

Applejack Shots and Beer

Reaper came for all of us
Jerked us up from the brine
Slipped out from his bony fingers
Landed on our feet just fine
Took four steps to Freedom
Took four souls to the line
Spat at the Devil at the Crossroads
Drank our sins with sweet wine
— *Death, Devil and Sin*

“Is that a quesadilla?” Kane’s sudden appearance at the edge of the roof’s pillow pit jerked Miki out of his daze. “And a beer?”

Glancing at the water-beaded bottle in his hand then the paper plate he’d set down near his hip. Suspiciously, one of the small quesadillas he’d made in the microwave was missing and a few feet away, Dude was chomping on what looked more like a flour tortilla than the beef snack Miki’d brought up for him.

Blinking against the bleached light slicing its way through the enveloping fog, Miki grunted, “Yeah. Why?”

“Because it’s seven in the morning, you git.” Kane climbed up into the pillow pit, ducking to avoid the overhang covering the area. Settling into the soft cushions next to Miki, he sighed then reached across Miki’s belly, snagging half of a quesadilla. He took a bite then hissed, motioning Miki for the beer. “God, what did you put in these? Half a bottle of Tabasco?”

“Bitchers don’t get the beer,” Miki grumbled but passed his drink over to Kane anyway. He took Kane’s kiss and murmured thanks, licking at the spice his lover left on his lips. Snuggling into Kane’s hard, warm body, he sighed, leeching off some of the man’s heat. “You home to stay or you’ve got to head back out?”

“Home,” Kane said around a mouthful of cheese and tortilla. “Caught the guy about two hours ago. Not bad considering I got the call... what? At seven? Dropped Kel off after we finished up the paperwork and then headed home. I’d have called if I’d known you were awake. Much as I love you, Mick, you and seven in the morning aren’t usually friends. What happened?”

“Playing.”

It was the simplest answer he could give Kane...and the most complicated.

For all the words strung together in his head, Miki didn’t have any for the barbed weave of emotions trapping his thoughts. He’d hoped to wind down on the roof, to process what he was going through but the fog and the soft, crisp breeze weren’t enough to calm the storm raging in his brain.

The music forged between them was magical, an odd mélange of everything right lining up with the stars, planets and the odd cuckoo clock sitting in a forgotten corner of an old woman’s living room. The hours flew, minutes dropping behind them in a wave of golden moments, hot metal chords frozen into a delicate filigree only to turn to a feathery dust when the next song hit.

They’d played for hours. Sweated for hours. And when they came up for air, the silence rippled on, resonating with the music they’d just played.

"You guys were playing when I left at two," Kane remarked, the Irish in his voice rolling up to the surface. "You must have done shit to your hands."

Miki nodded, suddenly feeling the sting on his fingertips. They hurt, ached in a way that wouldn't heal after a good night's sleep and probably were bruised down to the bone but he didn't care. It felt good to hurt that way again. Even though Damien's first words in the silence brought them all to a shuddering stop.

Swallowing a mouthful of beer, Miki cleared his throat and spoke the one sentence he thought he'd never ever say again, not since they'd all died under a semi's tires so many years ago.

"Damie wants us go to on tour."

Every day
I am one step closer to the box
Every moment
I am one step further away from you
Every breath
Is one we will never share again
Every night
There's a darkness of one instead of two
— *Every Darkness Follows*

"He wants to go out on the road."

"Well then," Donal murmured over the rim of his glass. "That's a wee bit of a snarl in yer life."

Kane slid a single ice cube into his glass, watching the frozen water seize the pale amber whiskey with a translucent swirl and contemplated the man sitting at the end of the couch across of him. Not since the first time his father'd invited him into the study and poured him a dram of whiskey, Kane found himself straddling the line between youthful confusion and an unsteady maturity.

The whiskey was a hot bite on his tongue, smoothing out to a numbing honey before sliding down his throat. There was a hint of cool on the liquid, a tiny touch of the water edging off the whiskey's burr and Kane swallowed, trying to gather his thoughts.

"Snarl is kind of a small word to be using there, Da," Kane grumbled. "I've just gotten used to having him in my life and now I've got to be sharing him with the world? I'd be lying if I said I like it but I'd be a fool if I were ignorant enough to tell him no."

"I love ye. Yer my second son and the one Ah've always thought to be the more rational of the bunch," Donal murmured. "But if ye think ye'd survive one minute past the moment ye tell our Miki he can't do something, then yer the donkey-headed ass yer brother Connor thinks ye are."

"Yeah, I'm sure Con's going to be through that door in a few minutes himself." He grimaced, half-hoping his older brother would do him a solid and fall apart inside just like he was. The door didn't open and Kane sighed. "*Asshole.*"

The couch was soft under him, cradling him in its leather curves. It was a damned sight prettier than the reupholstered sectional they had in the warehouse and while he'd slept away more than a few rainy afternoons on the overstuffed nest of cushions Miki refused to replace, Kane didn't want it to become his permanent bed.

A real possibility if he didn't get his head on straight.

"What's bothering ye about him going out with his boys?" Donal broached. "What are ye worried about?"

Kane had one answer, a fragile poisonous bubble of a response he was afraid to even think much less voice. The whiskey went sour in his mouth, dribbling down his tightening throat. Looking up, he met his father's steady gaze with a troubled shrug. Taking another sip, he rolled the liquid fire around in his mouth and wished he could bury the grit in his stomach under a rock.

"There's nothing ye can say, son, that'll make me think less of ye," his father murmured. "Ye know that, right?"

"I know." Kane grimaced ruefully. "I just think less of me"

“Then what is it?” Donal cocked his head, studying his son, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Or is it less a who?”

Kane smirked, wondering why he was always so surprised when his father ferreted out his truths as easily as breathing.

“You’re not wrong in that, Da,” he admitted softly. “It is a who. More than a couple of them, in fact. Miki? I don’t worry about him. Hell, he’s like a fucking pissed off mongoose most of the time. He can take care of himself. It’s the others—hell, Damie—mostly. How can I say I’m okay with Miki going out on the road when I don’t think they’ll take care of him while they’re out there?”

Picked up a piece of silver from the ground,
Used it to end a bit of my strife.
If I'd known I'd need it to get into Heaven,
I'd have carried it with me all of my life.
— *Going Over The River*

It wasn't easy being a father.

