

# MERCY KILL SHATTERED MELODY



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Mercykill: Shattered Melody

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ALSO BY MICHAEL BARNETTE

[All Hellos: A Mojocastle Trick](#)

## DEDICATION:

To Auburnimp, who was there when it all started. To Barbara Sheridan for finding someone to help with translating the song lyrics used in this book into Japanese, and to her and her co-author Anne Cain for Mr. Shu, the original Poisoned Dragon.

MEREYKILL:  
SHATTERED  
MELODY

## **AUTHOR'S NOTES:**

**All names in this book follow standard Japanese order, which puts the family name before a given name.**

Here is a glossary of a few Japanese words and terms that are used during the course of the book.

Koban - A mini police station. Police don't have squad cars in Japan the way they do in the States. Instead they have stations, where from three to eight officers can be found. Japanese police either walk their beats or use bicycles. The areas patrolled by such small teams are also small, under a quarter of a mile in a big city.

Manga ka - A person who draws manga, i.e. Japanese comic books.

Shojo manga - Comics for girls that typically feature beautiful boys, cute girls and romance themes.

Otaku - A person who is a die-hard fan of something, especially of anime or manga. It used to have seriously negative connotations, but the fans took the word and made it their own, taking most of the sting out of it. Anime and manga are much more accepted than they were even a decade ago and

people proudly proclaim their otakuness as a matter of pride.

Cosplay - Costume play, dressing up as a character from anime, manga or TV shows and goes to conventions in their costumes. Star Trekkers were some of the first people to do this in the United States. Just proves that otaku are everywhere.

Nawa shibari - Japanese erotic rope bondage. Also called kinbaku. It can be beautiful if done properly by someone that has mastered the art form. If done improperly, it can cause harm to the person being tied up.

Yaoi - What you're about to read. A story, anime, manga or novel about beautiful men in love or lust with other beautiful men set against the backdrop of a moving story and lots of hot sex. Once the genre was written almost entirely by women for women, but more and more men are getting involved in the genre. Let's face it, gay and bisexual men like reading about hot guys, too.

Shounen-ai - Literally means 'boy's love'. A manga or anime about hot young guys in love. Shounen-ai is sometimes hard to tell from yaoi, but classic shounen-ai fades to black before the actual sex scene, which is the usual difference. Shounen-ai is typically aimed at a younger readership than yaoi which is for the eighteen-and-over crowd.

Sensei - Teacher. It's also a term of respect

Tatami - The mats traditionally used to cover floors in Japan. They are still far more commonly found than Western style carpeting, which most Japanese still don't care for because of how dirty it gets.

Udon - Thick white noodles served with a variety of flavorings. There are many kinds of instant available even here in the States.

## PROLOGUE

**Present day**  
**Tokyo Prison Facility**  
**Ten in the morning**

Three young men were led into the room by grim-faced police. They were in prison grey, their wrists cuffed to chains around their waists even though they had yet to be tried or convicted.

Handsome—some would say beautiful—they didn't have the look of hardened criminals as so many of the people brought to speak to the defender did. In fact, the youngest and smallest of the trio was white as a sheet, fear written in his wide eyes, eyes the color of melted chocolate. Eyes that started to glitter with tears as he regarded the man directly in front of him.

Takeshi, his lover. Taller. Stronger, physically and mentally. He walked with his head held high, shoulders squared, unafraid. Unashamed and unrepentant.

Takeshi was afraid of nothing.

They'd been happy. The three of them in love with what they did, in love with life. In love with one another.

Juro was stopped, forced to kneel on an elevated

block of concrete, chains locked to his waist to hold him in place, kneeling on the hard, cold surface. A guard roughly shoved his head down, making the violet-dyed hair fall into his eyes.

“Don’t move!” the guard snapped.

Takeshi offered no resistance, kneeling when he got to the block that would be his, but there was a sneer on his face, defiance in his obsidian-black eyes.

No, Takeshi wasn’t afraid. And if Juro feared, he hid it well.

But Akira was scared and trembling, heart filled with terror, mouth dry as ash. He didn’t so much as kneel on the unyielding block of concrete as he wilted onto it. It didn’t matter to their guards. He was treated with the same rough disgust as the other two had been shown.

The guards left, and a man in a very conservative—and expensive—suit entered the room. Tall, slender, he regarded the trio with cool dispassion.

He walked to the table, put down a briefcase that shone with golden fixtures, hinges, lock, the metal holding the leather handle to the case, even the latches. Gold. Not brass. Gold. There was no mistaking it. “I’ve been appointed to represent the three of you, as you are to be tried for your crimes together.”

“What chance do we have of being found innocent?” Takeshi asked.

The man took a seat in the wooden chair and stared at them for a moment before replying, “None.”

Akira visibly wilted.

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me? Anything you didn't say in your statement to the homicide detectives?"

Takeshi met the man's eyes. "Yes. As I've told the police, it was me. Juro and Akira weren't involved, so they should be released."

"Unfortunately they were present, and therefore they are considered—at the very least—accomplices to the crime."

*"And I'm telling you I did it! Me!"*

The man frowned, reached for his briefcase. "I won't be shouted at. If you want me to defend you, you can be civil or have other legal council assigned to you."

Takeshi, proud and unafraid, glanced at Akira, saw how pale his lover was, and bowed his head as low as his position on the block would permit. "Forgive me, I...this has been difficult for us, for them. They really weren't responsible."

The man let the briefcase go, sat down. "Shout at me again and I will walk out and leave you to whatever fate God has in store for you. Do you understand?"

Takeshi nodded, head still bowed respectfully. "Yes. I understand...sir."

"Much better," the man replied. "Now I want to hear what happened, in your own words."

"But you have our statements," Juro replied.

"Yes, but a statement frequently leaves out things. I want to hear about the whole thing from start to

finish, in your own words. Can you do that?" He looked at each one of them in turn.

Takeshi raised his head. "I'll tell you."

"You used to be in a band together, is that right?"

"Yes, sir," Takeshi agreed. "We are...*were* called Mercykill."

"Interesting name, considering the crime you are charged with."

Takeshi shrugged.

"So, you were all in this band together. Tell me, what led you to commit this terrible crime?"

"It wasn't a crime," Takeshi stated, voice hard, icy.

"Then what was it?"

"Justice," Takeshi replied. "Justice for a crime no one else cared about, for a woman that we loved."

"I see. Well, that doesn't really match the report I have. Suppose you tell me why you feel that such a heinous series of crimes could be called justice by anyone?"

Akira flinched at the coldness in the man's tone.

But what else could they expect after what they'd done?

Guilty in the eyes of the law, even though there had yet to be a trial.

Just a formality, they'd been caught redhanded.

Murderers.

Killers.

That's all they were to everyone now.

But it hadn't always been that way...

## CHAPTER ONE

**Six months earlier**  
***Nippon Bodukan* concert venue**  
**Nine in the evening**

An electric melody rolled out across the crowd, the sound like liquid silver, bright-toned, sad, the stage still darkened.

Excitement rippled through the sea of fans, played on the stage of faces, lights flickered across them, revealing painted hair, leather clothes, lace, velvet, wild makeup.

The guitar's lonely melody was abruptly joined by the bone-vibrating thrum of a bass, the sharp crack of drums and the lights came up on stage, bright as a lightning flash.

A roar from the audience drowned out the music for an instant, the sound making the concrete walls of the venue vibrate with the sound.

A crescendo of glittering notes, rose over the noise of the crowd, the opening melody of the band's first song rising like sparks from a bonfire.

Onstage the guitarist stepped forward, bathed in a pool of light, red and black streaked hair, red and white painted face, slim body encased in leather from neck to toes. Only the dancing white of his fingers

against the inky darkness of the guitar were visible.

Behind him his bandmates were playing, the drummer in a floor-length dress that was a confection of black taffeta, dove-grey lace and pearls, blue hair elegantly styled. The makeup that turned good looks into incredible beauty was perfect.

To his right, their bassist moved to the music in a pair of micro-shorts in black velvet, high-heeled patent leather boots and a violet velvet crop top with long pointed sleeves that looked like vintage 1960s era clothing. A torrent of violet hair that reached almost to the bassist's waist sparkled with motes of silver glitter. A bar of violet broke the perfect geisha-white of the bassist's pretty face.

This was their first major appearance since they'd signed with indie label *Poisoned Dragon Recording Company*.

They were just the opening act for a well-established band, but they didn't care. They were playing to twenty thousand people, the biggest audience they'd ever had. And, even more thrilling, the whole thing was being recorded for later broadcast on a couple of pay per view stations, including *Music Alive* in the States.

It was their dream come true and Takeshi, whose stage name was Kei, felt his veins filled with the power of such an accomplishment. They played better than they'd ever played before, song after song leaving the listeners wanting more, the crowd's roar a drug to the man who'd dared to dream of fame.

Fame. Right here in their grasp.

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And they'd saved their number one hit for last.

As the roar of the crowd slowly died, anticipation of their next song silencing the fans, the guitarist saw movement at the corner of his vision. Backstage. A man and a woman. He didn't know the man, and he couldn't see the woman clearly with the lights in his eyes, but if they were there, they must have permission.

While he couldn't tell *who* they were, he could see they were arguing.

But that wasn't any of his business at the moment. He had work to do. Work he loved. Wouldn't have traded for anything in the entire world.

Music flowed from his hands in a glissando of notes that fell like brittle tears on the crowd. Slow. Sad.

He stepped forward to the microphone, the opening lyrics to their biggest-selling single pouring from his lips.

*"Iku tokoro wa shiranai.*

*"Itta toko wa oshienai."*

Hana, the drummer, echoed the words in chorus with Maki, the bassist, their voices blending smoothly.

Over their heads the huge display showed falling rose petals, the English translation of the lyrics in bold lettering; the display provided for the English speaking audience that would later watch the broadcast.

*I don't know where I'm going.*

*I can't tell you where I've been.*

A change in lighting resolved the woman into the familiar figure of their handler – the manager for their band. She stood there in her all her tatter-lace beauty, black mascara artfully streaking her cheeks. Sadness incarnate. Gothic Lolita, her makeup turning her face white as death.

But he still didn't know who the man standing there with her might be.

It didn't matter. They were no longer fighting, and Kita was watching them with adoration in her wide eyes, hands pressed together in front of her breasts.

He could feel her love even with most of the width of the stage between them.

Their hard work had paid off. Hers. Theirs. Together.

Pride and love burned in his chest as his voice soared into the next verse.

*"Namida ga ame no you ni ochite.*

*"Hi ga kimi no egao to kieta."*

Rose petals changing to falling rain on a sere and dead garden, the words streaming across the display as he sang them.

*Tears fall like rain.*

*And the sun is gone with your smile...*

Kei glanced sideways, trying to see Kita, wanting to make sure the man was leaving her alone. But they'd either moved away, or the lights onstage kept him from seeing them. This wasn't the time to be distracted. They had to be perfect. Nothing less was acceptable to Kei. He focused on the song, fingers sliding and fluttering across the guitar, creating

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music.

*"Mou koi ni ochitemasu ka."*

Hana echoed the lyrics alone, and Kei wondered what the hell Maki was doing as the translation rolled over their heads. *Can you ever love me again*, the rose petals falling in an endless rain. He turned his head to look and found the scantily-clad bassist was looking backstage, frowning.

It had to be their relative positions to the lights, because when Kei tried to see what was going on he couldn't, the area too dark in relation to the pool of light bathing him, lighting him for the adoration of the crowd.

*"Kokoro ni hi wo modoremasu ka,"* he sang the words, putting all the hurt and emotion in his voice that he could, letting his voice break slightly the way he'd recorded it the night his last girlfriend had walked out, unable to handle the fact that he wouldn't put an end to his first love: his band. Overhead the words were emblazoned across the setting sun, *Can the sun shine in my heart?*

It was working, too. Kei could see a few of the girls right in front of the stage had tears running down their faces. One of them held up a sign that read *I will always love you, Kei*.

He fought the smile, but he couldn't fight the upwelling of emotion.

This was what they'd always wanted. Fans. Fame. Notoriety.

They'd finally arrived as a band, finally had more than just a concept and good music. They had fans.

Adoration. Love. And the notoriety that came from being the sort of band they were: visual kei, their look and sound blending to create what they were.

*Mercykill.*

And this song, ‘*Mou Hi wa Nai*’ – ‘No More Sun’ – had always been their best because it was the one that most deeply touched them and those who listened to it, as any ballad of love lost tended to do. It had even hit the European charts, coming in for one brief, bright week at number fifty-three in the top one hundred before falling off the charts.

But they’d done it. Mercykill had cracked the top one hundred in Europe.

Kei kept on singing, Hana’s mellow voice and Maki’s slightly sharper counterpoint backing him up. Whatever had distracted the bassist had only caused a tiny mistake, one Kei could forgive considering how well the night had gone.

As the last strains of the song died, he glanced at the girl with the sign. She was weeping, her lips still managing to form the refrain with Hana and Maki.

The last notes faded, lost in the screams of the audience as the lights went out.

Elation filled Kei as the trio hurried offstage to make way for the main act.

But they’d had their first taste of the big time, and Kei found himself wondering what had happened to Saya, the girl whose departure from his life had caused him to write ‘*Mou Hi wa Nai*’, which had been their first real hit and got them their contract with *Poisoned Dragon*.

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The roar of the crowd as the main act took the stage made Kei shiver. The screaming had been loud for them, but compared to this unbridled adulation, it paled.

Someday, he told himself. Someday soon.

They shed their instruments the instant they were offstage, handing them to the people waiting to take them and put them in their cases.

Maki almost took Kei off his feet, as the shorter man jumped on him the instant they were backstage. "We were great!" he said. The guitarist threw an arm around the bassist and grabbed for the wall, trying to steady them both.

"Damn it, Juro, you're going to get me killed doing that!" he snapped, but there was no real anger in it. Kei was just too pleased with things tonight to be really angry with the too-exuberant behavior of the bassist. The firm pressure of something hard against his belly did raise a dark-red eyebrow. "Happy?" he asked archly.

Juro blushed, but it was hard to see under the geisha-white makeup that covered his face everywhere except across his eyes, where it was a rich shade of glitter-silvered violet.

Hana giggled. "Didn't you notice he was like that for the last three songs? There were two really attractive young men making eyes at our Maki all night."

Kei pressed his lips to the bassist's warm mouth before he put Juro down. "Really? Imagine that? And here I thought it was that group of girls eyeing him

that caused this reaction.”

Juro slipped from his grasp, but not before he got a good grope in on the bassist’s ass.

Juro laughed. “Girls, guys, you know I’m easy.”

“But not cheap,” Akira giggled, repeating one of the jokes they’d been playing with for years.

Juro patted their Hana on the behind, hitting nothing but the heavy satin of the drummer’s skirt. “Unlike someone else I could name.”

“I am *not* cheap,” Hana insisted.

“Two hamburgers, fries and a soda? I’d say that was pretty cheap,” Takeshi reminded the younger rocker.

“First date, too,” Juro added. “And you were flirting worse than a fangirl.”

Giggling, Hana poked Juro in the chest. “You were just too cute to resist.”

“Cute?” Juro asked, sounding offended. “I’ll have you know I’m not cute, I’m sexy.”

Takeshi looked along the length of Juro’s booted legs. “Yeah, very sexy.”

“And what am I, a leftover?”

“Hardly,” Takeshi replied, putting an arm around Hana and hugging the drummer close.

The three of them were laughing as they walked through the backstage area, acknowledging the congratulations and smiles of the people as they made their way to their dressing room to get out of their costumes.

“Hey, don’t you think we should stay dressed like this, you know, to sign autographs?” Juro asked as he

opened the door of their dressing room.

“Hmm... That might be a good idea,” Kei agreed as Hana moved closer to the pair. He was looking around for their handler, wondering where she was. He’d expected her to be in the wings waiting for them, but there was no sign of her.

Maybe she was off planning some nefarious deed, like a celebration party. Or maybe she was off in the bathroom fixing her makeup. He was positive he’d seen tears on her face.

Either way he really wanted to ask her who the man he’d seen arguing with her was, and more to the point, find out what the quarrel was about. He knew Kita’s friends, most of their business contacts, on sight, and he’d never seen the man in the suit until tonight, he was positive. He’d have remembered.

“Don’t I get a kiss too, Kei?” the drummer asked, turning his face up to the taller man.

Kei obliged, his arms wrapping around the slender form of his other lover.

“I told you no!”

The kiss ended instantly as Kei, Maki and Hana—otherwise known as Morishita Takeshi, Hideo Juro and Inoue Akira—turned to see their handler Takei Kita and the same man who’d been arguing with her while they were on stage.

The man was tall, almost a hand-span taller than Takeshi—who was rather tall even without the high-heeled boots he was wearing—which made the man quite tall indeed. Dressed more like a businessman than someone who would be present at a concert like

this, he seemed as out of place as they would be in the corporate offices of an investment firm.

Next to him, Kita looked like a doll. She was so much smaller—she and Akira were able to share their wardrobe. Tonight, in her makeup, she seemed delicate. Fragile as a porcelain doll.

Dressed in a very tiny black velvet miniskirt that was covered by a floor-length layer of tattered lace ruffles. Long black hair had been pulled up into loops and streaked with deep royal blue. The top she wore left most of her upper body bare, only her small breasts covered by a sheen of midnight blue satin, the same fabric forming the gloves that covered her hands from fingertips to biceps.

The man glowered at her, towering over her in a threatening manner that made Takeshi's eyes narrow. The slender guitarist took a step forward.

"I don't know who the hell you are, but you should leave," he told the man.

The man turned. His look was one of sneering contempt, the dark eyes cold, hard as stone. "Mind your own fucking business!" he snarled.

"Kei, please..."

The lead singer took a step forward, anger, the desire to protect their handler—one of his lovers—stronger than common sense. He'd been in few fights, but he wasn't about to stand there and let this man do anything to Kita.

"This isn't over!" the man growled, leaning down to menace her.

"We won't do it! I won't do it!" Kita said, her voice

shaking with fear.

“Bitch! You’ll do it! You’ll do it all right, or....” the man snarled and slapped her, knocking Kita to the floor, blood running from her split lip. Eyes wide with shock, she stared up at the man.

The three men stood frozen by shock. It was the drummer who reacted first, his hand going to his face as it he’d been the one stuck. “He...hit Kita...” he said, his chocolate-brown eyes wide, the pupils huge. Akira stepped forward, the small drummer no bigger than the woman who’d just been hit.

Juro grabbed his arm. “Akira, don’t.”

The drummer was ashen. “He’s going to hurt her. Don’t let him hurt Kita!”

The man grabbed Kita and yanked her back to her feet. “Walk!” He shoved her and she fell again.

Too stunned at first by what the man was doing to Kita, none of them had reacted with more than horror. But seeing her trying to get away, the panic and terror in her eyes was enough for Kei. A flash of anger dispersed the shock and he crossed the room to grab the guy, shoving him away from their handler, snarling out an enraged, “Stop it!” as the man stumbled and almost fell.

Kei put himself between the man and Kita. “Leave her the fuck alone, asshole.”

Hana pulled away from the bassist. “We can’t let him hurt her, Juro.”

“Shit,” Juro muttered as he hurried to help Akira get Kita out of the way.

The two men, Kei and the unknown businessman,

faced one another. The taller man had a smile, cold and contemptuous, on his face.

"You'd have been so much better off if you'd stayed out of this, *Kei*." The way he said the rocker's stage name made it sound like a slur.

"Go fuck yourself," Kei snarled, taking a stance, ready to fight.

The man just laughed at him. "She's going with me."

"Like hell she is!" the guitarist retorted. He glanced to see where Akira was. "Go get security!"

That was all it took. One second of distraction.

White points of light, shooting comets in his vision. Kei stumbled, went down to his knees, the world spinning crazily, those little stars filling his eyes, his jaw feeling as if he'd been hit by hammer.

"You son of a bitch!"

Juro, angry. The sound of scuffling feet, flesh striking flesh, a grunt.

Kei shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

Juro hit the floor beside him, as dazed as he was, his mouth bloodied.

Angry, Kei got to his feet intending to face the man again, give him back as good as he'd gotten.

The man had Kita by the arm, Akira was sprawled out on the floor, tears in his eyes, scared, bleeding from a split lip.

Rage filled Kei and he went for the man, anger fueling his fist.

The man let Kita go to meet the wild charge of the leather-clad rocker, the pair of them exchanging a

flurry of punches while Kita screamed for help, and Juro tried to regain his feet. But the roaring of the crowd, the wailing of the guitars on stage muted the sounds of the struggle going on backstage.

Juro got back to his feet just as Kei went down for the second time, dazed by a right cross to the jaw.

“Asshole, get the fuck away!” Juro shouted.

Kei got back to his feet, tried to tackle the man, but was met by a vicious kick to the ribs that laid him out on the floor, gasping for breath.

He could hear Juro fighting with the man again as he dully wondered why no one was coming to help. There should have been security people, stage helpers, dozens of people around.

But there was just them.

And damned if he was going to let anything happen to Kita.

Especially not after what she’d told him before the concert.

He wasn’t angry with her anymore. He could never stay mad at any of his friends. His lovers.

Takeshi forced himself back to his knees, tried to stand again, his legs unsteady, the room spinning around him as Juro hit the floor beside him, the bassist’s face bloody, eyes half closed, dazed.

“Kita, run!” Akira’s panicked shout.

“No! Please!” Kita, screaming in terror.

He looked up in time to see the man’s foot heading for him, something dark and menacing in the man’s fist.

An instant later he was sprawled out on the floor

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with white sparks dancing in his vision, barely aware of a sharp crack of sound, of Kita's shriek of pain, Hana's scream of terror. And blood. Spattered like windblown cherry blossoms across the floor.

So much blood...

**The next day  
An apartment in Tokyo  
Eleven in the morning**

The headlines in the paper made Takeshi fight a renewed war with the tears he'd been struggling with all night. He stared at the words emblazoned across the top of the front page, the horror of it a nightmare he was unable to wake from.

