another word to him, indeed the CEO turned from the law man and held out his arm to Amy Spiedel. “Show me to the showers please?”

Amy's giggles floated back to the remaining group as the two strolled away. Joey sighed and shook his head at the state trooper. “Told you not to piss him off.” Offering his arm to Ramona, he grinned winningly at the older woman, making her blush. “Don't suppose you got any crab left do ya?”

Ramona's laughter floated back to the officer as he stood dumbly watching them go. He was still standing there when they strolled out of sight. His commander walked up to him and asked “Did you get the heroes's statements?”
“Such as they are. I pissed off Seto Kaiba and he demanded I speak to his lawyer.” No point in hiding it. Pissing off someone with the wealth and status of Seto Kaiba was akin to pissing off a movie star but with political repercussions. He knew this could and probably would affect his career.

His ranking officer let out a soundless whistle. “Man you stepped in it. You try to apologize?”

“Of course. He just walked away. The asshole acted like I wasn't even here. I was tempted to cuff him but...”

“Not worth it. Where did he go? I'll go smooth his feathers.” It wasn't something he enjoyed but he knew he would do it. Schmoozing came with the territory when a man moved up into administration.

“He went off with the Amy and Ramona Spiedel. Seemed really friendly.”

The older man grunted “Shit I have to talk to them anyway. A witness says he thought he saw one of the boys running away from the area about the time the fire started. This could get ugly fast because Ramona used to work for Kaiba's company so they're probably old friends. You really fucked up.” Without another word he spun and strode off towards the Kite and the Heron.

Ramona and Joey caught up with Seto and Amy as they reached the restaurant. Amy pushed the door open and ushered them in. “Hey Dad, it was the campgrounds on fire.” She yelled before sputtering to a stop. Her father, Mark and Ty were sitting at the prep table. “Oh hey! I thought you guys would be upstairs. When I left you were saying you were going up to get Mark and Ty was trying to get you to let him sleep.” She confided “Mark sleeps like the dead.”

Seto's sharp gaze flicked over the boys, lingering on their faces for a moment. “And wearing his makeup too.” He commented coolly, surprised to see both boys pale instead of one of them flush with embarrassment.

“What are you talking about?” Brad Spiedel asked, confused.

“Mark is wearing concealer on his scar. It’s how I've been able to distinguish one from the other.” Seto explained.

“Why...” He broke off to examine his sons carefully. Sure enough the scar was concealed. Uncertainly he asked “Mark? Ty?” He suddenly wasn't sure which was which. Ten minutes ago he would have said who without a doubt but... “Why are you trying to look like Ty?” He asked the one he thought was Mark.

The other boy rubbed his brow, wiping away the concealer. “It was just a joke. We wanted to see if you guys could tell us apart without the scar.”

A knock at the door made everyone turn to the door. Ramona answered, her eyes widening to find a state trooper on her doorstep. “Michael! Is there something wrong?”

“Well, I need to speak to your guest for a few moments, and then I need to talk to you and your husband.” He said respectfully. “May I come in?”

Confused she stepped back and motioned him in. “Sure. Michael, this is Joey Wheeler and Kai...”

“Seto Kaiba. I know already.” The officer smiled and held out his hand. He was confused by the way Ramona gasped and took a step back and the atmosphere thickened.

Seto took command immediately. “I've already spoken to the other officer. I have no further statements to make unless it's through my attorney.” His tone and expression were pure ice and pride.
The commander knew he'd get nowhere.

Unexpectedly he got help from the blond 'hero.' “C’mon Seto, I know you’re tired but give the guy a break. He just needs to get the paperwork done. If we don't get it done we won't be able to leave tomorrow- today.” Coaxingly the blond smiled into the frigid eyes. Michael was surprised the man didn't turn into an icicle from the arctic chill of deep blue eyes..

“I am not tired. I am pissed off at the rudeness of the other officer. We had just saved several people from being burned to death, narrowly missing dying ourselves and that person acted as if we were at fault somehow.” It still galled him that the other officer had dared to insinuate such a base, stupid thing.

“Sir, Mister Kaiba, I apologize. The other officer was following procedure. The first person on a scene, to report a scene, especially an arson scene, is automatically suspect. We have a witness who saw someone running away from the scene about the time it started, you are completely clear.”

Seto sneered at the man. “Fine, I'll say it again. I woke from a dream and accidentally woke Joey. He recognized the light in the camper as fire and ran outside, moving our car and camper. Then I called emergency services and together we ran to get the other campers out.”

“Okay, did you see anyone running around who shouldn't have been there? See anyone running from the scene?”

“No. I was actually in the camper when Joey moved it. The fire was already spreading through the shower area when I called emergency.”

“So you didn't see anyone running away.”

“I've already said no.” He nodded sharply “I need to shower. Amy will you show me where I can wash the smell of smoke and ashes off?”

“Sure K... Seto.” Giving everyone a small grin, she led the way upstairs.

Joey took a deep breath, wrinkling his nose slightly at the smell of burning and gasoline. “Whoo I'm ripe too. Maybe I should go outside and air out so I don't stink the place up.”

Ramona shook her head at him like he was one of her kids. “Don't be stupid. Just sit here and let me get you some ice water. Your voice is very raspy.”

“Any hope for some crab?” He teased.

“I have some classic Boston clam chowder. Creamy and smooth, perfect for your throat.” She bustled to the large commercial refrigerator. “Anyone else want something?”

There was a murmur of ‘no’ around the room, with only her husband saying 'yeah, sounds good.'

While Ramona bustled at the stove Brad turned to Michael. “You said you needed to speak to our guest and us. What else did you need?”

“Mmm... Ramona I saw you at the fire, you and little Amy. Were your boys there too? I didn't see them.” He asked carefully. This was very crucial.

She answered absently “They were home with Brad. We were having a family talk about the future. Brad is taking Mark to San Francisco and Ty is going to stay with his uncle in Montana. Brad can use the company when he's in the city and Ty is going to help with the ranch. With the drought out
there my brother can use all the help he can get.”

The trooper pursed his lips “I see.” And he did. But his compassion for the family couldn't interfere with his duty. “So you both were here?” He switched his gaze to the boys.

Brad stepped in front of his sons. “Yes, they were both with me sitting right here for over an hour before we heard the sirens. Why are you asking?”

“Well Brad, if you say it then I'll believe you, but I have a witness who swears he saw a boy matching your son's description running away from the camp just a few minutes before the nine one one call.”

“My son's? Both of them?” Incrédulous he stared at his old friend.

“No just one.” He scratched his neck and sighed. “He saw a boy about seventeen running away and he swears he saw him turn down this street.”

“Who is accusing my son – and which of my sons?”

That made the man shift uncomfortably. “Well it was a tourist. Someone who'd fallen asleep at the beach.”

“Someone who was shitfaced claims to have seen a boy of about seventeen running away from the fire. You immediately come here with bullshit like this?”

“Brad, your boys are troublemakers. It...”

“Get out old friend. My boys would never do this and it shows what kind of friend you are that you come here just because some drunk hallucinated a running boy turning onto this street.” Brad was went from incrédulous to outraged in just a few heartbeats. “And don't come back unless you have evidence!” Anger in every stiff line of his posture, Brad crossed the room and threw the door open. “Get out!”

Michael sighed and walked out. He knew that he had likely lost one of his oldest friendships but he had to do his duty. And his regret wouldn't stop him from arresting the man-boys who'd stood there watching him with sly, smug eyes.

Ramona, who'd been watching her husband and sons with wide eyes, slowly place the bowls of soup in front of her husband and Joey. Uncertain of what to say she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “Brad...”

He looked at her with fierce eyes. “Our boys weren't involved.”

Again she wet her lips. “I... Are you sure?”

“Of course I am. They were here with me!” He practically shouted at her. Ramona caught the smug look that passed between the boys.

“I...”

“Dad wait.” Amy came to the top of the stairs. “Are you sure? Remember Mark was wearing concealer. Did you see both of them together before the fire started? How long after?”

There was a moment when confusion knit his brow, then it cleared. “Of course I did. Concealer or not I know my sons.”
Amy stared at him for a moment then sighed and shook her head. “Then why do Ty's jeans stink like gasoline? Why are there matches in the pocket? He put them in the hamper and when I got fresh towels and washcloths the bathroom smelled like a gas station. I pulled them out and turned on the vent but...”

Ramona saw the sheer panic and rage contort her son's face and for the first time genuinely feared her sons, feared for her daughter. “Toss them down to me Amy.” She ordered softly, stepping between the stairs and her sons. She wouldn't put it past them to charge the girl.

Amy tossed the wadded up jeans down to her mother. “The matchbook is in the front pocket. I didn't touch it, just saw it sticking out.”

The smell of gasoline and a hint of smoke overrode the pleasant smell of clam chowder mixing with Jou's pungent smoky smell. Ramona turned and held the jeans out to her husband. The dark, oily spots of gasoline stood out against the faded material in sharp relief. “Brad did you see both of them at the same time?”

Brad took the jeans slowly, staring at the damning evidence with eyes widening with pain and disbelief. “Ty? Mark?” He questioned softly.

Mark laughed nervously “It's not what you think. We were here with you! That must have happened earlier. It...” But the three of them had been together all day except for when Brad had gone to the beach party and the boys had stayed home. And as he thought about it, he couldn't say for certain he'd seen them both before the fire started. In fact, Ty had argued about going upstairs and waking Mark. Buying time? Brad didn't know but he didn't like the path his mind was taking.

With a heartbroken sigh he squared his shoulders and faced his sons. Time to get to the bottom of this. “First, last, and only chance to come clean. If you lie about this we'll throw you out with the clothes on your back.” With eyes hard and empty with betrayal and pain. “You started the fire. I want to know what the fuck you were thinking?”

Ty opened his mouth to say something, but Mark beat him to it. “You know we were here.”

“I know one of you was here. The other was starting the fire.” He corrected flatly. “I...” He held out a hand to his wife. “We want to know what the fuck you were thinking. People could have been killed.”

“People were hurt. What were you thinking? If Kai and Joey hadn't...” Ramona blinked and trailed off. “Kai and Joey were staying at the camp...” She swallowed back the nausea suddenly rising in her throat. “You wanted to hurt them because you blame them for me sending you both away.”

Joey stood suddenly, scraping his chair back noisily, reminding them that he was still in the room. Everyone looked at him with varying degrees of shock. Joey rolled his head in a circle, cracking his neck loudly. He glared at the boys for a moment, seeing past the youth to the corruption beneath.

“Yeah, that's sounding right. See I didn't tell the cop everything I know. Was going to talk to Seto about it first. I was awake before Seto. The dogs barking woke me from a fantastic dream. I looked out the window to see what was upsetting them and I saw your kid, dunno which, but he was wearing jeans and a dark shirt, standing beside the showers. He was holding something in his hand. I saw it spark so I guess it was matches. It sparked twice so I guess he lit two and tossed them on the ground and it burst into flames. That's when Seto woke up. I was too worried about getting everyone to safety to talk about it then and there.” He gave Brad and Ramona a solemn look. “I didn't say anything to the cops because... well I was a kid in trouble once.”

“You're a liar.” One of the boy's yelled. “We were here. You're a lying fag. You just wanted to butt
fuck me and are mad that I turned you down.” He was still screaming invectives when his father pulled out the pack of matches and flipped it open. Two torn stubs attested that two matches had been used.

In a move so fast it blurred, Brad – their supporter and champion – swung out and backhanded the screaming teen. There was a horrible crack, then thud as he hit the ground. White with fury the betrayed father ground out harshly “You are the liar. More, you are a spoiled little shit who blames everyone but himself for his troubles. You are just like your uncles. You deliberately tried to hurt people you were pissed at and you didn't care about the others who got hurt as well.”

Ty, in the process of lifting his brother to his feet, denied fiercely “That was an accident. We didn't mean for anyone else to get hurt but the fags. They ruined everything. We had a plan that would have got us home. All we want is to go home.”

“You were home.” Ramona cried softly. “This is home now. You didn't even give it a chance.”

“Fuck this place. We hate it here and want to go back to L.A.” Mark hurled back, tears pouring down his face from the pain of his father's blow, but rage crackling like a nimbus around him.

Seto, now clean, but wearing the smoky clothes from earlier observed from the top of the stairs. “If those people die you will both go to jail for murder. As it is you can be prosecuted for arson and destruction of private property not to mention conspiracy to commit murder.”

“Fuck you. This ain’t your business.”

“No thanks, murderous schoolboys aren't to my taste.” He sneered. “And on the contrary it is very much my business. I am one of the people you attempted to murder. I have a lot to live for and...” His eyes glinted with a look of absolute ferocity. “It was my lover you tried to kill. For that alone I would see you rot in prison.” His lips took on a disdainful curve nobody mistook for a smile. “Perhaps there you will learn to appreciate 'fags.' You'll both make pretty bitches.” His voice cold enough to form icicles. “Joey, you will have to shower elsewhere. Perhaps the police will have a shower at the station.”

Ramona gasped and reached out to grab his arm as he strode past. Giving her a look that froze her to the core, cementing in her mind once and for all that the tall, shy, helpful man who'd worked with her so easily was truly Seto Kaiba, he shook her off and continued through the group.

These were her sons. Ramona knew that she had to do something. “Please. Kai – Mister Kaiba. Please let us deal with this. Let us...”

“Like you did when they were trying to kill seagulls? Abusing and neglecting their family?” Cutting coldness and relentless ice. Not even a hint of bending in his attitude showed through.

Recognizing the futility she let her hand fall to her side. “I...”

Brad drew her back into his arms and stared at the brunet with assessing eyes. “You're a businessman. Can't we make a deal?” What his boys had done was horrible, but they were his sons. He had to protect them.

Seto turned to look at the desperate man. “A deal? You think that I would 'deal' when it comes to my lover's life? The lives of myself and others? What do you think you could possibly offer that is worth those things?”

Brad swallowed hard. He hadn't thought of it like that. His sons were screwed up. He shut his mouth and watched silently as the tall brunet took the blond's arm and pulled him toward the door. Amy
dashed forward, grabbing his other arm. With eyes pleading for something, anything, she begged “Kai... Seto... Please, won't you please... can't you... fix this?”

For an instant the icy gaze pinned the girl, then inexplicably softened and a gentle hand caressed Amy's hair in a soothing gesture. They had no way of knowing that the girl had touched the part of him that loved his brother to the point of doing anything for him. Images of his brother superimposed over the girl's pleading face. With a heavy sigh he nodded slowly. “All right. I...” He blinked and the images faded. “I can't do anything about what's happened Amy. But it will go better for your brothers, for your family, if they turn themselves in. We will hold off going to the police for four hours or until we hear that the injured people die. At that point we will have no choice. They have until that time to take responsibility. If they run – If your father and mother send them away – we will go to the police immediately.”

“But can't you...” She started to plead again.

He shook his head slowly, “They have to take responsibility. They hurt people and caused a lot of damage. It... They brought this on themselves.” He dipped his head slightly, and turned away. “Jane.” He said softly as he tugged Jounouchi from the room.

They were almost back to the crowd milling around the burned campground when Seto stopped abruptly. “Well?”

“Well what?” Jounouchi wasn't sure what was going through Seto's mind but he was sure it was complicated. He frankly didn't feel up to dealing with it. He was exhausted, both mentally and physically.

“Are you going to tell me I did the wrong thing? Right thing? What?” Seto was agitated and it showed. He normally didn't second guess himself like this.

“I think you did the only thing possible. I also think you did good getting out of there when you did. Those kids needed a beating. They were trying to hurt us and didn't care who they hurt to do it.”

“Kill not hurt.” Seto corrected. “You hurt with glass outside the steps or something non-lethal. Fire is lethal and they know it.” He sighed and leaned his head back to look at the stars. “They were trying to kill sea gulls and pelicans, and if we asked around I'd bet there have been quite a few pets gone missing. Baby serial killers.”

“Ain't that a bit extreme? I mean...”

“I've seen it before, that kind of madness. It was in my step-father's eyes. He enjoyed destroying people. They have just a touch of it in them. Perhaps it's reversible, perhaps not. But I won't stand by and...”

“I understand.” Jou whispered softly. Seto knew about monsters because he'd lived with one. Of course he would react harshly to being the target of two budding sociopaths. “And I agree with ya. They need to take responsibility for what they did. You gave them time to 'fess up, so now it's up to them.” He sighed and shook his head out of his eyes, lifting his hand to push it further back.

Seto caught the tremor in his hand. “You're exhausted. Let's get back to the camper. You rest; I'll take care of the pups and...” He broke off as Jou suddenly sprinted off. “Jou what is...”

“I left 'em in the camper. Their gonna be...” Jou didn't need to elaborate. Both pups were bound to be upset with all the sirens, noise and commotion. At the best hysterical and at the worst destructive. He sprinted after the running blond.
Thanks to having to stop to unlock the door, Seto entered directly behind Jou. They'd both envisioned the worst, with the cots destroyed, the carpet shredded, and the dogs hysterical. What they found was Scapegoat huddled in a ball under the cot and Kit, teeth bared in a snarl reminiscent of her mother, standing protectively in front of him.

“Hey Seto close the door will ya? They might bolt.” Jou didn't make the mistake of reaching for the dogs.

“Got it.” The door swung shut and instantly Scapegoat bolted from behind Kit and literally climbed up Seto's legs, ignoring the bare skin and using his claws as hooks. Seto after a quick wince scooped the dog off his thigh and cradled him close, soothing him gently. Kit stared for a moment, then in a surprise move, bolted to Jou, jumping high enough that his quick grab saved his upper thighs from severe scratches.

Moving as fast as he could, Jou folded the table and bench down and out of the way, pulled the mats and blankets off the cots and folded the cots away, opening the cramped space in the camper to it's largest capacity. Using his free hand and foot he scooted the mats together and nudged the pillows into place.

“What are you doing?” Seto was confused.

“They are too upset to be on the cots and they need us to reassure ’em. We can lay on the floor with them between us. I'm too beat to stay up holding a dog.” That reminded Seto of the tremor of exhaustion he'd seen in Jou's hand.

Hoping his love took the hint he dropped onto the makeshift bed and put Scapegoat down. Jou was a right beside him as he sank down, placing Kit between them, but careful to keep his hand on the half-tame pup. The dogs stayed tense, growling and grumbling for several minutes, but the soothing closeness of warm bodies pressed together had a rapid effect on Jou. In moments he was sound asleep.

Seto watched as sleep claimed his lover, his heart smiling at the smudged cheeks and peaceful expression. He'd been so tired he hadn't even bothered to wash. Figures Jou would be more concerned about the dogs than himself. Fleetingly he thought his lover needed someone to look after him, protect him from giving too much of himself. As quickly as the thought came he dismissed it. Jou was strong and more than capable of looking after himself and anyone else.

Relishing the ability to do so, he twined his long legs with Jou's and scooted close enough to nestle his head into the crook of the sleeping man's neck, totally encircling the still tense pups. In just a few moments they were all sound asleep.

The sun rose and hours ticked passed unheeded by the sleeping huddle. They probably would have slept the day away if a soft knock at the door hadn't roused the sleeping pups. A sharp pain on Seto's arm brought him awake. Sitting up, he took in the situation. Kit was standing by the door growling, Scapegoat was nuzzling his arm apologetically. Another knock at the door made him frown and stand up. He patted his pup and nudged the wild thing away from the door with his foot. As silently as possible, he opened the door and stepped out, careful to keep the dogs inside.

“Artie, Alma. This is a surprise.” Not really, because of course the Spiedels would send some kind of emissary.

Artie shifted uncomfortably and mumbled something vaguely incoherent, but Alma came right to the point. “The boys turned themselves in. They are being charged with Reckless Arson. They can get anywhere from sixteen months to four years. They will be fined and have to pay for the damages,
plus the cost of containing the fire.”

“What of the people injured?” Seto was not concerned for them personally, but it seemed odd there were no charges.

“They weren’t injured. A little smoke, but they were both passed out drunk. They will have to replace their camper as well.”


“Reckless…” Alma turned to her husband imploringly. She didn't want to explain this. She had hoped he wouldn't ask.

“Reckless means they did it on purpose but without intent to harm people. If they intended to hurt someone they would be charged with Malicious Arson. Their sentence would be four, six, or ten years.” Artie explained softly. He'd spent an hour with Ramona at the police station then with the public defender. “They admitted to wanting to build their own bonfire.”

“I see.” Seto's eyes narrowed and became glacial. He didn't know it but his expression was every bit as ruthless as it had ever been. It caused the old couple to quail and back up. “So they get away with attempted murder by confessing to a lesser charge. We are supposed to accept this as justice?”

Alma swallowed hard and stepped forward again, catching his hand in her gnarled old fingers. “Mister Kaiba... Kai, they are kids. They made a mistake and are scared to death. It should be enough. It will be enough. When they are done with their time they will have learned. Can't you give them a chance to learn?”

“They are monsters who would have hurt and killed anyone in their way.” His voice was harsh with pain from a past dealing with a monster, pain he'd denied and hidden away even from himself. He glared angrily, his expression unyielding. “If it were up to me I'd see them get the maximum penalty before they can cause more pain.” A sudden barking behind him gave him the perfect out. “Excuse me I have to take the dogs for a walk.” Turning his back on the elder couple, he slipped into the camper.

A quick glance told him Jou was still out like a light, and the pups dancing around his feet let him know that they truly did need to go for a walk. Attaching their leashes, he slipped out the door again, relieved to find the older couple gone. Old anger and pain fueling him, he set off on a brisk walk.

Jou waited a couple minutes, and then crept to the window. Seto was disappearing around the corner towards the beach. Judging by the stiff set of his shoulders and the rapid clip, his lover had a lot of energy to burn. The older couple had really caught the asshole side of Seto. He'd been tempted to step in, but realized that Seto had to do this on his own, had to face the pain they brought. Not just the pain of someone trying to kill them, although Seto didn't seem too upset by an attempt on his life. He was more upset that he – Jou – could have been hurt. As much as he wanted to shield Seto, Jou also knew that most of the pain and rage didn't come from the actions of the boys. It came from Seto's past, all the pain and betrayals he'd never let himself show his feeling for. His lover had a lot to work out. It would take time.

Jou knew he couldn't take away the old pain, but he could stop the regret that Seto would feel once he worked everything out. Hurriedly he washed the soot and smoke from his skin, careful of the burns and blisters, then applied a quick rub of antibiotic lotion. He dressed hurriedly, grimacing at the faint smell of smoke in his hair, dressed in slouchy shorts and flip-flops, and left his shirt off. The blisters would pop and stick to it. He didn't want that pain.
He poked his head out, double checking to see if Seto was on his way back. Seto was nowhere in sight so he slipped out of the camper and hurried in the opposite direction his lover had taken.

Seto returned to find a freshly showered, shirtless, Joey just waving goodbye to the same officer from the night before. A smile bright with welcome lightened his brooding heart. Before he could ask, his lover nodded to the retreating figure. “Gave him my statement. He took it down on a laptop and I did an electronic signature. High tech cops! Let’s go get some food.” Then the grin widened. “NBS Rocks.” With a deft flip he tossed Seto the map with a red pen tucked into the crease.

Confused Seto glanced down and blinked at the small red X in the north east corner of California. “Uh... our next destination. You want to eat rocks? You picked a great place for it. Nearest town is about a hundred miles away.”

“Not just any rocks.” Jou laughed at him, shaking his head “Pure sugar rocks. You have to know about it. It's a very high end rock sugar candy. Made by hand at the Natural Beauty Settlement – NBS Rocks.”

Seto nodded as the details clicked “Privately held company. Produces gourmet hard candies by hand, the crystalline properties are billed as healing, and the addition of herbs add to that image. Brilliant marketing. Get healthy while enjoying sugar.”

“Yup, that's the one. Got some old friends there. I feel like some candy and it's time to blow this place. It's gonna be uncomfortable for a while. The townspeople know that we didn't do anything wrong but we are outsiders so they're gonna want someone to blame for them messing up. I don't want it to be us – Or at least I don't want to be here to give them a target.” He scooped the dogs up and tossed them in the back of the car. “Camper is all set. We just gotta get some gas and you hafta pick the route.” He smiled at the vague look of confusion on Seto's face. Leaning close he brushed a soft kiss against the tight lips. “It's cool Seto. I asked the cop. Everything here is taken care of and we are free to go.”

The brunet hesitated for just a moment, then nodded, opened the door and slid into the seat. Jou gave him a wry grin and hopped over the door, hitting the plush seat with a loud whoosh. The crackle of paper in his pocket reminded him and before he could forget he plucked out the slightly crumpled envelope and dropped it on Seto's lap. “Your wages. Amy and Ramona sent them. And don't argue because I think they needed to do it.” A quick flick of golden eyes before Jou started the car. “Besides you can save it for when we get to Vegas. You can use it for a stake in the games and treat us to a hotel room” teasing smile “if you win enough.” Seeing the slight flexing of the other man's jaw, Jounouchi decided that he'd teased enough. “So, gas first. Where to next?”

“Hmmm... You get the gas. I want to look at the map.” Seto grumbled, still not entirely sure leaving was the right thing to do. It felt incomplete.

Seto's first instinct was to plot the quickest route. But even as his eyes traced the roads, he hesitated. Jou said he wanted adventure and fun. They really had no time line and nobody was expecting them. Why hurry? Discarding the discipline of a lifetime, he traced his eyes over the map, pausing here and there on cities and park listings. Sacramento valley was beautiful. He'd seen it once when he'd flown over it in a helicopter on his way to a meeting. He put a small tic mark there. Then continued to look. Locke, a historic town of Chinese settlers, still original, was something he'd been curious to see. Another check mark there. Napa valley was known for it's wine and it's lush scenery. Perhaps a drive through there? Another small mark. For a few minutes he lost himself in finding areas of interest or curiosity. Some things had such promising names! Paradise? Who wouldn't want to go there? And Weed? Perhaps they could try Weed. Seto had never used marijuana before, knowing its effects on the brain, but honestly what could going to a town named Weed hurt? He was curious
about it. The peyote had been an uplifting experience, maybe Weed would be too. Smiling slightly, he put another check mark. A volcano? Lassen volcano? That seemed suitable since Jou was hot as lava.

While Jou pumped the pre-paid gas, Seto continued to make small check marks. Soon more than a dozen covered the map. When Jou slid in next to him, he glanced up sheepishly. “I...uh...”

Jou looked the map and chuckled approvingly. He’d been worried Seto wouldn’t get it. He could see he had nothing to be concerned about. Seto had outdone himself. “Great! Why don't you just connect them in the order you want to go! You're the Navigator.” He could see Seto preen in his praise and it gave him a warm glow to know he could make his love feel good. A quick turn of the key and the powerful engine purred to life. “While you do that I'll get the top up.” At Seto's look of surprise he gestured to his back. “Sunburn on top of blisters ain't good.”

Seeing the common sense in that Seto bent back to the map.

Top in place, Jou reached back and scooped up Kit, settling the tiny dog on his shoulder. Scapegoat whined for half a second before Seto snatched him up and set him in his accustomed perch. “Okay we're set. First stop is the Curvaison Estate Wines on Durig Street – Napa.” He smiled slightly. “I need a drink.”

Jou gave him a grin and hit the gas. “Load the CD player Babe. Make it hot!”

Seto pulled out the case, giving him a sidelong look. “You don't think we've had it hot enough?”

“Hell no! Never too hot.” Ignoring the road Jou gave him a look that invited him to relax and live. “Hot as the sun Baby.”

Seto blinked at that. Jou had called him Babe and Baby twice in less than a minute. That was... weird and vaguely offensive. But the look and smile were... loving and inviting. Giving him a small glare, tempered with the quirk of his lips, he ordered “Don't call me that.”

“Sure thing Sweetcheeks.” Jou needled deliberately. Yeah he loved Kaiba, and yeah Kaiba was messed up, but damn it he was still Kaiba – and Jou was still himself. With the returning of Seto’s spirit, it was time for Seto to see that Jou was still – Jou – the same boy who’d teased him in high school was still around inside the man.

A bonk on his head made him grin. “Don't call me that either.” Seems the old Seto was still around too.

“Whatever you say Honey Buns.” A blast of loud, hard music answered him. Completely familiar with the music, and happier than he'd been in years, Jounouchi began to sing along with the music - loudly. After a time, a deep rich voice, hesitant at first, then strong and equally loud, joined his.

Seto was enjoying himself, the breeze in his hair, even if it came from the windows, was refreshing. The pups had moved to the back seat and were wrestling with a toy that had somehow found its way there. Jou was still humming with the music, once in a while commenting on the scenery. Seto was perfectly content. All too soon for his taste they turned into the entrance to his chosen destination.

Jou glanced over at him and smiled slightly. Seto wasn't even bothering to hide his reluctance to go in to the sharply designed building. “Change your mind? We can drive on?”

“I just... I want to go in and sample the wine but...” He shrugged slightly. The modern architecture and upscale look was too much like before. “But it looks too...” He hesitated a minute “Pet unfriendly.”
Jou caught his meaning and nodded. “Yeah, it's fancy looking. Let's go look for someplace more casual so we don't hafta worry about leavin' the dogs in the car.”

Stifling a sigh of relief, at what he didn't know. Seto agreed. “Sounds good.” He waited a heartbeat then grinned “Baby.”

The blond snapped his head around so fast it was a wonder he didn't get whiplash. “Hey! You...”

“Drive Babydoll!” Was his answer.

A bonk on his head and laughing “Drive Babydoll!” Was his answer.

Stifling a sigh of relief, at what he didn't know. Seto agreed. “Sounds good.” He waited a heartbeat then grinned “Baby.”

The blond snapped his head around so fast it was a wonder he didn't get whiplash. “Hey! You...”

A bonk on his head and laughing “Drive Babydoll!” Was his answer.

Not in the least put out by the endearment, because to be honest, Jou would have been happy with anything Seto chose to call him, he put the car in reverse and pulled out of the parking lot.

Half an hour later they sat at a picnic table shaded by a huge green umbrella. In their hands they held glasses of perfectly chilled white wine. Beside them, leashes staked to the ground, their pups bounded through grass and flowers. “Hmmm...” Jou yawned and gazed out over the rich green landscape. “I never knew grapevines were so pretty.” He gave his lover an encouraging look. “You should take a picture.”

Seto looked away from the brilliant green landscape to glance at Jounouchi curiously. “Picture? I...” then he remembered the camera. “Oh the camera's in the camper.” He sighed regretfully, but was too content to open the camper up to go get it.

Jou grinned and shook his head. “Nope, it's in the trunk. I put it in when I packed up. Thought you might want it.” Giving his love a quick wink he stood and stretch, picking up his empty glass to return to the bar.

To Jou's discerning eye, it looked like Seto hadn't moved an inch, although his glass was over half empty. Deftly he slid the camera next to the glass and slipped onto the bench across from him, setting his own glass of sparkling apple juice on the table. Seto grunted what Jou assumed was a thank you, even as he reached across for Jou's glass. After a quick sip, the glass was set back down. “Hmmm...”

“Designated driver.” Jou grinned cheerfully. “So, what are all them little pockets and stuff?”

“Lenses I think.” Blue eyes flickered slightly. “I haven't had a chance to look at it yet.”

He watched for a few moments while his lover opened each pocket methodically, pulling out the lenses and laying them on the table in order. The camera came next, as well as several black cylinders. He chuckled when Seto gave a small crow of triumph as he pulled a small book from the bottom of the leather bag. “Users guide huh?”

Seto gave him a smirk. “Owners manual.” He corrected. “And it has a section of lenses.”

“Cool. So you gonna take my picture? Do I gotta say 'cheese?'” He asked, hamming it up with a big, toothy smile. A distracted hum answered him. Now that was new. He hadn't seen Seto focus on anything except Scapegoat and himself with that kind of interest since finding him on the beach. Maybe this was something his love needed. “I'm gonna take the dogs for a walk in the vines. You stay and play with the camera.” He could have saved his breath, because Seto just hummed again, his eyes moving avidly over the book. Grinning Jou unfastened the leashes and set off to explore the vines.

Seto finished the small, but surprisingly comprehensive book in short order. Closing it decisively he looked up, ready to share his discoveries with his lover only to blink and look around uncertainly. Jounouchi had left him alone? He was alone again? As soon as the thoughts crept in he shook them off. Of course not. Jounouchi had probably just taken the dogs for a walk. In fact he vaguely recalled
something like that. He'd been focused on the book at the time but... then it hit him like a ton of bricks. For the first time in his life his sharp, ever attentive mind had failed to record every aspect of everything going on around him. His photographic memory had failed. For long moments he sat dumbfounded. Then as his shock faded relief and happiness took its place. He had never explained it, not even to himself, but deep in the recesses of his heart he'd felt that his perfect recall more a curse than a gift.

Who wanted to remember every single detail of every moment of their life? Not just the things that involved them, but the license plate of a car randomly driving by, or the color, design and horrible feathers of some visiting parent's hat from first grade. Not just Mokuba's first steps or his first words, but the voices and words of the neighbors arguing or the faces of people they passed on their way to the store. That was the world Seto had lived in forever, and now, in this place and time, with Jounouchi – perhaps the person he most wanted to see and remember – he discovered that his 'gift' was fallible. Hopefully it would become more so, so that all he saw and remembered were the important things, like Jou's smile while the pups played at his feet. And if not... If he became more normal and forgot, then he would have pictures. For Seto it wasn't a sad realization but a liberating one. He wouldn't be responsible for the keeping memories, he only had to make them and take pictures like any normal man. Perhaps that was why he was so drawn to photography. It was the normal way to keep memories, and normalcy was something he'd had precious little of in his life.

Lighter than he had ever have imagined, Seto picked up his camera and stood. He was going to find his lover and make some memories to put on film. They were memories worth keeping. Jounouchi chasing Kit and Scapegoat, tripping over vines and sprawling in the deep green and purple foliage. The pups pouncing and Jou throwing back his head in laughter. The pups scampering after a butterfly, Jou gazing out over the vineyards as sunset, haloed by the deep orange red and gold of the day's last rays. Seto was disappointed when he ran out of film. There was so much he wanted to capture.

That night as they lay pressed together in the small, single bunk, dozing after the long day, Seto broached the subject. “Hmm...” He nuzzled into the blond head resting on his chest. “Tomorrow we have to stop and get film for my camera.”

Jou, on the verge of sleep, mumbled, “As long as your wages cover it. We're on a tight budget and I have to get gas tomorrow.”

“I'll call the toll free number and make sure my cards are still working. If Mokuba hasn't shut them down we don't have a problem with money.” To Seto, it was that simple. But his statement brought Jou up in such a rush he cracked his head painfully on the bunk above them. “Seto! You can't...” He yelped even when holding his head in pain.

“Relax I didn't say I'd use them for gas or food or anything. Just film – and the dogs. Look you didn't count on us and we should pay our own way. I don't mind earning as we go. I like it.” He grinned crookedly and shrugged slightly. “But I... I need...” Giving Jou a serious look he said, “Yes need to try it, try to take pictures. It's... I have always loved photography. I even had a camera I built into my books at school. I've never been able to indulge myself before and I... please? It... I can't explain but when I have a camera in my hands it's like... like I'm flying.”

Jou pretended to think about it while he caught his breath. Realization pierced him as sharply as a blade. Seto had asked his permission! Seto had given him the choice to take away something he obviously loved. That was... that was... wrong. Gods, that was so wrong! Was he as bad as Mokuba and Gozobuttface? No fucking way would he ever... And he had to let his love know that.

Seto doing something he loved for the sheer love of doing it was... breathtaking. Seto enjoying life -
maybe for the first time in his entire life - was something precious and rare. It made Jou so happy he could have cried. Of course he didn't tear up. Instead he cleared his throat slightly and tumbled them from the bunk. He ignored the 'oof' and curses coming from the startled brunet and kicked the bunk in the folded up position then sat up, straddling Seto's waist. "You don't have to ask me that. You are your own person. My rules don't have to apply to you. I've been an ass to force you to live like me on this trip. You can do whatever you want from now on. You want a hotel you get one. You want some fancy restaurant, go. But..." He shook back his blond head and smiled down into the wide blue eyes. "But don't expect me to change who I am either. I love you for you. And I love you for trying to live like I am. But I realized something just now when you said please... I was controlling you just like every fucking body else has." Framing the stunned face with strong, calloused hands he rasped, "I'm sorry. I can't tell you how sorry I am without crying so just... I'm sorry. I don't want to control you. I want to love you. So get film if you want. Get anything you want. You don't need to ask me but I'm asking you to please keep me informed okay? I kind of like knowing what you're up to."

"Jounouchi..." Seto honestly didn't know what to say. His lover had just given him Carte Blanche to be... himself. No rules or conditions, no stipulations or promises. Just... be himself. It was stunning, amazing, and terrifying. He'd always had rules and structure, always had someone to answer to or a goal to meet. Now, in just a few seconds he was free of all that. It was dazzling and so frightening he didn't know which way was up. "I... don't... You don't say sorry. I needed you to help me see my way but now... now... I need... I'm..." Elated terror stole his voice. He didn't need Jou to save him any more. He didn't need anything but... he was so used to structure, it was as if he were free falling. Panic made his heart race and the need to run, irrational as it was, filled him.

"Shh... I get it. I really do. When you are ready to talk we will talk." Seeing the blue eyes fill with fear, tears and warmth Jou realized his love, so unused to emotion, was becoming overwhelmed. Seto was so fragile right now, so unsure. He could easily bolt back into his emotional wasteland and depression. Jou wouldn't allow that. He had to do something to ease things, to put Seto back on a comfortable plane. Going with what he knew would give the closeness and support and distract him from the storm, he leaned forward and brushed his lips across Seto's trembling mouth. "I think you are in dire need of distraction. You look like you are going to fly apart. Fly apart in my arms. I promise I'll catch you and keep you safe."

Desperate for an anchor in his spinning world Seto wrapped his arms around Jou's middle, clinging tightly and nodded jerkily. "Please... I..."

A lovingly knowing smile smile crossed his lips. "You know, I never knew you loved photography but I get the feeling you've liked it for a long time. Tell me about it. When did you start taking pictures?"

For a second Jou could see the brunet teetered on the edge of flight, then as their gaze caught and held the panic faded and an iron thread control took over, only to be replaced by a curious light that seemed to mix pleasure and pain equally. A wistful look filled his eyes. "My mother bought me a camera to take pictures of Mokuba before he was born. It was just an instant one, disposable, but she said that I was going to make memories to share when he was older, because I was going to love him so much."

"Sounds like a good mom. She found a way to bring Mokuba into the future and share the joy." Jou soothed, running his hands lightly down his love's back, careful of the blisters from the fire.

"She was amazing." Seto cleared his throat slightly as the memories rose from deep inside him. "She was like me, or maybe I should say I take after her? Her mind, her gifts, are passed to me. She... she was warmer, more loving, than I could ever be, but she got me, even though I was different, because she was like me." The brunet explained quietly.
Jou nuzzled the dark tangle of hair. "I could argue that and probably win because where I'm standing
you are the most loving and giving guy I've ever met. But, she was your mom and belongs on a
pedestal so I'll leave it."

Seto shook his head. "You are a lovesick fool if you think that." He sighed and nuzzled Jou's chest.
"I've destroyed companies, ruined people's lives." He hesitated and lowered his voice to a whisper.
"Killed people directly and indirectly."

Jou stayed silent for a long moment feeling the tension in the long body against his, knowing that
Seto was waiting for rejection or something from him that would validate his own feelings. Instead of
an indictment, Jou simply waited for more as he continued to stroked Seto's back.

When it became obvious that he wasn't going to answer, Seto levered up in a seated position, glaring
down at him in a mix of defiance and fear. "Well aren't you going to say anything?"

"What do you want me to say? It's been speculated that you killed your step-father for years. I saw
your scars when they were still pink and healing instead of white and faded. If he caused those scars
I'd kill him myself if he were alive." Jou sat up and ran his finger across one of the almost invisible
marks. He met Seto's eyes head on with absolute sincerity. "Sometimes people stray so far from their
humanity that their souls cry out to be released from the animal in control. Killing such a tortured
soul is not murder, it's mercy."

Seto gasped slightly, his own eyes widening as the new idea filtered through him. He'd never
considered what had happened, what he'd done, as mercy.

While the genius brunet processed that piece of information, Jou continued calmly. "You run a
successful, profitable business and are the fourth richest man on the planet. You have made make-or-
break decisions for most of your life. Those decisions affect thousands of people. Not always in a
good way. I've known that for years. It hasn't changed my feelings for you yet."

Seto's blue eyes widened further and then narrowed, shock and something like wonder filled them.
"You honestly mean that."

"I can't promise never to lie to you Seto, because everyone lies. I mean, if I give you a neon pink tie
for Christmas you are going to lie and say you love it, and if you wear something that makes your ass
look flat I'm going to say you look great. It's the way things are. Little things to avoid hurt, yeah I
might lie, but the big stuff I won't lie to you about." Jou promised solemnly.

Seto stared at him for a moment, then nodded slightly. "I accept that. Although if my ass ever looks
flat I expect you to tell me." The levity faded. "Jo- Katsuya, I need to clarify something in my mind. I
know it's probably moot to you but I need to know definitively, I need you to say it flat out."

The blond head dipped slightly in acknowledgement. "What do you need to know Seto. I don't have
any secrets from you."

"You said you had only one male lover besides me, Raymond, and you also said you only top, never
bottom. I... I know you even said that if Mokuba had tried anything with you, you would have
reacted violently, but Mokuba told me something different. He said you chose him and he never told
me anything different. You say you weren't with him, but he... I believed him for years. It's hard to
change my mind." Seto looked down at his hands, vaguely surprised to find they were clenched into
fists. Consciously he relaxed them. "Please tell me what happened."

"I don't know what happened with Mokuba saying that stuff and he's the only one that can tell you,
but I'm being straight with you. I have never been interested in your brother that way, never even
considered him sexually." Jou reached into his pocket and pulled out the phone. "I'm not the one to clear this up Seto. Call your brother and ask him. Then you will have the answers I can't give you."

Hesitantly, Seto took the phone. "Won't that be me not trusting you? Won't you get mad?"

"No. If he lies I'll call him on it, if he tells the truth we can both be happy he is not a liar." Jou smiled slightly. "He's been the center of your heart for years and I'm barely on the fringes. Just call him."

The brunet hesitated another moment wanting to debate the 'fringe' statement, but in the end decided to call Mokuba and end the uncertainty once and for all. He flipped the phone open and dialed the number he knew by heart. To his relief it was answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Mokuba, it's..."

"Seto! Where are you? I'll come get you right away. You escaped Jounouchi didn't you? I'm sorry I wasn't able to find you sooner, just tell me where you are and you will be rescued as soon as possible." Mokuba's words tripped over themselves in his eagerness.

"Wait! Mokuba didn't Aishira and Matashi tell you I was on vacation?" Seto frowned, a heavy crease lining his brow.

"Vacation! You don't have to protect Jounouchi any longer now that you've escaped. Just tell me where you are."

"I didn't escape Mokuba, there was nothing to escape from. I'm on vacation with Jounouchi Katsuya. We will be gone for a while longer. Get hold of your imagination little brother. I'm fine. I don't need rescue, I want answers." Seto made his voice as stern and firm as possible. His little brother was prone to flights of fancy that rivalled Doctor Seuss at times.

"But, but, Seto? A vacation? You've never taken one. What's going on?"

"It's about time then don't you think? Nothing is going on except that I have fulfilled my promise to you Mokuba, and now I'm going to find out what I want, find a promise to give to myself and my lover." Seto caught the sudden luminosity in Jou's amber gaze and smiled slightly. "I have some questions for you though. Your answers aren't important to that promise, but I dislike contradiction that is easily explained, you know that."

Mokuba's voice sounded shaky and young when he answered, "Oh, okay. Uhm, tell me where you are and I'll come talk to you."

"No need. I want to be with Katsuya and no offense, but I want to be alone with him. You're old enough to take care of yourself and live on your own. I want to enjoy my empty nest for a while before filling it again with mine and Jou's little chicks."

"Nest? Chicks?" Mokuba's voice was incredulous. "Seto are you on drugs? Has Jounouchi given you something to fuck with your mind? Tell me where you are, I'll bring you to a hospital right away."

"I'm fine and outside of some very nice wine, influence free. My question is simple. Why did you tell me you and Katsuya were lovers?" Seto deliberately worded the question to make it sound like he knew the exact opposite.

