

The man was nothing to look at. Pasty skin, brown curly hair, thick glasses and an unkempt goatee. Blue jeans. Heavy black jacket, open. Look- at- me- I'm- witty t- shirt. But none of that mattered.

Raiku shrank back, mashing himself into a corner. His heart raced in his chest, his mind awash. Go away go away go away go away go away go away go away.

The man glanced at him in passing, an eyebrow raised. Concern registered on his face.

Those eyes. Simple brown eyes, caked with filth. Eyes that turned every woman to body parts, individually wrapped, stamped and ready for sale. Eyes that made children into play things, dressed them in leather and chains. Go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away.

The plain man took a step closer. “You okay, kid?” His brow furrowed, worried.

Raiku could smell it. All of it. Sex, semen, and shit. Blood, both from wounds and menstruation. The smell of leather, the smell of plastic, the smell of a dingy little basement full of mold and soiled furniture. “Y.. yeh, I... I’m fine, man, jus’ feelin’... not good.” Go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away.

“You... sure? You look rough.” He raised a hand, began to reach toward the young man’s shoulder.

It touched his jacket, but it burned anyway. Burned and burned and the pain spread from shoulder to chest to feet to face. His teeth grit and his eyes clenched and he shrunk back but he was already in the corner and there was nowhere to go and why wouldn’t this asshole just go away.

The man squeezed gently. “I can call someone, you know, if you need h —”

“GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!” Before he could stop his hands they were pushing, punching, shoving, scratching. His eyes weren’t even open but he felt his fist strike something and it hurt and he heard the man cry out and heard him hit the floor and felt his feet carrying him far far from here as fast as they could manage.

As soon as the bathroom door slammed shut behind him, Raiku flung his jacket off his body. He clawed at his shoulder as he stomped into the crowd, blindly pushing his way through, bumping into people and drawing curses. It burned everywhere and nowhere at once, pain seeping from his skin to his gut. The voice grew louder and louder still; his vision blurred until he could hardly find his footing.

He was in an elevator. When did he get there? There were people all around it and he hated it but they weren’t like that man. Sheep and cattle, harmless and oblivious, prey for the whims of their fellow. Prey — not predators.

Home. That’s where he was going. He was halfway across the mall now, closer and closer to the doors that he silently vowed never to cross again. He did his best to be careful, but he could hardly see, hardly hear. He looked to his left to pass an old man and crashed into a young woman. A mumbled apology joined a raised hand and he stumbled straight by her, hoping he’d never seen her again.

Security was at the door. He could make out their radios against the mouths, hear the faintest crackling voices, and it was enough to know that he had hurt that man and now they were looking for him.

The fear was there, but at this point, altogether negligible. He stumbled back a few paces, turned clumsily and stomped back towards the nearest restroom, where he would hide in a different stall until they gave up looking.

Uniforms were branching out, searching. He knew he was easy to find. How much porcelain could possibly be wandering these open spaces? It was hard to keep an eye on his path, but he had been through this place many, many times. He could make it anywhere blindfolded, navigate without the slightest —

Who?

Who was that he just passed?

He knew her from somewhere.

Didn’t he?

He had to.

Raiku turned around, walking backwards, eyes fixed on the face of a woman walking his same direction. He could hardly see her from here, and there wasn’t much to see, anyway, with a heavy trench coat and scarf obscuring nearly all her features. Red hair, he thought, maybe. Or was it brunette?

Her eyes met his, ever so briefly. He couldn’t make out the color, but he knew that she knew and he didn’t know why or how. She had to. He knew her, from somewhere. She was like him. She had to be. She was like him and she knew and she could tell him what this was and why and how and who.

He whipped around, raising a hand and opening his mouth to shout to her, when his foot caught a kiosk corner. He flew straight into the nearest employee, a heavy set man with a shaved head and a hundred piercings.

A tray hit the floor. Glass shattered. The man lurched forward from the blow and Raiku fell straight past him, twisting with momentum and landing the back of his head against tile and glass. He could feel his lips part as shards pierced his skin, could feel the pained gasp leave his throat, but he heard nothing.