It certainly wasn't any easier having to father eight souls and the world got a little heavier when one of those souls cracked a bit under the pressure of life's troubles.

Since the time he'd first laid his hand on his pregnant wife's belly and felt the kick of his first born beneath her taut skin, Donal swore his own would never know the crush of the world for as long as he had breath in his body and a fire in his heart.

It'd taken him a few months after he'd held his squirming, wet, and squalling son to realize he couldn't protect his children from the world but he'd sure as hell could prepare them for the journeys they would go on.

Never once had he faltered. He'd done his best, apologized to his wide-eyed offspring when he'd gotten it wrong and never once rubbed salt into their emotional wounds when they'd cut themselves on their mistakes. Just when he thought he'd gotten the hang of things, his steady-as-a-rock second son brought home the most fractured of men with the intent of loving him whole.

"Ah, our Miki," Donal mused. "Ye think he'll come to harm out there? Left to his own devices with the rest of the Lost Boys?"

Kane's look was priceless, a hint of withering mingled in with a strong dose of smirking disgust at Donal's obtuse innocence. It was the same look his bride gave him when he suggested something as ridiculous as their spawn couldn't possibly have been involved in the sudden appearance of a golf cart in their pool.

"This is Miki. If someone comes after him, he'll rip them to shreds," Kane clarified. "But you and I both know, he can't cross the street without an elephant landing on him. And Damien..."

Kane trailing off was as heavily weighted with unspoken tension as the line he made with his lips.

"Fucking Damie." Kane smothered his snort with a sip of whiskey then Donal waited him out, knowing his son would fill the silence. "The two of them can't remember to eat if they've got a guitar in their hands and I'm supposed to let them go wandering off?"

"The boys aren't that bad." Donal bit back a smile. "And well, they're artists now, aren't they? Ye'd be expecting them to be a little...distracted."

"D's... hell, he needs a keeper as much as Miki." Kane rattled his glass, swirling the remains of his ice into the whiskey. "Da, look at the four of them. Not a lick of common sense among them. Forest... maybe... but between them, you've got maybe three-quarters of an adult. If that. And Damie's wanting to be doing this with just the four of them. No road manager. No roadies. Just the four biggest idiots I've ever known. Probably get lost on their way out of the city and end up in Canada because they took the wrong fucking left turn."

"Miki's not leaving ye or getting lost, Kane. If anything, he's needing to find himself again." Donal prodded delicately at Kane's hurt, scraping back a bit of his simmering grumbles to find the wound hidden by Kane's flippancy. "What are ye really worried about, son? Because Ah'm thinking this isn't about the band so much as it is about ye."

“They’re like golden retriever puppies chasing a butterfly and ...*fuckin*g *hell*,” his son shot back. “I can’t... I can’t lose him to the world, Da. Miki’s—*shite and hell*—I just got used to being here, in my heart. I’m not ready to let him wander off. I’m just not.”

The road holds no life
Nothing to keep me warm
Hotel rooms bleached and fallow
Strings leaving my tips all torn
Just one more day without you
Another day gone in time
I'm another step away from you, baby
Please don't forget that you're mine
— *Love Letter to the Lost*

The world's troubles were back in his son's clear, blue eyes, raising a storm up in their depths. Of all his sons, Kane was the one who carried everything on his shoulders. He'd always been a serious boy, solemn-faced and somber with a rolling, husky laugh, determined to follow in his older brother's footsteps and pick up after Con's excitement -fueled charges into trouble.

Slow to anger but quick to smile, Kane'd been a rock for the family to lean on since before the twins were born and Donal often reminded his wife their second hid his hurts behind a stoic wall, bricking up his emotions until he was ready to share them.

Miki brought out the passions in Kane, tearing his son open for the world to see the sentimental romantic lurking behind his sardonic grins and hard gaze. It was humbling to see Kane brought low by his emotions and Donal set his glass down, moving over until he sat next to his son.

"Ye've married a gypsy soul, Kane," Donal murmured, patting Kane's thigh. "Yer Miki's like yer mum, leaping for the sky to see what the clouds and sunshine taste like. It's not a bad thing, not by a long shot but here ye and Ah sit, wondering when they're both going to be falling back to Earth."

"And we're there to catch them," Kane grumbled, working his fingers into a steeple. Blowing hard between his cupped hands, his son ground out his exasperation in a forced hiss. "I love him, Da. He's a fierce, wild thing I just can't live without. I never thought I'd ever love someone—not like this—not so much that it hurts if I don't touch him every day. I don't know if I can survive not having him near me. Because I've got to tell you, Da, he's the stronger of us."

"Ye've held in your hands what the world's done to him," Donal agreed. Kane'd come to him, stumbling with pain and anger after the discovery of Miki's abuse and they'd held onto one another until time numbed their senses enough for them to breathe again. "He's a strong one, our Miki. He'll bend but not break. Even at his lowest, yer man, he's looking forward. Ye've got to have faith in that. In him. He'll always come back to ye, reach for ye because he needs ye as much as ye need him. Ye know that in yer heart, without even looking too hard."

"Yeah, I know." Kane ducked his head, snorting a hard laugh. "But God, I'm going to be missing him something fierce."

"Ye will," he replied. "But it's not as if ye can't go to him but this is who he is. Just like yer that badge and gun. Our Miki's mind is full of sound and words, and a drive to sing out what he dreams. The world will be a darker place without his soul's imaginings and yer just going to have to learn how to share. Ye'll be the better for it, son. Ye'll see."

"I know he has to go. If only to prove to himself that he can do it. Especially after... *then*." Kane scrubbed at his face then grinned between his fingers. "And, all kidding aside, Da, I would pay a million dollars to see Mick's face if ever you tell him he's just like Mum."

Rain on the glass, reminds me of you
A sip of hot chocolate, a song played in blue
Lyrics written on a postcard
Melody slick, deep and charred
Anyone not loving you
Ain't trying that hard
Shout at the moon, dance in the rain
Give me your heart, I'll keep back the pain
— *Rain and the Blues*

Rafe felt every bump on the sidewalk under his feet by the time they got to Finnegan's. His knees hurt, he was pretty sure his ass fell off a few blocks back, possibly on the hill Sionn took at full speed and without a doubt, he'd gotten a beak in his left eye when they'd turned down onto the pier then took on a storm of seagulls taking flight towards the fishing boats coming in.

