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**TITLE:** That's None of Your Business

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**PF Date:** 303 Days Post Fall

**Location:** Just outside of Bamberg, South Carolina

**Prologue**

*It has been about a year since The Fall; since the world was thrown into a "dark age" as technology, political order and even basic needs have been decimated, overthrown and*

*destroyed. Life continues, but it is a life very different from before The Fall. Less than 11% of the World's former population still lives; riots, war, disease and chaos, having claimed so many. Those left have begun to realize the World did not just stumble or trip to be picked up and dusted off, sent on its way; no, the World fell and shattered. Slowly people are adjusting, changing, trying to live. Instinctual survival, an autonomic function coded into most species' DNA, is a key motivator for trying to continue in this fractured nightmare, but there are other reasons to live too. Some selfish, some altruistic, some dark and all archaic as the way of life that forged those motives, that birthed those now orphaned souls is dead and gone.*

*Business as usual takes on a whole new meaning in this razed world as the 'usual' was crucified when the World was Depleted.*



## THAT'S *NONE* OF YOUR BUSINESS



**"Y***ou slutty bitch. I am going to flay you live once I get done fucking you,"* he spit in the blonde's face, nodding his head at his companion to hold both of the woman's arms, thus freeing up one of his hands. He felt the blonde buck underneath him as he knelt down, straddled over her hips, the gravel covering the frozen ground biting at his knees, the sting minor as the adrenaline from the fight and the thought of a quick lay worked to block other sensations.

He laughed, wiping some blood from his eye that was seeping down from a cut over his brow. He heard grunts and slaps coming from behind him. He barely turned his head, not really looking, just trying to throw his voice behind him. "You two ain't put that bitch down yet? Lazy asses. Go get your guns from the truck and just kneecap her," he laughed, his companion joining in. The laughing was cut short as the blonde managed to twist her hips enough that her knee came up, hitting him in the side.

"Fuck," as he swore, he plunged a finger through the blood-soaked, ragged bullethole in the woman's jacket, the wound located on the side of her right upper shoulder. He regained his sense of humor hearing her scream.

"Seems like someone don't know how to control their woman, you be the one getting all slow Bobby. Need me to go get your gun from where she kicked it earlier?"

Bobby looked up at the speaker, wiping his bloody finger on the woman's jacket so he could begin undoing the snap to her jeans. "Mort, you best be keeping your guff to yourself or you ain't getting none of this blonde. I don't need my gun to best this whore," he then turned more fully to the side to taunt his other two companions. "See Dar, this's how you make a woman behave. Now stop playing kung-fu footsie with her and beat her down."



So caught up in his taunt, he never heard the warning from Mort, a metal baton catching him fully across the side of the head, knocking Bobby off the woman. He gagged as his face pressed into the ground, the woman's boot kicking him as she curled away from him.

Pushing up, Bobby watched as the blonde managed to fling a handful of dirt at his companion, the man yelling and backing away, rubbing at his face to try and clear the debris from his eyes. Clutching the side of his head, Bobby staggered to his feet, noting Mort's wild dance to clear his vision. A quick check to the left confirmed his other two friends were unable to fight, both sprawled unconscious on the ground. His eyes narrowed as he moved, but not towards the brunette who held the baton, waiting for his attack. Instead he swerved and used the steel toe of his boot to kick the blonde on the ground, once in the ribs, followed by a shot to the head, a cruel smile snaking across his face as he saw the blonde's body go limp.

Twisting, he raised his arm, deflecting the incoming blow from the baton, going down to his knee and lurching forward with a punch, managing to catch the brunette with the last space of his punch. The woman staggered back, thrown off as Bobby had connected with her hip. He shuffled up, intense on the brunette, tensing himself for the baton's hit he knew would come, trying to prepare for the pain.

He felt the baton crack against his arm, but he pushed forward, pushing the woman back, keeping her from being able to use one of those martial arts kicks that had felled his buddies. As she backpedaled, Bobby kept after her, allowing a small gloat as he saw his friend come up behind the brunette. Mort used his shoulder and arm to slam into the brunette's kidney area, the follow-thru hitting her back, the woman dropping to her knees.