**Mercykill Handler Takei Kita Slain Backstage at Concert: Bassist in Stable Condition After Shooting.**

He sighed and gingerly sipped his tea, trying not to get the hot liquid on his swollen lip, worried about their future. Juro was so badly injured that the doctors were saying he might not be able to perform for several months. That was, of course, if they could save his arm in the first place.

And then there was Kita...

He closed his eyes and took a shuddering breath, trying not to think about it because that hurt too much, bit so deep that it felt like dying, and he just wouldn't let himself feel it yet. Wouldn't. Couldn't.

But it was there, a steely thorn shoved into his heart.

Akira was still rubbing sleep out of his eyes as he

walked up behind the other man. He was tired, but he couldn't sleep anymore. The night at the hospital while they waited for word on Juro had been rough on them both, but he knew that Takeshi blamed himself. He put a gentle hand on Takeshi's shoulder, leaned down and brushed a kiss across his cheek. "Juro will be fine."

"I know. It's just..." Takeshi shuddered, fighting the upwelling emotions, trying to keep from shattering into a million splintered fragments, but it was no use. "Kita...God, why...why Kita?" His voice broke, and he laid his head on his folded arms, the paper beneath them, a scattering of tears falling, soaking in, the ink running black as death on the paper.

Akira put his arms around the guitarist, rested his cheek on the man's dark hair. "You did your best."

Kei leaned back into Akira's embrace, missing Kita's smile, Juro's laughter.

The apartment too silent, lonely despite Akira's presence.

"She's gone." His voice was a numbed mutter, the beauty of his tones leached by pain, sorrow, the loss of the bright dream that had been his life.

Their life together.

So much hardship, ended by two bullets.

Takeshi wished he'd been the one killed.

*Why Kita? Why her?*

And that bastard had gotten away.

Takeshi shivered, remembering the man's cold stare, the feel of his fists as they'd knocked him

almost senseless.

Hard fists driven by powerful shoulders.

Suit or not, that man had been a fighter. A killer.

A murderer, who'd stolen their dream from them.

No handler. No bassist. No band.

Soaring to the heights of happiness, their dreams had been dashed onto the rocky shores of misery in the span of moments.

Kita's death was a leaden weight in his chest, so heavy that breathing hurt.

"God I miss her so...so much," he gasped out. Hurting. Still hearing the echo of a scream. Kita. Dying. Her song ended forever.

He shivered. Cold and aching, his grief so profound he didn't think his heart would ever know joy, the breakup that had led to him writing 'No More Sun' pining by comparison.

"Shhh..." Akira murmured, stroking Takeshi's hair. He felt the loss too, felt the pain, a deep ache that hurt worse than anything he'd ever known.

He'd liked Kita a lot. Loved her, really. She'd been the older sister he'd never had. The friend he could go shopping with, trade secrets, laugh with. Share his love of men with and not feel shame that he was more gay than bisexual as he pretended. *Okama*. In love with Kei, who she willingly shared with him on those infrequent occasions the older man would agree to make love with both 'girls' at once. She'd been the only woman who'd ever had sex with him, and who he'd ever considered it with.

And she was gone.

No, not just gone. She was dead.

He bit back the sob, but it was no use. Takeshi, his beautiful, strong Takeshi – their Kei – had heard it.

The man sat up, reached back and took Akira's hand, guiding him around until he could pull Akira into his lap. He held their Hana tight, face pressed into his hair, hair that still carried the blue streaks of dye from their performance last night. The tears came then. Hot, full of misery, and not even the comforting embrace of Takeshi could stop them.

Both men cried their loss, sharing a hurt so deep that it forged a bond between them stronger than that of almost love they had shared before this awful tragedy. Stronger than the bonds of friendship, adversity and their passion for music had already formed.

His lips found Akira's, the kiss needy, desperate and he responded, clinging to his lover, pressing close, seeking what comfort they could offer one another in a world turned upside down. In a world without Kita, who'd meant so much to all of them.

Hungry and hurting, they kissed, their tongues sliding in a dance of brittle-need lust, tasting salt tears and fear, honeyed passion and bitter sorrow.

Breathing hard, hardly breathing, Takeshi broke the kiss to look into wide, chocolate-brown eyes. Eyes full of tears, need. Desire. And... Takeshi didn't want to see more, didn't want to accept what had always been there, his love for Kita blinding him, her death giving him the ability to finally see what he should have seen before. Something that had been there

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always,

Love. Pure. Freed of restraint and desperate.  
Wanting.

He pulled Akira closer, held him and rocked him gently, kissing his soft hair, giving instead of just taking for once. Showing the younger man that even though he'd never said it, he did love him.

He didn't know when it had happened, and it hardly mattered. What mattered was the truth.

He'd loved them both, but he'd never said those words to her. Never spoken them. Kita knew, though. She'd always known how it was between all of them.

And now she was gone.

All he had was Akira. Sweet, beautiful Akira.

And Juro...if he lived.

Takeshi shuddered, clung tighter to the only scrap of sanity left in his world. Akira.

It had been there all along, bound up and chained to his feelings for Kita, muddled and blinding him to the truth, how he felt, really felt for both men until it was almost too late.

The truth had always been there between them, unspoken because he hadn't had the courage to admit it. To say it. Not even to her.

But life was too short for lies. Especially to one's self.

And he wasn't going to lie anymore. Not to Akira. Not to Juro, if he lived.

*God, he has to live. He has to survive!*

Takeshi couldn't get the memory of the blood out of his mind. Juro so pale and still, like Kita. Unlike

Kita, Juro had still been breathing when the ambulance arrived.

He'd lied to everyone, even to himself.

But he wasn't going to lie to them anymore.

"I love you," he whispered.

New tears, soft sobs, too much emotion, both of them crying for love lost and love found, and suddenly just holding Akira wasn't enough. Just having his arms around him wasn't enough.

Takeshi pushed his hands under Akira's shirt, wanting to feel the younger man's warmth. Feel his soft skin, kiss every inch of his body, touch and be touched.

Akira gasped as a nipple was tweaked, the sound cut off by a greedy mouth. His cock had gone hard, throbbing with desire.

They'd lost Kita, precious Kita, and maybe Juro too, but they still had one another, they weren't alone. He held Takeshi tighter, an arm around the man's neck, the other around his shoulder.

The kiss went on until the drummer was dizzy with need for air. Head spinning with love and lust, the sadness that lay just below the surface.

Clothes fell to the floor, bare skin was touched, kissed, tasted, caressed. Loved and loving, soft gasps, quiet moans, sleek bodies seeking warmth, finding, giving and taking.

With a soft cry of loss, Akira felt Takeshi pull away.

Need heated the man's eyes as he looked at the

drummer, held the smaller man.

"I love you, Akira," he said.

Akira touched Takeshi's face, tears welling in his gaze. "Takeshi..."

He was lifted onto the kitchen table, the guitarist's head bowing between his parted thighs, his mouth closing hot and wet around Akira's cock.

Akira groaned, lost in the feeling. This was the first time Kei had ever taken his cock into his mouth. Always he'd been the one going down on Kei, the other man hardly seeming to admit that Akira wasn't another woman until now.

He didn't really mind. He liked the illusion of being a woman, or he would never have started dressing as Hana in the first place. It was the same with Juro to some degree, both of them enjoying the ability to cross-dress in their guises as Hana and Maki, which left Kei to be the guy in the group.

It drove their fans wild. The women because they loved seeing beautiful men portraying beautiful women. The men because they either wanted to be those beautiful women on stage, or because they liked the thought of being in a band, being able to create the beautiful illusion.

For someone who hadn't sucked cock very much, Kei was doing a wonderful job, his lips wrapped firmly around Akira's hardness, the suction just right, tongue sweeping along sensitive skin, drawing appreciative whimpers of delight from him.

Akira fell back onto his elbows, head back, lips parted in a soft moan as Kei's strong hands gripped

his thighs and held him still. The tips of his fingers were rough, hardened from hours of guitar playing, the hold on him possessive.

He felt his balls pull closer to his body, orgasm threatening, sweeping him upward in a soaring taste of golden light.

With a final savoring sweep of his tongue, Kei stopped what he was doing to Akira, the flavor of the younger man's precum like honey in his mouth. He kissed Akira, a hand moving from the drummer's firm thigh to the equally firm cock. Kei stroked his lover's erection slowly, silken skin wrapped in the grip of his fist.

Needing lips, hungry mouths, the slither and slide of tongues penetrating their mouths, being penetrated.

The kiss ended, their gazes locked, pain, passion, sorrow, desire. Raw emotion bleeding from their hearts, their souls laid bare in their eyes.

Still gasping for breath, Akira was picked up and carried into the cramped bedroom the four of them had shared.

Four.

Now there were only two.

Broken and lost in the pain, desperate to be whole once again, Kei lay Akira down on the bed.

Soft, sweet, Kita's perfume filled their senses, brought memories to the surface.

Her laugh. Soft and gentle.

Her smile. Sunshine on a rainy day.

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Her touch. Salvation in a kiss.

Warm, loving, she'd wrapped them in her beauty, made them whole, given them purpose, believed in their dreams and turned them into reality.

Akira sobbed, Kei silencing the sound with his mouth.

Love lost. Love adrift.

Found in the glitter of a tear.

The memory of a woman taken from them by brutal fate.

Or more accurately, by a man's hatred, a single bullet shattering their dreams, the life of the woman they loved forever. A second bullet ruining what little hope might have remained when it shattered Juro's right arm.

"Kita...oh...K...Kita...." Akira gasped.

Kei's fingers touched his lips, urging him to silence.

"K...Kita..."

"Shh....shhh.." Takeshi murmured, kissing the trembling mouth, pulling the slender drummer close, holding the shivering body, letting Akira voice the pain they both felt.

"She's gone...she...."

"Yeah," Kei's voice broke on the sound. "But she isn't gone, Akira. She was taken from us, and I intend to make that bastard pay for what he did, even if I have to hunt him down and kill him myself."

"Kei, w...what can you do? The...the police will find him. They will..."

"I hope so, Aki," he murmured, lips touching the

tear-chilled face. He kept silent, didn't mention that there were few leads in the case, few people who'd seen the tall man who'd taken their Kita from them, who'd hurt Juro. Who'd probably ended their career before it really got started.

He hurt inside and he needed something to wash away the sadness, even if it was just for a few brief moments.

"I want you, Aki," he murmured, using one of the pet names the drummer went by among them. Aki, koi, Hana-chan. Endearments. Love expressed in gentle ways between them.

Akira's arms tightened around him, the drummer kissing him, seeking the solace he too wanted in the arms of a lover, a friend.

Takeshi kissed him, one hand reaching for the bedside table, the bottle of lubricant they kept in the drawer. But one of Akira's hands had gotten there ahead of him, and he felt the cool surface of the bottle pressed into his palm as Akira wrapped a long leg around his hip. The tip of the younger man's cock brushing against his own erection was like a jolt of electrical discharge through him.

Why he started to shake, Takeshi didn't know, but he didn't want to analyze the emotions burning through him too closely anymore either. Maybe it was just the act of making love with Akira minus Kita—her death so new and raw that he couldn't breathe when he thought about it—or maybe there was something more to it than her loss. He didn't know. Didn't care.

All he knew and cared about was that he wanted Akira, and that Akira wanted him. It was enough. It had to be, because that was all they had now. One another, and Juro, when he could come back home again. And he had to be all right. The two of them unable to consider losing Juro to death, as they'd already lost Kita.

Akira's hands on his, helping to get the bottle open, a small hand held out for the slick stuff. He squeezed some into the waiting palm and groaned when Akira slicked it over his erection.

"Fuck me, Kei."

The cap of the bottle clicked shut, Kei gripping Aki's hips and lifting the smaller man to get access. This was something they'd done before, and Takeshi slipped a finger into Akira, the slender body thrashing against him.

"Oh, God, please, Kei, just fuck me, I can't stand it."

Kei slipped the finger in deeper, Akira's hands fisting the sheets, body shuddering. Ready and wanting, midnight-blue hair spread across the pillow, face pale, with a faint trace of color blooming across his cheeks.

Takeshi's breath caught, Akira's beauty slamming into his heart, blazing hot through him. He gripped his own cock and pressed against Akira's tight heat, slipped in and groaned, Akira whimpering out his own pleasure at the contact. Flesh merging with flesh, need meeting need, they started to move together.

Akira watched his lover's face, the pleasure suffusing it, the love burning in his eyes and he felt tears filling his own gaze, blurring his vision. He loved Takeshi, his Kei, so very much that words could never express what he felt.

He touched his lover's cheek, straining to reach until Kei leaned forward a little more, pressing Akira's legs tighter to his body, making the smaller man's breathing more labored, rushing him toward climax.

Akira's face flushed, his eyes closed. Kei touched his lover's cheek, moved just enough that he could kiss the parted lips, feel Aki's moans of pleasure singing in his own vocal cords. So close. Already he was so close to the edge, both of them ready to fall over the brink and go tumbling down into pleasure's harmony.

Love dance to the music of their drumming hearts, shuddering breaths, whispered words, hands gripping, fingernails biting lightly across skin, taste of pain, pure lust. A passion-driven inferno roaring in their ears as it consumed the sorrow, burned away grief in a burst of music played on the stage of love.

They came back to themselves gasping for breath, arms and legs entwined, leaden sadness returning to settle in their hearts.

But a bright spot remained.

They still had one another, and that was worth something in a world composed of sadness and broken dreams.

## CHAPTER TWO

**Tokyo hospital**  
**Three in the afternoon**  
**The same day**

Akira walked into the room, a bouquet of bright yellow dwarf sunflowers in his hands. He paused, eyes filling with tears as he saw Juro.

Ashen, face drawn into lines of pain and sorrow that slumber had not erased, the man lay in the bed limp as a broken doll, his right arm in some sort of metal framework, with horrible screws and things sticking deep into his flesh.

Akira pressed a hand to his mouth, fighting the sob of grief that tried to break from him when he saw Juro's right arm. It looked so awful, the damage enough to draw a moan of horror from him.

He started to turn, to run from the room, but Takeshi was there, his strong arms enveloping him, holding tight, easing the pain, soft words whispered into his ear, "Don't worry. He'll be all right."

"I know, but...his arm...God, his arm."

"Shhh.... No guarantees, but the doctors are optimistic." His arms tightened around the drummer. "At least he still has an arm. That's something."

It had taken hours of surgery, careful

reconstruction of bone shattered to pieces by the bullet and when they'd left early that morning, sometime around three, the doctors had been guarded in their responses. But daylight and a few hours of recovery changed that to optimism, a trace of hope that Juro would not only keep his arm, but perhaps some day be able to stand on a stage and play again.

More than they'd hoped for last night, when there were no guarantees he'd even survive the massive loss of blood.

"He's going to be okay. You'll see," Takeshi murmured into the smaller man's ear, his hands rubbing up and down Akira's back slowly, soothing, trying to calm the distraught younger man.

Always so sensitive, Akira, his Hana. He pressed his face into the royal blue of the smaller man's hair, breathing in the scent. Kita's perfume, lingering in Akira's hair from her pillow. They'd slept in the bed he and Kita had shared in their cramped bedroom, neither of them had wanted to be alone.

Hana, Akira had always needed the emotional support of everyone around him. It was just how he'd always been, and they'd long ago accepted he acted much more like a woman than a man. He even went out in public when they weren't performing dressed in women's clothing more often than not.

Takeshi was used to it now, but he hadn't always been so accepting, and it had caused friction between the band members for a long time. The past. A wound Kita had healed in his own heart had given him the

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ability to appreciate Akira fully, to finally come to terms with how he felt about the other two men.

It wasn't just that they were his friends. It wasn't just that they'd formed a band together, had a chance at a future as musicians. She'd made him accept that the bond was stronger than that.

What he had wasn't just a band. Friends having casual sex.

He loved them both, and they loved him.

Kita was dead, but he still had Juro and Akira, his Maki and Hana-chan, and he could draw the strength to go on from their love.

He just hoped it was enough to combat the hard core of darkness that had formed in his soul, the need to see her killer pay for what he'd done like an evil seed, waiting for a darker sort of light to make it grow.

Akira pressed his face to Takeshi's chest, the beat of his lover's heart steady, reassuring.

Their dream was cracked, damaged, but maybe, just maybe they still had a chance at what they'd worked so hard to achieve. They just had to go on, continue with their lives, difficult as the present might be; they had to hold out some hope for their future.

It was what Kita would have wanted.

*You know it is,* a voice in his head whispered, the memory of Kita's smile clear in his mind's eye, the warm sensation of her lips brushing his cheek comforting, even if it was just a waking dream.

The taller man's embrace tightened, Takeshi needing to hold and comfort Akira as much as the drummer needed to be held. "Love you."

Lips pressed to his hair, the touch just as soothing as the imaginary lips that had touched him. "I love you too," he told the guitarist.

"Maybe we should just leave the flowers and go. The nurse said he might not wake up because of the painkillers they are giving him.

"I hope you aren't standing there planning my funeral," a voice said weakly from the bed.

"No," Takeshi replied. "We...needed to see you." His arms fell away from Akira, the drummer feeling the loss of Takeshi's strength, the warm glow of love fading as the distance widened between them.

*I'm here with you, Hana-chan. I'll always be with you. I promise,* the gentle voice in his head murmured. He wanted to smile, he wanted to believe the voice, but he knew it was just his imagination.

Akira wiped away his tears and went to place the flowers on the table beside the bed before he gave Juro a tear-washed kiss. "We were so afraid," he whispered, still crying through a hesitant smile.

"Poor Hana, you cry so much," Juro said as he touched Akira's face, glanced at the flowers and wracked his brain for what dwarf sunflowers meant. *I wish I could remember. Something about...devotion, or...* but he couldn't remember, the painkillers in his system numbing his brain almost as much as they'd dulled the pain in his arm.

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The guitarist had followed Akira to Juro's bed. When the small drummer stepped aside, he bent down, shocking Juro with a heated kiss unlike any the older man had ever given him. The passion behind it, the need evinced told Juro a story of grief that his own injured state couldn't fully explain.

He closed his eyes, remembering Kita's scream, the agony of the sound. His own pain had drawn a curtain of black oblivion across his mind so quickly that he hadn't registered what such a scream might mean.

Until now.

No words passed between the three men. None were needed. Kei's lips told the bassist everything.

Kita was dead, their lives shattered as badly as his arm.

Crying, he threw his good arm around Takeshi and wept, Akira crawling onto the bed to lay his head on Juro's chest, the three men seeking comfort in each other in a world that had gone dark with the extinguishing of a single point of light.

**The next day**  
**An apartment in Tokyo**  
**Eight in the morning**

Akira couldn't cry anymore. Eyes dry, red and sore from the crying he'd done for two days, his cheeks felt as if they were burned, the salt having irritated his skin. His face hurt from where the man had stuck him—the bruise across his cheek black and blue, lower lip still slightly puffy. He was emotionally numb, held in a grip of lethargy, his ability to feel deadened.

He sat down at the kitchen table, listening to Takeshi speaking on the phone with the police. He could hear the anger in his lover's voice mingled with biting frustration and pain.

"But it's been almost two days now! How can you not have any leads? Yes, of course, I'll hold."

There was a photo album on the table. Beside it sat an empty glass and a depleted bottle of imported liquor. Akira stared at the label, trying to puzzle out the words. It was in English, but try as he might he could make no sense of the letters printed there. It was too hard, too much more effort than he had attention span.

Tired. He was so tired.

Takeshi was trying to drown the pain in booze, his usual response to hurt, heartache, sadness. He

touched the glass and wondered when Takeshi had left the bed they'd been sharing. He hadn't even awakened, had no idea how long the guitarist had been awake.

Most of the night, if the bottle was any indication.

Akira touched the photo album lying in the middle of the table, running his trembling fingers over the cool pink vinyl.

Kita's scrapbook. Pictures, clippings and playbills from their performances at small clubs, bits about them from music magazines. A photocopy of their contract with *Poisoned Dragon*. Without opening it he knew what was inside, had helped her put it together.

The past was inside there. Good and bad.

He knew there was a picture of him in his older red and black Goth Lolita gown sitting on a concrete wall outside one of the clubs they'd played, hands hiding his face as he cried because he'd dropped one of his drumsticks mid-song.

She'd taken it herself, before she'd become their handler, back when she'd been just a fan with a dream.

Back when Takeshi had refused the idea of a handler, wanting to do it all himself. Control junkie, unable to let go, to accept he couldn't do it all, couldn't do anything but get them an occasional job.

His little mistake had cost them a repeat performance at that club.

He remembered how angry Takeshi had been with him, how he'd refused to even look at him for more than a week. To speak to him, except through Juro.

He'd never made that kind of a mistake again, couldn't take failing the man he loved. Couldn't handle the silence, the coldness or the fact that Takeshi had put an ad in a music magazine saying they were looking for a new drummer. It had hurt.

But nothing in there was as bad as the present.

He flipped the cover back and started at the first picture.

The three of them, the first promotional photograph they'd ever done. Him in the same tattered lace Gothic Lolita gown that Kita had been wearing the night she'd died.

To his left was Juro in his thigh-high patent leather boots, but the micro-shorts were a deep burgundy velvet and he'd been wearing a corset of black satin tightly laced over his chest, the edge of one pink nipple barely visible. Maki being a naughty 'girl' for the camera. His persona, just as too young and innocent Hana was Akira's chosen role, while Takeshi played the cool badass—except for certain songs, when he'd play to the audience and show a softer side.

Takeshi was in black leather as always, his hair blood-red, chrome chains wound around his waist and hips, dark sunglasses hiding the fact his eyes had been bloodshot from getting drunk the night before.

Akira touched the photo, remembering why Takeshi had gotten drunk.

That girl. The one who'd told him to get a *real* job and stop screwing around with childish dreams. She'd wanted him to leave the band, walk away from

him, from Juro. From their music, and the fragile relationship they were developing.

And Takeshi, in love with her, wanting her, had wanted his dream and their friendship more.

*No More Sun.*

His gaze lifted to Takeshi, seated in their tiny living room, face haunted by their loss, his fist wrapped around the phone, eyes closed, whole body stiff with tension.

