

you're just a number to them

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you're just a number to them

by [immolxtion_stxtion](#)

Summary

Ash is in the fucking corner, and he's as good as a feral animal. You know what not to do with feral animals, right? You don't push them into a damned corner, because then they have no way out that isn't through, that isn't full of teeth and claws and feral rage.

“See the chains around my feet.”

Vows | Restraints | “Don't move.”

Notes

I am an incredibly huge fan of defiant whumpees for a variety of reasons, so working with Ashswag's character for this was very fun, even if things get pushed in the direction of unseriousness at points. That's all part of the fun, though, because who doesn't love to see a defiant whumpee go from, well, *defiance*, to a breaking and cracking shell of a person. Stick around for the show, folks, because it sure was a fun one to write!

The title is from Paradigm by The Plot In You, but the song that I find really defines this fic is Animal by Saint Agnes (*I won't behave, and I won't obey / I'm nothing but an animal, anyone?*)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Ash has gotten used to dark rooms. They're all he's known for the past fuck-knows-long, stone brick and the damp trails of water that coat them, an empty, endless labyrinth.

He's used to the dark rooms, used to the bars, used to not eating for what could be hours or days. He's even used to his captors, the disgusting incense and oil that fill his senses, flickering candle lights haunting rooms like clusters of ghosts. They speak in languages he doesn't understand, speak with what they call holiness.

Ash thinks it's horseshit. First, he's kidnapped, next, he ends up stuck in some shitshow of a cult? It's like a story you see in bad documentaries, and he hates every second of it.

He'd kill himself, if he weren't so determined to make it out.

Because that's how the story goes, you see. You either die, or you escape, and Ash is the only one who decides when he dies. If he does, it's not going to be at the hands of these freaks. They can preach, and batter, and bruise, but they cannot take his life.

He's sitting in his corner when the cultist who's supposedly in charge of him comes for a 'visit'. Ash doesn't know his name, has taken to calling him various iterations of *shithead* and *fucker* and *little bitch* whenever necessary. He's tall, but not as tall as Ash, draped in red and black with a mask covering his face. The only visible skin there is are his eyes; hard, cold, and revealed by diamond cut-outs.

If Ash could, he'd take his hands, and claw out both eyes. He'd tried, before, but it only resulted in his nails being pulled out of the beds, punishment for growing them long and trying to bite them into points, filing the rough edges against stone. It hurt like a *bitch*, had people looking at him like he was vermin, like scum of the earth.

The only way he'd do it again was if there was no way he could be stopped. When that day comes, hell better watch their asses, because he's gonna go batshit, and it'll serve these fuckers right for trying to keep him locked up. He won't convert to their cult, not now, not ever.

Diamond-eyes looks at him with some sort of curiosity, a tip of the head. It's the same movement he makes when Ash is being beaten black and blue, screamed at about sin, forced to listen to endless chanting. His hands have been sliced open, knees cut by glass, eyes doused with something worse than water, and diamond-eyes has watched it all.

It's fucking cruel, and Ash hates him almost as much as he misses the sun.

A hand lands on his shoulder, and Ash almost sinks his teeth into it.

He's in the corner, legs crossed, hurt and wounded and still recovering from the way his arms were pulled out of their sockets, left to hang limply until he slammed his shoulders against stone in an attempt to pop them into place. He's in the corner, beaten and bruised, hobbling around on a foot that was fractured and didn't set properly, because he doesn't *get* medicine, doesn't *get* clean clothes.

Ash is in the fucking corner, and he's as good as a feral animal. You know what not to do with feral animals, right? You don't push them into a damned corner, because then they have no way out that isn't *through*, that isn't full of teeth and claws and feral rage.

So yeah, it's ironic. He *really* wants to sink his teeth into the skin bared to him, rip out chunks of flesh until there are scars on someone else's body, because he's really tired of being the one hurt. He's tired of mapping scars, of waking up in pain, of the ribs that become more and more visible

on his chest with each passing day.

But Ash does not bite.

Maybe in this aspect, he's like a trained dog. Maybe he's fucking tired of getting hurt when he lashes out, even though it's the only thing that can make him feel like *him* again.

