

A close-up, vertical photograph of a red electric guitar. The guitar is the central focus, with its body, neck, and headstock visible. It is surrounded by intense, bright orange and yellow flames that appear to be consuming it from the right side. Thick, white smoke billows upwards and to the right from the fire. The background is solid black, which makes the red of the guitar and the bright colors of the fire stand out sharply. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

SHOT GLASS SIN
BLOG TOUR
RHYS FORD

Shot Glass Sin

After Whiskey and Wry

1

"You're having Doritos and coffee for breakfast, Sinjun." It wasn't a question for Miki, not in Damien's mind. More of a statement, especially since his best friend shot a disgusted glance back at him then continued to munch at the bright orange triangles he'd poured into a bowl.

"What's the difference between this and corn Chex?" Miki said through a mouthful of crumbs. "Just cheesy powder. And you dairy Chex up with milk."

Damien couldn't argue that. In reality, there was little arguing with Miki St. John. Most of the time his odd decisions on food, love and life in general made sense if asked. It was just the convoluted path getting there that made Damien dizzy.

But there was definitely no arguing the point of Doritos and Chex.

It was early morning, early being relative for a couple of musicians. Ten was early in Damien's mind but he guessed Miki'd been up for hours. The passing years were good for the guttersnipe he'd found on a Chinatown fire escape. Sure, the car crash was a shitty thing to happen but what followed seemed to hang okay on Miki's shoulders.

A lot of that had to do with Kane Morgan, the man Miki'd fallen hard for, and the scraggly blond terrier gnawing at an old bone on the couch by Miki's feet.

"Give any thought about the band?" He figured he'd make an early stab at it. Get the argument over before the day really got started so he could call it done and move on. Surprise wasn't a big enough word for the shock Damien felt when Miki nodded while he scribbled in one of his damned notebooks. Damie waited his mostly-brother out then when Miki remained silent, he prodded again, "And? What do you think?"

Miki stared up at him, glittering hazel eyes through a shock of dark brown hair. In all the years Damien'd had Miki at his side, never once had they'd been at the crossroads they were at right now. Damien *longed* for the stage but Miki *needed* the music. They could play in a closet at the back of a fast food restaurant on pans they found in the kitchen and Miki would be happy.

Damien would not. He knew it. They both knew it. What Damien was asking—begging, really—was for Miki to step up onto a stage and live his life out in public. Again.

Back when they'd had nothing and no one, being a touring band was all they'd known, all they'd wanted. Now without a reason to sleep four to a van or eat stolen diner crackers for lunch, climbing back up on the boards seemed a lot to ask of Miki.

But there Damien stood, at the edge of the refurbished couch they'd dragged around from apartment to apartment, silently begging Miki to join him in the insanity of being in a band. It was a lot to ask the very private Miki St. John.

Maybe even too much. But he couldn't do it without Sinjun. He *wouldn't* do it without his brother.

Miki licked the bright orange dust off of his fingers, scraping at it with his teeth. He swallowed then said very softly, barely loud enough for Damien to hear, "Yeah, we should do it. D. Let's get a band together."

Miki'd been waiting for Damien to push again, asking once more to cross over a line he thought he'd never have to cross again.

He'd thought about what to say. What to do really. Recording was exhausting. Touring was... he couldn't even think about that. Not yet. Not with the searing guilt building up inside of him.

Damien spent the day on Cloud Nine. Excited and chattering away, he didn't seem to notice Miki slinking down into his thoughts, plunging into the inky thickness waiting for him beneath the what-nows plaguing him. Sionn came home to snag Damien off to a date night and Miki waved them off, thankful to be alone.

That is how Kane found him, alone and in the dark with a snoring Dude splayed out in the middle of the living room floor.

"Any reason you're sitting here without the lights on?" Kane's Irish rolled thick and deep, breaking away the fragile solitude Miki'd built up.