Bobby grabbed the baton as it rolled across the gritty ground, coming up to kick at the brunette, feeling the tide had turned as he saw Dar pushing up from where the brunette had felled him. "You're going to wish you'd never met the Feckle Boys," he raised the baton up, prepared to strike, when the roar of a gun preceded a flash of agony that streamed from his hand to his shoulder. Bobby dumbly watched the baton drop, his hand mangled and shattered.

He pivoted to the right, the pain growing and ballooning, making it hard for him to move, another roar, this time it was Mort that received the bullet.

Bobby staggered to the side, scuffing up the frozen gravel as he searched for the gun he had lost in the initial fight with the two women, cursing that he had been bested enough to lose it, cursing that he'd been so intent on taking the blonde he'd dropped his guard and underestimated the women.



Somehow Dar managed to get a shot off before more gunfire took him down. Bobby's body began shaking, reacting to his wound. He scooped up his gun and pointed it at the brunette, meeting her brown eyes, noting there was no fear as he began to pull the trigger.

He heard the sound of the gun firing, jerking back, watching as the brunette fell.

But, wait, if she had fallen, why was he looking up at her? Shouldn't he be looking down?

He tipped his head down, frowning as he did not remember having a huge red spot covering his chest. His vision began to blur as he tried to look back, finding it was very hard to move. He realized he had not taken a breath, his body seeming to not work properly. He tried to force his lungs to breath, but found it too much effort. Bobby blinked once, an unknown face peering down at him now; a man, with long silver hair drawn back into a ponytail. He blinked once more, and then closed his eyes, finding it was too hard to keep them open any longer.

**T**he brunette stayed still, listening, trying to assess where the next attack might come from. She stared at Bobby's body, watching his chest shiver once before caving downward, not rising again. She continued to stare, ignoring the older man who was bent over Bobby's body.

"Got this little sucker too, damn, what a waste of lead. Hey you-sah, you look like shit, you going to pass out on me?"

Minako took in a breath, trying to ignore the pain radiating through her body from the fight, as she watched the old, silver-haired man walk toward her. She was defenseless, her weapon lying about a meter away. She looked at the rifle the old man held, then turned, limping to where Josephine was lying.

"Well you are either a fool, badly hurt or too damn fed up with this world to care as you turn your back to me."

"Yes," Minako said as she closed her eyes a moment, trying to prepare for whatever she might find. She knelt then, tenderly beginning to assess Josephine's injuries.

The old man began to cackle as he moved, kicking at each of the four bodies he had shot. He frowned as he kicked one body, aiming his rifle and firing.

Minako flinched, tensing, yet she never looked back, continuing to assess her friend's state.



"Damn, I thought I got all of them the first round, oh well, no more twitching from these idiots," the old man knelt by one of the bodies as he began to check Bobby's lifeless corpse, patting down the pockets and removing anything he found.

Detached, Minako moved from injury to injury, leaving the bullet wound as the last she examined, biting her lip as she realized the bullet was still lodged in Josephine's shoulder.

"She dead?"

Minako looked up, a disapproving frown on her face. "No."

"Oh. She gonna die?"

"No. Are you always this preoccupied with death?"

"Since The Fall, who ain't?"

Minako took in a breath, mentally counting to five, squinting a bit as she looked the man over, her lips puckering out as she tried to assess the man's mental state.

"Humphrey Shackelford, older than 60, don't go asking by how much. Lived here forty years, born 30 miles North, lived there 'til they ran me outta town. I ain't planning on killing or raping you unless you try those things on me first. These asses were roughing you up so decided to get in a little target practice. I had oatmeal for breakfast and already had my good bowel movement for the day. That answer any questions you were planning on?"

Minako's lips twitched a bit as she stared at the man, trying to find a response. "You are wearing pantyhose," she finally managed to blurt out.

Humphrey began to cackle, coughing a bit between laughs. He flexed his arms, looking at the pantyhose that covered his arms from the edge of his T-shirt sleeve to his wrist. "Yeah, so I am, I like the feel. Wear them under here too," he pulled up the leg of his khakis, displaying the darker tan hose that covered his leg. "Cut the toes out though; don't like how those crowd my little piggies all together," he shuddered a bit as he released his pant leg. "Make good hair holders too," he turned a bit, tugging on his ponytail, allowing Minako to see the brown material holding the man's hair.