"I never told you that." Mokuba denied. "I even tried to tell you that I hadn't been able to talk to him that time but you cut me off and you told me not to discuss my love life with you ever again. So I let it go."
"So it's true? You left him in a strange country without a penny to his name? Did you try to find him, to help him?" Seto was shocked by the lie by omission. He could see how it played out but if Mokuba had said just once that he hadn't spoken to Jou then the misery and separation of the last few years would have been different.

"I tried to catch him but he disappeared. I didn't know where to look." His voice was pure agitation, but Seto knew his brother's scheming mind.

He might love the brat and have some blind spots, but not when it came to this. He had trained Mokuba to prey on weakness, to create the weakness if none existed. "You wanted him dependent on you." It was a flat statement, not a question. "You were going to try to manipulate his needs into some kind of relationship." Fury lit Seto. Yes he had taught Mokuba those tactics, but he'd never suspected his brother would use them to hurt someone they considered a friend, a potential lover. "Mokuba that's little better than rape." He rapped out as his fury took over. "You were going to force him."

Mokuba sounded equally outraged "I never would. I was going to play the hero is all. I'd never blackmail someone to be my lover. I'm not like you - I don't have to pay for it or bribe people."

It was a low blow, lower than any ever dealt before, all the more painful because of the truth in it. Quietly, Seto said "Now I know what you truly think of me. I also know who to believe - Katsuya. Goodbye Mokuba." He clicked the phone shut and carefully laid it on the floor. With as soft mewl of pain, he hurled himself into the strong golden arms held open, waiting for him.

A continent away Mokuba Kaiba hurled his phone across the room and watched with satisfaction as it exploded against the wall. "Damn Jounouchi! What the hell is he doing to my brother? Nest? Chicks? Lover? He wants to spend time with a lover instead of me? That's bullshit, pure bullshit." He was completely oblivious to the tears streaking down his cheeks and the snot dripping from his nose.

A soft, feminine cough from the door of his office spun him around. Special Agent Clark stood in the doorway watching him with cool, dispassionate eyes. "Pardon the interruption Mister Kaiba, your secretary isn't at her desk, and as I heard your voice I came in."

"Oh." Mokuba wanted to yell at her, but remembered the training drilled into him by his brother. "I'm sorry, you caught me at a very bad time. Please excuse me while I clean up." He didn't wait for the psychologist to speak, but turned and hurried into his private bathroom. He took just a couple minutes to wash his face and tidy his hair, then returned to find the woman staring out his windows. "Forgive me, but what can I do for you?"

"Actually, I'm here to talk to you about your brother. I expected him to contact you soon, but this is sooner than I could have predicted. I overheard your discussion." At his disgruntled looks she pointedly looked towards the open office door. "Speaker phone and open doors are not good for privacy."

That made Mokuba blush slightly. He rarely made those kinds of mistakes, but he'd been so excited to see the blocked number come up, knowing it was Seto, that he hadn't taken appropriate precautions. "What about my brother?"

"Originally I came to inform you that the case was officially closed and to have you sign for the return of your satellite images. After I heard the conversation between you I decided to talk to you about your brother." She smiled slightly. "I'm a fully licensed psychologist and I assure you completely discreet."
The young Kaiba stared at her with disdain. "You aren't suggesting my brother needs mental help are you?"

She laughed slightly. "Oh no, I'd say he's well on the way to healing. He's looking forward to a future and he's making decisions based on what he wants rather than the promises he made to others. I liked hearing he was looking for a promise for himself. It means he's giving himself a goal, a long term goal. One that includes a partner and children from the sound of it." She sobered and gave him a direct look. "He's getting all the help he needs. I think you're the one who needs help."

Mokuba didn't even stop to consider the possibility. The stupid bitch just crossed the line. He'd have her job and her 'license.' "Get out. I won't listen to your shit. If you're that hard up for money I suggest you sell it on the street because by the time I'm done with you, you won't be a cop or a shrink."

She tilted her head and smiled slightly. "You're a spoiled brat who needs a spanking. I offered to help. Feel free to get me fired. What I just heard is worth plenty to the tabloids anyway. I will be able to sell it for millions. Mokuba Kaiba in love with genius brother, Seto Kaiba hiding out from brother's unnatural fixation, oh and Mokuba Kaiba, jealous of brother's lover. Those are all accurate headlines aren't they? From what I've seen and heard. I'm an expert in these kinds of things, and" her smile widened, "I'm sure there are people, - ex-lovers, your ex-fiance, - who will no doubt back me up."

"Fuck you, Bitch." Mokuba lost his composure, shouting his rage and fear. How dare she taint what he felt for his brother. She didn't know a damn thing. They belonged together, they had always been together, the two of them against the world. It was as simple as that. It wasn't like what she said and she can't prove otherwise. "Nobody will agree with you. Not Rebecca, not anyone."

"You're wrong you know. I've seen in the paper a few times where your girlfriends say the relationship ended because they couldn't compete with the closeness you two shared. A few have mentioned how your brother indulges your every whim. It looks bad Mokuba. I'm sure the public will believe it." Her look became cunning, "Of course there is one way to make sure I don't spill what I know."

Mokuba had known this was coming. He was going to pay the bitch, pretend to go along with her terms, then destroy her. "What would that be?" He grated out. As if he didn't know. He wondered how many zeroes were going to be on the check.

"If you were my patient I'd be bound by patient confidentiality." She grinned at his startled look. "No cost except time of course. I will see you at my office Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, four in the afternoon. Don't be late." She didn't wait for his agreement, just waved and turned to saunter out of the room. If he hadn't been so furious, he'd have noticed that she had an enticing wiggle he'd always found irresistible in women.

He was still mentally snarling when Matashi and Aishira strolled into the room. "Mokuba!" Aishira scolded when he didn't respond to their greetings.

That brought him out of his angry fugue. "What? Oh hey guys."

Aishira's eyes flicked to the remnants of his phone. "If you hadn't destroyed your phone you would know that we are on our way to California. The parks there need some oversight and we have to assist in caring for the mountain lion Seto rescued and gave to us."

The younger Kaiba jolted. "What the hell are you talking about?"
"For someone who claims to love Seto you haven't paid attention. It's all over the news how Seto Kaiba helped in the rescue of an exotic pet who had been turned loose in the wilds of a southern California mountain region. A tamed mountain lion. The vet he contracted to heal it called us. Seto left instructions that we were to be given first choice in adopting the poor kitten. We're flying out now to see the creature and get training on how to care for it properly." Matashi gave him an impatient look. "I've been dealing with calls from various organizations wanting to know if Seto would assist them in their animal right's campaigns. Didn't you get my memo this morning?"

Mokuba coughed slightly. "I haven't had time to read anything not marked urgent. I don't understand how Seto gets anything done!" He frowned and glowered at the remnants of his phone. "I should have asked him when he called, and now I'm going to have to get a new phone, something else I don't have time for."

"Maybe if you rolled out of bed and into work before ten in the morning? Seto was always here before six." Aishira pointed out with a small bite to his normally soft voice. "And if you stay later than three? Seto stayed until eight or nine."

Bristling, Mokuba snapped back "If I did that I wouldn't get any sleep or have any fun."

"Sounds a lot like your brother's life doesn't it." Aishira fired back ruthlessly. "He said the parks are yours. Take care of them like you should Mokuba. We're headed to the west coast to check on the parks there for a while. We've appointed interim managers. Check your email for the information." The tall handsome man, smiled almost vindictively and tugged Matashi around, leading him from the room.

With a furious sigh, Mokuba reached for his office phone. If he had to be miserable in the office his previously 'for show only' secretary was going to have to start earning her keep. She could start with getting him a new phone, and calling Seto's secretaries and ordering them to start work in this office. Just because Seto was on missing supposedly on vacation didn't mean the executive admin staff could loaf around. He didn't believe for a second that the call he'd just received was of Seto's own free will. Something else was going on. It had to be. Seto would never leave him, would never believe Jounouchi over his own brother.

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AO3 wants me to break it up - here ends part one on AO3
Jou glanced sideways at Seto, "Weed? Are you serious?"

"Yes." Straight faced, the brunet handed him the map. "It's on the way to your hard rock candy mountain."

"Big Rock Candy Mountain." Jou corrected. "It's an old hobo song from the nineteen twenties."

"Hmm. You have very eclectic knowledge Jounouchi. I'm impressed." He meant it, but he was teasing too. Big Rock Candy Mountain? Big or hard, of the two Seto would take hard. "I prefer it hard. Big can be painful." He mock winced.

Jou gave him a laughing look. "Are you complaining?"

The new-to-sex brunet gave him a bland look that didn't hide the teasing look in his blue eyes. "Did it sound like a complaint? You're not that big."

"Hmmm big enough to make you scream like a girl." Seto wasn't the only one who could tease.

"I wouldn't know. I've never made a girl scream." The ex-CEO admitted primly.

Instead of continuing to tease Jou fell silent for a few minutes, then said softly, "Seto, about where we're going. I want to tell you something. Do you remember when I told you about my history? About Eliza and Raymond being together?"

"You're going to say they are at the Natural Beauty Settlement aren't you?" Seto asked neutrally.

"Yeah, they are. I didn't think it would matter but now, I think it does. Seto, I was with them for five days, that's all. They were a couple when I met them, I ended up with them thanks to a purple crystal lollipop. By the time the fog lifted from the herbs in that sucker we had been lovers for almost four days. I didn't object or think they took advantage because I was very attracted to them both and wouldn't have minded either, although both was kind of odd. I'm not indiscriminate, you know that, but they were - are - as close to a one night stand as I've ever come." Jou shrugged slightly. "I don't want to be with them and I won't be. I just wanted to be upfront about it."

"Then why are we going there. It's not just for candy is it?"

"It's going to sound weird to you, but I've had a feeling there was something important there for a long time. Something I left undone. It was one of the places Oli suggested I go, to help me understand myself better and since I'm honoring Oli with this trip, it seems right I stop there." The blond shrugged slightly. "It's very earth and nature centric with people in communal living, but they have some very traditional values. Which is why it always confused me that Raymond and Eliza included me in their relationship. It isn't the way of the people there."

Seto gave him a sidelong look. "You are very attractive. Maybe they had a fantasy about a hot blond
stranger."

"That's what I've always told myself but if that's the case why do I feel like it's not finished?" Jou shrugged and turned his gaze back to the road. "If you don't want to go I understand and you can choose someplace else."

Seto was silent for so long Jou thought he might not have heard the question. Just as he was about to repeat himself the brunet sighed and seemed to curl in on himself. "Before I tell you how I feel about that, I think I need to tell you my history. I'm not like you, I can't reel off their names and say where they are. I could tell you their first names, or what they introduced themselves as, but I don't know where they are now." He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. "I didn't 'pay for it' like Mokuba said, it wasn't that cold, but I never cared enough to go back a second time. Where you've never had a one night stand, that's all I've ever had, only a handful of them. I've slept, no wait, not slept, had sex with two women and three men. I've topped the men each time. It wasn't that I didn't want to try bottom, it was that I didn't want them inside my body. The women were not... You said you lusted after Mai like a dog. I've never lusted after any woman like that, and only one man. You."

The information hit Jou like a punch in the gut. Slowly, carefully he pulled the car over and turned the car off. "Seto." The poleaxed blond whispered. "If I didn't love you so much right now I could touch the clouds, I'd kick your damn ass." he turned and snatched the cringing man close. "Jeeze, you provoked me, pushed me into taking you without any kind of prep or romance. Damn it! Your first time! I should have made love to you for hours instead of shoving it in because I was pissed and you were pushy." The blond head dropped onto Seto's shoulder. "I could have hurt you, you idiot. I've been taking you constantly since. You aren't used to it and you have to be raw. I haven't seen any bleeding but it can't be far off. Idiot, I want to love you but I don't want to hurt you."

Seto nestled close and hummed contentedly into his lover's chest. "You're the idiot. I achéd for you to be inside me, had to feel your heartbeat with mine. I needed that closeness. I didn't need hours of foreplay to draw out my torture, I needed to be as close to you as possible because you were the only thing that could ease my emptiness. You're the only person I've ever known that could. I will need you beyond life and death."

Jou tightened his hold around his love. "Aw hell Seto, when you say stuff like that I want to hug you until your eyes pop and shake you 'til your teeth rattle. I'm only human and you are driving me nuts. I know you need me, I know you care for me, and I know you enjoy being my lover, but when you say stuff like that, and when you talk about us being life partners and having a future, it fucking hurts because I know you are going to fly free as soon as you're healed. I know damn good and well you are not ready to love me yet and you may never be. I'm a vagabond, a bard, and I got no place in your world."

There was another protracted silence, then surprisingly Seto chuckled and leaned back to meet Jou's amber-gold gaze. "You are still an idiot. I've been giving you too much credit. Katsuya, I've loved you for years and if Mokuba hadn't interfered I would have chained you to my side instead of flying away and leaving you stuck at an airport. No matter how messed up my head might be right now, my heart is sure of you. That has been a constant since we were in school together. We do have a future together, and currently you, Scapegoat, Kit and my camera are my world. If or when it expands, it will include you or I will not belong there either. Now, shut up and drive. We are going to get your damn candy - but you don't get any purple crystal lollipops."

Jou couldn't resist dropping a quick kiss on the freckles that had appeared on Seto's nose. "What if I share it with you in our camper?"

Blue eyes regarded him thoughtfully. "Only if you change your mind about me topping because if
not forget it. I love sex with you, but you are right, I am very sore." The thoughtful look deepened to a probing stare. "Going to tell me why you don't want to bottom?"

"Tonight when we camp outside Weed, I'll uhm... I'll show you." Jou temporized. "We are almost to Shasta Lake. We'll take a break there then head over to McArthur-Burney Falls. We can spend the night there and then go hiking on Mount Shasta tomorrow."

"All right." Seto settled back in his seat. "So, have you ever been to Weed? Or the Falls? Mount Shasta?"

"Never, but I've always wanted to go. Good choices, Seto." Jou chuckled and nodded. "Music Maestro."

"I pick every time. You pick." Seto was still insecure about choices and definitely didn't want to give Jou any more reason to wonder about his mental strength by admitting to not knowing anything.

Jou gave him an evil grin. "All right, but you'll be sorry. I'm in the mood for music to shake your ass to and your cute ass is sore." The grin lightened to a playful ogle. "I've always liked the way you move. I'd love to see you dance."

Seto handed him the CD case and dared him "Do your worst." Jou didn't elaborate that he'd never felt like dancing, never understood why people behaved like idiots because of drum beats and guitar strums.

"Hah, if you like Weird Al you are sure gonna like some of the other stuff I've got." Jou flipped through the carrier, pausing now and again. He'd only picked a handful of selections when he reached to ones marked 'friends.' There was a noticeably longer pause and he pulled out a disk that was strangely alone in it's multi-pocket page. It wasn't labelled with a list of friends like the others were, instead it was simply labelled 'More.' Slowly he drew it out and lifted intense golden eyes to Seto. "I think this one first. It's yours after all." He grinned crookedly and loaded the CD player.

"Mine? But I..."

"It's not full. I add to it every year, just one or two songs. They are songs that reminded me of you. They are recorded chronologically and the disk is still open. I started this CD after my first Hobo, before I saw you again at the tournament where you told me not to talk to you."

Seto didn't quite know what to say, so he reached out and gently ruffled the windblown blond hair. It would have to be enough because he truly didn't have the words.

Jou hit the button and a low, tender melody began to play. A woman's voice half-sang, half-spoke. "Maybe I hang around here..." It was pretty, breathy and sweet, and not anything Seto would have expected. The woman sang it simply - love - "I honestly love you..." For some reason the low key delivery and almost shy notes added depth to the repetitive, heartfelt confession. "I love you... I honestly love you." The concern in the song, the lack of selfishness or for more than the acknowledgement, "I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable..." Showed the same caring and beautiful selflessness that Seto had experienced first hand. The sweet simple song pierced him to the core and an ache unfolded in his chest as he realized this was what Jou felt for him, had shown him time and again. (Video link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOyUUCJY6kE)

The song ended and a hard beat jumped in. It was more like what Seto had expected, but it definitely conveyed Katsuya's feelings, the woman's voice firm, angry, but with an undercurrent of pain as she sang about hardening her heart, of turning and leaving, walking away. It was obviously right after the tournament where he'd told Jou not to speak to him. The pain and anger added to the ache deep.
in his chest. If only he'd known what his pride was costing him. If he had known, so much misery could have been avoided. (Video link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqeKV2UYq1Q)

The song ended with a great riff, and a discordant note started immediately. Seto couldn't place the song or the music, it sounded almost amateur, but it portrayed the anger and self-castigation Jou felt, obviously there was something Seto didn't know, some attempt at contact or something because the song asked repeatedly "What am I fighting For?" It had a strong beat and stronger tone of fire and fight, something he'd always associated with Jounouchi. Although he was disturbed by it, Seto was also slightly cheered. His lover had been fighting back, not moping and pining. It reminded him of their confrontations back in school. (Video Link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fp1AkEceZc)

After that song the tone changed from angry or sad to resigned, wistful, or full of hope even while conveying a sense of melancholy. The pain in his chest receding, Seto listened with not only his ears, but his heart, regret for the pain and bone deep happiness warring for control in him. He hated that he'd caused Jou pain, hated it with every breath he took, but at the same time that pain, the evidence of it, gave him joy because Seto knew he mattered enough to actually hurt Jou, that he was real, someone, not just a promise, a business automaton or a walking wallet, but someone worth knowing and loving to Jou. That gave him emotional pleasure as intense as the sexual pleasure Jou gave his body.

In one of the few spontaneously affectionate moves he had ever made, Seto reached down and hesitantly laid his hand on Katsuya's thigh, trying to convey just how much the music and Jou's love meant to him. His lover must have understood because without hesitation Jou's rough hand covered his and held on the entire drive to Shasta Lake.

Seto stared around the artificial lake wide, appreciative eyes. He hadn't expected the lake to be so large and blue. The mountains as a backdrop were incredible. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of trying to capture the lush beauty on film. "Jou it's beautiful..." He breathed softly. "I need my camera from the trunk."

The blond chuckled ruefully. "It's in the back seat under the blanket. Somehow I knew you'd be wanting ready access to it." He grinned sideways at the brunet as he instantly unbuckled his belt and dove over the back of the seat. "You could wait for me to park." He teased lightly.

A low grunt answered him as Seto turned and slid back into his seat clutching his prize. "Good thing we stopped this morning for film. It was on the floor behind your seat." The brunet sounded a lot more pleased than Jou would have thought possible. Much to Jou's amusement, the singular focus of the winery returned even before he parked the car. The vehicle had barely stopped rolling when Seto was out and striding away, looking at the lake through his camera's eye.

Jou chuckled and leashed the pups, following his driven love at a leisurely pace. The rugged, rocky shoreline, white tipped waves on deep blue, and lush green plants and trees were spectacular and Jou didn't blame Seto in the slightest for wanting to capture it. For himself, he was content just to amble along behind the sexy brunet enjoying the lake almost as much as he enjoyed the way his lover began to wake to the beauty of living for himself - flying free.

As happy as he was to follow in his lover's wake, the pups had other ideas and Jou found himself towed off towards the rocky shoreline as the pups played tag with the waves and each other. There were a few tense moments when other dogs came around because Kit was not a social animal and cringed around other dogs, but Jou managed to put a stop to it before there was too much trouble.

He expected the foxy little sheltie to be aggressive, but it was actually the black-haired termagant masquerading as a ball of fluff that was over the top. Any time another animal came anywhere near Kit, Scapegoat would lose his mind, barking and snarling like an enraged black powder puff. Figures
Kaiba's poof of a dog had more attitude than the Great Dane Scapegoat ran off for sniffing Kit's tail.

Jou didn't know it, but he and the pups had an adoring audience. Seto loved the way the sunlight bronzed his lover's skin and sparkled in his golden hair. Scapegoat's energy and protective instincts were a challenge to capture in just the right way, and even Kit, with her red hair and mix of timidity and wildness was engaging. Seto wanted to capture it all exactly the way he saw it in his mind's eye.

The blond and the pups were oblivious to their audience and continued to explore. After a particularly hard fought battle with a piece of driftwood, both pups flopped down in the shade closely followed by their master. Jou glanced over when Seto dropped down next to him a few minutes later. "Hey, you finished already?"

"Smart ass, I know very well it's been almost four hours. I'm out of film." The erstwhile photographer grumped.

"I don't care how long it's been Seto. We don't have a schedule. If we make it to Weed in a week and spend that time here, it won't matter to me." The blond shrugged slightly. "Want me to go back to the car and get some more film?" He offered.

"There isn't any more in the car. I brought it all with me." Seto admitted, slightly sheepish. "I need to buy more."


"I did and there are thirty-six to a roll, but it took me awhile to figure out the shutter button. The camera takes up to ten shots per second. I had it set to maximum speed." A hint of embarrassment came through with the admission.

"Oh. As long as you got some great shots, I guess it's okay. Good thing you're using your credit cards. That stuff is expensive." Jou sighed and stared out over the lake, leaning slightly against Seto's shoulder. "It's gorgeous here. I have a national parks permit and a fishing license for all California parks. Want to camp here tonight, head to the falls tomorrow? I'll catch some fish and we can hang out."

When Seto hesitated, looking around them doubtfully, Jou gave him a small grin. "Not right here. There is a campground normally costs ten bucks. No electricity, but a place to camp on the lake. But with my annual pass for national parks it won't cost a penny."

"In the camper? We won't have to sleep outside?" That was something Seto never wanted to have to repeat. Yes he'd been in the car, but the oppressive darkness and wild shadows had been traumatic to his already fragile psyche.

That tickled Jou's funny bone and he nudged Seto with his him. "Afraid of the bogeyman in the dark?" He teased.

Seto's reaction wasn't what the blond was expecting. Instead of a light teasing remark back Seto recoiled violently, stood and scooped Scapegoat into his arms, snapping that he was going to the car, he wanted more film. Jou blinked and rose to follow, restraining Kit as she tried to bound after the retreating pair.

Seto sat rigidly in the front seat, horribly aware of exactly how revealing his retreat had been. He trusted Jou not to make fun of him, he had learned enough about Jou's caring heart to know that, but would his love look down on him? See him as weaker than he already did?

Jou boosted Kit into the car and waited for her to scramble into the back seat before sliding into the
driver's seat. "Want to buy me lunch? I feel like a burger and you're the man with the credit cards."

"You're breaking your rules?" Seto was startled out of his defensive posture.

"Rules are made to be broken. I feel like cow, you have the means. There is an outdoor cafe here. You can buy me cow and I'll think of some way to earn it."

Seto hiked an eyebrow. "So you want to earn an advance on a salary you haven't got a job for yet?"

"Yep." Jou gave him a reckless grin. "Now you know why I don't carry credit cards and earn as I go. I'd never make it if I had access to my ready cash."

"No will power?" Seto taunted as he relaxed into his seat.

"None at all." Jou cut his eyes towards the brunet with him before turning to watch the road as he drove toward the cafe. "You've always been strong that way. I've always admired that about you, your strength of purpose, no matter how scary or bad shit got. You never lost sight of your goal. There were times when you had to be sweating bullets, like on the island when you stepped out on that parapet. You stayed calm and cool. I'd have been shaking so hard I'd have probably fallen off the side from the vibration." It wasn't subtle, but Jou wasn't going for subtle. He wanted Seto to know that no matter what was going on, he was in his corner. Seto needed to understand that he never needed to be defensive around Jou, simply because Jou would fight for him, not against him.

When Seto started to fold his arms against his chest, Jou caught his hand mid-motion. "I'm not asking what set you off 'cause you will tell me if you want me to know, but do us both a favor? If I upset you, don't walk away and close me out. If you can't talk about it just find something else to do with your mouth - like distract me with a kiss."

For an instant Jou thought Seto would pull away from his touch, but warmth flooded him when the brunet relaxed his arm, sliding it down to twine their fingers. The brunet smiled slightly. "You are much smarter than I remember."

"Not really. I just find you easier to read. Suki da." Jou dropped into Japanese almost without thought. English was a hard learned skill, one he used as much as possible, but at this moment, the words from home seemed to fit.

Seto gave him a rare smile, "Aishiteru."

Jou found himself turning bright red. It was such a rare, formal word, but and he knew that Seto hadn't used it lightly. "Ah..." He gave his lover a very shy smile and shook his hair back. "I love you too." He cleared his throat and started the car. "You're buying me cow and you're getting film."

"Sounds like a plan. I even know how you'll earn your meat." Seto deliberately kept his tone innocent.

"Oh? Ya got something in mind?" Jou's tone was the exact opposite.

"You're going to model for me. I want to work on the different lenses." A small laugh escaped the brunet when the car swerved slightly. "Eyes on the road. Oh and we need to get some healing creams. These blisters are almost as painful as my ass. Both inhibit our sex life."

Jou quirked an eyebrow but limited himself to a simple "Okay."

His casual acceptance reminded Seto. "Don't think I've forgotten about your promise to 'show' me." Blue eyes turned to study the blond's profile. "I'm curious about what you will show me. Why don't
you tell me about it so it's not a huge shock. Besides if you tell me about it, maybe you won't have to show me."

Jou gave a ghost of a smile and decided to just say it flat out. It's not like it was something he could ever change. "Remember I was in a gang? When I left, they brought me back. Yugi and the tachi rescued me, but not before some damage was done. Hirutani, the leader, was wicked with a knife and into torture. He wasn't gay, but he liked dishing out humiliation. I had sixteen internal sutures and forty external stitches, where he marked my ass his." The faint smile faded to a hard line. "I almost killed three of them before they brought in another four to hold me down. In the end I threw Hirutani off a building. So yeah, his mark, even if I can't see it, is a reminder of him. I killed him after all. I shouldn't ever forget." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The scars make it difficult to... I have to eat a lot of fiber for the plumbing to work. I've been following the doctor's orders since it happened and have only had a couple times when I've had pain."

"He damaged your nerves? Your prostate?" Seto tilted his head slightly, contemplating everything he knew in relation to anatomy and diet. He ignored the unimportant confession of murder, after all Jou didn't care about Seto's own peccadillo.

"Nah, not really. Just it's not as flexible, it doesn't stretch as much as normal. The scar tissue doesn't give. According to the doctor, I can rip open, develop a fissure if I eat too much cheese and dairy." Jou wasn't sure exactly why, but he found this actually more embarrassing than almost anything in his life. "I watch it, so I have never ripped and bled."

"I still want to see." Seto leaned back in his seat and faced the front. "I thought I'd seen every inch of you, but I don't remember seeing anything like that. I'm going to have to investigate you top to bottom and everywhere in between to make sure I didn't miss anything else."

Jou chuckled, but it was more of an invitation than humor. "I think I'd like that."

"Mmm... " Before Seto could go further down the road towards verbal seduction, Kit yelped and Scapegoat whined pitifully. The Brunet master turned immediately to his little charge. "What's up, pup?" He deadpanned, as if he actually expected the little pom pom to answer him.

For the first time since Kit joined them, the little black dog left the feral dog alone in the back seat, leaping into the front and scampering up to rest on Seto's shoulder, whining and whimpering in obvious complaints. "Huh. What do you expect? She is a bitch after all."

Jou glanced over and snickered. "He really looks like he understands you."

"He should know the word bitch - I used it enough for him to understand the negative aspect." When the blond just snorted Seto elaborated. "Average dogs can learn over one hundred and sixty-five words. I told you he was smarter than average. He knows over two hundred. With the addition of bitch, I'd say two hundred and ten. He may be a genius in dog terms."

Jou rolled his eyes slightly. "How the hell do you know that? Did you hook him to a machine or something and monitor his brain waves?"

"Nothing that sophisticated. I just noticed the words he responds to and made a list. I'll have to add that one and a few others."

"Yeah? Hmm two hundred and ten? What's the weirdest word? I think 'no' would be the most common."

"Weirdest?" Seto had to think about that for a moment. "Dragon." On cue his little Scapegoat lifted
his head and growled into the sky.

"Kaiba, I got news for you, if your pup didn't do that when you said 'dragon' I wouldn't believe he was your dog."

"Hmm, you're right. Weirdest..." More thought, longer. "Damn Mickey." That set Scapegoat off, he leaped to his feet, standing on Seto's chest and shoulder and started barking furiously. "He picked that up while I was taking over Disney. It was a challenging time."

"Damn Mi... You cursed out Mickey Mouse?" Jou was completely scandalized. Kaiba cursing out make believe mice? The devil had repented, hell was empty because all sinners were transferred to heaven, and the restored angel Lucifer was giving away ice cream on the boardwalk in Malibu.

"You don't want to know what Scapegoat did to the dozen or so stuffed versions of the wretched mouse I was using as Dammit Dolls." Then Seto chuckled. "Or maybe you do."

"Ah, does it involve... wait no no... I will not go there. You defiled Mickey Mouse."

Straight faced Seto nodded, "Daily."

"That's... That's... un-American!" Jou was completely aghast. "You trained your dog to do unmentionable things to him."

"I'm Japanese." The brunet couldn't help laughing when Jou sputtered at that. "I didn't train him. He did it all on his own based on my tones and attitude. He's not a puppet, he thinks for himself. That's the true mark of intelligence."

Jou finally managed to control his sputters. "Dam it. I should have known." He took a deep breath and let it out in a huff. Casually, carefully, the blond probed. "You went through a lot of film."

"Mmmhmm, I've always liked taking pictures." A rusty sounding laugh rumbled from Seto. "I've taken pictures on and off for years. Even in school. I took pictures of all of you back then. Do you really think I was reading all the time? Even I don't like Nietzsche or Machiavelli that much."

"Really? Ah man I bet you got some great shots from back then." Jou laughed and shook his hair back, enjoying the breeze. "You have to share. When we get through with our hobo you're going to have to bring some to my place. Honda and Otogi will get a kick."

"Honda and Otogi." Seto repeated neutrally.

"Yeah, I have an apartment in their house in Malibu. They got married a few years back. You were too busy to attend the wedding, but Mokuba brought your gift and card. They're on the road a lot so I watch the house for them. It gives me a quiet place to write and I get to hang with friends when I want company."

"I was not too busy." Seto corrected. "I was not invited. Mokuba went, but he didn't want to because I was not wanted."

Jou felt his hackles raise. Mokuba had a lot to answer for. "I helped Otogi with the invitations. I saw your invitation, Seto. You were invited separately from Mokuba because nobody knew what was going on in your personal life and they wanted you to bring someone with you. It was a time for couples. It was sent in the same envelope because we were sure Mokuba would convince you to come."

Seto froze, even his breath stopping, as he remembered the pain of that time. He'd always thought, in
some way, that he was still part of that group. Okay he'd rejected their overtures, but they had still persisted. The deliberate exclusion of him from the wedding of Otogi and Honda had cut him to the bone. "Are... are you sure?" His breathing started again, but only because he was growing light headed.

"Yeah I'm sure." Jou bit his lip. "I... I wanted to talk to you and even put a note in asking you to please come."

"Oh god." Mokuba's betrayal was almost too much to handle. Unconsciously his hand fist ed in Scapegoat's thick pelt. A yelping cry brought Seto to his senses. Instantly he released his painful grip on the small creature. "Shit."

"I see now you didn't get the message. I was pissed, but I got over it. You heard the songs. You know I did."

"You might have." Seto rasped softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "But I don't think I ever will." The blue eyes filled with tears and even Seto didn't know if they were anger or pain. "Do you know what it would have meant to me, back then? In the time since? I've been so..." He broke off and dashed his hand across his eyes. "Never mind."

"Uh uh." Jou pulled into a scenic overlook and turned to look at the brunet. "Not going to let you write yourself off like that. You've been so - what? If you don't tell me, I'll start guessing, and I'm a pretty good guesser."

Seto remained silent and Jou settled back into his seat. "Okay so, you've liked me all along and your brother knew that and fucked it up. You've never reached out to anyone before, have you? So let me see, you've been so - lonely? Cold? Isolated? Hurting?" When Seto jerked in his seat, Jou nodded. "All of the above? How about something else too, missing me?"

"Jerk. Stop." The words were an admission, a demand, but it wasn't for Jou to stop, not really. It was a plea for understanding, absolution, for the weakness of being human.

"Let's go with this then. Angry? Frustrated? Lost?" Jou's eyes narrowed at the stiffening of his lover's shoulders. "I can stop any time, you simply need to tell me what you were so - " More stubborn silence so Jou continued. He wasn't being reckless or cruel to simply be a jerk. Seto was ready to wake up, it was time for Kaiba Seto to stop hiding. "You were suicidal, you wanted a way out. Hopeless? Helpless?"

Jou barely dodged the fist that flew at him from across the car. He caught it and yanked Seto across the console. "You were betrayed, manipulated and owned too. What's more is you know it, deep inside, because you're too fucking smart not to see that he's been pulling shit all along. You might not have known about what he did to me - to us - but you know other things. You can hide from it but you knew. That's what drove you to that beach, the final straw. You damn well gave him everything and the little shit betrayed you."

Seto pulled his arm from Jou's grasp and scooped Scapegoat up, burying his face in the thick coat of black hair. There were long moments broken only by the panting of both dogs. At length, Seto said softly. "It's too hot for Scapegoat. All this hair keeps getting tangled and it takes forever to get rid of the mess. I think it's best if I get it cut."

"Sometimes cutting things away clean is the best way to sort out tangles and snares." Jou agreed quietly.

"I'm going to buy a prepaid phone like yours." The brunet announced as Jou got the car back on the
road. "I need to deal with a few things. I think..." His steady voice lowered and trembled slightly with uncertainty. "What do you think? Will it bother you?"

"Nah, I kinda kidnapped you remember? You're like the fourth richest guy on the planet, with more things going on than I can imagine. I'll tell you if something bugs me. Seto, you've got stuff. Just remember when I'm writing or doing a book tour I got stuff too. I'm not your brother, trying to control everything you do. I'm your partner, your lover." The blond hesitated a second. "Just don't let your stuff or Mokuba take over okay? Remember you are on vacation? And... And don't... If it gets to you and you start having problems I'm going to let you make your choice but if I think it's wrong I'll argue for you to take a step back and if it gets bad I'm going to throw that phone away too okay? Not to control you but to... love you." Jou smiles slightly. "I just got you and I sure ain't going to lose you now."

Seto turned and caught his gaze. "You saved me, you're responsible for me. You couldn't get rid of me with a stick of dynamite. You're stuck with me." The brunet felt his own face crease with happiness when his lover's face practically glowed with joy. Lips still smiling, Seto leaned forward and pressed their smiling mouths together lightly and dropped his head onto Jou's shoulder. "Cow and film. Drive on. Don't forget cream stuff.

Instead of putting his hands back on the wheel, Jou reached up and buried one hand in Seto's hair, nestling him closer while the other smoothed across Seto's thigh. "In a minute. Stay close and look out at the lake. It's beautiful and you just made me happier than I've been in a very long time. Suki da."

Seto dropped a light kiss on the pulse point in Jou's neck and snuggled even closer, tilting his head to gaze out at the lake. It was beautiful, and at the back of his mind was an itch to capture that beauty on film, but it was dim and faded when compared to the need to simply lean into his love and enjoy the warmth of the sun and the closeness of his lover.

The good feeling lasted until the end of their alfresco lunch when the waitress returned to the table without Seto's credit card, and with an embarrassed expression asked Seto and Jou to come to the manager's office. "Ah, we have the dogs." Jou gave Seto a curious look.

The server smiled nervously. "One of the busboys will watch them. They will be fine. Please, follow me." After a young man sat at the table holding the leashes, Jou and Seto followed the young woman.

The manager was waiting in a small cramped offices. His expression was equally embarrassed. "I'm sorry to trouble you both, but there was a problem with the credit card. It was declined and a request came through to take the card and have you contact your corporate office."

Jou reached for his wallet. "I'll get the tab. Seto you don't have to..." Jou turned to talk to Seto only to gasp slightly. Part of him was happy, another part sad.

The soft-eyed lover was gone. In his place was the icy-eyed CEO that the world knew. "You will not. The credit card is issued in my name and is privately paid for. It has no limit and has a balance of less than a hundred dollars. May I borrow your telephone please?" Although it was phrased as a polite question, there was no doubt it was a demand.

"Of course." The man scrambled out from behind his desk, obviously cowed by Seto's switch into bad ass CEO mode.

Seto dialed a number he obviously knew by heart, however instead of greeting Mokuba or even asking for his brother, Seto's clipped tones said "Jamie, it's Seto Kaiba." There was a pause,
obviously a hello and some kind of question because the brunet's tones softened to more cordial notes. "I'm fine. Or I was until I tried to use my credit card only to be told it was declined and was to be removed from my possession. As your bank issues it, I thought you could help me clear up this misunderstanding. I don't mind holding for a few minutes." Seto reached down and pressed the speaker button so the manager and Jou could hear the rather boring hold music. After about ten seconds a recorded voice announced "Thank you for holding, we at JP Chase want you to know your call is important to us and we are working to serve you as quickly as possible. Please continue to hold."

The manager nodded slightly. "If I may ask, who is Jamie? Your account manager?"

"You could say that he manages all accounts. He is James Dimen, CEO of JP Chase." Seto lifted a brow when the man choked. "Did you read the name on the card? Do you know who I am?"

"Ah, yes, no, not really? Kai?"

"Kaiba." Seto drew himself up proudly. "Seto Kaiba."

The manager actually paled and wilted. He would have probably hit the floor if Jou hadn't caught him and guided him back to his chair. "Nah, don't worry. You're just doing your job. Seto appreciates that. Don't you Seto?" Jou chivvied the brunet into alleviating the manager's incipient panic attack.

Obligingly Seto nodded. "Of course I do." Before he could elaborate there was a click, the hold music ended, and a low masculine voice asked "Seto you still there?"

"Yes Jamie. What did you find out?"

"First, let me assure you that all cards have been released. If the vendor would re-run the charge, there will be absolutely no issues. There was an annotation in the account about a call from your brother, he says that you had mislaid your wallet and although there was no theft involved, if the cards were used before you told him the wallet was found, you should be asked to call in to let him know. He didn't want the cards active if you didn't find your wallet."

"Jamie, he's not a signer on my accounts. He was removed several months ago. Make sure that is annotated please. I'm grateful for his concern but he is an adult as am I. He has no say in my finances. I will discuss this with him as well of course."

"Hmm sounds like your brother is having separation issues. You're on your first vacation ever right? Aishira mentioned it to my wife. You know you've started a trend? Giving rescued exotics as gifts."

"They need good homes." Seto accorded. "Thank you Jamie. I have to go now. Vacation is calling."

"My pleasure. If you have any more trouble, don't hesitate to call." The man sounded distinctly cheerful.

"I won't. Thank you again." Seto disconnected and hung up the speaker line. "Please re-run the charge."

The manager came back, beaming with a relieved smile. Seto thanked him for his competency and after adding a nice tip, hooked his arm around Jou's waist and towed him from the restaurant. They picked up the leashes and strolled back to the car.

"Let's set up camp and go into town. I want to see if Scapegoat can get a walk-in appointment at a groomer and I really need that phone."
"Wanna talk about it?" Jou asked quietly.

Seto shrugged. "No point."

"Didn't think so but I had to ask. Call me a sensitive modern lover."

"You're just in a good mood now that your inner carnivore has been sated." Seto teased the blond.

Jou just grunted in response. He could have very easily have said that Seto had eaten meat too, but somehow, Jou knew that the predator in Seto was waking up and preparing to have a feast.

While Scapegoat and Kit were being groomed Seto and Jou roamed around the touristy city of Redding. Jou picked up a few t-shirts and Seto picked up a full dozen more plus more sandals and shorts. None of them expensive or designer, but he effectively quadrupled their shared wardrobe. They stopped at the local pharmacy to pick up the lotion and applied it in the bathroom - Seto applying his privately although Jou offered to help.

The next stop was an electronics store and Seto, after carefully examining each cell phone, chose the one Jou had secretly picked out for him the moment they entered the store. It wasn't because it was the latest and greatest, although Seto would have said that was why he chose it, nope, Jou thought his sexy love would pick it because of the silvery white case and blue flames. It just screamed blue eyes attack. When Seto bought it, and a pay by the minutes plan - then loaded the plan with ten thousand minutes - Jou just snickered and rolled his eyes.

Film was much harder to find, and only after over an hour of dedicated searching did they find thirty-five millimeter type. Digital was taking over it seemed.

They picked up the noticeably smaller and cooler dogs from the groomers and wandered back to the car. The sun was just beginning to set when they reached their camper. "Don't you have a phone call to make Seto?" Jou prompted.

"I'll wait until tomorrow. East coast is a few hours ahead. I don't like to deal with lackeys so I'll wait until the morning."

"Lackeys? I thought you were going to call Mokuba." Jou's confusion showed plainly on his face.

"I'm calling my bank and a few other places. Mokuba isn't going to be allowed to mess with my finances or personal life again." Seto declared firmly.

"So no Mokuba?"

"Katsuya, he messed with my credit cards today. Remember I used them early this morning to buy film. I spoke to him yesterday. I refused to tell him where I was, refused to come home, refused his every demand. This was his revenge, or maybe a way to bring me to heel. I don't know which, but I do know he expects a reaction from me, anger or something. That's why he demanded I call corporate. It's a manipulation. If I call him, he gets what he wants. I'm simply going to make sure to limit what he can do in the future and avoid his schemes. If I don't respond he can't play his games."

The blue eyes were glaring at the lake. "I won't let him 'own' me any longer. It takes two to play. I'm opting out of the game."

That brought Jou's narrowed gaze to Seto's calm face. "You said that too calmly. No way in hell you are that calm. He's been your center since I've known you, probably before. Are you going to tell me?"

Seto slowly shook his head from side to side. "Katsuya, when I didn't fall in line with his wishes about Rebecca he withdrew from me, completely stepped back. We haven't spoken in months except for business. I was pissed because I thought he had broken your heart and tossed you away. I was
cruel to Rebecca but I won't apologize to him for it. His deception caused it. I... You said that I knew, and maybe I did - If I didn't I do now. Katsuya, he loves me, I know he does, but on his terms. For so long that was enough, but when even that much was taken it was... The realization that I had done it all for him, but that he didn't have that same devotion, was devastating. I... " Seto knelt and stroked his hands over Scapegoat's shorn coat. "I was empty."

"Tapped out more like." Jou knelt beside him and dropped his hands on top of Seto's. "I'm not going to argue with you about him Seto. You know him better, but I'm going to give you my opinion. I don't think he loves you like a brother should. He's jealous, possessive and manipulative. That's not normal Seto, it's really not. I love Shizuka with all my heart, but I want her to be happy. Sure I might feel jealous of time spent with other people if I want to hang, but I sure as hell wouldn't sabotage her relationships and I wouldn't do shit to cause her trouble if she didn't do what I wanted her to do. Most of all Seto - and this is the biggie - She knows I am always in her corner. No matter how mad we get at each other or how much we fight - I am there for her if she needs me. Where has he been Seto? When you needed him? Was he helping you? Fuck no, he was hurting you worse, and more, I'll bet he knew, that he kept tabs on you. The little shit was turning the screws and punishing you. Too bad you can't check it. I bet you'd find out a lot."

Seto felt like he'd been punched in the gut. "You... What you're suggesting... Do you even know?"

"Seto, I'm less than a semester away from my degree in clinical psychology. I know the fancy words, but I don't need them to tell you what I see because you already know most of this, you're wearing blinders out of habit. It's easier that way, I know. But it doesn't help you. You need to know what you're up against because you have an existing need for him, one you are evolving through, but he knows about that need and is fostering it. When you step away he tries to draw you back. It is vicious Seto and he will hurt you any way he can."

"I wondered how you knew so much." Seto tilted his head and smiled slightly up at his lover. "We really do have to get to know each other better. What school did you get your undergraduate's in? Where are you attending now?"

"Yeah but we have our lives. I mostly attend online classes UCLA. They are top rated for my degree." Jou smiled slightly. "I had a great role model of being the best so I decided I was going to be the best."

"Hnn..." Seto nodded slightly. "Tell me about Oli."

"A lot to tell." Jou grinned slightly but his eyes darkened with a touch of grief. "He was the last living of his tribe of Miwok. His people are extinct now. It always made him sad."

"He didn't have children?"

"Nah. His soul mate died when they were just kids. He couldn't bring himself to be with anyone else. He always called me the child of his heart and soul." Wistfully, Katsuya gave a small half smile. "I've wished he were my bio father many times."

"What about your biological father? Do you see him? Talk to him?"