He wanted to go over and kiss the hurt away. To make things right. Wanted to see Takeshi smile.

But nothing he could do would ever make things right for Takeshi, for his wonderful, too handsome Kei.

If that Saya leaving had made him write 'No More Sun', what would this do? How would Takeshi express this pain? This terrible, unimaginable tragedy?

He touched the page again. The past, before Kita had joined them. He turned the pages until he found the most recent picture of them, but this time Kita was there with them. Warm brown eyes, wide happy smile, love burning in her gaze.

Love for *her* boys. *Her* band.

She'd been the missing piece of their lives. They'd needed a manager, but Takeshi had maintained he could handle them. Managers came to speak with them, promising jobs, contracts, but Takeshi had sent them away.

Until Kita.

She'd come along with her sweet smile and her

driving passion for *them*. Not just her passion for their music—something that had been lacking in a few other potential handlers—but her adoration of them. The men who made up Mercykill were her obsession. She'd laid out her plans for them, pouring out her heart, showing them what they were doing right, what they were doing wrong.

And Takeshi had actually listened to her as she'd shown them their performances through the eyes of a fangirl.

She'd adored them, wanted them to succeed, become the next big-name band. She also had connections to *Poisoned Dragon*, a friend who was receptive, had an interest in them, but said they were too raw for a deal.

By the end of the evening they'd come to an agreement, taken her on as their handler, giving over their management to her.

Two days later they'd moved her into their apartment, become lovers and her adoration had grown into love. She'd loved them, their music, the life they had together, and they'd learned to love her just as passionately. Like a puzzle piece, she'd snapped into place, a perfect fit.

In the six months they'd been under her management, they'd gone from a band that got the occasional job in tiny clubs hardly bigger than an average apartment with a small, loyal following to having a recording contract with a well-known independent studio. They'd made the cover of a small music magazine, and they'd been the opening act for

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a much larger band.

All because Kita loved them and wanted them to succeed.

All because Kita had kept her promise to them, proven she could make something of Mercykill; transform them into something other than a small-time group fit only to play rathole clubs.

Akira closed his eyes. The last six months had gone by so quickly, the four of them happy. Sure, there were disagreements. But they'd been minor. Nothing like the screaming battles that had occurred when the three men had first moved in together.

And the only screaming he could remember was Kita yelling at Juro for almost setting the kitchen on fire, and the time Kita had tripped and spilled hot chocolate on Takeshi's leg.

He sighed. So many good memories, so few bad ones...until the night of their concert, when they should have been happiest. He touched the album, flipped back a few pages looking for a picture of them at Anime Expo. They'd gone to see his mother, the manga ka, the four of them dressed as some of the characters from her most popular shojo manga. It had taken a lot of convincing to get Kei to agree, but in the end they'd had a great time, and Kita, ever the clever and aggressive businesswoman, had made new contacts that had gotten them a few nights at a popular Shinjuku club.

A loose paper fluttered out. He grabbed it before it could slip into a sticky smear of booze on the table, wondering what Kita had tucked in the book but

never gotten time to make a page for. Probably a playbill, or another of her souvenirs.

Takeshi's handwriting.

Without looking he knew what it was, what would be written there.

Takeshi's pain poured out of his soul.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and looked at the words written in Takeshi's too precise handwriting, a good indication that the man had been very very drunk when he'd written it. Like 'No More Sun', which they had framed and hanging in their living room. He stared at the title. 'Brittle Tears'.

He started to read the song, a hard knot forming in his chest.

*Memories fill my mind  
Beauty's smile  
Laughter sweet  
A cherry blossom  
In Spring  
Glow of sunshine love*

*Shattered, broken  
Lost to me  
Gone from me  
Taken by death's  
Chill embrace  
And all I can do is cry  
Bitter, brittle tears*

The last word had run slightly. Akira touched a tiny blot on the paper, recognizing a tear that had

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dried. So like the original of 'No More Sun', but the pain was deeper. He could almost feel Takeshi's sorrow, as if the page itself had been steeped in misery, a bitter perfume that suffused the paper the way Kita's perfume filled the whole apartment.

*I never meant to fail you  
I never thought I'd see you  
Hold you as you died  
Tears fall on desolation  
Rain in the desert  
Where my heart once beat*

*Lost, alone  
Broken and burned to ash*

*What happens to a soul  
Left in the dark?  
What happens to a love  
Burned to ashes  
By another's careless act  
A man's rage, his hate*

It had been rage driving the big man in his attack on Kita. Hate must have been involved in his killing of her, his wounding of Juro.

But why? That was a question to which none of them had an answer.

Like the man's identity. No one knew who he was. Why he'd been there. Why he'd killed Kita.

It was all a mystery.

And there were no answers.

None.

*Careless words spoken  
Can't be taken back  
Broken dreams  
Can't be mended  
Hearts stilled by death  
Can't be given life  
No matter how many  
Bitter tears fall*

Akira remembered Takeshi and Kita had argued—voices tense, whispering, Kei's voice harsh, Kita's determined—backstage right before the concert. He didn't know what the heated words had been about, and his questioning glance had met with a shrug from Juro. It couldn't have been anything too serious, because when they'd taken the stage, Kita had been smiling. Whatever the argument was about had died with her, except for the splinter of guilt Kei now carried in his heart because of it.

He looked at the words on the paper. *Hearts stilled by death...*

His and Kita's, wrapped together in a poet's soul-deep misery?

Or was there more to it?

He thought about the way the pair had stood so close, the way Kita's hand had rested so lightly on Kei's forearm, the way he'd stood so still, as if frozen by shock.

Akira's face crumpled into tears as understanding took root.

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She'd told Kei she was pregnant. It had to be the answer.

And Takeshi had said not one word to him or to Juro about it, hiding the full scope of the pain from the two least able to take more. Akira because he was so emotional to start with, Juro because he had nearly been lost to them too, nearly died of blood loss before the paramedics had arrived.

*God...oh why, God, why? Why steal something so precious from us? What sin have we committed? What crime are we been guilty of? We love. Loved! Isn't that your message to us? To love and be loved?*

He wiped the burning tears from his eyes, barely able to see, eyes and head aching from too much grief.

*Lost, alone  
Bitter, brittle tears  
Falling (into darkness)  
Falling (into darkness)  
A heart full of desolation*

"Yes, I'm still holding. How much longer?" Takeshi said into the phone.

Akira looked at the man on the couch, seeing someone he loved, someone who'd poured all the pain in his heart out onto a sheet of paper while he'd probably been too drunk to walk or speak coherently.

But the handwritten words, the flowing kanji that filled the paper had an almost mechanically crisp appearance except where the ink had spread out in tiny starry patterns to mark where a tear had fallen.

*Gone from me  
And all I can do is cry  
Bitter, brittle tears*

*Broken and burned to ash  
A heart lost to darkness*

*And all I can do is cry  
Cry (the night won't end)  
Cry (the pain won't stop)  
Cry (the nightmare doesn't end)*

“Yes, I’m here, Detective. I want to know what you’ve found out about the man who killed her.” There was a harshness in Takeshi’s velvet voice, a demand for justice underlying the words.

*Lost, alone  
Falling (forever in darkness)*

*Forever shedding  
Brittle, bitter tears*

Takeshi’s voice from the living room, harsh, angry. “We told you what he looked like! Why do we have to come down and give you our statements again?”

Akira looked into the living room to see his lover standing, his whole body rigid with the tension of fury, the knuckles on his clenched hands standing out white as he held himself still. He glanced back at the paper in his hands.

“You...lost them? You’re kidding, right? This is

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some sick joke. Tell me you're not serious and you still have the reports we gave."

Akira closed his eyes as the nightmare spun on. *Will there never be an end to it?*

He looked at the paper again, seeing the carefully drawn lines of the staff, the neatly inked notes.

The melody of sadness. Akira read the notes, hearing the sound of Takeshi's guitar in his mind. Goosebumps raised on his skin, tears blurring his vision.

'No More Sun' had been their best song...until now.

*Bitter Tears.* Beauty from tragedy. The memory of a woman they loved become a sweet refrain, an homage to love played in liquid sound.

"Yes, we'll come down. No, I'm not sure when we'll get there. We have to take a bus. Yes, today."

Hands shaking, Akira put the paper back inside the album, and found a picture of Kita smiling up at him. She was in a bright red T-shirt that proclaimed: 'Personal Property of Mercykill.' In smaller lettering it said, 'Fondle at your own risk.'

He lay his head down on the table and started to sob. A hand came to rest gently on his shoulder and he turned into Takeshi's embrace, strong arms enfolding him in love.

"They lost our reports. We have to go to the station and give them again."

Akira nodded. "I heard," he murmured, his hand still on the photo album. "I miss her," he said, his voice breaking.

"Yeah, so do I," Takeshi agreed as he leaned down to place a gentle kiss on the younger man's cheek, face turning to breathe in his scent. Kita's perfume was clinging to him and he realized it was more than just the lingering smell from the bed they'd shared with her.

Akira was wearing her perfume, his way of remembering her, of keeping her alive.

"Come on," Takeshi said as he lifted Akira into his arms and carried the slender man toward the bathroom. "Let's take a shower and get this over with."

They reached the bathroom, and Takeshi put the distraught Akira down. He stood there, looking into the younger man's red-rimmed eyes, put a hand to the pale cheek in a caress meant to reassure.

All it did was start a new flow of tears and he leaned down to kiss them away, knowing what Aki needed. What they both needed right now.

Love. Closeness. The bond between them growing stronger, merging into unbreakable ties that would weather any storm.

He kissed Akira. "My Hana," he murmured against the soft lips that tried to devour him in a flood of desperation fueled lust, the drummer's slim arms twining around his neck, clinging, both legs coming up to wrap as tightly around Takeshi's hips. Both of them wrapped in the sweet scent of Kita's perfume, wrapped in the memory of a ghost

Groin to groin, cocks hard, straining at their jeans,

he lifted Akira, rested his lover's butt on the counter. Hands tangled in his hair, tongues sparring, his greedy mouth locked with Akira's, their panting breath mingling as Takeshi tore at Akira's shirt, snapping off a button in his haste.

Akira broke the kiss. "Hey, I like this shirt, don't ruin it."

"Sorry," Takeshi murmured, bending down to retrieve the button and drop it in a porcelain box on the countertop.

Kita's button box. There were a few from her blouses inside, one from a shirt of Kei's that she hadn't had a chance to put back on, another to the bassist's favorite sweater.

Akira dropped a hand to reach between them, his fingers struggling with the button of Takeshi's too-tight jeans.

"Not working," Takeshi gasped as he let Akira go and pulled the drummer's shirt off over his head.

In a matter of a few racing heartbeats, both men were naked, Akira still on the counter, legs once more wrapped around his beloved Kei's hips, their tongues thrusting and penetrating, cocks rubbing flat bellies in a frenzy of passion.

Takeshi pulled away. Eyes hot with passion, he just stood there, panting.

Akira's whimper of loss at Takeshi's withdrawal made him want to grab the smaller man and fuck him blind, the drummer reaching out for him, molten chocolate gaze full of desire's heat.

It was all happening fast. Too fast. Like last time

they'd made love, their emotions were out of control.

He shook his head, seeking a shred of sanity amid the rampaging lust ripping at him. "We're going too fast," he panted. "Want to slow down."

Akira nodded, the ghost of a smile edging through the drying tears. "Okay." He held his arms out to the other man, and Takeshi stepped into the drummer's embrace.

For the longest time he just stood there, looking into the smaller man's eyes, then he lowered his head and kissed his sweet Hana. His Akira. One of the two men he loved. "I love you, Akira."

"I know," was the soft reply as their lips met again, the kiss gentle, his tongue probing lightly at Akira's lips, which parted in admittance.

They kissed until neither of them could breathe, then Takeshi knelt down in front of the counter and took Akira's cock into his mouth, sucking gently, listening to his soft cry of pleasure. Slender fingers caressed through his hair, so like Kita, his Hana. His Aki.

He refused to hurt, refused to relive the nightmare. Aki was here. Alive. And he loved him so much. He put an arm around the drummer's waist, pulled him closer to the edge of the counter, Akira moaning in pleasure, the gentle fragrance of Kita's perfume enfolding them in the embrace of better memories.

Her touch. Her kiss.

Love warm and bright in her eyes.

She'd loved them all. Called them her boys.

And they were.

## MERCYKILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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In his heart, Takeshi knew there would never be another woman in their lives.

She'd been too precious.

Precious and fragile. A blossom of finest crystal.

Shattered by one bullet. Taken from them forever by a man who they didn't even know.

Akira's cries were harsher, his breathing labored, the fingers in Takeshi's hair tight and he could tell Akira was getting close to climax.

He could also tell Akira was crying.

He stopped what he was doing, stood up and kissed Akira's wet cheeks, kissed the tears from his eyes, his lips.

"Hana, I love you."

Slim arms wound around his neck, legs wrapped around his hips. "Please, make the pain go away. Please."

He pressed his face into Akira's hair. "I wish I could, Aki. I wish I could go back, change what happened..." His voice broke. "But I can't." He drew in the warm scent, the perfume of love that lay over the drummer's own faint musk, the bitter smell of grief.

Hands stroked through his hair, Akira trying to comfort him as he was desperately trying to give comfort to the drummer, and failing in that, too.

"Love me, Kei."

"Okay," he replied, giving the younger man a loving smile, a kiss before he groped around in the drawer under the counter trying to find the bottle of lubricant they kept there.

He found the bottle and slicked his cock, Akira's strong-fingered hands helping, caressing along the length of his erection, touching, teasing. When he was ready, Akira didn't have to be told what to do. The chocolate-brown eyes showed he was eagerly awaiting what they were going to do, how Takeshi would make him feel. Akira tipped his pelvis, arching his spine downward toward the top of the cabinet as Takeshi gripped his hips and impaled him on his erection, the drummer groaning in pleasure.

Neither of the, moved, just enjoying the contact, the merging of flesh at the point of pleasure. Hana's fingers gripping Kei's hair, the drummer's blue hair tumbled partly over his face like a curtain, leaving Takeshi with a view of trembling lips, one closed eye, a dark smudge of bruising.

He kissed the man's cheek, his soft lips, feeling the swollen lump that was the result of a backhand to Akira's face. That man, Kita's killer, had done this to his Hana. His own injuries he could deal with, he'd been fighting for Kita's life, fighting to protect her. But the things the man had done to Kita, Akira and Juro...he felt impotent rage, frustrated hate.

Akira whimpered, arms tightening almost as if the drummer could sense what he was thinking about. Perhaps in a way he could, his body tense, anger visible in the eyes staring at him from the mirror over the sink. He looked like hell, face bruised, lips swollen, the bottom one split deeply enough to leave a scar, or so the doctor had told him. A reminder of that night he'd carry the rest of his life. Like Juro's

arm. Scars that would never heal.

“Love me, please, Kei.”

“I do love you. I love you so much,” he said, brushing the long hair away from Akira’s face and kissing him.

Akira smiled, a faint, sad smile. “I know.”

Takeshi kissed him, hips nudging his cock into the drummer, drawing a soft moan from him that hummed into the guitarist’s mouth, his own quiet moan forming a melody for their dance of love.

Hands caressed broad shoulders, fingers sliding through soft hair, touched a cheek as Takeshi’s thrusts drove them to the heights of passion, Akira’s legs spread wide, one over the taller man’s shoulder, the other around his waist, both men gasping, moaning with the power of desire, of love and lust that was consuming them.

Akira’s velvet cries only fueled Takeshi to try harder, his own groans of ecstasy doing the same to the drummer he was fucking, the pair rocking to the most primal rhythm of humanity. Takeshi held Akira’s cock in his hand and stroked, grip firm, the motions of his hand fast, demanding surrender.

Mouth open in a long cry, Akira came, his creamy semen spattering his own belly and Takeshi’s hand. Takeshi gave another thrust, his own groan of release loud and low, almost a growl.

When he was able to focus, he saw Akira’s happy-sad smile, the glimmer of tears. “Are you all right?” he asked as he lifted Akira’s leg off his shoulder, careful to keep the smaller man from slipping off the

counter.

"Yes, Kei. I'm more than all right," the drummer said, his gaze lowered. He leaned forward and kissed the older man. "You are what makes any of this bearable."

"Beautiful Hana," he murmured and kissed Akira, glad that even in the midst of this hell they were living in, he had an angel to hold.

Akira watched as Takeshi licked his hand clean, then bent down to give Akira's belly the same treatment. He laughed softly, his lover's tongue tickling, freed for a moment of the deep sorrow that had gripped his soul since Kita's death.

Takeshi stood up and gripped his hips, lifting him off the counter. "Come on, let's take a shower and get this trip to the police station in Kudanshita over with, I want to go visit Juro this afternoon."

Akira managed a bit more enthusiastic smile at the mention of visiting Juro. "Hai! Let's go see him!"

He gave Akira a gentle hug. "We should go and eat, too. Maybe before we get to the station? What do you want?"

"Let's eat after we've given our statements. I—" Akira lowered his head. "I think going there will upset me, and I don't want to get sick."

"Okay. We'll go after."

Takeshi stepped into the shower and turned on the water to get it set, Akira stepping in behind him, a small but strong hand caressing his side, bringing a flicker of pain. "Your ribs look really bad," he remarked.

"I'll live."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Liar."

"I'm okay, Akira. He kicked me, that's all."

"Okay, but if this doesn't go away soon I'm going to make you see a doctor. That bruise is very ugly, with so much red in it."

"Red?" Takeshi turned his head to get a better look and frowned. "When we go to the hospital, I'll have someone look at it. You're right." The real reason he was agreeing to have a doctor look at it was the unhappy frown on Akira's face. His lover was already too sad and upset, he didn't need to worry that something might be wrong with him too. He really should have had a doctor examine it the night it happened, but he'd been so worried about Juro and hadn't wanted Akira to be alone while they took him wherever for tests.

The water was ready and he turned the spray on, wincing as the hot water hit his side, a quiet, "*Ouch*," pulled from between his gritted teeth. It *did* hurt.

Akira frowned. "You definitely need a doctor to look at that," he said firmly.

"Okay, no arguments," Takeshi agreed.

"Good, because you won't get to squirm out of it later," the drummer stated firmly.

Takeshi picked up the bottle of bath gel they shared. Toasted vanilla. Kita had bought it for them to use because, as she'd so often stated, *it doesn't stink up the bathroom like that stuff you like, Takeshi.*

MICHAEL BARNETTE

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At the memory he smiled, his tears lost in the spray  
of the shower.

## CHAPTER THREE

**The same day**  
**Kudanshita Police Station**  
**A few minutes until ten in the morning**

Because the investigation into Kita's death was well beyond the scope of their local *koban*—police box officers who dealt with minor local issues in a small area of the city—the pair of men had to go to one of the larger police stations. Since the crime had occurred at the concert, that meant going to the big station in the area of the concert venue. The ride across town had taken well over an hour, but they'd finally arrived at the police station.

An austere stone-faced structure, it had weathered typhoons and man-made storms as well, both political and those of popular opinion.

The pair of musicians went inside, got directions to Detective Konda's office and went up the elevator to the floor he was on.

They'd hardly spoken during the entire trip, Takeshi lost in thought, Akira too aware of the frustrated anger that was eating at his lover like acid bit into steel.

On the elevator he dared to slip his hand into Takeshi's, felt the guitar-hardened fingers close

around his hand. Strong, reassuring.

Tears tried to come, he fought them away, trying to be a man as was expected.

But he always felt like a child next to Takeshi's strength.

The taller man's arm slipped around him, gave a gentle squeeze. Reassurance. Comfort. Two things he needed.

"You worry too much."

"I do, I know it, but..." Akira shivered, feeling cold.

"No buts. Okay?"

"Okay," he agreed, lying to make Takeshi happy. He couldn't help worrying. Too much had happened. Kita. Juro. The man who'd killed her, hurt all of them.

He'd never forget the man's face. Not if he lived to be a hundred years old, he wouldn't forget.

There was just something about the lost statements that bothered him.

Takeshi stepped away from Akira, let his hand go as the elevator door opened on a large room full of police officers. The two visual kei musicians stepped out of the elevator, aware of the eyes on them, taking in their appearance, the hair that still carried the bright colors that were part of their chosen profession.

Takeshi could see it in some of those eyes, the contempt, ill-concealed disgust, dismissal, as if somehow what they did made them less worth the time of a police officer, less worthy of help.

The contempt was mutual, at least as far as Takeshi was concerned. Anyone that looked at a person and

made such a snap judgment wasn't worthy of his attention. He'd gotten more than enough of that growing up in his father's home to last a lifetime.

But this time he had to at least make some effort at pretending respect he didn't feel. They needed the help of the police to find Kita's murderer, to bring the man to the justice he deserved. Pissing off the police was not going to get what they wanted.

And it just might get them tossed in jail for a few nights.

Swallowing his pride, he led Akira into the room, trying to find a face he remembered from the night Kita was murdered. But there wasn't one person he could honestly say he recognized. He'd been too upset, probably in shock, and now he was too hung-over to clearly remember anyone.

But the events of that night, his fight with the man that had killed Kita, the man's cold, arrogant gaze—those things he'd never forget.

An officer approached them. "You're here to see Detective Konda?"

"Yes," Takeshi replied, remembering to bow his head respectfully, even though he hardly felt the need. But it was expected, though he kept it to the bare minimum, the greeting of equals, not a inferior person meeting someone of higher station.

"I'm Officer Matoke. Is there anything I can get for you? Coffee or tea, perhaps?"

"No, thank you," Takeshi replied.

Matoke looked at Akira, who just shook his head and wouldn't meet the older man's gaze.

Officer Matoke smiled gently. "I'm so sorry about what happened to Takei Kita. She must have meant a great deal to the three of you."

Takeshi nodded, and found Akira's hand in his, gripping tightly as the drummer tried not to cry.

"It's been..." Takeshi swallowed. "Hard on us."

"And what of Maki-san?" the officer asked, not only calling Juro by his stage name, but adding an honorific, showing respect.