If Rafe hadn't been dead sure Sionn loved him like a brother, he'd have thought the brawny Irish man was trying to kill him.

Or he was sure right up until the moment Sionn slapped down a heavy mug onto one of Finnegan's outdoor tables and a black sludge sloshed up over the thick rim with a sullen oozing a cheap treacle would be proud of.

"What is this shit? Coffee?" Rafe was man enough to admit he was too scared to sip at the brew, especially when he thought he heard a growl come up from its bubbling depths. "Dude, this is fucking Kraken shit. What the hell?"

"Just drink the damned thing," Sionn grumbled, swinging his chair around. Straddling the seat, he leaned his arms across the chair's back, picking at the sugar cubes he'd brought out on a plate. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"This, my friend, is the blood of a very bitter, sour woman who spends her life ironing out dogears from library book pages." Sniffing at the coffee only assured Rafe his friend went insane at some point during the morning's run and he'd only just noticed. "You could use this strip oil off of otters."

"So I made it a little strong." Sionn's shrug tested the seams of his shirt. "Ye've never complained before."

"There's strong and then there's tar," Rafe muttered. "I stick a spoon in this shit and I'm going to be pulling out mammoth bones. I'm going to make another pot. Don't...Jesus, if a witch comes by with an apple, eat that instead of drinking this shit."

A pod coffee maker was going to have to do. Finnegan's old brewing machine was a complicated dance of hoses, steaming nozzles and a bean grinder angry enough to spit out nails if it didn't like the person manning the dials. A few minutes later, Rafe emerged from the pub holding two steaming fresh cups of at least drinkable coffee and found his best friend with his head down on the table, snoring up a storm.

A true friend would have gotten one of the oversized hoodies Finnegan's sold from under its bar to cover Sionn and let him sleep but Rafe wasn't a true friend. No, when all was said and done, he considered Sionn a brother—if a Portuguese Catholic mutt could have an Irish brother who could pound him into the ground with a massive swipe of his clenched paw.

Putting the coffee down on one of the far tables, Rafe walked back over to Sionn and did what any loving, nearly-twin would do to their brother.

He kicked Sionn's chair hard enough to rattle the man's head and then stepped back when Sionn came up swinging.

"I'm going to fucking tear ye apart one day, Andrade." Sionn rasped, his Irish hot and thick around his words. "And no fucking jury in the world would convict me. They'll probably hang a medal on me for it."

"You wouldn't last a goddamned day after you walked out of the court room," Rafe scoffed as he moved the coffee over to the table. "Quinn would fuck your shit up before you could even thank the judge."

"Bastard would," Sionn conceded. Rubbing at his face, he sighed then reached for the coffee. "Thanks. I'm... a bit tired."

"Damien's getting in as much as he can before we roll out?" Cocking his head, he chuckled at Sionn's uplifted fingers. "Crude, Murphy, and hardly original."

"Mostly it's him talking. Second-guessing himself." Sionn added a few sugars and a dollop of cream to the brew, swirling it together with a rapid tap of a spoon. "Ye've got him worried. Hell, he's just worried all around. Wonders if he's right in doing this. Wonders if he's asking too much of Miki for going."

"He's got nothing to worry about. Where Damien roams, Miki's in his footsteps," Rafe replied. "Forest and I are merely along for the ride. It's the two of them that makes this thing work. For all my fucking hubris and narcissism, I'm the first one to admit I'm barely good enough to play the shit they write together. Humbles a man when he knows he's standing behind two guys who can kick his ass on the frets and not even blink but damn them for not rubbing my face in it."

"Yer good," he snorted, bringing his cup up to his mouth. "They wouldn't have had you with them if ye weren't."

"I'm good but they're... it's hard to explain, Murphy." Rafe searched for the words to explain away the emotions he had when he shared a stage with the Sinners boys. "It's scary how they click into each other. How they play together is insane. Because music's not work for them, not like it is for the rest of us. Sure, we hit grooves but they're... it's like they're bleeding out into a crystal chalice and daring the rest of us to sip at the stars pouring out of their veins. Closest thing I've come to being in a spiritual orgy was at three o'clock last night, we slipped into *Devil's Waiting* and I thought, fuck my life... I've got Quinn and Crossroads. I must have died and gone to Heaven."

"He's Heaven for me too," Sionn whispered then shot Rafe a cocky grin. "As hard as it is to let him go, Damie's got to fly and the three of you... not just Miki... are his wings."

"Well then," Rafe saluted Sionn with his coffee. "Here's hoping I'm not made of wax and we don't fly too close to the fucking sun."

Sliding around in my dreams
Your inky black kiss
Staining my life
With something I'll never miss
You pushed yourself into me
Down deep into my soul
Wish I could dig you out
Burn you till I'm whole
— *Ink Black Kiss*

"Well, ye've got us all in a tither, I'll be telling you that, boyo." Sionn grunted at Damien's elbow into his gut when the guitarist climbed into their bed. "Hey, watch the jabs there. Few inches more and ye'd have hit the boys."

"Spent time with the cousins today?" Damien hitched himself up, tugging at the blankets trapped under his ass. "You sound like a bowl of Lucky Charms drowning in Guinness."

"Yer an ass, Damie." Sionn rolled over onto his lover, trapping the lanky guitarist under him. Damie didn't put up much of a fight, a weak kick at Sionn's leg before he fell into a fit of laughter. "Stop wiggling or ye'll hurt yerself. Or me. Mostly me."

Sionn shifted, resting his weight on his knees. The scars along his left leg gave a little twinge, reminding him of the long, hard run he'd dragged Rafe on that morning but the knee itself held. Straddling Damien's slender hips, he cupped his lover's face then stole Damie's breath with a simmering, lengthy kiss. He tasted of cinnamon toothpaste and candy, probably a handful of SweeTarts from the jar on the table after he'd brushed his teeth but Sionn also tasted the man underneath the sugar and spice.

"God, I'm going to hate not having you in bed with me, *a ghra*," Sionn muttered when he pulled away from Damien's mouth. "But I understand why you've got to go."

"Really?" Damien sighed when Sionn slipped off of him. Sliding over on the bed, he nested against Sionn's side, laying his head back on Sionn's chest. Drawing his knees up, Damien grimaced and said, "Because everyone else is acting like I'm tearing babies away from their mothers' teats."