To give Kane credit—and Miki was always one to give Kane credit—his lover didn't flip on the switch. Instead, Kane found his way across the warehouse's great front room, probably using the ambient light coming from the floor to ceiling windows to see, until he was standing at the end of the couch where Miki sat staring off across the Bay.

"You okay, a ghra?" Kane sat on the shipping crate they used for a table. His hands were on Miki's face and arm, stroking away the tickle of uncomfortable he'd been unable to shake since he'd agreed to Damie's insane plea. "Talk to me, Mick. Is everyone alright?"

Fair question, considering the shit they all went through recently so Miki nodded. "Everyone's fine."

"Then what is it, love? You wallow in the shadows any more, remember?" Kane teased. "No more Batman for you now, right?"

He should have turned on one of the lights. Kane didn't need to come home to darkness but the time'd slipped away from Miki before he could grab at it. Kind of like his mouth answering Damien's impossible question before his brain could stop it.

The ambient light was spare. They were too far from the bridge and piers for the floods to really touch the warehouse but there was enough of a glow to see Kane clearly, especially since the curtains were pulled back.

"I told Damien yes today." Miki shifted, easing his legs from the couch so he could face Kane. "About the band thing."

"The band thing." Kane slid his hands around Miki's, holding them like Miki was precious. It was a touch Miki had a hard time getting used to. It was easier having Damien back than to really accept Kane loved him but there it was, in every little thing Kane did and said, he loved Miki and had never looked back once. "You okay with it? Being in another band?"

"No," Miki choked out. "I'm so *not* fucking okay with it, K."

Miki let himself get bundled up off the couch and into the kitchen. He'd agreed to the no-sex on places they prepared food on but he'd be damned if anyone told him where to sit. Perched defiantly on the counter while Kane rattled about making them dinner, Miki sorted through his feelings and thoughts, thankful Kane was patient enough to wait for him to get his head together.

Handed a bowl of green beans, Miki stared down at the worm-like vegetables for nearly thirty seconds before shaking the container at Kane. "What the fuck am I supposed to do with this?"

"Clean them." Kane had his back turned to Miki so he couldn't see the confused look on Miki's face.

He sniffed at them, smelling only beans and water. "They're already clean."

"They're washed, Miki love. You've got to..." Kane finally spared Miki a glance then laughed at the snarl he got back. "Sorry. Here, you grab the end there like this, then peel up the string. Leave that in and it's like you're chewing on fishing line."

"Huh." Miki experimented with one of the beans, drawing out a long thread of translucent green from its side. "Fuck, that's why they're called string beans."

"Probably." Kane went back to frying chicken pieces. "Put the string part in that bag I put next to you. I'll toss them in the water once you're done."

"Why not use frozen?" He knew he didn't like fresh peas. They were too mealy and off in his mouth but frozen were good and there was nothing like canned peas with a bit of mayonnaise and pepper. "Do they taste different?"

"I think they taste better."

"You said that about the peas too." A large piece of one bean snapped off in Miki's fingers and he tentatively licked at it. It tasted raw, as green as anything green should taste. Curious, he bit down into the end, careful not to get the hard stem in his mouth. It was sweet and a bit meaty, but not bad. "They're okay."

"Better cooked with a bit of butter." Kane finished poking at the chicken and turned around to watch Miki de-threading their vegetables. "Nothing's the same as what we're used to. Sometimes it's better. Sometimes it's worse. But we've got to try, you know?"

Kane was big, thick and muscled in places Miki found fascinating but it was the intelligence in his dark blue eyes that captured Miki's heart. As one of the older Morgan boys, he'd grown up during the beginning of Donal and Brigid's marriage, gleaning off pieces of wisdom as his parents learned how to maneuver through their own love and growing family.

Miki had no doubt in his mind Kane was *not* talking about green beans.