"Not in a couple years. I went back to Domino to visit Shizuka and stopped to see the old man. I swear he hadn't moved since I left. He was in the exact same position, sitting on the chair drinking a beer. I walked in and he kinda looked up and asked if I brought the food. When I said I didn't have any food he threw his beer bottle at me so I walked out. Haven't been back or anything since."

"You knew he'd be that way." Seto gave him a steady look. If Jou wasn't going to let Seto hide
behind self-deception, then Seto wasn't going to let Jou hide either.

For the first time, Jou moved away from Seto. He stood and turned to gaze out over the lake."Yeah, I did. I hoped not, but I knew he would be. It's weird though, because the whole reason I got into the psychology kick is because of him. I wanted to know what made him tick, why he was an alcoholic."

"What did you discover?" Seto already knew of course, but he wondered if Jou's insights went just as deep into himself as they did into others.

"That sometimes, most times, there is no true reason, just an excuse. That the person is just a selfish dick. That people are people, some are weak and some are not."

"You aren't saying it's a disease but a choice?"

"Yeah. It's why I'll never have the license. In the end, it's a choice to pick up that bottle. It's not like liquor is sitting on every surface. You have to seek it out and pick it up. Weakness sure, disease? Something that happens and can't be controlled? Hell no."

"Sounds like unresolved baggage."

"Whole set of luggage, but I call it like I see it. Cancer is a disease, AIDS, is a disease. Alcoholism is a conscious choice."

"So if I confessed to alcoholism you would...?"

"Kick your ass into next week, tie you to my bed until your body was purged of it, then keep you so busy you wouldn't have time to drink." A wicked smile crossed Jou's face. "There are natural herbs I'd sneak into your food that react badly to alcohol. After you power puke for a month you will not touch the shit. I promise. Are you confessing?"

Seto shuddered at the mental image. "No. I like some wines and an occasional scotch and cigar but only socially. I dislike the 'trashed' feeling and don't touch hard liquor."

"Hmm... Why don't I start our campfire while you try to catch a fish or two for dinner. I'll be down to help you in a minute."

"Catch a fish, with what? My bare hands?"

"Yeah." The blond deadpanned. "Really, haven't you been curious about the stuff in the back of the car? There's a tackle box and that long bag has a couple of fishing poles. You ever fish?"

"I don't stick my nose into your business. No I haven't fished before unless you count our second day, when we were camping and the fish were stunned by the soap. Never had time."

"Okay just FYI, if it was private I'd tell you. Feel free to poke around. Ask about anything you don't recognize. The first thing to do is we both gather wood for a fire, then I'll go over the basics, then we'll work on catching dinner." Jou grinned at Seto's stoic expression. "C'mon, I promise you're going to like it. Nothing beats eating a meal you caught and cooked for yourself." When the expression didn't lighten Jou mock frowned. "I guess you can eat an MRE while I eat trout. Up to you of course."

"If you catch anything, you mean." Seto's remote expression faded into a small, teasing smile. "If we don't catch anything, it'll be up to you to feed me. I fed you lunch."
"Deal." A matching smile tilted the blond's expressive lips. "I'll set-up the poles while you get firewood."

"Deal." Seto nodded agreeably. He wasn't very interested in fishing, or fishing poles, but he had a new fondness for fire. He knew his little 'journey' had been a combination of peyote and other hallucinogenic plants, but the memory of the fire people was vivid, vital, and as real as anything he'd ever experienced. "Katsuya, that first night. The peyote... did you have any weird hallucinations?" He asked softly as he gathered twigs near the car where Jou was rummaging in the trunk. It was strange he hadn't thought of asking before.

"Hallucinations? Nah. I did have a spirit journey, just as you did, but I didn't hallucinate." Jou didn't glance up from his hunt for fishing supplies in the trunk.

"Isn't it the same thing?" Seto asked rhetorically.

"Nope. Not that you'll believe me. I saw you on your journey. You don't have a spirit form yet, you're a gorgeous light, bright as any sun. You were flying with your guides, the Heron and the Snow Goose."

"You saw me?" That was just a little too much for the pragmatic CEO to believe.

"Mmmhmm how else do I know about the Heron, the Snow Goose and the river of tears?"

"I told you about it?" Seto was sure he hadn't though, but the alternative was completely unacceptable.

"You didn't. I watched you from my own place, on my own journey." Jou found everything he needed and pulled it from the compartment. With a dull thud he closed the trunk. "Why don't you finish getting the firewood and then we'll talk about my first hobo vacation, about Oli, and my meeting with my guides."

Seto didn't reply and Jou chuckled slightly. "Believe it or not, I was as skeptical as you. I'll tell you all about it, but first lets get our lines wet and our fire started."

Seto was finished collecting firewood before Jou was satisfied with the setup of the poles. When the tall brunet gave Jou a questioning look the blond smiled slightly. "It's harder than it looks because I have to wind the line around the reel. If I'm not careful the line will tangle." As the reel spun in his competent hold, Jou inclined his head slightly. "Light the fire - I noticed you bought a lighter today. I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't smoke." Seto hastened to tell his lover. "Aishira, one of my top executives and friends, collects lighters from new places. I pick one up for him whenever I go out of town."

"Nice hobby. Shizuka likes to collect teaspoons. I get them from every place I go too." Genuine curiosity peeked out of the amber-gold eyes. "Do you collect anything?"

"I have an art collection if that's what you mean. But useless trinkets because of some compulsive desire for a particular image? No."

"Damn, that shoots down one theory." Jou mumbled.

"Theory?" Seto quirked an eyebrow as he watched the pile of sticks catch flame.

"I always had a pet theory, dream, whatever, that you had a secret collection of blue-eyes stuffed dragons on your bed." Jou admitted with a rueful laugh.
"Stuffed animals?" The brunet CEO actually snorted at that.

"Yeah. I liked to think you had a tender side that you hid under all the ice. The thought of you with stuffed animals made me go all soft just thinking about. Of course the dream of doing you on top of them was enough to make me hard again." The hentai blond confessed outrageously.

That got another snort from Seto. "And you were outraged when I told you Scapegoat did horrible things to Mickey Mouse. You wanted sex on top of stuffed animals. Perv."

"Proud of it." Satisfied that the reels were spinning easily and the line was set up with the correct weights and hooks, Jou set the poles aside and picked up his bag of bait.

Seto saw him pick up the bag and shook his head. "No thank you. I'll wait for dinner."

"Good thing." Jou grinned at him cheekily. "This is the bait."

"Katsuya, I think you pulled out the wrong bag. Those are marshmallows. Even I know that they are for humans, not fish." The fishing-novice said quietly.

"These are for people normally, but fish love 'em too. Trout especially. That's why I put sinkers on the line. They float and the sinkers pull them down so the fish can get to them." Deftly Jou tied the sweet treat on the hooks.

"They work?" Doubt was clear in the deep voice.

"Yup, and we don't have to deal with smelly bait or catching frogs." The blond flashed a smile. "And they're good for a snack if you get hungry."

"You're the expert." Seto acceded but his tone was doubtful. His tone was enough for tease a spurt of laughter out of his lover.

"Yep. Grab a blanket to sit on and grab the pups from the camper." Jou's laughter faded to a small smile. "I feel like a blanket under the stars."

Sounded reasonable, even romantic so Seto went and grabbed a blanket from the camper. When he got back Jou had already cast one line and was holding the other pole. "This one is yours. You want to learn to throw the line or you just want to watch it."

"Honestly?" Seto gave him a direct look. "I don't like fish enough to want to learn to catch them. I don't see the 'sport' in sport fishing and there is plenty available at the market or restaurants."

"Fair enough. You okay with this or you want to do something else for dinner?" Jou nodded agreeably.

When Seto hesitated, Jou gave held his gaze steadily. "Your choice. I'm going to catch my dinner from the lake. Remember what I said? I'm your partner. I don't want to force you into anything."

"You won't be disappointed?"

"Maybe a little, but that's my hangup not yours. I don't want you doing stuff just for me. If you want to do it then yeah, if you don't - don't."

"I thought partners did stuff the other person wanted to do. Compromise?" Seto tilted his head slightly. "Isn't sports one of those things? Am I being selfish if I say no?"

"Some do and some don't. I'd rather we find stuff to do together that we both like. It can be selfish,
but you've never been selfish a day in your life. I think a little will go a long way. If it gets too bad I'll tell you." The blond held out the pole. "Wanna learn to fish or not?"

"Not really. I watched the fishermen in Japan on their boats, and I've watched the people in Florida fishing on the pier, boats and even bridges. I never had the urge to do the same." Seto confessed, his tone slightly tentative.

"Good enough. Next time say something before I set the pole up." Jou set the fishing pole aside and took a few corners from the folded blanket. "Let's spread this out."

The settled together comfortably. Not quite touching, but not far apart either. The pups curled together at one end while he and Seto sat at the end near the lake.

Jou held his pole in his hands and Seto leaned back on his arms and gazed up at the stars. After a few moments of silence broken only by the waves and the wind, Seto asked, "Tell me about the marshmallows."

Jou knew it wasn't just a request for information about his choice of bait, but a request for his story. "Have to go back a ways for that, back to a few weeks before the airport. See, I heard you were going to be judging that tournament so I was all up for going. Mai wasn't keen. She wanted to go visit her family in London. We argued about it, and in the end she dumped me, telling me to run after my master like a good little mutt."

Seto shifted slightly, but didn't say a word so Jou continued. "You know how that came out. I did so bad I ended up stranded. I ain't blaming you - just saying what happened so don't get all stiff like that okay?" The blond admonished his lover gently. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me." Jou settled settled more comfortably. "I walked out of that airport without a clue, not even the money to make a call or buy a soda. Hitchhiking is illegal on that road so I took my backpack and walked on. I could have called collect, I could have contacted friends if I really wanted to, but I was so angry, so disillusioned, so fucking hurt, that I just wanted to get away." A wry smile crossed his lips. "Part of it was stupid selfishness too. I wanted you to wonder what happened to me, wanted you to maybe feel guilty. I know you didn't know and you probably would have never checked, but if you did, I wanted you to be aware even if it was just for a minute."

"Jou if you had..."

"Hush, I know that now, but it's good I didn't then. Seto, I wasn't in a good place then. I got out on the road and the first day I met a truck driver who took me in. He was my dad's age and had been on the road since he was a kid with his dad. I felt safer with him than I had ever felt with my own dad. He was the kindest man I'd ever met. Gentle. I can't explain it well but he was always caring, not just about me, but about everything and everyone. We talked about the news, other truckers, and even the animals and the environment. He listened to the radio a lot and knew tons about the world even if he never ventured far from his truck cab. For all the bad news, he was sensitive. He would cry at some news stories and laugh at others I stayed with him for almost a week but..."

"Oli?"

"No, his name is Wayne Stewart. He was gay Seto, and sending me signals like crazy. I didn't know until he got beer brave and tried to kiss me. It was just a kiss, not even a grope. Wayne wasn't like that, wasn't trying to force anything. I treated him so badly. Instead of letting him down nicely and just gently pushing him away, I lost it. I unloaded on him, hitting to hurt, calling him horrible names, things I wanted to say to myself, to Mai, to you. I jumped out of the truck as if he were a rapist murderer and ran away. I've looked for him, everywhere I go, but I haven't found him." Regret tinged his voice. "I want to apologize to him." He cleared his voice. "Oli was at the truck stop. He
saw what happened and followed me. Not to help me, but to read me the riot act. In his eyes I had used Wayne, led him on, and when it came to pay up I didn't follow through. Oli had a very strict code of ethics, and even stricter code of morals. Nothing wrong with selling a commodity, but you give value for what you're given. That was one of his sayings." Remembrance had him wincing. "He also had very hard fists, harder than my dad's. I needed a good punch in the head."

"I take he gave it to you?" Seto murmured softly.

"Yeah. When I stopped seeing little stars dancing around my head I let fly with him as well. I was still pissed and ready for a battle. I don't know what I said, but partway through my hate filled tirade he lowered his fists and just stood with his head tilted to one side and a weird ass smile on his face. He waited for me to wind down, to wipe the tears off my cheeks, and then he said something that completely baffled me." Jou took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "He called me the blindest eagle he'd ever met."

“Eagle?” Seto asked sharply.

“We’ll get there. I’ll tell it my way so you understand how I came to see it.” Jou put off the question. “He offered to explain, said he hated to see animals in pain.” The blond shifted slightly and spun the reel. “I still don’t know why I did it, but when he said I could follow along with him on his spirit journey I did.”

“You went with a stranger who attacked you?” Seto was completely aghast.

“Nah, I followed him; literally walked in his footsteps sometimes. He completely ignored me for a few days, then one night he built a large fire and threw flowers on the flames. I saw the people of fire dancing for the first time. He didn’t put peyote on the fire, or anything powerful, just stuff to relax his mind – and mine. He began to sing, not to me but to the fire people. I didn’t recognize the language or the song but I knew he was singing to the flame people. I moved next to his fire and found myself humming along. Don’t laugh.” Jou nudged the snickering brunet with his shoulder. “It’s not funny.”

“I’ve heard you sing. You probably scared those poor flame people.” Seto teased and nudged back, not moving away, but leaning against Jou’s strong shoulder. “I saw them, the night of the peyote, the flame people. Some looked familiar to me.”

“They should. I know humans believe that when we die we go to hell, but I think that’s bull. I think we take on new forms, to experience new things. Of course we recognize and even still feel for the others we know, no matter what form they are in.” Jou sighed and leaned into Seto as well. “After that Oli and I travelled together, at first we were just companions, then student and teacher, then like father and son. I told you that his people, the Miwok were extinct and it saddened him, so he adopted me as a Miwok and taught me all he knew, all he remembered. I have a whole oral history spanning thousands of years that I’m writing. I took notes, books full of notes. Not just on the history, but he showed me places sacred to his people, showed me hidden cache’s of tools and remnants of the people that lived here not so long ago. He made me promise that when the time was right, I would go public so his people were not forgotten. That was the bargain we made – I will keep it.”

“Hmm I wondered what you did with your time. People have mentioned books but you don’t write all the time do you?” Such a quiet job did not suit what he knew of his energetic lover.

“I attend online classes in psychology, and I am a holistic healer, alternative medical practitioner of Ayurveda in addition to writing.” When his love looked at him with starlit blue eyes Jou nodded slightly. “It is a medical practice using hygiene, exercise, natural foods and exercise to keep the mind, body and spirit in balance.”
“New age?” Seto couldn’t keep the hint of scorn out of his tone.

“Very old, ancient in fact, about three hundred BC. It is Krishna based, although I do not practice the religious component. I believe every man has a path to walk and there are as many different paths as there are people. The important thing is to find the right path. There are eight components of the healer, Kāya-chikitsā is for general medicine and cures of diseases affecting the body, Kaumāra-bhṛtya is the treatment of children, Śhalya-chikitsā is surgery - which I do not practice beyond removing splinters or ingrown toenails. It's not legal in the U.S and I send people I think need surgery to a western doctor. I don't practice Sālākya-tantra either. It is to cure of diseases of the eye or ear etc. by sharp instruments, for the same reason. Bhūta-vidyā is treatment of mental diseases supposed to be produced by demoniacal influence and I do some treatment there, but if there is anything that I think is a genuine threat to the patient or other people I send them to a western doctor or call the cops. If you hadn't snapped out of it, your ass would be inpatient somewhere." When Seto only nestled closer instead of protesting, Jou continued his explanation. "Agada-tantra is antidotes and toxicology, Rasayana-tantra is elixirs, and Vājīkaraṇa-tantra are aphrodisiacs." Jou didn't need to see Seto's expression to guess his response. "I don't expect you to believe the same as me. Just respect my choices." He shrugged slightly. "Besides, like I said, I am not really into the worship so much as the practical aspects of balancing all parts of your existence to be healthy."

Jou didn't quite know what to expect, but having his pole shoved out of his lap and Seto crawl on top of him, clinging tight was unexpected to say the least. Not that Jou minded exactly, but what bothered him was the way his lover was shaking. "Seto? Are you all right?"

"Fire went out." Jou could barely hear the strained whisper.

"Ah yeah it did. Must have... Oh!" He broke off as a tremor wracked through Seto's slim body. "Okay fire went out. Let's get it started again." Jou would have moved away, but the clinging brunet in his arms wouldn't let him budge. After about a second, and three more tremors, Jou tightened his hold and rolled his lover onto his back, coming down on top of Seto like a blanket. He could see the wide eyes, so beautiful in the moonlight, practically rolling with fear as more tremors shook Seto. "Close your eyes, Seto." When he hesitated, Jou ordered sharply. "Close them."

The moonlit orbs shut tightly. "Good, now listen to me and do exactly as I say. Do not fight me on this, just do what I say - trust me to keep you safe." Jou ignored the clinging arms and pulled away. He could see the panic in Seto's expression despite the limited moon and starlight. "Stay right there Seto. Do not move an inch. I want you to stay perfectly still and I want you to count for me. Count your breaths. Count to a hundred and I'll be back. Only when you reach one hundred. Start at one. Go. You will be fine until then. Remember count to a hundred. Count out loud okay? I want to hear it. Count and breathe, Seto. Let me hear you."

"One." It was a mere thread of sound, but it allowed Jou to let out his breath and start to move, gathering kindling and large logs that were scattered around. Something about the fire going out had precipitated a near meltdown. If Seto need a fire he'd get the biggest Jou could make with what was around him. He didn't go further than five metres from Seto. No way in hell. If Seto panicked and bolted, he could end up in the lake. At breath eighty, Jou started the kindling, and at ninety was adding the larger logs. At one hundred, he was wrapping Seto in his arms. "Okay, I'm going to turn you a bit then I want you to open your eyes okay? Seto, okay?"

"You..."

"I'm back just like I promised. Now open your eyes. I'm right here for you, you know that. Open your eyes. Let me see them sexy blues." Jou coaxed. Seto only scrunched his eyes tighter.
"Damn it Seto open your eyes or I'm gonna... gonna... make you cook the fish. Open 'em. You'll see, the fire people weren't gone at all, just resting. C'mon."

Seto gathered himself, Jou literally saw the strength of will his lover pulled from deep inside, and opened his eyes wide only to close them again as the bright light of the bonfire Jou created. They popped open again almost immediately though. "Let's move the blanket closer to the fire." Jou dashed back and grabbed it, dislodging the pups from their corner.

Seto didn't protest, didn't say a word, just stood and waited, his eyes never leaving the glowing warmth. He sank down, once the blanket was moved, gripping Jou's arm and pulling him down into a graceless, strangely natural heap. Jou didn't protest, just held onto his lover and watched the fire with patient eyes. He barely noticed when Scapegoat and Kit joined them, piling into their tangled bodies like they were a litter of puppies.

At some point the tremors shaking Seto's body stopped, as did the desperate clinging. They were replaced by a boneless sprawl and deep even breathing of exhaustion. Jou didn't move an inch. He continued to stare at the fire and silently ask the fire people for advice and guidance. He wasn't surprised by the hummingbird that greeted him with the sunrise, but he was surprised to see a great blue heron wading placidly in the shallows of the lake just a few metres from them.

He'd seen it before, flying with Seto's spirit light, but Jou honestly didn't expect Seto's animal guides to be present in this realm for some time, if ever. The elegant bird turned and gazed at him critically, seeming to weigh him on some inner scale, then with an abrupt, harsh, loud 'rokrok' the bird launched skyward and disappeared in just a few seconds.

The bird must have woke Seto, because the tall brunet uncurled his body and stretched, sighing before snuggling back into Jou's warmth. "Mmm..." Then memory filtered in and he bolted upright, eyes wide with chagrin and panic.

"'Bout time you woke up, sleeping beauty." Jou teased and stretched his cramped, aching body.

"Katsuya I..." But Jou's warm, good morning kiss cut him off.

"Uh uh. It's too early in the morning for confessions of the rich and infamous. Let's get cleaned up and dressed, then we'll pack up. MREs for breakfast."

"But I..." Seto broke off when he saw the warmth shining in his lover's golden eyes. "I'll pack up while you get the MREs ready." A whimper at his feet brought his gaze down to Scapegoat and Kit. "I'll feed them too."

"M'kay." Jou nodded agreeably. "Let's hit it."

Seto was surprised when Jou didn't pitch in to help but instead sat quietly at the fire warming water for the MREs. Seto had offered but it wasn't like his boyfriend to sit and leave the work to him. Maybe Katsuya was angry? Disgusted? Upset? Maybe he was disillusioned that the 'Kaiba Seto' was weak and afraid of the dark? Maybe... Maybe he didn't love him any more? That wasn't right, he knew it wasn't, but something had driven Jou away.

He worked automatically as his mind spun out possibilities for Katsuya's silence and lack of assistance. The reason for it didn't occur to him until he literally stepped on it. As it squished under his foot, Seto recognized it immediately. Jou's bag of 'bait.' The marshmallows didn't fare well under his size twelve, but from what he could tell the bag was almost completely full. Did that mean Jou had gotten lucky on that first cast? That was unlikely, but he didn't use any other bait. Jou hadn't fished past the first cast? Had he ruined Jou's fishing with his panic attack?
Admittedly Seto didn't remember much of what Jou said past mentioning an eagle and his own panic attack. It had brought him memories of his dream, but before Jou could explain, Seto had seen flashes of movement in the bushes, heard sounds he knew in his head, but the instinctive part of him had panicked because while his head was reasonable, his flight or fight response was not. He'd crept closer and closer to Jou until a particularly loud sound had driven him to Jou's lap in a panicked frenzy. Seto didn't remember much after that except counting - counting? Why had he been counting? Then the brilliance of the fire and Jou's arms holding him tight.

He was about to use the discovery as a way to break the unusual silence between them when a flash of blue-grey at the edge of the water caught his eye. It was a heron feather, and floating on the water. Next to it, just sticking up out of the water was what looked like a handle - a slightly familiar handle. Jou's fishing pole was in the water? Jou wasn't careless. How had it ended up there? And why hadn't his love retrieved it? He was about to call out and ask when Jou's voice reached him. "Seto, get over here and feed your dog. He still won't take a bite from me."

"Be right there." The brunet, still holding the waterlogged fishing rod, finished cleaning up the area exactly as Jou had shown him and hurriedly put everything in it's place except the pole. Jou was leaning against the camper holding the bowl of food when Seto reached him. "Trade. You take your fishing pole and I'll take care of the pups."

"I've already given them their water. I'll break down the pole, but I'll put it in the back window of the car. I want the wood to dry out." He smiled slightly. "You're driving but I want the top up. MRE's are ready when you are." With a simple nod, Jou turned away. Seto frowned after him but turned to feed the pups. Whatever was wrong they could talk about in the car. That's when it hit him. Katsuya said that he was driving, but... "Katsuya wait." He started to call, only to swallow it back. If his love was angry, disappointed, disgusted, whatever, would he really trust Seto with his car? The short answer was no.

Gaining confidence in the fact that nothing was wrong, and if there was it would be resolved, Seto closed the door so the pups couldn't get out and picked his way across the rocky ground to join the blond in breakfast. He was surprised - and grateful - to find Jou had made them each two MREs. Seto found he was more than a little hungry. Lunch yesterday was a long time ago.

Jou ate quickly and silently, excused himself and hurried into the woods. Seto finished his own meal and followed, in a slightly different direction. He had to urinate, but he'd wait until civilization to do more. When he finished his 'business' he found Jou and the pups in the car, the keys already in the ignition, Jou flipping through the CD collection and loading disks one at a time. Seto slid in and buckled up. "Falls?"

"Yeah that's fine. It's a hour and a half to get there. If I'm not awake and you want to wander around taking pictures, go ahead, just don't leave the paths." Jou sighed and leaned across to kiss the brunet's cheek. "Night babe." With a flick of the switch Jou's seat reclined and the blond was out like a light.

Instead of putting the car in gear, Seto stared down at the blond. Blue eyes narrowed as they saw for the first time the dark shadows that ringed Jou's eyes and the slightly pinched look that didn't fade even though he was fast asleep. From the look of things Seto's lover was exhausted.

Why would he be... Then the memory of the 'bait' and the pole floating in the water, and their significance hit him. With absolute certainty Seto knew that Jou had abandoned the fishing without a second thought to handle the panic attack that had gripped Seto. More, Jou had held him all night, probably only moving long enough to keep the fire burning. Jou hadn't fished, eaten, or slept to take care of Seto. All of the doubt Seto felt earlier fell away. Jou still loved him, loved him past the point of common sense and self-preservation. Seto would have to take care not to forget or doubt it ever
Two hours later, Seto pulled into the parking lot at the Falls Memorial park, and looked around curiously. It was similar to Shasta Lake in that it was green and foresty, but there were also cabins and a gift store, more importantly there were people everywhere. Families, couples, and even a tour bus filled the area. He found that he didn't mind that at all, not after the isolation of the last little while. He didn't want to necessarily go out and mingle, but he didn't mind the anonymous bustle. A few of the more interesting people would actually make good photo studies.

A body assessment told him his physical needs were pressing, Seto decided to take care of business first thing. With a quick order to Scapegoat to ‘watch’ which would make the dog go into a barking frenzy if anyone came close to the car, and hopefully wake Katsuya, Seto climbed out of the car, stretched, and sauntered confidently into the gift shop and public restrooms.

He was washing his hands while absently thinking about renting a cabin when he caught sight of himself in the mirror. At first he didn't recognize the sun kissed, cutely freckled, wind tousled young man with mahogany hair streaked with bright red where the sun had lightened the color. When he did, rather than turn away from his reflection, as he had many times in the past, he studied himself, trying to see what Katsuya saw, the 'work of art', the 'beauty.' At first he really couldn't see it, but when he met his own baffled gaze in the mirror he realized that his eyes were bright, soft, and warm. Not the gaze he was used to seeing, and that warmth and softness were... they made him... made his eyes actually pretty. The hated freckles weren't bad at all, in fact they were cute and took years off his looks. Now that he didn't have to worry about being a badass, the freckles were... well cute. His skin, sun-kissed color aside, was smooth and didn't look bad at all. So maybe Jou was right, he was attractive. Certainly more now than before, at least in Seto's opinion. Not a work of art, but... "I'd do me." Seto mumbled aloud

His own voice startled him, and without drying his hands, he hurried out of the bathroom. After a quick check on his still slumbering love, Seto hurried over to the camping and rental office. He was disappointed to find they only had rental cabins with bunk beds, but shrugged philosophically and went with it. They could put the mattresses together on the floor if they had to.

Another quick check on his sleeping lover and attentive guard dogs, Seto went to the large general store. He was happy to find not only more lotion for his almost gone 'intimate' pain and scabbed blisters, but an air mattress and a couple big fluffy pillows. Jou would sleep comfortably for as long as he wanted. Groceries, real healthy groceries, with simple recipes, lined a few aisles and without hesitation, he picked up a few meals. He couldn't mess up something as simple as organic bean soup - he even remembered the bean-o - and boxed whole wheat macaroni and cheese was entirely doable.

With Jou still snoring lightly beside him, he drove to the cabin and quietly unloaded the car. He used the small, foot operated pump to blow up the air mattress and then covered it with a blanket from the camper. He smoothed the pillows into place, then put the bean soup on to simmer on low. The package said to cover with water and simmer low, the meal would take five to six hours. As exhausted as Jou was, that would be just about right, but to be safe, Seto set the timer on the stove.

Satisfied with his prep, he went out and caught the pups, throwing them in the second room of the cabin while he hopefully got Jou inside without waking him too much. He needn't have worried. Jou didn't stir when Seto opened the car door, and didn't do more than murmur a protest when the brunet hoisted him upright and half carried, half dragged the blond into the cabin.

Jou sank on onto the carefully prepared pallet with a low murmur and sprawled limply, sinking into
the queen-sized air mattress. He looked comfortable and Seto smiled slightly at the picture he made. It was almost perfect, but Jou's clothes, obviously binding in their twisted state ruined it. With only his lover's comfort in mind, Seto virtuously stripped the blond of every stitch. Jou must have enjoyed the freedom because he stretched and rolled over to his belly spreading his arms and legs wide. Seto, all thoughts noble and pure, eyed the exposed back, tracing the strong line of Jou's spine where it ended in a tantalizing cleft.

The burns on Jou's back were worse than Seto's. He didn't need to see his own back to know that. Most of his blisters were scabs and there was very little actually pain involved, just tightness. But Jou's back still oozed slightly where scabs hadn't formed yet, and the skin around the wounds were red and swollen. With only concern for his lover, not a single hentai thought, Seto grabbed the healing lotion, applying it with feather-light strokes.

Jou flinched slightly under Seto’s careful ministrations, but Seto after a quick check, he didn't see any sign of Jou waking. The lotion was absorbed greedily into Jou's skin, and even as Seto watched, the redness started to fade. Not ready to stop touching Jou, Seto slid his hands further south, smoothing the lotion over the lightly tanned ass cheeks of his sleeping lover. That area could have been burned too, at least that's what Seto piously told himself. And since he was down there, maybe he should just check out the scars that Jou seemed so apprehensive about. That way if they were too bad Seto could control his reactions so they didn't hurt his lover.

With warm, lotion slick hands, he bent Jou's leg up slightly and looked at the slightly parted cheeks. “Hmmm nothing visible.” Seto mumbled softly to himself. Unconsciously he leaned forward to get a closer look, but when he still couldn't glimpse a scar, he gently pressed one muscular bun aside. Nothing - no wait, there was a very faint set of lines bisecting part of the pink-brown pucker. He leaned in closer, his warm breath washing over the exposed flesh as he tried to identify the symbol. Maybe Kanji, but it was so faint, so difficult to see, he couldn't really tell. With the barest touch he traced over the almost invisible lines watching the tiny marks shiver and flex with the muscular stimulation he gave. No real difference, he'd have to explore further to see if there was something inside but so far... he rubbed more lotion on his finger and pressed at the opening only to freeze when Jou mumbled and shifted uncomfortably.

What the hell was he doing? He'd practically molested Jou in his sleep. What kind of lover was he? What kind of man was he? Wasn't it rape if there was no knowledge? What the hell? Thoroughly disgusted with himself, he threw himself off the bed and stalked to the second room where the dogs were. He ignored their sleepy growls and snapped their leashes on their collars. After loading his camera, he dragged the dogs off to take pictures. Maybe the untainted beauty of the falls would wash away his perverted, disgusting impulses.

Katsuya watched through slitted eyes as his lover stalk off with the pups dragging behind him. He had been aware of Seto's care since the antiseptic cream had touched his back. The stuff stung for half a second before soothing and he'd jolted awake. Seto's hands had been so curious, so tender, that Jou had held himself still and let Seto have his way. It blew Jou away to realized just how much Seto wanted to care for him. He was completely turned on by the way the touch had changed from curious and soothing to warm exploration. Jou had actually started to protest when Seto bolted away. At first confusion kept Jou silent, but at the angry expression on Seto's face, Jou realized why Seto had run.

He sighed and shook his head as he realized exactly what was going through the brunet's head. Seto was so naive about some basic relationship interactions and it was obvious that he didn't know that lovers woke each other with sex and play all the time. It was a joy and privilege to watch Seto as he learned and opened up.
Jou was glad the brunet hadn't gone further with his exploration, though, because he was genuinely exhausted and where Seto had been headed was not a place they should go unrested. One weight was off his mind, though. Seto didn't find his scars a turn off. The light touches had been warm and loving as they traced the disfigurement, and Jou would have had to be blind and deaf not to notice Seto's suddenly accelerated breathing and the erection the brunet had sported when he bolted from the mattress. Images danced in his mind's eye that made his own body react pleasurably.

When Seto got back they were going to have a great time. Jou'd never made love on an air mattress but it struck him as just right for some very fun trampoline action. He closed his golden eyes again and nestled his own erection into the warm sheets beneath him. Seto's breath on his balls and ass was something he absolutely loved. Maybe he could finally convince the brunet to go for a sixty nine.

A low beeping brought him back from the realms of morpheus. After a few moments he located it as the alarm on the stove. A pot was on low simmering, and now that he was fully awake to appreciate it, whatever was cooking smelled delicious. The time displayed on the oven clock made him sit up and glance around. He'd been asleep probably five or six hours, so where was Seto? From the look of things his lover had been a busy man. Their things were piled next to the door, Jou's clothes were laid out carefully on top of the pile, the air mattress, pillows and cabin spoke for themselves. Now to find the busy little bee and reward him with some honey.

He schlepped to the pile of stuff and grabbed his shorts, sliding them on commando. A quick peek out the window and he knew where his sexy lover was - sitting on the stairs to the cabin absently petting the dogs. The rigid posture, despite the casual seat told Jou a lot more about Seto's frame of mind than the neatly arranged belongings. His love was upset and although Jou thought he knew why, he would take it casual until he was sure.

He scooped up a large bowl of the meal Seto prepared and grabbed a spoon. He would kill two birds with one stone - fuel and reassurance. He knew Seto heard the door open by the way the brunet's shoulders got even more rigid, but the stubborn man didn't even glance over his shoulder. "Mnyam... Good morning Baby." Jou mumbled as he sat down beside his love. Spying the camera slung around the other man's neck he nuzzled into Seto's side. "Get some good pictures?"

Guilty blue eyes stared at him from an adorably freckled face. "I think they're okay. Katsuya..."

"Hmm thanks for letting me sleep. I know you wanted to jump me, but I was too tired. It wouldn't have been much fun." Jou slurped a bite of bean soup. "Mmm... have you eaten? This stuff is really good. You get to cook from now on." He joked, then sobered. "My scars didn't turn you off. I saw how hard you were. Kinda thought you'd try to drill me right then, but you got more control than me I guess." Another bite. "Thanks for that, and thanks for taking care of my back. It feels much better, even if it stung at first, I'm glad you put that stuff on."

Guilty blue eyes widened in surprise then narrowed. "You were awake." He didn't ask.

"Yeah, that stuff you used on my back stings. You didn't know?" Jou gave him a hentai grin. "Perv. Taking advantage of me when I'm snoozing." The guilt was back in an instant, but Jou was ready for it because he added "Glad to know I'm not the only one. You know how many times I've groped you when you were asleep? You usually wake up, but not always."

"You grope me? When I am asleep?" Seto didn't know whether to be amused or outraged. What he distinctly wasn't was violated.

"You like it." Jou took another bite, making yum-yum sounds.
"If I'm asleep how could I possibly like it." The ever logical man argued.

"Your dick gets hard, just like mine did this afternoon." When Seto's lips dropped open in surprise, Jou shoved a spoonful of food into his mouth. "Eat, you're going to need the energy."

"I think I should be mad." Seto reflected after swallowing. "Or something."

"Why? It's not like I'm forcing you. If you showed you didn't want my touch by moving away or if you woke up and said no I'd be okay with it. Like today, I wanted you to touch me, so I let you. If I had a problem with it, I would have said something." He took several large bites.

"Sleeping? Could you?" He knew he was over analyzing, but Seto couldn't help it. Sometimes his mind just latched onto something and didn't let go.

Jou chuckled. "I don't think I'll ever sleep deep enough naturally to not notice someone playing with my ass Seto. Doubt you would too." The blond handed him the empty bowl. "I'm going to shower. Why don't you come in and get yourself some food. If you're lucky I might give you a floor show to go with your meal." When his lover didn't move, Jou reached over and traced a few of the new freckles on Seto's cheeks. "Don't worry about it. I'll let you know if you ever step out of line. I want you to touch me, kiss me, hell just about anything you can think of. Still worried about bottom, but you can convince me to try - if you like my floor show." With that carrot dangling, Jou stood up and stretched, ruffled Seto's wind blown hair, and sauntered into the cabin, his ass provocatively swaying - deliberately.

Seto watched him go with a slow smile dawning on his face. He snatched up the leashes to the dogs and half dragged the sleepy pups into the cabin. To ensure privacy he tossed them in the second room and just as he was refilling the bowl with fragrant soup he heard the shower kick on.

He expected to finish and join Jou in the shower, but he was barely through half the bowl when the shower cut off, and his droplet studded, golden skinned lover sauntered into the room naked as the day he was born. A wicked grin crossed the blond's face. "Ready for the show?"

Seto put down his spoon and licked his lips. "Depends. Is it interactive?"

"Not the first act. After that it's up to the audience." Jou smirked. "So enjoy your meal."

He picked up his spoon again. "I'm used to the best entertainment." A brunet brow lifted haughtily. "I demand it."

"Mmhmhm." Jou settled one leg on the bed and the other on the floor, spreading his thighs for a view of his dark blond thatch of hair, sac, and mildly interested cock. Seeing the blue gaze focus right where he wanted it, he reached down and cupped his balls, rolling and fondling gently. His other hand lifted to stroke along his chest, teasing at his nipples lightly. He ignored the tingles of pleasure running through him to ask, "Tell me about the scars. I've never seen them."

"Obviously." Seto's eyes were avid as they took in every move of Jou's hands as they caressed and fondled. "I could barely see them and I couldn't make out any kanji. Your sphincter is intact and seems to be normal, although I didn't get a chance to test it." He took a bite before offering. "I'll explore later if you let me."

"Count on it." Jou's hand slipped below his ball sac and pressed upwards. "I love external massage here, can't get enough." As if to prove his words, his half hard cock stretched and grew to full erection. "I can come just by pressing here in circles." The hand teasing his nipples dropped to circle the base of his arousal, circling and stroking firmly. "Ah, feels so good." Golden eyes closed in
pleasure and he let out a slightly breathless moan.

Seto's spoon hit the bowl with a clatter. "Act two?" His pants were too tight, his heart hammering, and his breath becoming shallower. Jou was incredibly hot with his head falling back in ecstasy, exposing his throat submissively, even as his hands stroked and squeezed to give more pleasure.

"Not yet." Jou's voice was thin and taut. "Seto, do you want to know what I'm thinking right now?"

"That you want me to end my meal with cream for dessert?" Seto offered hoarsely. He nearly moaned when Jou let out a low whine and bucked into his stroking hands.

"Fuck yeah, oh god. No no... " Jou visibly fought for control. "I'm thinking of how hot your dick will feel inside me, how tight and full I'll be. I want that so badly I can feel my ass clenching and relaxing, like it would if you were really there."

"God, Jou don't - you might not be able to..." Seto grasped for sanity even as he rose from his chair and took two steps towards the blond writhing on the bed shedding his clothes as he went. He wanted to make love to Jou so badly he thought he would explode, but he knew he had to take it slow, had to be very careful, and if it wasn't possible, reassure Jou that it didn't matter.

"Thought about it while you were - oh man I'm going to cum if I don't stop - taking care of me. I trust you not to hurt me."

With a low growl Jou yanked his hands away and threw himself back on the air mattress. "Come here Seto, let me have your mouth. Time for your dessert."

Seto gazed at him with stark yearning. "You are incredible, not just hot and sexy as hell, but your heart is so... so... open." He had never seen such frank desire or open love and trust.

"To you, always. Seto... Not to be too pushy but I'm going to blow with or without you. Come here please." Jou was outright begging, his body rocking urgently as his thighs tensed, obviously on the edge, teetering between agony and ecstasy.

Heart melting from the love and trust that Katsuya gave him, body surging with the passion that was never far away, Seto knelt on the mattress and reached for his lover's hot, cum-slicked cock.

"Without me?" He murmured as he tightened his grip, slowing the impending climax. "I think not."

When the blond whimpered and thrashed in his grip, he relented to bend and swirl his tongue around the head of Jou's cock, enjoying the musky, salty flavor of Jou's cum and the slick heat under his caressing touch. "Mmm..." He hummed his approval of the taste and Jou's soft cry. Wanting to hear and taste more, he rimmed the glans with his tongue before sucking the entire bulbous head into his mouth, using just the edge of his teeth to stimulate as he sucked and tongued the sensitive underside.

Instantly the shaft and head swelled, and despite his tight hold, the flow of silky fluid increased. Seto knew he didn't have the experience to take Jou deep, so instead he closed his lips tighter and flicked the tip of his tongue into and around the very sensitive slit at the same time freeing his restrictive hold on the base of Jou's cock. Instantly Jou's body shot jets of cum into his mouth, giving Seto his creamy dessert.

As gorgeous as he found Jou lost in passion, the relaxed, blissful look on the other man's face was far more beautiful. It was infinitely satisfying to know he had given his love that kind of joy. While his lover came down, Seto went to retrieve the bottle of lubricating hand lotion he'd picked up.

When he turned back to the mattress Jou was leaning on one elbow watching him from dark golden eyes. "Hmmm, smart." His gaze flicked to the bottle. "And caring. Suki da." A tiny smile edges his lips. "How the hell did you get so good at blowjobs? I thought you only had a few one nighters. I
can't see you doing that for a one nighter."

"I haven't ever wanted to, but I do know what I like." He shrugged uncomfortably. "Do you really want to hear how other people went down on me?"

"Sure." Jou grinned when Seto's stride faltered. "Not right now, but sometime, because sure as hell I'm going to suck you off so well you forget all about them. I need to know the competition." The smile faded as his eyes skimmed down Seto's body. "You've lost interest. Want me to..."

Ruefully, Seto shook his head. "Like hell. Look at the mattress. I made a huge mess."

Jou glanced down at the large puddle. "Oh, you get off sucking dick? Huh, I think we can make a deal."

"Idiot. I get off seeing you cum because of what I do. The act is secondary." Seto snapped. "Must you be so crude?"

Jou laughed and swung himself up in a sitting position. "Seto, we have sex. Sex is crude just by the act itself. Have you ever heard of polite sex? It's wet, hot, sloppy, and if it's done right, it will make even the strongest man beg and a virgin sound like a whore. It's what it is."

Seto didn't know how to respond to that. He looked away, feeling strangely hollow and ashamed. How could he explain to the pleasure-loving blond on the bed that his sexual encounters before him had been polite and pleasant, not hot, wet, or sloppy. He and his partners had copulated, politely looking away or burying their faces in the pillows, completing the act in silence and withdrawing immediately. Leaving without any kind of embarrassing declarations or promises to further the empty awkwardness.

Jou's heart cracked slightly at the melancholy expression on Seto's face. A quick rewind of what he'd said made his breath catch. Had Seto's experience actually been polite? How the hell did one fuck politely? Say please and thanks? If that was what Seto knew then no wonder he was restrained when they had sex. He probably thought he would be 'rude' if he got too wild. Huh! It was time for the sexy brunet to gain a much broader perspective. "Yo, you're too far away. Get over here and make me hot and sticky. I want to scream your name at least twice." A sly glint lit his eyes. "I'm gonna make you scream my name twice that."

"You want to make this a contest? A game?" Seto didn't know whether to be amused or insulted, but he did know he could feel his dormant competitive spirit - and his cock - stirring at the challenge.

The playful blond bounced on the bed. "Got a mattress that is made for fun and games thanks to you. I trust you not to hurt me, and if it don't work we'll figure it out. So yeah... Let's play while we love Seto. Only rules are love and respect - the messier the better."

Seto grinned and dove to the mattress, bouncing both of them wildly. "Be prepared to lose!" He mocked, echoing his old dueling days.

Joucing around on the springy air mattress, Jou laughed wickedly, "Lose? Kaiba, even if I lose I win. It's win-win for both of us."

That struck the brunet as strangely poignant. He'd never encountered a true win-win situation. In his world it was cut-throat, kill or be killed, take no prisoners. A person either won or they died. In all the experiences in his life, the boardrooms, the political maneuvers, the deals, he had never found a truly win-win situation until now, on an air mattress in a cabin, loving a hedonistic blond whose sole
aim seemed to be to simply love him. Definitely win-win. Warm, joyful laughter bubbled up and he rolled over to pin the wriggling blond beneath him. "Let's play." He rasped as his lover welcomed him with clinging arms and legs. The next intelligible words heard in the room were simultaneous shouts of their respective names... Repeated several times.

Katsuya was in that state between sleep and waking where he knew he was asleep, but was aware of the world around him. He could hear Seto talking to someone, feel the warm, sleepy, well-loved feeling in his body, but at the same time, the heaviness of sleep blanketed his mind. Strangely, his friend the hummingbird flitted into view. The tiny bird was darting to and fro in agitation, and Jou tried to focus on what his little friend was trying to tell him. As he focused on the messenger he became aware of a black cloud forming in the distance, lightning and power shooting from the swirling vortex that looked like a giant funnel cloud. Even as he watched it, terror gripping his throat, it swelled, taking on more power, spinning towards him on a collision course. With a jolt he brought himself out of his dream state. Something was very wrong.

"Seto." He gasped as he sat up.

The brunet turned and blinked at him, surprised by his urgent tone. "What's wrong? Are you in pain?" Instant concern replaced the surprise.