He stroked Damien's hair, soothing away the inky black strands from his lover's eyes. There was a tension in Damien's words, stopping an edge to the faint cut-glass accent in his voice. For all of his bravado and flippancy, Damien was bothered by the reactions rippling through the family.

"Ye've got to remember we're not used to this," Sionn broached carefully.

"Bullshit, you guys saw Rafe hit the road."

"And ye saw how well that turned out all around, didn't ye?" He grinned at Damien's pained groan. "He wasn't anyone's other half then and now... well, Quinn's not sharing how he feels. That one plays everything close to his chest and I'm not even sure he's using the same deck as the rest of us."

"We're musicians, Sionn." Damien tilted his head back and stared up at him. "We play. On stage. We're a band. It's not fucking Rock Band on an Xbox. We're an actual fucking *band*."

"I know that," he conceded. "But the reality of that hit a bit hard and fast."

"We...the four of us...talked about it. Everyone—including Miki—wants to do a tour." He settled back down, still a bit grumpy. "I'm the one who wants to do it old school because we need to. We need the

connection between us. No pressure to be rock stars. Just a few gigs and living in each others' shit to see if we can."

"And if you can't?" Sionn pressed. "Then what?"

"Then Crossroads Gin doesn't happen," Damien replied. "We don't do this...we don't gel...then we're just four musicians jamming together in a studio and that's the end of it. And that's not something the four of us are willing to give up. Not for anyone, love. Not for anyone."

He found me on a staircase of steel.
Nowhere near Heaven, a Devil making a deal.
Come on down, son, my Satan said with a grin.
Come with me and we'll make Sinner's Gin.

— *Gin and Demonic*

The music player was old. Or at least in tech years. Its case was cracked in one corner and its back was scraped down deep across the top but it still played when hooked up to a pair of throwaway speakers Miki'd picked up from a swap meet down in Half Moon Bay. It only had enough storage for less than fifty albums and seemed permanently stuck on shuffle no matter how much Miki monkeyed with its settings.

It seemed to really like Bob Seger and on rainy days, shuffled Queen up to the top of its play list more often than not but every once in a while, its tiny, mercurial brain grew maudlin and Miki found himself listening to his own voice pumping out of the player's enormous speakers.

He could never reach the player quick enough to stop it before the bass and drums kicked in. Some days, it was all he could do *not* to toss it off the rooftop while some days he ached to hear Johnny's husky laugh through the lyrics or Dave's deep rolling baritone singing back up vocals, always slightly off-key.

It'd been one of the things he'd been handed after he'd been discharged from the hospital, a remnant of their final night together shoved into a crinkled up padded envelope, his name scrawled over the flap with a thick black marker. Their final night celebrating their bond...their union. A platypus' lifetime of gigs, bad food, fatigue and long roads. Gone in an instant under a crush of stupidity, rubber and steel.

And curse his damned soul, Miki'd just agreed to do it all over again.

The player, perverse and contrary, began the opening bars of *Gin and Demonic* and the San Francisco skies opened up to drown out Miki's pain. Protected under the thick roof Kane erected to shelter the rooftop enclave and its vast nest of oversized cushions, he shoved himself further back into the soft pile and watched the sheets of rain swallow up the city stretched out around him.

A shape emerged from the misty deluge...dark enormous, and familiar. With the sun doused by the thick veil of storm clouds, Miki had only the faint glow from the street lamps to see but the sleeping dog by his feet didn't stir at the sound of the man's heavy footsteps stomping across the roof's slate floor which could mean it could only be one of two people intruding on his solitude. The flecks of silver in the man's black hair was Miki's first clue then the comfort of the older man's strong, thick Irish murmuring curse damning the heavy rain confirmed his suspicions.

Donal, the only man besides Kane, Dude didn't perk up and double-check before letting him approach Miki.

"Yer perched in here snug and tight." The Morgan patriarch ducked under the raised platform's roof, shaking the excess water off as he handed Miki a heavy thermos. "Dinner's up in an hour. Brigid's brought ye all in a pot roast. Said she'd made too much but ye know as well as ah do, she cooked that up special for ye."

"So she can snoop," Miki grumbled, cracking open the thermos. The coffee inside was ripe with whiskey and sugar, a bit of cream in its depths to lighten up its tones. "Got a cup?"

"Ye've got something ah should be worrying about, Miki boy?" Donal crooked an eyebrow up as he settled down into the cushions, dwarfing Miki with his bulk. Dude nattered in his sleep, curving around the man's booted foot.

"Nothing your son didn't give me," he shot back, sniffing at the thermos. The whiskey burned his nose but promised to warm his belly.

"Drink from the lip then pass it over. Pretend yer an Irishman."

Miki's nose was right. The whisky passing itself off as coffee seared his throat and lodged embers in his stomach. Gasping at the lack of air in his lungs from the single sip, he passed the thermos over to Donal who patted him gently on the back.

"Let it sit. Ye'll be fine in a few bits."

"Jesus, I can't breathe," he rasped, struggling to sit up. The wind kicked in but the niche sat between the aircon units and a maintenance shaft, protecting it from most of the chill. A tendril of cold hit Miki's face and he sucked at it, soothing the fire in his chest. "So other than trying to kill me, did you come up here to talk me out of the tour?"

"No, Mick boy," Donal took a swig from the thermos, smacking his lips appreciatively then pressing the steel container into Miki's hands. "Ah'm here to be talking you into going."

Devil by my side, a devil I know
Riding the Crossroads, heading to the next show
Hearing my name on the crowd, never thought I'd be back
House lights going down, time to dance in the black
— *Breathing Again*

Miki tilted his head back, burrowing deeper into the cushions. Staring out into the rain-thickened fog, he took a deep breath, drawing on the crispness in the early evening air then grunted, “*Huh.*”

Dude sighed, his body going lax. Tucked between two of his favourite humans, he slugged down into the cushions and Miki braced himself in case the dog gassed them but nothing whispered from the canine's body except for a fluttering snore.

“Sorry.” Miki shrugged when Donal shot him a perplexed look. “He got into Chang's garbage when I went to grab lunch. Chomped down half a head of rotten cabbage before I could stop him.” Nudging the dog's ass with his toe was a life lesson in letting sleeping dogs lie because Dude retaliated with a slithering curl of acrid aroma. “Shit. *Fuck.* Sorry.”