"Suppose it's shitty? Like peas. But you've got to eat them because you've promised." He paid much closer attention to the beans than he needed to but it was hard to look at Kane. Kane who'd never stood at the edge of nothing and stared it down time and time again until the void became his shadow, something he could never avoid. "And I've promised him, K. I've promised Damie. Now suppose I let him down? Suppose I can't deal with a new band?"

For all of his prettiness, Miki was far from delicate. Still, Kane edged up to him carefully, moving the beans to the counter then nudging in between Miki's legs. He brushed away a piece of hair from Miki's troubled hazel eyes, sighing when Miki instinctively flinched when Kane drew near.

If the men who'd taught Miki to flinch wasn't already dead, Kane would eagerly set his badge aside and beat them to a pulp. His lover's soft muttered *sorry* humbled Kane and he tucked his finger under Miki's chin, lifting his head up until he could see Miki's face.

"Mick love, I'm going to asking you something and I don't want you to get mad at me for asking." The look he got from his lover was one of Miki's best snarls. Kane kissed the corner of Miki's mouth, teasing out a smile. "Don't growl at me. Just listen."

"I don't growl." Miki tugged at Kane's collar, stretching his t-shirt. "Talk."

Kane wasn't going to point out the obvious rumbling purr beneath Miki's words. He was tempted but his lover was kissing the edge of something dark and the last thing he wanted was for Miki to go over.

"Are you going to be in this band of Damien's because you want to or because Damie wants you to be?" Kane pried Miki's fingers from his shirt, kissing his lover's knuckles once he got them free. "What do *you* want?"

"I want the music," Miki admitted. "I just... *fuck*."

"Now, *you* talk to me, love." Kane pressed in, sliding his hands up Miki's strong thighs. "What's the *fuck* for? What's got you tied up in knots if it isn't the music or the stage?"

"I don't even care if we suck..." The husky velvet of Miki's voice broke, crumbling into hard thin threads. "So fucking stupid. There's just so much shit in this. You're here. Home. I have a fucking home and D wants to go out gallivanting around. Then there's who the hell else are we going to bring in?"

"Not stupid," Kane reassured him. "All things considered, very normal. And yes, I'll be here. Hell, I might even follow you. I could be your groupie."

"Groupies are crap. Trust me," he snorted. "D was big on them back then. Now, probably not so much with Sionn. He'd rather have Sionn on the phone than someone disposable in his bed. Got no worries on that one."

"What about you? Phone calls good enough?" He said it to tease but the stricken look Miki gave him cut Kane down deep. "I wasn't serious, Mick love. It was just a joke."

"Not funny, asshole." Miki shook his head, pulling back when Kane leaned in for a kiss. "Seriously. Not fucking funny."

Relationships were hard for Miki. Kane often forgot that. When raised in the boisterous sprawl of a large, affectionate family, it was hard to step back and see the world through Miki's eyes. It was a rosier view than when Kane first met him but there were still lingering wounds beneath the surface, often rising up when Kane least expected it.

"I never for once believed you'd take someone else to your bed, love. That's not you." Kane got his kiss this time, a simmering hot splash of Miki on his tongue. "And being unsure about new people is normal. I'd be."

"That's the big thing, you know?" Miki sighed and leaned his head on Kane's shoulder. "Because it was so fucking magical before. And I want it to be magic again."

"You feel guilty about going on with a band without the other guys?" Kane rubbed at Miki's legs, generating more than heat under his skin.

The last thing Miki wanted was to deal with a hard dick while he hashed out the crap in his brain but Kane probably had no clue about how much his touch tickled Miki's senses. There'd been times when he'd struggled to keep his mind focused on the pleasures of sex before he met Kane but there were moments when all Miki could see or feel was the bleakness and pain of being trapped in a small little room with no hope of escaping.

He never had that with Kane. His cop never made him feel unsafe. And unfortunately, there were now little things Kane did, like rubbing Miki's battered knee or quirking a wicked smile that brought Miki's libido up to a roaring boil.