He laid there, stunned, arms curling against his pounding head, when he felt himself being pulled up. The man was barking something to someone else about getting a first aid kit. Raiku looked up, squinting to make out the face of what appeared to be a heavily reformed, once- angry biker.

How a biker could wind up selling lotion seemed, for a moment, equally as important as the three uniformed guards rushing towards him, one of them with a red- and- white box. He knew what happened next — charges filed, his doctor, guardian, and shrink informed, his wrist slapped

and his lawyer called. But none of that seemed important. That woman. Where was that woman? He needed her and she needed him and where had she gone?

But she wasn't there. That man, that horrible horrible man, was there. He was coming this way and the screaming was growing worse and he could smell him and taste him and his stomach churned. He could feel the words leaving his mouth, protest, begging the biker man not to let *it* near.

But the biker man just squeezed his shoulder warmly and grasped his wounded head, holding it gently so the man with the box could pick the glass out of his skin.

Raiku lurched away, not from pain but from fear, his body screaming at him to run, to flee, to get as far away as he could. One of the guards grabbed his arms, pulling him back. He was saying something about the glass, how he knew it hurt but it had to come out anyway. The glass didn't *matter!*

"That's him, yeah," the voice of *it* was saying. Why was his voice so clear, so loud, when everything else was drowned out, muted by the screaming and begging? "But go easy, I think he's sick. Just look at his skin, man. He needs a lot more help than I do."

*It* was stepping closer. His face was clear, vivid, coated in as much worry and concern as it was sin. His cheek was swollen, his lip seeping blood into a wad of paper towels.

"Go away, *stay the hell away, die in a goddamned fire you sick son of a bitch!*" The words pierced Raiku's lips, bursting free against all manner of will. "I KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE! I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE!"

*It* paused, shock registering on his face, then confusion, then hurt. He stepped back, just as he'd been asked, raising his hands in surrender. "S- Sure, kid. Yeah. Sorry."

Raiku lurched away again, only to be pushed back down. The last glass was pulled from his head and heavy gauss was pressed into his wounds. It hurt, he knew, but he could hardly feel it, anymore. Every inch of his being begged for release, pleaded to escape, even as the voice in his head beseeched him the same.

When he was finally pulled to his feet, he stopped struggling, just to seem complacent. The glass was gone, and they kept talking about how they'd get him fixed up, and how they knew it hurt. But as soon as their grip on his arms loosened, he dove forward, yanking himself free and bursting into a sprint.

He wasn't even sure where he was going. The guards were chasing, cursing at him and ordering him to stop, but it didn't matter. He had to leave. Had to get as far from *it* as he could. But more than that, he had to find that woman. He needed her. She needed him.

As his feet carried him around a corner, a heavy set guard just ahead broke into a run. Raiku slipped as he tried to whip around, his shoes losing traction. In moments, he was on the floor again, this time on his side. His tongue was bleeding in his mouth, but he scampered back to his feet, taking off in the opposite direction.

But the other guards had caught up. Three ahead, one behind. He tried to get past the one but he was caught by the arm. The others surrounded him as he flailed and hollered, screaming obscenities as a knee met his lower back. By now, there was a crowd.

They forced him to his knees, forced his hands behind his back. One of them said something about the police being en route, another the ambulance. A pair of hands tried to steady his head, but they passed by his mouth. He bit.

The free hand struck the side of his head, a reactive blow. The guard behind him pressed harder, forcing him to his stomach on the floor. It was cold and his head hurt and *it* was coming back, watching him like some kind of goddamned spectacle, just like the rest of the crowd.

"GET AWAY FROM ME! I'M NOT SOME FUCKING JOKE! STOP... stop..." he trailed off, eyes catching a hint of that woman behind the guards. She was there. She could see him. She knew. She knew he needed her and she needed him.

He stopped struggling. Time seemed to stop. His vision was still a mess — tears had joined the screaming and the concussion — and he still didn't know how he knew her but he knew her and she was here in the crowd. He wasn't a spectacle to her. He wasn't a show. She knew.

It wasn't long before the police — the real police, with guns and badges — had shown up. He let them escort him out. Let them lead him to the ambulance. Let them take him away.

He had to find her. She had to find him. He knew they'd meet again.