"Pain? No, I'm good. Great! Uhm... what's going on? I thought you sounded upset on the phone just now." Jou knew his lover wasn't ready to accept spirit guides and spirit journeys yet, that he may never be, so he kept it simple.

"More irritated than upset. I called Jamie to make sure my information remained private. Just a precaution, or so I thought. My secretary called to get a listing of my purchases in the last twenty-four hours. She is on my access list - was. I called to speak to her and she informed me she now is working for Mokuba. He flew out at three this morning. He is due to land in Redding in half an hour."

"Redding is an hour away. He'll be here in less than two hours." Jou closed his eyes and sighed. "You want to stay and wait for him?"

"I told him no and I was on vacation. I want to be long gone when he gets here. I removed everyone but me from my lists. Mokuba will not be able to track us." Blue eyes asked the question before he said a word. "Do you mind if we leave?"

Jou was up and moving before the words left his lips. "Hell no. We need to shower - PTA Seto. Then we'll clear out. Haul your cute ass."

"PTA? Do I want to know?" He did, if for no other reason than to know what his lover was saying to him.

"Pits, tool, ass. Just the basics, babe. We gotta fly. I don't want him anywhere near either of us right now." On more than one level. Seto had yet to break the stranglehold of the chains Mokuba bound him with. The chains would never disappear, but Seto had to learn to not let them choke him. He was learning, but Mokuba was a master at manipulating Seto and if the little shit got his mitts on Seto before his lover had learned how to see through the brat, all the healing Seto had done would have been for nothing.

"Tool?" Amused, the brunet strolled into the bathroom. "What kind of tool?" He stepped into the narrow shower stall and turned the knobs.

Jou squeezed in behind him, sharing the scant drizzle of water. "Hammer drill." The blond grinned.
"'Cause you know how to hammer and drill."

"Does that make you an O-ring lube injector? 'Cause you..." His words were cut off when Jou shoved his face into the shower spray. Chuckling to himself as Jou started to wash both of them, Seto put Mokuba out of his mind and relaxed into his love's touch. Messy, rude sex games were definitely win-win. Even when they discovered their airbed was considerably flatter, thanks to a blown out seam in one of the tubes that made it up, he considered it all part of a winning deal.

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Mokuba drove up to the cabin his brother had rented twenty-four hours before. He didn't see any sign of his brother or Jounouchi, but figured they had probably gone to the store. The door was unlocked and he barrelled in like he was a swat team securing a building only to stop his forward rush and look around blankly. Empty. The cabin was empty. Or almost. On the stove was a pot of leftover soup. Next to it was a note addressed to him in his brother's distinctive hand.

Mokuba,

Go home! I don't want you following me any more. You are ruining my vacation. If you do not leave me alone I will take drastic action. You are not my parent, you are not my spouse, you are my brother. I love you but you are getting on my nerves. For the last time leave me alone! I am warning you. It is the only warning I will give.

Enjoy the soup. It is delicious.
Seto

Jillian Clark sighed and stepped into the open doorway. "I told you he would leave if he knew you were coming. Mokuba when are you going to get it through your head, your brother needs to do this, and he knows that. I understand what you are feeling and why you are acting irrationally, but by now you have to see this is futile. You aren't saving him, you are trying to save yourself."

"Shut the hell up." The black-haired man snarled at the woman who had forced her way onto this trip. He had no other defense against her too accurate words but to attack. The letter wasn't random, it wasn't done under duress. If it had been Seto would have used the code they had worked out years before. His brother meant what he had written. Pain blossomed in Mokuba's chest and raged hazed his vision. His brother wanted to be left alone, had left to avoid a meeting. Scalding tears of hurt and anger filled his eyes. "Just shut the hell up." He whispered as the tears fell. "You don't know jack shit."

She tilted her head to one side and asked "Are the tears real or is it another manipulation. I lean toward manipulation, but since I'm immune and there is nobody here for you to try to control they could be real."

"Shut up!" He yelled. "If you don't shut up I swear I'll leave you here."

"Yeah, real punishment there Kaiba. I have my credit cards and I will enjoy a few days vacation." She hesitated for a moment. "Mokuba, there are two bunks here, it's pretty and quiet. Why don't we stay a few days. It might do you some good to get away." Seeing the instant denial she added a lure she was sure he wouldn't refuse. "Your brother might come back, after all he optioned to rent the cabin for a week. If he thinks you've left he might come back." It was brutal, but it was also a great hook. She added another. "Besides he may not have left the park at all. He may be waiting for you to leave, watching right now." Not that she believed it. Seto Kaiba and his lover were long gone and she couldn't be more relieved.
Looking very young and hopeful, her patient gave her a genuinely pathetic look. "Do you think so?"

Hell no, but if it helped Mokuba's brother fixation, she'd play along. "It's possible. You know your brother best, but I think he might bluff."

Slowly the black-haired man nodded. "Yeah he would. He probably expects me to leave, to just do as he says. Well if he can run off on vacation then I can take a few days and wait for him to return."

She nodded agreeably as she mentally wished the elder Kaiba a nice long trip. The thought crossed her mind that she would have to send Seto Kaiba a bill for running interference. The Kaiba brothers were hard work. A person could spend a lifetime and never figure them out completely. "I'll get my bag. You'll need to go to the store and get some stuff for yourself since you didn't pack anything."

Mokuba gave her a cold look and stalked off. He decided to burn some energy walking to the store and set off down the path grumbling under his breath about women, brothers, and troublemaking dumb blonds. At the store he grabbed a few of the least obnoxious, touristy shorts and t-shirts, then snatched up a pair of overpriced leather sandals. At the checkout he reached for his wallet only to close his eyes in chagrin. It wasn't in his pants, it wasn't anywhere this side of the continent. He'd left it sitting on his nightstand.

Embarrassed and infuriated, blaming Seto and Jounouchi for his predicament, he gave the clerk a haughty look. "Excuse me, I've forgotten my wallet."

Jillian chuckled from behind him. "Good thing I'm here then." She handed the clerk her credit card. "I'm sure you're good for it, aren't you Kaiba?"

"Of course I..." He broke off when the clerk interrupted. "Kaiba? Are you related to the guy who was here earlier?"

"My brother is Seto Kaiba. He was staying in the cabin down the road. He left, but since he paid for it we decided to use it." Mokuba challenged the woman directly.

"Not at all. When he and his friend left they stopped in and told me you might be coming. I just wanted you to pass along the information about the popped air mattress. It is covered by warranty and the company would like to send a replacement. I'll have them send it to the address on the credit card verification if that is okay?" She explained in the 'happy to serve you, even though you are an asshole' voice that all customer service people perfected early in their careers.

"Popped air mattress?" Mokuba gasped, his face turning puce.

Jillian completely ignored the apoplectic man and answered. "That will be fine. Mokuba grab your bag and let's go back to the cabin.

When he didn't so much as flicker an eyelash, she picked up the sack in one hand and roughly grabbed Mokuba with the other. "Come on!" She snapped harshly, dragging him out of the store before he could have a meltdown in such a public place.

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The only thing Seto found interesting enough to photograph in Weed, California was the arched sign proudly announcing the city of Weed. It was possible his enthusiasm for the town had died when he realized they were only nine miles from the cabin where Mokuba would be arriving within the hour. He wasn't curious enough about the town to mark it as a potential place to visit in the future though. He was too intent on getting as far away from his brother as possible.
"NBS Rocks, the settlement is about thirty minutes outside of Alturas, up three ninety five." Jou explained when he saw Seto squinting at the map. "Don't look for roads or cities because there aren't any. Alturas is the closest, but I wouldn't call it a city. There are less than three thousand people there."

"So about three hours east from Mount Shasta?" Seto looked at the map again, amazed at the long stretches of land that were completely empty of development. In Japan land was at a premium. Americans did not appreciate how very lucky they were to have such space. "Do you think he will track us there?"

"Nah, I will pay for stuff using cash if we need it, and NBS is a commune so there isn't any stores there. Everything is shared. They go into town about once a month for stuff they need, but they have their own food supply and they use wind and solar energy for power."

Jou's tone wasn't as admiring as Seto expected and he couldn't help remarking, "You don't sound too enthusiastic. It sounds like a utopian way of life."

"I suppose." The blond admitted quietly. "But remember what I told you? About the purple crystal lollipop? Four days in a fog, and the last day... well there was something off but I can't figure it out. Raymond wasn't really around that last day, but I know that we were all together for the other days. I don't know why Oli was insistent I go back. Now it's like an itch in my brain."

"The obvious question is, could Liza have gotten pregnant?" Seto questioned softly.

"She already was pregnant, at least according to them she was over a month along, and she was taking the herbs and stuff to help with the baby so no." Jou shifted uncomfortably. "Besides I used some of their 'natural' condoms, even in my haze I remember that. NBS markets candy flavored condoms and are tested at almost one hundred percent effective, so I don't think that's the issue."

"I know you've been checked, but I have to ask, healthwise? STD's?"

"You know I'm clean. I wouldn't have touched you if I wasn't. I always use protection, except with you, and I always have a physical before my hobo."

"Wasn't an accusation, just a check. Did you leave anything there? Was there anything in your book about them that they could object to?"

"Nah, but..." Suddenly Jou smiled. "But, Oli brought me there and he told me that it was a sacred place before they settled there. Maybe I'm worrying about it too much. Maybe Oli wants me to visit the sacred place."

"I thought he showed you several places like that."

"Yeah and no. See, there are sacred places, places of ritual and worship, but then there are places that are... Places of Creation, places of the Spirit Brothers. It is very different. They are the places where the gods crossover, where they mingle with their creations - man and animal. NBS is one of the Places of Creation."

"Not going to talk about magic. You know my feelings..."

That made Jou laugh. "Gods, you really do stand your ground. C'mon Seto, you believe, I know you do. You slip up enough. Tell me the truth about what you know, think, believe. Let me see inside."
Seto grinned at the infectious laughter of his lover. "Someday, when you're old enough." He teased. "Right now I want to hear the song about highway to hell. It seems apropos doesn't it?"

"AC/DC. Should be right in front of the rock section. Load the CD's baby." It was all Jou could do to stifle another chuckle at the snarky blue eyes that flicked him a glance, probably at the endearment.

The disks loaded, Seto checked on the sleeping Kit and Scapegoat in the back seat, then lay back, resting as the music blasted around him. To pay him back for the 'baby' and because he wanted contact with his lover, he rested his hand comfortably over the flap of Jou's zipper, squeezing lightly in time to the thumping beat. After the first wild swerve, Jou drove like the proverbial bat out of hell. Seto was satisfied - and if the speed of the car was anything to go by, the three hour drive would take less than two hours. That should be enough time for Jou to have healed... a roadside quicky was just what Doctor Seto ordered before seeing Jou's ex lovers.

Didn't happen quite that way, but close enough to fill Seto's prescription. As they curled up in the back seat, the dogs having been moved to the front seat, Seto nestled his face into Jou's heaving chest. "Hmmm... So tell me about this place. Commune gives mental images of hippies and flower children running around in faded tie-dye and preaching free love."

That made a chuckled rumble up from the chest under his cheek. "Probably was at one time, but now it's more modern, very hip and chic. Most of the people have online jobs, there is a satellite uplink, in fact I think they rent from your satellite. There are commodities traders, stockbrokers, online teachers, some doctors who make a living charging people thirty bucks a pop for people to ask their medical question. Plus NBS Rocks. That candy is making a killing. There is no individual wealth, it is all funnelled back into the community. The school is top of the line with all new computers, playground equipment, and a library of actual books as well as an online exchange system. There are plumbers and electricians, builders and carpenters, even heavy equipment operators. Everyone is treated equally, and everyone gets the same exact benefits and rights. There is no upper, lower, middle class. There is simply people."

The concept was great - in concept - but Seto would have to see it to believe it. "And they are green too. Utopia. Who governs or distributes?"

"There is a council of elected individuals. Three hundred people live at NBS, and there are ten council members. One for every thirty people."

"Racial or religious tension?" Get that many people together and there was going to be issues. "Politics?" He tried to lever up to right his clothes only to be brought back against the golden chest.

"Not tolerated. I don't know the particulars; I was only there for five days and four of them I was drug hazed, but I do know that the people police their own." Jou gave him a tight squeeze. "Let's go. Your questions are better asked at the source. I don't know a whole lot, and what I know is fogged by purple crystal persuasion."

Seto nodded and straightened his clothes to near decency as he climbed out of the car, buttoned and zipped, then tossed his black-eyed, shorn pup back in the rear of the car. Jou, after a moment did the same. "You keep mentioning the purple crystal. Do you feel... You said you didn't feel they took advantage, that you were attracted but I hear something else... What... ?"

"Thought I was better at hiding it. Either that or you are getting good at reading stuff I don't want to mention." He huffed out a breath as he put the car in gear. "I would have been okay with it and I thought they knew that, but they still gave me that sucker. I don't understand why. I'm going to ask though. Why use a roofie if I was willing?"
"Power? Control? You say your memories are cloudy from that time. Maybe there was something they wanted you to forget?" Seto said thoughtfully.

"Don't know but I'm going to ask." Jou smiled and threaded their fingers together. "I love it when you get hot enough to jump me on the side of the road, and I want you to do it any time you get the urge, but I... are you worried about meeting them?" Before Seto could get defensive, Jou hurried into speech. "Not complaining, you know that I love you. I just want to make sure you're not feeling insecure about me. If it bothers you we can drive right by and wave. Whatever I need to see there isn't as important as you sitting next to me."

Seto gave him a direct look. "I was." A smug look, reminiscent of the look Jou remembered from high school crossed the cutely freckled face. "I doubt both of them working together made you scream as loud as I did five minutes ago. No I'm not insecure. I'm curious too now." And although he didn't say it, he was also angry on his love's behalf. Drugging someone, even a willing someone, was wrong, not just because of morals and ethics, but they had no way of knowing if there was any kind of physical danger. They were wrong all the way. Seto wasn't being jealous or insecure, he was being protective and if he got the chance he would tell them what he thought of them endangering his love.

Jou blinked at the suddenly ferocious look on Seto's face. "Seto..." He began worriedly only to break off. If his lover wanted to be protective then he wouldn't complain. Instead he leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on the almost snarling lips. "Suki da."

Seto smiled and leaned into the loving touch. "Suki da."

Jou turned back to the steering wheel and Seto let his head fall on Jou's shoulder. He didn't bother with music, he was too caught up in the arid beauty around him and the golden warmth next to him. Content and happy, he dozed lightly. Loving Katsuya was a physically draining job. He'd take riding beside Jou over riding behind his desk at KC any minute of the day.

While Seto dozed on his shoulder, Jou kept his eyes peeled for the 'New Pine Creek' sign. The turn to NBS Rocks was just a few yards past the sign and the road didn't have a sign, or at least it hadn't. Roadsigns started popping up every mile advertising that NBS Rocks was just a few miles ahead.

The bright, colorful pictures of various candies were tempting, and would have been more so if they hadn't eaten on the run earlier. The signs weren't the only changes. The turn to the settlement was clearly marked, and instead of a dusty track disappearing over a hill, a paved road led you to a large wooden building clearly marked NBS Rocks. Discreet signs directed customers to the Rocks Cafe, Rocks Gift and Visitor Center, and of course Rocks Restrooms.

"Huh." Jou frowned slightly. This wasn't at all what he remembered.

"Problem?" Seto mumbled drowsily, not opening his eyes.

"This wasn't here last time." He explained as Seto sat up and looked around.

"Looks like they're cashing in on their popularity. It's something any savvy business man would do." He wasn't disturbed or impressed. It was just good business. "Let's go to the visitor center. They should be able to get in touch with people you know, or who knew Oli."

Jou nodded and parked the car in the half-full parking lot. "Yeah I guess."

The visitor center was the two thousand thirteen version of hippy chic. Tie-dye clothes and homespun goods shared the space with boxes of smartly packaged candies, with various
woodworking and other handicrafts displayed in artfully casual groupings. Products ranged from soaps infused with flower petals to bottles of dried herbs to help with everything from allergies to zygomycosis.

Seto examined the offerings carefully while Jou waited in the two person line to speak to the clerk. He didn't have to wonder if the woman behind the small counter recognized his love because there was a screech that scared the birds away and the small older woman flew around the counter to hug Jou in a squeeze that Seto swore made Jou's bones crack loud enough for the departing birds to hear.

His blond was laughing and returning the hug with equal fervor. After a minute of greetings, where Seto drifted closer to the pair, Jou turned, breaking her hold and caught his hand. "Calla, this is , Seto. Seto this is Calla, one of the founding members of the Natural Beauty Settlement."

"Calla, for the lily?" Seto smiled at the petite woman with bright green eyes and steel grey hair. "A pleasure to meet Jounou - Joey's friends. He's told me a lot about the Natural Beauty Settlement."

"You slipped. You're an old friend of Joey's if you call him by his given name instead of his nom de plume. If such young men could be called old that is." She grinned and shrewd green eyes assessed them, making the connections between their hearts. "Yes Calla for lily. It is a pleasure to meet Joey's better half."

"Hey!" The blond in question protested. "Better half? How do you know he's better? I could be his better half."

The grin broadened. "You are. Both halves strengthen the other. While you are here you must let us throw you a party to celebrate your marriage."

"Ah, we aren't officially married yet." Jou explained as he gave Seto an embarrassed, startled, look.

"Official? Who cares about official? That will take happen when you go." She waved her hand broadly. "We'll have a ceremony and party for you here. I'll take care of everything if you will allow it? You are staying for a few days aren't you? Give us enough time to plan."

Jou was completely at a loss for words. Deep inside the yearning to be tied to Seto forever was almost as strong as the need for his next heartbeat, but no way was he going to say that, to guilt Seto into making that kind of commitment. Seto said they were together forever, but they had only been back together for such a short amount of time, and Seto hadn't been mentally stable much of that time. It wouldn't be right.

Seto had no such doubts. He nodded and smiled. "Nothing in heaven or earth would make us happier. Of course we will stay, if it isn't too inconvenient? I didn't notice a hotel and we don't want to put you out."

"We have a spare cabin for friends, and it is perfect for a honeymoon. Please be our guests for a few days, enjoy the settlement, enjoy the party, and let us start you off in your married life. It will be an honor." Calla's eyes were warm and sincere. "Joey's books put us on the map, his time with us is treasured by everyone. Please let us honor you both."

Jou, his heart beating a joyful, rapid tattoo in his chest, nodded. Right or not, Seto seemed completely confident. He would trust his lover. "Of course, and we are truly honored." His voice had the barest of cracks, but it was enough to bring Seto's questioning gaze up to him. He met the vulnerable gaze with all the love he felt. "Oh hell yeah. Let's do this. Suki da- No - Aishiteru, Kaiba Seto. Will you share a honeymoon with me?" Jou asked in the traditional Japanese way, with an indirect question. Not that he feared rejection, but it just seemed right to fall back on the traditions of their homeland.
Seto, his breath caught in his chest, examined his lover's face. He hadn't thought Jou would object, but things were so new between them that even though it was a symbolic joining rather than the legal joining, it was a huge leap into the unknown, but one that he wanted to make with every fiber of his being. He gusted out a sigh of relief as he saw the joy blazing from Jou's golden eyes. Jou wasn't upset or in any way repulsed by the idea. Seto could see that in the way his love's eyes blazed incandescently. If anything he looked like he would burst into tears of happiness.

Seto had no way of knowing that his own eyes beamed with matching happiness and he didn't notice his own lashes grew damp with tears of love and joy. "I can't think of anything that would make me happier than to share a honeymoon, and the rest of my life, with you." He smiled and nuzzled his lips into Jou's cheek, enjoying the bristly beard that Jou hadn't had the chance to shave.

Calla bustled off. "I'll call down and have Raymond come escort you to the settlement. We had some trouble about a year ago. Young people came into the residential area and caused damage so we have the settlement fenced off with alarms and security required for entry. It goes against the grain for a lot of people but after the attack it was decided to keep things as safe as possible. Jealousy of our success has been a trial for us." The older woman paused and glanced over her shoulder. "Do you remember Raymond? You stayed with him and Eliza a few days."

"Yes I remember." Jou smiled. "Sort of anyway. That purple lollipop Eliza gave me packed a punch."

"Purple?" Calla froze, her gaze sharpening. "We don't make a purple."

"Well, she did say it was a new flavor. Maybe she decided it packed too much of a punch. It made the first four days I stayed with them a blur. I barely remember that time, and the last day is like looking through a telescope." Jou admitted, his own eyes becoming somber.

"I see. Was it an infusion? With flowers and herbs maybe? That was a line we were considering at that time." The words were very carefully spaced, as if hiding some underlying meaning.

"Maybe. Don't really remember. Just remember it being purple and crystal clear, but with yellow and red flower petals, and a few seeds in it. The stick was like a tightly rolled leaf, dried, but really stiff. like a twig. I think there were seeds in it but I'm not sure." He described the vivid memory as accurately as possible.

"Well it's definitely a failed experiment. We know that our market demographic would not enjoy their candy on a twig." Calla gave a light laugh that sounded forced to Jou and Seto. She waved them towards a corner of the store. "Joey your book is over there. " Joey your book is over there." She gave him a wistful look. "If you wanted to sign the copies we have..." She hinted.

Jou chuckled ruefully and nodded. "I'll borrow one of your pens off the counter." He hooked his arm through Seto’s and led him first to the counter, then back to the rack of prominently displayed books dominating a corner shelf.

While Jou began autographing the books, Seto counted five different volumes, all bearing the title 'Hot Wheels and Cool Country Roads' by Joey Wheeler. Each of the volumes had different cover art and a discreetly placed number, starting with one and going through five. There were even a gift box sets of all five in hardback and paperback. "Joey Wheeler... I haven't ever read your books. Maybe I should buy a set. I can read while you drive." He gave the blond a look out of the corner of his eye. "Gets boring sitting there all day."

"I'll give you one of the leather sets my agent gave me as 'heirlooms' to pass down when we get home so don't waste your money on the good stuff. Go with the paperbacks. The gift set is the best
deal.” He didn't look up from where he was signing. If he had he would have seen Seto's wide-eyed look and convulsive swallow. When the brunet didn't respond Jou glanced up to meet the soft gaze. "What?"

"Heirloom? For children... our children? Grandchildren?" Seto didn't try to hide the husky wobble in his voice. He had wanted children so badly, loved being a parent, but it wasn't something he had ever considered possible.

"Of course." Jou smiled warmly. "We are going to adopt a whole baseball team, just so you can drive me crazy spoiling them."

"Nine? We are adopting nine children?" That might be a little much, but Seto was game to try.

"Yeah, why not? We - I do mean we - can afford them and my writing allows me plenty of time. You don't know what you want to do yet, but I'm sure you'll make time for what's important." He grinned, his cheeks bright red. "I've always wanted a huge family Seto. I know that it's not really popular or 'green' or even fiscally sound, but I want... I want to raise kids around me like flowers. We have the love and we have the money. Why don't we?"

Seto gave him a smiling look. "Lets start with one or two and go from there? I'm not saying no. In fact I'm all for our own baseball team. I just want to take it easy. Let's find us first, so we have a good foundation to grow our flowers in okay?"

"Well I didn't mean anytime soon. Couple years. Right now I just want to practice making babies." He gave a small flirty wink.

Seto wagged his eyebrows meaningfully. "Me too. I..."

A low voice from behind them interrupted. "Before this gets any more intimate, I should say I'm here."

They turned to look at the slim, brown haired, blue eyed man standing behind them. "Ah... Raymond." Jou murmured. "It's good to see you again." For a moment discomfort was written clearly on the blond's open face, then it wiped away and he turned to Seto. "Seto Kaiba, this is Raymond Walters. I've told you all about him."

"Twins?" He asked at the same time Jou burst out "Twins! That's great."

"A boy and a girl." Raymond beamed proudly. "We named the girl Kwanita, in Zuni it means God is gracious. Our son is Whakan. It means 'sacred' in the Sioux language. They take after their mother with golden hair and green-gold eyes."

"They sound gorgeous. I can't wait to meet them." Jou said sincerely.
Seto smiled at his lover's enthusiasm. It was obvious Jou loved children. Word of their arrival must have spread because people were walking up the path to greet them and it became even more obvious as they strolled along the path toward their proposed honeymoon cabin. The Natural Beauty Settlement seemed to have children of all ages, from toddlers to teens, roaming around.

Some greeted Jou like he was an old friend, some who were too young to remember his visit, bounded up to him talking a mile a minute, like he was someone they knew would come and had just been waiting for him to show up, and some, the youngest, simply seemed drawn to him because the other children were there. To his surprise, as soon as Jou introduced him, the children included Seto in their enthusiastic chatter.

They made it to the cabin, although it took much longer than Seto anticipated because of the group of adults and children clamoring to meet and speak to them. As discreetly as possible Seto moved from the center of the hoard to sit on the steps of the cabin. He wasn't anti-social, but he wasn't the most comfortable with large groups of people all yammering at him at once. Put him in front of an audience and he was pure showman, but this was not the same. He was relieved when people took the hint and left him alone. Or so he thought.

Raymond sat down next to him, smiling slightly. "You are exactly as I expected." He said softly. "He talked a lot about you when he was here before."

When Seto didn't say anything the other brunet went on like he had. "You're jealous. You don't need to be. I think the only reason he touched me at all was because of our resemblance. When we were intimate, it was your name he whispered, although I'm not sure he remembers that."

"I'm not jealous. I never had to drug him or trick him to make love with me." Seto turned and pinned the other man with a hard glare. "What the hell was that about? Why did you drug him? He told me he would have been willing without the drugs and that you knew it." He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So why do it? Why mess with his head like that? Why take away his choice and his memories? What did you want to hide?"

"The effects of herbs on people can be unpredictable, especially if they've already ingested other potent chemicals. We didn't know that Joey had taken part on a peyote ceremony the day before. We only meant to bump his sex drive. My wife and I were emotionally charged with the pregnancy hormones and needed a vigorous lover. Our herbs mixed with what was already in his system. That's all there was to it, nothing sinister or a hidden agenda." Raymond explained quietly. "If we had known he thought that way - felt that way - we would have explained long ago."

"He says you took off after your 'lost weekend.'" Seto challenged.

"I did. I needed time alone to assess what I'd learned about myself. I... I had never been with a man until then. I enjoyed every moment of it and wouldn't trade the experience for anything, but I learned that penetration, of a man inside my body, was something that I simply couldn't tolerate ever again. I just... the invasion was too much for my psyche." The candid response caught Seto by surprise.

"He's a great lover, you enjoyed him but you don't want...?"

"I don't. Penetration is too subjugating for me, and while I enjoyed it that one time, I never want to do it again." Raymond was completely positive about it. "I will stick to my first preference - women - specifically my gorgeous blonde wife." At the doubtful look on Seto's face, Raymond added "I once ate at a restaurant that served baby ducks, with their feathers and beaks boiled in their eggs just before hatching. I ate it, because my wife wanted to try it. The taste wasn't bad, but I never want to eat it again and just the memory makes me heave. That's how I feel about sex with a man. Okay?"
"Hnnn..." Seto studied him carefully, from his short crop of chestnut hair to his boot-clad feet. "Fine. I'll explain it to him so there is no more question of what happened or why."

"Thank you, Seto." The other man murmured. "So, I know about you from Joey's stories of that time, although he was rather angry with you and I'm sure you have changed from the person in his memories or he wouldn't be with you, why don't you tell me about yourself. You raised your brother didn't you?"

"Yes." Seto acknowledged briefly. There was no way he was going to discuss anything personal with this man. There was something about him that was jangling along the base of his spine like some kind of early warning system, but for once his acute senses failed to tell him exactly what was wrong.

"How old were you, twelve? Thirteen?"

"I was fifteen when I gained full custody of Mokuba." Even that seemed like too much information.

"Ah the hardship of that must have been incredible. He's an adult now isn't he?" Raymond didn't wait for Seto's answer. "You must be glad to be an empty-nester. I believe I heard you saying you wanted to adopt. Were you serious about that or were you humoring Joey?" A tiny smiled cured his lips as he looked across to watch the blond tickling a little boy. "He's a natural parent."

"I don't lie to him about anything, except maybe if his pants make his ass look flat." For a second humor flickered to life at the memory of that conversation. "I certainly wouldn't humor him about something as important as children." He hesitated for a moment, then just to make things perfectly clear to the man, he said "I want Jounouchi Katsuya, Joey Wheeler, with every bit of me, and if that means wanting children, I want children. There is nothing I wouldn't do for him - nothing." He didn't mean it to sound like a warning, but for some reason it did. "In this case though, I want children, lots of children. He wants nine and I think that might be just enough, although fewer might be better, depending on the children. Some need more parenting than others."

"I believe you mean that." Raymond nodded, a single dip of his head. "I feel the same for my Eliza. She wants children, she gets children. She wants the moon, I will build a spaceship. If she walked into a burning building I'd follow without hesitation." The bright eyes were sincere and steady with his absolute conviction. Whatever was setting off Seto's alarms, there was no denying the absolute devotion the man had to his wife.

"Then we understand each other." Seto acceded. "As long as you know my husband is off limits, I will refrain from murdering you." He said it with complete sincerity.

Raymond nodded. "We do indeed. Your possessive violence is certainly a surprise in such a sophisticated man. You wear your modern man well, but your caveman is very close to the surface. It is an interesting combination. Your genetic imprinting must be very unique. You would be a great breeder, if you were so inclined."

"I am not." Seto snapped. He didn't care to talk about that kind of non-sequitur information. As long as they had an agreement. They stay the hell away from Jou and he would refrain from ripping them apart if they got too close or too familiar.

A tiny smirk on the other man's face caught Seto by surprise. Before he could pursue what was amusing Raymond, Jou collapsed on the stairs next to him, dropping his head onto his shoulder. "Save me. The kids think I'm some kind of tree they must climb."

Seto looked at the boy and girl impatiently trying to pull Jou back up. "Kwanita and Whakan?"
When they nodded, Seto smiled at them. "You really think he's a tree?"

"He's taller than mom and dad!" The blond girl explained.

"Huh... Well..." He rose slowly and held out his arms. "I'm his better half and I'm much taller. I think I make a better tree."

Whakan tilted his head to the side as his hazel-green eyes studied Seto carefully. "Not that much, but a little. You sure you don't mind Mister Kaiba?" The words were polite, but the glance the boy shared with his twin sister was hauntingly familiar in its mischievous, wicked, playful look. For an instant Seto could swear he was looking at a clone of the young Jounouchi Katsuya. Then the boy laughed almost girlishly and the image faded.

"I don't. Not only will it give Jou a break. He looks all done in doesn't he? But it will get me in practice for our children. I'm told we're having nine of them. I don't think I will have an issue but I need to practice so I can take some of Jou's slack." He sent Jou a teasing look.

Jou gave him a laughing look. "Oh please climb him like a tree. He needs someone to sit on his head. It's getting too big." Almost before he finished speaking, the mighty oak was felled by a hoard of children. Jou laughed aloud at the sight, something he could never have imagined seeing. A movement from the corner of his eye brought his gaze around. Raymond was busy snapping pictures with his digital phone. "I have to have some copies of those. If I give you my email will you send them to me?"

"Of course." Raymond smiled slightly. "I was happy to hear that you had arrived. I volunteered to come up right away. Your arrival, this time as last time, is when we need our friends around us." He waved at his look. "Not like that. That incident is long past and never to be repeated. No, we will celebrate our new joy while you are celebrating your husband. It just seems like it's fated for your happiness to join with ours. That's all."

That surprised Jou, but he disguised it as best he could. In his mind his time with Eliza and Raymond was almost surreal and had no real significance in his life, yet Raymond was acting as if it were world altering and destiny. "Ah yeah." He sort of mumbled as he rose to his feet. "I'm going to rescue Seto - or the kids - because I swear I never would have guessed Seto knew how to play tickle monster games but he hasn't learned to let kids win yet." With a laugh and a whoop he left the other brunet on the porch as he went to rescue Seto - or the kids.

That scene set the stage for the rest of their stay. Jou reacquainted himself with the members of the community, introduced Seto, and met all the new additions. Not just the children, but the people who had been drawn by the lifestyle and the popularity of the candies.

Seto was impressed by the practical side of the settlement. It was completely green, with renewable energy sources and waste management that was second to none. There was very little plastic in the settlement, nothing not biodegradable. Even things that were normally made of plastic were adapted with different materials. What plastic that was unavoidable was recycled in very innovative ways.

The quiet acceptance and warmth was like a balm to Seto. There was nobody 'awed' by him or trying to suck up to him. If anything he was secondary to Jou - a person of almost superstar status in the commune. Seto was perfectly content with that role. He kept a wary eye on Raymond and Eliza, and although his alarms still jangled when he saw them, he couldn't find fault with their behavior. Not once did they do or say anything out of line. Their children were great and they made Seto's heart yearn for the future, for the time he and Jou would share children. They were bright as the sun and as mischievous as kittens. Seto was going to miss them when they left.
Their 'joining party' was loud, happy, and more than a little raunchy. They got gifts that ranged from Ben Wa balls to a multi-colored, fruit-flavored, pleasure-enhancing condom bouquet.

They spent their 'wedding night' trying out various colors and flavors before deciding they liked au natural best. The next morning they woke with warm smiles and even warmer hearts.

They were grateful and happy, but the both knew it was time to move on. If they didn't leave soon, they probably would never want to leave, and as great as the Settlement was, there was a great big country out there calling their names. They ignored the wreck of their cabin to go speak to Calla.

Calla walked them back to their cabin chatting about the party and about the parties of the past. They all stopped in surprise to see Raymond and Eliza leaving the cabin. "What...?" Seto started to ask only for the small busty blond to interrupt by holding out a small bucket and the natural trash can liners. "We came to clean up and make the bed." Eliza explained, smiling warmly. "You are typical guys. Messy! Don't worry it's all clean." She grinned naughtily. "Which one of you used the red condom? It's my own creation and I want to know how the warming lotion and enhanced arousal herbs worked."

Seto didn't really care for the woman who had been Jou's lover, but he wasn't sure if it was jealousy or something else. There was just something flighty, flakey about her. He could never imagine her as a parent. Seto coughed and his cheeks turned pink. "I used the red. It worked... it was fine."

"Great. I'm thinking of patenting the mixture. Did you use the green Joey? Did you enjoy it?" When the blond man nodded she grinned and with a happy look she hooked her arm through Raymond's and led him away. "I'll call you guys if I need a testimonial."

Jou gave him a perplexed look. "Why didn't you tell them you used them all. You were their market research."

"They might have been hurt if they thought you didn't use one." Seto prevaricated. He didn't want them to know any more than they had to. They set his teeth on edge and he didn't trust them for an inch. He had enjoyed their company - marginally - and he adored their children, but he simply couldn't bring himself to like them. He attributed his aversion to knowing they were Jou's lovers during a time when the pain and emptiness in his own life was scorching him like a desert sun.

"Hmm." Jou was too perceptive to have missed his dislike of them but he didn't answer. If Jou was honest with himself there had been something strange in the air a few times when he'd been with them. It hadn't been sexual or even some kind of weird memory thing. It had been strain and something they had been at pains to hide. "Let's make sure we're all packed and go get the dogs from Kwanita and Whakan. The pups are going to miss this place as much as we are."

Which was true. Scapegoat and Kit had been ecstatic during their stay. For some reason Kit did not mind the children and even greeted them with licks and happy chuffs. The pups were welcomed, petted, and completely adored. Strangely there were few 'pets.' Most of the animals at the Settlement were useful, be it as food sources or transport.

Calla grinned and pulled out a stack of books. "Sign these before you go? We're going to run an internet special. You don't do book signings often so we are going to advertise these heavily."

Seto rolled his eyes. "I'll load the car and get the pups. You sign."

"Thanks Seto." Jou gave him a vaguely apologetic look that the brunet waved away.

"Wait - wait. Sign one of these too. I want one with both of your signatures. Makes it more
personal." She held out one of already signed books to Seto along with a pen.

After a quick look at Jou, Seto took the pen and scrawled his signature next to Jou's. With a quick wave he started loading the car. They were on the road in just under fifteen minutes. Neither noticed Calla wave after them as they turned on the road or her rueful, exasperated expression that turned to wry amusement as she stroked the book Seto had signed.

They were well on the way, with Seto having chosen Las Vegas as their next destination before the brunet questioned, "You disappeared, leaving me to watch the kids. How did we get volunteered for daycare duty? And why did you bail on me?" The brunet shook. "Never mind, I had a great time. I like kids. Nobody saw you leave, so I assume you went to the sacred place that Oli wanted you to visit."

"I did. It wasn't touched. Oli drew some symbols in the earth that I could still make out. They hadn't been disturbed. It was like a time capsule. I could swear Oli had just left there." Jou frowned and sighed. "But..."

"But what?" Seto gave him a curious look.

"I still feel uneasy. I expected it to be a great relief and it wasn't. I feel like there is something I'm missing there." The frown deepened. "I kept seeing Oli's hummingbird. This morning I swear I saw a snow goose and a heron on our way back to the cabin."

Seto didn't tell Jou that he had seen them too and it had cemented his desire to get out of NBS Rocks quickly. He wasn't superstitious but he had to admit to more than coincidence when it came to seeing those birds. "I wish I could help, but... The only vibe I got that was off was about Ray and Eliza. If Whakan didn't look like a blond version of Raymond I'd think they were yours. Kwanita and Whakan are very like you Katsuya."

"Yeah, but it could just be that they are kids. You always used to say I was immature. The thought did cross my mind too though. Except you're right - they are twins and Whakan is definitely Raymond's child."

"So something else then. It'll come to you and then we'll go back." Seto soothed.

"Yeah, I'd love to see the kids again. I can take or leave Raymond and Eliza. Didn't they seem creepy? Lurking about, watching us? I don't remember them being like that." Jou cleared his throat. "So Las Vegas huh? Vegas Baby..." He broke into a very bad imitation of Elvis, singing Viva Las Vegas (Youtube link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYSGOlfm1e4 )

Seto tolerated it for about two seconds - about one and a half out of sheer love - before interrupting to explain. "I don't trust Mokuba not to try to track us and I don't like living poor. I don't want to be dependent on you and I've worked all of my life, I want to play. So, we are going to Las Vegas. I am going to borrow some of your cash as a stake and make us more cash than we will be able to use on a dozen trips."

"Kaiba, you may be a genius and you may know games, but Vegas bankrupts people like you." Jou cautioned.

"There is a reason Seto Kaiba is banned from High Roller rooms in Vegas. I went through a phase where I wanted to try other card games. Poker and blackjack are no challenge. I nearly broke the bank at the Mirage." A wicked grin crossed his face. "I doubt anyone would recognize me and I'll stick to low stakes tables. Less than five thousand. If I do that across three casinos and fifteen tables winning at the ten to one we will have two hundred and fifty thousand dollars by the end of the first
night. We will go again the next, for another five hundred thousand, then we will take in a show." A
sidelong look. "I've heard Zoomanity is quite... interesting. Cirque Du Soliel."

"Sounds good. Then before we leave, we can catch a sky show. I've always wanted to see the Elvis
Impersonators, maybe see the flying Elvis's." Jou grinned at the thought. "Think of all the rhinestone
glittering in the air."

Seto chuckled and leaned back to check on his pup. "Hmmm Jou, have you noticed Scapegoat is
cringing from Kit? And he has a scratch on his nose."

"Did you notice she went into heat? She went out again a day later. I'm glad he's cringing, it means
she probably nutted him for trying to ride her." Jou came back surprisingly.

"I didn't notice. That explains it though. Only a day? I thought it lasted longer, besides, isn't she too
young?"

"First season, and it was short. Don't worry daddy, your baby isn't going to make you grandpa yet."

"Or in the future." Seto turned to glare at both pups. "Fixed, both of them, at the earliest opportunity.
Can you imagine how hideous the pups would be?"

"Half snob-pom and half wild-sheltie? Adorable not hideous. Fluffy balls of orange and black.
Maybe even calico."

"I believe they are called 'Poshie', now that I think on it." Seto admitted grudgingly.

"Poshie! Seto those pups are adorable. Almost as cute as the Papillon." Jou enthused. He was a
sucker for cute and fluffy. Shoot him.


"Says the owner of the ultimate ball of fluff." Jou snipped right back.

Surprisingly Seto chuckled. "Well that is true. And I wouldn't trade him for anything." For the first
time in days he snapped his fingers and Scapegoat, true to his training, scrambled into the front seat
and crawled up on Seto's shoulder. "Hey boy. Sorry about the blue balls." Seto stroked the shorn
hair gently.

Scapegoat whimpered like he completely understood what Seto had said and dropped down onto the
familiar broad shoulder, making little whining noises that sounded to both Jou and Seto as if the pup
was telling them all about it. An occasional yip from the back seat reinforced that impression.

When the pup quieted, Seto sighed and settled into his seat. "Almost eleven hours of driving. That's
non-stop. We could stop for a night in Reno, it's about four hours. I can get my stake there."

"Sounds good to me. I'm kind of low on reserves anyway and need to pick up a job. You go play
Reno High Roller, I'll go sweep floors or something." Jou nodded agreeably. After a moment he
reached down and took Seto's hand. "Tell me about your parents, your real parents, not that asshat
who adopted you."

"I... What do you want to know?" Seto wasn't sure what to say or where to begin.

"Start with your birth name and go from there. Your parents named you Seto didn't they? There has
to be a story behind it and I'm sure they shared." He encouraged his lover. Now that Seto was
healing, it was time to bring up the things that had damaged him so badly. It was always best to start
at the beginning.

Slowly, haltingly, Seto began to speak, memories he had long since put away coming to his mind easily, and as Jou asked, left his lips to form pictures and share emotions Seto barely recognized as his own until they burst out.

Several times he caught himself on the verge of laughter, anger, and even tears, as the memories poured through him and from him. His words gave the feelings power and strength, freeing the emotions he had bottled for so long. When they threatened to overwhelm him and drag him down, to steal his ability to think and reason, Jou guided him back with simple words, touches, and even sometimes a small jog of the steering wheel to remind him of the here and now.

He was completely amazed when he saw the Reno city limits sign. "I've been talking for four hours?"

"We, but yeah. I think you had a lot to talk about, and before you apologize or whatever, I asked because I wanted to know. I love you, you know that. But, you gotta know you are a giant mystery wrapped in an enigma, stored in a puzzle box. I want to hear about everything so I can see the real you, the one that I fell in love with even though I only saw him a couple times. I want the you that's sexy with freckles and waffles in the morning, and I want the you that's powerful and in control, wearing a suit and ready to take on the world. It's all part of you and I want to know it all."

"You'll get bored if I don't maintain some mystery." Seto was elated, and terrified to his toes. Nobody had ever wanted to know so much about him.

"Hell no. Bored? Kaiba Seto, I am going have my life to get to know you and I don't think I'll know even half by the time I cock up my toes. So expect me to bug you in the afterlife and the next dozen lives." Jou let his eyes cut to his passenger. "Did I just scare the fuck out of you?"

"Hell no. Scared? Jounouchi Katsuya," Seto mimicked. "I'm going to do the same to you so it's fair. Only the next dozen lives? I will have to come up with something else then to keep you interested."

Jou grinned. "Let's find an RV park. We probably won't spend the night but I want the camper safe. If we're lucky there will be some retired old lady who 'loves' dogs and will watch the pups for us. If not, well... We will manage."

"Yes, we will." Seto agreed, reaching up to stroke Scapegoat before putting him in the back seat to curl with Kit.

They lucked out. The first RV park they pulled into was reasonably priced, well lit and maintained, and had a 'pet yard' that the man operating the office watched from his window. While Jou dealt with the registration, the man, 'Mick' by his name tag, snapped his fingers and leaned forward suddenly. "I know you guys."

"Uh..." Jou really didn't want to deal with fans. "Well..."

"You're the Half Moon Bay heroes. You rescued all them people at the RV park down in Half Moon Bay when some kids caught it on fire right?" He grinned at them. "You know we're a franchised chain right? Our franchise has issued you guys free passes for any of our campgrounds. Let me call and get you the information and cards faxed over."

"Ah well that's..." Jou started to demur only to have Seto interrupt.

"Fantastic. Thank you so much for telling us." The freckled brunet smiled slightly. "It will help our budget out a lot."
"Nah, thank you! Those poor people were going to be barbecue if not for you. Stupid kids. I heard that one is going up for two years and the other was supposed to go to some ranch out in the middle of nowhere to help out a family member in a bad way. The judge allowed that as long as the boy stayed on the ranch under the eye of his uncle." The older man grumbled "Better than he deserved, but maybe it'll make men of them."