"I always found them to be a waste and irritating as well," Minako replied, unable to really believe she was having this conversation.

"You-sah don't have none with you do you?"





Minako stood, limping toward where her bike had been thrown, looking for her medical bag. "No, I had some a couple months ago; it is very good for filtering. It was contaminated when we were flooded out at an encampment we were visiting and I lost it."

"Damn, I hate to hear about the loss of sweet nylon," Humphrey moved to begin pulling the boots off a dead body. "Whatcha looking for?"

"My bag," Minako replied in a clipped tone, digging through the spilled contents, finding her kit. She moved to Jo's side, taking out a small pair of scissors so she could cut away some of Jo's shirt. "Your house is near here?"

"Eiyup, though now that I told you, I should kill ya, make sure you aren't coming to rob me blind."

"My friend and I are travelers who share medicine and knowledge, nothing else," Minako replied, her focus on trying to determine the severity of the wound.

"Travelers? I just met a group of you a few months ago down at market, they your friends?"

"What?" Minako turned, looking up at Humphrey, seeing the man's face tighten into a wary, guarded expression. "It is just Josephine and I that travel together, well, for now."

Humphrey used the lip of Bobby's boot to scratch at his chin. "You-sah sure you're not one of those Travelers? They had some fancy gadgets, acting all cold and high-n-mighty, kinda like your attitude. Treated me like pig scraps, while trying to find pieces to fix their radios. Although they did take enough time to deal with me for some of my fuel. Tried to cheat me on the pay thinking I'd be too dumb to know," he made a clicking noise with his tongue.

Minako pulled her attention completely to Humphrey and Travelers. "My friend might know what you are talking about, but I do not. Josephine mentioned finding a group that understood how important technology was and that travelers were misunderstood. She was rather drunk at the time and I assumed 'travelers' was a general term. So, in terms of belonging to a group, no, we are not one of those Travelers."

He nodded, seeming to accept the answer. "You-sah a doctor though? A real one?"

"Yes, a real doctor," Minako replied, a touch of indignation seeping into her voice. "Are you a real redneck and pervert?"

"You-sah gots guts, I like that. Is she going to die?"



"I told you already Mr. Shackelford, no. Well, as long as I can get her somewhere where I can remove the bullet and have her rest while I see if she has a concussion. I am also concerned about her ribs. Her breathing is shallow and there is major bruising, they may be fractured or worse."

"You-sah can remove bullets?"

Minako finished taping gauze over the oozing shoulder wound. "Not as easy as I once could have, but yes, I have removed quite a few in the last year."

"Listen doctor..."

"Minako Yoshimoto," she interjected, finding it less and less necessary to have others use her title. "And this is Josephine Banyham."

"I give you-sah place to do your operating and you in turn operate on me."

Minako's eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure what you have in mind."

"I got some lead in me awhile back when some looters tried to destroy my special place. I managed to tape it and keep it from going bad, but it stayed stuck in me and hurts something awful, 'specially during the snows. Seeing as we're probably fixing to have a few more snow storms this season..."

"Fine. How did you arrive here?"

"Had planned a bivouac up North for today, there's some trailers I wanna look through, maybe find me some nice nylon or such, get some good supplies before going to market in a week. Course, I happened to hear the commotion, decided to have a look-see."

"It is very fortunate for my friend and I you did. Thank you Mr. Shackelford."

"Humphrey. Or Sir Humphrey if you rather," he paused, scratching at some gray stubble on his left cheek, "Minako, that's Chinese?"

"Japanese," Minako replied as she finished examining Jo.

"You ain't slanted."

Minako bit her lip, hating any sort of slight, intended or not. She, however, needed this man's help; as much as her father and mother would object, today was not a day to try and make a stand. "I am adopted. I was born in New Orleans and adopted by a Japanese family. Can you help me bring her to your car?"



"Oh that makes sense; you do got more Creole look to you than Chinese. As to going, you help me skin the bodies and load your stuffs in the truck and I'll help you carry your friend to my car."

"You want me to do what?" Minako did not attempt to hide her horror at the thought, once more wondering if she had not gone from the frying pan to the fire; their savior more a demon.

Humphrey looked confused. "They're dead, they ain't going to need those clothes, I keep anything I find, never know when sumthing might come in handy. Plan on driving their truck to my place too, can use the fuel and parts. You-sah know how to drive?"