"If Connor and Quinn died, would you feel guilty if you liked new brothers your mom brought home?" Miki asked softly. He was unprepared for Kane's shocked hiss and frowned when his lover's hands stilled.

"Got to hand it to you, Mick, you're never one to pull your punch." Kane exhaled slowly. "I guess for you, that'd be what this feels like... like you're replacing brothers with strangers. And yes, when Mum brought the twins home, it wasn't exactly my most shining moment. I didn't *need* any more siblings...and certainly not a *girl*."

"Kiki can hand you your ass," he reminded Kane. "Worst part about your dad and mom getting together. All of Donal's bad-assedness and most of your mom's fuck-the-rules in one package."

"Yeah, I figured that out when she grabbed Con's balls and twisted them around because he pulled her hair." Kane chuckled, probably at Miki's wince. "Thing is, I love Kiki and Riley because of who they are, not who I already had in my life. And unlike siblings, you and Damie are going to be choosing these guys, so it's not like you've got to take what you get. You did that with Johnny and Dave, didn't you? Or were they there before you?"

"Damie knew Dave but they weren't in a band. Damie had some guys he was playing with but they fucked around too much." Miki caught Kane's slightly confused expression. "Not show up for gigs. Didn't learn the music. Or when they did show up, they were too drunk to play."

"So he just kicked them all to the curb and started over with you?" Kane asked, his fingers moving over Miki's knee again. "Not stupid on his part."

"Not stupid on mine. Got me a place to crash." Damien'd struggled back then but to Miki, the one room apartment was a godsend. He'd never thought things were lean. There were always ways to get by, stolen toilet paper from gas stations, recycled fast food cups refilled on the sly and sharing a large fry after scraping up some change were how things were. The music...*that* had been life changing.

And probably would be again.

Kane was right. It was just another beginning. One of many. A new band changed nothing of the past and sure as hell wouldn't take away anything he already had in the present. He had Kane, Damien, Dude and everyone else crowding in on him, within reach whenever the world got too dark. Adding two more to the mix would just be icing on the already filling cake.

"Yeah, you're right. Not replacing anyone I've already got. Just making new," Miki stole a kiss then lightly tapped Kane on the jaw with his fist. "And I think your chicken's burning."

During Tequila Mockingbird

6

Sinjun was quiet.

Not unusual for Miki but he was oddly quiet when Damie came downstairs, freshly fucked, newly showered and ready for coffee. There was thinking going on behind his friend's wary hazel eyes, obvious to anyone who knew him well enough to see the slightly spacey film in his gaze. Mixing coffee, cream, and sugar into two mugs, Damien padded into the living room and sat sideways and cross-legged on the sectional, mimicking Miki's habitual perch against the padded couch arm.

Miki still didn't look up. He continued to scribble down notes over sheet music, humming out pieces as he worked. Waiting Miki out was going to take too long so Damien shoved a cup of coffee under his nose, jerking Miki's attention up.

"Put that down for a bit, Sinjun." Damien tugged at the notebook, wresting it free so he could replace it with the mug.

"Doing something here," Miki protested but it was a half-assed murmur and he looked glad for the coffee. Taking a delicate sip, he leaned back and sighed when he swallowed. Peering over the cup's rim, Miki stared at Damien. "What?"

"What did you think about the drummer from Red Runners? She's good." He didn't really want to talk about drummers but it seemed like a good place to start. "Want to see if we can steal her?"

"Kind of angry," Miki muttered under his breath. "Like really angry."

"Only room for one angry person in the band?" Damien nudged Miki's knee and got the scornful glare he'd been expecting.

"I'm *not* angry."

"Right, because you're a ray of sunshine and rainbows."

"Fuck you."

"Proves my point right there, Sinjun." Dude joined them on the couch and Damien scratched at the terrier's belly.