"They don't know if he'll ever be able to play again," Takeshi replied.

The officer frowned. "I'll pray for his recovery." The officer bowed. "Detectives Konda and Saigo are waiting to speak with you. Please follow me."

"Thank you," Takeshi replied, following the officer, his hand still in Akira's because he knew the younger man needed the contact. Sometimes that aspect of their Hana bothered him, but after three years together, he was used to it. And if it kept Akira from melting into tears, he would do it if for no other reason than for the sake of love. He was strong, he could stand up under the disapproving stares of strangers. Even when they were police.

Normally Akira wasn't quite so bad, but the events of the past few days had taken a harsh toll on the drummer and made his dependence on other people even more pronounced.

Officer Matoke led them down a hall, opened a door. "Mister Inoue, please go in there, Detective Saigo will come in to help you with your statement."

Akira looked up at Takeshi. "I want to stay with

him.”

The officer shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I’m sure you remember that we like to take statements with the victims separated, that way we don’t have you influencing one another. It makes it easier for us to find details in the different statements and use those to help us establish the facts.”

Akira nodded.

“It’s okay, Aki,” Takeshi said, giving a reassuring squeeze to his lover’s hand before he let go.

With one last, sad and uneasy look, Akira went into the room and the door was closed behind him.

Takeshi was taken into another room farther down the hallway, Officer Matoke asking if he needed anything before the door was closed and he was left to wait.

He hadn’t had to wait long, but now, in retrospect, he wished they’d never agreed to come. They’d been at the station for hours and he was starting to worry about what they were doing to Akira in view of the fact he’d been answering questions over and over for several hours now. He was getting tired, and if he was tired, Akira had to be exhausted.

“I’ve told you, I’ve never seen the man before. I don’t know who he was.”

“Yes, you have said that, you’re right. You told us you didn’t know him, even though he was backstage talking to your handler.” The detective ran a hand over his chin as if he were thinking something over, then he said, “You’re right. Let’s talk about something

else.”

Konda took a paper from his pocket and unfolded it. His dark eyes scanned the page, and he nodded as if reading a note he'd made about the investigation. After a moment of study he placed the paper on the table in front of Takeshi, reached into his coat pocket and set a pen beside it.

The rocker looked down at the paper, wondering what it might be. At the top of the paper it said, 'Confession to a Crime' and as he glanced along the page he realized it was a prewritten statement of how and why he'd killed Takei Kita, their handler.

“What the fuck is this?” Takeshi asked, his voice an outraged snarl as he lifted his gaze up to Konda.

“Watch your mouth,” the detective grated out. “This is a serious charge against you. It's better if you just sign the confession and get it over with.”

“You're crazy!” the guitarist snapped, shoving the paper away. “There is no way I'd sign something like that. It's a lie! I did not kill her.”

“People saw you arguing. Several people backstage told us that they'd seen you grab her, that you were angry.”

“It wasn't something you kill anyone over. Not something I'd have killed her for!”

“No? Care to tell me what the argument was about?”

The guitarist stared at the paper, numbed by the thought that the police might actually accuse him of her murder. “I loved Kita. I'd never hurt her.”

“That's what they all say,” Konda retorted. “So tell

me, what was the fight about? Money? Other women?"

"It wasn't a fight."

"No? From witnesses' reports, it sure looked like it."

He didn't want to tell anyone about this. Didn't want anyone else to know. Not when it would get back to Akira and Juro. And neither of them needed to know how much they'd lost. How much more had been taken from them.

"I'm waiting."

"It's private. I don't want to discuss it."

"Fine. I can put you in jail and you can consider what your defense for her murder will be."

"You can't arrest me, I was a victim of that guy, too. Are you trying to say I busted up my own lip and did this," he touched the dark bruise on his cheek, "to myself?"

"No one saw this man you claim killed her but the three of you. We're thinking of arresting all three of you for conspiracy to commit murder, and her actual murder."

Takeshi's blood went cold. This couldn't be happening. How could the police think they would have killed Kita? It made no sense.

Nothing made sense, including Kita's death.

Konda shoved the paper in front of him, put the pen down by his hand. "Make it easier on yourself and sign it."

"I didn't kill her, so you can forget that."

Konda took a few steps away from the rocker,

turned to regard him. "Tell me about Inoue Akira."

Takeshi frowned. "What about him?"

"He cries a lot. Maybe he doesn't like what you did, feels guilty."

Takeshi sighed, annoyed by the man's dogged insistence that they had murdered Kita.

"Nothing to say about that?"

"Why don't you check out his school records? He's been like that his whole life. Better yet, ask his family. His sister was at the concert."

"We plan on it."

Konda was quiet for a moment, standing there just watching Takeshi. "Come on, Suzuki, tell me the truth. What sort of relationship do you have with Mister Inoue?"

Takeshi shrugged. "We're friends."

Konda gave him a wry smile. "Friends, is it? Looked a bit more like lovers, the way you held his hand."

The guitarist shrugged again, realizing that he might as well tell the full truth, at least about his relationship with Akira...and Juro too, if he had to bring the other man into the discussion.

"Admit it, your relationship is more than friendship."

"Does it matter?"

"It seems there are a lot of possible motives for you to murder Takei Kita."

"To you, maybe. But you don't seem to be able to understand that we would never have hurt her, much less killed her."

"She'd been crying, that was very apparent from the state of her makeup, and her eyes were bloodshot, also consistent with tears."

"I told you that man was screaming at her."

"But you didn't hear what he said?"

"We were onstage for the first part of it. I told you what he said when we finally got backstage."

"Tell me again."

Takeshi met the detectives' gaze and repeated everything he'd heard the man say to Kita, and everything she'd said in reply, word for word.

Konda listened to the whole thing without interruption. "You must have a good memory to be able to recall that argument in such detail."

Takeshi didn't make any comment; he waited to see what the man would say next.

"Or maybe you rehearsed it with your friends. Worked out what you'd say about the argument in advance."

"I've got a perfect memory. Photographic."

"Really? You must have had good grades in school then, right?"

"Yeah, so what?" Takeshi was getting tired of talking to Konda. Tired of being forced to restate his innocence.

Konda pushed the paper in front of him again. "Look at it."

Takeshi did.

After a couple of minutes, Konda pulled the paper away and looked at it.

"Tell me what the first paragraph says."

Takeshi started to open his mouth. Stopped, suspicious of the detective's motive for having him say what was on the page out loud.

It only took a moment for him to figure out what was on the man's mind.

Getting a confession no matter what it took.

"I think I'd rather not say anything that's on that paper," he said, and noted a flicker of anger in the detective's eyes when his ploy failed.

"Well, I guess your memory isn't as good as you say it is."

The guitarist could see the man was trying to get him angry enough to do something stupid. While Takeshi could be accused of being many things—including being somewhat pig-headed—stupidity had never been one of those things.

He met Konda's gaze squarely. "Being a musician is not synonymous with being an idiot, no matter what you might think, Detective. And I won't be tricked into saying that I had anything to do with Kita's murder when, in fact, we've told you who did it."

"The man in the suit. You're going to keep insisting that there was someone else, then?"

"It's the truth, so why wouldn't I?"

Konda leaned down until his face was close to the rocker's face. "What if I tell you we have a signed confession from Inoue Akira that you killed her? What if I tell you I also have a signed statement from Hideki Juro that says you killed her and shot him?"

Takeshi laughed in the man's face, the sound

harsh. "I'd tell you that you were a liar. Neither of them would ever sign anything saying I'd killed Kita, because I didn't. And neither did they."

"You're so sure of them? People will do a lot of things to save their own skins from death, you know." Konda pulled up a chair, sat down and regarded the rocker with open contempt. "You thought you were being so clever, having your friend hit you, hitting him back, making it look like you'd been attacked by this tall man in the suit."

Takeshi glared at him, angry that the cop didn't believe them, furious that they were being accused of killing the woman they had loved. "And you think I would have shot Juro? Come on. Do you think anything would make us, make me want to throw our career away? We'd just reached the big time. What would I gain by killing her?"

"You tell me? Did you have an offer from a more prestigious handler? Was it a better recording deal than she could get for you? More money?"

"You *are* crazy," Takeshi growled. "I'd have sooner killed myself than her."

Konda raised a dark eyebrow. "Really? Is that why you had a gun? Was it a suicide pact? Something else? Elaborate. Tell me why should I believe you?"

"We gave you our statements the night she was killed," Takeshi reminded him. "Oh, that's right, you've lost them." He leaned forward, toward the detective. "Let me spell it out for you. We chose her to be our handler because it worked for all of us. She was able to get deals for us, jobs, she had contacts in

the business we didn't have. And Kita made us what we are, helped us change a few details about our look, our sound, our stage personas. None of our hard work would have meant shit without her and the guidance she provided."

"But she didn't have the big time contacts you really need to be successful, did she? Isn't that why you killed her?"

Takeshi's eyes narrowed, his voice gone hard, icy. "I did not kill her!"

"Back to that again, are we?"

"It's the only answer you'll get from me, because it's the truth. Now why don't you stop wasting your time and go find the man who killed her?"

"Because I feel I have that man seated right here in front of me. I don't need to look for a conveniently unknown and unidentified suspect."

Takeshi's hands tensed into fists, the guitarist shaking with the fury that raged inside him. He wanted to knock the man's teeth down his throat, and realized that was exactly what Konda wanted. A display of uncontrolled passion, anger strong enough to make him lash out. He was tense, ready to strike out.

But he wasn't going to make that sort of a mistake, either.

He'd long ago learned to hold his anger under the tight rein of his willpower. All it had taken was one slip, a carelessly delivered backhand that had sent Akira to the floor with a bloody mouth and tears flooding his eyes.

## MERCYKILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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What was that, almost four years ago now? Akira had still been a senior in high school, and he'd been trying to go to college, frustrated by his father's insistence on him getting a business degree, become a salaryman just like dad.

Not his road. Not his choice.

Sitting there, thinking about the past, he realized even then he'd loved Akira, but he hadn't expressed it, couldn't get past the idea that he'd felt anything that tender for another man.

Not until Kita had come along and led him to a place where it was okay to express something other than anger, to feel something beyond the drive to succeed as the lead vocalist and guitarist for a band. His band. *Mercykill*.

It had been Kita who'd given him the capacity to love and be loved.

And he wasn't going to dirty her memory by acting like the old Takeshi. The man he'd been before he'd become her friend, her lover. Her Kei.

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

The paper was shoved closer. "Much easier on yourself if you just sign it now," Konda told him softly. "We know it was you."

Takeshi looked up at the man. "She was the center of my world. I didn't kill her," he stated softly, voice calm, steady. "And I won't sign that paper. Not ever."

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours had passed. Long agonizing hours of the cruel

man asking him the same questions over and over. Demanding he say that they'd killed Kita.

It made no sense. None.

*Isn't the pain bad enough? Aren't we suffering enough?  
God, why are they doing this to me?*

He sobbed and covered his face with his hands.

"Admit your guilt and the pain will stop," the police detective said, laying a gentle hand on the weeping rocker's shoulder. "You know what you did, and all this hurt is a result."

Akira shoved the paper away, tears coursing down his face. "None of us would ever have hurt Kita. Never," he insisted for what had to have been the hundredth—or was it the millionth?—time. "We loved her. She was like a sister to me."

The man stood over the frail-looking rocker, his expression going suddenly stern. It reminded Akira of a teacher he'd once had. The man had been so mean to him, finding fault in everything he did. How he acted. How he always dyed his hair in pretty shades of blue as a statement of who he was, that he wasn't like anyone else. "Admit your guilt."

"But..." Akira shook his head. "We didn't kill her!"

"We have witnesses that saw the three of you."

"No!" Akira wailed and broke into bitter sobs.

"Sign it!"

"No, I won't! I won't!" he moaned. He was shivering, cold inside and out. Veins filled with ice, his belly on fire with the need to empty his bladder.

He was so tired. All he wanted to do was sleep.

A hand came down on the table with a loud bang

that made Akira jump in the hard seat and he came close to peeing himself, the sound too like a gunshot.

"I want to go to the bathroom," he said quietly, still crying.

"Sign the paper."

"Do you want me to go on the floor?"

"Confess your guilt and you can use the toilet."

Akira covered his face with his hands. He wouldn't look at the written lie. Wouldn't see it. Maybe if he just refused to see, refused to acknowledge the paper or the detective, the nightmare would be over. The man would let him leave. Or maybe Takeshi would come and take him home. Wrap his strong arms around him, hold him close and tell him this was all some terrible mistake. Tell him that they were free to go.

"Sign it!" It was a roar, angry, demanding, full of hate and contempt.

His head snapped up, eyes wide with terror, pupils dilating.

Akira's hand was grabbed with bruising force, the pen shoved into it, the man's tight grip forcing his smaller hand to the page.

Something broke inside Akira's mind, in his heart. He didn't want this awful man touching him. Stronger than he looked from hours spent playing drums, Akira pulled his hand free, threw the pen across the room and got out of the chair, running for the door, the freedom it represented.

But it was locked and he couldn't get out. Couldn't run from the terrible man, the detective who was

accusing him of something so horrible.

Face twisted in grief, the pain of the lies, the accusations he struggled with the door. Fear made him panic, made him claw fruitlessly at the door like an animal trapped in a cage. He pulled at the doorknob, pounded on the door itself, memories of being beaten, kicked, trapped in a corner, scared and crying coming back to him from his school days.

Of teachers who just turned aside. Looked the other way.

“Please let me out, please. Please...”

It was no use. He sank to the floor, crying, heart pounding, shaking like a frail sapling in a hurricane of tumultuous emotion, a storm of hate, scorn and baseless accusations. He could never hurt anyone. Never.

He'd never even defended himself from schoolyard bullies.

And he had no defense against the bully terrorizing him here in this very room.

That's what he was. Saigo the Bully.

A hand closed on his upper arm, hauled him roughly to his feet and yanked him back over to the chair. He was shoved into it so hard his teeth clicked and he bit the edge of his tongue, mouth filling with blood, the violence of the actions stealing Akira's ability to speak. He wanted to crawl into a dark hole, wanted to hide. Wanted to die.

But more than anything, he wanted Takeshi. Kei. His strong, fearless lover to come and save him from the crazy police detective.

The man had to be crazy if he thought Akira could kill anyone. Most days he couldn't even stand the idea of eating meat because he knew an animal had died for it, and he liked animals.

The pen was slammed back down on the table, the paper shoved toward him. "Fine, we'll do this the hard way, then," the detective hissed in his ear. "Do you know what will happen to someone like you in prison?"

His shoulders were shaking, the young drummer crying so hard he couldn't make a sound, couldn't even answer. Didn't want to answer, or know what the detective was implying.

The man was...evil. Evil to accuse them of something so terrible. Evil to expect him to say he'd had anything to do with Kita's death, or to imply that it was over money. None of them gave a shit about money. That had never been the thing motivating their lives. What they wanted was the rush of pleasure they all derived from being in front of an audience, of playing their best and hearing the adoration of their fans.

It was love. Love of music. Love of doing their best, making people happy with their songs.

Money was...nothing.

"Okay. Okay," Detective Saigo picked up the paper, shoved it into his pocket and pulled out another. This one was neatly folded and he opened it out, laid it on the table in front of Akira.

Through his tears he made out enough of the document to realize it was a paper that accused

Takeshi of Kita's murder. A paper written as if he'd made such a statement himself. Blamed Takeshi for killing her.

He shoved the paper off the table and bolted for the door of the interrogation room a second time.

He didn't get far.

A hand closed on his upper arm, pulled him almost off his feet and shoved him back into the chair for a second time. "Sit down!" he was told, the man's voice harsh.

"W...want...to...go...home..." Akira panted, his breathing ragged, the room starting to spin in his vision. He felt light-headed, dizzy.

He felt like he had the night Kita died.

The first paper was slapped down onto the table.

"Choose. You confess and go down with him, or you say he is guilty and you might get a lesser sentence."

Too much, too much.

Akira's mind went blank, the room closing in, going dim in his vision. Kita's gore-spattered face swam up out of the choking darkness, her lips stained red with blood as she whispered, *I'll always love you...all of you.*

Akira slipped bonelessly out of the chair and lay, limp and unmoving on the cold floor.

The blood faded away, Kita's smile warm and loving. *Hana-chan, don't be afraid. I won't let anyone hurt you. Remember, I promised to always be with you.*

And she *was* there, her arms around him, holding him and protecting him from the pain like she always

had, Kita's love wrapping around him, warm and glowing, soothing as sunlight on a cold winter day.

Vaguely he was aware of the detective shaking him, slapping his face to make him wake up. Wrapped in the memories of his dead friend's embrace, he didn't feel anything.

"Shit," he heard the man say somewhere far, far away. "He's emotionally unstable. That could work in our favor."

Kita kissed him on the cheek that the man had slapped and the slight sting went away. *I love my boys. Never forget that.*

Akira smiled.

That was how Akira still was when they finally let Takeshi in to see him. Takeshi knelt down beside his lover, taking one of the younger man's hands in his. It was icy cold, like the hand of a corpse, and Akira was pale. An unhealthy sort of tinge turning his face grey, a bright mark on his cheek showing where he'd been slapped, but there was a strange smile on his face, as if he had slipped into a pleasant dream. The odd color of his lover's face worried him, though. Takeshi could see the pain beneath the almost beatific smile. He knew Akira was hurting, and from more than just Kita's death.

The rocker glared at both detectives. "What did you do to him, you bastards?" he snarled.

"Speak to either of us like that again and you'll find yourself in jail!" Konda snapped back angrily. "You're a suspect, and so is he!"

Takeshi's eyes narrowed in fury, but he chose to ignore them, touching Akira's face, fingertips feeling the heat of the reddened cheek. He'd been hit hard, the slap already showing signs that it would leave a bruise. "Akira, talk to me."

"What the hell is wrong with him?"

"He's fainted. He did it the night Kita died. He's been too upset over her death—which neither of us had any part of—to eat or sleep much. He's probably weak from hunger and exhaustion." He glared at the other detective. "And whatever you've been saying to him drove him over the edge."

"So he blacked out. Sounds like he might be a suspect, then. Man blacks out, kills the woman."

"I didn't say he blacked out, I said he passed out, as in fainted. And if you two think Akira killed her, you're even crazier than I thought. He wouldn't hurt anyone. He grew up with a Buddhist father and a Christian mother. He's totally nonviolent. He got beat up in school because the bullies knew he wouldn't fight back."

"It's only going to get worse for you until one or both of you confess," Konda's voice was harsh. "And if he's so nonviolent, that leaves you, doesn't it?"

"And I told you who killed her."

"So you say. But again," Konda shrugged, "no other witnesses. So confess and it's over, he goes home and you go to prison."

"No. And if you're going to hold us here, you'd better get us something to eat. Of course, with his weak stomach he's only going to vomit all over your

interrogation room if you do, but, hey, you want us here."

"You stay right there," Konda snapped as he and Detective Saigo left the room.

Takeshi turned his attention back to Akira. He didn't care what they did so long as it involved leaving him alone with Akira.

"Hana-chan, baby, talk to me. Please."

The younger man blinked, his beautiful eyes focusing. He smiled, looking a bit dazed. "Takeshi, I had an awful dream."

"Shh..." he murmured. "Are you all right?" He brushed a few strands of hair from Akira's eyes.

"I don't know. I..." Akira realized where they were, that it hadn't been some sort of an awful dream. His stomach hurt. Back aching. It was awful reality, the two of them in the police station, being accused of Kita's murder. "I want to leave. Please... God, please..."

He put his arms around Akira and held him close. "Shhh. Baby. Shh... We're going to leave. Just calm down and then we'll go."

Akira shook his head. "They won't let us go. They want us to...but we didn't...we didn't..."

"Shh...shhhh.." Takeshi murmured, his hands rubbing along Akira's back, trying to calm him down, though he knew nothing short of them getting out of there was going to get the drummer to stop being so afraid.

He was scared too, but refused to show it, or let it rule him. Someone had to keep their cool, manage to

stay in control, and that someone sure as hell wasn't going to be Akira. Which left him to handle everything.

Just like he'd done before Kita came into their lives.

But he'd never done a good job of it, making things worse as often as he'd made them better. She'd showed him his mistakes very clearly.

He found himself wondering what she'd have done in this situation, but he couldn't think clearly, he was too drained by everything to do a real analysis of the situation. They both needed food and rest.

Something warm brushed his hand, the touch fleeting. He shook his head, tired and imagining things, his head aching dully from too many hours without sleep, or too much to drink the night before. He rubbed his eyes and wondered how long you could go without sleeping before the hallucinations started. Maybe he'd already reached that point, because he thought he heard someone speaking to him, as if from far away. He tried to hear, to make out what was being said.

*Get Hana out of here...*

He blinked and came back to the here and now with a snap, everything going sharply clear in his vision as if he'd awakened from a dream.

Akira's hand was on his cheek, the drummer's gaze on his face, his expression puzzled. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Just tired. What about you?"

"I want out of here."

"Me too."

The door swung open and the detectives came in,

both of them glaring at the men on the floor. "The two of you aren't going anywhere until the one who killed Takei Kita admits what he did."

Akira's eyes widened, and a wordless scream of denial burst out of him. It tore at Takeshi's heart as Akira started to sob, "No. No. No," repeating the denial over and over. Then he said, "Go home. Go home," reduced to sounding like a child, the stress too much for the drummer.

It was too much for Takeshi to take, hearing his love so close to suffering a nervous collapse.

*Get Hana out of here...*

The whispered words came back to him from his waking dream and Takeshi decided he would do just that. He glared up at the detectives, daring them to try and make him stay. "Okay, Akira. That's exactly what we're going to do." He stood and pulled the drummer to his feet, steadying the younger man when he swayed.

"We're going to leave. He needs to eat, we're tired and you're both out of your minds if you think we killed Kita."

Konda put out a hand to stop him, and Takeshi just stared at the appendage as if it were a roach crawling toward him, his contempt evident in the twisting sneer on his lips. Trademark Kei. As the guitarist of a visual kei band called *Mercykill*, he'd practiced the look because it went with a song they performed. "You going to charge me, then do it. Otherwise, get out of my way."