"Oh, you mean loot the bodies," Minako sighed, hearing the disapproval of her parents at the potential of disturbing the dead; but she knew she could not keep to the same standards she had once followed. "Fine, but please, let us hurry. I do need to take care of my friend."

"And me."

"Yes Mr." she paused as the old man waggled a finger at her, "Humphrey. Come on," giving Jo one more check, she moved to help Humphrey.

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**"Y**ou-sah really are professional."

Minako tried to ignore the man as she scrubbed her hands, reviewing what she had laid out and what she wanted to do.

"Is your friend always so whiny?"

Minako puckered her lips, a small smirk almost gracing her features, an expression that would have shocked Josephine. The tech professor liked to tease anytime Minako displayed something against her Ice Queen typecast. "Most people in pain wake up only semi-aware and resort to more impulsive, instinctual actions."

"She's whiny, that's why I came in here."

"Well Humphrey, normally in the hospital I would counsel the students to use a patient's mannerisms as part of their diagnosis. When a patient was," she paused, her lips quivering more towards a smile, "whiny, it would be an indication to increase their IV drip."





Humphrey began to cackle. "You-sah would knock them right out."

Minako's eyebrow arched and she tilted her head to the side, leaving Mr. Shackelford's statement as possible.

"I could trip as I am walking by her, carrying one of my sculptures, whack her head a little. A nice oopsie to help."

Minako paused, as if considering this, finally a corner of her mouth curled upwards. "I think we shall save your art. If the pain is too much, she will pass out," her mouth dipped downwards, "I don't like restraining her though."

"I've watched too many buck when trying to pry buckshot from their hides, ending up with a knife right through the gullet. Best to make sure she stays put, especially since we don't have no funny gas."

Minako knew he was right; the tech professor was still too disoriented, the slight concussion lending to the potential for erratic actions. She'd had to restrain many since beginning her travels, each time she did that, she found it made a small chip at the ethical and moral lifestyle she once had the luxury of pursuing. Survival now outranked civility and empathic sensibilities.

"Shit luck for her she got the right arm shot up."

"Actually Josephine is left-handed. They thought they were taking out her shooting arm, it seems their stereotyped action was the slight edge I needed."

Minako pulled on her butyl gloves. She had procured a number of this type of glove as she had learned how to reuse and sterilize them so she they could be used for non-invasive surgery and procedures. Any cut meant infection, but removing a bullet was not as invasive as some of the other surgery she had done, so she had learned to reuse as best as she could. Something as simple as how to reuse gloves provided another reason why she traveled; to try and collect as many medical methods as she could that doctors and medical professionals were using in these times. Each stop meant new information, a sharing of hard lessons learned and stories of the horrors that could not be prevented.

"Kinda like those fake eye fish."

Minako was pulled from her musings by the seemingly *non sequitur* remark. "Excuse me?"

"You-sah knows, those weird freaky things that look like they have a third eyeball near their butts."



"Um," as had been the frequent case since meeting Humphrey, Minako was at a loss as how to respond. Her flustered state, however, never seemed to bother or influence the older man as he would just continue; the silence as much an encouragement to his storytelling as any comment. It had been a blessing in disguise she had driven the Feckle Boy's truck back, the only silence she had enjoyed since meeting the survivalist.

"Makes those bigger, dumbass fish go for the butt. Then, when they get a mouthful of poop, the freaky fish gets away."

Minko continued to just stare.

Humphrey took that as confirmation. "Eiyup, sees, I remember some of what I learned at school. No offense to your teaching, but teachers are boring as woodchipping mulch for Grandma 's garden. In goes the good stuff, and out comes a lot of mulch."

Somehow this colloquial saying struck a sympathetic chord with Minako. "I had many mulchers who came into my classroom. Most ended up going on to another profession."

"Ohhhhh you were the strict going to flunk us all kinda teacher. I gotcha," he shook his head as if that told him everything he needed to know about Minako.

The doctor bristled a little at the assumptive nature, turning her back on the foolish man so she could finish preparing.

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**"Y**ou know, I never took you for kinky."

Minako paused, the scalpel hovering as she looked up, seeing green eyes looking at her. She noted how one pupil was not as dilated as the other, additional confirmation of the concussed state she'd suspected for Josephine. She watched as the eyes closed.