He's the dog backed into the corner, and he's the dog sitting by the master's side, and Ash is in the fucking corner, with nowhere to go.

He flashes his teeth at diamond-eyes instead of biting down, lets the sharp white of his canines do the work, no matter how much he wants to taste flesh. He can be the good dog, the *good-fucking-dog*, so long as he doesn't get hurt any more than necessary. 'Necessary'. What the fuck kind of torture is necessary, huh?

"Rise," diamond-eyes says in that quiet voice of his, soft but threatening. His hand doesn't leave Ash's shoulder.

Ash *snarls*, but gets up anyways, bones shifting and cracking and groaning at the movement. He's young, probably nineteen, maybe twenty, depending on how long he's been down here, but his bones sound like a senior's. What a sick joke, huh? Young little Ashswag, ready to get put down from old age.

On his feet, he's reminded of the height he has on diamond-eyes, almost having to duck so his head doesn't run into the low ceiling. It's his little bit of power, the one thing he holds as his advantage.

That doesn't stop diamond-eyes from darting around him in one smooth move, and stabbing something into the small of his back. Liquid seeps into him, a forceful push that has him saying *fuck being a good dog*, turning to swing at whatever body part is nearest.

His hand catches the mask, a glancing blow that has his palm stinging, and his teeth snap shut on air, diamond-eyes once again spinning out of his way. It's stupid. It's fucked up. Ash's whole body feels way too fucking heavy, and before he can catch himself, he's going down.

The first thing Ash knows when he wakes up is that his nose is broken. That much is obvious: it's not dripping blood down his face anymore, but he can feel the throbbing ache of it, the way blood cracks off of skin when he grimaces.

See, the next thing he notices is a lot less fucking fun than having his nose broken, and having his nose broken *sucks*, 'cause it still hasn't healed right from all the other times it's broken. He still can't breathe properly, and sometimes his breath whistles when he tries to inhale through his nose, like he's a bird or something.

So yeah, his nose is broken. It sucks, but Ash can't bring himself to care about that, because he tries to breathe, and he tries to wipe away the dried blood as best he can, and it becomes horrifyingly clear that there are ropes all across his body. He's bound fucking—within an inch of his life, barely able to breathe, and it's all he can do to not start screaming, to try and tear his arms free.

The rope will hold, he knows that much.

Knowledge doesn't get rid of the urge to scream and thrash and try to fight his way loose of the constricting rope, because it makes him feel *small*. Bound so tightly there's no room to move, Ash is left claustrophobic, and completely helpless.

The wooden pole they've slipped down his shirt and against his spine is just as bad, forcing his shoulders back with each tie used on his arms. His hands are folded near the small of his back, pressed against the pole and that stupid fucking injection spot, every movement digging into it until it throbs.

His shoulders ache with a vicious sort of passion, almost as though they were dislocated again. It almost wipes out the pain from his knees, because of *course* they have him on them, legs bound together with twists and whorls and knots of rope so that he can't unbend his knees. Every joint in his body hurts, straining with exertion and no chance to rest.

He had to have been out for a while, for all of this to happen. Nausea builds in his chest at the thought, because as it is, he hates sleeping. Being completely unconscious, at the mercy of your captors and tormentors is even worse, especially if they managed to pull this clusterfuck of a thing off. He's *immobile*. *He can't move*.

It gets even harder to breathe, like all the air's been sucked out of the room. The sharp jerks of each attempted inhale only force the rope tighter against his chest, and Ash wants out—he fucking wants *out*. He wants to see the sun, wants to go home, wants to get out of these stupid fucking catacombs he's trapped in. He's trapped.

Blood rushes in his ears, loud enough that the harsh shake of his breaths is completely drowned out. All that exists is the scream of his heartbeat, the vice grip around his throat and his chest and his eyes, the world narrowing down to the circles of rope on his legs, the way it scratches and pulls and keeps him *still*, makes him vulnerable.

He shakes in his binds, wrists straining against the rope holding them together until a distant part of him screams that it'll bruise.