“Ah've got six boys, Mick.” Donal coughed through his smile. “That's practically perfume after having three brawny teenage boys sharing the attic rooms.”

“Yeah, kind of like a tour van,” he grimaced. “Shit, that's something I don't miss. You know how hard it is to find time to wash clothes when you're on tour? It's fucking impossible. At least if we stay in good hotels, you can toss it into that plastic bag and they'll wash your shit. Instead, now we've got to hoard quarters and hunt up Laundromats everywhere we go.”

“So yer not wanting to go then?” Donal's prodding was subtle but Miki could feel the older man poking around the tender scabs in his soul. “On tour with the boys.”

“Yeah, I want to go,” Miki whispered. “More than fucking anything else in the world. I just... fuck, Dad, suppose something happens when I'm halfway across the damned country? I've never had to worry about leaving someone behind, you know? And then there's... Johnny and Dave. I know what they'd say. Dave—mostly because Johnny'd be drunk and grabbing any angel's ass who got too close to him—but Dave'd tell me I was being stupid. That I should go because it's in me, right? Like an itch I couldn't reach for fucking ever and now, I can dig in deep and scratch as hard as I want.”

Donal nodded, a solemn, still granite of a man who wore unnervingly wore an older version of Kane's face. Connor's mannerisms were more like his father but it was Kane who reminded him the most of Donal. They both had an unwavering, entrenched feel to them, spiritual mountains set into the raging rivers of life. Not to mention the irritating knack to punch through a situation with a few words and Miki was forced to roll over and show belly when he least expected it.

And this time, as much as Miki was ready for Donal to turn him inside out, he wasn't prepared for the stab of Donal's Irish-slathered words.

“Maybe, Miki boy, it's time for ye to admit that when they died, ye crawled into their coffin with them and waited for someone to toss dirt on yer aching soul.” Donal shifted, sliding his arm around Miki's shoulder, pulling him in until they lay side by side with hardly any room for Dude between them. “Ahl won't let ye bury yerself with yer mates, son. Aye, it may seem harsh but when it's all said and done, yer too dear to me and mine to put into the earth just yet.”

It felt...odd lying next to Donal. A gasping remnant of loathing and fear scabbled up from the back of his mind, its mewling, scratchy whine screaming about another time—another man—another lifetime and Miki

shoved the brittle, sharp terror back into the shadows where it'd been born. He no longer smelled of blood and sweat. His belly didn't twist with hunger. His body wasn't bruised and the only wounds he bore on his skin were minor pecks left from snapped guitar strings and a few welts on his chest where Kane'd bit him that morning during sex.

He could face down a crazy man with a gun or launch himself into a broken-bottle pub brawl without a second thought but laying next to a man he'd come to think of as his father left Miki shaking and weak. Blinking back the tears swelling in his eyes, he swallowed and bit his lip, focusing on the frayed shoelaces on Donal's left boot. The panic passed and only an odd disquiet remained, assuring him of Donal's faith in him and how hard he'd fought to get himself to a place where he could simply be held.

Sometimes, Mik'd learned, it was the peace and quiet he feared more than anything else. Not because he believed Damien, Kane or Donal would hurt him but because he expected the violence—shaming the affection they held for him.

"Talk to me, Miki boy," Donal murmured, keeping still when Miki wiggled his shoulder blades to angle himself better against Donal's thickly muscled arm. "Are ye alright? Is this too much—"

"I'm good. It's just...me and hugs are kind of like other guys having to learn how to take a punch. You know it's going to happen but you've got no fucking clue how much it's going to hurt. Or not hurt." Pursing his lips, Miki mulled over Donal's words, finding more than a few grains of truth in them. "Yeah, you're right. I mean, I know you're right...about Dave and Johnny...and it's stupid because I know they're not coming back and shit, I know Forest and Rafe aren't here to replace them. Maybe 'cause it's all new and different and I'm just not fucking ready for that."

"So what are ye going to do then, kiddo?" His...father... hugged him, squeezing his shoulders in one-armed clenched strong enough to rattle Miki's bones. "If ye think ye're not ready, then tell them. But if ye are, then go."

"I'm not going to know until I get out there," he admitted softly. "It's kind learning how to take a hug. It's a good thing, something I want really fucking badly, but I'm scared it'll hurt."

"Then if it hurts and ye stumble, Mick, ye know we'll all be there for ye," Donal promised softly, ruffling Miki's hair with a brief kiss on the side of his head. "No matter what, all of us....Morgans and yer boys...we're here to catch ye if ye fall."

Mouthful of whiskey
Sweat running down my back
Strings under my fingers
Amp cord hanging down slack
We gather here together
On stage for one more day
Stomp your feet and sing along
Rock and Blues are here to stay
— *Roadshow Blues*

“Get the door. Get the door!” Connor ducked under the pergola, hunched over the barbeque chicken and vegetables he’d pulled from the grill. The steel pan was hot, burdened with heaped over, steaming food, and the oven mitts he’d bought last week were too damned thin and too small, chafing his knuckles and the pan’s sides were burning the back of his fingers. “Forest!”

“Hold on,” Forest griped around a pot holder he’d clenched in his teeth. Fumbling for the screen panel’s handle, he let the mitt drop then yanked the door open, its ear-splitting screech reminding Con its tracks needed replacing. “Crap, it’s crazy out there. I can’t even see the fence.”

Con eased past Forest, stopping only long enough to give him a kiss before heading to the kitchen. The pan was cooling off rapidly but the mitts were going into the trash as soon as Connor could chuck them. He did a small dance with Quinn when his younger brother nearly bumped into him reaching for a wooden spoon on the kitchen’s butcher block island then cursed Rafe out in Gaelic when his friend picked off a piece of chicken skin from the pan.

“Andrade, you’re asking for a whipping,” Connor growled, shaking the mitts off his hands after sliding the pan onto the island. “Dinna Mum teach you not to sneak food from the plate?”

“Your mom might have but she ain’t here, is she, Morgan?” Rafe grinned at him, a cocky bright smile painting a light tease in his warm eyes.

“Same rules apply.” Connor rubbed his fingers. “Sides, I’ve got to check the meat to make sure it’s done. The rain’s coming down too hard. Fire couldn’t fight it but I think we’re good.”