The pair of detectives backed off, the two

policemen exchanging unhappy looks. All Takeshi cared about was they were letting him get Akira out of there.

He didn't know what in hell was going on. But he was damned sure going to find out. One way or another.

But that would have to wait until he'd taken care of Akira. They both needed food and rest. And after that...he was going to find his own answers.

"Can you stand?" he asked Akira.

The drummer tried, but his legs were like rubber and he needed to use the toilet so bad his back hurt.

Leveling another frigid stare on Konda and Saigo, Takeshi scooped the smaller man up, hiding the pain that jabbed across his side, teeth gritted against making any outcry. He carried Akira to the door, kicking it open because he didn't have a free hand, and the pair of bastard cops made no move to help him.

"You've damaged police property. Now I can arrest you!" Konda stated as he started for the rocker.

Kei spun on the ball of his foot, eyes full of icy fury. "Go on, try it! See what happens when I tell people how long you've kept us here, trying to make us sign confessions to a murder we did not commit!"

The eyes of every police officer in the room were on the red-haired man as he faced off against the pair of detectives. Anger, outrage poured off of him, visible in the tense lines of his body, the angle of the rocker's head.

"What did he say?" an officer seated at a desk

## MERCYKILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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asked the female officer standing beside him.

"It sounded like he said Konda was trying to get him to confess to killing their handler."

The man at the desk frowned. "That doesn't make any sense. Wasn't she shot?" the male officer asked.

The woman nodded. "They dug a bullet out of a wall, heard it was a .45 caliber. They think it's the one that shattered the bassist's arm."

"None of them had a gun," another officer remarked.

"Were they tested for powder residue?" another female officer asked.

"No, they were all beat up, why test victims of a crime for that?"

Kei glared defiance at Konda. "Still want to arrest me?"

The detective glared back. "Get out of here. Don't leave Tokyo. We may have more questions."

"Oh, don't worry," Kei snarled, "I'm not leaving Tokyo. Not a chance."

*Something is going on here. Something smells really rotten and I want answers, you bastards. And I'm going to get them even if I have to scream about a cover-up to the media or go to the Police Commissioner to get help.*

*No one fucks with us like this.*

*No one.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

**The same day**

**Cab ride to a noodle bar in Kudanshita**

**A few minutes after six in the evening**

The first thing the pair of rockers had done after escaping the police station— and that was exactly how both men felt about it, as if they'd escaped rather than being released— was find a toilet and get some relief.

The guitarist was livid with rage. It was bad enough they'd treated him so badly, but what they'd done to Akira was unconscionable and amounted to nothing less than torture. As soon as he had a chance he planned to file a complaint with their superiors, but he wasn't going to do that right now. Akira would likely have to file a complaint also, and the younger man's emotional condition was just too delicate for any more shocks or upsets today, the drummer positively white as someone close to death.

He suspected a good portion of the younger man's condition had to do with the pain he'd been in, forced to hold his bladder so long he was in agony.

There would definitely need to be a complaint filed about their treatment at the hands of the two detectives.

Treatment that Takeshi was still at a loss to understand. *None of the other officers considered us to be anything but victims. Why were Konda and Saigo so intent on having us confess to a crime perpetrated against us? It makes no sense.*

The cab driver pulled over and let them off at a noodle bar down the street from the train station.

Normally they would have walked, cabs being very costly, but Akira wasn't in any condition to walk that far, and Takeshi certainly couldn't carry him the nine blocks to the station. Not even if his side hadn't started to feel as if he'd been hit by a speeding truck after carrying Akira to the elevator and across the ground floor lobby of the police department.

He helped Akira out of the cab and paid the driver from the cash in his pocket. Fortunately the food ticket machine outside the noodle bar took credit cards or they would have had to go in search of an ATM.

That was something else weighing on his mind. Money.

Juro's hospital stay was going to be expensive. Even with their health insurance with *Poisoned Dragon* paying the biggest chunk of it, they'd still have to pay off the rest themselves. Then there were all the bills to pay: rent for the apartment, food. They had a reasonable bank balance, but if they weren't able to honor their contractual obligations to *Poisoned Dragon*, they would have no income and might even lose the hard-won contract entirely.

There was just too much to worry about, and

Takeshi felt the pressure acutely. He was the only one able to even make the effort at holding it all together, and he already knew in his heart that he wasn't going to manage it.

Not without help.

And there wasn't even anyone he could ask.

They made their selections from the ticket vending machine outside and went into the restaurant. He had no appetite. Still, he had to put on a good face and cajole Akira into eating something. The drummer needed food, they both did and the rest of their troubles would have to wait until morning. He was just too tired to think, his head pounding after the night of drinking and the hours of Konda's endless questions and demands.

They went in, Takeshi taking Akira to one of the small booths along the wall before he went to the counter to turn in their tickets and put in their order. He got a bowl of udon noodles for himself and some shrimp ramen for Akira, explaining to the man why the ticket was for a child's portion. Akira couldn't finish an adult-sized bowl. The man who took his tickets just nodded and told him the order would take a couple of minutes. He gave Takeshi a number that would be called when it was ready, and the guitarist nodded and went to sit with Akira, not wanting to leave the drummer alone longer than necessary.

"We won't get back to Tokyo in time to visit Juro," Akira remarked, voice a ragged whisper.

Takeshi reached across the table and took the other man's hand, changed his mind and got up to sit by

Akira, slipping an arm around him. "We'll call him and talk if he's awake, okay?"

Akira nodded.

"I don't think we should mention what happened to us today," Takeshi said.

"Me either," Akira agreed.

"If he asks, blame me, say I was asleep from getting drunk last night."

"Okay."

Takeshi gave the younger man a hug. "It will be okay, baby. You'll see," he said, hoping he sounded appropriately reassuring, because he wasn't sure he believed a word he'd just said.

They sat in companionable silence, both of them lost in their own thoughts for a few moments. When their number was called, Takeshi went and got their food.

Akira stared at the noodles.

"Eat, Hana-chan. Please?"

The blue-haired rocker nodded and picked up his chopsticks.

They ate in silence, Akira too tired to manage any conversation, Takeshi lost in his own gloomy thoughts.

Akira got half the bowlful of noodles down, then stopped when the food started to try and come back up. It always happened when he was upset. He'd been sick the night before the concert, too nervous to keep his dinner inside him where it belonged.

He kept thinking of Detective Saigo's cruelty. He

hadn't even been allowed to use the toilet. *What kind of way was that to treat someone?*

A hand touched his wrist and he looked up to find Takeshi's dark eyes, so full of concern and tenderness, regarding him.

"Not feeling well?"

He shook his head, afraid if he tried to speak, he'd throw up. A glance told him that Takeshi had actually managed to eat, most of the food gone from his lover's larger bowl.

"Ready to go?"

He nodded.

Takeshi got out of the booth and waited for him, offering an arm for him to lean on as they headed for the door. He felt strange. As if he were floating along. Lost in a strange dream where nothing seemed real.

Tired. That was the problem. He was very tired. He remembered being this way once before. The first time his mother had taken him to an anime and manga convention with her. He'd cosplayed two of her characters that weekend and stayed up for two days straight. He'd been too excited to sleep.

Now he was just sad and miserable, full of an ache that didn't end, afraid that he'd feel like this the rest of his life. Empty. Nothing but a hollow place inside his chest, his happiness stolen forever.

He glanced up at Takeshi.

No, he still had some joy. Takeshi loved him. That was something.

He moved closer to Takeshi, slid his arm around the older man's waist. The arm he'd been holding

moved to slide around his waist, pulling him close.

"I love you," Takeshi murmured.

He could feel eyes on them, but he didn't care. What mattered was Takeshi holding him, showing his love. Putting up with his childish shit.

He knew he should try harder, make the effort to be a man.

Knew it. Couldn't do it. No matter how hard he tried, and that upset him too, made him start to hate who he was, what he was.

He missed Kita so much. The *real* girl that had treated him just like another girl, like a sister and friend, the two of them happy to share the men in their lives.

A shudder passed through him, a moan of anguish slipped from his parted lips as fresh tears began to flow.

*How could they think Takeshi would kill her? How could they think I would hurt her? I love her. Takeshi loves her. Oh, God...God, why?*

But God didn't answer him, and the hurt overflowed with the tears.

"Shh..." Takeshi stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, bending down to murmur soothingly into his ear, a hand brushing the tears away. "Come on, baby, don't cry. I know it hurts, please don't cry. It's just a little farther to the station, just a short wait until we'll be on the train home."

He nodded.

"I love you. You know that, right?" Takeshi asked. There was hurt in his lover's eyes too. Worry.

"Kei," he used the man's stage name, whispered it softly as he touched his lover's cheek, let his hand fall. "I know. I love you too."

"Can you make it? Do you want to just get a hotel room and not go home tonight?"

He thought about it. Go back or stay in a hotel? Be away from the place that carried her ghost around every corner, in the very air they breathed for a night, or return to the apartment, knowing she would never be there with them again?

"I miss her," he moaned.

"I know, baby," Takeshi whispered, his own voice choked by pain and unshed tears. Akira could hear the hurt in his lover's voice as clearly as he felt his own tears coursing down his cheeks. Takeshi was better able to hide his emotions, keeping his cool, betraying nothing to most people.

Until now. The weight of Kita's death was too much for Takeshi, and the man wasn't able to hide his feelings so readily from strangers, much less from Akira, who knew every nuance of his voice, every line of his face as well as he knew his own.

He took his lover's hand. "Let's go home. I...want to be with her, even if she's only a memory."

"You're sure?" Takeshi's gaze searching his face, so very worried.

It warmed the chill inside Akira's chest, the cold desolation of loss retreating slightly under the evidence of the other man's love. Real love that had started as friendship and grown into something stronger, enduring, the man finally returning what

Akira had felt for better than a year.

All because of Kita, the woman who'd set his heart free and taught him to soar on the winds of love.

His lip quivered, eyes brimming with tears.

Dead. Their Kita taken from them.

It was so awful. They didn't even know why the man was there, who he was, or why he'd done such an awful thing.

Strong arms pulled him close, a hand stroking through his hair. "Shhh...baby. Please don't cry."

Takeshi's voice, normally so mellow—a voice like sunlit honey—but now it had a raw, broken glass sound and he knew without looking that the guitarist was crying too.

"I want to go home," he said. "Take me home, Kei."

"Okay. We'll go home. You're sure that's what you want?"

He nodded, the motion a firm affirmation of his intention, his mouth set in a determined line against more tears, but his surroundings wobbled, seen through the tears that filled them despite his resolve not to cry anymore.

He wiped his eyes.

"Okay, Hana-chan, whatever you want." Takeshi's voice was soothing and gentle, the whisper of a lover. The arms around him pulled Akira close in a quick embrace before one fell away so they could walk. "We'd better go or we'll miss the next train."

Akira forced a brighter demeanor, pretending happiness he didn't feel, but couldn't quite manage a

real smile. "Okay, Kei-kun. Let's go home!"

They walked to the train station, Takeshi's arm around him, the taller man matching his pace to Akira's shorter stride.

They paid the fee and reached the platform just as the bullet train arrived, the pair hurrying into one of the crowded cars. They couldn't find any seats so Takeshi grabbed one of the overhead bars, his arm winding around Akira, who couldn't quite reach the bar comfortably.

Akira sighed and wrapped his arms around his lover, closing his eyes and wishing he had a place to sit so he could just slip into the grey twilight where Kita waited for him, her smile never changing, her laughter bright as sunlight. So long as he kept her in his heart she would never die. Not completely.

"Please excuse me," a man's voice said.

Akira opened his eyes to find a guy about Juro's age standing near. His hair had been dyed a deep shade of green, and his eyes were tinted the same color by contacts. Soft leather pants and motorcycle boots were offset by a shirt of lacy black silk, a heavy motorcycle jacket and enough earrings to set off a metal detector. A ring of silver glinted from his lower lip.

"You're Kei-san and Hana-san from Mercykill, aren't you?"

"That's right," Kei replied.

"My girlfriend and I were at the concert. We'd be honored if you'd take our seats over there," he said pointing to where a very attractive young woman in a

black miniskirt and fishnets was seated. She waved at them, the kohl around her eyes making the blue contacts she wore seem to glow in the lights of the train.

"We wouldn't want to put you out of your seats," Takeshi replied.

"Oh, you wouldn't be putting us out. We're fans, really, the honor would be ours."

His lover glanced down at him and Akira nodded.

"Sure, we appreciate it."

The two rockers followed the man back to where the girl waited. "This is my girlfriend Suzue, and I'm Eiji."

Akira took the woman's seat with a grateful smile, Takeshi sitting beside him and pulling him close.

"We were at the concert, you guys were great," Suzue said enthusiastically.

"Thank you," Akira murmured. He didn't feel like talking, not even to fans. He was just too drained by the events of the day to take any pleasure in speaking to anyone, and his memories of the concert were forever tainted by Kita's death.

That night should have been one of their best memories, one they should have been able to look back at with joy and pride, not one that would haunt their dreams with the blackest misery for the rest of their lives. Life was so unfair. Fate was the biggest bitch in creation.

"We're trying to start our own band, but," the man shrugged, "well, you know it's hard."

"Yes, it is," he heard Takeshi agree.

Akira rested his head on Kei's chest and closed his eyes.

"We were both sorry to hear what happened to Takei-san. It's an awful tragedy."

"We miss her," he heard Takeshi say.

"And Maki-san, is he going to be all right? The news reports said he might lose his arm..."

"We don't know, but we're hopeful."

He could tell Kei was being polite, but he could also tell from the guitarist's replies that he didn't want to talk about any of this with strangers, even if they were fans.

"When is your first album coming out?"

"We don't know. We were supposed to start recording next week, but we can't until Maki's arm has recovered."

"Oh, how awful for you. You don't think *Poisoned Dragon* will cancel your contract, do you?" the woman asked.

"Right now we haven't even thought about that. We're more concerned about Maki's recovery and helping the police find Takei-san's killer."

"That's so awful. Right there at the concert, too," the woman again. She seemed to have a morbid interest in the tragedy that had befallen them. Akira shivered and wondered how many of their other fans were following the terrible story of their handler's murder, and the downfall of their band.

"Do they have any leads on who did it?" Her again, pushing for more details.

"No."

"Suzue, you've bothered them enough. Can't you see they're tired? Come on, let's leave them alone," Eiji was telling his girlfriend.

Akira didn't want to listen anymore. He wanted to forget, slip into dreams where Kita waited for him and the world was a happy place.

A delicate hand beckoned to Akira. *Hana-chan, come on!* a voice laughed inside his head, the conversation around him fading away.

He followed the woman into the brilliant golden glow that was as warm as summer sunshine, the sweet scent of cherry blossoms and Kita's perfume wrapping around him like a lover's embrace.

The train ride home and the short walk back to their apartment went by in a blur, the drummer half-dozing during the ride from Kudanshita, Akira too dulled by weariness to even assist his lover as he was undressed, tucked into bed like a sleepy child.

Strong arms embraced him, lips touching his hair, hands caressing him slowly, gently, not to arouse but to comfort, to show love and caring.

Wrapped in Takeshi's love, encircled by the familiar comfort of Kita's perfume, he slipped into a grey haze where a woman's happy smile and gentle laughter carried him into slumber.

**Later that day**  
**An apartment in Tokyo**  
**Midnight**

Takeshi moaned, the sensations coming from his groin were sweet agony.

A mouth was wrapped around his cock, the suction exquisite, a small hand caressing his balls, smoothly manicured nails raking the inside of his thigh.

“Gods...” he groaned, hips lifting off the mattress as he started to thrust into the wonderful wetness, the heat as a tongue slid across the head of his cock, the tip slipping across the slit, probing.

He reached for Akira and met soft flesh in the darkness, the curve of a breast, his hand following the shape to a firm nipple.

“Kita, baby, I love you.”

*I love you too, Kei. Always.*

Shaking, sweating, Takeshi sat bolt upright in the darkness, his erection straining for release, the delicate sweetness of Kita’s perfume filling his nostrils.

Beside him Akira lay asleep, the pale curve of his cheek, the dark line of his lashes visible in the dimness.

*A dream. Just a dream.*

## MERVILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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Takeshi lay down, his hand closing around his erection. Stroking himself slowly, he turned on his side and looked at his lover's face. So beautiful, Akira looked like a woman even without makeup. With it, he went from a beauty to heartbreakingly stunning.

Memories formed the stuff of dreams, and sometimes what you most wanted came to the surface. He wanted Kita, so the dream had been about the two of them making love.

*But it had felt so very real.*

He tightened his grip around his cock, stroking harder and faster, trying to get the release he needed.

Out on the street below their apartment he could hear the muted rumble of the traffic that never stopped, the faint noise of a television in a nearby apartment. Probably the elderly couple next to them, who seemed never to sleep.

What he couldn't hear was the soft breathing of two people he missed. Juro, who would come home, come back into their lives as if he'd never been gone.

He closed his eyes against the tears.

Kita would never murmur softly in her sleep, never wake him up with her wonderful mouth or her clever hands. Never kiss him or sleep at his side.

He swallowed, but the knot of pain stayed in his chest, in his throat. Tears slid from the corners of his eyes.

*Gods, I miss her so much...*

Akira made a soft sound and sat up, blinking sleepily. "Kei?" he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah, baby." He released himself, wiped away the

tears and touched Akira's cheek, seeing the confusion and pain mirrored in his lover's dark eyes.

"I thought Kita was..." He shook his head and lay back down, pressing close to his lover, the hardness of a cock pressed to Takeshi's hip, a shudder passing through the drummer's slender body.

"So did I, Aki baby, so did I," he admitted, turning onto his side and taking the younger man's erection in his fist.

Akira moaned softly and pressed his face to Kei's shoulder, his smaller hand curling around the guitarist's erection.

They both missed her, and the only solace they had was with each other.

Takeshi stroked the hard shaft in his hand gently, going slow, knowing Akira would take his cue from him, the drummer matching his languid pace.

He reached up with his free hand, raised Akira's face so he could kiss him gently, the younger man responding, the returned kiss desperate and needed.

His Hana-chan, always hungry for any kiss, any touch that could ease the pain.

But he wasn't any better, really. He wanted easement of the hurt just as much, both of them living with memories that reminded them of the raw wound of loss: their Kita gone.

Akira moaned softly as they kissed, his slim hips bucking into Takeshi's grip, showing what he wanted, a faster pace. "Shhh....let's take our time," he murmured, their lips still touching. He locked his mouth over Akira's in another impassioned kiss,

remembering another pair of lips, another greedy mouth and he moaned, the sound full of loss.

Akira released his cock and both hands pushed at Takeshi's chest. Knowing what Akira wanted, he rolled onto his back and looked up at his beautiful young lover.

"You wait here," he was told softly, and sighed when Akira slipped out of their bed. His pale body bathed in the dim light coming in from the closed blinds looked like ivory.

Takeshi watched his lover open the closet, pull something out, the rustle of satin loud in the quiet, the ivory glow of the slender body obscured by dark fabric as Akira became Hana.

He sat up, smiled. "You don't have to do that for me anymore, Aki."

"I know," the drummer replied softly as he quickly pinned up his hair. He turned around and even in the darkness Takeshi could see the bittersweetness of the smile as his male lover transformed himself into Hana for him. "I want to do it for you. To make you happy."

Akira went silent for a moment, his voice when he finally spoke was a soft whisper, full of hurt. "Unless...it doesn't make you happy anymore..."

Takeshi got out of bed and pulled his lover into his embrace. "My beautiful Hana," he said, leaning down to kiss his 'girl' gently. "Of course you make me happy," he reassured, feeling the firm body beneath the dark satin gown. From the feel it was the midnight-blue one that Aki had stopped using for

their stage shows because he thought it made him look too fat. He'd never told Aki, but that was his favorite, because the color made his pale skin glow and the off the shoulder bodice actually enhanced the feminine illusion.

Thinking about it he came to a decision. There wasn't anything keeping him from telling Akira the truth, his foolish pride, all his idiotic denials about sleeping with other men were at an end. Permanently. Takeshi found himself wondering if it had ever really mattered, his fear that his image would be damaged, that it might ruin their career. The way the girls had acted at the concert...well... they wouldn't be the first band to play yaoi kiss and grope games for their fans.

Right now what mattered was proving to Akira that he'd come to terms with their relationship, that it wasn't just the illusion he loved, it was Akira himself. He'd hoped their last two times together had ended any doubts, but seeing Akira standing there in his guise as Hana – well, he wanted to be sure.

He caressed Akira's cheek. "I love you, Akira. Not Hana-chan, Akira. Does that make sense?"

The drummer nodded. "Yes."

He smiled down at the smaller man, tipped his face up a little more, kissed him tenderly. "I want you to remember that, Akira. I love *you*, no matter how you dress or what face you put on, it's you that I love. Okay?"

"Yes, Kei." An actual smile graced the delicate face of his lover. Yes, he was more beautiful made up to be Hana-chan, but it *was* still Akira. It was always still

his lover Akira beneath the illusion.

"You know that dress is my favorite, don't you, my Hana?" he asked softly, running his hands down his lover's back to grip the firm ass beneath the heavy satin.

"Is it, Kei-san?"

"Yes." He buried his face into Akira's soft hair, the clinging scent of Kita's perfume permeating everything. He'd never realized just how much everything they owned smelled like her until she was gone.

A hand closed around his erection, stroking him with slow gentleness. Takeshi backed up slowly, drawing Akira along, kissing his lover's face, his mouth. They reached the bed, and Takeshi lay Akira, his precious Hana, down on the bed, moaning as the strong hand of his lover enflamed his desire. On their sides, face to face, "I love you."

Akira, his Hana, smiled, and Takeshi found it hard to breathe, staring at the stunningly beautiful illusion, man to woman, woman to man. His perfect Hana.

"I love you, too."

The hand on his erection let go, pushed at him until he rolled onto his back, the drummer moving to straddle him, his firm butt rubbing along his cock, teasing them both, the rustling mass of satin draped over them.