Taking a steadying breath, Minako made another cut, steeling her hands so when Jo flinched and made a groaning noise, she was able to ignore it and continue.

A string of curses filled the room as Josephine struggled a bit, Humphrey's cackle mixing in with the blonde's potty mouth tirade. Minako rolled her eyes but managed to stay focused, now using a pair of forceps to probe for the bullet.

"I swear I am going to kick your arse all the way back to the college as soon as I am free of th--," Jo's words were cut off, muffled.



Surprised, Minako looked up, her eyes flaring wide as she saw Humphrey had stuck something in Jo's mouth, the blonde gagging a bit as she tried to spit the material out.

"You-sah whine, I put a sock in it," the survivalist gave a nod as if agreeing with an unspoken chorus before turning back to sorting through the items they had looted from the Feckle boys.

"Josephine, I am sorry, I hope that rag is not too soiled. I can't stop now and risk any more possibility of infection. You have a bullet lodged in your arm that needs to be removed. And no, I am not enjoying this." Removing her mind from the distractions, she zeroed in on the task, employing the narrow sight she used when in surgery. The intense focus helped her find what she needed, the metal clank as she put the bloody metal in a small tin cup, catching Humphrey's attention and bringing him near.

"Mine's bigger," he crowed as he examined the bullet.

"You should not sound so happy," Minako commented as she began using an alcohol treated cloth to wipe the wound, trying to stay in the right area as Josephine wriggled and jerked.

"It stfinggggs," the grunted syllables trickled through the gag as Josephine suddenly paled, her body shivering as her eyes fluttered shut.

"Damn," Minako muttered as she began stitching the wound. "Humphrey take that rag out now."

"Do I have to? Her squeaks hurt my ears."

"Now."

Sighing, the man did as told, patting the blonde's cheek. "She ok?"

"I hope so," Minako muttered as she tied off the last stitch. She began bandaging the area, putting some of her precious homemade herbal ointment on the wound. She would need to make more soon; if she was able to find the ingredients. Her time in her grandfather's garden seemed so valuable now.

She brushed at her forehead as she stepped back, surprised to find beads of sweat along her bang line. "I need to rest a few moments and then I can take care of you."

"No rush, this been in here many-a-day, one more minute ne'er hurt," he said handing the doctor a glass of water. "I'll go check a few things, then you can let those pretty hands do their magic on me," he gave Minako a wink before heading out of the room.



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"So tell me, how did you end up with your pantyhose..." Minako paused, trying to think of a polite word to use in describing Humphrey's interest.

"Freakish, fetish?" Humphrey supplied, laughing and then hissing as that jolted his body. "It's not, really, you-sah know? I ain't got no sex thing."

"I've begun to see it is something else, something deeper and if you do not hold still, I will need to tie you down as well."

"Can I help? I'm real good with knots."

Minako and Humphrey looked to the doorway, a very pale and weary Jo leaning heavily against the doorframe.

"What? You go and tie me up, with kinky women's undergarments no less, and expect me not to want payback," Jo said, taking in a ragged breath.

"How do you know what I tied you up with?" Humphrey demanded, squinting one eye in an expression that made him look like the cartoon character Popeye.

"One of my former girlfriends had this thing for bondage, she'd use whatever was around and well she was a banker, had to always wear dress skirts, so we often had plenty of..."

"Enough," Minako ordered, trying to look stern and stop Josephine's blossoming smirk. "I thought we had agreed no more descriptions of your sexcapades until we cross the county line."

"I think I should get a reprieve considering I have a gimp arm."

"That makes no sense."

"You are always telling me I make no sense so why would I start now?" Jo fired back.

"You-sah remind me of my bickering aunts. Old maid hags that just loved to pick back and forth. Made for quite the rousing entertainment at the family dinners. Thanksgiving was fun, watching the words and then food flying," Humphrey interjected, laughing and then wincing.

The wince brought Minako back to what she should be focused on, the doctor chiding herself for having been pulled into the divergent conversation. "You need to lie down



Josephine, you have a mild concussion, bruised ribs and I need to make sure your shoulder does not draw infection."

"Yes, she's always like that," Jo said, seeing Humphrey about to speak. The two sharing a snicker at Minako's pained expression.