“Smells nice,” Quinn remarked softly. “You should let it rest a bit before cutting into it. The juices will be pink and it’ll look a bit rawer than it is. If you leave it for a minute or two, you’ll get a more accurate assessment about its doneness.”

His younger brother had their mother’s eyes, a fold of Irish green and citrine shining with a magpie’s cunning. The storm of intelligence brewing in their fractured emerald depths was oddly challenging, a bait Connor’d bit on more than a few times in his lifetime. Mostly, it was hard to swallow his baby brother’s irritatingly exacting competence and steel-trap memory but accepting Quinn’s advice was far easier to get down than the helpings of seared crow he’d eaten over the years.

Trusting Quinn was another matter. While unflinchingly honest and self-effacing, sometimes his younger brother with his sincere face and professor-serious voice could get a man to do the stupidest things because Quinn was in a teasing mood.

The advice over the chicken seemed solid and there wasn’t any harm in letting it sit. Unless he counted Rafe’s incessant need to peel off and eat every bit of broiled skin he could get loose.

“Step off, Andrade.” Connor elbowed his friend in the ribs and Quinn’s eyes narrowed.

It’d been months since Rafe’d somehow talked Quinn into a relationship and Connor had to admit, it was hard getting used to. Rafe spent most of their formative years bed-hopping with the best of them and

spending long evenings at the pub, elbow to elbow with Sionn, Kane and Connor while they tried to put a dent in Finnegan's kegs. Watching Rafe slide up behind Quinn and hug him was... unsettling but not as scary as Quinn's silent, weighted notice of Con's swipe into Rafe's side.

It was common knowledge among the Morgan siblings that their passions ran deep but tempers and flaring angers were shallow flashes, rarely serious enough to merit anything more than a sincere apology. Fights were plentiful and short, a quicksilver flow from dust-up to hugs but their third—Quinn—was rarely a part of the skirmishes. He lingered and lurked on the edges of the battles, keeping his own counsel and pulling away before he could be tangled into anything too deep. He was a constant neutral, more likely to give a sibling a shrug and walk away than argue.

Until something made him pause, then Quinn became a force to be reckoned with and laid waste to whoever pushed him that final inch into anger.

That was in the look Connor got from Quinn when he sharply elbowed Rafe; a brief and deadly flicker of their mother fiery nature and a reminder of Q's broiling nuclear wit coiling to strike.

"Ease off a bit, magpie," Rafe teased Quinn, patting his belly with his callused fingertips. "Your brother's been picking on me for years. It's what friends do. 'Sides, I can take him."

"Right." Quinn snorted at the same time as Connor then pushed Rafe away. "Where are the plates, Con?"

"On the table." Forest padded in from the dining room, tossing the pot holder he'd dropped while opening the door for Connor onto the counter. "Those things suck, Con. Just so you know."

"Yeah, I guessed. Burnt my damned hands carrying the pan in." Snuggling up against Forest, he held up his fingers. "Kiss and make them better?"

Then flipped off Rafe and Quinn as they made hacking noises behind Forest.

"So no eating in front of the game?" Rafe frowned. "I was promised a ball game. We called off band practice for food and game."

"You called off band practice because Mom was heading over to Miki and Kane's place with food and you didn't want to be there in case she gave you shit about us missing the last two Sundays," Quinn corrected.

"We were busy." Rafe protested, hissing at Connor's slapping the back of his hand inching towards the chicken pan.

"We were too lazy to get out of bed," Quinn argued. "Da told me our asses better be in those chairs this Sunday or there's going to be flying monkeys winging our way."

"Fucking Damien and Sionn miss tons of dinners," Rafe complained at the brothers. "Why do we have to—"

"Because she's our mom," Forest cut him off. "And well, Sionn's a nephew so he's cut more slack but the rest of us...it's because it's a family thing and that's what we do."

"Besides, it's free food, lots of it and we get to catch up with each other at the table," Connor pointed out. "Like I'm very interested in hearing about how the four of you plan on not killing each other. Very interested. Maybe we can even talk about that over dinner."

“So long as we eat in the dining room.” Forest cut into a piece of chicken, separating the meat so Connor could check its doneness. “Because I sure as hell didn’t spend three weeks helping Con build that damned thing for no one to eat on it.”

§

“So you guys think you’re going to be fine?” Connor passed Quinn the grilled corn, deftly maneuvering around the beer bottle Forest put down in front of him. “I mean, sounds kind of rough on the nerves there. One van. Three egos.”

“Four,” Rafe commented, leaning back and patting his flat stomach. “Shit, I’m full.”

“Three. Forest doesn’t have an ego.” Con hooked his arm on the back of his lover’s chair. “Just you three assholes.”

“Yeah, of course. I forgot about the perfect happy unicorn.” Rafe winked at Forest who chuckled. “And I think we’ll be okay. We’re locked in a room with each other for hours on end trying to make music. If that doesn’t break you, nothing will.”

It hit Connor in that moment between Forest’s husky laugh and Rafe telling Quinn about how stubborn Miki could get about a line of music and what Damien did to cajole his brother into changing his mind that the man he loved was leaving him for weeks on end.

And the realization turned his heart to stone, a leaden, enormous weight pressing into the hollow of his chest.

The world’s noise grew distant, fading into the background until all that remained was Forest, laughing and talking while he leaned into Connor’s right side. The side he slept on. The ribs he liked to bite in the middle of the night when Connor rolled over and pinned him to the bed. The skin marbled with tiny bruises from those nips and the side Forest leaned over to give Connor a lingering kiss before they fell asleep each night.

He’d grown used to those kisses...needed those kisses... and damn the world for wanting to take Forest away from him before he’d had his fill of the man.

Connor’d almost caught his breath again by the time Forest turned to look at him, his face soft with love and his hand gentle as his fingers stroked Connor’s thigh.

“You okay?” Forest’s eyebrows pulled in, a frown creasing his forehead. “It wasn’t the chicken, right? It looked done. I mean—”

“No, *a ghra*. I’m good. The chicken was fine. Great even.” Connor exhaled hard then brushed a quick kiss over Forest’s lips. “I’m just going to miss you. Something fierce and hard, while you’re gone. I love you. Don’t ever forget that. You are my heart.”

“I know,” Forest murmured against Con’s lips. “Just so you know, that’s what’s going to get me through every day I’m gone—knowing you love me, as much as I love you.”