Bruises don't mean *shit* when he can't even breathe, heart beating so violently it might snap ropes in half before he can. He's trapped, he's trapped, he's—

A hand grips the steadily-growing hair on the back of his head, and shoves his head down. It doesn't help the choking, the way he can't move air down his throat. The suffocation just *increases*, and *fuck*, what he'd give to just fucking pass out. Anything would be better than the way his arms shake from their position behind his back, each rattling gasp that fails to move enough air to his body.

His head gets shoved down further, the grip on his hair getting even tighter until he can feel each individual strand. It's something to focus on, something beyond the panic and the pain and the proneness of his body. Pain sucks. It's fucking horrible, and he hates having it used to push him around like a doll, but it's something to focus on, and Ash takes it.

There's a pit he's sitting in, full of trembling arms and chattering teeth and that horrible, horrible feeling of choking on air, not being able to breathe. Ash uses the hand in his hair, the violence of his captor, and he forms himself a ladder, a rope to drag himself away from the horrors of his mind until he's simply left with the horrors of his body.

He breathes, and it's strangled. He breathes, and it's air in his lungs.

Ash forces his head up, grits his teeth and fights against the pressure against the base of his skull until he's upright again. The ropes aren't any easier to handle, but he leans into them, lets them become a base for his defiance.

They want him to break.

They want him in shreds on their floor, shaking and panicking and so fucking desperate that he'll swallow whatever poison they hand him.

This is what they want from him.

Ash looks up, turns his head until he can meet diamond-eyes and his flat, impassive stare. If they want him to swallow their poison, they'll have to pry his mouth open and force it down his throat. He stares diamond-eyes in those cold, brownish-red eyes of his, and Ash lets his body scream defiance.

Obviously, it gets him nowhere. That's beside the point. His goal is to survive, to outlast, and if defiance is what keeps his spine strong, then it will be what he weaponizes. If diamond-eyes wants him to bow his head, he'll have to fucking make him.

The grip on his hair tightens, but Ash is allowed to keep his head raised, allowed to grit his teeth and silently challenge the man in front of him to try his fucking best. He doesn't *break*. That's not the Ashswag way of life. Giving up is giving in is being a little bitch who lets others decide how they live.

Ash meets the gaze of his captor, and he fucking *dares* him to try something.

He gets no response, which is both expected, and boring. Usually, this is the part where they kick him around, or yell things at him, or try to get him to be less like himself. Usually, this is the part Ash tries to revel in, because getting hurt as a result of his refusal to bow means that he's still around; still kicking. It means he's alive.

Diamond-eyes, though, has a stupid sort of patience nobody else around here has shown. He has a liking of Ash, an *obsession* with him, blinks at him with hollow eyes and watches his movements like Ash is some zoo animal. He doesn't hit Ash, doesn't reprimand him, doesn't even get started on whatever they've brought him to this room for.

All he does is look, and stare, and keep a tight hold on Ash's hair, which is starting to hurt. It's uncomfortable in more ways than one, the silence that cuts through the room like a razor blade. Something should be happening. It's probably not good that something *isn't* happening.

There are a great many things Ash could say to diamond-eyes and his strange obsession with staring and not talking. He could swear, could make threats, could curse out the entire damn cult like it was the morning news. Instead, he settles with simply saying, "I am going to fuck your mother."

Pressure digs into Ash's leg uncomfortably in response, the hand in his hair tightening even further. Ropes pinch at his skin, driving further in by the heel of diamond-eyes's boot, and his hair is practically one good tug away from being ripped out of his skull. Ah, so he doesn't like his soon-to-be stepfather. Noted.

"My mother is dead," diamond-eyes says in that strange, quiet voice of his, completely shattering Ash's plans and dreams and hopes of pure psychological torment. "Nice try, though. Your spirit is admirable."

"I'm going to fuck your dead mother," Ash says in response, because he's got a grave he's digging himself, and humour is all he's got right now. If he has to choose between your mom jokes, and the crushing knowledge that he is more trapped now than he's been in ages, he'll take the your mom jokes.

“You’re going to shut up, if you know what’s best for you,” he gets in response, and Ash can take a hint. He can’t *listen* to it, but he can take it.

“That’s precisely what your mom said last night.”