"So, you have a thing for tights?" Jo decided to shift the topic before trying Minako's patience too much.

"Tights, pantyhose, fishnets, hose, stockings, nylons, gaiter, hosiery..." Humphrey paused to take a large breath.

"Oh yeah, you got it bad," Jo chuckled, grimacing as she put an index finger to her temple, trying to massage away the throbbing.

"Perhaps you should do as I told you and go lie down," Minako said, a quick glance catching Jo's gesture. "I do not have anything I can give you for another few hours," the doctor pursed her lips as she looked back to Humphrey's old wound, trying not to think about how she had to ration, to give half-doses, and the other compensations she'd made in this wasted world.

"You realize if we were near a market, there would be plenty of stuff I could get to make this headache go away," Jo grouched.

"No. Those drugs or alcohol would simply delay the headache and you'd wake up with an even bigger headache and a step toward addiction," she knew she sounded harsh and more like a parent disciplining a child; yet Josephine too often approached the situation with an immature or child-like logic.

"Fine, I'll just stand here and suffer. But you know I like company, so you get to share in my suffering," she chose to stick her tongue out at the doctor,

"I take it back, you are like sisters, cranky ones," Humphrey had wisely stayed silent through the exchange. "After you-sah finished, I can offer a bit of my stuff to help."

Jo's eyebrow arched as she asked, "Stuff?"

"I'll introduce you to my Sally-Mae; she makes some of the finest whisky round, I also have a bit o' this and that."

"Humphrey I am in love," Jo crowed, smiling wide.

"You realize now she will follow you around like a little puppy dog," Minako could not resist the teasing jab, the doctor allowing a small smile as she took in a breath,



realigning her focus to removing the rest of the shrapnel, the conversation fading to the background.

"I miss my Shepster, he was a good bird dog. Been hoping to find another," the man said in a wistful tone, grunting a little at the end as Minako began probing deeper into the wound.

"You know, I was thinking about a dog, Minako hates them."

"Does not see the need to have them as a pet," the doctor amended in a neutral tone.

"Doc's not really into animals. Only pets she had were these goldfish things; Krolls or something like that."

Minako could not help but be drawn from her activity. "How do you come up with Kroll from koi?" She knew she rolled her eyes, unable to help herself as the tech professor often provoked that response from the doctor.

"Hey, I had the first letter right, just go back to your little butchering there," Jo held up her hands. "I am teasing Doc, you know I know you are the best," she waved at her injured arm. "Living proof right here. You just are so easy to goad."

Minako clenched her jaw, repeating one of the many passages from the "Hagakure"; a text she used to shape many of her meditation sessions. She knew she was easy to draw off and that Josephine had mastered the skill to quickly push her buttons; every.... damn..... one of them.

"Perhaps we should go back to my earlier question of how you began your collection."

"It was because I had to sneak some cake."

Jo moved more into the room, her path not quite straight as her equilibrium was still off. "I was ten, and had to find a place to eat the cake I took from the kitchen before my mother might catch me. I hid in her closet; there was a pile of her dirty hose. Then my mother and father came in and, well, I was in the closet for a long time. Fell asleep using them as a pillow. I liked how they felt, so took them with and started sleeping with them."

"Aww like a teddy bear," Jo interjected, exchanging a smile with the older man.

"One became two pair; two pair became more," he explained. "One night, I got a notion to twist them and then spray paint them and, well," he shrugged and then yelped a little as he jarred the wound Minako was trying to stitch.





"You remind me of my roommate during medical school. Well, her boyfriend," Minako shook her head at the memory as she tied off the last knot. "So, just the arm and leg?"

Humphrey nodded as he looked over the area before Minko covered it with gauze.

"Come onnnnnnnnnn already," Jo's exasperated voice cut across the room, a scraping sound following as Jo rocked the wooden chair back and forth.

Minako and Humphrey looked expectantly at Jo.

"I wanna hear about your kinky roommate's boyfriend, did he happen to pass any kink along to you or did you suck it out just like you sucked life out of your students and made them zombie doctors."

Minako jutted out her jaw a little, glaring at her traveling companion. "I should just let you stew in your impatience."

"Sure, just because you got your little meditation thing going and can snatch a pebble from my hand Grasshopper..."