Since Miki'd agreed to look at musicians, they'd done rounds in clubs and bars, listening to sets and judging what they found. Some were decent. A couple were good. Most were slogging through cover tunes and eyeing pieces of ass to tumble once the set was done.

"You're right. She was pissed off. Might have been an off night," Damie pointed out.

"She spent five minutes telling me that Kane and I weren't really a relationship because guys can't love right without a chick in the equation," he growled back. "A ménage, sure. But just two guys? No. What kind of fucked up shit is that?"

"Yeah, I thought you were going to punch her." He did. There'd been a split second when Damie'd thought they'd both end up in jail. Miki loved sparsely and fiercely. He knew that from experience. "And she didn't like dogs. Pity the bassist was shit. He was cute. Stupid but cute. Like a golden retriever puppy."

"Sionn's going to stretch your neck if he catches you looking." The warning was hot, a slide of anger under Miki's whiskey-gold rasp. "Just sayin'."

"Not for me, jerk. For the crowd. Cute's nice to have on stage. Main reason I dragged you up there." Damien slapped Miki's thigh and the sound resonated through the living room. Dude perked up his ear and lifted a lip, giving off a warning snarl. "Hey, I was here first, dog. I get to smack him."

"So we're back to square one on our drummer." Miki scratched at Dude's ears.

"Yeah," Damien agreed. Now was the time to bring up the favour Sionn's aunt asked of him. "Since we're back at square one, there's someone Brigid wants us to meet."

After Tequila Mockingbird

It was their god-knew-how-many practice and Forest still couldn't believe he was sitting behind a kit, drumming for Sinner's Gin.

No, not Sinner's. Not any more.

Damien'd been firm about that. The band would be different, a blend of new members and the two men who'd put Sinner's on the map but different. It was not how things were done. When a band resurrected from its ashes, it usually retained some shape of its former self.

This wasn't going to be Sinner's.

It was something new.

And Forest was as much of a part of its creation as Damien and Miki.

Miki and Damien switched off on bass, trading the instrument between them whenever they got sick of the four-stringed monster lumbering through their music. The foundation lines were kept simple and clean, crippling the music Miki'd written for their new band but while Damien could to the runs, his fingers instinctively reached for strings that weren't there.

Another flub and the song tumbled to a broken stop.

"Fucking hell," Damie spat, slinging the bass off of his neck. "Sinjun, you're killing me with this goddamn break."

Their singer didn't respond at first. He was too busy sucking at the back of his hand and glaring back at his best friend. When he finally spoke, Forest could feel the chill in Miki's voice ice over the room as he held up his bloodied hand for Damien to see.

"Really? The bass line's fucking killing you?" Miki's tone was low, a purring thread of menace compared to the bright splash of Damien's high energy. "You bleeding yet or just me?"

"Shit, dude, why didn't you tell me the string broke?" Discarding the bass, Damie grabbed at Miki's arm. They had a small struggle but Damien was stronger or at least more aggressive, yanking at Miki's wrist to examine the strike. "Hey, Ackerman, can you grab me the first aid kit?"

"It's a fucking hole. It'll heal," Miki groused. He wriggled, a slinky fold of bone and sinew but his knee gave out from under him, nearly tipping him over. "Shit."

"Yeah, give it a rest." Forest eased out from behind the drum kit set up in the garage studio. "I'll be right back."

The studio was nice, a bit tight compared to the Sound but good to practice in. A converted docking bay in the old refurbished warehouse, the space'd become a second home of sorts for Forest. Miki'd given him a key. A fucking key to the place and Forest wasn't sure if he was going to cry or break down and give Miki a hug.

The hug was out. Maybe. He felt an odd affection for their singer. There was something wild about Miki St. John that drew Forest out of his safe, silent zone and willing to follow wherever they wanted to lead him.

For the first time in his life, Forest felt like he fit. Connor, he loved—deeply and fully—but the band... fit. Into him. Into spaces he didn't know were empty.