Seto couldn't agree more but he could tell by the tense set of Jou's shoulders it wasn't a topic he wanted to discuss. "As long as nobody got seriously hurt." Seto murmured.

"Right, well you guys are in the only shaded space left, lot seven. When you're ready to go out, just drop the pups here. I got food and water for them if they need it. If it's after the office closes I live in the blue camper at lot one. I have a nice fenced yard and my wife has a couple of poodles." He laughed gleefully. "Wait til I tell her you guys are here. She'll probably want to meet you. I hope you don't mind if she feeds you some peach pie?"

"We'd be honored to meet her as well." Seto grinned back. "I love peach pie." The brunet leaned forward as if confiding a great secret. "I always get it with three scoops of vanilla ice cream."

"Never tried it that way, but I'll give it a shot. One scoop though." The manager laughed and patted his round belly. "Gotta watch my girlish figure."

Jou and Seto both chuckled at that. "We'll look forward to it," Jou said easily. "For now we have to get the camper set, then I'm going to find some work and Seto's going to tour the sites. You know anyone looking for daily help?"

"Well, down on the strip they are always looking for people to do everything from serve drinks to hold signs on the sidewalk. If you just ask at a couple places I'm sure you will be okay. But you might want to leave that fancy car here because there are some desperate people out there. Take a taxi, or walk. It's only about five blocks."

"We'll walk. Thanks for the tip." Jou hooked his arm through Seto's and tugged him back to the car.

"Hmmm... You are not happy with me." Seto hazarded.

"I'm not," Jou agreed tightly. "I don't want people to know who I - we - are. They will treat us like celebrities and I don't want that. I like hanging with the real people behind the ones who try to meet us." His anger was practically rolling off him in waves.

Seto flinched and chewed his lips, drawing blood as he gazed unseeing out the windshield. "I know that. I do... I just... I thought how much easier it would be if I had a larger stake," He rasped. "I'm sorry Katsuya... I'm really sorry I... Did I ruin... I ruined your trip? Your book?"

Jou wanted to slap himself for his own stupidity. Seto was still working towards normal, his emotions completely bare and open for the first time. He was vulnerable in the way of a small child, and after the rollercoaster of the ride his memories took him on during the drive down here, his love was too raw to deal with anger, anyone's anger, much less the misdirected anger of the one person he trusted. He continued to call himself all kinds of stupid and insensitive as he watched a small drop of blood slip from the corner of Seto's lip.

With a sigh Jou leaned over and caught that tiny droplet on his tongue, tracing it back to the source. "You don't have the power to ruin my trip or my book. Only I have that power. I'm the one who should be sorry. I got angrier than I should have. I have a headache from the sun. I should have put the top up when it started. It's not your fault Seto. It was a good call, not just because of your stake, but because we now have dog-sitters." Nuzzling into Seto's crop of streaky red-brown hair he
whispered "Forgive me for being a prick?"

His heart gave a painful lurch as Seto turned and burrowed into his arms like a small child seeking comfort. He figured that was the only answer he was going to get for a while. With one arm keeping Seto close to his heart, he carefully maneuvered the car and camper into their parking spot. After parking the car and killing the engine he sat quietly and held his wounded love, mentally kicking his own ass for several minutes before switching to mentally beating the living daylights out of Mokuba, before switching back to kicking his own ass.

An hour later they were all set up and ready to go to town. Mick smiled and led them to the pen. "I'll put out food and water. If you guys aren't home by closing I'll take them to my place. Me and the missus go to bed about ten. If you're not back by then you can pick them up tomorrow morning."

"I'll have to come back at least once." Seto smiled slightly. "The little black dog is trained to eat only from my hand. He's already had breakfast but he would miss his dinner. I will be back to make sure he eats. Thank you for watching them." Nowhere was a sign of the man who had clung and whimpered in Jou's arms. Seto Kaiba was back in control, at least on the surface. That would have to do for now.

"Oh yeah? I guess travelling around like you do it's safer that way." Mick nodded. "Hey, I have some tokens from the Bonanza. They are for customers here. Just five dollar chips, and you get two each."

"Bonanza?" Seto asked, tilting his head slightly.

"Yeah, most games are reasonable, seventy-five cents to a dollar, on up to five dollars. Slots and video poker mostly, but some real tables too. Sometimes they have a twenty-five hundred dollar event but not this week."

"Sounds perfect for our limited budget." The genius brunet was already calculating the number of wins he would have to make to move up to a slightly higher paying establishment. He took the tokens and went out to pet Scapegoat one more time.

Jou smiled and leaned on the desk. "I know it's gonna sound strange, but could you not tell anyone about us? I mean besides your wife. It's kind of important. We want to keep a low profile after all that happened in Half Moon Bay. You may have noticed, my partner is..."

"Shy? Yeah kind of. I mean he's friendly, but you can see he's not comfortable with people. Dunno why he would be so gun-shy but I get it. My wife is the same way. Sometimes it's hard to get her to leave the house just to go to the store. She says there are too many people."

If it worked, then Jou would go with it. "Thank you. I'm glad you understand."

Mick nodded. "Gotta take care of our special ones. They may not be like everyone else, but that makes them rare and precious. You have fun looking for a job. You don't find something let me know, I'm sure I can call an old friend or something and get the skinny on who needs a strong back."

"Thanks again." The door opened and Seto strolled in. "You ready?"

"Yes I am." Seto jangled the tokens in his pocket. "I'm going to come back with a hundred times this."

Mick laughed at the overconfidence of youth. "You do that son. Just remember us if you strike it rich."
"Definitely." Seto cheered and let Jou lead him out the door.

The strip was literally five blocks from their campground. The Bonanza two blocks further up. Jou noted a few help wanted signs as he walked Seto to the casino and steakhouse. "You sure those tokens are enough? I have..."

"It will be plenty. Katsuya, trust me on this. If I lose it all I will simply find a job and earn enough to try again. Don't worry, I'm good."

"I know you're good. It's just that these kind of places are very deceptive and they..."

"I know what they are Katsuya. I'll be fine." Seto gave him a warm, sweet, kiss right out on the sidewalk, in front of everyone. It shut Jou up as nothing else could. "Now go to work."

Jou decided to stick close, just down the block, from the Bonanza. That way if Seto needed another stake Jou was nearby. Unfortunately the help wanted signs he'd spied just a couple moments before were gone. With a frown he turned and went up the other side. He was eight blocks away from the Bonanza when he got lucky.

The Bassett was a small place, very old fashioned, quaint almost. There were a dozen tables on the first floor, and a curved wooden staircase led to a second floor where two heavy wooden tables dominated the area. Hardwood floors and discreet lamps provided the ambiance of a bygone era, and the bar, with its bartender wearing a derby hat, white shirt and suspenders, added to look. The servers wore white crinolines and black skirts that stopped exactly at their knees and their white lace shirts with mother-of-pearl buttons, black stockings and low, lace-up boots completed the total look of a retro gentleman's club.

They needed a bar-back for the evening, one who could carry a keg of beer or ale up from the basement and take a turn busing tables as needed. His uniform would be provided, but had to be returned at the end of his shift. He would make eight dollars an hour and get to keep all tips. It sounded perfect to Jou and he accepted without hesitation. The manager gave him a dubious look, then gestured for him to follow. He was going to start as soon as he could get into a decent fitting uniform.

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Seto watched Jou walk down the block and smiled slightly. His love so obviously was worried about him. There was no real need. Nothing here could or would disturb Seto. Jou obviously didn't realize that it was Seto's reaction to Jou's anger, not general upset from too much drama that had set him off earlier. Seto wasn't going to enlighten him either. Instead he was going to show Jou that Seto Kaiba was only weak with him, could only be weak with him.

The Bonanza was a haven for truth in advertising. Touristy, western themed and gambling. Seto doubted anyone but the owners had ever actually made bonanza, but that was going to change. He didn't make the mistake of sitting at the first table in the room. There were eight tables in all and he made a point of checking each one out. The four poker tables he rule out almost immediately. There were too many wannabe poker kings that bet outrageously on nothing. Seto wanted to play the hand, not 'all in' stupidly. He wasn't like Yugi, putting his faith in the fickle heart of the cards.

After assessing the play and players, as well as the dealer, Seto chose a blackjack table in the back of the room. Less noise and distraction, more serious, thoughtful play, and most importantly, the dealer looked tired and close to the end of his shift. Tired workers were sloppy workers.

His first bets were cautious, getting a feel for the table and the cards, running the numbers through
his brain. To his surprise it actually took work to focus. Not much, but enough for him to know that rigid insular training he'd always used could fade without constant practice. It was actually a relief to know his 'trained' focus could relax that much. He still had the skill, it just wasn't automatic.

When he was sure he could run even with the table his bets were less cautious. His first hundred won he felt a rush akin to when he won a major contract. His first hundred won he felt a rush akin to when he won a major contract. When he lost half of it on a reckless bet, he almost felt as bad as when he lost to Yugi. It reminded him of his strategy and to run the numbers no matter how good he thought his hand was. It was the only reminder he needed. His pile of tokens rose steadily from the initial four - twenty dollars - to over a hundred.

He knew that card games didn't have IRS reporting laws, so he didn't worry about paperwork from that end, but he didn't want to make too big a pile at one time because some reporter might make it a story and that was something Seto wanted to avoid. Not only did he want to alert any of the casinos that Seto Kaiba was on the premises but he also didn't want his name to appear in any online database or news source. He knew his brother very well, and Mokuba was likely to be searching for him through every available resource. Regretfully, he cashed out at a winning streak of five hundred dollars and after receiving five crisp one hundred dollar bills and four five dollar bills, left the Bonanza. There was a place just up the street, the Eldorado. Hopefully it would be as profitable as the Bonanza.

More tables, more people, more serious players, and an intriguing game called Pai Gow and Pai Gow Poker. After several minutes of watching the game, Seto decided to buy, mentally frowning at the thirty dollar buy in that forced him to use one of his crisp hundreds, but he resolved to make his winnings proportional, so instead of five hundred profit he would cash out at seven-fifty. The game was slow and more of strategy than of luck, and it was based on dominoes, something he had excelled at during his 'experimentation' phase.

A young Japanese man, perhaps twenty two, was dealing the game. With each hand he would say something like 'come on' in heavily accented English. At least that is what the Americans around Seto seemed to think. Seto knew the truth. The dealer wasn't saying 'come on' he was saying 'kamo' meaning sitting duck or sucker. Occasionally the man would say what sounded like heavily accented 'come on and get it.' In reality he was saying 'kamonegi', meaning 'here comes a sucker just begging to lose his money.' It amused Seto, and at the same time sparked the desired to put the upstart in his place. He was an employee of the Eldorado and as such should treat guests with respect.

He was tempted to speak to the man in their native language, but decided to hold that information until later. With a small, cool, smile he set out to teach the man a lesson. Half a dozen hands later the other players started dropping out. Three hands later, Seto and the dealer were the only people playing on the table, although several interested people watched their game. Another two hands and the lack of customer service came out in force when the dealer lost yet again and snarled "Korinaiyatsu."

Seto didn't allow himself to grin at the breach. He had been called a lot worse than a jerk. He doubled his bet again and the dealer froze. "House limit is five thousand. I need to call the manager."

"Do so." Seto allowed. Technically he had only bet twenty-five hundred, but because it was a double down, the house would have to pay five thousand if they lost. The twenty-five hundred was from the seven of eleven hands he'd won.

A signal from the dealer and a small, bustling Japanese man wearing more gold bling than a rap singer hurried to the table. The dealer explained in rapid fire Japanese that contained more curse words and insults to Seto than any of explanation. The manager gave Seto a cursory glance, looked at the cards in the dealer's hands, and gave a curt nod. Seto wasn't worried about what the dealer had.
He had been dealt the wild card and an ace of hearts. The table cards were a flop of jack, queen, and ten of hearts. The turn and river were a pair of nines. They didn't worry him in the slightest. He had a royal flush, completely unbeatable. Even four of a kind wouldn't beat it. His second hand was two pair, jack and queen.

The manager himself placed the chips in the center of the table. "We accept your wager." He smiled slightly. "Shall we see?" As Seto expected the dealer's first hand held a pair of nines, giving him four of a kind, and his second hand held a queen, giving him a pair.

Seto allowed his lips to curve in a smirk that felt like an old friend. "Good - but expected." With a dramatic flourish that was famous around the world, he flipped his own cards displaying the royal flush. While the audience and manager were gasping in shock, he flipped his two pair. "And that is also expected. My win I believe." Seto stated coolly.

While the dealer cursed virulently the manager shoved the chips across the table. "Sir, you have broken the floor limits. I must ask you to move to the high roller's room."

Seto stood and scooped up the chips. With a scant bow he said in fluent Japanese. "No thank you. I will find a new game to play, one where the dealers do not insult customers." He smirked and flipped the cards in a fancy, flourishing move. "One that has skilled players as well. This was no challenge." Without another look at either of them, he walked to the cashier's cage. He now had five thousand, five hundred, and twenty dollars. That was plenty for a stake in Las Vegas. Cheerful, he strolled back to the campground. He had to feed Scapegoat and then he would see about making one of the packaged meals from the cabin.

Mick wasn't at the office, so Seto walked down to his camper. Coughing slightly, he knocked on the door. Mick chuckled. "Lost your stake? Well don't worry about it. Come on in. You weren't kidding when you said that dog of yours wouldn't eat a bite. The missus has been trying to get him to eat for almost an hour." He stepped back and gestured Seto into the camper.

"I hope he wasn't too much trouble." Seto was greeted by a happy yip and the scrabbling of claws on tile. He bent to pet the pup. "I'll feed him."

The woman seated on the couch stood slowly, her slim hand reaching for the white cane next to her. "No trouble at all. He's quite a scamp. Scapegoat is an interesting name. Your Kit girl is a shy thing, hiding under the stairs and growling at anyone who comes close." The woman held out her free hand. "I'm Marie, Mick's wife."

"A pleasure to meet you ma'am. Please sit back down. I'll take the dogs and we'll get them out of your hair." He said softly as he shook the unexpectedly strong hand.

"You don't have to go so soon. We don't get many people visiting." She smiled in his direction, remarkably accurate despite the obviously sightless eyes. She sank back into her seat, setting her cane within easy reach and folding her hands neatly on her lap.

"Thank you for the invitation. My husband and I will stop by and visit when he gets home. I want to make him a nice meal." Seto explained, watching both Mick and his wife for signs of discomfort at the open announcement of their relationship. While he watched he absently gave Scapegoat the signal to eat. The pup dove headfirst into the dry kibble.

The fading smile widened at the sound of Scapegoat crunching his food. "Oh going to make your hubby a good meal then? Well you boys come down for some peach pie for dessert."

"We'd be happy to if it isn't too late." Seto agreed warmly, a tiny curl of relief in his belly. It hadn't
been difficult, claiming Jou as his husband. "Kit is under the stairs? I'll just go get her." He said it with more confidence than he felt. His relationship with the wild thing was shaky at best and he was positive he would probably end up bleeding from this encounter.

"I'll help you." Mick offered. "She is all fangs and claws. For a while there I thought she was a wild cat."

"That's more accurate than you know." The brunet chuckled. "Let's go get her." He turned back to the woman staring silently at the wall. "Ma'am, would you mind holding Scapegoat for a while longer?"

"Of course not." She wrapped her arms around the pup he carefully placed on her lap. "He's a good boy. My poodles are such lazy old things, they are sound asleep in their room." She chuckled slightly. "Spoiled babies, but I love them very much. I used to style their hair with ribbons and bows and paint their nails. They were gorgeous. Perhaps you will meet them tomorrow."

"Ah...It will be my pleasure." Seto cleared his throat. "Out the back?"

Mick led him out the back door and across the attached patio. "Under here." He didn't need to say anything though, Kit's rumbling growls told him where the little bitch had curled up.

Seto knelt down and crawled behind the steps. "Kit, Come!" He tried calling her firmly. All he got was a deeper snarling growl.

"Temperamental little thing." Mick observed. "Try talking to her nice. Women like sweet words. Most don't like being ordered around."

"She's a wildcat and she's jealous of me with Scapegoat." Seto mumbled.

"My wife used to love it when I called her that and sometimes jealousy can make for some fun times. Not much fun these days." The older man said sadly. "Now...when I call her my wildcat it makes her cry."

It wasn't Seto's way to get involved with other people's lives, but something about the proud, squared shoulders and straight back of the woman touched him. She had looked so brave, and so sad. "She's blind. Was there an accident?"

"She has Keratoconus. It's rare and genetic for her. It's not... Usually people don't go blind from it, and people who can afford it can get cornea transplants to restore vision, but... but our insurance company refused to pay for it because it's not life threatening and we can't afford the fifty thousand dollars on our own. It isn't covered by another company because it is pre-existing." Anger and hopelessness filled Mick's normally jovial voice, then he coughed and turned to the problem at hand - retrieving Kit. "I got a fishing net that might work."

"You going to try gambling again? Thought you lost your stake." Mick said dubiously.

"I don't have the Bonanza tokens any longer but I will be all right." Seto reassured. "I'll see you in the morning. Please tell your lady we'll stop by for peach pie for breakfast."

Seto was horrified to see the man reach into his wallet and pull out a few faded bills. "Mick, you..."

"Take these and play them for me will you? Win or lose, play them. They are my birthday money. I
don't want anything but for Marie to get better. So, anything you win will go towards my wildcat's surgery." The old man smiled winsomely. "Who knows? Even if we don't get enough for the surgery, we might get enough to put in a few of the devices they say she needs so she can get around better."

Seto took the bills, nodding slowly. "Yes. I will play them for you. Thank you." Mick showed him around the trailer and back to the sidewalk. As Seto walked back up the strip he reflected that this might be a better way. He had been going to talk to Jou about using his cards to pay for the surgery or maybe arranging some kind of endowment, but this way, Seto could do it with the stake given by Mick, and since there was no IRS reporting of table games, he didn't have to worry about taxes.

He started his quest at the Vagabond Casino, buying in at a five dollar table using the old bills Mick had given him. An hour later he cashed out with ten thousand in hundred dollar bills. Next on his list was the Silver Legacy. His first few hands he lost almost five hundred, then he caught on to the shuffler routine and forty minutes later he left eight thousand up. He didn't leave because he wanted to. The manager asked him to leave after he refused to go to the high roller's tables.

Two more casinos passed in a blur to Seto. He was completely focused on the goal and the games. He was up to forty thousand, all in hundred dollar bills carried in a hastily purchased 'man-purse.' He really didn't care if it looked gay - he was gay. No way was he letting his winnings out of his sight. He chose his final casino - The Bassett - because of the old world quaintness of it. After the hype and glitz of the previous casinos, something quieter was just what he wanted.

It was more crowded than he expected, but he found the tables to be exactly the type he wanted to play at. Seto bought in and settled down to reach his goal.

Jou found the job was much more than simple running for the bar and bussing. He was moved from one station to another, acting as bar-back, busboy, relief bartender, short order cook, dishwasher, and even server. He had just finished loading the dishwasher and was going to pull a few bottles of champagne from the wine cellar when the bartender grabbed his shoulder. "Joey, could you go over to table six and get the guy to order something? On the house. He is a hot player and the manager wants to distract him. None of the girls were able to get his attention, and since he's carrying a purse, the boss thinks a cute guy might be more to his taste."

"Distract him? Look, I didn't hire on to be a rent-boy." Joey snapped.

"No, no. Just get him to drink something, maybe smile at him and make him forget the cards for a minute. That's all." The bartender soothed.

"I'll go over and offer food and drink, that's all. If he gets grabby like that chick you sent me to serve earlier, I'll 'distract' him with my fist, then I'll do the same to you and the manager. I've told you guys I'm married." Joey snapped and stalked off.

About halfway to the table he caught sight of the very familiar tumbled auburn streaked, chestnut hair. A wicked grin crossed his mobile features as he wheeled around to the kitchen. Fresh peach pie and three scoops of vanilla ice cream. It wouldn't distract Seto, Joey knew that, but it might amuse him.

With newly acquired skill, Jou assessed the pile of money in front of Seto, his brows lifting in surprise and admiration. Close to six thousand. Not bad at all. He was about six feet away from his lover and closing fast when Seto stiffened and swiveled his head around to fix an intent blue gaze on him. With a big rolicking grin Jou held out the tray, offering the plate. "Dessert?"

Seto gave him a small nod. "Put it on the table please." Critically he eyed the uniform. "You need
more color. Black and white are too stark."

Jou nodded and took the hint. He turned and strolled back to the bartender. "I'm done. I'll change and take my pay."

"Night's not done yet." The bartender protested as he signalled to the manager to come over.

The manager, a man just about Jou's age hurried across the room. "What?"

"Mark, Joey says he is done. Wants his pay and is going to leave." The bartender whined.

Mark sighed and shook his head slightly. "Go back behind the bar." When the other man left, the manager turned and gave Jou a small, rueful look. "We asked too much. I'm sorry to see you go. I was going to offer you a permanent job." The carrot was dangled uselessly.

"Nah, it wasn't too bad. Just that my better half wants me to come home. I have to go."

Mark frowned. "I didn't see you talking to anyone, and I have been watching. Joey, are you really married? I mean... Would you like to go out after the club closes?"

"My husband would probably kill you - and tie me to the bed for a week. I'll just change and take my pay." Joey grinned to show there was no hard feelings.

That was true on his part, but Mark's face lost it's engaging expression. "I can't pay you if you don't stay 'til closing." He hesitated for a moment. "Why don't you come to the back office and we'll discuss it. Maybe find a way for you to earn the rest."

Jou gaped at the man, unable to believe what he had just heard. "Dude, did you just suggest that I fuck or blow you to get the money I've already earned?"

Mark's face became sly, then suddenly went blank. Jou felt the presence behind him at the same time. "Uh oh." He mumbled under his breath as he spun to find himself practically in his husband's arms.

Seto's gaze was frozen fire. "Did I understand what I just heard? This man just suggested you perform sexually to receive your wages?"

Before Jou could say a word, Mark rushed into speech. "Please, do not misunderstand. Joey and I are lovers, have been for years. I was just... just flirting with my boyfriend. I apologize, it was completely unprofessional and I..."

"Shut... up..." Seto rasped, he was astounded at the gall of the man, to dare to claim what was his, to claim his husband. Rage, pure clean rage bubbled up in the brunet, threatening to erupt from him in an explosion that would leave devastation for miles. He dropped into Japanese without conscious thought. "Katsuya go change clothes. How much does he owe you?"

"Eh, he's holding my tips Seto. So I don't really know. But wage was eight an hour and it's just over four hours."

"Jou was staring at the barely contained emotion with apprehension. Seto had a lot of rage and whoever it was directed at wasn't likely to walk away unscathed. Mark was in a serious world of shit and didn't even know. Jou knew he should intervene, talk Seto down, but damn it the jerk deserved to be flattened. He turned and spared a pitying glance at the manager, who was staring at them blankly, obviously not understanding their words. The guy was too stupid to realize they were together. There wasn't even a glimmer of understanding. Yeah, the idiot needed a stomping. With a nod he stepped away. "I'm going to change. My husband..." He waved to Seto. "Will take my wages and tips."
Seto glared at the pathetic man as the color leached from his face. "Do you want to repeat your lies? Or will you grovel like the worthless creature you are?"

Marks lips worked soundlessly several times before he spoke again. "He didn't finish his shift, he doesn't get a penny."

A smirk that sent chills down the spines of the few people who observed it, crossed Seto's face. "I thought you would say that. My husband's good name is priceless to me. Bankrupting your bank will be a down payment. You will want to call the owners. They will need to be here." Without another word at the stricken man, Seto strode back to the table.

Jou, dressed in his shorts, t-shirt and sandals, sighed and shook his head when, after a quick check, he located Seto back at the table. Mark pounced on him before he went three steps. "Why didn't you say he was your husband?" He accused harshly.

"Why would I? It's none ya. What the hell did you say to piss him off? He's so hard you can bounce quarters off him." The blond caught his breath slightly. "You did apologize didn't you? Gave him my money?"

"I told him what I told you. You don't finish your shift, you don't get paid." The idiot actually sounded proud of that.

"Shit. You don't cheat Seto Kaiba. Have you lost your mind?" Jou breathed, genuinely scared for the man. Seto wasn't all that sane to begin with and add in lies, cheating and insults. This guy was lucky not to be a burned heap of coal.

"Seto... Kaiba...?" Mark the Manager looked like he was about to faint. "It can't be." The man whimpered.

Jou nearly moaned at his own stupidity. Not just because they were keeping a low profile, but because now that the man knew, Seto had no reason to pull his punches. Without a word he rushed to his husband's side.

Seto glanced up at his nearly frantic husband. "Hey, you okay?"

Jou bent down and whispered in his husband's ear. "Ah, I fucked up Seto. We need to get out of here fast. I told him who you were."

Instead of leaving, or even looking put out, Seto laughed that dark laugh that killed puppies and dropped birds from the skies. "Good, let him know who he fucked with, let him anticipate his loss, crush all his hope and leave him in despair. I might forgive the insult at that."

Grinning like a demented demon, Seto pulled out all of the winnings from the Bassett and his original five thousand. Waving his hand with all of his old drama, he ordered, "Deal." Jou, after a terrified second, began to grin too. He loved every part of Seto, even the insane demon that enjoyed crushing people - as long as the people weren't Jou's friends.

This time Seto didn't try to hide his skill or his brilliance. To Jou he shone brighter than any glitter or lights on the Reno strip. His eyes blazed with intensity, his expression could have been carved in ice, and his hands moved quickly, but with a dramatic flare that anyone familiar with duel monsters of the past would recognize instantly. Seto Kaiba was playing with all the drive he had ever shown because for the first time in longer than he could remember, he was playing with his heart.

Without Yugi there to put a stop to his destructive tendencies - and with his lover cheering him on beside him - Seto systematically broke the bank of the 'Bassett.' He didn't win every hand and there
were a few where the odds were against him and he bluffed, but in the end, the owners, who had been called by the bartender when Mark refused to, were forced to close the casino. When they tried to force him to move to the high roller's table he had flatly refused, and challenged them to a personal wager. The bank at the Bassett versus ten percent of Seto's personal stock in Kaiba Corporation. Their greed did them in, just as the brilliant CEO expected and he walked away with a personal voucher plus all the cash on the floor stuffed into three old backpacks found in the storage room. After they loaded up, they went to the office, leaving the pandemonium of the arriving press and gawkers behind. Jou, familiar with the layout, led Seto down to the cellar, out a delivery side door, and onto the street. A quick glance showed the gathering crowd of people still trying to get into the Bassett.

Jou sighed and chuckled. "Remind me not to piss you off."

"Noted, although I told you many times when we were young and it never bothered you then." The blue eyes slid sideways. "Mad at me? Mokuba will come you know."

"Yeah but we will be gone. Just to be safe I think you should avoid gambling in Vegas. Let's just take in some shows and stuff." The blond yawned and stretched. "It's only ten. Want to go somewhere else? Maybe find a locker or something for these backpacks?"

"Hmm why don't we go talk to Mick and get on the road? We slipped out but I'm sure there are reporters or criminals looking for us; probably both by now." Seto looked around, his eyes scanning for threat. They were carrying almost half a million in cash and a voucher for twice that much. He had specifically asked that his name be left off the voucher. He didn't need the money but he was sure he would find someone who did.

"You up for a drive tonight? Not tired?" Jou asked, his eyes roving over his tall lover with open concern.

"I have more energy now than I've had in years. I'm... I feel like I'm flying. Katsuya... If you're tired I'll drive. I just... We need to leave. I'm not ready to face Mokuba yet. I'm still working things out in my head and my heart." Seto admitted.

"Then I'll trust you to do what's best." Jou smiled crookedly. "Let's go. You're right, I can practically feel Mokuba breathing down our necks."

Keeping watch for people following them, they hurried back to the campground. Mick and Marie were sitting on their front step, Scapegoat, Kit and two very frilly looking poodles decked out in ribbons and lace played in front of them. "Hey, it's us." Seto greeted, more for Marie than Mick. "Joey meet Marie, Mick's wife. Marie this is my husband, Joey Wheeler."

Joey took in the distinctive white cane with a knowing, compassionate glance. "Pleasure to meet you. Thank you for caring for the dogs." He greeted gently.

"They were no trouble once Kit settled down. She's not a normal dog is she?" Marie nodded to where the dogs played. "She purrs, kind of like a cat, or tries to."

"She was raised by a cat, so she kinda acts like that." Jou explained.

"Joey, could you hand Mick your backpack please?" Seto asked as he slipped out of his own and handed over the packs he carried to the older man.

The older man laughed and shook his head. "What's all this?"

"Your winnings." Seto said quietly. "Your stake hit lucky and these are your winnings."
"What?" Mick paled as he opened one of the backpacks filled with cash. "But how? What?"

"The Bassett - I broke the bank tonight. That is from the money you staked me. I used some assets of my own for the final coup. I have that settlement tucked away. I suggest you might want to put it in the bank or something. There is four hundred ninety three thousand dollars."

"But... But... I can't take this! The Bassett? I heard some high roller... You? But... I can't take this." Mick sputtered, but his eyes were shining with hope.

"You certainly will." Seto folded his arms across his chest. "You asked me to play the money and give you the winnings, there they are. I am an honest man."

"But... But..."

"But nothing." Marie interrupted. "Thank you. I... There are no words, but we are grateful." Tears were filling her eyes.

"No gratitude needed. Don't you dare cry or it will be for nothing. Wildcats are rare and shouldn't cry." With a nod, Seto turned and snagged a gaping Jou by the arm. "We'll get our pups. You will want to hit a few ATM's I think."

"ATM's nothing. My brother manages a branch of our bank. I'll call him and tell him the Bassett high roller wants to make a deposit. He'll be there with bells on. I can't wait for him to see all this cash." Mick sounded shell shocked, but pleased.

"Enjoy. Let me know what's going on with Marie. I put my contact information in the blue backpack. I'll send flowers when she goes into surgery."

Jou, both dogs in his arms, nodded. "We're going now Mick. Like Seto said, let us know okay?"

"Yeah..." The older man lugged the backpacks into his RV, Mick didn't watch them leave. He was too busy holding his sobbing wildcat, mopping up her tears of joy and gratitude. Jou managed to pull together his scattered wits enough to take the leash Seto handed him, and by the time they made it back to the camper, he was back in control of his faculties. He worked in silence for a few moments, breaking down the camp they had set up only a few hours before. He tossed Seto the keys and slid into the passenger seat. They were on the road before he broke the silence between them. "Gonna tell me about it?"

"I won my stake, came back to get the pups, met Marie, Mick's wildcat, and she reminded me of you and your sister. She needs surgery and there is no money for it. I... He thought I lost my stake and offered me his birthday money to play, said just to give him the winnings." Seto swallowed audibly. "Fuck Katsuya, he was... She was... I know I can't save everyone but they were both so damn..." He broke off, hunting for a word that conveyed his perception.

He didn't need to say a word. Jou's hand dropped to the struggling brunet's thigh as his blond head nestled against Seto's shoulder. "I got it." Jou's voice was husky with emotion. "Know you don't want to hear it, but you're fucking wonderful!"

"Jou, I..."

"No arguments, damn it. I'm too tired to tell you what a fantastic, hot fabulous, gorgeous... Just shut it and drive. Go down three ninety five toward Mason. It's about an hour out. Mason has a rest stop with toilets and RV parking. Stopped there once with Oli. Nobody will look for us that close to Reno and we can both get some rest." Without another word, Jou turned his face into Seto's arm and
closed his eyes.

He didn't move so much as an eyelash until the car slowed to turn into the rest area. "Park on the side nearest the lights, but back in so that we can leave in a hurry if we have to. This place has cameras so it is as safe as we can get."

"We're going to set up the camper?" Seto asked dubiously.

"Nope, we're getting cozy in here. The dogs are fed and watered. We'll grab some snacks from the vending machines and hit the bathrooms. It gets cold in the desert at night, in case you didn't notice. We'll grab the sleeping bag from the trunk and sleep in the car. Backed in, the lights will put us in shadow and the tinting on the window will do the rest. We'll lock the doors, set the car alarm, and cover up. We'll be fine or we'll run over anyone who fucks with us."

"Don't we have to pay to park here?"

"I have passes because I never know where I'm going to end up. It's about ten dollars a state and I do all forty eight so it's an expense, but it's better than ending up in an unsafe area because of some paper pusher who went home early with flu." Jou's tone said it had happened more than once, so Seto decided he wouldn't ask.

"So snacks and bathroom? I need both. I'm starved." Seto confessed.

"Super brain takes super energy I guess. You didn't eat your peach pie?" Jou clicked his tongue in mock reproof.

"Saw the way the guy looked at you before he followed you. Decided I didn't like him ogling my husband that way and I wanted to see you plant your fist in his face."

"Instead you bankrupted his place." Another click of the tongue this time shaking his blond head.

"He pissed me off a little when he lied to me." The blue-eyed dragon master made the understatement of the century with a completely straight face.

"Huh. I'd have never guessed." Jou deadpanned. "So snacks it is. Nearest restaurant is Yerington. There won't be anything open this time of night. I did stock up on MRE's when we left the cabin. They are in the trunk so if you're that hungry we can do MRE's. I can light a fire on the barbecue pit by the tree over there," He pointed to what looked like an ancient backyard barbecue grill stuck on a pole in the ground, "and heat the water." Jou honestly didn't expect Seto to agree. So far on this trip Seto had acted selfless, with very few signs of the selfish bastard Jou had learned to love despite himself and his sexual confusion.

He actually jumped and laughed when Seto, instead of the expected demur, nodded and agreed "Make three for me." At Jou's laugh Seto shot him a rueful glance. "Please?"

Jou nodded and climbed out of the car, "Pop the trunk. I'll get the fire started and get the MRE's, you get the dogs and check out the snacks."

"Sounds like a plan." Seto scooped up the leashes - dogs still attached - and tugged the wriggly, waggly, pups out into the yellowish light of the almost empty RV parking lot.

He chose not to go to visitor's bathroom and vending center without Jou, deciding it was best if they stuck together, so instead he sat at the rickety picnic table and watched as his love built a small fire.

Jou didn't seem put out by the change of plans, if anything he seemed almost radiant. Seto could
swear he saw Jou swaying in place with the rhythm of the fire people as they sprang to life. The brunet didn't quite know when he stopped thinking of fire as a simple chemical reaction, but instead gave it a life and personalities, but he wasn't going to change his mind about it. Each dancing flame was unique and full of life. He was amazed he ever thought of it any other way. As the sparks haloed his lover, Seto couldn't keep back the comment. "You're glowing."

"Every day, sometimes more than once a day, you find some way to make me one of the happiest men alive." Jou admitted in a soft voice.

"What... Oh the money for Mick and Marie?" Seto shrugged. "It wasn't that difficult."

Jou waved his hand as if shooing away a fly. "Nah, not that. You don't even know what just happened. That makes me even happier. Seto... I... I won't explain except to say that you will eat every mouthful of this meal if I have to shove it down your throat."

Seto blinked at that. "You're happy but you say that like you're angry."

"Nah. Ah okay I will explain. You know I'm beat but you demanded a meal without apologizing or worrying about that. You put yourself and your needs first. Seto... I could just hug the stuffing out of you right now."

Seto blinked and tilted his head to the side as he considered what Jou said, not just the words, but what they meant as well. "You want me to be a selfish ass?"

"I want you to care about yourself Seto. Not because you love me, not because I love you, but because you value yourself as much as your loved ones - me, Mokuba, your friends. You're not quite there, but you are reaching for it and that's half the battle won."

Seto didn't know what to say to that so instead he knelt down to pet Scapegoat. He was surprised when both pups crawled up onto him. "Hmm... She likes me all of a sudden?"

"Hormones. She's responding to the alpha male." Jou's smile flashed in the darkness. "It's natural for females to gravitate to the alpha. They want strong babies."

"That is disturbing you know." Seto put both pups down and glowered at the grinning blond. The sound of a vehicle into the rest stop had them both spinning around.

As it rounded the curve it looked like a spaceship landing. Blindingly bright lights studded the tops and sides of the massive RV, flooding the entire parking area with enough candle watts to rival the daylight. Jou and Seto automatically stepped back into the remaining shade of the trees as the behemoth parked across three RV spaces."

As one, Seto and Jou eased towards their car, only to freeze in horror as four more behemoths followed by a dozen satellite vehicles circled around their suddenly insignificant looking car and camper. They shared a look of determination, linked hands, squared their shoulders and met the bright lights head on.

The first monster vehicle's door flew open and a tall man with wildly frizzy rainbow hair and white face makeup stepped down. "Hey sorry to block you in. We needed a rest and didn't think anyone would be here." He laughed and shook his head. "I'll radio the guys to move so you can get out."

"Ah... uhm? No hurry we're staying the night." Jou coughed and guessed. "Circus? You guys are on your way to Vegas?"

"Yeah. We were performing in Reno and lost our audience. The cops and the gaming commission
are tearing Reno apart for a pair of con artists who broke the bank at some casino... The Foxtrot? Something." The clown shrugged. "Cops were looking everywhere for them and our audience didn't like being rousted so they left. We shut down and got an early start to our next gig."

"Con artists?" Seto stiffened and snarled.

"Well they aren't saying that, just that they want to talk to them, not that they conned anyone. They were saying someone broke the bank and didn't get any kind of income paperwork, just took the money and left. Then we heard the owner was saying that the guy who did it had his wife work for them as a waitress. Something like that. Nobody knows who they are and since the money wasn't marked or anything whoever it was got away clean." The clown laughed again. "Good on them I say."

"Yeah." Jou agreed. "They really don't know any names?"

"The manager said something about some rich guy, but nobody believed him, I mean why would he bother? Besides he's doesn't have a wife. It's all just stupid but since we didn't have to refund anything it's just an early night for us. So, you got a fire going, we'll get the others fired up and start dinner. We got plenty of dogs and burgers. Join us, as an apology for blocking you guys in?"

Seto gripped Jou's hand tight for a moment, then nodded. "Burgers and dogs sound great. We were just making MRE's."

"Hey cool. I'm Dave, clown, ringmaster and lead driver. Oh you have pups. Uh... keep them away from the three trucks in the back. We have our animals in there and even though we know our babies won't hurt anyone or anything on purpose, accidents happen."

"Animals? What kind?" Jou eased further out of the lights and back to the table.

"We have a lion, a couple zebras, some Lippizaners, an elephant, monkeys and a few others. Stay away from the monkeys, they are nasty when they are tired." Before he could say more, they were converged on by what seemed like a hundred people.

Introductions were informal, Joey and Kai met the entire troupe, some still in makeup, some looking very ordinary. Outside of a few grumbles, there were no further mentions of the con artists or the 'Foxtrot.' Instead there were conversations about everything from tight ropes to ripped tights.

Joey was enthralled, his exhaustion forgotten, as he listened to their stories, asked questions and simply soaked up their culture. In all of his travels it had never occurred to him to travel with a circus or some other vagabond troupe. Now it seemed like a great idea for his next book.

Seto devoured three huge burgers, the best he had ever tasted, as well as two ears of corn on the cob dripping with 'real' butter, and just for the experience, a corn dog. It was all entirely too delicious, and very soon he found himself leaning heavily against the rapt Jou, nodding into the blond's shoulder.

He was vaguely aware of Jou leading him to the car and tucking him into the seat, then just a few minutes later, of being led to the familiar blanket covered floor of their camper. Scapegoat and Kit snuggled into his back, and he gripped his pillow to his chest, curling up and falling into a food induced stupor that dropped him straight into a dreamless sleep.

Seto woke to the rumble of engines and the sound of someone pounding on the door to the camper. After a quick check at the strangely familiar-unfamiliar man outside he called. "Who is it?"

"Dave, Clown with the circus. Joey wanted me to wake him for breakfast and breakdown. I'll see
you guys in a few minutes. We're on the road in half an hour." The unpainted clown turned and hurried back to where his troupe were starting the barbecues.

Seto turned to wake his sleeping love only to chuckle at the sight in front of him. Jou, hair sticking up at all angles, was sitting up rubbing his eyes like an adorable child. "You'll make me feel like a child molester if you keep looking like that."

Golden eyes popped wide, then slitted with mischief and interest. "Feel like getting freaky with me this morning Kaiba?"

The very interested brunet chuckled as he knelt next to his lover. "Define freaky. I was thinking of fucking you into the carpet."

"That will cover it." Jou's naughty grin peeked out. "Too bad it will have to wait. We have to join everyone, chow down and get on the road."

"Why?" Seto didn't like the sound of that. It was almost as if there was something he didn't know.

"Oh well Dave offered to let us hang with him for a few days, work as ticket takers and booth attendants. He also mentioned something about an act they might have to replace that we might help with. Don't know the particulars though." When Seto would have protested Jou shook his head cutting him off. "Seto we have to figure out what the hell happened in Reno and we have to do it without tipping off your brother, the gaming commission, or the cops. Nobody would look for us - or you - here with all of these people, and we can wear costumes and nobody will care. C'mon, you built some of the world's largest entertainment companies. Are you saying you can't run a booth?"

"What about our plan for a hotel and some shows?" The brunet asked wistfully.

"Still doable, just not until you get the gaming commission off your back. Seto the hotels and casinos have to work closely with the commission, so the hotels are probably watching for you - us. If we tried to check in to one we would likely be shown to a room and while we are unpacking the cops and gaming commission would be on their way to pay us an unwelcome visit. This way we travel anonymously while you straighten the mess out."

It was a reasonable, even good plan, if they were going to continue on their vacation. If he walked in and announced he was Seto Kaiba and demanded the mess be cleared up with all the clout of his position behind him, he would not be able to travel anonymously for a very long time. "Fine." He sighed and stood up, then reached down and yanked his smart-ass blond to stand. "Let's get going."

He patted his stomach. "I wonder if they will have any burgers for breakfast."

Jou dozed in the passenger seat - again - while Seto hummed along happily with Weird Al's Yoda. Kit was curled up on Jou's neck and Scapegoat was perched on Seto's shoulder making an occasional rumble-yip that sounded a lot like Yoda' in time with the music when it struck Seto that he should probably listen to the radio to see if there were any details about what had happened at the Bassett.

He only listened to a few minutes of some kind of twangy music before the news came on. He waited through the national news, not caring about the stock market or overseas posturing, and drummed his fingers impatiently through the commercials until the local news came over the airwaves. He had expected perhaps a mention, but not the immediate lead story.

The announcer seemed to relish suspense, but eventually Seto got the whole story. A person, possibly two people, claiming to be Seto Kaiba and his 'husband' broke the bank of the 'Bassett' a locally owned casino in Reno. They left with an undesignated personal voucher, which seemed to be
the basis for the entire investigation because the IRS and the gaming commission need to know who is to pay the taxes on the income. There was no proof that Seto Kaiba had been in Reno, and no proof that Seto Kaiba was married to the mysterious 'Joey.'

After urging the two men to contact the Gaming Commission or the police at a specially set up number, the radio newsman moved on to another story, but it was enough information for Seto to reach for his phone.

"NGC Tipline, could you hold please?" A harried voice answered on the third ring.

"This is Seto Kaiba. You want to speak to me?" He ignored the request to hold. Why should he? They asked him to call and his time was valuable. Seto Kaiba did not hold.

"Yeah right. You're the third Seto Kaiba to call in a minute. Hold on and I'll send you through to ..."

"I will not hold - I do not hold for stupidity. I assume there is a question that you will ask, perhaps from Aishira, Matashi, or my brother Mokuba. Ask it or I hang up. I will not call back, my lawyers will."

The man snapped, "Fine, what is your dog's name and breed?"

"Scapegoat is black pomeranian, a gift from my friends Aishira and Matashi." Seto said calmly, but inside he was more than ready to hang up.

"Holy shit, it's you - You're him! I mean... Wait a moment, I won't put you on hold, but wait a moment please." Seto wasn't really inclined to, but the grovelling tone and shock in the other man's voice mollified him just enough to let the man have a few minutes to contact his supervisors. In the background he could hear the panicking operator yelling 'It's him, Seto Kaiba - he answered the question. I got him on the line..." A deep voice growled something and for an instant he flashed into hold, for less than a second, then the deep voice greeted, "Mister Kaiba, this is Ted Mannis with the Nevada Gaming Commission. Thank you for calling."

"You wanted to speak to me?" Ice cubes would have been warmer than Seto's tone.