The boot digs further into Ash’s leg, but before he can focus on that, he’s being backhanded, a sharp, sparking pain blooming across his cheek. It makes his nose ache worse, and instinctively, he tries to raise a hand to assess the damage, but they’re still bound behind his back. Anger burns steady in his chest, keeps him focused.

He lets the pinpick needles of his hair being yanked sink into his body, fights against the tug like it’s the moral thing to do. You hit the bull, you get the horns. Now Ash feels twice as stubborn, even less likely to do what’s asked of him.

“*Behave,*” diamond-eyes says in that clipped, quiet voice of his, stern enough that Ash can tell he means business. “There are things more important than you.”

Yeah, Ash doesn’t quite agree with that one. As the local kidnappee, who might or might not be getting tortured, he is *very clearly* the most important thing here. He’s just that desirable, just that hard to ignore.

The grip on his hair slackens, and then leaves entirely, diamond-eyes stepping back and to the side, moving to the front of the dim room to yank a cloth off of something. It reveals a pedestal, a heavy thing made out of wood and sat on a platform of stone. Menace drips from every sharp corner, every angle of the thing Ash can see. He doesn’t like this one bit.

Instinctively, he tries to wriggle his way free of the ropes, because he’s fucking bound, in a room with a maniac, and there’s some sort of book on the podium, like this was a chapel. Chapel of the damned, maybe. It’s all giving red flags, big, flapping things that sit on top of buildings, screaming *thou shalt not go here*.

Diamond-eyes goes to the front of the room, stands in front of the podium. He’s the perfect little picture of piety, a little boy whose parents dressed him up all nice and pretty for Sunday service. He looks stupid as fuck, and Ash wants to spit on him, more than once.

Across the room, idiot fucker in charge of the asshole kidnappee (name still in progress, Ash can’t help but think) pulls out a thick, heavy book, drops it with a thud that reverberates through Ash’s bones. It feels like a death knell, the final tolling of a church bell. Whatever’s in there isn’t good, and he *really* doesn’t want to stick around to find out.

Unfortunately for him, they put the dog on a leash. There’s nowhere Ash can go, because he can barely even breathe, and it’s starting to get hard to think when his joints scream of an ache he cannot fix. The faint smell of incense and ash in the room only seems to grow stronger, flaring to life like the dozens of candles tucked around the room, piled and stacked into walls of flame.

They flicker and dance as diamond-eyes flips through the book, pulls it open to a page. He looks almost contemplative, almost calm, dipping his fingers into something before smearing it across the top of his mask, dragging it down to his neck. This place is full of nonsense rituals and practices, and Ash is so tired of having to witness them, to be forced into place much like he is now so he can listen to them proselytize.

Ropes are worse than hands on his shoulders, chains on his wrists. Ropes are worse than beatings when he acts out, worse than the annoying, endless boredom of stone walls and a shitty bed. Ropes give him *no-fucking choice*, no room to wiggle around or flip people off, to use his body like a

weapon to give his mind a break.

The intensity with which he's bound gives him no option other than to listen to the words diamond-eyes starts spewing, lyrical and melodious and in no language Ash knows, bouncing off of his ears until they bleed.

Ash is the one-man congregation, the farthest from willing worship there is, and diamond-eyes is the preacher in the pulpit, the pastor on the stage. Not a word he says makes sense, but he seems to believe it regardless, stupidly calm and in control for a kidnapper and a torturer. It makes Ash sick to his core. Does he even matter to these people, or is he just a pawn to tie up and hurt?

He doesn't know, he doesn't know, he doesn't *know*, and it makes him *mad*, makes the claustrophobia wrapping its way around his chest grow a notch tighter. They've got his arms behind his back, but Ash knows if he had them free and in sight, they'd be trembling with anger, with fury, with something he doesn't want to put a name to. Tension lines his jaw, teeth gritted so tight that there's barely any room for his tongue to move. If he could just *snap*—

English fills the room, a change from the stupid language everyone around here *but* Ash seems to understand. It should be nice, to be able to understand what's going on, but Ash thinks he almost hates it more. Now he *understands* the things being said, and they grate like sandpaper, like someone's boring holes into his brain. Holiness and salvation and purity fill the room and suffocate everything in reach, preached by a man who seems to believe it fully. *If you just convert to our cult, everything will be fine. If you decide to become a batshit insane person who kidnaps and tortures because god says it's okay, everything will be fine.* Absolute bullshit.