He came back with the first aid kit and Forest threw caution to the wind. After handing Damien the cold white metal box he'd unhooked from the back wall, Forest drew Miki in for a tight hug, squeezing the lanky man until he squeaked.

"Okay, dude. It's just a snapped guitar string." Miki patted Forest's back. "Not I'm going to die or anything."

"No, you're not," Forest whispered into Miki's vanilla-scented hair. "But you sure as hell are helping me live."

The Sound was packed.

Overpacked, by Forest's standards and it didn't seem like it was going to unpack any time soon.

"Didn't know there were this many fucking bassists in California," Jenkins growled from behind the receptionist's counter. "And you guys are going to listen to all of them? What the *fuck* are you thinking?"

The product of a 1970s biracial marriage, Jenkins grew up hard and fast in Oakland, picking up the sax at an early age to make himself some money in between drug deals. He'd gotten good enough as a sax player the drug deals fell to the wayside but not so good as to land a solid gig. He'd been a fixture at the Sound for as long as Forest had been there, a freckled, umber-skinned man with a mop of red curls shuffling in to do sets or cover the front when he needed the money.

Jenkins always needed the money and since Forest had taken over, he now manned the front desk regularly in between gigs.

The call went out for auditions. Sort of. It was more of a murmuring about Sinner's Gin strapping on its wax wings again to head for the sun and the word spread. Demo links were uploaded and sent, gathered up here and there by Edie, Damien and Forest then appointments were made to hear everyone they liked. Nothing was sent to Miki. Forest'd been shocked to discover Miki was so far off the grid, he didn't even have an email address and steadfastly refused to get one.

"Everyone I fucking know I see on a daily basis," he pointed out, barely looking up from his guitar. "And I've got a cell phone. I'll get one when I need one. If I need one."

And with that, Miki shut the conversation down.

"There something's wrong with that boy. That St. John boy. He's not right in the head." Jenkins cracked a sunflower seed between his teeth. "The other one's like a used car salesman. Makes me want to check my fingers to see if my rings are still there whenever he shakes my hand. You sure you want to hook up with those two?"

"So bad I can taste it," Forest confessed. "And they're not bad. Just... it's kind of their way of keeping people out. Damien charms everyone into seeing what they want to and Miki... well, he's got walls."

"Walls?" Jenkins coughed out the wet seed, patting his chest. "That boy's got a fucking labyrinth."

With a few clusters of musicians waiting outside for a turn at the studio, Forest could barely see the sidewalk. He'd listened to more renditions of Smoke on the Water than he'd cared to count and they still hadn't found someone who'd clicked with them. Damien headed over the newly remodeled Amp to grab them iced coffees and Miki'd slipped out, hoping to get a few drags of a kretek before they began round two.

"Speaking of taste it, your boy's just come up to the curb." Jenkins nodded his head towards the studio's broad windows. "You've gotta tell him not to come in here all copped out. Scares the customers."

Connor was coming around the front of his Hummer when Forest turned around. Jenkins was right, dressed in the steep black combat gear he wore for a raid and standing nearly a head above the musicians, Connor Morgan was definitely terrifying for the crowd that probably had more than a few illicit drugs on them. A pair of mirrored Oakleys hid Con's deep ocean blue eyes and he cut a swath through the sidewalk, easily muscling through to the door.

More than a few of their potential bassists took Connor's arrival as a sign and quietly slunk off.

"Hey, babe." Connor's voice sent a chill down Forest's spine, silky, dark and full of promises for a later in the Victorian they lived in. After tucking his sunglasses into the collar of his shirt, Con caught Forest up in a fierce, brief hug, searing a kiss on his mouth before letting him go. "Guess you haven't found your guy yet."

"No, not really." It was hard to describe what they were all looking for. Damien wanted someone with technical skill and stage presence but there was something elusively missing in the few players they'd actually liked. "No one's wowed Miki. It's kind of like speed dating with conjoined twins. Damie pulls them in but Miki's the one who's got to say yes."