I walked onto the Delta, hoping to make myself a man,
Cocky as shit, with my guitar in my hand.
Walked past the Crossroads, paid the Devil no mind.
He didn't reach for me, saying I was already his kind.
— *Delta Spawn Blues*

Miki's most treasured memory was the moment he'd fallen in love with music.

San Francisco's summers were a swaddle of heat and anger, bristling with a barely contained rage and Vega's fists were thick balls of fury and hurt, finding every aching, bruised spot on Miki's body with an uncanny accuracy. He'd have questioned how the man could have remembered where he'd struck before but as he drowned in the sheets of pain, their edge sharp enough to slice through his bones, Miki'd been more focused on surviving the beating.

And praying he had enough strength in him to find someplace to lick his wounds.

Despite the muggy heat, he'd buried himself under an oversized sweatshirt, pulling its hoodie down over his nose. It'd been hard to see through the slit of his left eye but he did his best. The right was swollen, tight and aching until Miki was sure it would burst if he touched it one more time. His city bus pass got him down to the pier without much trouble but he kept his head down, nursing his left elbow still crackling ominously after the vicious twist Vega gave his arm after one of the neighbours asked about the marks on Miki's face.

He was a dot of silence in a world of noise. Invisible, unheard and dead inside. Nothing but an echo of flesh and bone, waiting for the next sour bite of pain only because it was the only way he knew he was still alive.

It was too early for tourists but there were a few stalwart souls were out on the sidewalks. An old garrulous woman snarled at him when he shuffled past her, her knotted, skinny hands clenching a battered broom tightly, making quick work of the sidewalk debris in front of an Irish pub. The bar-slash-eatery's doors were open and the scent of rich, strong coffee tickled Miki's nose.

He jangled the coins in his pocket, wondering if he could beg some off of her for a few dimes when she stomped through the pub's doors, letting them swing behind him. Ducking a particularly aggressive seagull, he swatted at the bird for a moment, preparing to sprint down the sidewalk if only to keep his eyeballs in his head when the old woman returned holding a grease-dappled paper bag and an enormous cup of coffee.

"Now, get out of here," she grumbled, her voice creaky and accented. "Got work to do. Don't need some young pup underfoot."

The bag ended up holding a couple of crullers, their twisted, yeasty masses uneven but still warm. A sip of the coffee sent his maybe twelve-year-old nerves into a fierce buzz but Miki didn't care. The day was still cool enough to be enjoyed, he had handfuls of sugar, bread and caffeine and the best part of it, he was miles away from the man who tore him apart and the woman who never saw him.

It was in his moment of peace—in the quiet zen of water slapping against the pier—in the cool shadows he'd tucked himself into, hidden from the crowds in a slice of space between a crab seller and a two-story cluster of shops and bars that Miki heard the woman's voice cut through the morning's low rattle.

At the time he didn't know what made her voice scratchy but the tones were pure, deep and husky and as satisfying to his gut as the sugar-thickened black coffee he'd sipped at like it was liquid gold. She sang of jumping fish and cotton growing high with a raspy siren of a voice rolled in glass and pain. The vinyl record popped and crackled as the needle ran lovingly through the song but her words—her voice—cradled Miki, promising him he would one day rise up singing and spread his wings.

The music, the words, her pain and the sultry scream of her singing soothed away the bruises and aches. It filled him, stretching Miki's skin and lungs until he wasn't sure he catch his breath. The recording continued, stroking at his soul and lighting a fire in the cold depths of his will. His broken angel coaxed him to try a little bit harder then coaxed him to love.

And by the end of the morning, his cup as empty as his soul was full, Miki's heart beat in time to the songs pouring out of the upstairs bar's window and the world's noises turned into music in his ears.

§

And then there were moments when he fell hard and learned to fly.

He'd already lost his heart to one blue-eyed devil and Miki wasn't looking to fall for another one. And unlike Damien, the smoky ocean-eyed wasn't looking for a brother. No, the cop banging at the steel walls he'd put up around his heart wanted in and Miki didn't think he could hold out much longer.

There was already too much pain, too much loss and the last thing Miki wanted was another crack in his already fractured soul. There was nothing left in him to burn. The semi and its driver took everything he'd built, doused it in gasoline and set it alight with a match fueled by arrogance and booze.

"Fuck you, Morgan," Miki growled.

But no one was listening.

The damned dog was scampering off behind the tall Irish man who'd made himself at home in Miki's kitchen. Within five minutes of being in Miki's house, the cop'd taken offense at Miki's food, the state of Miki's unmade bed and the towers of worn, inked over notebooks he'd piled on the cargo crates scattered through the warehouse's living space.

Someone was trying to fuck with Miki's mind and the only thing the damned cop was concerned about was if there was a fruit or vegetable somewhere near Miki's plate at least once a day.

"Pop-tarts have fruit!" He called out towards the kitchen. "Lots of fucking fruit. And vitamins. *Asshole.*"

"The only Pop-tarts you're having in this brick pile you call a house are brown sugar cinnamon ones," Kane said, padding into the living space. The dog—Dude—was hot on his trail, sniffing at the air. "Last time I looked at that blasted food pyramid, neither sugar nor cinnamon were considered fruit.

"Here," Kane thrust a plate under Miki's nose. "Some actual food. It's called a carne asada quesadilla. And shit, I forgot the forks."

"Your mom's not here. We'll use our fingers."

Waiting until Kane wasn't looking, Miki sniffed at the food. The cop was too quick or maybe the Universe simply had a perverse sense of humour because Kane caught him with his nostrils flared and inhaling the steam rising up from the stuffed folded tortilla.

Kane grinned at him, a silly, open grin warm enough to do stupid things to Miki's guts.

"What are you doing there, Miki boy?" Kane leaned over and sniffed at the food. Meeting Miki's stare over the plate, his smile gentled. "You okay?"

"I do... weird things," he whispered. "And I don't even know I'm doing them... don't even know it's kind of nuts until... someone tells me. Or looks at me funny."

"I've never done this before, sniffing at my food," his lover remarked. "You can smell everything in it. Like you're tasting it before you eat. It's not a bad thing, babe. Not a bad thing at all."

Trust Kane to know the right thing to say when Miki hurt the most inside.