Ash can't help the grimace that pulls at his face, the way the rhythmic sound of nonsense makes him want to shout profanity and hiss and spit. He wants to bare his teeth and growl, because he can *handle* the torture, the torture is fucking fine compared to this mind-numbing drone of delusion. His arms scream a wicked ache behind his back, and he can't feel his feet, and Ash wishes the ceiling would cave in and suffocate the both of them, so he no longer has to listen to *o god, show the lost and the fallen the way.*

"Ash," diamond-eyes says, and it feels like someone has shot electricity through all of Ash's veins, because he hasn't heard his own name in months. His gaze shoots up to the pulpit, locking on the mask's eyeholes and the endless eyes underneath. "You are here for the next step on your journey."

Fuck that! He's not going on any goddamn journey, unless the journey is *home* and away from these fuckers. The pure bafflement at the entitled assumption that he's going *anywhere* is probably obvious, because cool air rushes through his mouth when he tries to breathe, tries not to laugh. Next step, his ass.

"The almighty Cleanser has decided you are ready to change, prepared for the next step. All you have to do is give yourself to him, surrender fully. Do you understand?"

Ash understands, alright, but he sure as fuck isn't going along with it. Cleanser his ass, he's going to stay in the mud willingly and freely. Being an unholy little shit certainly hasn't done him any wrong, unless he counts being kidnapped and forced into catacombs because a cult is determined to fuck him over. Semantics.

Diamond-eyes leaves the podium behind, steps down the ledge to Ash's level, and walks forward. A simple little *walk* shouldn't feel as ominous as this one does, but every footfall indicates something bad is going to happen, tension coiling in Ash's chest until it feels like it could snap.

“Do you want freedom, Ash? Do you want to be loved?” diamond-eyes looks at him like how a predator would prey, and that’s just *wrong*, because Ash has teeth of his own. “Of course you do. Repeat after me, would you?”

“No,” Ash spits. “Fuck you.” Why on earth would he *ever* do what they want him to do?

A hand cracks against his cheek, so quick and so violent he almost didn’t see it coming. The impact stings, and his teeth slam together, narrowly missing his tongue. It aches when exposed to the air, and Ash can’t help but click his tongue, grimace at the radiating pain. Well, that’s more like it. More pain, less words. He can do that.

“I surrender—” diamond-eyes says, sharper around the edges like there’s no room for argument, like he’s upset at being interrupted. “—myself, body and soul. There is nothing in me that I will not give in the pursuit of holiness. Cleanse me, save me, fill me with your purpose, and teach me what life means.”

All that Ash hears is bullshit, absolute nonsense words. He’s not going to say *shit*, especially when it sounds so stupid. A derisive little scoff rumbles through his throat, a noise he makes again, just to make sure the point gets through.

A hum fills Ash’s ears, low and warning. He’s heard it before, heard it in the spaces between cold water flooding his face, the desperate attempts to stay sane and not pass out. It’s not a good sound. It means Ash has really, truly fucked it up this time, and it’s just as much of a win as it is a loss.

“Say the vows,” he repeats again, and each word is clipped. A hand grips the back of Ash’s neck with no kindness, jams his head down until tension screams through every vertebrae. “You know you want to give in. It is what’s best.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” Ash spits, tongue getting heavier in his mouth. “I’d say make me, but you can’t even do that.”

In front of him, diamond-eyes simply lets go, shrugs, and backs away. Ash almost thinks that’s it, that he’s been deemed unworthy, and won’t have to deal with this for a long while, but then he sees what diamond-eyes brings back. A wood rod hangs loosely from a hand very experienced in things like these, and it dawns on Ash that tonight—today—whatever time of day it is—is going to be very, *very* long.