He reached up, took Akira's face between his hands, sat up to kiss him as Hana caressed his chest, touched the bruises from his fight with Kita's killer.

"Fuck me, Takeshi. Please. I want you inside me."

"Sure, baby," Takeshi said as he rummaged in the bedside table for the lube. Akira took it from him, pushed the gown aside and slicked his cock thoroughly, the drummer's grip firm. He leaned back on his elbows, his eyes taking in his lover's exquisite form, the ivory curve of cheek, the slender arms, the firm line of a thigh just visible where the satin had been pushed aside.

Akira gripped his cock and guided it to the tight ring of muscle that guarded his entrance, the drummer easing himself down with a groan of pleasure.

He trailed a finger along the hard line of Akira's thigh, enjoying the contrast of soft skin and rock hard muscle, loving the man who was his Hana.

"You feel so good," Akira told him as he took Takeshi's full length inside his yielding body, the heat closing around his cock in ways that were so much the same as a woman's and so different.

Akira's thighs tensed and he rose up, stroking Takeshi's cock. The drummer's anal muscles were bound around him in a vice of desire, Akira throwing his head back and moaning loudly as he dropped down.

Takeshi thrust upward to meet Akira, the hard thrust igniting a roiling heat inside him. He reached for Akira's cock, but a small hand stopped him.

"You first, I want to feel you cum and watch your face."

He smiled. "Okay," he moaned as the drummer started to ride him hard and fast, the heat becoming a

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bonfire, and he got his feet under him, meeting the grinding roll of Akira's hips.

He came hard, thrusting upward into Akira's tight heat, groaning and holding to the trim waist tightly as Akira's mouth closed over his in a greedy kiss that swallowed down his ecstatic cry the way a starving man would consume food.

When he could move again, he pulled free of the smaller man and drew him along his body until his head was under the skirt and able to take Akira's erection into his mouth. He sucked, the flavor of his lover's precum bursting like sunlight across his tongue, the scent of Kita surrounding him. The gown was pulled up, shoved out of the way, a hand gripped his hair, urgent, wanting and he moved his mouth faster, knowing Aki couldn't take much more. Not after being so well fucked.

Akira gave a sharp cry, cum poured into his mouth and Takeshi swallowed, sucking, savoring the last drops of cum as Akira gasped and whimpered, hips bucking slowly, the drummer lost to the blaze of passion.

When it was done, he lifted Akira and sat up, cradling the smaller man in his arms, kissing him slowly, his Hana licking gently at his mouth, tasting himself on Takeshi's lips.

Forever always," he whispered to Akira, the same thing he'd always told them, Kita, Akira and Juro. His lovers.

"Forever always," Akira repeated it softly, kissing

Takeshi to seal the promise that none of them would ever break.

Takeshi was already drifting to sleep, the tension drained from his body.

Inside his head, Akira heard the soft murmur, *Forever always*, repeated from the sunshine dream of Kita that lived in his head.

He smiled and kissed Takeshi, feeling her love, trying to pass it on to his lover. But he knew it wasn't time yet. Takeshi wasn't ready.

*But someday...*

*Yes my love, someday he will be ready, Kita told him.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

**The next day  
An apartment in Tokyo  
Eight in the morning**

Takeshi rubbed his eyes and looked blearily around the kitchen as the noise that had awakened him repeated itself.

The phone was ringing.

He stumbled out of the chair where he'd fallen asleep—barely remembering coming out near dawn because he didn't want to awaken Akira. He hopped over the couch to reach the phone before the answering machine could pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Takeshi. Man, you sound like shit." Juro's voice was cheerful.

"Thanks a lot."

Laughter, bright motes of light bubbling from his friend through the line. Juro, happy and smiling. Alive.

He closed his eyes and held the phone tight, missing another voice, other effervescent laughter.

"Don't go back to sleep on me! I want to come home!"

Takeshi's eyes flew open, shocked. "What?"

When?"

"Today. As soon as you get here. The doctor doesn't want me to try and ride public transport alone. He's acting like I almost died or something, doctors. Can't stay alive without them, but they *are* annoying!"

"Gods, Juro, you're sure you're ready to come home? You were in pretty rough shape."

"Yeah, I'm good enough to come home. I just have to take it easy and, well, not use my arm. I'm going to be a real baby, you know. I bet you and Aki will get sick of taking care of me within a week."

"Never," Takeshi denied gently, meaning it with all his heart. "I love you, Juro."

There was a moment of silence that felt longer than infinity, though hardly a half-minute actually passed.

"Yeah, Kei, I know you do. I guess..." Another long pause. "Well, I always did, you just never said it before, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. But I'm going to say it now. Is that okay?"

"Sure, Kei. Sure. I just wish..well..you know."

And Takeshi did know. Knew exactly what Juro was getting at without saying it. He should have admitted his feelings before Kita was dead. Should have had the guts to admit it to them all. To them, and to her without being prompted for it.

Too late. So damned much left unsaid, and all of it too late.

"Hey, Kei, it's okay."

"No, Juro, it's not. We'll come get you, and then we

can explain.”

“Sure, Kei. I’ll be waiting. Oh, hey, you better bring me some clothes, okay? They cut my costume off of me and, well, I can’t go home in a hospital gown. Not unless you want everyone watching my ass.”

“Hmm...I wouldn’t mind watching it, but I certainly don’t want to share with anyone but Aki.”

“Well, you’re certainly getting possessive, aren’t you?”

“It’s about time, don’t you think?”

There was another of those long silences, then a softly murmured, “I miss her too, Kei.”

“We all do,” the guitarist agreed, no longer trying to hide the pain.

It still hurt so much, but just talking to Juro somehow made life better. Takeshi hadn’t realized just how much the other man’s indefatigable cheerfulness uplifted them until he was away from them.

Until they’d almost lost him, too.

“Come get me, Kei. I want to come home.”

“I’ll wake Akira and we’ll be on our way as soon as we’re dressed.”

“Don’t forget my clothes.”

“I won’t.”

There was a brief pause and then Juro said, “Love you.”

“I love you too, Juro.”

“See you soon.”

“We’ll be there.”

Takeshi hung up the phone and turned to see

Akira stumbling into the kitchen, his long blue hair still partly pinned up, some of the artfully styled tendrils slipping, others totally free around his shoulders. He was wearing a pair of Juro's shorts, the too-large garment hanging low on his hips.

"Who was on the phone?" he asked as he opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of juice.

"Juro."

Akira's eyes brightened. "He called? Does he know when he can come home?"

"Yes, he called and yes, he does. He's coming home as soon as we can get there to bring him some clothes and get him."

A wordless cry of joy came from Akira as he set juice down and ran for Takeshi who caught him as the smaller man jumped to give him a tight hug with arms around his neck and legs around his waist.

The guitarist couldn't help but smile as he was *glomped* anime style, their lips crushing together in a happy noisy kiss.

Akira hopped free of Takeshi's embrace and smiled up at him. "What are we standing around here for? Let's go get him!"

**An apartment in Tokyo**  
**Three hours later**

They'd been given very clear directions by the hospital staff on how to care for Juro's injured arm.

They'd said nothing to Juro about the insane accusations of the two detectives on the long train ride home, preferring to wait until they were back in the apartment and seated at the kitchen table.

"You aren't joking about it, either, are you?" Juro asked.

"I wish we were, but...no," Takeshi told the bassist.

"This is really nuts, you know. I mean, they came to talk to me about what happened, but never even mentioned you being a suspect."

"I can't figure it out either," Akira stated as he got three glasses out of a cabinet and set them on the counter, then started searching the refrigerator for drinks. "We were victims, why accuse any of us?"

"So, what do we do now? I wouldn't hurt Kita, and neither would either of you. That's just..." Juro shook his head in disbelief. "Crazy."

"I want to file a complaint with the police commission," Takeshi stated. "I was planning on doing that today, but you called."

"So call, nothing stopping you now."

Akira put glasses of juice down in front of Takeshi and Juro, the drummer taking a drink from his own

glass before putting it down and moving to stand behind Juro, draping his arms around the other rocker's neck in a gentle hug.

"But what if they ask us to come down and file the complaint? We can't drag you all over the place," Takeshi said, indicating the bassist's arm, still in the painful-looking metal cage.

"Oh, you can leave me on the couch in front of the TV. I'm sure I'll survive a few hours on my own."

"I'm not sure about that."

"Me either," Akira interjected softly. "That doctor told us to take good care of you. And you aren't supposed to use that arm at all until they can take that thing off. That's what he said."

"I'm a big boy, really. And it would only be for a few hours, right?"

"Maybe," Takeshi said. "Unless they decided to arrest us for some reason."

"He's right," Akira agreed. "They might decide we're making trouble and put us in jail."

"I just don't understand why they'd think either of you did this. I mean, for one thing, where's the gun? And why shoot me? Did those smart asses have a reason for that?"

"They seemed more interested in trying to force us to confess, never mind any lack of real motive."

"We need a lawyer, that's what we need," Juro told them, his expression seriously worried.

"Won't that be like saying we're guilty, though?" Akira asked. "I mean, if we haven't done anything..."

"That's why I haven't called one," Takeshi

admitted. "They might take it as a sign of guilt, and then we'd be arrested for certain."

"Maybe," Juro agreed. "But if they're already trying to force you to sign confessions, it's time to at least ask for some advice, don't you think?"

"Probably." Takeshi frowned. "But there's just something very odd about that whole thing. They accused us, tried to get us to confess, but the other officers all thought we were innocent."

"So what's with the detectives, is that what you're wondering?"

"Yeah," Takeshi replied.

Juro nodded. "Well, maybe we should try and find out what's going on, don't you think so?"

"But how?" Akira asked, letting go of Juro and dropping into a seat.

"Well, I'd say to start with the police commission, and if we don't get answers there, we have to start trying to find them on our own."

"I'll call them right now," Takeshi said as he got out of the kitchen chair to go and look up the number.

**That same night  
Four in the morning**

It hadn't taken Takeshi long to determine that calling the police commission had been a waste of time. In fact, he'd determined it about four minutes into the call, when he'd been put on hold for a person who in turn told him he could leave a message about his complaint, and was then routed to the voice mail of Detective Konda.

Thinking there was a mistake, he'd called back and been informed that since he was a suspect in an ongoing murder investigation he wasn't able to file a complaint, not unless he was first cleared of suspicion.

Angry with the lack of logic regarding the situation, he'd given up, taken something for the ache in his side, and gone to lay down.

But he couldn't sleep. He was too frustrated and angry.

In the long run, it was just as well he hadn't gone to sleep because Kita's mother called and asked them to help her make the funeral arrangements for her beloved daughter. Her only child.

He'd agreed to go and help her, explained why Juro and Aki wouldn't be coming, then he'd left to go see her.

Between the woman's tears and his own, the report

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from the coroner that proved without a doubt Kita's suspicions regarding her condition, the two of them had shed a lake of tears, both of them grieving for what might have been, for what could never be.

It was late when he got home, the apartment silent, only the ever-present sound of the TV next door greeting him. He left his boots and coat by the door and crept into the apartment, moving slowly in the darkness.

A light came on before he'd gotten more than a few steps and he found Juro lying on the couch, the bassist looking tired, pain in his eyes.

A pink vinyl album lay across his legs.

Kita's scrapbook.

"Hey."

"Hey," he replied tiredly as he flopped into a chair, too numb and exhausted to make more conversation than that.

"There's some rice in the steamer."

"Thanks, but I'm not really hungry."

"You should still eat."

Takeshi shrugged.

"Starving yourself to death won't help any of us, Kei."

"I know," the guitarist said.

Juro got off the couch, careful not to jar his arm, and headed for the kitchen.

"What are you doing?"

"Making your stubborn ass something to eat. What else do you think I'd be doing out here?"

Takeshi sighed. "Don't. I...I'm just too tired."

Juro walked over to him, held out his hand. "Come to bed, then."

The older rocker took the offered hand and followed Juro to their bedroom. He stopped and shook his head. The room was totally rearranged, the pair of beds shoved together, the small storage shelves pushed out of the way to make room.

If Kita had been alive to see it she would have chewed them out for making such a mess, Juro knew that and he felt a pang over messing up what she'd so neatly arranged. Well, as neatly as piles of music magazines, sheet music and the collection of fashion rags that Akira and she seemed to collect faster than they collected their piles of American metal sheet music and information on other bands around the world. It was always good to know what other bands were doing so you didn't accidentally copy a look or sound. It paid to be unique, not a copycat in this business.

Akira was lying against the wall, peacefully asleep, leaving plenty of room for the two other men. "I can't crawl into the middle," Juro explained softly, motioning with his chin toward his arm because his usable hand was still wrapped in the guitarist's callused fingers.

"Okay, I'll take the middle then."

Akira opened his eyes at the sound of voices, smiling wanly at Takeshi and Juro. "Just coming to bed?"

"Kei just got home."

Akira glanced at the clock and sat up. "So late?"

"I...didn't want to leave her. She's..."

He visibly wilted and Juro put his good arm around Takeshi while Akira crept to the edge of the bed and reached for the buttons on his lover's leather pants.

"She misses her too," Takeshi finished softly, his voice breaking.

Akira exchanged a glance with Juro, Akira nodding to the violet-haired man.

"We...know about Kita and the baby," the bassist informed gently.

Takeshi gave a dispirited nod and broke into hard sobs of grief, the younger pair guiding him to take a seat on the bed.

Akira put his arms around Takeshi from behind, as the older rocker pressed his face to Juro's chest, the bassist's good arm around his shoulders.

They held him while he cried, both of them crying with him for a loss greater than any they'd ever imagined possible. Their love, Kita and a child they'd dreamed of having. She'd promised them they would all raise a child together, share their love with a baby. Someday...

And the promise of that someday was lost to them.  
Lost to a bullet.

To a killer whose name they didn't even know. Might never discover, because the police weren't doing anything to find him.

No one was.

"I want him dead...I want him dead..." Takeshi sobbed. "Gods, I want him to suffer..."

"Shh....shhh...." Juro tried to soothe the distraught man, but he knew there were no words to heal this wound. Not for Takeshi, and not for him either.

"Please, Kei, don't cry anymore," Akira begged, his own voice raw from crying, face wet with a new wash of tears.

"Dead...he has to die...has to..."

"Yeah. He does. But that's up to the cops."

Takeshi gave a harsh bark of humorless laughter. "Oh, yeah, that's right, isn't it? They're going to find him for us... Oh wait... That's right. I forgot, they aren't looking for *him* because they say *we're* the killers! That's what they tried to tell Momma Takei, that we'd killed her angel. You know what she told Konda? She told him he was a lunatic if he thought we'd hurt her baby! She defended us the very day after Kita was killed. And the day after that the bastard tried to force *us* to confess. He went to her looking to have her back him up, tried to get her to say we'd been a bad influence on Kita," he gave a harsh snort of derisive laughter, the tears wet on his cheeks, new ones sliding from eyes that burned with anger and unending pain. "You know what she told him?"

"No, Kei, what?" Juro prompted gently, wiping his lover's eyes with the bottom of his t-shirt.

"She told him that if he tried to arrest us for the crime, she'd go to the media and tell them what a liar he was. That's why he hasn't come after us again. It's probably why he hasn't had us arrested either. He's got no proof. We never had a gun, so he can't produce

a murder weapon with any of our fingerprints. He has no one willing to accuse us. And they didn't check us for traces of powder to prove we killed her because Konda didn't want suspicion to be removed. If he'd done that, there'd be no possible way for him to accuse us of the crime. He has nothing to connect us to her murder but his own lies, so any evidence to the contrary would shatter his efforts to make a case against us."

"I should call my sister," Juro said, "and see if they've talked to her." While it was true that his sister didn't entirely approve of the life he'd chosen for himself—it wasn't the band she disliked, it was his love affairs with the members of the band that upset her—he didn't think she'd go so far as to believe he would be involved in murdering anyone, least of all their own handler.

"Well, he'd be a fool to even talk to my family," Akira stated firmly. "My parents helped us get started. They know we'd never have hurt her. If he did call them, though, I bet my dad told him exactly where to shove his accusations."

Juro put his good arm around Akira and smiled at the younger man. "Yeah, you know I bet he did just that, too, if this Konda idiot called him."

"I don't think Konda would call them. It's pretty much public knowledge that they gave us a lot of help to get our band going. We've said it enough in interviews," Juro stated. "Besides, we go to anime conventions dressed as your mom's characters. Even this guy Konda can't be stupid enough to think your

parents would say anything bad about us.”

“Momma Takei was serious about the media. I think...she wants reporters at the funeral, just to keep that bastard cop at bay,” Takeshi told them. “He really upset her when he went to talk to her about us. She kept saying what a rotten man he was and crying. I guess he pressured her as much as he did me, or Saigo did with Akira.”

“So is she going to officially invite reporters?”

“I don’t know. She said she’d decide the morning of the funeral.” Takeshi sighed, leaning forward on the bed to rest his elbows on his knees.

The drummer started to massage Takeshi’s tense shoulders, hoping to get their lover to relax enough that he would be able to sleep, even if he only managed it for a few hours.

“So, invite them. They’ll come,” Juro said.

“They might make trouble for Konda, too.”

Akira’s unhappy gaze went to both of his friends. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I mean...”

Takeshi pulled Akira into his lap, shot a questioning glance at Juro who knelt down and kissed their drummer gently, silencing the younger man’s objections, the two of them kissing while Takeshi slipped a hand inside Akira’s pajama bottoms and gripped his already hardening cock.

When the kiss ended, Akira looked at the two other rockers. “Not fair,” he said, unable to keep his hips from moving with the gentle stroking of Takeshi’s hand on his erection.

“Seems perfectly fair to me,” Takeshi said as he

gazed down at the smaller man in his lap. "What about you, Juro? Does it seem fair to you?"

"Not really," the bassist replied.

"*What?*" Takeshi exclaimed.

"He's getting all the attention, that's hardly fair," Juro explained as he smiled at the older man.

"Ah, well, yes, you do have a point, don't you?"

Juro's honey-brown eyes were warm with desire. "I think so. I mean, here you've got both of us and we're giving Hana-chan all the attention. Nothing for you, nothing for me."

"Good point," Takeshi said, trying not to think about the missing note in the melody of love they were about to play.

Juro must have seen his slight change in mood because the bassist grabbed a handful of his hair and forced his head back, kissing him with tender desperation. He let go, staring into Takeshi's eyes. "Stay with us, Takeshi. Be with us here in the present instead of dwelling on the past. Just for now."

He nodded. "Sure, Juro."

"Maki. For you, I'll be Maki, if that's what you need."

Takeshi looked down at the beautiful man in his lap, felt the rigid flesh in his hand. "No, be Juro. I...owe us all the truth, don't I?"

Juro's hand slipped through his hair in a lover's caress. "You don't owe me anything, Takeshi. I love you. You love me. That's enough."

Takeshi met his lover's gaze. "You're sure?"

"Of course," Juro replied.

"Are we going to make love, or are the two of you going to talk all night?" Akira asked.

Juro grinned at Takeshi. "I think someone else is complaining now."

"So it would appear."

Akira squealed as Takeshi picked him up and set him down on the bed abruptly, the guitarist stripping his pajama bottoms off and tossing them aside, leaving the slender man exposed to the appreciative gazes of his lovers.

Both of them.

He stared at them for a moment, then tried to bolt off the bed to make a game of it, but he didn't even get his feet to the ground before Takeshi had him around the waist and back onto the bed.

"Easy, Akira. Juro isn't up to any rough stuff."

"I know, that's what I was counting on," the drummer said with a giggle. "I figured I could get away."

Takeshi kissed along the drummer's collarbone, nipped at him once. "Is that what you want?" he asked.

"Hmm...I don't know...you guys look kind of dangerous with all that crazy hair."

"Do we?" Takeshi asked. "What do you think, Juro. Are we dangerous?"

"Oh, hell yeah. Very dangerous," the bassist agreed as he wiggled out of his pants, his erection leaping free the instant he had his jeans and underwear down.

"You don't seem too dangerous," Akira said,

reaching to help the bassist.

“Well, if you fall on your ass, you’re going to hurt yourself,” Takeshi muttered as he sat up to help Akira undress Juro.

It took them some effort—and the removal of the sling that held his arm still— to get the bassist out of his shirt, the pair being careful not to catch the fabric on the metal framework that held his shattered arm together.

By the time they had him undressed and in bed, Juro was wan and sweating from the pain.

“Where are the pills the doctor gave you?” Takeshi asked.

“Kitchen,” Juro replied while Akira stroked his face and kissed him gently, trying to distract him from how much he was hurting.

Takeshi left the room, Juro watching the guitarist’s ass as he left.

“You know,” he murmured softly to Akira so the other man couldn’t hear, “he really is beautiful.”

“Well, of course he is, silly. But it can’t have taken you this long to notice. I mean we’ve been living together for a long time and well, he’s been fooling around with his Maki and Hana-chan for a while too, hasn’t he?”

“Sure he has, but... Well, I did notice how fucking gorgeous he is, you know, but I don’t think I’ve ever told him.”

“I don’t think you have, either.”

Takeshi walked back into the bedroom with a glass of water and one of Juro’s pain pills. “Here, Juro,” he

said as he knelt down by the bed and offered the medicine and water to the injured man.

"Thanks." Juro took the pill and swallowed it down with some water. "This is going to put me to sleep, so if we're going to fool around, we'd better get started." He grinned. "I don't want to miss anything, you know."

"You won't miss anything important," Takeshi promised as he set the glass aside and got into bed with the other two rockers.

He sat there for a moment, considering them both with a calculating gleam in his eyes. "Well, you can't use that arm, so we're going to have to be careful. I don't want to do anything to hurt you."

"I'll be okay."

"Sure you will, Juro," Takeshi agreed and leaned down to kiss the bassist, the man's strong hand moving to the nape of his neck to keep him there while their tongues touched and tasted. There was a faint bitter flavor lingering in the other man's mouth from the painkiller, but he didn't mind.

"Not fair," Akira complained, pitching his voice slightly higher, playing at being Hana-chan.