"Yes. Were you... You heard the story on the radio, I guess. Were you at the Bassett in Reno last night?" The man asked, after clearing his throat nervously.

"Yes I was. I broke their bank and took their voucher. I didn't want it in my name because I plan on donating it to a worthy cause. I will have my lawyers contact you all with the pertinent information. I had every intention of reporting the income - I pay my taxes. I believe I have until I file my taxes, do I not?" He said briskly.

"Yes, yes of course you do. Now that the issue of who has been resolved, there is one other issue. The manager, Mark Sutter, says that you had a partner who infiltrated the casino and you worked as a team, that you cheated. That is a criminal charge. Would you like to come in to the police and address it?"

"No I would not. I have not been charged, and if you review the security tapes then speak to the bartender, the owners and the other staff there, my companion got a temporary position at the casino as a walk-in. My companion is the writer 'Joey Wheeler' and he writes books about his experiences as a transient person crossing the country. Mark, the Manager, refused to pay him, sexually harassed him and insulted him for wanting to leave prior to his shift end. It made me angry and I decided to own the place. I value my friend's good name."

"I see. That explains it of course. Let me have your number and I'll call you back after I speak to the
police."

"I don't think so. I'll call you in an hour. Good bye." He disconnected the call and tossed the phone on the dash with a disgusted snort.

"You handled that well." Jou mumbled softly. "You didn't threaten to kill anyone and you answered clearly, without too much detail."

"Thanks, but I can handle them in my sleep." He smiled slightly at the mussed blond. "How was your nap?"

Jou yawned and stretched. "Not long enough. I think I'm sleeping too much."

"I think you're sleeping just right. I never get tired of your sleeping face." Seto admitted with a tiny smile. "I think I might just have to get a few pictures of it."

"Huh..." Embarrassed silence, then Jou blurted "You called me your companion and friend! I was demoted from husband?" There was a world of hurt that he couldn't hide in his voice.

Seto went rigid for an instant before reaching across and pulling Jou across the console against his side, pressing his lover's head against his chest. "No! But that type of bureaucrat looks for all the 'i's' dotted and the 't's crossed.' We don't have a legal wedding license. If I called you my husband without it he would doubt everything I say."

"Oh." Jou nuzzled into the strong chest under his cheek. "Sorry, I had an insecure moment."

"You're allowed - one. The rest are mine." Seto teased.

Jou bent and sucked lightly on the sensitive cord of Seto's neck, leaving a light pink mark. "Huh. Greedy. I insist on two with the option of more." He licked the mark, savoring the taste of Seto, and slid back into his seat.

"I'm open for negotiation." Blue eyes flicked his way. "If you wanted to... negotiate now I'm sure I wouldn't mind a little persuasion." His tone was cool, but the suggestive overtones were more than adequate for Jou to get the message.

Wicked amusement and something very like curiosity blazed in Jou's golden eyes. "Really? Who knew you were an exhibitionist?"

"Top's up. The mammoth RV's are ahead of us and nobody else will see in." Seto refuted calmly. "But I've always been curious about... well... and I..." Color flooded the sun-kissed brunet's cheeks making his freckles stand out as he sputtered then retrenched. "You don't have to do..." He broke off to hiss out a sharp breath when Jou reached down to fondle and stroke the sensitive place below his sac, bringing more pleasure with each touch.

Seto didn't argue. It was one of his most ardent curiosities, besides there is never a bad blow job, at least he had never experienced one. Not that he had... His train of thought was derailed when Jou reached down to fondle and stroke the sensitive place below his sac, bringing more pleasure with each touch.

Seto was elated, enthralled and completely in lust. He understood the appeal of a road head immediately. There was nothing like guiding a three thousand pound rocket down the road at seventy miles an hour while his lover tried to suck the cum out of his stick shift. It was rude, it was crude, it was extremely dangerous, but it felt marvellous and Seto loved every hair raising, breath
stealing moment of it.

Even later, when they were at camp and one of the circus people, the one who had driven behind
them, mentioned his erratic driving pattern, Seto couldn't find any part of him that regretted the
experience, and he knew he would try to get Jou to repeat it as often as possible, maybe he’d even
return the favor.

Because of Jou's teasing ways, Seto had been late calling Ted Mannis back, but he couldn't find it in
him to regret that either. Jou was driving, having switched places with a relaxed, bleary-eyed Seto.
They had pulled over and Seto simply crawled into the passenger seat, not really caring if Jou moved
or not. They could cuddle for a while. To his mild disappointment Jou had slid out of the seat and
jogged around to the driver's side. The blond tossed the phone into Seto’s lap. "Call before sleep."

"Not been an hour." Seto mumbled in protest.

"Huh. It takes you an hour to cum twice Seto. It's been an hour. Call." Jou got back on the road,
taking up the tail end of the caravan of circus vehicles. "I'm just gonna sit here and relax. Don't
expect me to talk too much. My tongue and jaws hurt... Next time only one for you."

Seto was too thrilled with the idea of next time to do more than nod dumbly and hit redial on the
phone. That promise was enough to make him consider buying a classic car with a bench seat. His
call was answered on the second ring by Ted Mannis himself. Seto assumed they were routing his
number directly to the man. He was mildly impressed by their use of technology. They were actually
using something from the last twenty years. "This is Kaiba." He said as briskly as possible. It wasn't
quite as crisp as he would have liked and he made a mental note to limit blow jobs when he had to
deal with governments and cops. When the man on the other end sputtered, sounding incredibly
nervous, Seto reversed that. Why should he limit them? They obviously didn't affect his efficacy.
"Mister Mannis?"

"Yes, yes, I apologize. I was drinking some water and it went down the wrong way. Mister Kaiba,
Detective Mascarelli is here. He is with the Reno police. I have you on speaker so he can hear you."

"Nice of you to call Mister Kaiba." The man sounded polite so Seto returned the courtesy.

"Yes it was as I am on vacation and this is a major interruption. You have reviewed the security
tapes and you have questioned the other people at the casino. Why do you feel I need to speak to
you?"

"We are still reviewing the tapes at this time but the investigation would go a lot faster if you and
your... companion... came in to talk to us." Seto ignored the emphasis on the word companion. It
didn't matter what the man thought.

"Not happening. We are on vacation and I refuse to let your bureaucratic slowness interrupt it." Seto
was not going to pander to idiots.

"We can do this easy or hard Mister Kaiba. I suggest you go easy and come in for questioning."

"This conversation is over. My law firm will contact you about scheduling an appointment for my
statement after our vacation. Unless and until you press charges don't bother me again." With a
stifled snarl he ended the conversation and called his law firm.

A very bright sounding young woman's voice answered on the third ring. "This is Kaiba. Put me
through to Fisker."

"Ah, one moment please." It was closer to forty seconds before his attorney's smooth tones came
over the phone.

"Seto, what have you been up to? I've been reading all about your adventures. Did you really break the bank of some dog casino?"

"Yes, I did. The Bassett. I'm on vacation and don't want to deal with this. The police here and the gaming commission are being very uncooperative. They actually expect me to interrupt my vacation to come in for questioning. If they bothered to do their jobs, review the security footage and interview the other people there they would know that their charges are ridiculous and would require a simple statement. I believe they are 'fishing' for a trophy. Can you deal with it? No charges just threats so far. Detective Mascarelli and Ted Mannis from the Gaming Commission. I believe they are out of Vegas and that is where I'm going to be."

"I'll call them. I can put them off for about a week, then you might have to give a statement, depending on how much they have discovered on the other aspects of their investigation. Don't leave the state Seto. You have to stay there to take care of this. I'll fly out tomorrow and meet with them." Seto's criminal defense attorney - a person didn't get where Seto was without needing one - observed half humorously, "Good thing I am licensed in Nevada."

"I'm sure you will charge for it. Do you need to meet with me or can you take a statement now?"

"My admin just made the reservations. I'll be in Vegas by noon tomorrow. Why don't I meet you? What hotel are you staying at?"

"No hotel. I'm travelling with Joey Wheeler doing research for his work. He is the second party mentioned as my partner in crime. I'll call you about twelve fifteen and tell you where to come."

"Oh! The Joey Wheeler? The bestselling author?" Then, "Are you on his trip? Can I expect to see you in print? I'll bring along a release as well."

That was something Seto hadn't even considered. "Thank you. See you tomorrow." He hung up and turned to his love. "Are you going to put me in your book?"

Jou didn't hesitate a second. "Only if it fits and only if you sign a release."

"Huh. Smart. I'll sign a release if you agree to let me read it first and refuse it if I don't like it."

"No problem." Jou smiled sunnily. "The cops stepped in it didn't they?"

"Tried to threaten me." The CEO told him placidly.

"Over their heads and sinking fast in shit. They didn't step, they dove in head first." Jou said cheerfully. "Music?"

"Music." Seto agreed. Both of them laughing at Seto's choice - AC/DC's Problem Child. (Link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__bOEU_XUBw)

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Setup of the circus was more complicated and labor intensive than Seto expected but he found he enjoyed it. The highlight of it was watching the big top go up. There was something genuinely inspiring about watching the center pole go up on a big top.

As the sun set, so did Seto's enthusiasm. He was tired, achy and ready to take a break. He was also fed up with listening to this one couple argue about everything from light position to lint. Even
though they were married, had been married for years, Seto didn't give them another month together. There was too much animosity and anger. He found their company draining, and he was glad to escape from them. They had disappeared during his break and he hadn't sought them out again.

Jou on the other hand was as bright and energetic as he ever had been. The blond head seemed to be everywhere, involved in everything, talking to everyone. There was a kind of energy that seemed to draw people to him, draw them in and make them want to share his space and take him into their confidence.

He didn't envy his love that talent. Seto knew if he exerted himself he could be charming, but it wasn't his natural state, or at least what he considered his natural state, although Jou seemed to find him charming no matter what he was feeling, even when he was an admittedly bad tempered ass. Seto admitted, if only to himself, that it was a great relief not to have to put on a mask.

Ruefully he looked down at the black mask clasped in his hand. At least it wasn't a mask over his true self. A 'Lone Ranger' mask was something else entirely. Seto couldn't believe he actually let himself be talked into performing at the circus, but somehow he had found himself agreeing to doing a sharpshooting performance in costume as the legendary American folk hero 'The Lone Ranger.' Jou was going to do a knife throwing performance as his trusty sidekick, Tonto. Who ever heard of a blond Native American? It was absolutely ridiculous, but at the same time, it sounded like a lot of fun. Besides, Jou had given very good reasons for it.

The first reason had been simple. Disguise. Nobody would recognize either of them from the pictures the newspapers had run; especially with the campy black wig Jou would be wearing. The second was equally simple although not as self-serving. The sharpshooting and knife throwing act were a husband and wife team that Seto had worked with all day. They had been fighting fiercely and Seto could see why neither trusted the other to perform safely.

Since Jou had mentioned he was great with knives, and subsequently proven it by putting on a show that still left Seto feeling slightly breathless with admiration, Seto had felt obliged to admit that he was well trained in guns of all types. He had actually enjoyed showing all of them, especially his lover, just how good he was with a firearm. There was something powerful about handling something that was literally a finger pull away from death. He thrilled with arousal caused by the power as each target shattered from his skilled shots.

When he'd laid the gun down it had taken a lot of self control not to stalk over to Jou and drag him off to their camper. Now, looking between his lover and the mask, Seto grinned inwardly and decided he had been patient enough. The urgency had faded, but not the desire. Tired and achy he may be, but he knew, thanks to a scouting mission, of a very comfortable place that could take care of his pains, even if he was more tired afterwards.

The hidden grin peeked out as he put the mask on and tied it behind his head. With a grimace at the way it blocked his peripheral vision, he strolled over to where his love was chatting with a couple of scantily clad trapeze artists.

The women must have seen something in his expression because they giggled and exchanged wistful looks before excusing themselves. Seto gave Jou a mock serious look. "Stick 'em up."

"Uh... " Jou's eyed him, golden gaze lingering on the bulge that only his lover should notice in the loose, comfortable costume pants that resembled chaps over long underwear. "Looks like you've already got something up."

Using his finger and thumb as a pretend gun he jabbed the blond lightly in the ribs. "Come quietly and you won't get hurt."
"Huh, well, I've never cum quietly with you, and I don't think I'll start now." Amusement and lust swirled in the bright eyes. "So, where we going?"

"Shouldn't you be more worried about what I'm going to do to you?" Seto gave him a cold stare.

"Nah, I already know. You're going to have your wicked way with me. You are a bad man so I expect you to be very wicked." The blond pouted slightly. "If you're not I'll be disappointed."

Seto gave his best villain laugh - and damn it was good enough to send shivers down Jou's spine - and prodded Jou in the direction he wanted them to go. Golden eyes widened slightly as he realized that they were headed away from the circus and all the campers, across the bustling field.

"Uh, Seto..."

"Shut it, Miss Kitty or I'll have to gag you."

"But..." When he would have lagged, Seto prodded him again with his 'gun.'

"I'll hog tie you if you don't get moving." Thoughtfully the brunet pursed his lips. "Hog tied and gagged, now that has some possibilities."

"Oh..." Jou bit his lip and chuckled. He didn't say another word when Seto guided him to a small copse of trees and maneuvered him between several branches to an unexpected clearing with several low growing, thick branches. "Wh... How... Seto how did you find this place?" If Jou didn't know they were only a few hundred yards from the circus he would think they were alone in a forest somewhere. Everything around them was completely obscured, even sound was muffled and distant.

Seto gave another low, villainous cackle. "Every bad guy needs a hideout." The 'gun' changed back into a hand that yanked him close enough for Seto to catch his lips in a deep hot kiss, plunging his tongue deep as the warm lips parted in welcome. Greedy fingers dove under Jou's shirt, stroking and caressing upwards to stop and pinch his tightening nipples with a touch that bordered on painful before sliding around to cup the taut cheeks of Jou's ass. After a few appreciative squeezes, Seto delved into the crease, seeking and finding the small puckered opening. His touch was light but insistent as he pressed against the tight ring.

"Hmmm in a hurry? Seto we don't have any lu... Oh." Jou blinked as his love's free hand delved into one of the many pockets on the costume pants the brunet was wearing and pulled out a small bottle of lube. "Boy scout?"

"Bad man is not a boy scout. I just like to be prepared... And I want you to be prepared."

"Bad men don't care about..." Jou hissed and jumped, breaking off his teasing as Seto's now lubed finger pushed past the resistance of his ring. "In a hurry?" He squeaked again.

"Have things to do... banks to rob, trains to hold up. The usual." Seto worked his one finger in and out slowly, then with increasing speed. "Fuck Katsuya, I've been aching for hours. Do you mind I..."

Jou arched his ass back onto the finger that was fucking him and nuzzled into Seto's neck, widening his stance and relaxing his body the best he could. "A sidekick's gotta do what a sidekick's gotta do." With deliberate eroticism he sank his teeth into the delicate skin covering the pulse pounding in Seto's neck. "I've been aching too, I just thought we would wait until tonight."

"Crime waits for no man." Seto rasped as he sank a second finger deep in Jou's tight channel. "Jou, turn and lean on the branch. I have to get inside you now or I am going to lose it. You are so hot and tight I could cum just from the feel of you on my fingers and the memory of my dick inside that."
Jou whined slightly but obligingly stepped back and turned to lean forward on the branch just a step away. To his delight and relief Seto's fingers didn't stop their pleasurable dance inside him.

"Mmm..."

"Bend a little lower, fold your arms on the branch and lift your ass higher." Seto instructed, eyes taking in the gorgeous sight of his lover bent low, ass high in the air, with Seto's two fingers moving in and out the way his cock was begging to do.

Seto slicked some of the lube onto his cock, and using the fingers buried deep in Katsuya, guided himself home, deliberately dragging his fingertips across Jou's prostate to lessen the shock and pain of his abrupt entry and the stretching of the tight opening to accommodate not only his cock but his two fingers too.

The distraction must have worked because Jou didn't flinch at all, instead he gave a keening cry and arched back forcefully as if to bring the retreating digits back inside his hole. Seto would have laughed villainously again, but his own pleasure stole his voice as his breath left him in a hard whoosh.

After that harsh exhalation and cry, the only sounds in the clearing was the hard slap-thud of flesh meeting flesh and guttural sounds that had meaning only to the two men making them. When Jou reached his peak, his voice was little more than a whisper, a soundless scream of pleasure that Seto felt in every cell in his body. It triggered his own release, and with a long, low moan, buried himself as far as he could inside Jou and shot his seed even deeper, painting the walls of Jou's tunnel with his cream.

The branch supported both of them as they slowly recovered. It was Jou who brought them back down with a laugh. "The Lone Ranger rides again." He teased.

"Hmmm I don't think he ever rode Tonto. Poor bastard." Seto teased back.

"Dunno about that. The Lone Ranger had chicks throwing themselves at him all the time. He always went and slept in a sleeping bag on the ground with Tonto rather than their soft beds. I wouldn't give up a soft bed for a sleeping bag if I wasn't getting laid in the deal." Jou chuckled tiredly. "Get off me Kemosabe, I need to pull my pants up. Don't suppose you remembered tissues did you? You blew a huge load and I don't want it visibly leaking."

Seto carefully disengaged their bodies, staring down at the puckered, reddened hole with the faint crisscrossing of white scars. Jou was right, a small trickle of cum was dribbling out. An unexpected hunger arrowed through him. When Jou would have straightened, Seto pushed him back down.

"Hey what the...Oh...no... Oh my god..." Jou's words were choked off as Seto's tongue brushed over him, laving up the line of cum, following it back up to it's source and delving deep to find the rest.

Jou came twice more from the stimulation, both physical and emotional before he called a halt to what was probably the most intimate thing he had ever experienced. Seto wanted to continue pleasing Jou forever, wanted to always taste the mingling of their bodies. It never crossed his mind to censure what he was doing because there was no wrong between them, nothing unclean. It was them, just them. When Jou collapsed to the ground, losing his hold on the branch and his ability to stand, Seto reluctantly ended his ministrations and sank down to curl around his lover, nuzzling into the sweat damp blond hair murmuring his love and devotion.

"God Seto, I have never..." Jou broke off his raspy confession to choke back an unexpected sob.

"You are so loving, I can feel your emotions inside me like I feel the beating of my heart."

"Mmm..." Seto continued to scatter light kisses on Jou's hair. "That is where I want to be, part of
you."

Jou was the writer who made his living with prose, but in that moment he was completely without words to tell his lover how he felt, instead he forced his limp arms to coil loosely around the tall body cradled against him. "Aishiteru." It was a formal, unused word, something most Japanese people did not use, but somehow it fit the moment.

Seto strengthened his hold and pressed his lips tightly into the messy blond hair. Exhausted and content they drifted off into a light doze, lulled by the sighing of the desert wind through the leaves of the trees.

***

Mokuba Kaiba lasted all of two days at Mount Shasta before remembering that Aishira and Matashi were in California tending to some animal Seto had given them. In the two days he'd spent in the cabin with the psychologist, Mokuba had come to realize that no matter what Seto had said on the phone, Seto would never have left him. What Jillian had said on their quiet walks was true - they were brothers and nothing would ever sever that bond. Jounouchi was forcing his brother to act this way, either brainwashing or some kind of mystical crap, but Seto and Mokuba were bonded - brothers by blood. His brother would expect rescue no matter what he was forced to say or do.

Without compunction he left Jillian sleeping in her bunk, used her phone to call for transport since his was dead and he had no charger, and was gone from the cabin before she woke to an empty cabin.

Jillian looked around, not really expecting him to have left because he had not taken his clothes, but after a few minutes she checked her cell phone and after redialing the number, cursed enough to turn the air blue, then, after a few minutes sitting on the steps enjoying the company of a hummingbird, decided to stay for the rest of the week. The cabin was paid for and she needed a vacation. Trying to help a Kaiba was hard work, especially one that didn't want to be helped. The previous night she had thought they had made a breakthrough, that Mokuba was finally beginning to see that his attachment to his brother was beyond the bounds of simple brotherhood, but now she could see by his abandoning of her and what she had been trying to say that it hadn't been a breakthrough, but probably a regression. Maybe she should reconsider helping Mokuba Kaiba. An attractive ranger-uniformed woman with dancing eyes and an interesting sway to her body joined her on the steps.

***

Mokuba was at the penthouse in Los Angeles within four hours of calling. He had watched the sun rise from a seat in the small jet his security team had hired for an exorbitant fee. Money well spent in his opinion. His cell phone was fully charged, his wallet and credit cards on a same day delivery jet, and what was more important, he had full access to the Kaiba Corp bank of computers. His calls to Seto's banks and credit card companies had yielded only the knowledge that Seto had been forced to call them and remove all access to the information. Damn Jounouchi! How dare he force Seto to do that? How dare he come between them like that? The asshole blond might have a cute ass, but there was no way his ass was more important to Seto than Mokuba was and no matter what Jou did, in the end Mokuba would have his brother back. Everyone was wrong, Seto was in trouble, not avoiding him... No way would Mokuba ever accept that his brother would prefer some idiot over his own flesh and blood.

After a frustrating few minutes of programming the software Seto had in place to track people he considered 'of interest' Mokuba had the computers running searches, both legal and illegal, on his brother and the blond piece of trash keeping them apart.
He didn't bother to sit and watch as the computers did their work, he turned immediately to arranging for staff to monitor the computers twenty-four seven. When he had transferred the appropriate people from the local office, he called his friends.

Aishira answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Aishira, it's me. I'm at the L.A. penthouse. Where are you? The office? You're not staying here?"
The younger Kaiba didn't bother with a greeting.

"Matashi and I are staying at an place a mile from the veterinary center. Currently we are feeding our pretty girl her breakfast." There was a distinct crunching sound and the phone line went silent.

Mokuba tried to call back only to have his call go directly to voicemail. Impatiently he disconnected without leaving a message and his phone buzzed as the screen lit up with Matashi's name. "Mokuba, our Chibi-ichi doesn't like her breakfast interrupted, sorry about that."

"Aishira dropped his phone in the kibble?" Mokuba snapped before recalling himself. "Sorry Matashi, I'm jet lagged and stressed." Before the older man could respond, the young Kaiba forced a cheerful tone. "Not your fault. So when do I get to meet your 'Little-one'?"

"She has to rest after she eats, but we will be back to exercise her later. If the vet caring for her says it's all right you may join us. We are excited that we get to take her home with us for a bit and she may not be up to company right away."

Mokuba heard the reluctance in Matashi's voice and decided to end the conversation before the other man could retract his invitation. "Great, I'll call you about eleven and get the directions. I'm going to catch a nap. Talk to you later Matashi! Give Aishira a hug for me!" True to his word, after a long hot shower and a meal delivered from his favorite L.A. restaurant, Mokuba checked the computerized results, then went to take a nap.

Despite his intention to wake up before lunch and mend fences with Aishira and Matashi, Mokuba slept right through his alarm, sleeping well into the early evening. He woke slowly, reaching automatically across his bed for the warm body he was used to laying next to him. When his hand met cool sheets he sighed and opened his eyes as he felt the loss of his fiancee, Rebecca, again.

With a huff he rolled off the bed, catching sight of the clock as he rose to his feet. "Ah shit." He grumbled. He reached for his phone only to find the battery dead once again. He slid it into the charging cradle on the bedside table and picked up the house phone, dialing Matashi's number from memory instead of speed dial.

Matashi answered immediately. "Mokuba, your phone isn't picking up. Are you alright?"

"Yes, my battery died. I'm sorry I overslept and didn't get a chance to meet your Little One." He translated the animals' name to English when he apologized.

"That's fine. The vet wasn't supportive of you visiting yet, perhaps next week. She is still too unstable to get too excited and she is moving to our place, it might just be too stressful." The other man gave Mokuba the perfect out. He really wasn't interested in seeing some 'rescued' wild cat, even if Seto was the one to rescue it.

He grabbed the out with both hands. "I'll look forward to meeting the Little One in a week then. Where do you want to meet for dinner? Or is Aishira cooking?"

"I'm sorry Mokuba, if you had called us of course we would meet you for dinner, but Aishira and I have rented a secluded beach house and are going to spend a few days there with our Little One. As
I said, the vet does not want her overexcited and relocating her will be stressful enough."

Disconcerted, Mokuba could only say "Oh." Then added "So you're not going to be in the offices this week?"

"I emailed you a few days ago. I thought my email is why you came out to California. There are some urgent issues that must be dealt with, and only by one of the principal stock owners - you or your brother. Read my email."

"Uh, aren't you interested in why I'm here if I didn't get your email?"

"No. I already know. You haven't given up on chasing Seto down on his vacation. We don't want anything to do with it. I suggest you focus on the company and leave your brother alone. Mokuba, for his sake and yours. Leave him alone." Matasha advised coldly.

"He is not on vacation. Jounouchi kidnapped him, tricked him or something. My brother wouldn't just leave me like that." Mokuba protested angrily.

"He did leave just like that. From what we found at his house he was planning it to be permanent too. I'm glad he's with Jounouchi and I wish them the best. Mokuba for god's sake, stop being an idiot. Do you even hear yourself? You are worse than an obsessed stalker." Exasperation and anger made the other man's voice harsh.

"You are wrong. Why can't you see that Seto would never leave me, never go on 'vacation'?
Mokuba drew a calming breath. "Never mind. It's obvious you don't care about what's really going on. I'll handle the issues at the office. You take whatever time you need to deal with your Little One. Perhaps you can take the opportunity to look for new positions while you are on vacation." With a snarl he slammed the phone down on the cradle.

He spent that evening eating comfort food ordered from a local japanese restaurant and setting up the four workstations for the twelve aides he'd requested, developing routines and easy to follow instructions for monitoring and mining for information on Seto. At the same time Jou and Seto were enjoying their first night in the 'honeymoon' cabin at NBS Rocks, Mokuba went back to bed satisfied that he would soon save his brother from the kidnapping blond.

While Seto and Jou were enjoying their honeymoon, Mokuba trained his crew personally and handled the emergency that Matashi and Aishira had needed his help with. He was vaguely surprised and hurt when the other men didn't come to him offering apologies and help with Seto, but he pushed it aside, determined to rescue his brother. No matter what anyone said, Seto and him were at team, and there was no way Seto left him. He absolutely refused to believe it.

The night they celebrated their joining at a party that ended in decimating a condom bouquet, Mokuba decided that he had given Matashi and Aishira enough time to reconsider and analyze the truth. He would go and ask for any ideas or possible input about what else could be done to rescue his brother.

Their 'secluded beach rental' was easy to find, because they had left the information with the office. Mokuba borrowed one of the company cars and after checking the GPS, stopped to pick up a few bottles of the wine he knew Aishira was partial to. He was timing his arrival to coincide with dinner on purpose. He loved Aishira's cooking.

His first sight of the property was a shock. Secluded was one way to put it. Isolated and inviolate was another. There was a ten foot high stone fence all around what appeared to be several acres of prime beach front and wild mountain property. He knew his friends were private, but this place
reminded him of a modern fortress, complete with a gate with electronic entrance.

He drove into an obvious visitor's parking slot and got out to ring the buzzer. Ashira's voice answered immediately. "Yes?"

"Aishira! It's Mokie. Open up, I want to apologize and I brought wine." The younger Kaiba was at his most charming.

There was a pause, then Matashi's voice came over the speaker. "Mokuba now is not a good time. Come back tomorrow please."

Mokuba barely controlled his shock at the snub. Swallowing back his anger, he responded "C'mon, I'm sorry for what I said. I was just worried about Seto. You can understand that? You know I didn't mean it. Let me come up and give you the wine at least. It's Aishira's favorite - Kayagatake, two thousand eight."

There was another pause, then Aishira, sounding torn, replied, "It really is a bad time Mokuba. I... I will meet you at the door but you cannot come in. We are entertaining and another guest would be awkward."

"Entertaining?" Outrage and betrayal welled up. They were having a dinner party and didn't invite him? Since when was he just a guest and a social liability?

"Yes. We are celebrating that we were able to bring home our Chibi-ichi." There was an electronic hum and the gates opened slowly. "Drive up and I'll meet you at the stairs."

Mokuba tamped down his feelings of hurt and anger and did as he was asked. Aishira was standing at the base of a sweeping staircase dressed in a colorful blue and white Kimono, obviously dressy, but casual too. He knew enough about his old friend to know that they were probably entertaining close friends, not associates. That meant Mokuba probably knew whoever was visiting.

He couldn't imagine who they would entertain that would not want to see him. He handed his friend the bottles and was driving away before he realized who might be there - Seto. In fact, that was the only thing that made sense. Seto and Jou were at Matashi and Aishira's. After all they would be the ones who would celebrate the release of the animal they had given to the couple. He was passing through the gate when he suddenly swerved to the side, jumped out and dashed through the shrinking opening. At a dead run he raced up to the house, stopping only when he reached the stairs.

Holding his breath, he tried the knob and to his great relief, it turned easily under his hand. Aishira hadn't locked it. Quiet as a mouse, he slipped inside and shut the door behind him. Head tilted, he listened for sounds to lead him to his brother. Low murmurs, words indistinct, drew him down the hall to a set of doors left slightly open. Eagerly he peered through the slit, hoping to see his brother. Instead he saw Matashi pouring a glass of something rich and golden and handing it to someone just out of sight. Curious and anxious he tilted and leaned slightly to get a better view. He was so caught up in trying to see the unidentified person that he didn't hear the nearly soundless pad of feet behind him and was completely oblivious to the golden eyes staring at him with inhuman intensity.

Mokuba's first clue that he had been discovered was when something large and heavy hit him shoulder height, knocking him through the doors and pinning him to the floor. When Mokuba's swirling eyes cleared he froze as his first sight was of a grimacing maw of some kind of giant cat. Instinctively he swung out to strike the cat only to find his arms caught and held firm. "What the
Aishira was holding his struggling hands tightly. "Don't you dare hit my Chibi-ichi. You're the one trespassing not her."

"Ch..Chibi? Th...This is your... Your..."

"Our baby. Right." Aishira smiled with pure love at the cat. "Come to Mommy, baby." He released Mokuba's hands to hold out his arms to the mountain lion. "You're shaking. Poor baby, did bad old Mokuba scare you?"

Mokuba flinched as the cat dug in and launched itself into Airshira's arms. Aishira had to be stronger than Mokie had ever given him credit for because the other man caught the cat as if it weighed nothing, and draped it over his shoulder like a silken scarf.

Cautiously, testing all his body parts, Mokuba sat up. "That's not a cat."

"Yes, it is a cat, a mountain lion true, but definitely a feline." Matashi snapped. "What the hell are you doing here? Get out."

"Matashi L..." Seeing the cat was busily playing with Aishira's hair, Mokuba straightened. "I know Seto is here. I want to speak to him."

"Seto is not here." For once the other man looked perplexed. "What gave you that idea?"

"You said your guests would... I could tell you didn't want me here because of your guests. I thought... well Seto is the only... well not Seto, but Jounouchi is the only one I could think of that wouldn't want to see me." The black-haired Kaiba looked around the room his eyes fixing on the other guests. "Oh."

"Mokuba." Yugi greeted softly. Rebecca simply inclined her head. Honda and Otogi deliberately turned their heads away, watching the cat as it slipped off Aishira and padded across to bat at the curtains.

"So you see Mokuba, not everything revolves around you and your obsessive compulsive desire for your brother." Rebecca stood and paced to the end of the room, standing beside the window where the lion was playing with the drapes.

"Shit, it is not an obsessive compulsive whatever. What the fuck is with you all? Don't you understand that Seto has been kidnapped?" Mokuba growled, frustrated.

"He hasn't." Yugi refuted quietly. "For some reason you refuse to see that he is with Jounouchi by his own will, that he has chosen to leave, whether permanent or not is up to him, but it was his choice Mokuba."

Mokuba wanted to scream, to yell, to do something to make them understand. Seto would not abandon him, not ever. Seto would die for him, didn't they know that? Why didn't they understand? "There is no proof, nothing, and I saw the recording of Jounouchi pulling him into the car."

"Seto himself told you didn't he? When we asked Jillian to speak with you, she told us about a conversation you had with him, one she overheard. Why won't you believe him?" Aishira asked softly, but with a note of pain in his voice that had the 'baby' lifting her head and looking at Mokuba with distinct menace, as if in recognition of Mokuba being the source of his 'momma's' pain.

"He was forced, I know he was." Desperate to convince them, he tried to find something anything.
"Look there hasn't been any more recordings or pictures has there? There has to be a reason for that."

Yugi sighed and shook his head. "I don't know if this is going to hurt or help you, but there are pictures. Mokuba, Joey Wheeler gets tons of emails a day. He asked me take care of his inbox, sort them, put them into different sub-folders. He received an email from someone named Raymond that had photos of Seto and Jou taken a couple days ago. I... I will show you." The smaller man pulled out his smartphone and in a few minutes had pulled up the images.

Seto Kaiba filled the screen, playing with children, chasing children, rolling around wrestling, laughing in a way that nobody had ever seen before. Then there were pictures of him and Jou standing shoulder to shoulder limned in the sunset, sitting on a broad timbered wooden fence kissing, and the last picture was of Seto sprawled in a hammock, two children nestled against him as sound asleep as he was, and Jou standing next to the hammock staring down at them with an expression of absolute adoration. Nobody in their right mind could look at that expression and ever think that Jounouchi Katsuya could ever harm Kaiba Seto.

"He's not kidnapped Mokuba." Yugi said gently.

Mokuba watched the images, emotions boiling up from deep inside. Rage, jealousy, hatred, envy all coiled through him. How dare he? How dare that... that... loser dog do such a thing? "Brainwashed... Seto has been brainwashed. That is what I see. Either that or drugged out of his mind. He would never roll in the dirt with children. He barely tolerates them, never wants to be around them." It wasn't exactly true, but it was what he had always presumed.

What Mokuba didn't take into account was that because Seto had been forced to become an adult early and his growing years had been stunted by abuse and loss, Seto envied children and being around them hurt him, which is why he had avoided them. Mokuba didn't realize that by playing with children, accepting them, that Seto was growing past his pain and loss. Matashi and Aishira, who had spent the time since Seto had left talking to professionals about their dear friend, knew what it meant and were happy for Seto, for his growth and healing, and they were grateful to their souls that Jounouchi Katsuya was with their friend.

"Mokuba that isn't true." Aishira shook his head to emphasize his point. "He loves children. He couldn't have made the worlds biggest and best theme parks if he didn't. We've been talking to someone about him, about why he left and..."

"You what?" He screamed. Betrayal from someone he considered a friend brought all of Mokuba's emotions to a head. "You discussed my brother with someone knowing how private he is? You..." Impulsively he lifted his hand and took a step towards the other man only to tumble and fall when a tawny gold flash pinned him to the ground again, this time the mouth was opened wide, large white teeth resting against the skin of his neck. Terror froze him in place as much as the cat's weight.

Matashi sighed. "Ah yeah, need to warn you about that. Mokuba, Chibi-ichi doesn't like violence or anger and reacts badly." Carefully the other man approached. "Come to Daddy, baby. It's fine now, Mommy is safe."

There was a pause when Mokuba could feel the massive jaws flex and the teeth dug into his skin, then carefully the cat released his neck and stepped off his chest, hurtling herself into Matashi's arms.

Mokuba, wary but still infuriated, turned to let fly only to find himself grabbed by the arm by Honda. "Time to go now Kaiba. Just to let you know - never return to my and Otogi's home. You will never be welcome. You just accused our best friend of brainwashing and drugs, not to mention kidnapping. We react badly to that. The cat let you off easy. Show up on my doorstep again and you will hope Chibi-ichi is there." The tall brunet opened the door and tossed him out, accidentally sending him
flying down the stairs. "Thanks for the wine."

It was only as Mokuba drove away that he realized that Honda had called him Kaiba, not Mokuba. For some reason that hurt almost as much as the shallow, stinging holes in his skin. Unconsciously he stroked his hands over the small beads of dried blood. Blood was thicker than water, it meant more than anything. He should have known that they wouldn't understand that. The pictures alarmed Mokuba more than they reassured him. The man in those pictures had his brother's face, but he was not Mokuba's brother. Didn't they see how wrong they were? Why couldn't they understand that Seto wasn't like that with anyone but Mokuba? Seto wouldn't take up with guttersnipes and Jounouchi's illegitimate bastards if he were in his right mind. Why couldn't they understand that Seto wouldn't behave that way unless forced or controlled in some way. Mokuba knew he was the only bright spot in Seto's life, the only one that Seto ever allowed in. Why couldn't anyone else see that? Not for a millisecond did Mokuba consider that he was wrong.

The first thing Mokuba did when he got back to the penthouse was order dinner, and while he waited, hacked Joey Wheeler's email account. He wanted to see the original email and get all the header and routing information. He would track down the source and find out where Seto was being held.

As he tucked into his dinner he dove into the hacked email of Joey Wheeler. He went straight to the emails with attachments, looking for the pictures that had shown his brother so clearly under the influence of something or someone. He didn't want to see his brother's weird looks and behavior again, he was looking for clues to location. He also wanted to decode the header and find the sender's location.

He actually didn't have to do more than open the email. A familiar logo on the email sent Mokuba to the NBS Rocks website where he read the bio of Raymond, the sender of the pictures, as one of the founders of the company. The site also detailed the NBS Settlement, the communal living, and there were several pictures of the living compound that were the same as in Seto's pictures. Before he was half finished with his meal he was on the phone arranging for a flight to the airport nearest the NBS Rocks compound.

He found that the nearest airstrip was two hours away from the commune and there was no shuttle, and the car rental office was located in town and closed about the same time he would be arriving. They did not offer after hours pickup or delivery so he wouldn't have a vehicle waiting. Disgusted he tried to think of a way to get to NBS Rocks and like a bolt of pure luck, his phone buzzed and Jillian's name appeared on the screen. If she had stayed, she could meet him there with her car. It was perfect.

"Jillian." He greeted warmly. "I was just thinking about you. Are you enjoying your vacation?"

"It's wonderful, thank you for giving me my privacy." The cop-psychologist's voice was coolly ironic.

"Are you still there? Or are you..."

"I am in Weed staying at a hotel. I want to know if you were going to accept my help or are you going to continually ditch me. I don't - won't waste my time on you if you're going to run off. I've had another offer."

A map of the area flashed through his mind and triumph surged through him. Yes, it was perfect. "Jillian I'm sorry, I just didn't feel safe there. It was too wild. I... I'll fly out tonight and meet you at... let me check for an airport. I think there is one in Weed or a few miles outside the village. I'll call you back with my arrival time." True to his recent behavior he hung up before she could protest.
Ten minutes later he was on the way out the door, pushing his empty food cart in front of him. The car was waiting to take him to the helicopter pad where the bird was warming up for their two hour flight. He would arrive just after eleven and he called the psychologist to let her know.

She answered cautiously. "Hello?"

"I'll be at the Weed airport in just about two hours. I'll see you then." Without allowing her to say another word, he hung up.

Jillian glared down at her phone, tempted to smash the stupid thing, and wondered again why she was bothering to try to help the youngest Kaiba brother. Yes she had agreed to talk to him, but enough was too much. She wasn't into torture or bashing her head into brick walls so why she even considered meeting Mokuba was beyond her. For a mental health professional sometimes her motivations were as clear as mud to her.

She was still angry about him leaving the cabin even though she had enjoyed her stay immensely. The jerk had been so inconsiderate and completely self-centered. Now he was expecting her to drop everything and run to the airport and pick him up. With a frown she looked over at the sexy park ranger she had been keeping company with since the day Mokuba had ditched her. They had rented this room because they wanted some privacy. Disgusted, she turned off the phone and tossed it onto the unused queen bed. It was time to clear the waters. Mokuba Kaiba was on his own for a ride from the airport. If it was convenient to her, she might help him out tomorrow. For now, other things were more important.

"Problem?" The black-haired woman asked Jillian from where she relaxed, totally nude on the other bed. A pizza box with half a pizza and a few beer bottles on the bed next to her.

"Nah, just work stuff." Jillian smiled and shook her head, "What was that you were saying about flowers being aphrodisiacs?"

Ranger Cavanagh grinned lasciviously. "Come here. I'll explain in detail."

Jillian laughed softly and swayed over to the bed, phone, airport and Mokuba Kaiba deliberately pushed far into the back of her mind.

Mokuba was surprised, but not concerned, when Jillian didn't meet him. He waited ten minutes before he called her, frowning when her phone went directly to voicemail. Another few minutes and the two more calls, both with same result. His chartered copter had taken off leaving him alone in the tiny terminal except for a cranky looking old woman who eyed him with distrust as she swept and mopped the floor.

After forty minutes he figured Jillian was lost, or a lost cause, and approached the woman who was putting away her cleaning supplies. "Excuse me ma'am." He greeted softly. "My ride seems to have gotten lost. Can you tell me where I may hire a cab or rent a car? I can't seem to find a number listed on the internet."

"No car rental at this airport. Hertz is in town and is closed for the night. Cab stopped running half an hour ago." She said prosaically.

"Oh." Mokuba blinked at that news. "I don't suppose you would give me a ride would you? I'd be happy to pay you."

"I really don't have space for a passenger..."

"A hundred dollars? I don't care about the seat or space, I just need a car ride into town."
"Not going to town. I live about two miles from here. Town's another five miles." She coughed slightly. "I can't take you to town. It's not a car. I have a ninety six..."

"Okay then, how about I rent your... buy your vehicle from you? Two thousand dollars cash." He was glad he had taken the wad of cash from the safe, having learned his lesson about having something spare just in case. He had counted it and been surprised to find almost seven thousand in hundreds.

"Two thousand? But it's my...

"Your only transport. I understand. All right, I'll pay four thousand." Probably some rusted out heap but Mokuba was desperate.

The old woman sighed and nodded. "Fine you want it that bad you can have it for four thousand, but you pay now and you take it and go. I don't want to hear another thing about it." She glared. "You are a rude young man. You need to learn not to interrupt people and treat your elders with respect."

All Mokuba heard was the agreement to sell the vehicle and the the rest was blah blah. He opened his wallet and pulled out the wad of hundreds, peeling off the four thousand, counting it twice, before handing it to her. "The keys and some kind of bill of sale?"

"Don't need a bill of sale. Here's the key." She tucked the cash into her blouse, obviously in her bra and pulled out a single key. "It's chained up outside. The lock sticks a little so work with it okay?" Without a word to him she turned and scurried away.

Frowning, Mokuba went outside to look at the vehicle that didn't need a key. There were no cars in the parking lot and the only thing with wheels in sight was a dilapidated old ten speed bicycle chained to a post near the doors. The padlock gleamed with almost preternatural shine in the haze of the airport lights. "No way." He rasped as he walked over and slowly fitted the lone key into the lock. It fit easily and when it turned with just a little sticking, he knew that it was true. He had just paid four thousand dollars for a bike that belonged in the junk heap.

Infuriated at being taken for a fool, he spun around and stalked back to the terminal, determined to confront the con artist old bat. He grabbed the door and pulled hard enough that the lock that had just been engaged shook the frame of the door. Snarling, he shook the door again, more violently, and the glass cracked. From inside the terminal an alarm began to wail.

Three minutes later - really where did they come from? - two security guards dropped on him like a bomb, pinning him to the ground roughly and laying a taser alongside his neck, daring him to 'breathe wrong'.

Mokuba was smart enough to shut up for once. He didn't breathe wrong or say a single word. He didn't even curse when the thieving con artist janitor hobbled out and asked 'John' to give her a ride home. She'd given her bike to charity. Yeah right, the charity of the gullible rube.

He explained he had been trying to get back inside the building to ask for directions to town when he had been startled and frightened by strange noises and pulled too hard. Of course he wasn't a terrorist, of course he would pay for the damages, and of course he was sorry.

Because it was an unprecedented event, and because he had access to his own aircraft, he was deemed a flight risk until it was all sorted out and he was a guest in their local jail for the night. The sheriff and judge would deal with him in the morning. The upside was that he had a ride to town and a bed to sleep in. The down side was that Mokuba looked really bad in orange. He couldn't believe they actually made him change into a jumpsuit for a single night's stay. When he protested the cop on
duty said it kept people in the shared cells from fighting over clothes, and since Mokuba's clothes were particularly nice, there was sure to be a fight.

Mokuba bit back the obvious solution of a private cell. He didn't think that the cop would appreciate his input and he didn't want to stay longer than he had to because he opened his mouth when he should have stayed quiet.

He was sorry he hadn't made the suggestion when he was led to a small room with a commode, four metal bunks attached to the wall, and three men sprawled out on three of the bunks. The fourth bunk seemed to be in use as a storage shelf.