He wasn't...*right*. Miki knew that. Had known that since before he could form a coherent thought. There was something off in his brain. He could have come that way or maybe something happened to him along the way but whatever it was, he just wasn't right. Not like Kane.

Everything was right about Kane. He was handsome, smart and sure of where he fit into the world. Miki thought the man's cocky, sure-footed confidence came from wearing a badge and a gun every day then he met the whole Morgan family and Miki's self-doubts slunk back out to pick him apart. They were loud and affectionate, a mess of strong willed, vibrant personalities too bright to be around for more than half an hour. Any longer was like standing on the sun and the threat of being burnt to cinders was a real one. He'd found a bit of shelter in Donal's cool shadow but time and time again, Miki found himself reaching out for Kane's strength to shield him.

"I don't want to be saved," Miki whispered. "I *can't* be."

"What're you going on about there, Mick?" Kane took the plate from him, setting it on the crate. "I'm going to be telling you not to worry about what's going on but you'll fret anyway. We'll catch this guy. The whole department's gunning for him. And if that's not bad enough, they've pissed off my mum and you know how fond she is of you. Come here. You're as white as a ghost."

He trembled when Kane reached for him and pulled Miki into his arms.

Overwrought from the world falling to pieces around him, Miki couldn't stand to be touched, couldn't stand to have the gentle rub of Kane on his skin. A kiss would shatter him, a too hot piece of glass touched by the cooling comfort of the cop he'd found trying to break down his front door with a clenched fist.

"I've got you, babe," Kane murmured into Miki's hair, rubbing at Miki's back with slow, circular strokes. "Always, Mick. I'm never going away."

"That's what I'm scared of." Miki choked on his tears, laughing into Kane's chest. "It's easier not to feel. And you make it so fucking hard to *not* feel, I want to punch you in the fucking face."

"You're insane, Mick." His laugh was deep, rumbling through him and its dark golden sound resonated through Miki, threading a baseline through the sharp, tightness of his thoughts. "God, I love you for it."

Words lingered on his tongue, pressed into the roof of his mouth because Miki wasn't ready for the truth of them. They slithered out anyway, subdued and unheard and Miki was unprepared for the swell of emotion pouring out from his heart. It filled him, scaring him with its sweet happiness and he swallowed, trying to clear the choke in his throat.

It was too early, too soon...too scary in case it wasn't real...but the words came anyway, insisting on being spoken because his soul demanded them. Softly, much too softly for Kane to hear, Miki said into the beat of Kane's heart and the song of his laughter, "Yeah, I love you too."

§

It was the night before they were to leave, one final hurrah and then, once the morning sun broke through the night's clench over the city, Crossroads Gin would begin its journey. The last case was locked into the back of the van and Miki stepped back, wondering when lightning was going to strike him down dead for leaving everything—everyone—he'd fought to break his heart open for.

Not everyone, his mind whispered, there were the three brothers he'd found and were now stepping onto the dusty road besides him.

The city sparkled, its clear skies bright with the energy of the streets below. Parked behind the Sound, the band spent the afternoon choosing gear and listening to Damien talk about the route they'd be taking. Donal threatened to contact every chief of police along the way to escort them to every town while Brigid said she'd just take matters into her own hands and stowaway. Miki was more than a little bit worried she was serious, especially when her deep green eyes went damp and she reached for Donal's strong, broad hand.

Around him, the parking lot looked like an impromptu party as the Morgans and their lovers were gathering near the van, a last bit of teasing and jocular pushing before they parted for the night. Sionn and Damie had reservations at a restaurant where slivers of artistically arranged food was served with aromatic foams and they'd need to stop at an In-N-Out on the way home for something to fill their bellies. Connor and Forest were going to go home and if Miki knew them like he thought he did, they were going to refinish some piece of furniture they got at a swap meet then have sex among the shavings and pints of wood stain but Rafe and Quinn were quiet, touching one another in brief passes but their eyes lingered on one another, hearts rubbing against the other's, waiting for a good time to slip off away from the family and simply be in the quiet of their love.

Then there was Kane. Kane who make Miki ache in places he'd thought were dead and celebrated the re-appearance of Miki's soul-twin. He didn't deserve Kane. And there were times when he was pretty certain he didn't deserve whatever fuckery God rained down on them because of Damien but mostly he questioned the unmistakable love he got from the man who held Miki's heart in his hands.

"Ten minutes, love," Kane bent his head and whispered into Miki's ear. "Then make a break for the GTO. I'll be right behind you. We plan this right and Con'll be the one stuck with Mum. Last one left has to have dinner with them."

"Then we should be the last ones," Miki replied softly, curling his lip up at Kane's surprised huff. "I'm not going to have... *this*... for months. Why wouldn't I want to be the last one?"

Kane shot Miki a rueful grin then nodded. "Fair enough. I'll give you that. Let me go tell Mum and Da we're having dinner with them at the house but afterwards, Mick, you and I are going to head home so I can remind you what you've got waiting for you when this is all done."

The pat on his ass when Kane walked away was unnecessary, a little bit of dominance and ownership Miki hated. Stupidly, it made him smile and he hid his face, growling a threat at his retreating lover.

Then an all too familiar weight leaned on him and Miki's shoulder was burdened by a long arm built up with muscle from slinging a guitar. Damien's breath was sharp and clean, his mouth working at a piece of gum infused with enough mint oil to peel Miki's sinuses from his face. Grinning down at Miki, Damien bumped their hips together then steadied them with a quick shuffle of his feet, probably to avoid straining Miki's sometimes sketchy knee.

"We're going to head out soon." D winked at him. "'Cause you know, there's Paradise by the Dashboard Light moments we need to work through before morning."

"I don't even know what that means," Miki scoffed. "Who's taking the van back to the warehouse now that we've loaded everything Brigid wanted us to take?"

"I will. Sionn's going to follow me then we'll head out," Damien replied, cocking his head. "You sure you want to do this, Sinjun? You ready to follow me out onto the road again? I can promise you shitty food, no sleep and broke-ass sound systems along the way but there's going to be *music*, man. All the music you can imagine."

"I dunno," Miki quipped. "I can imagine quite a lot."

"Heh," Damien grunted. "Seriously, you okay? Because if you aren't..."

"I'm ready," Miki murmured, hooking his arm around his brother's waist and squeezing him tightly. "It's time to dance in the black and show people how to sin."