"Not fair?" Juro grinned at Takeshi. "Maybe he needs something to keep him occupied?"

"Probably," Takeshi agreed as he slipped back out of bed. "I think I have the answer to that too."

The guitarist vanished into the kitchen for the second time.

"I wonder what he's up to," Akira said as he lay down beside Juro and started to trail his fingers over

the bassist's sleek body.

"I guess we'll just have to wait and find out, won't we?"

They could hear the sound of cabinets being opened and shut, then Takeshi was back with two bottles of syrup they'd bought over the summer from a store that imported things from other countries. Akira had a liking for some of the peculiar things they'd found there, including the flavorings which he liked to put in some of his drinks, like the soy milk he enjoyed so much. One bottle was chocolate, the other berry-flavored.

"What are you going to do with those?" Akira asked.

In answer Takeshi popped open the top on the chocolate-flavored stuff. Smiling, he squeezed the bottle, and Juro gasped as the cool liquid flowed over his cock.

"Give you any ideas?" he asked the drummer.

Akira grinned and nodded, scooting down on the bed to take the nicely presented treat into his mouth.

"Bitches, both of you," Juro moaned.

"Really?" Takeshi asked as he poured a thin streamer of the syrup along Juro's body before he dropped to his knees and started to lick.

"Not bad stuff for chocolate," Takeshi remarked as he lapped the dark liquid off the bassist's chest, his tongue finding a chocolate-flavored nipple to taste.

Juro moaned as Akira licked his cock, lapping delicately at the chocolate, his hand wrapped around the base and stroking ever so slightly.

"Messy, but good," Akira remarked. "I like this idea of yours, Takeshi."

"Hm...it's not bad," the guitarist agreed.

"Chocolate Juro. I wonder if there's a market for that," the drummer mused.

"Never know. Our fans might like it."

"God, I know I do," Juro moaned as a wet heat engulfed his erection and started to suck. Added to the feel of Takeshi licking his chest clean, the combination was intense, a gentle roaring in his ears telling him he was going to lose control rapidly if they continued their assault.

Juro moaned loudly as Takeshi's tongue swept across his body, lapped at the other nipple, teeth grazing, inflaming him as Akira's skilled mouth turned his groin into an inferno, the pleasure spreading through him, coiling inside his balls, building rapidly toward an orgasm.

"Easy, baby," he heard Takeshi admonish the drummer and the pace on his cock became less demanding.

He took a deep shuddering breath, hips rocking with the motion of Akira's mouth until a hand pressed down on his lower belly, holding him still. Takeshi, keeping him from controlling the pace.

"Shhh...Juro. Just relax and enjoy what we're doing."

"You...think...I'm not?" he gasped as the sensations blazing along his nerves from his groin threatened to steal his capacity for speech, much less form any coherent thoughts.

The mouth that was doing such wonderful things released his erection and he groaned at the loss until he felt a tongue lapping at his balls.

He cried out as more syrup slid down his erection, the touch feeling cold over his heated cock.

"Yummy," Akira commented.

Juro nearly screamed when the drummer's mouth encased him, the bassist dimly aware that he could feel Akira's lips at the base of his erection. He would have marveled at the younger man's ability to take all of him in without gagging, but he didn't have that much brain power left, the incredible sensations reducing him to a whimpering, moaning wreck as his body strained for release.

So close, but it wasn't quite enough.

"Having fun, Juro?" Takeshi whispered into his ear, and all he could do was groan in reply.

"I'll take that to be a yes," Takeshi replied, and he could hear the gentle amusement in his lover's voice.

His lover. Takeshi. He could feel the tears welling up in his eyes.

"Shhh...." Lips kissed him gently, fingers wiping away the dampness at his eyelids. "Together forever. I promise."

And then he was crying out as his body convulsed, bittersweet joy mixing with the intense pleasure that burned like the warm breath of a spring wind through his body, erasing everything but the love they shared.

Takeshi pulled him close and kissed him, stroked his face and murmured, "Shhh...Juro. It's all right. I'm

here, baby, I'll always be here."

He felt Akira leave the bed and a moment later, the last of the chocolate was being washed away with a damp cloth.

"I love you, Juro," Akira told him.

"I love you too," he replied. "Both of you."

He was wrapped in the warm embrace of both men, their lips touching his face, his mouth and it was so good to be in their arms feeling their love.

He watched as Takeshi kissed Akira, the guitarist murmuring, "You taste like chocolate."

"Is that a bad thing?" Akira countered.

"No."

The guitarist started to climb over Juro, who caught the older man's cock in his good hand and held on, forcing the other man to remain straddling him.

"Umm..." Takeshi was looking at his erection, frowning slightly. "I seem to be stuck."

Akira actually giggled. "I wonder what you're stuck on."

Takeshi looked down. "It appears to be a hand."

"Imagine that," Juro remarked as he moved the hand in question, smiling at the moan that slipped out of Takeshi's mouth. A moan quickly silenced by Akira as he kissed their lover.

*Their lover.*

But only two of them to share Takeshi instead of three.

Juro shoved the hurt aside. It wasn't going to help any of them to keep reopening the wounds in their

hearts, but it was hard not to keep remembering Kita, hard not to stare into the cold darkness of reality and feel the terrible loss.

He could see the hollow ache of sorrow in Takeshi's heart just by looking at the guitarist's face even as the man groaned in pleasure.

He turned to watch Akira, seeing the shadow of grief lurking in the drummer's face, his eyes reddened by tears.

It would take time for them to heal. But Juro was sure that they *would* heal. Forget, no. But someday, yes, they would come to the realization that, while they missed her, the pain was less, their wounded hearts scarred over and no longer as tender.

"No chocolate," Akira remarked as he lay down on the bed, angling his body so he could get his mouth on the head of Takeshi's cock while Juro kept stroking the man's erection.

Takeshi's breath caught and he braced one hand on Akira's hip.

"Maybe we should let him lie down before he falls on me."

"Be a...good idea," Takeshi informed them as his thighs started to shake slightly under their onslaught.

Akira let go of what was in his mouth and scooted out of the way as Juro let Takeshi's erection go.

The guitarist dropped belly-down between his lovers.

Akira sat up and pouted at Juro. "Oh, now, that is so not fair," Akira complained. "I can't reach my toy now!"

"I'd noticed that," Juro replied. "So he leaves us with only one choice."

Takeshi rose up on his elbows, his pelvis pressed hard into the mattress. "Which is?" he asked, dark eyes going from Juro to Akira and back.

"Well," Juro said, as he sat up, his hand moving to Takeshi's ass, "you've only left us with this to play with."

"That's right!" Akira agreed, patting the guitarist's firm behind. "Guess I should go find that box of toys."

Takeshi turned over. "No, that's okay."

Juro leaned down until his lips were almost touching Takeshi's. "You're scared of those still, aren't you?"

"No."

"I think he's a liar, what about you, Akira? Do you think he's lying about being scared of letting us play with him?"

"He might be lying," Akira stated.

"Not tonight," Takeshi murmured as he reached for Akira with his right hand, hooking it around the nape of the drummer's neck and pulled him down for a kiss while his left hand caressed down one of Juro's thighs.

Juro sighed, realizing that, while they might mess around, he'd never get to actually fuck the guitarist. He'd dreamed about it. Wanted it. But, Takeshi had never let anyone, not even Kita, put any of their toys inside him, much less a flesh and blood cock.

He had hopes that it would change, that Kita

would get the guitarist past that point. But that hope was ended with her life. And Juro knew there wasn't anything he'd be able to do to change who Takeshi was. He was their lover, sure, but Takeshi was still lugging around too much mental baggage from his childhood to allow anyone to do something that might impinge on his self-image as a man.

He could dream about it, but that's all it would ever be. A dream.

Juro put aside the tiny sting of disappointment and curled his good hand around his lover's cock. He'd have to be satisfied with turning Takeshi's mind to mush in other ways.

Akira returned his lover's kiss, wishing that, just once, Takeshi would let them show him just how wonderful having something up his butt felt. But as usual, the man stubbornly refused to allow it.

It was a little disappointing, but they'd lived with it so long Akira just shrugged it off and let the older man kiss him, happy to just have him in their bed.

He'd been so worried that with Kita gone Takeshi would pull away from them both, deny how he felt, but instead he'd finally admitted his feelings in more than a joking way.

"I love you," Akira said when they came up for air.

"I love you both," Takeshi said without hesitation, though his words were trapped in a pleased moan that brought a smile to the drummer's face.

Juro turned to fumble at the nightstand, trying to get the lube.

"I have it," Akira said as he reached under his pillow. He opened it and poured a generous amount over Takeshi's hardness.

"Damn, that's cold," the guitarist complained.

"Poor baby," he said as he crouched over the older man. "Here, let me warm it up for you," he added as he lowered himself onto the man's erection, whimpering as it parted the tight ring of muscle and slid inward.

Juro sat up to kiss him, his hand moving up the inside of Akira's thigh to grip his cock. He felt Juro jump slightly and glanced to see that Takeshi had taken hold of Juro's cock, which had started to harden for the second time.

"Going for a ride?" Juro asked him.

Akira smiled and nodded. "Got my own pogo stick."

Takeshi laughed softly, the sound a velvet purr of lust. "Well, aren't I the lucky one?"

"Hmmmhummm," Akira agreed as he tensed his thighs and started to move, riding the hard cock inside him, taking it slow, letting it go deep, his ass resting on Takeshi's hips at the end of the down stroke, the head barely inside at the apex of the motion. It felt so good, heat expanding through him, warming him from the inside out.

Love was like that. Yes, he enjoyed sex, but only Takeshi and Juro could make him feel this way, as if he were filled with the sunshine of summer, his whole body alive, singing with the beat of his heart.

"Going to cum," Takeshi groaned.

Juro let go of his cock and leaned down to kiss Takeshi, murmuring, "So cum."

Hands gripping Akira's thighs right where they joined into his pelvis, Takeshi thrust upward, groaning out his pleasure.

Akira slowed his movements, letting Takeshi glide back to himself as his cock softened. When Juro moved, Akira dropped to his knees, feeling his lover's penis slip free, the guitarist sighing at the loss as he leaned forward to kiss the older man.

"Feel good?" he asked.

Takeshi nodded. "You didn't cum, did you?"

He smiled at Takeshi. "Nope. But Juro's ready for me."

The drummer watched the wry smile quirk up the corner of Takeshi's mouth. "Guess I'm stuck watching."

Akira touched his lover's flaccid penis. "Wake up! Come on, wake up!"

Juro laughed. "I think it's done for."

"I think you're right."

"Done for the moment," Takeshi argued, fighting a yawn.

"Tired?" Juro asked as the guitarist sat up and got out of their way, moving to the far side of the bed.

"Yeah, a little."

Juro patted Akira's ass as he rolled onto his back so the younger man could straddle him the way he'd so recently been crouched over the guitarist.

"Well, once we've gotten some relief, we can go to

sleep if you want.”

“Might be a plan,” Takeshi said as he fought off another yawn and lay down on his side, facing the other two men.

They were both beautiful, Juro with his long violet hair and lean, nicely muscled body, Akira a sleek beauty, his face as delicate as any woman’s.

He loved them both so much.

The two of his lovers joined together, and he watched them as they made love, watched their faces as the passion claimed them, took them to that place only lovers ever went.

A place he’d gone with Kita so many times.

A place he would never reach with her ever again.

Hearing their cries of passion, their soft groans of pleasure as Juro and Akira made love brought a smile to his face, and tears to his eyes.

He loved them. He really did.

Akira cried out, his semen spattering Juro’s belly, the bassist’s hips bucking hard under the drummer.

Takeshi moved closer to them, touched their faces, kissed them both, sharing his love for them the way they deserved.

No, not completely.

But he wasn’t ready to completely let go yet.

Not yet. Maybe he never would.

But he did love them. Loved them so much it hurt.

“I love you both. You know that, right?”

Juro smiled up at him. “Sure, Takeshi. I know. But I won’t ever get tired of hearing you say it.”

He kissed the bassist and then looked at Akira.

"Of course I love you, Kei. I always have." The drummer said as he put his arms around him and leaned in for his own kiss.

Juro yawned and sighed, "Pill is working. I'm getting sleepy."

Akira climbed out of the bed to clean up, and Takeshi leaned down to lick the cum off Juro's belly.

He saw the surprised look from the other rocker and gave him a wicked smile.

"We miss her too," Juro whispered as he stroked his hair.

Tears burned his eyes and all he could do was nod, the knot that filled his throat too tight for him to speak through.

Then he was being held, Juro whispering softly to him, "Never forget we love you too, Takeshi. We're your friends, your lovers, and we won't ever leave you. Never."

Akira's soft lips touched his cheek, a hand caressing his back. "Forever," the drummer whispered. "Forever and ever and always."

They urged him to lie down and he did, unresisting as they caressed him, trying to console him, making him feel guilty for being so needy, so weak.

They loved him.

And they'd loved him long before any of them had even known Kita.

He understood that.

And he accepted it.

But it didn't fill that hole inside of him.

He started to cry, the pair of men whispering to him, telling him he was loved, telling him they'd never leave him.

Takeshi fell asleep with their murmured promises to love him always following him into the realm of dreams.

Dreams where one more voice whispered soft endearments to him as they made love to the music of the rain.

**That same night  
Four in the morning**

Takeshi slipped out of bed, unable to sleep. There was only the dim light coming in through the closed blinds, but he somehow managed to make it to the bedroom door without tripping over anything like their discarded clothing.

Padding on silent, bare feet, he slipped out of the bedroom door, entering their small kitchen and stood there, staring out the window across the lights of Tokyo. It wasn't much of a view, just another building lit by the ambient glow of a big city.

He was tired to the point of numbness, unable to sleep, the days of unending sorrow weighing on his mind.

Kita's funeral would be the day after tomorrow – No, he realized, it's tomorrow. We say goodbye to her forever tomorrow.

They had arrangements to make still. Some way for him to say his final goodbye the way he thought she'd have liked.

The hurt welled up inside, and he wondered how they could go on without her.

The truth was there, lying right in front of him.

They couldn't go forward without her.

She'd arranged everything for the last six months.

She'd handled it all. Their appearances. Their recording deal. Organizing the pickup and delivery of their instruments to their jobs. Everything.

He buried his face in his hands, realizing he didn't even know where their instruments and sound equipment were, or if they'd even been taken out of the *Nippon Bodukan*. Realizing he didn't know the full details of their contract, what their obligations to *Poisoned Dragon* were over the next few months, or if they had other concerts they were supposed to play, how to reschedule or cancel them because it would be weeks – maybe months – before Juro could play bass.

She'd been so good at arranging things, taking care of them, professionally, even personally that her loss left them stranded like the survivors of a shipwreck. And there was no rescue in sight, no shore they could swim for amid the violent storm their lives had become with her death.

Kita had done everything for them, even the shopping. She and Akira.

The memory of them all dressed up to go shopping, his pair of little goth girls.

His girls...

And Gods, but he missed her. Realized he would be burying a piece of his heart – his soul – with her tomorrow. A piece that he would never forget. Didn't even know how to live without.

Six months of her had made an indelible mark on him. On them all.

Crying wouldn't bring her back. It wouldn't help them.

All they could do was say goodbye.

One last time, forever.

And there was only one way they could say goodbye to her properly.

He got up from the table and pulled the pink scrapbook off the shelf, found the place where he'd put *her* song.

*Bitter Tears.*

He stared at the paper and wondered if Juro could even manage to play the slow melody, wondered how his dear Hana-chan would hold up while they performed it for Kita. To say their final farewell for her.

Maybe the Inoues knew where their instruments were. He knew that was where their older costumes were kept, and where they'd put their sound equipment since they'd moved to Kita's smaller apartment to save money. But he didn't know if the stuff had made it there after...she died.

*No, she didn't die, she was murdered. Murdered, and no one seems to care about finding the real killer. No one but me.*

He went back to sit at the table, put the song down, one hand laying on it, his eyes staring at the window.

*Kei, you should go to bed,* he could hear her in his mind chiding him as she'd so often done, teasing him when he couldn't sleep. Insomnia. Too many old ghosts haunting his memories. A childhood full of sorrows, the ghosts of an unhappy past.

The past she'd come so close to finally helping him lay to rest.

Now there was a new specter to haunt his nights.

And this one would never be laid to rest.

Takeshi glanced at the paper under his hand, at the rows of neatly written kanji.

He couldn't lay the ghost to rest, but he could tell her goodbye.

He could call later and find out and let them know about the funeral too. They'd want to be there. They'd liked Kita as if she were their second daughter, or the wife their happily gay son would never have.

They'd been family. Momma Takei, Akira's parents and his older sister, Kita, and the three of them. More family than he'd ever have.

They were still family, but the center of their world was gone.

Kita.

And he was being accused of killing her, accused of destroying the best part of his life, the center of their world.

He heard a sound and turned to find Juro, the bassist slipping his good arm around him, offering comfort, knowing why Takeshi was out there alone in the dark.

Grieving.

A warm cheek pressed against his own. "Never forget that she loved us, Takeshi. We were hers as much as she was ours."

He reached up to touch Juro's face, feeling the damp trails of tears. "I want him, Juro. I want him to pay for this."

"I know. And he will."

## MERCYKILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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“Will he?” Takeshi asked softly.

Standing there in the darkness, something unspoken passed between them. Something as dark as the night around them.

“Yes,” was Juro’s answer, the word coming out as an angry snarl.

## CHAPTER SIX

**Two days later**

**A Buddhist Temple in Tokyo's Tsukiji district**

**Two in the afternoon**

Pain fell in a steady downpour, the tears of heaven falling as freely as the tears of the people who'd come to pay their last respects to the handler of Mercykill.

The funeral hall was huge, fully able to accommodate several hundred people. What it couldn't accommodate were the two thousand people who'd arrived to say their goodbyes to Takei Kita. Some were friends, business acquaintances, people from *Poisoned Dragon* and a dozen or more clubs where the band had played, but more, far far more of the people there were fans of the band.

The hall was full to bursting and there were still hundreds of people lined up outside, the throng come to offer their condolences to the band members themselves. Most of the mourners had come dressed as Kita's mother had requested, fully decked out in their gothic best, a sea of black leather, satin, velvet and lace filling the hall with only the occasional black suit or kimono to mark businessmen or businesswomen. Each and every one of them stopped

to speak to the band and pass a traditional envelope to one of the members of Mercykill, lay a flower on her coffin, or place one of the stuffed toys she'd admitted to loving in a magazine article that had recently appeared near her coffin. Money, well wishes, outpourings of respect, love and sorrow for the members of a band they adored, or for a woman they respected. There were so many of the small envelopes and other little objects that the directors of the funeral hall had to find boxes to hold them all and word had been sent that other things were being left at the *Nippon Bokudan* where she'd died.

Like the tradition that dictated the attire the mourners should have worn, tradition also demanded that Kita be in a kimono, or formal dress, for the occasion of her own funeral. But, as in life, in death she was a fragile gothic doll, a froth of black lace surrounding her artfully made up face, her lips the same pale blue shade they'd been the night she'd been murdered, black kohl outlining her eyes, black tears painted at the corner of the right one.

And her boys were in their newest stage costumes, ones they'd never worn before.

Kei covered from throat to toes in black leather that gleamed dully under the lights, silver studs striking sparks of blue-white fire as he moved.

Juro was in black patent leather micro-shorts, fishnets, platform shoes and a silky black crop top that showed off his belly button and flat torso, the only off-kilter part of his attire the metal brace that held his right arm together.

Akira was another tragic goth doll, but the way his mascara had run across his geisha-white face wasn't simply an artistic bit of drama. It was genuine, the drummer unable to stop crying since they'd been picked up at Momma Takei's house by the car provided by *Poisoned Dragon*.

He was in a blue satin gown with a long train of black lace and ruffles around the décolletage; a choker of black velvet with a cameo hid the slight bulge of his Adam's apple. The long locks of his blue-dyed hair had been styled in fanciful loops, the bulk of it pulled back into a French braid and coiled at the back of his head, a few artificial lengths of hair added by his sister to increase the illusion of feminine perfection. He'd cried then too, because Kita had always helped him with his makeup from the day she'd become their handler.

Both Juro and Takeshi were worried about their gentle Hana-chan, concerned by the drummer's inability to stop crying, to eat, almost as if he were determined to follow Kita into the grave.

Juro leaned close to Takeshi. "Maybe someone should take him out of here, to a private room where he can rest."

"I've been considering that," Takeshi replied.

"He won't want to go."

"I know that. We could see if Momma Takei or his mother will get him out of here for a while."

Juro saw the older rocker go stiff and cold and followed the guitarist's gaze to find Konda coming their way amid the mourners.

"I don't know why that man is here, but Aki doesn't need to see him, that's for sure."

"Saigo's here too, about fifteen feet behind Konda," Takeshi growled.

Juro grabbed his arm, or the guitarist would have left to confront the detectives. "Not here, not now," he warned.

"Yeah, okay. But..." Takeshi shot a glance at Akira. "He has got to get out of here. Now."

"Agreed." Juro motioned to Akira's sister, the young woman hurrying over, her expression questioning. All Juro had to do was point and her gaze found the men, mouth pulling down in an angry frown.

"Those bastards," she hissed. "How dare they come here?"

"Get Hana out of here. Quick, before he spots them."

She nodded emphatically and slipped between her mother and Momma Takei, taking her brother by the elbow. "Hana, come with me to the bathroom, you know I don't like going alone."

"Clever," Takeshi remarked softly as the weeping drummer followed his sister like a lost puppy, never the wiser about the way his already fragile emotions had been spared further damage.

And none too soon.

"Quite a spectacle you've created," Konda stated coldly. "Must be costing you dearly to put on such a sham of grief."

"Only family and fans were invited," Takeshi

remarked, his own tone just as arctic as the detective's voice.

"Well, since the killers were also invited," Konda said. "I didn't see what harm my attendance would cause."

Juro was about to say something when Kita's mother beat him to it with, "Why don't you go and find out who the real murderer is instead of wasting your efforts harassing innocent boys! Or would finding the real killer of my baby prove too difficult for someone of your obviously limited intelligence, Detective Konda?"