He was reaching for the first box to empty the bunk when an angry voice snarled, 'Don't touch my shit.'

"Uh..." Mokuba looked down at the man on the bunk below his. "My bunk. If it's yours, move it. I want to sleep."

"Sleep on the fucking floor. I'm not moving a damn thing. Don't touch my shit or I'll kick your ass."

Mokuba would like to see the asshat try. He wasn't going to let some jailhouse loser fuck with him. Determination hardening him to readiness of attack he reached for the box again. Before he could touch it a weathered hand gripped his. "Don't. You are dense and your blindness is a major cause of pain."

Mokuba swung around to face the person gripping his hand. His breath left him in a relieved whoosh. "What the hell? Who are you and why are you interfering?"

"That man is not to be 'messed' with, Child. He has killed others for less. You dying at this time would cause great harm. Come sit with me by the window and we'll keep each other company."

"Window?" Mokuba looked around and saw a barred window he'd somehow missed before. "I see it now. I wonder why it's there. Aren't they afraid of contact with the outside?"

"Nothing out that window will interfere here - except me of course." The old man laughed as he led Mokuba away from the bunks. "I am is Licicint. You are called?"

"Mokuba Kaiba. Your name is.. Lee see sint." The younger man repeated doubtfully.

"It is who I am, chosen at my creation." A small smile lifted the lines of the old man's face. "As was yours I believe. Tell me, does it have a meaning?"

"It means wooden horse." Mokuba admitted quietly.

"Ah what a troublesome name. Your choices are so diverse with such a name. Are you a wooden horse for joy, like a child's toy brings happiness, or are you a wooden horse like the famed Trojan Horse, bringing destruction and death to those who care for you? Outwardly a gift but inwardly empty of all save betrayal."

"What the hell?" Mokuba yelped and started to back away, only to be caught by the weathered hand again.

"I am not the one who gave the name to you, nor am I the one who decides what you do with it. Settle down and tell me about yourself. Do you have family?"
Reluctantly Mokuba settled back against the wall. Above him he could hear the sounds of birds chirping outside the window and it relaxed him enough to admit. "I have an older brother, Seto."

"Seto Kaiba." Licicint mumbled thoughtfully. "It has a meaning too. Do you know what it is?"

"I... uhm... Seahorse. It means seahorse." He was uncomfortable discussing his brother with this man.

"What a great name. Patience, generosity, intelligence, and the future growth into a creature of great power. Tell me, does your brother live up to his name?"

"He raised me when our parents died." Mokuba said almost defiantly.

"Yes, of course he would. A male seahorse is a natural parent, carrying the young. Is he lonely with you not with him? Seahorses are solitary creatures, allowing only specific people around them. Some have been known to die rather than suffer the company of a creature they can't abide."

"He... I... We haven't spoken in a while but I'm trying to catch up to him so we can be together like we should be." The admission was difficult, and Mokuba wanted to call the words back as soon as he said them.

"Catch up to him? Has he left you? If he has maybe he has decided you do not need a parent and has decided to let the current carry him along on adventures." The old man paused as if expecting an answer. When there was none, he said quietly "Seahorses do not migrate much, they move too slowly. However they do wrap around their homes and anchor deeply. If their homes migrate, the seahorse will move with them. You know this? Has your brother perhaps found his home?"

"I am his home." Mokuba snarled violently.

"He wouldn't have left you if you were. You were his child and he left when you no longer needed a parent. That is typical of seahorses. Many are prey to their own currents and are dragged out to sea, never seen again."

Rage spiralled through Mokuba. How dare this man presume anything about him or his brother. "You don't know me and you don't know Seto. He would never leave me! He would never anchor with Jounouchi! You don't know a damn thing."

The old man sat back and folded his hand in his lap. "Of course I don't. I was simply discussing names. My name means hummingbird in my language. Hummingbirds are messengers and sometimes I find myself the bearer of unwelcome news." The old man glanced up at the window and sighed. "I will leave you alone now. Please think on what I said. If... If you look for me again, empty wooden horse, I will come to guide you."

A snarling sigh from behind him brought Mokuba's gaze to the sleeping man on the nearest bunk. When he turned back, the old man was gone. When he glanced up at the window he blinked in shock. There was only smooth stone walls.

He jumped and yelped, and a hard thud brought him full upright. Mokuba glanced around, taking in his position on the top bunk, the boxes on the floor, and the rousing men in the room. "What..."

"You okay?" The growling, threatening man from the bottom bunk grumbled.

"Uh yeah. Ah, about your stuff."

"No worries. I told you to move it didn't I? Didn't know we was getting another drunk or I'da moved
"Ah okay. So... uhm... what happened to the other guy, Licicint?"

"What other guy? Only four in this room. Me, you, and them." He pointed to the men sliding out of their bunks. "I'm Gabe, the guy on top with the red hair is Louis, and the bald guy on bottom with the tats is Dave. We're the three musketeers. Got stuck in here for ninety days for a bar fight. What did you get stuck with?"

"I broke a window at the airport." Mokuba bit his lip, hating to admit it.

"Shit man, why would you do that? It's federal. Besides there's no money in it. Place is broke and going under faster than a torpedo."

"It was an accident. I was trying to get back in to get directions. There was a... sound. It startled me and I pulled too hard on the door."

"Huh. Well still destruction of fed property. Gonna be some serious fine there. Hope you got rich friends." Louis remarked as he stood in front of the commode, opened his fly and relieved his bladder.

"Ah, well I... I will call my - a - lawyer and ask him to handle it." Mokuba mumbled, averting his gaze from the urinating man. "So when do you guys get out?"

"Today or tomorrow. Depends on when the judge signs the papers for release. Guy's being a dick because I don't do family politics." Dave sighed in relief as his bladder drained in a golden stream in the commode. "See Judge Ramons is my uncle. He took in me and my sister when my dad took off a few years back. He fed us and clothed us and all that shit, never let us forget it either. All I ever heard was about how worthless my dad was. Ain't saying he was great, but he was my dad and I didn't want to hear it. I took off and moved in with Louis and Gabe when I was eighteen. Been two years and the ass still calls me an ingrate."

"Your sister?"

"She's stuck so far up his ass she's only fourteen and talking about college. Want's to be a lawyer and judge, just like him."

"What about your mom?" Mokuba didn't want to know, not really, but he didn't want to think about his straining bladder and the unflushed toilet just a few yards away.

"What about her? She took off after Donna was born and never looked back." Dave waved, "Piss dude. We can only flush a few times because of water restrictions. We like to save our flushes after we dump."

"Oh didn't know." Mokuba straightened his shoulders and crossed to the toilet. He pretended he was back in school, in the communal bathrooms there, rather than a jail cell with strange men. The image helped release his straining bladder, to his great relief.

He washed his hands in tepid water with bar soap, something none of his cell mates did. "So, breakfast? Is that why we are up now?"
"Always up at the buttcrack of dawn. What's your name?"

"Oh yeah, sorry. I'm Mok... Mokie. Nice to meet you. So why are we up at the buttcrack of dawn?"

"Make the bunks, then they check on us, make sure we didn't escape. Then shower, breakfast, and legal shit. Hopefully we will get out today. Longest they can keep us is one more day." Gabe tilted his head in consideration. "You, they could probably call the feds on and keep you until the fed judge deals with you. How big was the window you broke? Cost more than a thou to fix?"

"Couple hundred max. The glass wasn't even tempered or bullet proof." Mokuba knew security and glass very well.

"That's good. The most they can hold you is a year then." Dave shrugged. "What do you think Gabe? Louis?" Dave knew a lot about it obviously. Either from practical experience or from being in the company of a judge was anyone's guess. Mokuba didn't want to ask.

"Depends on if he's got a record I guess." Gabe studied him carefully. "Got any kind of record?"

"Of course not, unless you count a few speeding tickets?" Mokuba was doubly glad that some of his exploits had been cleaned up by his brother.

"Probably just have to pay for the damage. Not like you're some kind of foreigner or something. If you were from another country there could be a pro... What's wrong?" Louis gave him a worried look. "You just went white as a sheet."

"I'm Japanese. My brother said I should become a citizen but I hadn't decided yet. I... Uhm... But the U.S. and Japan are allies, right?"

Dave frowned and slowly shook his head. "Dude you are fucked. My uncle, the judge, hates Japs. Seriously, his dad was on the Arizona. Body was left on the ship."

"But I had nothing to do with that." Mokuba protested.

"Don't matter a damn. He considers all Japs cowards, dishonest and sneaky. Might help that you don't really look Jap, but when he finds out you're in deep shit. Blames them for his dad's death and he won't believe a word you say. When you get a chance call your lawyer and have him move it to fed court or you will get the max, in as hard a time as you can get. Believe me on this. Call a freaking lawyer and get the hell as far from here as possible."

Mokuba nodded, his heart missing a beat as he realized that he really could be stuck in this jail for a while. "Show me how to make the bunk please? I don't think I know how." Louis chuckled and crossed to give him a lesson on bunk making.

After breakfast Mokuba requested his phone to make a call and was told to use the guard's office phone. After explaining that he needed a phone number from his phone, the guard grudgingly asked what number.

"It's unlisted. I need to call my friends. They will get a lawyer for me." Mokuba explained tightly.

"Well then it looks like you are going to have to call someone else." The man said indifferently.

Mokuba racked his brain, finally coming up with what he hoped was Jillian's number. Showing more confidence than he felt he dialed the number. Jillian's low voice answered on the third ring. "Hello?" Her voice was tentative and vaguely curious.
"Jillian!" Mokuba breathed a sigh of relief. Sure he was still pissed at the bitch for leaving him stranded - this was all her fault - but right now he needed her to get him out of this.

"Kaiba. Didn't you get the message last night? I am not at your beck and call."

"Jillian, I'm sorry, I really am. I need your help. I... I had a problem at the airport last night and now I'm in jail. Can you.. Will you come help me with this? Please?" He hated to grovel, his brother had always said for him to stand tall, but his brother had also always done what had to be done, even if it meant swallowing his pride.

"Jail? What did you do now? Insult the pilot? Threaten the stewardess? Fart at the ticket counter?" She sounded more exasperated than concerned.

"I pulled too hard on the door and cracked the glass. Only thing is, I'm still a Japanese citizen and according to the people here the judge isn't going to like that, something about some Arizona thing killing his dad. Please Jillian, I won't ever ask you for anything again, but please, just come and help me with this."

Jillian's first thought was 'is he serious? Then, 'he's calling the death of hundreds aboard the Arizona and attack on Pearl Harbor a 'thing'? What the hell did they teach these kids in Japan?' His desperation tugged at her though and she set aside her outrage and disgust. "I'll see what I can do." Ignoring his attempts at gratitude she disconnected the call.

He didn't see Jillian, or anyone remotely friendly, for several hours. He did meet the judge and the sheriff. Neither were inclined to simply let him pay for the glass and let him go without pressing charges. They all but called him a liar about why he had accidentally broken the glass. It was a lie, but his reasons hadn't been terroristic as they implied. In the end they decided to wait for a federal investigator to be dispatched, and a federal judge to look at the evidence. Until then Mokuba would be a guest of their jail.

Mokuba protested of course, but it did no good. The only concession he received was a second orange jumpsuit. When he got back to his cell he found the other three there as well. "Thought you guys would be out of here."

"Nah. Snafu in paperwork. Missing a something or other. Could take as long as a week." Dave stared down at his hands. "I hate the fucker. He did it on purpose to keep us in here longer."

"He's a shithead." Mokuba agreed. "He was all for me paying for the glass until he saw on my paperwork I am Japanese. Then he insisted on a terrorist check and federales to handle it. They said it could take as long as a month."

"Man they are really shafting you." Louis sighed. "Too bad you don't know somebody local."

"I called someone I thought would help. She is a federal cop, and she is in town. She blew me off." That actually hurt. Jillian had said she would do something and she'd abandoned him, just like... just like his brother.

They were in their cell waiting dinner when a guard walked in, leading Jillian. Mokuba leapt to his feet eagerly, expecting the guard to open the cell. Instead the man stepped back and motioned for her to step forward. "Jillian, thank you! What took so long?"

"Oh you're welcome, although you are going to owe me big time for this Kaiba. First, there are no charges against you. You are being held on 'suspected terrorism.' Because you are not a citizen you don't have our rights. They can hold you indefinitely. However, I have contacted several people
about this - it is just a cracked window - and I have the federal prosecutor, federal marshal, Homeland Security as well as a lawyer specializing in this kind of harassment looking into this. They will arrive tonight. Tomorrow your local yokels will be answering to them all for this. It isn't smart to use terrorism to disguise bigotry and harassment. Also, did you give your clothes, watch and smartphone to the deputy at the desk as a gift? He had them all. Claimed they were confiscated in a terrorist raid."

"I did not. No way in hell would I give them the sweat off my..." He broke off when she coughed slightly. "No I didn't give them anything of mine."

"Didn't think so. You're a selfish prick and it would never occur to you to... " She broke off shaking her head. "Never mind. It's enough to know they stole from you." She turned to the man standing behind her. "I've said what I wanted to. Please escort me back to the desk. I'll have a word about the 'gifts' this man took."

"Wait. Fisker, Robert Fisker out of New York handles stuff like this for Seto. Give him a call please?" Mokuba said desperately as she turned away.

"I'll look him up, but I've done all I can for you right now."

"Wait, there's more I need you to check on." The younger Kaiba said impulsively.

"I am going to make a few more calls. I don't..."

"No, not for me. Them. They were sentenced to ninety days for a bar fight. They were due out today but there is a missing paper or something. Can you see... I mean..." Mokuba faltered to a stop at the strange look that crossed Jillian's face.

"I'll look into it Mokuba." She glanced around at the boys in the cell. "No promises." With a brusque nod she turned and strode away.

Mokie turned to his cellmates expecting something, a comment or maybe some kind of gratitude, instead he was met with stares of recognition and something very like glee.

"What?"

"She called you Kaiba. Mokie Kaiba, Mokuba Kaiba. Spoiled brat baby brother to the one and only Seto Kaiba. No wonder you weren't worried, you had a fed on tap." Gabe said softly.

"Must be nice to be that rich." Dave whistled softly. "So where is your famous big brother. He'd probably burn this place to the ground to get you out."

"Ah... uhm... I... You know my brother?" It was dumb, but it was the only thing he could come up with.

"Know him? Fuck no. My dad worked for Disneyland before he took over though. Quit before then. Didn't want to live in southern Callie any more. Dad kept up, and after he took off I did too, kinda hoping my dad went back there." Dave shrugged. "When KC took over Disney I laughed until I cried. They were jerks to work for."

"Human resources are an issue we've been working on." Mokuba admitted modestly.

"Yeah, I'm sure. So what's it like having someone like Seto Kaiba for your brother? You guys close or is he a dick to you?"

"I don't know what you mean, someone like Seto? Seto is great, he is always there for me, always has my back, we do everything together." Or used to. Mokuba realised that it was no longer true, and
"He's a genius right? Gotta be hard to live with. Didn't I hear you got engaged? How is he with that? How is your fiancee with you two being so close? My girl used to get pissed when I hung too much with Louis and Gabe."

"He's a genius, and he can be mean about it." Mokuba didn't hesitate to admit that. Everyone knew Seto could be difficult. "My fiancee, Rebecca and I broke up because she was jealous of my relationship with Seto. She didn't understand how close we are, how much we need each other."

"Dude, that sounds weird. I mean, you don't break up with your girl because of your brother." Dave frowned. "I mean your brother would have got over it right?"

Gabe shook his head, interrupting. "No you don't. I mean sure if it's just a fling yeah, bros before hos, but a fiancee? That's like forever shit." He shook his head again. "Bet she would be here now. Question is, where the hell is your genius brother?"

Mokuba didn't have an answer, not one he could explain in any way they would understand. Instead of trying to formulate an answer they could accept he turned to the wall and imagined he was looking out a window watching a hummingbird dance among flowers.

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Seto adjusted his mask and his six shooters, making sure that the hammers on his guns were not cocked and the locking straps were snug. He didn't want someone to accidentally, or deliberately, pull one of the guns and get hurt. It would be two hours before his next show, his third, and there was just enough time to grab a heavenly burger and meet with his lawyer.

Robert Fisker was waiting exactly where Seto had texted him to wait, on the small bench next to the burger stand. The 'Lone Ranger' didn't wait in the small line for his lunch, instead he went to the back and knocked on the door. One of the acrobats, now out of costume, opened the door and grinned at him. "Two burgers, catsup and mustard and tomatoes coming right up. You just missed Tonto. He's talking to Gagne at the Monkey cage."

He'd just left Jou by the foul tempered, worse smelling monkeys. "Thanks."

She pulled her head back in and returned in just a few seconds holding out two wrapped burgers. "Enjoy."

He smiled slightly and nodded. How could he help but enjoy what had become his favorite food. Spurs jingling he went around the vending booth and sat down next to the woefully out of place lawyer. "Fisker, you need to relax. This is the circus, not the circuit court."

Astonishment covered the man's face. Seto was more than mildly amused, he laughed outright. The man was a lawyer with one of the best poker faces ever, and here he was gaping like a child - at the circus.

"Kaiba?" Robert gasped after finding his voice, if not his poker face.

"You were expecting someone else?" Seto asked, taking a big bite of his burger.

"No, no of course not." The lawyer rapidly regained his composure. "It is unexpected to find you here, in such an outrageous costume."

"Stay a couple hours you can watch me perform." Another bite woofed down. "So did you contact
"Yes, and as expected, they are stonewalling, demanding an interview with you and your companion." Shrewd eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I'll arrange for a meeting, but I should hear everything from you and your friend first."

"There isn't a lot to tell. I was working my way up the strip winning a stake to play with in Vegas when I went into the Bassett. My companion is my old school koohai, Jounouchi Katsuya. He is a duelist of some renown. He beat me not long ago. He goes by the name of Joey Wheeler in the States and is quite famous for his books. He takes odd jobs as he travels around the country meeting new people and having grand adventures. He was working at the Bassett as part of his research. The manager, Mark, refused to give him his pay and sexually harassed him, then lied to me about it. Simple as that. He pissed me off so I broke the bank. The owners were there at the time, and Katsuya was hovering over my shoulder. There was no cheating or any kind of underhanded play."

"I believe you, but maybe I could talk to..." Robert broke off as a man with braided black hair and buckskin shirt and pants, completely with fringe and knee high moccasins, leaned over the back of the bench and took a bite from one of Seto's burgers. "Ah... Tonto?"

"Joey Wheeler, AKA Tonto." The man said through a mouthful of burger and bun. "Got tired of monkeys. You want to talk to me?"

Seto sighed and handed the remains of his first burger blindly over his head. "Eat."

Robert goggled at them both as, instead of taking the proffered food, Joey caught Seto's hand and brought it up to his mouth, using the 'Lone Ranger's' hand to feed himself. "Ah, uhm. Nice to meet you Mister Wheeler. I've read all your books."

"Mmm.. fanks." Another bite from Seto's hand muffled the words.

"Robert, pop your eyes back into your head, it's starting to scare the children." Seto ordered placidly, his one hand still held up, feeding 'Tonto' while the other hand maneuvered the wrapper off a second burger. "The reason that the manager has been spewing about wives and husbands et al, is because Joey and I are together, we are married heart and soul, even if we don't have the paper to prove it yet. That will change as soon as we get around to it. We addressed each other as husband in his presence." Still completely calm and in control, despite the fact that Joey was now licking the traces of burger from his relaxed hand, Seto took a large bite of his second burger. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Robert looked around the circus desperately. This was too surreal. Seto Kaiba dressed as some nineteen fifties singing cowboy? Breaking banks at casinos because of insults to... his husband? Who happened to be dressed as a singing cowboy sidekick? What the hell? Had he fallen into an alternate dimension? Had his plane crashed and this was hell or some coma induced dream? "Kaiba... I am having trouble believing this situation. Perhaps..."

"What is to believe? We are on vacation, currently travelling with the circus. I am part of the entertainment industry and many innovations can be found here." Seto's voice, which had been casual and amused, came out in brisk, cold tones that Robert was used to. "There was a shortage of an act and since Joey and I had the skills we filled in."

Now that made sense. Research for his business definitely made sense. However, "You and Joey Wheeler are a couple? You want to marry?"

"Yes. Not so odd, most people marry. Why are you shocked?" Joey leaned down and instead of
stealing a bite of burger, stole a quick kiss on the high cheekbone just under the black mask.

"It's just that..." The lawyer sighed and shook his head. "Just that it's well known that Seto doesn't date or have a steady relationship. He's considered asexual by most of the people who know him."

Joey's lips curved into a smirk. "Guess they don't know him well, 'cause there ain't nothing 'asexual' about him. Hottest lover in the known - and unknown - universe. Trust me on that, though 'cause he's all mine."

Seto smirked and said courteously, "Thanks Jounouchi. I'll put it on my resume."

"Don't mention it." Definite teasing lit the brown eyes. "But you don't need no resume for that, you got a several lifetime gig lined up, remember that." Another kiss on the cheek under the mask. "Now let's stop fucking with his head and get down to business."

Robert blinked at the distinct pout that curved Seto Kaiba's - Seto Kaiba's - lower lip. "No fair. I was enjoying his eyes bulging out of his sockets."

"You were messing with my head?"

"Couldn't resist. You looked so shocked and I have found that I enjoy shocking people." Seto was completely unapologetic. "But what we said was true. Now that you know the facts, can you handle it?"

"Of course." Robert wanted to huff and snarl, but the relaxed smile and blue eyes that sparkled at him from behind the mask made him hesitate. Seto Kaiba had never been happy, to the best of his knowledge, he'd never even been photographed laughing. Was it such a bad thing for the man to tease a little? If his client was happy dressed as the Lone Ranger, travelling around the country with Tonto, was it bad? He didn't know, but the sparkle said no. Besides everyone knew that rich, unworldly people ran afoul of the law frequently. This new Kaiba would be a repeat customer. Not a bad thing at all. "I did receive a voicemail from a federal agent regarding Mokuba. I haven't returned the call yet, but did you want me to handle that as well?"

"Is he alright?" The question was almost automatic.

"Got into some trouble up in some place called Weed. Something about a broken window. I'll go talk to the gaming commission and cops for you then fly down and get information on what's going on. You want an update?"

Seto hesitated, lowering his burger to his lap. The hand that had been feeding Tonto was now gripping the other man's hand tight. "I..."

Jou leaned forward and nuzzled into the top of Seto's head. "Keep him informed but don't let Mokuba know. Mokuba's having some issues with accepting responsibility as an adult and..."

"Katsuya..." Blue eyes turned to look up at his lover. "Are you... Is it...Okay?" Uncertainty and a kind of soft sadness made the lawyer blink in as much shock as he'd felt earlier. Seto Kaiba uncertain? Sad? Asking for another's permission? The world was going to end any second.

"Seto, he's your brother and you love him. It's not healthy for you to ignore who you are, who you have always been, simply because you are trying to grow. Keep tabs, give him support, but don't let him know. That way he can't take advantage." The golden eyes that blazed down at Seto were lit with love, warmth and acceptance.

The lawyer watching them swallowed down a lump of envy. He had never seen that much caring in
his life, and the aching void just seeing it caused was enough to make him want to cry. Seto Kaiba was definitely changing, but if that kind of love and devotion was supporting him, Robert had no doubt that it was definitely the best thing for his client.

"Robert, please handle it and keep me informed, but do not let Mokuba know I know or agreed, also don't let him know that you've seen me. Weed is a little too close for comfort. Be sure to send his portion of the bill to him. I don't pay his bills any longer." Seto lifted the burger and took a big bite, all uncertainty gone from his face.

"Of course." Robert grinned slightly. "I'll call you, if you'll give me your number?"

"Only if you do not give it to anyone - I mean anyone - else." Seto gave him a direct look.

"Of course. Client confidentiality. I'll call you when I have something to tell you." With a nod to the buckskin-clad Tonto behind Seto he stood and turned back towards where he had parked his rental. As he walked away he could hear Seto grousing about another burger and Joey Wheeler's response about Seto eating as much as he did. The last thing he heard of the conversation was his client's challenging "So?" He was happy for Seto Kaiba and Joey Wheeler.

Seto grumbled enough that Jou went and got another two burgers and then flopped down next to his lover. "So, you think teasing your lawyer is fun?"

"Robert Fisker is a lot like I used to be. He... He needs shaking up. I enjoyed it a lot, and I hope he... I hope he did too." Seto unwrapped his burger and took a big bite, humming his approval.

"Yeah, I'd say both of you enjoyed that." Jou snarked and bit into his own unwrapped sandwich. "He's pretty hot. You weren't ever interested?"


"You like teasing him, I like teasing you. Seems like a fair trade." Jou grinned mischievously.

"I don't want to repeat myself, but... Jerk." Seto mock pouted as he finished his burger.

Jou laughed to himself as he shifted to lean against Seto's shoulder. "Suki desu."

Seto grunted and swallowed, mumbling softly "Suki." Katsuya's happy laughter rocked them both on the tiny bench.

When Seto's voracious appetite for burgers was satisfied, Jou nudge him to his feet. "Time to go visit Annabelle. She isn't performing today because the vet said she could deliver any time. I have to go spell Rolf for a bit. Come hang with me?"

Seto sighed and patted his belly. "Now I know why you fed me. You wanted to bribe me to hang out with you while you babysat Annabelle. That animal is grumpy Katsuya. That makes her dangerous."

"You would be grumpy too if you were preggers for twenty two months. Sheesh, and she is overdue by three days. How would you feel if you were carrying around over two hundred pounds in your belly?"

"Depends on how much fun I had getting pregnant." Seto quipped outrageously as his long legs started walking towards the elephant's trailer.
"Figures you'd say that when you're safe from getting knocked up." Jou teased back.

"I'm more than willing to let you try to get me pregnant." More silly outrageousness, but it made them both chuckle.

"I'm more than willing to try... Oh Seto! Look, the vet's van is here." Jou's voice rose a couple octaves. "Rolf said that he would only come again when she was in active labor."

"Guess he doesn't need us to spell him then." Seto turned away from the trailer.

"What? Aw, c'mon, how often do you see an elephant being born?" Jou touched his arm lightly.

"About as often as I want to - which is never." Seto curled his lip slightly. "Normal sized mammal birth is messy, smelly, and completely disgusting. An elephant birth is that on a mammoth scale. I've been to several 'births' of our attraction animals and always end up wearing some kind of birth related fluid or slime. I'll pass."

"What are the odds? She wasn't even in labor a few hours ago, but okay." Jou gave him a questioning look. "Do me a favor though? Let's check the status and you go give Dave an update?"

"I suppose." Seto agreed grudgingly. He didn't want anything to do with birthing baby elephants or the slime-fluid hazard.

"Thanks." Jou threaded their arms together, turning the tall brunet around at the same time. "I can't wait. They are going to have a contest the night the baby is born. One of the kids in the audience is going to name it."

"Sounds like a good PR gimmick. Should be lots of fun and bring in some revenue." Seto observed casually.

"Yeah, definitely." Jou came to a dead stop as a thought occurred to him. "Seto, what are we going to name our kids. I mean I know adopted might mean they already have first names, but are they going to be Kaiba, Jounouchi, or Wheeler?"

"Hmm...I have a better question. Which of us is going to take the other's name?" Seto asked straight faced.

Golden eyes widened in shock before narrowing, "Oh you are messing with me."

"Not at all." Jou countered smoothly. "But I have a suggestion."

Jou eyed him with suspicion. "I'm sure. Let's hear it."

Seto was tempted to tease his love more but decided to go with an honest response. This was obviously very important to Katsuya. "We keep our names and hyphenate for the kids. Kaiba-Jounouchi, Or Jounouchi-Kaiba. We'll flip a coin when the time comes. Fair?"

"How 'bout we duel for it?" Jou bargained.

"Forget it. You would lose." Seto shook his head. "Flip a coin is at least even odds."

"Did you forget I beat you not too long ago?" The bewigged blond reminded smartly.

"Idiot, it was my goodbye gift to you. You know I..." He broke off when he found himself squeezed in a tight hold. "What... Katsuya what's wrong?" He could feel the sudden trembling that shook the other man's body.
All of the rigidly controlled emotions swirled through Jou, cracking through his hard won calm. He knew he should be angry at Seto for throwing the match, hell he probably would be some time in the future, but right now fear, panic, and a storm of other emotions were uppermost. "Shit Seto, I know and you know, and you know I know, but damn it when you say it like that, when I think about how close you were to... How close we came to almost missing this. It scares the hell out of me."

Seto cradled his shaking lover close, rubbing his slightly hamburger-greasy hands on the chamois of the fringed buckskin costume. "I'm sorry. You've almost never shown me any kind of upset so I thought... I didn't think it would bother you if I talked about it."

Jou burrowed into Seto's chest, obviously seeking comfort and trying to hide from the question. Seto wouldn't allow that any more than Jou allowed him to hide away. Seto pushed Jou's head back and forced the golden gaze to meet his.

When Jou saw that his lover wasn't going to let him evade, he sighed and closed his eyes tight enough to bring the tears he had hidden all along to the surface. "I'm upset about you almost offing yourself. Hurting for you, pissed at Mokuba, and scared half out of my mind you'll change your mind about sticking around." Jou confessed for the first time. "But you don't need that kind of emotional crap on you, especially not from me, so I just... I live in the moment."

Seto groaned and pulled him back into the curve of his body. "Katsuya, I'm not going to change my mind. Not in this lifetime or the next dozen. The only thing that could take me back to that dark place is if you died. If you left me I'd hunt you down, so you running away wouldn't do it. You are as essential to me as my heart. I know you don't think that's healthy or normal, but that is who I am - I need purpose and direction. Without you I am... nothing. I need you to need me. When you die I will stay long enough to see to my responsibilities, then I will walk in front of the nearest bus. If our children still need a parent I will do what I must until they are able to care for themselves, then I will join you. You may not want it, but there it is. I love you - You are my everything."

Katsuya gripped him convulsively, nearly crying with his mixed emotions. They stayed locked together for several moments before he cleared his throat and stepped back. "You can't take that back, not ever. God as sick as it sounds, you have made me the happiest man, even though I know it's wrong, part of me likes knowing I'm your everything. I mean... I know... but it doesn't feel... aww fuck me."

"Every day of our lives, but not right now." Seto gave him a steady smile, his eyes bright and clear. "Right now you have to watch some elephant cow give birth and I have to bring a circus clown the news of the new arrival."

"Annabelle. Right." Jou gave him a wobbly smile. "Let's go Seto." He threaded their fingers together and held on tightly to his lover's hand.

Jou poked his head through the door not wanting to come fully inside if it upset the laboring cow. He needn't have worried. The new mama was busily wiping down her newborn babe. "Ooh... Seto come look."

Seto warily stepped in behind Jou with a vague idea that the baby had been born by the gentle cooing of his love. Seeing the cow placidly wiping down the calf with her trunk, he stepped further into the huge trailer. "Oh, a boy. He's ador..." Seto broke off as the busy mama shook off her trunk, splatting him with the remnants of birth and... ick. "able..." He finished weakly as he backed out of the trailer. Jou, who had somehow managed to stay clean, followed hot on his heels.

"Seto, I know its... Okay I don't know but I understand. Look on the bright side. You were right!" Jou tried to put on a cheerful face, but it faltered in the wake of Seto's dust churning strides and rigid
posture. "Think how cute he is?" Jou tried desperately to find something positive to cool Seto's ire as he trotted after the long-legged brunet. Damn his sexy baby could move.

That froze Seto in his tracks. Slowly, with clockwork like precision, laser blue eyes turned to bore holes into Jou's brain. "Have I ever cared about cute?"

"Ah.. Yes?" Jou said hopefully. He winced when the laser blue gaze turned arctic and swung away, and the Lone Ranger strode off with more speed than if he were riding Silver.

Trailing behind like the Tonto he resembled, Jou gave up trying to calm the brunet. When Seto stopped at their camper and ducked inside, Jou decided to give his lover some space and go update Dave. He was sure Dave would not want anyone to spell Rolf other than people who were very familiar with the new mama. Anyone else was likely to become paste.

After a round of congratulations and the discreet procurement of a new costume for Seto, Jou went back to their camper hoping to find his guy in a better frame of mind. What he found was a stark naked brunet ruthlessly wiping every inch of his body he could reach with lemon scented wet wipes. "Eh... I think you got it all." Jou murmured tentatively, taking in the reddened expanse of skin.

"I can still smell it." Seto snarled as he wiped again at his chest.

"Hang on." Jou took a wet wipe and rubbed it over Seto's face, then took another and held it to his nose. "Blow! Hard!"

Seto blew although because Jou said so or because he wanted to express his feelings was anyone's guess. "Now wipe your face again while I put this costume in a plastic bag." Jou shoved the fouled clothes in the plastic bag and tied it tight, sticking it outside for good measure. Then he did the same with the soiled wet wipes. "Okay? Now sniff."

Fine nostrils flared as Seto took a deep breath. Grudgingly he nodded. "Now I smell like lemons."

A distinctly hentai grin crossed Jou's face. "In writing circles, especially fanfiction, lemons are graphic sexual scenes. I'd say you smell like you look - walking sex."

"Sometimes I forget you are a writer." A tinge of color washed up Seto's cheeks. "Do you write fanfiction?"

"I do sometimes, when characters move me. Spock and Kirk from Star Trek are great for some homoerotic stuff. I write under a pseudonym so people don't know it's me though. I only do it for fun, when I need a break from writing about my travels." Jou admitted casually.

"Really? What's your pseudonym. I'll have to look it up. I enjoy Star Trek. I've always thought Kirk and Spock had a thing for each other." Seto gave him a sideways look. "That a clean costume?" He gestured to the bag Jou had dropped on the floor.

"Yeah. I write my stuff using the name Marta Droxine." Jou scooped up the bag. "Get dressed, because walking sex is too tempting and we don't have time for making you a lemon cream pie. We have a show to do in just over an hour."

"You think I'd let you? I need to shower in the worst way. I do not feel clean but going into town and renting a room is out of the question and I do not want to speak to any of those people."

"Wow, you are in a snit. I never knew you to be that way. It's not their fault you got splatted." Jou saw the mutinous set of his lips and sighed. "Babe, you know that the wipes are anti-microbial, antibiotic, cleansing and kills ninety-nine point nine percent of all possible nasties? You know that you
“I didn't say I wasn't clean, I said I didn't feel clean. I want a shower.” Petulance was rampant in Seto's voice and expression.

Katsuya rocked back on his heels a bit assessing his love. This really wasn't like the brunet at all. Seto would normally treat the incident as beneath notice. So if it wasn't the 'ick' then what could it be? He didn't have to think hard to figure it out. "Ah hell, this isn't about being splatted, that's just an excuse to vent. You are worried out of your mind aren't you?"

Seto's hard eyes dropped to the floor, guilt and shame curving his shoulders down in a defeated slump. "I'm sorry Katsuya. I can't help it."

With a sigh, Jou shook his head. "You are falling into old habits. Get it through your head you don't have to hide from me. Seto, it would be unnatural if you weren't worried. The man you raised is in jail. You are used to being his savior and you still have parental feelings for him, you always will. I don't expect you to not have those feelings." Jou tugged at the braids on his wig, wishing he could tug on his own hair. "I only expect you to be honest and share them with me if you can."

Still looking at the floor, Seto nodded. "Katsuya I'm worried about Mokuba." He whispered softly. Jou tugged Seto into his arms, cradling him tenderly. "I know you are Baby. I'm here for you, but if... If you need more, if you need to see him to relieve your mind we might be able to work something out." His mind was spinning with ideas, but he wouldn't do anything unless Seto said so.

"I... Maybe? I need to think about it." He gripped Jou convulsively. "But not... Not alone?"

Jou wanted to laugh at the absurdity of that. No way in hell. Instead he cradled his lover and nuzzled into Seto's neck, whispering. "Not a chance." Then he nipped lightly at the sensitive skin, then nipped harder. "Hope you don't mind, but I'm suddenly craving a double helping of lemon cream."

"Better make it fast - It takes an hour for me to cum twice, remember." A little off balance by the switch, Seto shivered at the nips, then blinked as Jou slowly sank to his knees, biting and licking as he went. When the wickedly hot mouth found his cock, Seto closed his eyes and let his lover distract and soothe him in one of the best diversionary tactics he'd ever had the honor of receiving.

Jou tugged Seto's neck, whispering. "Not a chance." Then he nipped lightly at the sensitive skin, then nipped harder. "Hope you don't mind, but I'm suddenly craving a double helping of lemon cream."

Seto learned a valuable lesson. Blowjobs relax him like nothing else on earth could, except sex with the orally talented blond. His eyes were sharp, his hands steady, and he was completely confident as he went through his sharpshooting routine. Even Jou's antics, hamming it up for the crowd or poking fun at him didn't rattle him.

He presumed giving blowjobs relaxed his lover just as much because when it came to Jou's knife throwing routine, his love was just as steady and confident. Seto wasn't surprised to find that the skills Jou displayed were an equal match to his own shooting skills. It made sense that Jou was just as lethal, albeit differently. As he held out a colorful balloon for Jou to hit with the knife, Seto couldn't help but think of the old saying, never bring a knife to a gunfight. Well in their case, if there was a fight, they would fight together. They carried both knives and guns so they had all bases covered.

There was something compelling and fascinating about Katsuya when he threw a knife. Seto couldn't quite put a finger on what it was that drew him in, but whatever it was, as soon as Jou started his solo and audience part of the act, Seto raced back to their camper as fast as his long legs could carry him to grab his camera and film. He wanted to take pictures and capture the mysterious 'it.'. Not just of Katsuya, but of Scapegoat and Kit. They were surprising little hammy additions to
the circus as they scampered around the outside of the rings. They didn't actually appear in any of the acts, neither were trained for that, but Scapegoat preened and posed for the audience in his huge ruffly white trimmed blue collar and red painted nose and Kit stood watch over him like an overprotective mama, her eyes filled with an atypical intelligence that Seto attributed to the cat in her. It was hilarious to watch. He was determined to capture it all. He wondered briefly if Katsuya would be interested in the pictures for his book, made a mental note to mention it, then put it away because when he got back to the big top Katsuya grinned and hollered "Kemosabe! Get over here and help me out. I need someone to hold another balloon. This time on top of your head like an apple."

Seto froze in fake shock, then shaking his head vehemently, pretended to turn around and leave, just for laughs. In a flash a circus clown and the ringmaster and head clown, Dave, were blocking his path. Of course he was only faking, he trusted Jou absolutely, but it was good to play it up for laughs sometimes.

On impulse he gave Scapegoat a small signal the dog instantly recognized and went into a frenzy of barking, adding to the general melee. Every time he tried to leave he sent the little dog the signal so it seemed like Scapegoat was trying to tell him to stay as well. Needless to say the audience, Jou, and Scapegoat loved it. Kit, not so much although the half-cat pup did add to the comedy with unique growling chuffs that Seto was positive no other dog on the planet had ever made.

During that performance Seto learned that the part of being the figurehead of Kaiba Corp that he hated most, being the 'star' and 'center' could actually be fun. He rewarded Jou for the gift of that knowledge with more lemony-cream later that night. They slept curled together with the dogs sprawled at their feet, both too happy and satisfied to give a single thought to anything but being close and enjoying feeling each other's heartbeats.

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Mokuba lay awake all night waiting for his brother to storm the building and free him. Seto had to know by now what was happening to him and Mokuba knew that his big brother would never leave him to rot in some prison. He watched the door with painful intensity, sure that any second his savior would appear. His eyes didn't close until the first rays of dawn were touching the eastern sky.

He'd showered and eaten breakfast before being led to a small visitor's area where Jillian appeared again. He could tell she had news so he didn't bother with a greeting. "What's going on?"

She gave him a wry look. "Good morning to you too, Mokuba. Your lawyer arrived late last night. He must have taken the first flight out when he got my call."

"Of course he did." Mokuba's chin tilted arrogantly. "I am Kaiba."

"Hate to burst your bubble, ego-boy, you might be a Kaiba but you are not the Kaiba. Your brother is still the headliner. You are strictly second page material." The cop informed him coolly. Before he could question what she meant she continued with her briefing. "There is a hearing today for the locals to present their evidence to the federal investigator. Your lawyer arranged it at about six this morning. You are required to attend, with your lawyer present. I'm not sure where he is at the moment but he should be here any time. You are only allowed one visitor at a time so I will not be able to stay when he gets my call."

"Yes, when will my brother be able to see me? I know they are probably stopping him from coming in to see me."

"Your brother? Has he contacted you then? Or maybe sent you a message? They are not restricting your visitors but I can ask."
"No, but I know him. He would never leave me alone when I need him."

"Shit." She actually swore at him. "Mokuba, your brother is... He has issues of his own right now. If he didn't contact you, then I doubt he's here." When he would have argued she shook her head sharply. "I'm not going to go into it right now, I am going to check on the visitor restrictions though because I find it odd that they would not restrict visitors on a potential terrorist." She turned and left without another word.

Mokuba was led back to his cell where he found his cell mates busily packing their things. "Hey you guys are getting out?"

"Yeah, your friend pulled some magical fed shit and the missing whatever was suddenly found. We're out." Dave hesitated for a second, sharing a brief glance with his compadres. "Mokie, if you ever feel like just chilling, maybe seeing how the broke half lives, you're welcome to hang with us. You did us a large and we owe you. Besides, you're pretty decent when you forget to be a prick."

"Ah thanks." Mokuba didn't quite know how to take the backhanded compliment or the invitation. "I'll... uhm... can you give me your numbers and whatever? Never know."

"Yeah, we put all that info on a note. We left it on your bunk." Dave shrugged slightly. "Didn't know if you were going to be back in time." He nodded briefly. "Nice to meet you Mokie. Thanks again."

The sentiment was echoed by everyone else, then the three men trooped out, led by a uniformed, armed, officer. With nothing else to do, Mokuba sat on his bed and read the note. A simple 'Thanks, call if you ever want to hang.' and a list of numbers was all it said, but it made Mokuba smile. The smile faltered and died as he realized that small note was more than his brother, the brother who had always promised they would be together, that he would always be there when Mokuba needed him, that small note was more than Seto had done.

Tears of rage and betrayal burned the back of his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. If he cried it would be admitting Seto wasn't coming. He would never accept that, could never believe that. Just the thought was enough for blackness to spiral through Mokuba and defiantly he pushed it back. Seto would come.

He held the thought, believing with all his heart, that when the guard came back to escort him to the visitors' room that Seto would be waiting there for him. His heart cracked and sank to his ankles as he recognized the criminal attorney his brother kept on retainer. "Hello." He greeted the man somberly. He didn't bother to hide his acute disappointment.

"Hello Mister Kaiba. Your friend, Special Agent Jillian Clark contacted me. We haven't met, my name is Robert Fisker." The lawyer, an attractive man in his early thirties with thick wavy brown hair and intense hazel green eyes held out a strong, well manicured hand. "A pleasure to meet you."

A tingle of attraction caught Mokuba by surprise as he automatically held out his hand in response. Automatically he fell into 'charming flirt' mode. Orange jumpsuit notwithstanding, Mokuba knew he was good looking and had appeal. Robert Fisker set off his gaydar too. He hadn't been wrong yet. "It's great to meet you too, Robert. My brother has talked about you." Which was entirely true. Not much, but some. He gave the man his most engaging smile as he deliberately held the man's hand just a little too long, discreetly conveying his interest and attraction.

To his surprise the attorney released his hand after the shake and gave him a cool look. "Mister Kaiba, would you like me to call another person to represent you?"
"No, no of course not." What the hell was that about? His little flirt? Or was it standard to offer to get another lawyer?

"All right then. Although we've never met, I have had the pleasure of serving as your brother's attorney and am confident I can represent you well in this case. However as you are my client, I have to insist on a measure of formality. Please do not call me by my given name. Mister Fisker works well." The more green than hazel eyes caught his gaze and held it steadily, making his point of 'business only' very clear. "I've reviewed the police reports of what happened as well as the video surveillance. Why don't you start from the beginning, Mister Kaiba?"

Ego chafing at the second rebuff in his entire life, Mokuba let everything he felt show. "The beginning! The beginning?! It all started when that... that... bonkotsu, that mediocre bastard kidnapped Seto."

"Your brother was kidnapped? When was this? And isn't that kind of a role reversal? Weren't you the one who usually was kidnapped?" His lawyer asked astutely, showing an intimate knowledge of the Kaiba family workings.