"Never would have thought that. Always figured Damien drove the bus there." Con cocked his head. There was movement outside, a flutter of arms and he'd gone still, watching for trouble but it was nothing, only a visual whirl of someone telling a story. "Well, hang in there. I'll come get you when you're done."

"Thanks," Forest sighed, hearing the back door open. "And if you see any kick ass bassists out there you think could last a day with these guys, send them in."

"What the fuck was wrong with that last one?" Damien paced the length of Studio 3, snarling at his best friend through the glass partition separating the sound room from the practice space. Miki glared back, hackles up and snarling in return, soundlessly communicating how far Damien could shove his head up his ass to fuck himself with his own tongue.

Or at least that's what Miki hoped it looked like. It certainly was what he felt like saying.

Forest, as usual, sat behind his kit, twirling a stick around his fingers, waiting for the storm to pass so he could continue on with his life, untouched by the craziness of Miki's relationship with Damien.

Nothing seemed to rattle their drummer. Not even Damien at his most infuriating peaks.

"He was an asshole. You could smell the asshole coming off of him," Forest interjected into the argument as Miki stalked into the room. "Like he was saying everything you wanted to hear. Packaging himself to fit."

"Faker than a third tit," Miki added. He plopped into a wing chair someone'd dragged in, holding his breath when it puffed out a cloud of lavender scent into the air. He missed Dude. He wanted Kane.

And most of all, he was really fucking hungry.

His stomach seemed to agree because it growled nearly as nastily as Damie did when he wasn't getting his way. Much like now.

"Sinjun, we've got to find someone," Damie dragged a short stool over, sitting down between Miki and Forest's drum kit. "Ackerman, you're not helping here."

"Do you really want someone even *Forest* doesn't like?" The question hit where Miki'd intended because he saw Damie wince and heard Forest give out a little *hey now* in response. "Dude, no offense but you're kind of like a chip off the Frank there. Apple. Tree. Falling. No rolling."

"True, you're a lot like Frank." Damien nodded.

"He wasn't my real father," Forest pointed out, riffing a skin with the tip of a stick. "Hell, I didn't even move in until I was in my teens."

"Nurture not nature," Damien chuckled. "So very Frank."

"Really? Is that why Miki's the way he is? Because you nurtured him?" Forest shot back.

It was a good hit. Miki had to give him that.

Until Damien replied, "One does not nurture Miki. That's kind of like waltzing with a honey badger. I just tossed him food until it was safe enough to approach and shoved a microphone into his hand."

"Nice. Going to be hard to kiss Sionn after I punch your teeth out." He was teasing. Damie knew he was teasing but Forest grew silent and still. Tossing a guitar pick at their drummer, Miki said, "Joke, Forest. Joke."

"I have to pack it up soon. The thing's tonight." Forest stared at his friends' blank looks. "The Amp opening? The *thing*?"

"Shit, that's right. Sionn wants us to meet up with Rafe Andrade." Damien stood up quickly and caught the stool before it tumbled over. "They're good friends but... I don't know. Kind of feels like a set up."

"Who?" Miki couldn't place the name but it sounded familiar.

"Guy from Jack Collins' band...what the fuck was their name?" D tapped his temple. "Shittiest thing about the whole head thing. It's like a goddamn hole shit slips out of. I don't remember the name but the guy crashed and burned after our accident. Fucked the band up and got kicked out for it."

"Rafe was crashing before your accident." Forest hauled over one of the baby amps they'd pulled out. "He used to come down here sometimes to play. He's really good."

"Maybe we should look at him," Miki suggested. "Can't be any worse than anyone else we've heard play."

"Oh fuck no, Sinjun," Damien grumbled back, a sour look on his expressive face. "Last thing we need is a fuck-up like Andrade. Haven't we gone through enough? We'll find someone. We just have to keep looking."