"You really enjoy butchering quotes as well as the English language I see," Minako cut across Jo's rant.

"At least I try to liven up the conversation."

Minako worked her jaw back and forth a bit, egged on by Jo's prodding. She knew she should not rise to the taunt, yet, something about the blonde always prodded her so she had to try and respond.

"Are you familiar, in all your pop culture studies, of a show called "Happosai"? And wipe that 'I won ' gloating smirk from your face," Minako chided.

Jo emphasized her smug look as she wiggled her face at Minako, sticking out her tongue for good measure.

Minako released an exasperated breath, her bangs ruffling. "My roommate and her boyfriend liked to watch anime. They would acquire tapes in Japanese and need it translated. I needed peace and quiet to study. So, I would translate and they would vacate the apartment to give me many hours of peace in return."

"And this Happosai was an anime series?"



"Yes Humphrey. The title character was infatuated with women's lingerie and spent much of the series taking what he could. While his reasons were different from yours, there is some resemblance, at least on the surface."

"You like anime?" Jo said, surprised to learn this.

"I did not say I liked it, rather I translated it. Although, I do value a good story, regardless of the medium."

"Can you-sah translate what she said?" Humphrey asked, scratching at his stubble.

"Erm, I think she likes cartoons as long as they are a little more than a cat chasing a mouse with a huge mallet," Jo replied.

"Someday I will teach you culture Josephine."

"But not today," Jo shuddered in mock horror.

"Let us celebrate the avoidance of culture and my healin ' with a toast," Humphrey said as he clambered off the table and began limping out of the room.

"Bring it on!" Jo cheered.

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**"M**uch easier moving things when I have more hands," Humphrey commented as he gripped the end of the large board with his good hand, Minako carrying the other end.

"Well you have three extra," Jo said, waving the hand not in a sling. "And you mentioned having a working still. I so wanna see, maybe some samples?"

"Please forgive my traveling companion, she's a lush," Minako said, rolling her eyes a bit at Jo's comments.

"Hey, life is short, best to enjoy what you can, however you can, when you can. And that whiskey was good, if there's more around, please mother may I have another?" Jo tried to bat her eyelashes to look sweet and pleading.

"She looks like she is in pain," Humphrey cackled as they neared the barn.

"Fine, remain oblivious to my charms," Jo grumped as she opened the door for them.

"Lights to the right, got it hooked to a solar battery so should go on," Humphrey instructed, shifting the weight a little as they slowed



"Wow, this place is wicked brill," Jo exclaimed, her voice sounded small and hollow as it bounced around the barn.

It took Minako a few moments to see what had caught Jo's admiration, the doctor focused on helping put the board against the wall. Once free of her burden, she moved to stand beside Josephine, her attention completely captured as she was assaulted by a cacophony of paraphernalia and bric-a-brac.

"Gor, it's like those restaurants that have weird stuff all over the walls and in every corner. It's like a living flea market and my grandmother's overflow room all stuffed into one place."

"It's," Minako paused, at a loss for words.

"My world," Humphrey said as he looked between the two, watching their reaction. "I've been building this ever since I came to live here. This's taken me over forty years."

He moved to the side, flipping a switch, a small whirl preceding the lighting of the barn, strings of Christmas lights hanging from the rafters and all corners, the multi-colored light cascading over the objects and space, the amount of illumination creating a heavenly effect.

"You really do have a thing for tights," Jo said, turning from where she had been examining a series of posters advertising assorted pantyhose brands. "This is like a museum. Everything in here has something to do with pantyhose."

The old man began weaving around the assorted mannequins, furniture, statues and large picture frames, a life size Coca-Cola polar bear and other art works and paraphernalia.

"This is," Minako began following Humphrey, taking in everything she could. She paused, seeing a stack of books, all with bookcovers made from different colored nylons. "Dedication."

"Devotion," Humphrey called out, pausing to straighten a picture of the Rockette's standing in a kickline.

"Who are they?" Minako asked as she rounded a corner, stopping in a small alcove that had been set up as a shrine. Three oil paintings hung in the center of the wall about 2 meters from the ground. Candles had been placed around, a few incense burners set on little tables and ledges. There were newspapers and magazine clippings pasted all over the walls in collage fashion.