"Weeks ago, by Jounouchi Katsuya, or Joey Wheeler as they call him now." Mokuba didn't bother to respond to the rest of the statement. What could he say to the truth?

"I recall something about him being in an accident just before he went on vacation. Are you saying he isn't on vacation? That he has been kidnapped?" Not by a flicker of an eyelash did Robert betray his doubt or confusion. If the emotion that Joey Wheeler showed Seto Kaiba was what kidnappers gave to their victims, Robert was sure that a lot of the lonely people in the known world would volunteer to be kidnapped. He personally would volunteer to be the first.

"That's what the police believe, and our friends, so they refuse to help me free him but I don't believe it. Seto would never leave me like that, never refuse to speak to me. If that bastard wasn't controlling and restraining him in some way then my brother would be here now." Mokuba snarled in frustration.

"I see." Robert nodded, privately thinking that Seto Kaiba and Joey Wheeler had understated Mokuba's issues. "How does this kidnapping become the cause of you destroying federal property?"

"I found information on where my brother was being held. Some loser, dropout commune called NBS Rocks. I flew out right away to rescue him. I told Jillian to meet me at the airport, but she... She never showed up. I bought the old biddy's bike, the old lady who mops floors at the airport, and when I got outside I realized I didn't know the way to town, so I went to go back inside but it was locked. She must have locked it when I walked out. There was a noise and it startled me. I pulled too hard on the door and the glass cracked. That is all there is to it." Mokuba told his story just like he'd rehearsed, just like he'd told it to the judge and the police in the past.

Robert frowned at the smooth, practiced delivery. It was obviously practiced. Didn't the boy - and he was a boy emotionally if not physically - know that only liars had to practice like that? It was a dead giveaway that he was not telling the whole truth. "Now tell me what really happened." He said flatly.

"What? That is what really happened." Mokuba glared and folded his arms defensively.

"It's not. I can tell you are lying. If I can see it you can bet so can they and the other investigator and judge who will be attending the hearing in about ten minutes. Tell me the truth." Robert's voice held the crack of a whip.

Mokuba glared and shook his head. "That is the truth."
"Lying to your lawyer is one sure way to go to jail. I can't defend you if I don't know what I'm fighting against." He tried to explain.

"That's all there is." The younger Kaiba maintained.

Shrewd hazel eyes weighed him for several seconds. "Fine. I'll see you in the courtroom." With a brisk nod he turned and left Mokuba gaping after him.

The officer nudged him back to his cell, offering the first bit of kindness he'd received from anyone official there. "Clean up and straighten your hair. You want to look neat and presentable. This kind of stuff is based a lot on how you look." Without another word the officer turned and left him.

Jillian, Mister Fisker, and a strange person were waiting in the same courtroom he'd been in the day before. The way the stranger stood just a little too close to Jillian had Mokuba's eyes widening in realization.

"Mokuba." Jillian greeted. "This is my friend, Ranger Cavanagh. She is going to testify that you did call me on the night in question. The federal investigator is on his way. He was taking pictures at the airport. The Federal Judge will attend via remote video."

Mokuba nodded briefly, holding his anger in check. He needed Jillian and her... Ranger Cavanagh at the moment. He would tell them what he thought later. "You have met my attorney? Robert Fisker?"

"I was just introducing myself." Robert said smoothly. "It is a pleasure to meet you both." He smiled warmly at Jillian. "Thank you for calling me."

"My pleasure." Jillian gave the lawyer a charming smile that made Mokuba blink slightly, although it didn't do anything to cool his anger.

"I haven't reviewed the evidence in depth. Do you know anything about the witness they are calling?" Robert asked.

"Witness?" Mokuba frowned. "Only person who was out there was the old lady who sold me her bike. She was cleaning the floors."

"Her name is Elizabeth Ramons, and she is the sister of Judge Ramons. She volunteers at the airport three nights a week." Ranger Cavanagh said coolly. "She is also a famous 'green' activist who helped found several earth conservation organizations."

Mokuba shook his head automatically, but stopped abruptly when the woman herself walked into the room. The drab cleaning clothes were replaced with a flowing cotton dress and leather sandals. The grizzled hair that had been pulled back in an unkempt tail now flowed smoothly in a silver and grey skein over her shoulders. She looked the same, yet completely different. He could believe this woman was the sister of a judge. "That's her."

"She says you were trying to get back in to the airport, not to get directions or because a noise startled you, but because you were in a temper when you realized you paid four thousand dollars for her ratty bike. She says she tried to warn you and you refused to listen and seemed to have an unstable temper. She locked the doors and shut down because you were a rude young man and she was afraid you would turn violent." Jillian relayed as if discussing the weather. "It doesn't really weigh in on the terrorist charges, but it does go to motive, honesty, and character. Given that testimony, their keeping you locked up is understandable." She shared a glance with the ranger who was obviously trying to stifle laughter. "Did you really pay four grand for a beat up old bike?"

"I thought it was a car at the time. I needed a ride into town since the person I called blew me off to
explore wild bush." Mokuba's eyes were sleet grey as they cut into her, damning her for being the cause of all this.

Jillian tilted her head slightly. "I don't recall ever agreeing to pick you up, not that you asked. I was busy. As you are learning, assumptions are hazardous."

"Besides, the car rental place was still open when you landed. Why didn't you rent a car?" Ranger Cavanagh asked curiously, although mocking laughter still danced in her eyes.

"It closed while I was waiting for my ride. They don't do pickup or delivery after they close, besides they are in town, not at the airport. If I had known I didn't have a ride I would have called them and arranged for something." Mokuba gritted.

Robert coughed slightly. "Blame doesn't help, nor does your attitude. When we go in there I want you to stay quiet and try to appear to be mild and humble. You need to convince them you are not violent. Given the way you are glaring and snarling that is going to be difficult. You should have told me earlier you were having a temper tantrum when you broke the door. I would have been able to setup some kind of testimony about your good qualities, called a few of your friends - presuming you still have some - but as it is, the only testimony we have is that of these two ladies, who you have just abused. They cannot testify to your even temper and lack of violence. Abuse is not just physical, as you have clearly demonstrated. Let's go sit down." He nodded briskly to Jillian and the ranger. "Thank you."

He was polite, but completely immovable in a way that Mokuba had never encountered before. Even his brother, who was well known as being completely focused - wasn't as solid. Mokuba had always known how to get around his brother and most people if he were being honest, but this man, the lawyer, was a completely different breed, one Mokuba found he couldn't read. Fear of the unknown touched Mokuba for the first time in years. He obeyed without a protest and did his absolute best to look humble and mild.

Given his luck of late Mokuba expected to be thrown in jail for a year, and several times the judge was on the verge of issuing just such a verdict, but Robert Fisker proved he was worth his fee because he skillfully worked the judge into a corner using the judge's own words. In the end the judge, completely boxed in, countered that if Mokuba was so trustworthy, then Robert Fisker could take full responsibility. Their county was poor and wasn't going to go bankrupt supplying monitoring equipment and personnel to keep up with him.

It was over the top and the judge clearly expected the attorney to turn it down, but to everyone's surprise he agreed easily. So in the end, Mokuba was not held, but he wasn't free either. Robert Fisker had complete physical custody in the absence of a court appointed guardian. As the jurisdiction was federal they didn't have to stay in California, but they had to stay together.

Mokuba changed into his own clothes and retrieved his belongings while his new 'guardian' handled whatever paperwork he had to deal with. There must have been a mountain because Mokuba was washed, dressed, seated in an uncomfortable chair in the courthouse hall and pressing the numbers for his 'research' team when a woman saying his name and giggling caught his attention. Frowning, he watched as the petite, grey-haired woman laughed again, handed the girl behind the clerk's counter some money and bustled away.

Barely holding on to his flaring temper, Mokuba stalked to the desk. "I'm Kaiba. Do you want to expl..."

The girl laughed. "Oh you are so impatient! I just got the paperwork. It has to be filed first. Leave me your address and I'll send you a copy."
"I thought my lawyer was dealing with it all." Mokuba said through tight lips. Okay maybe the old woman had worked for the court.

"No need for a lawyer for your wedding license, even if it is kind of rare around here for two guys to get married it still happens. Calla was so excited to deliver it."

"Calla?"

"The lady who married you and your husband? She just left?" Her smile faltered and slid away. "I thought you said your name was Seto Kaiba. Surely you remember the lady who presided over your wedding ceremony." She waved a very official looking document, California seal plainly visible on the bottom.

"My name is Kaiba - Mokuba Kaiba. I... I heard my name and I thought... Seto Kaiba is my brother! He is not married. Who the hell do you think he married?" Mokuba snarled.

The girl behind the counter stiffened and stepped back, clutching the paper to her protectively. "I'm sorry Sir, I can't discuss any documents with you until they are entered into public record."

Rage and panic swirling through him, he leaned over the counter, practically climbing after the girl. "Let me see that you stupid bitch. My brother is not...Eiiyeee.... what the hell?" Mokuba found himself dragged painfully back across the counter by his hair. Furious and ready to swing, he spun to face his attacker only to freeze. Robert Fisker stared at him with cool eyes that dared him to say another word. Something in the look turned his knees to water and stopped his anger.

"I apologize, miss." Robert smiled charmingly at the clerk. "He's had a rough few days. This was not the way he needed to find out his brother was married to Joey Wheeler. Please forgive him."

She nodded but stayed well back. "Yeah, got that. Man, he needs some anger management therapy." With a quick nod she scurried away.

Robert grabbed Mokuba's arm and dragged the black-haired young man out to the rental car. "Jillian and her friend are back at their hotel." He snapped curtly. "Buckle up, our flight leaves in fifty minutes. We have to be back in Vegas by four."

"Vegas? Good idea. I'll have my plane meet me there and then I'll be out of your hair." The younger Kaiba said casually.

Just as casually Robert explained, "You are with me until this is settled. I signed for you and I will bear your sentence if you take off. Forget it."

"You can't sto..." The sudden blow to his mouth had him yelping and spitting blood. "What the fuck?" He burbled through the split lip.

"Let's get something straight. I won't go to jail for you, I won't lie for you, I won't ruin my life for a worthless piece of crap like you." The lawyer said dispassionately.

"Nobody asked you..." Another backhand and more blood flowed.

"Shut it. I was going to wait, explain it back in New York, but now will be better because it will stop you from doing something worse than you've already done." With the car dead center of the lane and holding steady on the speed limit, the lawyer explained, "You hit on me earlier. Props for being perceptive. Nobody has ever suspected or known unless I've told them. Don't get excited, I'm not going to fuck you. Spoiled brats have no appeal for me." A small, cold smile touched his lips. "Let me guess, you like sex with a little kink, maybe handcuffs, but always with keys or buttons. Role
play, but no real emotion. That isn't what I like. I outgrew that before I hit fourteen."

"You like it rough?"

A low silky laugh that sent shivers down Mokuba's spine came from Robert's lips. "Rough? Only if my sub wants it that way." At Mokuba's small start, the laugh came again. "I'm into control, everything from the food you eat to the breath you take. My choice, my way. No arguments, no deviations. If you break my rules you are punished."

"Th... That's..."

"I'm a master with a taste for sadism. I don't have 'lovers' or boyfriends. I own my men. I enjoy giving pain, I enjoy punishing those who deserve it, and my slaves enjoy it as much as I do. So no, I won't fuck you, I won't even touch you - unless you deserve punishment." Anticipation lit his expression. "I'm sure you're going to need a lot of punishment." Broad shoulders shrugged under the well tailored silk suit. "If you are hiding a slave under that spoiled brat shithead attitude, I might find something attractive enough about you to fuck you."

Mokuba barely had an inkling of what the man was saying. He had never been into that side of things. One thing he did know though. "No way in hell am I turning into some kind of sadist's blow up doll. I'll tell my brother and he'll..."

Genuine humor filled the laughter that cut Mokuba off. "Oh hell, is that all you know?" More chuckles. "Mokuba Kaiba, you created this mess, you should handle it like a man. Grow up and take your punishment. Your brother is happily, deliriously in love. He is on his honeymoon and doesn't want you around. Why don't you think for once?"

When Mokuba would have argued Robert shook his head. "Your pursuit of them is over because I will not allow it."

"I'll leave. Fuck it, I'll go back to that podunk town and spend my time behind bars." Mokuba answered, ignoring what the other man said. "Welcome to, but don't think your brother will rescue you. Also that podunk town is the least of it. You are a non-citizen suspected of terrorism. You will likely be sent to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba." Robert pulled over to the shoulder of the road. "Make your decision. I take you back and they arrange for transport to Guantanamo Bay to enjoy the interrogation of the American government and the company of suspected and known Jihadists, or you come with me. If you choose the latter, you will obey me in everything. If I say be quiet, you won't make a sound, if I say stand naked in the snow, you stand naked in the snow. I will tell you who to see, who to talk to, what to eat, what to wear. You will have no choice in anything. If I dress you in a blue dress with crinoline, you will press it if it crumples. Do you understand?"

"Freaky bastard." Mokuba swore. The smack to his lips was a reminder as fresh blood flowed. "I want one word. Guantanamo or Master. Anything else and I'll punish you." To Mokuba the man sounded like he would enjoy it too much.

He folded his split, bleeding lips closed and for the first time since Seto disappeared, actually used the reasoning his brother had taught him. Guantanamo... There was no way to escape, no hope. Also if he went there he could be there for years. Out of sight out of mind for the U.S. Government and if Seto truly didn't care, then relying on him for rescue was futile. New York... no matter what abuses Robert Fisker dealt him, there was hope, people he knew, friends, places he could hide until he could find a way to shed Fisker as his lawyer and guardian. He drew a deep, calming breath and said
slowly, clearly. "Master."

As if Mokuba hadn't just given himself over to be his slave, Robert carefully pulled the car back on the road and continued to the airport. Instead of checking in right away, the lawyer led them to the bathroom and carefully wiped the blood from Mokuba's lips. When Mokuba tried to pull away, the icy eyes pinned him in place. "When there is discipline, there is care as well. I care for what is mine." With a brisk nod, he turned and strode to the exit. "We have to hurry. I can't miss this appointment."

The plane ride was mercifully brief, as was the small trip to the hotel. Mokuba barely had time to rinse out his foul tasting mouth before his 'master' ushered him from the room and into another rental car. "Gaki, from this moment until I say, you will not say a word, not make a single sound. No matter what you see or hear, not a single sound. If you do the consequences will be very painful." Robert gave his new slave an oblique glance. "I won't go easy on you. You have had it too easy for too long. Nod if you understand."

Mokuba nodded mutely. When he got permission to speak again he would ask about the man's fluency in Japanese because his intonation of that single word had been perfect. Staying quiet shouldn't be an issue. He had been trained to hold his tongue - and his composure - since the orphanage. A simple business meeting between lawyers would be no trouble at all.

With his recent experience he wasn't surprised to find himself walking beside his 'master' in a hallway at a large police station. They were met by a Ted Mannis and a Detective Mascarelli. They showed them both into a small room with a table and four chairs.

Again, Robert Fisker showed he was worth every penny he charged. He didn't say a word, simply waited for them to begin. Ted Mannis broke first. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. You have to be exhausted from your trips."

"I am fine. You said in your message you have reviewed the recordings?" Robert prompted.

The detective gave him a quelling look. "This is a private proceeding. Who is he?" A rude finger pointed towards Mokuba.

"He is my trainee and of no concern to you. He will not say a word and his discretion is without question." Bland and blunt, if not quite honest. Although, when Mokuba thought about it, it really was very honest.

"Fine." The cop glared for a moment then sighed. "All of the staff, the owners, and even the security footage back what your client says happened. We have stopped all broadcasts and we would like to offer our apologies for any inconvenience this incident may have caused."

"I see. Is there anything I need to have them sign?" Robert got straight to the point.

"Them? You represent both Mister Wheeler and Mister Kaiba?" The detective clarified, startled when the 'trainee' jumped and cursed.

"Yes." The lawyer acted as if the black-haired young man was invisible.

"All right, we didn't know that." Ted mumbled and made a quick note. "No that is all. We had hoped you would bring them with you so we could apologize in person."

"Forward a written apology to my office, I will see to it that they get it." The lawyer rose to his feet. "If there is nothing else there are other things I must attend to."

"No, nothing." The two men hesitated, then the detective sighed and shook his head in disgust. "We
are supposed to ask if we need to have our city attorneys contact you."

"I will let you know my client's stance on litigation regarding libel and defamation in addition to harassment and general incompetence, when we have had a chance to meet and discuss it." With a cool, barely civil nod, Robert turned on his heel and left the room. The entire meeting had taken less than eight minutes.

Mokuba barely contained himself until they reached the car. As soon as they were on the road he shrieked "You bastard! You've seen my brother. I demand you take me to him. Now! Take me to him now! You know..." This time the blow was low in his solar plexus, driving the air from his lungs and stealing his voice.

"I did not give you permission to speak, Gaki." In clear contrast to Mokuba's shrill, heated screaming, Robert's voice was low, cool, and smooth as silk. Trying catch his breath, Mokuba could only glare as his lips worked soundlessly. He was still wheezing when they walked into the hotel room.

Robert ignored him and his rasping breath, completely confident in exactly what he'd done to the other man and its physical effects. Anatomy and physiology weren't necessary for his legal practice but it was definitely handy with his personal choices, as were psychology and massage therapy. Aside from feeling breathless he knew for a fact that the other man had suffered no permanent injury.

Without a look at his slave he opened his flip phone and dialed Kaiba's number. "Mister Kaiba, this is Fisker. The gaming commission and the police department offer their sincere apologies for any inconvenience. Also they would like to know your intentions regarding litigation. I suggest if you want to pursue that angle you contact another attorney. I am strictly criminal. Civil cases are..." He went silent for a moment, glaring hard as Mokuba scrambled up and raced towards him, obviously intent on snatching the phone. When the 'slave' was just a step away, Robert deliberately lifted his knee and kicked him in the gut with just enough force to send the other man tumbling across the carpet. "I see, in that case Mister Kaiba I'll head back to New York." Another silence, one Mokuba was too busy writhing on the floor holding his belly to notice, then, "Yes, I have nothing further to do here, all matters have been resolved to my satisfaction. Goodbye Mister Kaiba." Robert deliberately kept his tone and words businesslike and formal during the entire conversation. He didn't want Mokuba Kaiba to know that there was any kind of friendship, even distant friendship, between him and Seto.

Mokuba staggered to his feet again, forcing his voice out in a choked staccato. "Take me to my brother, now." Robert tilted his head slightly as if considering the request. In reality he was actually impressed by his new 'slave's' unexpected recovery. A spark of interest flared. There was more strength in the Gaki than he'd thought. "You were told to be silent. You know you will be punished, but you broke the rules again. Attacking me for the phone was another, more serious, infraction."

"I want my brother. I don't care about your stupid punishment or rules. You don't own me." Mokuba yelled rashly.

"But I do. By your own words, I am your master." Robert sighed as if hard put upon. "And now you've earned a severe punishment, one I'm not sure you are ready to stand for." He sighed again. "Fine, I will take you to see your brother, if you take your punishment like a man. One complaint, one sound, and you will not see him."

"Anything." Mokuba agreed without really caring. All he could see was that he would finally get to be with Seto again. He could put up with anything for that.
"Remember that." Robert reached out and took Mokuba's wrists in his hands, skilled fingers finding the nerve points in the bony hollows. Instantly his slave dropped to his knees, paralyzed by the pain. "We have just enough time."

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Seto grinned at his lover. "Problems solved. So we can do tonight's shows, then head to a hotel in the morning. I still want a shower, a real shower. The girls were nice to let us borrow their R.V. but I want unlimited hot water. Maybe a hot tub to soak in."

"Your rich boy ways are coming out." Jou grinned. "But I gotta admit, it sounds great. I've been thinking about that shower we shared and some things I want to try with you and bubbles."

"Bubbles are slippery in the shower." Seto pointed out dryly as he watched the blond hair disappear beneath the tacky black braided wig. "That thing does not suit you."

"That's okay Baby, I'll make sure you land in the right spot." The blond snorted. "I think I look hot with braids."

"So grow your hair long. I'll even braid it for you. The color is all wrong. I like your golden hair; it matches your eyes."

Laughter sparkled in the golden eyes as he moved close enough to help lace the shirt of Seto's costume. "I'm going to miss these clothes. I know you find them cheeseey but you look hot. I like these laces, kind of like unwrapping a great present, and the pants are almost as sexy as that apron you wore at the Kite and the Heron." A lecherous look filled the tawny gaze. "Have to get some for role play. Cops and robbers or cowboys and indians?"

"No distractions!" Seto admonished as his blue eyes matched Jou's sparkling look. "I need to shoot straight and when you get all flirty I can't walk straight much less shoot. Let's go get burgers. I'm starving."

"Again?" Jou teased. "We have to get their recipe for burgers." The blond hesitated. "Don't forget your camera."

He picked it up and looped it over his shoulder. "I've asked. They laugh at me." Seto mock pouted. "I even threatened to buy the circus and they laughed harder."

"I would have too. Seto, they don't know who you are. Don't worry I'll get the recipe for you." Jou grinned and winked. "I'll make them for you." Jou ruffled his hair and went to the door. "Mask on Lone Ranger. The customers are arriving so we have to stay in costume."

"I know." Seto followed. "Burgers are calling my name, so lead or get out of the way Katsuya." But he didn't rush ahead, instead he threaded his arm through his love's and strolled along towards the food trailer, enjoying the hustle and bustle of the busy circus around him.

They watched from the prep area outside the bigtop, Seto still munching his fourth burger and Jou sharpening his knife as the circus performers went through their routines. Seto found he enjoyed the spectacle, but he also respected the technical expertise and hard work they all put into their acts. He found himself holding his breath as the acrobats went through their new routine, the one that had sent three of them crashing into the net just a few hours before. It went off smoothly, and nobody would ever guess the troupe argued about performing the new stunt right up until the moment they walked out into the ring.

Seto let his eyes rove over the audience, reading the customers with a practiced eye. He was
surprised to see his lawyer threading his way through the crowd towards the performer's area. He shoved the last bite of burger into his mouth and said softly, "Katsuya, Fisker is here."

"Huh. Let's go see what he wants." The wig-wearing blond carefully placed the sharpened knife in its sheath.

Seto nodded and led the way, meeting the other man at the back entrance of the performance prep area. "Didn't expect to see you." The brunet greeted coolly.

"Change of plans. Your brother is in my physical custody. He will remain so until he is cleared of all charges. He wanted to see you before we left." A slow cruel smile touched the lawyers lips. "I haven't told him anything about you or performing, I agreed to let him see you. He will not speak to you, nor do I expect you to speak to him."

"I see." Seto frowned deeply. "He really messed up this time didn't he?"

"Suspected of terrorism. He attempted to break into an airport because he was angry and wanted to take it out on a little old lady. She happens to be a judge's sister."

"He has a corporation to run. It is based in Florida. He..."

"He will handle it from an office in New York. I will not let Kaiba Corporation suffer." Robert promised.

"He is agreeable? I..." Seto broke off and sent Jou a hunted look.

"It was either my custodial guardianship or Guantanamo Bay. He chose to stay with me, although he is already saying that you will 'save' him. He may call you or try to contact you with wild stories to bring you riding to the rescue. He's already claiming abuse." A mirthless laugh escaped. "See for yourself. He said he will 'tell his brother' that I abused him. If you look for yourself, he's seated in the blue section under the clown balloon light, you'll see that he hasn't a mark on him." The lawyer coughed slightly. "Do you want to speak to him?"

Seto looked up to the area as suggested. His brother, wearing a tight wife beater, mid-thigh biker shorts, and a pair of flip flops sat rigidly on the bench, eyes frantically scanning around him. Robert was correct, the bright white light highlighted his brother's skin very well. Any dark mark would have been clearly visible. He also didn't appear 'hurt' instead looked furious and on the verge of a tantrum. "I... No. He looks fine. I trust you to take good care of him." Relief brightened Seto's smile. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." There was a hint of something hidden in that, but when Seto's eyes cut to him questioningly, the lawyer gave him a bland look.

"I would like to..." Seto shook his head and sighed, turning to look at his lover in mute appeal.

"Why don't you..." Jou thought for a moment then said "Be right back." Braids flapping behind him, he raced back to the performer's tent.

Seto gave Robert a wry smile. "He has great ideas."

"You're a lucky man. He's completely devoted to you." For an instant envy showed clearly in the other man's eyes.

Seto didn't mind the look. Once upon a time he would have envied Jou's love too. "I know." Blue eyes appraised him. "I've never seen you wearing casual clothes. I would have never guessed you
had a tattoo." He let his eyes linger on the edge of the tattoo he could just see. "What is it? It looks like flames and clouds?"

"It is birds, a pair. A Great Blue Heron and a Snow Goose. They are flying in clouds over a lake of flame." He smiled slightly. "I met someone once while stuck at a truck stop during a freak storm. He and I chatted and he drew that for me. Told me that it was my future and I wasn't to ever forget. I got drunk one night and got it tattooed. I've never regretted it."

The niggling doubt and concern hovering over Seto faded away. "I'm considering a tattoo. Something... for Katsuya and I. Perhaps a mountain lion."

"I won't ask." Robert smiled as 'Tonto,' braids flying, ran up to them holding what looked like an antique camera.

"Seto..." Katsuya huffed and wheezed a bit. "Have Mokuba take pictures of us." He handed his love the camera.

"Great idea." Seto smiled warmly at his lover. "Good thing you reminded me to bring the camera." He handed the camera to Robert. "It's pretty simple. Have him read the guide. It's in the front flap." It was surprisingly hard to release the strap but he managed it. "Drop it off at the hamburger stand near the arcade after the show. They will make sure it gets to me."

"Will do." Robert nodded and turned away. Seto watched with steady blue eyes as the lawyer made his way back to the bigtop. As a unit, Jou and Seto turned and went back to the performer's area. He watched them for a few minutes, impressed by the way his brother seemed to be minding his manners. Normally Mokuba would have been all over the place, demanding everything from childish balloons to all the food and drinks that were being offered. Instead, he sat quietly, eyes scanning the area, trying very hard to blend in with the crowd. When Robert bent down and whispered something and handed Mokuba the camera, Mokuba smiled brightly and nodded eagerly, then took the camera and pulled out the user's guide without a single protest. So much for the abuse Mokuba was claiming. Mokuba would never smile so brightly if he were being abused.

When their cue came, Seto entered first, Scapegoat at his heels. Smiling broadly, he introduced himself as the Lone Ranger, and the mutt at his side was Tonto. A scolding bark from Scapegoat brought his gaze down to the little dog. "Oh sorry, this is Scapegoat, my other sidekick. Tonto get out here. Stop playing with your hair."

Tonto, sexier than Jay Silverheels ever thought of being, sauntered out, buckskin fringe dancing around his thighs. "Keep your mask on. These braids are killers."

This was new to their act, but it was something they both agreed on. They much preferred the laughter to the gasping awe and fear of some of the audience. "Why don't you go hold a target. I want to shoot something." Seto made his voice deliberately cranky and suggestive.

Jou did a double take and shook his head. "You speak with forked tongue." He deadpanned.

"I'll hold your targets if you hold mine?" Was the playful bargain.

"If I live that long?" Jou responded smartly.

"Just go hold the targets." Exasperation shaded every syllable.

"You first." Jou countered.

"You're making me angry." Seto mock glared as he spouted the overused line. "You won't like me
when I'm angry."

"I don't like you now." Was the smart-ass response.

"Then why the heck do you follow me around?"

"Safest place to be is behind someone who shoots guns." Tonto pointed out logically.

"Not really. I can shoot behind my back." Seto bragged.

Jou did an exaggerated double take. "No way."

"Hold my targets and I'll show you." He repeated the bargain.

For a moment 'Tonto' pretended to consider, then he looked around at the audience, then down at Scapegoat. "So, would you trust him?"

A signal from Seto and the little dog went into a barking frenzy. Jou listened for a moment and sighed. "Dog speaks with forked tongue - or I don't speak dog." As if to defend Scapegoat's honor Kit bounded out and joined the melee. In reality the trapeze artist who had been holding the half-wild cat-dog set her gratefully on the ground. With a disgusted sigh Jou looked around at the audience again. "Well should I trust him?"

A roar, shouts, whistles, and laughter filled the tent. Needless to say, Jou trusted him. It was one of the best shows of the night and the ringmaster knew it. After the show was over and the crowds were filing out, some to play arcade games, some to visit the animals or grab food and some to head home, he called Seto over to him. "Kai, Joey, are you guys busy?"

"We have to go pick up my camera from friends who took pictures in the audience." Seto said as he reluctantly turned back to Dave. "They are going to leave it at the food cart." Jou followed, Scapegoat and Kit trotting happily beside him on their leashes.

"It will be fine there." Dave, clown makeup in place but wig missing, gave them a smiling look. "You guys did great. The new stuff was perfect for your dynamic. I was hoping you would travel with us for a while. Tim and Erin have split up for good. They both took off this afternoon. Erin with some biker guy and Tim... Tim got on a bus for his home town."

Jou blinked and started to shake his head only to stop. He couldn't make decisions like this without consulting his husband. Besides, fate had been guiding them all along. This was a blatant, too blatant almost, attempt. Without caring about manners he asked in Japanese. "Seto, do you want to travel with them for a while?"

Seto wasn't surprised that the quarrelling couple had split. They hadn't lasted the month he'd given them. He didn't hesitate. "No. I have enjoyed this, and maybe we can do it again, but for now I'm ready to spend some time in a luxury suite, relax and enjoy a few shows, then, as navigator, I thought we'd go to Cheyenne and check out the rodeo. After that... I want to take in a Tiger's baseball game. I have a friend on the team."

"Detroit? Who is your friend?" Jou blinked at that.


Jou nodded and switched back to English. "I'm sorry Dave, tonight was our last show. We're going to enjoy Vegas for a while, then head out towards Cheyenne, and then further east to Nebraska."
Probably head to the faces, then down to Louisiana. I'm craving warm beignets and real Cajun jambalaya." He didn't show the pure joy he was feeling. Seto Kaiba had just shown his returning strength of will and purpose. It cemented what Jou already knew. His love was healing and growing stronger and didn't feel the need to hide any longer.

Dave nodded. "I figured. You two are gypsies. I get that but I thought I'd offer anyway. I'll give you my card and if you ever want to join us again, just give me a call."

Seto shook his head. "Not gypsies - Hobos. This is our Hobo vacation."

"Gypsy, hobo, wanderer, traveller. All mean the same thing to me. You're welcome anytime. Go get your camera and stop by in a little while. I'll have your wages then." The ringmaster smiled and waved them on their way.

Seto was genuinely surprised to find that his camera wasn't at the expected food cart. Jou was watching him with a quiet, patient expression that Seto had come to realize meant that his lover was restraining himself. "Tell me."

"He's got something of yours, something you want. He's not going to give it up without a fight. I wouldn't be surprised if he found some way to try to force a confrontation with you." Katsuya explained softly.

Seto closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. He didn't want to confront his brother, didn't want to feel all the pain that seeing the person he'd loved so dearly, the one he'd given everything to, only to have them walk away, he didn't want to... Slowly he released the breath he'd taken and squared his shoulders. Mokuba was his brother and he loved him, but his brother was no longer the center of his heart and soul. It would hurt, probably hurt like hell, but he wasn't alone. Katsuya would stand by his side. "Let him. I'll tell him what he needs to hear."

Concerned golden eyes weighed his words and expression carefully before the concern faded and warm approval took its place. "I believe you will. I'll be with you every step of the way."

"I know. Let's go get my camera. I think I'll find him instead of letting him find me." Taking 'Tonto's' hand. Seto walked around the side of the food vending cart.

Mokuba stood a few yards away looking around frantically, clutching the camera like it was a lifeline. Seto didn't hesitate, simply walked over and plucked the camera out of his hands. "Thank you Mokuba." They were the first words he'd spoken to his brother in months.

"S...Seto?" Wild blue-grey eyes bulged. "That's... you? Oh thank god Seto!" The black haired young man flung himself into his brother's arms and burst into tears just as he had as a young child.

Seto allowed it for a moment, then gently pushed his brother back. "Yes. I was performing here. Surely you recognized Scapegoat." At the sound of his name the little dog gave a small bark.

He made no move to greet Mokuba.

"Your dog? You cut his hair so it took me a minute." Mokuba admitted, then seemed to realize that Seto was really there. "Seto you... are you okay? I know Jounouchi kidnapped you and everyone's been saying such horrible things. I wanted to rescue you but I couldn't seem to catch up with you."

"I didn't want you to." Seto admitted softly. "Mokuba, you're an adult, you have your own life. When I realized that, I decided... I didn't have a reason to live. I was going to..." He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I was going to end my life because I had nothing to live for. I need a reason, a purpose. Katsuya didn't 'kidnap' me Mokuba. He saw that I was lost and he found me."
Another slow deep breath in and out and Katsuya squeezed his hand tightly.

"No, Seto! I need you! I'll always need you to be with me. You don't need him, you don't! I am your reason - we've always been together."

"Listen to me Mokuba. That is how I felt, but it's not any longer. You know I've always wanted Katsuya. I know what made you lie about your involvement with him and it made me realize just what I'd given up for you. I won't do that ever again. I love you, but you are not my life's purpose any longer. From now on, Katsuya and our family, the children we are adopting, our puppies, our adventures, they will be my life." He returned the tight grip of his husband and stepped further away from his brother. "What you feel isn't natural or healthy. When you can accept the role of brother, second to my husband and family, find me."

"Seto, please..." Mokuba begged, tears falling from his wounded eyes. "I need you."

With a sigh, the tall brunet stepped forward and hugged him tight, then stepped back to Jou's side before the younger man could grab tight enough to hold. "No, you don't, but you don't know that, not yet. Mokuba, you're not my scapegoat any longer - I don't need one and nor do you."

Ruffling the black hair affectionately, he nodded to Robert, who had walked up silently behind Mokuba. "Take care of him Robert. I'm trusting you to help him grow to become a better man."

Smooth hands settled on Mokuba's shoulders, skilled fingers finding the pressure points with ease and pressing lightly, reminding the younger Kaiba of the punishment he'd endured earlier and a promise of the punishment he'd receive for running off and for talking to his brother without permission. "Don't worry Seto. I've got him now. You enjoy your honeymoon. I'll teach him what he needs to know." The lawyer didn't worry about Mokuba crying out. The young Kaiba was still sensitive from earlier and the pressure he was applying was enough to make breathing difficult and talking impossible.

Seto nodded and smiled, ruffling his brother's hair again. "Enjoy your time with Robert. He's a good man."

Katsuya, eyes fixed on the fingers resting on Mokuba's shoulders, nodded to the lawyer in acknowledgement and said softly. "Yeah Mokuba, I'm sure Robert will teach you a lot. He's used to pressure and... seems to have a deft touch." With a cold look of satisfaction that told Mokuba and Robert that Jou knew and approved of what was going on, he allowed his husband to pull him towards their camper. In his mind the little asshat got what he deserved for the torture and abuse Seto had received at his hands. Mokuba had driven his lover to the brink of suicide and that was something Katsuya was sure he'd have a lot of trouble forgiving. A little physical and mental manipulation at the hands of someone as subtly skilled as the lawyer was very mild justice. Maybe by the time they met again Mokuba would have learned and Jou would have forgiven. Time would tell. Speaking of time...

With an inviting look at his husband he picked up his pace. If they hurried they might be able to break camp and get a nice hotel room. Jou was suddenly craving lobster and champagne with chocolate dipped strawberries for dessert. They were on their honeymoon after all. Maybe some warmed chocolate sauces and chilled whipped cream for other kinds of dipping.

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Katsuya checked the rucksack one last time before placing it carefully in the trunk of his bright red Lexus LF-A convertible. Seto had tried to get him to trade the four year old car in on a newer model, but it was something he flatly refused to do. The car was well maintained and stored in Seto's garage,
besides it had sentimental value. It was where he'd first picked up Seto on that life changing day. Five years later, they were still going strong and enjoying every second of their lives.

Seto did eventually go back to Kaiba Corp on a limited, very limited, basis. His passions for photography and Katsuya had led him into publishing his own books. The first was a companion piece to Katsuya's book, written from the experiences of that first hobo vacation. After the critical and popular acclaim of that book, Seto had dove head first into learning everything he could about photography and publishing. His next book had been 'Flying High with the Jet Set.'

Where Joey Wheeler's books were about real people and down home, honest experiences of average people, Seto's books almost entirely of images from exotic, expensive and just plain fancy places around the world. They travelled the summer for Katsuya's books and January through May for Seto's. They settled in spending the holidays quietly together, writing from mid-August until the new year.

It was a good life and they were blissfully happy. The only shadow on their bright lives was Seto's brother Mokuba. Mokuba had changed almost beyond recognition. He'd become focused, responsible, driven, much like Seto had been in the past. He had avoided Seto during his year long stay with Robert. It had taken that long to get the young man clear of the charges.

After the charges were cleared, Mokuba had returned to Florida and moved into Seto's mansion. By that time Seto and Jou were living in a large fenced home just across from Aishira and Matashi. They had been so caught up in their lives that they hadn't noticed at first, but it had dawned on them that something catastrophic had happened to the youngest Kaiba. Since the realization, two plus years, they had all tried - Seto, Jou, Matashi and Aishira - to reach him only to be turned away.

Katsuya knew Seto was growing more and more worried for the withdrawn young man his brother had become. Only Seto's promise to Jou had coaxed his sexy husband to leave Mokuba. With a quick glance up the stairs to make sure his husband was occupied with getting the pups settled with the sitter - because no way were they taking half a dozen six week old Poshie puppies on a road trip - Jou dialed his best friend's number.

"Almost. Are you... Are you sure you can do this? That you want to do this?"

"I'll be fine Joey. I can do this, you've trained me well. Are you sure you want me to do this?" Yugi said softly.

"I knew what Fisker was doing and I didn't step in. I even thought the little shit deserved it at the time, but what I've seen since Mokuba's been back is... I think it was taken too far. I can't help him because I am not his biggest fan. I can't separate what he did to Seto from what's happening to him now. He needs someone and it can't be me or Seto. You still love him, so you care enough to..."

"I know Joey. I understand. You say it went too far, but do you mean physically or something else?"

"I think Fisker broke him, made him care, then tossed him away. Mokuba is like a ship whose anchor has been cut free, simply staying on the course that was set for him. I'm hoping you can anchor him." Jou admitted quietly.
"I'll do my best." Yugi promised. "I'll be there in a few hours. Enjoy your trip." The line went dead and slowly he pocketed his phone, trying to think of something he could do to help Yugi.

"Answer the intercom." A voice broke through his abstraction.

"What?" Katsuya glanced up the stairs at his husband.

"The intercom is buzzing. Answer it." Seto lazily descended the stairs.

Jou nodded and pressed the button. "Yes?" He wasn't expecting anyone and anyone important knew they were leaving this morning.

"This is Wheeler-Kaiba residence." A brisk voice stated coolly.

"Yes, this is. How may I help you?" Eyebrows lifting in surprise he shared a glance with his husband.

"We are here to see Seto Kaiba and Joey Wheeler. Open the gates and door." The brisk voice was imperious, as if a royal were addressing a commoner.

"We?" Seto mouthed as he pushed the button to turn on the camera at the front gate. Three children stood holding hands in front of the gate. Two blond children, a boy and a girl, of about eight flanked a tiny brunette girl who couldn't be more than four. It was the little girl who tiptoed up and pushed the button, speaking clearly, "Open the door now. My brother has to pee. If you don't he will piss on your gate."

The threat didn't move them one inch. Then Katsuya gasped as the boy turned his head slightly and squinted at the camera. "Whakan? Kwanita?"

"Joey!" The blond boy smiled. "You recognized us. Can I come in and go to the bathroom? Our dad left a letter for you we have to deliver."

"Oh, okay come on in." Jou hit the button and unlocked the gate and door. Grabbing Seto's hand he dragged his equally baffled husband out onto the stoop. The three children hurried up the drive, cutting across the green lush lawn to reach the house. "Where's the bathroom?" Whakan asked urgently.

"Through the door, straight down the hall, third door on the left. The door is open so you'll see it." Seto rattled off automatically. Whakan bolted into the house leaving the door open wide behind him.

"Ah, Kwanita, good to see you again." Jou grinned at the blonde girl and looked at the little brunette, his breath leaving in a whoosh as he met the sparkling blue gaze that was a dead ringer for his husband's, as was the delicate features and smattering of freckles across her nose. "We haven't met. You are?"

"My name is Akane - Akane Kaiba." She dropped the words like a bomb.

"Uh..." Seto and Jou exchanged a look. "Your mother and father are..."

"My mother is Eliza Walters, her spouse is Raychelle Walters. You donated the seed to grow me. Just as Joey Wheeler donated the seed to grow Whakan and Kwanita. I have a letter that explains it all." She reached under her t-shirt and pulled out a pristine white envelope, handing it to them with the air of someone delivering a great present.

Seto wasn't surprised to see his hand shaking as he took the letter. He slit open the envelope and a
single sheet of paper fell into his hand. He had a very bad feeling about this. Too late he remembered the odd feeling Raymond gave him, like there was something off, something he was missing.

"Dear Seto and Joey,

Surprise! That is unfair, I suppose, but life is unfair. Eliza and I have had many surprises, so now it is your turn. You will of course have the genetic tests performed, but I will explain briefly. My Eliza wanted children and I wanted to try heterosexual sex. Joey came at just the right time. Imagine my shock when I found myself pregnant. I've taken testosterone for years and only stopped for a few months because I agreed to try, I had assumed I was sterile. Whakan is my child, Kwanita is Eliza's child. They are not twins, but they were conceived the same night, born on the same day, to the same biological father, within the same hour.

When you both visited us, it truly was fated because Eliza wanted another child. I can deny her nothing, but we knew that you would not agree to 'donating.' We wanted another golden-haired child and used the donation from the green condom. They were coated with a motility enhancing preservative that allowed us to store the semen until Eliza was fertile.

Another surprise when Akane was born a clone of Seto Kaiba. Because I said I was interested in your breeder possibilities, Eliza was convinced I used the contents of the red condom. That is why Akane has her name. Akane for brilliant red.

Our final surprise came just a few months ago. Eliza developed a cold, or so we thought. Turns out she had something else entirely. She was buried four days ago. If you remember our conversation Seto, you now understand why the children are with you. I instructed Akane to wait an hour before approaching your gate. By now I am with my precious Eliza.

Enjoy our gifts to you. Their birth certificates are on file at the same courthouse your marriage license is filed. You and Joey are both listed as their fathers so there will be no legal issues.

Goodbye

Raychelle Raymond Walters."

Whakan dashed back out onto the deck asking, "So are they cool with being our dads? Akane? What did they say?"

The little girl gave them a scorching look. "Nothing. I think they are going to faint. Whakan, Kwanita, step back. They'll crush you if they land on you."

Katsuya, who had been reading over his shoulder, dropped his head down, burrowing into Seto's neck mumbling something unintelligible.

"What?" Seto asked in a voice that quaked at the enormity of what he'd just read. He didn't address Whakan's questions. He needed to discuss this with his husband, his lawyer and he needed to call the cops.

"I said we're gonna need an RV." The blond straightened and stepped back then waved at the kids. "Follow me guys. Scapegoat and Kit are gonna love seeing you again. They have kids too."

Seto gaped after his partner as the children followed like ducklings. Joey was not normally so unreliable. They had to call the police and report the children and Ray. What if Ray changed his - her - mind? This couldn't just be let go. An RV? They were going to need a fleet of lawyers to figure this mess out. Birth Certificates? Marriage license? What the hell? Was Ray deranged? They had both discussed marriage and were planning a massive wedding after this trip. There was no way they
were ready for kids yet.

A movement from the front lawn caught his eye. A heron with a hummingbird perched on it's crest eyed him critically for a moment before alighting into the sky. He'd seen them both enough to know this was destiny knocking. With a resigned sigh, Seto stepped into his home, a smile picking up the corners of his mouth at the shrieks of laughter coming from upstairs. A baseball team. This was Fate’s way of saying it was time to get started. Ready or not...

First he had to be practical since his love wasn't, but later though... Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, Seto accepted the expansion of the focus in his life with eagerness. Life was great and only going to get better. He couldn't wait, but for now he had a legal mess to sort out and children to get to know. His youngest daughter was much too adult. He was going to have to teach her how to play and he knew just the game to start her on. He had a feeling she'd enjoy his old blue-eyed dragon friends.

Owari

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