The ropes on Ash’s chest serve as a guide for where to hit, it seems, because there’s no time wasted. Unforgiving wood slams into his side, into one of many diamonds the ropes have left, and it *hurts*. Breathing is impossible, the air slammed right out of his lungs. He chokes on nothing, desperately trying to get a full breath, but only finding another hit.

Agonizing pain ripples through his chest, mixed with the urge to curl up into a ball, press his stomach to his knees in hopes of protection, but the ropes won’t let him. He’s forced upright, held in place as the sick sound of wood hitting flesh echoes throughout the room. Gasps of pain stick in his throat, held back by sheer will, and the fact that Ash isn’t even sure he *can* gasp. His chest has been replaced with fire, with agony, with a growing pain that eats away from the inside out.

He’s beaten so incredibly methodically that it can’t be classed as anything but torture. A regular beating is just a couple of fists to the gut, a hit to the face. This is the steady destruction of Ash as a person, unforgiving wood against *very* forgiving flesh. Stars burst in Ash’s eyes, and he bites his tongue so hard it has to be bleeding, because there’s iron in the back of his throat as something *cracks* in his chest, a sharp ache that won’t be ignored.

A noise that wouldn't be out of place coming from a wounded animal slips from his chest, and he tries his best to curl in on himself as diamond-eyes switches sides, decides to spice up his life and his beatings. Ash wants to *die*, wholeheartedly and more genuinely than he'd prefer.

Waterboarding was absolute, pure hell, but this is hell squared, hell two, hell but on steroids, because the pain keeps coming and Ash can barely think around it, falling into pieces that the ropes keep catching.

They chafe when he tries to twist away, trying to get out of range. He makes one wrong move, and the ropes dig into the broken parts of his sides, the parts that are going to be bruised an ungodly colour in the morning. This time, Ash can't help the noises he makes, can't help the broken yell that slips from his throat and tears it raw, followed by a heaving sob, and a gasp of pain. Now that the floodgates have been broken, the noises won't stop.

Ash's chest is full of knives, of so many stab wounds that the pain starts blending together into one mass that shifts and aches and screams whenever he breathes, and it takes him far too long to realize that he's no longer being hit. It takes him even longer to pull himself into check, to step away from his body in an attempt to dull the pain.

Ash isn't completely, truly there when he looks up, looks at diamond-eyes and his discarded little baton, waiting for the next move. It's easier to breathe when he barely registers his lower half, ignoring the pain and the numbness and simply not *feeling*.

"Are you ready?" diamond-eyes asks, and Ash *laughs*, laughs until the pain in his chest gets so sharp it almost cuts through the veil he's thrown between himself and his body, laughs until a fist slams into his face, into his mouth, into every inch of available skin.

He keeps laughing, and he keeps getting hit, a mess of pain and noise and breathless little gasps, the crack of Ash's nose and the sting of his lip splitting in two. Dull aches radiate through his face, barely-there flashes of pain that he knows will become overwhelming the second he crashes back into reality.

But Ash isn't in reality, and he's high off of his own defiance, off of the muted pain and illusion of zero consequences. Diamond-eyes keeps punching him, throwing hit after hit until Ash's face is swelling and his knuckles start cracking, and Ash keeps enduring, lets laughter fade into wheezes, into a defiant little glint in the eyes that are going to be ringed in bruises come morning. A fist slams into his jaw, rattles his whole face around, and finally, Ash stops laughing.

Instead of laughing, he grins.

He grins, and it's bloody. He grins, and he looks like a man deranged. Ash grins, and it's dried blood rewet because his nose won't stop bleeding, dripping down his teeth and his lip and the corner of his mouth like he was a vampire, finding a way to revel in the pain. Defiance slips through his veins like adrenaline, warm and comforting and stupidly powerful, because Ash is powerful in his constant refusal.

It slips away from him slowly, but slips away nonetheless, leaving him cold around the edges, the pain starting to slip past his carefully-crafted net of Do Not Exist. His ribs scream individual little aches that threaten to choke out his heart and lungs, and Ash wouldn't be one bit surprised if they were cracked, or broken, or bruised, because they hurt like a bitch. All of him hurts like a bitch, an overwhelming scream that makes him woozy, clogs his brain.