"This is the man who made possible all I treasure, the godly E. I. du Pont," Humphrey bowed, deeply genuflecting. "Sir Allen Gant brought stockings from the dark and the fair maiden Julie Newmar, a bold inventor that brought ultra-sheer freedom. The Holy trinity of the Pantyhose."

"You are completely nutters, gone right round the bend," Jo muttered as she looked over the alcove.

"This article is from a paper dated May 15th, 1940," Minko said as she stepped close to look over the yellowed and worn clippings.

"The year the Holy Grail was given to the masses. Found the newspaper ten years ago in an attic. Do you know they resisted the madness of trademarks and gave the word and concept of Nylon to the people?" Humphrey moved and ran his fingers along some small objects on a shelf by the paintings; closer inspection revealing they were small animals made from shaping and twisting pantyhose, rubber bands holding the "sculpted" animals together.

"Oh, hey, Newmar, wasn't that the name used for a Patrick Swayze movie?" Jo blurted out as she knelt down to look at a mobile that was made from popsicle sticks and garter belts.

"How long have you been creating the items in here Humphrey?" Minako asked, ignoring Jo's outburst.

"Since I came here, little by little, it kept me sane," he replied, moving from the alcove. "I like how they feels, making this special place gave me reason to play and touch and experience."

Minako continued looking around, amazed at the way the Prepper had worked pantyhose into one artwork after another. She turned as she heard a smacking sound.

"No touching."

Jo's lips were juttet out as she waved her hand, "I just wanted to see if they were real."

Minako came over, looking at the rainbow colored sculpture. The pantyhose were filled out as if being worn, painted in a splash of color. She looked around the barn and noted about 25 of the same sculptures, each one was decorated in a different motif.

"Eiyup, I starched them then kept them filled out 'til hard. I plan on adding another one when I get back from market, in tribute to the doctor."

Minako's eyebrow arched in surprise.



"You know these are like those cow statues that they put all over Chicago." Jo said, waiting until Humphrey was not looking to reach out and knock on the legs. "A number of cities used that idea of a thematic statue decorated in different designs," Minako added.

"I gets an idea and then lets go and watches it come alive," Humphrey said, smiling wide as he watched the women admiring his work.

"There has to be over 400 pieces here."

"643 and counting. I've collected over 5000 pairs," Humphrey proclaimed. "Wellsa 643 works that I made. More if you counts all I collected. There's an upstairs too, wanna see?"

"This is the special place you mentioned protecting?"

Humphrey nodded to answer Minako's question. "It is my family; they stayed by me when all others left," he rubbed at the silver stubble on his chin, thinking something over. "I can see you-sah busy lady Doctor and wish to move on. But I know whiny has to heal."

"Hey!"

"I make fuel and other stuffs and take it to a market down the way by Sylvania. I'd hoping to be ready next week when the batches finish up. Mayhaps you-sah help me get ready, then I gives you a ride up that way. Betcha make a lotta connections there. Give you both time to heal and be a help to me as I am a little off," he waved at his leg and arm where Minako had removed the bullets.

"Perfect, give me some time to work on my tan. We could use a break from the road Doc," Jo said with an enthusiastic plead to her voice.

"Then it be settled," he held out his hand, Minako hesitating, looking at the hand.

Jo stepped up and held out her hand, grabbing Humphrey's hand, both wincing as they gripped tight and shook. "So, how about you share some more of that whisky and tell me how you came by an autographed picture of Ann Miller," she motioned at a large framed photo of a young Humphrey and Ann Miller, the starlet modeling her pantyhose clad legs.

Humphrey let go an amused cackle. "Well, let's just say it was me, a hot dog, a very naughty bottle of mustard and the acquisition of my thousandth pair. Highlight of my life."



"Josephine, do not egg him on."

"Hell yeah I am gonna egg him on; this is going to be a great week. I had a major crush on her in high school," she clapped the man on the back, the two walking toward the front of the barn, Humphrey already launching into a story.

Minako pinched the bridge of her nose, "Grandfather, this is your doing, isn't it? You always told me I would someday find my patience tested and find a spirit who would best my resolve. You pushed Josephine into my path, didn't you?"

"Hey Doc, come on, you gotta hear this. This guy is a riot."

Groaning, Minako took in a steady breath and moved to follow the pair.

