

Nikei Love

By

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STYLE IMAGE IS JUST A GLORIFIED TATTOOISTS and Sharin-A is a tough piece of work. But she's got a reputation as the best.

I watch the green fish on her wallpaper expel bubbles from their gills while she works.

'I had a run of your family in here,' she remarks, sweating over her tools. 'Last month it was ORRITO'S, this week NIKEI blends.'

I act deaf, but she keeps pushing it.

'You look like a 'ridgie', though. How come you want a blend brand?'

I get cold all over. This nosy tattooist has got me picked even before I set flipper on the pavement.

I'm NIKEI family, but that doesn't mean much. NIKEI is a world family; one of the biggest. Them and IMT. What Sharin-A's picked, though, is that I'm an *original*, a silver spooner, not one of the millions of blends. Original, blood, compound-raised NIKEI means money, connections, power. Christ, it means fucking immortality!

Originals—'ridgies—don't hang around divey tattoo parlours scoring blend brands.

So where does that leave me?

Too damn obvious, that's where!

I notice her shoes. 'Nice leather,' I remark, trying to throw her off balance. Leather only comes in illegally, on off-world ore traders. 'You know some off-worlders?'

Sharin-A flinches, flicking her laser like a throwing knife; darting me a scowl.

I smile.

That shuts her up for a while, and the pulse of her sculpting scalpel almost has me out to it in the chair. That and lack of sleep.

I've been looking over my shoulder ever since word got around the Nikei Swim team that we were in for the cut. That's why I was here, slumming it on the *Corpus* strip.

Sharin-A proves as good as her reputation and soon I have a common blend tattoo—a basketball that spins out the faces of the legends. An extra hundred bucks for the tiny audio implant and you can even hear them trash talk.

I pass on that, though. I've got enough voices in my head. Pure bred's are like that, they say.

Out on the boardwalk the air sticks to my face, sending rivulets streaming down my back. The orange neon outside *Style Image* splutters like a dirty cough.

I disguise my shape under the stifling weight of a *driza-bone* coat. I've deliberately worn it thin in places, so I don't smell like money.

Despite what they say, 'ridgies' aren't all brawn. We're just super athletes. I mean you can't help your genetics, can you? Qualify that! Of course you can help genetics—but if you were born a 'ridgie' would you change things?

Only if you were in my position.

I'm a swimmer, born and bred. Tall yeah! Most 'ridgies' are. But my body's smooth as velvet, no drag in the water. My fingers and toes are webbed like big paddles. Genetics. I got eight gold Solar Olympic butterflies and three Pan-Jovian backstrokes. The coach tells me it's not enough. Not economically *vi-able*. He wants to dump me in a vat and re-mix my tissue. See if he can come up with something better.

I hike a couple of blocks in my heavy coat and try not to worry about dehydrating or who's watching me. *Wiggers* hair specialists is on the same side as *Style Image*, but set back into an alcove. In the dark I accidentally brush against a man leaving.

'Watch the hair,' he snarls.

Wiggers was built in the same era as the tattooists, but the girl sitting behind the desk is no Sharin-A. Violet-black hair streams past her knees. Her face is a perfect, white oval. As I get closer I notice her eyes are framed by tangled, red eyelashes. The girls that I'm used to don't have hair, only determination.

She stares dully at the vid screen. The sound crackles and glubs like an underwater disco. On impulse I reach behind and tug the input cable. It's loose and I jam it back in place.

'Thanks.' She breaks eye contact with the screen in surprise and motions to the specials. 'What number?'

I scan the board. 'Umm ... twenty-five, please.'

She stares harder.

I curse myself. Nobody says 'please' down on *Corpus*.

'Twenty-five. Body re-foliation? Fill this out.' She leans across the desk and I notice the skin under her armpit is the same white as her face. No pigment mismatch. Maybe even authentic.

'Press the colour shade you want. Don't forget to nominate length and ethnic preference.'

When I finish with the form she leads me to a cubicle that smells of shampoo. She passes me a robe.

'Put this on. Rules say I have to wait 'til you do.'

I turn my back on her to climb into it. Modesty, partly.

She seems surprised again, eyes my hairless body curiously.

I know I'm oiled all over from sweat.

'Lie down,' she says.

My feet hang over the end.

She busies herself folding my coat. 'You been radiated or something?'

'Yeah.' It sounds as good as any answer.

'Tough.' She shrugs. 'The Doc'll be here in a minute.'

The hair re-foliation takes about an hour and a half. I lay there wondering if my hep boosters are activated.

The Doc finishes up, his masked face covered in a layer of fine, loose body hair.

I don't ask him where it comes from.

He sneezes, then slips off the mask. 'Your scalp and pubic hair will take twenty-four hours to thicken. Don't rub them until the roots have had time to burrow. Pay on your way out.'

The girl is watching a news bulletin.

Universal Sports Incorporated has announced a halt on all swimming competitions while the economic viability of the sport is examined. Nikei and Uncle Tostie's swimmers have been confined to the Inc. body's home offices during this evaluation period. Rumours leaked to UBC reporters suggest that the athletes may be subjected to physical 're-constitution'. UNINC deny such claims.

In other news ...

We stare at each other. I hold my breath and wonder if she'll call the sports militia. There'd be a reward. Rogue Nikei's like me bring thousands. The family hates it when 'ridgies desert and the gene pool is diluted. There is more than enough trash on the streets.

Her red lashes flutter closed for a moment, like she's communing. When she opens them the corners stay tangled together.

I want to smooth them.

'That'll be three thousand kinos.' She takes my money and counts it carefully. Then she looks at me straight. 'You look like a ball player?'

I let my breath out, unsteadily, and finger Sharin-A's fresh tattoo. 'Yeah, 'ball. Nothing special though. Just a regular blend. HiiBak and Converse family.'

'I'm Revlon. But my mum was an Estee,' she says, sort of shy. 'I'm gonna be in make up one day.'

'Maybe I could see you sometime?'

'Yeah. I'd like that.'

I slip on my 'driza' and step out into the street night. The *Pigmentors* sign is a steady pink beam of lettering a half a block away on the other side. It'll take a coupla days for the hair to grow and the new skin colour to take, and then I'll come back.

Hope she recognises me.

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