"I'm giving you one last chance," diamond-eyes says, voice skating over the layers of different aches, the different types of pains sticking out of Ash's body like he was a target board. He circles like a vulture, like a bird ready to feast on whatever carrion is left. "Say the vows, Ash."

“No.”

A harsh kick to the back, landing right beside the pole holding him upright. There's no air left in Ash's lungs, barely any strength in his body, but he will not break. They will not win, taking what's left of him as a prize. He has himself, and he has his defiance. He has everything that matters, has a self beyond the pain and the imprisonment and the torture.

The baton from earlier slams viciously into his back, into his arms, into the few places that are blissfully free of hurt, and Ash is starting to wish he had something that wasn't defiance. Defiance *hurts*, is the crack of wood against skin, ropes pinching and biting his arms and legs and chest until he only feels the sharp pinch, the bone-deep ache.

He lets out a low groan, and then bites his tongue with too much force, looking for salvation in the pain of his own making and finding nothing. Blood spills from Ash's mouth, and not even the pole can keep him from slumping forward, almost completely doubled over. The rope digs into his chest with a vengeance, but he's in enough pain that it barely registers, just another voice in the chorus.

He can't—he can't *breathe*. His lungs won't work, fluttering and spasming in his chest, but not drawing breath, a candle choked out. His own flame flickers, and he skates between reality and dreams, blackness slipping in and out of his vision. There's no more pain forced onto him, but he's in enough of it that it doesn't really matter, tears slipping down his face in a brand of weakness that feels so achingly similar to loss.

The pole is removed from his back, and there's no longer anything to keep Ash from collapsing on the floor. Skin pinches and screams where the ropes dig in, refusing to give, but Ash can barely care, face pressed to cold stone floors. He's so fucking tired, so full of pain and exhaustion that all he can do is lie there, lay in his pain and try not to cry more, try not to lose himself.

Time passes in jumps and skips, moments where Ash blinks in and out of consciousness, the pain flaring with each waking breath. He doesn't know how long he's been here, how many hours he's been feeling his body ache and trying to ignore it, only that he wants to cry, that his joints feel like they're being ripped out of the sockets, and that his stomach aches a vicious, violent ache.

“I surrender,” Ash finally whispers to the silent room, to the floor, because he has nothing left. He's fucking starving, hurting in ways that are almost worse than torture, breathing in dirt and trying to gather the strength to keep up. “I surrender myself, body and soul. There is nothing in me that I will not give in the pursuit of holiness. Cleanse me, save me, take me off of this goddamn floor.”

“That was almost perfect,” diamond-eyes says, and Ash flinches, because he could have *sworn* that he was alone in the room. “You have potential, don't you?”

A hand tangles itself in Ash's hair and lifts his head up, taking on the job his neck is too weak to do. Diamond-eyes crouches beside him, runs an almost-soothing hand down the ropes covering Ash's back. It's pitiful how much the kind touch makes him want to melt, to slip into a softer self in hopes of getting more. He'd force himself back into defiance, because he's had worse, been worse, *withstood* worse, but Ash is just so fucking tired.

The hand tightens in his hair. “Say it properly this time, and you leave.”

Ash tries his best to nod, but can't quite manage the effort required. There's still blood dripping down his face, and he feels like he's been run through a meat processor, barely any circulation left in his arms and legs.

“I surrender,” he starts, and tries to ignore how every word after it feels more and more like losing himself.

End Notes

I cannot even begin to describe how hard it was to continue writing this after the “your mom” bit, because I found it so absurdly funny and tonally jarring that all I could do was laugh. The cons of having been a crackfic writer include unconsciously bringing it into a wip, and then wanting to keep it.

The binds Ash is in are a loose combination of [loop-chain stockings](#), with an [h-shaped futomomo](#) keeping the legs bent at the knee. A [dragonfly harness](#) deals with both immobilization of the arms and the ties on the torso, and then assume a [drum harness](#) has been modified to connect the torso and leg ties. They really aren’t necessary to the story to know, but I wanted to give myself a landing to jump off of for description.

There are two other parts to this story that can be found [here](#), and [here](#).

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