"I'm sorry for your loss, Takei Rie. I'm also sorry these three have been able to blind you to what they are, and what they've done to your daughter. But I assure you, with or without your help, I will bring them to justice."

"You're a fool!" Kita's mother snapped. "A complete fool. These boys loved her, worshipped her. I know that! I know them! What I don't know is why you're insistent on blaming the last people on earth who would have hurt her for her murder!"

The detective shook his head, his expression sad.

Juro looked at the man's eyes and saw the sorrowful look for what it was. A sham. The only thing on the detective's face was cold fury, regardless how he tried to appear sad. And underlying the fury was the hard, calculating expression of someone who was a liar came through clearly to the rocker. He might fool others, but not Juro.

There were people watching the exchange, people

hearing the detective all but publicly accuse them of the murder of their handler, and Juro wasn't about to let the detective get away with smearing their reputation with that kind of shit.

"So tell me, Konda, did I shoot myself in the arm to make her murder look good? Or did I stand still so Kei could do it? Where's the gun we used, can you tell me that? If we killed her, why haven't you had us arrested?" He took a step toward the older man, his very pose a challenge to the man. "What's the motive for such a stupid crime? Bet you're going to say it was money, right? Well, that's bullshit!"

"Is it?" Konda countered, his entire stance, his voice aggressive, meant to intimidate the rocker who dressed like a woman. "I've had a look at the contract she signed on your behalf. She had total control of the money you made through *Poisoned Dragon*. Total control. My guess is you killed her to break the contract. But that won't work. They'll just assign a different handler, one from the company, and then you'll be without the money anyway." The detective shook his head as if unable to believe their stupidity, while the pair of rockers stared at him.

Juro frowned and shot a glance at Takeshi, who frowned back and shook his head. They'd both seen the contract that Kita had signed, had been with her when the deal was made, so what the detective was implying about their deal with *Poisoned Dragon* was a total fabrication.

Something was very wrong. Not with their contract, but with the contract that Konda claimed

existed, claimed to have seen. A contract that, from the detective's description, bore not even a vague resemblance to the contract Kita had signed on their behalf as their handler. They'd all read it, had a lawyer they trusted—one recommended to them by Akira's mother—explain it to them in detail. He'd even altered a few of the clauses for them.

One of the clauses that the lawyer had changed for them included the automatic assignment of a new handler by the recording company if something ever happened to Kita.

They'd had that deleted because they wanted to choose their own handler if.... The revelation hit Juro hard as a bullet train.

Nothing Konda said made sense. Unless... Juro's eyes narrowed, anger igniting, burning hot, intense as a solar storm through his mind and heart, searing him to the core of his soul. Nothing that was going on made any sense until you started to think about the contract they'd signed. Then started to think about the one they'd refused to accept. Konda was right, it *was* the perfect reason for Kita's murder.

If they'd kept the original version of the contract, it would have been the perfect way for *Poisoned Dragon* to gain total control of them and everything they ever did. They wouldn't be the first band to be so thoroughly screwed by either their manager or the company with which they signed a contract.

Kita wasn't the guilty party in that, though, which left only one other possibility.

And if what Konda said was true, and if the

contract that had surfaced wasn't the one they'd signed—

Maybe the cops were being taken down a false trail.

Or maybe they knew exactly what they were doing.

By nature, Juro wasn't a suspicious person. He didn't subscribe to conspiracy theories or think anyone was out to get them, but considering what was happening, what had happened—the numbers were adding up to something very underhanded and nasty.

Deadly nasty.

Time to do a little questioning of our own, he decided.

Mourners passed them in a slow procession, grieving, each tear cutting Juro's heart with the pain of a razor across his flesh.

All this was because Kita lay not five feet away, wrapped in the embrace of death: murdered. Their beloved Kita, dead.

And he'd bet his own soul that Konda knew who had done it. Knew, and had been paid to cover up the truth.

The bassist leaned closer to Konda, whispering, his lips close to the detective's ear so no one else could overhear what he was going to say. "You know what I think?"

Konda smiled frostily. "No, what do you think?"

"You know dirty cops don't stay that way forever. Eventually someone comes along and washes them

clean. You see it in the news all the time. The smart ones—well, they get clean on their own. Usually with a bullet or a piece of rope, somewhere nice and quiet. Saves their family a lot of embarrassment. It's nice and neat, suicide, no messy arrest, no trial. It's the stupid ones that have to be caught and taken to jail. Gives the police a bad reputation, those dirty cops. Don't you think so?"

The detective's eyes narrowed in fury. "You're threatening me?"

Juro stood back, his eyes sparkling with dark amusement. "Am I? Seems to me I just said that dirty cops always come clean...eventually."

Saigo joined them. "People who make false statements wind up in jail."

Juro pretended to be shocked. "What false statement would that be?"

"You're accusing us of being dirty, aren't you?" Saigo questioned.

"Am I? I don't recall mentioning any names, but..." he shrugged, flinched a little at the pain it caused. "Well, if you feel some sort of guilt, perhaps you should take a walk around the temple, find a priest and do some praying."

Konda was glaring at him, at Takeshi. "We aren't done with you three."

"You'd better have hard, rock-solid evidence, Detective Konda. Because if you don't..." Takeshi didn't finish the warning, because Kita's mother broke in.

"If you don't, Detective, I'm going to make so

much noise that you won't be able to get a job cleaning toilets." The woman stepped closer to the pair of men. "You aren't welcome here. This is a funeral for my daughter, whose murder you are supposed to be investigating. Instead, you are here upsetting innocent people and making a scene. Go away, or I'll call your superiors and tell them how rude you've been. No respect for the dead, no respect for a grieving mother. The papers would love to report that."

A voice from behind the pair of men added, "Yes, it will make for an interesting story. Police harassment. Grieving mother and Mercykill band members accosted by police during funeral of handler. Might even make the lead story tonight."

Juro saw the anger on both detective's faces as they turned to find a young man and woman in conservative attire standing there, both carried identification badges saying which news station they worked for, and the young man had a camera. He didn't know who'd invited them, but he managed a polite bow in their direction, noting that Momma Takei also bowed to them respectfully, realizing with no small shock that Kei had done so too.

Kita had trained him well with her, *Make nice for news people. They're either your best friends or your worst enemies. Which way they go is up to you, so be polite, or be scorned.*

He glanced at the remains of their best friend and lover. She'd taught them so much.

And now she was dead.

"This isn't over," Konda warned.

"You've said that before, too," Takeshi reminded the man, his voice calm and unruffled.

"Excuse us," the female reporter said as she pushed by the detectives who'd been blocking the flow of mourners. "We were *invited* here, Detective."

The pair of policemen slipped through the crowd and the lady reporter watched him go. "Reprehensible, that's what he is," she muttered after him. "Coming to a funeral and bothering people. It's just not right."

"Thank you for coming, Nanami-san," Momma Takei said. "If you want to mention how rude he is, we certainly won't complain."

"No, we won't," Kei agreed, giving the reporter a sad smile. "He's been insufferably rude."

"He keeps accusing the boys of killing my baby, and," Momma Takei shook her head, "they'd never have hurt her. Never."

Juro felt her hand on his arm and he moved closer so the cameraman could get a clear shot of all three of them together.

"And Hana-chan? I don't see..." The reporter hesitated, obviously debating how to refer to the drummer. "*Her* here."

"Hana is very upset, no thanks to the police," Momma Takei stated, letting a bit of anger creep into her words. "Hana-chan's sister took her out to rest for a while."

"Those police detectives have been very cruel to Hana-chan, and to me also," Kei stated, and Juro saw

the cameraman move in for a close-up of the guitarist. "They even went so far as to try and get us to say we'd killed Kita."

"What? This is unbelievable!" the reporter stated, her shock and sadness perfectly blended to elicit sympathy from viewers.

"Takei-san, do you think Mercykill are responsible for the death of their handler, your daughter, Takei Kita?"

"No, of course not!" the woman said indignantly. "That detective keeps saying they killed her for money, but nothing could be further from the truth. She managed their money carefully, and they never wanted for anything they really needed."

From the reaction of the reporter and Kita's mother, this had all been arranged, set up to turn the tables on Konda, making him the villain of the story.

Juro glanced at Takeshi, raised an eyebrow.

The older rocker just smiled, a viciously amused glint in his eyes that told Juro the whole thing had been planned, the reporters there as insurance if Konda showed up to make a scene.

Juro nodded his understanding.

*Payback, Takeshi style.* Konda had started a war, dragging their reputations through the dirt, but Takeshi never suffered an insult, especially not from someone he felt was inferior, and it was evident to Juro that the older rocker had nothing but contempt for the detective. Considering Takeshi's upbringing, it wasn't surprising.

It was another reason the whole idea they'd have

killed Kita over money was so laughably absurd, so tragically stupid.

Why would Takeshi kill the woman he loved over a contract worth only about eight million yen per album when he were going to inherit several dozen times that in, at most, a little over two years?

While the man's father might have disowned him for not following his footsteps and getting a business degree, working in the family's business as his father's shadow, he still stood to inherit a substantial amount of money from a trust fund left to him by his grandmother. All he had to do was wait until his twenty-fifth birthday.

Or get married.

Juro heard the reporter say, "Kei-san, isn't your real name Morishita Takeshi?"

"Yes."

"Is it true you're related to the owner of Morishita Blue, the firm that manages several luxury resorts and condominium apartment complexes?"

"My father is Morishita Takero, yes, but we're estranged."

"Is that because he didn't approve of you being in a visual kei band?"

"Yes. That was the motivating factor in his decision not to speak with me."

"But don't you stand to inherit a good deal of money anyway?"

"Yes."

So there would be no reason for you to kill Takei Kita."

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“No, of course not. I...” Juro saw Takeshi lower his head and Momma Takei put her arms around him as the rocker broke into tears.

“Kita was pregnant. They would have married in the spring, as soon as their first album was cut.”

Juro put his good arm around his friend and joined him in tears. Tears for everything they’d lost.

## An hour later

The parade of mourners ended, the hall full to bursting with people staying to attend what would be the hardest part of this for them all. Nailing Kita's coffin shut.

A subdued and freshly made up Hana-chan joined them, the drummer's eyes dulled by more than grief, the pupils slightly dilated in a way that told of mild sedation.

They were her family as much as Momma Takei was, and the grieving woman had asked for their help, as she had no son and no husband to help her carry out the formalities of the funeral rites.

And when the time came to close Kita's coffin, to forever cover her face, all three men were crying as hard as Kita's mother, hardly able to hold the hammers, to keep the nails still and finally the Inoues—Akira's mother, father and sister—lent their aid, the group of them getting the nails in while Akira wept and sobbed uncontrollably in Momma Takei's arms.

Takeshi finally took his beloved Hana-chan aside, scared and worried that he'd lose Akira too if the man didn't calm down. "Baby, please, pull yourself together."

"C...can't, can't..."

He shook Akira gently. "Look at me!"

Bloodshot eyes met his gaze, tears falling as freely as the rain outside.

"You're making yourself sick, Hana. We still have to honor her memory just like we planned it."

"K...Kei...I...c...can't."

"Yes, you can. If you loved her, yes, you can. You have to, Akira."

"Juro...his arm..."

"Hana, baby, he says he can do it and we have to let him. He needs this, and so do we."

"Can't...just..." Akira shook his head emphatically, unable to get behind his drums, unable to fulfill the obligation they'd all felt to play for her one last time.

Takeshi's fingers bit into Akira's biceps. "Damn it, Akira! Pull yourself together, just this once, stop being such a fucking crybaby!"

The second the words came out he regretted them, and he pulled the weeping drummer into his embrace, a hand to the back of Akira's head, the other stroking down his back. "I'm sorry, baby, I'm sorry I said that."

He felt Akira shake his head. "N...no...you aren't...you..."

Takeshi held Akira away from him, bent down to look right into his eyes. "I am sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Akira looked away and Kei took gentle hold of his face, made Akira look at him. "Please, Hana-chan. We can't do this without you."

Akira wiped his eyes with the tissue, saw all the

makeup smeared across it. "I must look horrible again."

"You're beautiful, my Hana."

"Let me go fix my face. Kita would be upset with me for messing up my makeup." He found a tiny smile somewhere deep inside him and let his face have it, putting up a brave front for Takeshi because the man deserved better from him than he'd received lately.

"I'll get your sister to help you. Where will you be?"

"The ladies' room, of course," he replied.

"Okay, I'll send her to help you." Takeshi's lips touched his; gentle, apology, the warmth of love, a golden glow filling him.

"All right, Kei." He turned, heard the rustle of lace, felt a warm hand trail along his bare arm. Love lost but not gone. Never gone so long as he could still see her smile, feel her love pouring through him warm as sunlight.

*No more crying, Hana-chan. I'm here, and I won't ever leave you. Together forever, remember?*

He nodded to the voice only he could hear. Throat raw from so much crying he said, "Yes, I remember."

*Good. Now promise me you won't cry anymore.*

He could feel hands touching his cheeks, brushing at the tears on his face, though he was alone.

"I promise."

**Same location**  
**Four in the afternoon**

Their instruments had been set up at the far end of the hall beside a huge digital video display that would allow everyone gathered to watch what Inoue Shun, Akira's father, had created for Kita's wake.

Kei cleared his mind. There was nothing but this moment, no future, no past, just now. They'd never played the song. *Her song*. Not once. But they'd do their best for her, playing from love, for love, to say goodbye.

Everyone in the hall fell silent as the soft strain of the melody started, the electric guitar in Takeshi's hands pouring out the gentle song, the notes rising over the pattering rain on the roof.

He stepped closer to the microphone, his eyes closed, concentrating on what he was doing, not letting the sorrow rule him as the soft bass and the susurrant of drums played with brushes joined the melody.

*Memories fill my mind*  
*Beauty's smile*  
*Laughter sweet*  
*A cherry blossom*  
*In Spring*  
*Glow of sunshine love*

Beside him on the big display, the video that Akira's parents had put together for the funeral began to play. A little girl of about eight running beneath rows of cherry trees in full bloom filled the screen. She was laughing, the sound carrying over the slight pause in the music.

*Shattered, broken  
Lost to me  
Gone from me  
Taken by death's  
Chill embrace  
And all I can do is cry  
Bitter, brittle tears*

Cherry trees in the rain, their petals falling to the ground under a lead grey sky dissolved into an image of Kei's face in the same style of makeup he'd applied for the concert the night Kita was murdered. The bar of red across his eyes began to run as he cried.

*I never meant to fail you  
I never thought I'd see you  
Hold you as you died  
Tears fall on desolation  
Rain in the desert  
Where my heart once beat*

Tears streamed down Kei's cheeks on the screen, the red makeup running, spreading out from his face until the whole screen was crimson.

Softly Maki and Hana-chan joined their voices with

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Kei's.

*Lost, alone  
Broken and burned to ash*

Kei's voice alone again as the screen darkened from crimson to a deeper shade, the color of heart's blood.

*What happens to a soul  
Left in the dark?  
What happens to a love  
Burned to ashes  
By another's careless act  
A man's rage, his hate*

A shadowy figure loomed out of the wash of sanguine color filling the screen, vanishing into images of Maki being lifted to a stretcher, the image taken by someone backstage while Hana and Kei clung to one another, both of them weeping bitterly, the picture fading into Kita's face, stilled by death.

*Careless words spoken  
Can't be taken back  
Broken dreams  
Can't be mended  
Hearts stilled by death  
Can't be given life  
No matter how many  
Bitter tears fall*

Tears started to flow from Kei's closed eyes, and his voice faded out, letting the other two sing this part alone because it seemed the right thing to do while on the screen clips of home movies flowed one into another. Kita smiling and putting on goth makeup, her lips full of hair pins as she helped Akira become Hana-chan before a show in Shinjuku a few months ago.

*Lost, alone  
Bitter, brittle tears  
Falling*

Kei's voice taking up the whispered echo as images of Kita spun, her face lifted to the falling rain, makeup running in black rivulets down her face.

*into darkness*

Akira and Juro's voices steady, strong, carrying the words as Kita whirled across the screen in a dress of black lace and velvet, laughing, smiling as Kei chased her through a neatly landscaped yard. The Inoue's suburban home, a wisteria tree in the background.

*Falling*

Their voices fading for Kei's pained whisper.

*into darkness*

A night sky, creased by bright lightning, the crack

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of sound like a gunshot.

*A heart full of desolation*

Kei began singing, the other two going silent as the pictures of their happy life together filled the screen with the memories of love and joy they had shared. Memories turned to bitter sorrow because of a man they didn't know, because of a killer who'd taken something precious from them forever.

*Gone from me  
And all I can do is cry  
Bitter, brittle tears*

*Broken and burned to ash  
A heart lost to darkness*

Hana and Maki took over the song as Kei fell silent, Kita laughing as she ran around the couch at her mother's home, fleeing from Akira, whose hair had streaks of bright pink mixed into the almost trademarked blue of his hair.

*And all I can do is cry  
Cry (the night won't end)  
Cry (the pain won't stop)  
Cry (the nightmare doesn't end)*

*Lost, alone  
Falling (forever in darkness)*

Kei's voice alone again. Despair welling up inside so that he had to fight for breath, had to struggle for the control to finish this for her.

*Forever shedding  
Brittle, bitter tears*

Almost over. They could do this for her, finish the song as the picture on the screen once again became the laughing young girl forever running through spring's warm sunlight, the three of them playing the ending until only Kei's guitar was left, the melody fading into the soft melody of the rain outside.

For a moment Kei stood, tears running down his face, then he crumpled in a heap, the strain too much for him to bear.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Passing days and nights Hospital stays and the return home**

The doctor that had examined Takeshi after he'd collapsed at the funeral had cited emotional and physical exhaustion as the cause of the guitarist's collapse, and had kept him in hospital for a few days.

Seeing the condition that Akira was in, he'd also ordered the drummer to be admitted for a few days of enforced rest.

When they'd tried to object, they were quietly but firmly informed that their own recording label had called and asked that they be looked after.

With both of the other men confined to the hospital, Juro had gone to stay with Momma Takei for a few days where the grieving woman had fussed over him and benefited from having someone to take her mind off her own loss.

The doctor had finally let Takeshi and Akira come home, but he'd also prescribed a mild tranquilizer for both of them, seeing how tired and fragile their emotions were. He'd said that it was for their own good that they take the medicine.

Akira dutifully took it, going through his days in a cotton-wrapped haze where nothing upset him.

Takeshi stopped taking them the day he came home. When he found Akira sitting quietly in a corner, staring off into space with the strangest smile on his face and talking to no one but the voices in his mind, he flushed the rest of the pills down the toilet.

The last thing they needed now was for Akira to become drug dependent. They had enough problems already without adding that to the growing list.

And the list was growing.

They'd gotten a letter from an executive at *Poisoned Dragon* telling them they had a month to get into the studio to record their first album, but the therapist that Juro was seeing had clearly stated it would be two to three months before he had proper use of his hand and arm back. At least the medical professionals were no longer merely hopeful he'd regain use of his arm. That, at least, was something positive amid all the negative things that they'd suffered through.

While Juro managed to play for Kita's funeral, it had been an act of sheer willpower on his part, the pain so bad they'd kept him at the hospital overnight on the fear he'd done himself harm by playing.

It had been a close thing, but in the end they'd determined he hadn't done any lasting damage. And now he was being very careful not to use the arm more than he was permitted, which wasn't much at all, though on the good side, the metal framework had been removed the day they'd let both Takeshi and Akira out of the hospital.

They'd come home to an answering machine full of well wishes, and a polite reminder from the manager

of their apartment building that their rent was due.

It took them two hours just to locate the checkbook. While Kita was a great manager, her method of organizing things in their apartment wasn't something the three men had ever tried to understand. After they located it—inside a little file box with the ever-present pink-bowed anime kitten on the top—Takeshi, with some help from Akira, rounded up all their bills and paid them so they wouldn't need to think about them for another month.

Not that they knew where the money was going to come from next month.

Going over the checkbook, there was one thing they did discover. They hadn't gotten paid yet for the concert at *Nippon Bokudan*.

It was just something else they'd have to take care of now that Kita was gone.

But they didn't even know who they should contact, because the phone number was probably on Kita's cell phone.

And the police had yet to return that to them.

Juro called and tried to speak to someone about it, tried to explain that they needed the phone to continue with their jobs of being musicians.

He met with polite refusal, the female police officer explaining to him that the phone was part of an ongoing investigation and could not be returned to them until the investigation was over.

Any effort to even get the numbers met with the same polite explanation.

Without that phone—or their copy of the contract—they didn't even know who to contact at *Poisoned Dragon*.

And even a call to the recording company failed to help, the receptionist gently explaining that she didn't know who they were, and that without a name or an appointment, she wasn't able to help them.

They'd hit yet another brick wall, and a little more of their already fading hope to continue as a band died.

**Two days later**  
**An apartment in Tokyo**  
**Nine in the morning**

Both Akira and Juro were worried. Takeshi was so silent, hardly speaking, barely eating, and they were both wondering if they should call the doctor and see about having their lover put into the hospital again.

But they were hesitant to do that, because it hadn't really helped the first time and they worried that if the physicians saw him the way he was now, they might commit him to an observation ward for mental health.

The drummer walked over to Takeshi and looked at him. His hair was showing dark roots, and instead of the usual leather or jeans, he wore a pair of pajama bottoms and nothing else. He hadn't gotten dressed since they'd come home from the hospital, except for the brief venture out to pay their rent and bills.

Akira gave Takeshi a fragment of a smile. "Are you feeling any better?" he questioned as he stroked his lover's face, smoothing a few strands of blood-red hair from the older man's eyes.

He got a shrug for an answer.

Akira could tell that his lover wasn't doing any better. Not really.

Then again, none of them honestly were, all of

them living day and night inside the apartment like old hermits.

Ever since they'd come home, Takeshi had been withdrawn, barely talking, disinterested in everything, even finding solace in the arms of his lovers.

They were all of them going through the motions of being alive, but their eyes told the truth. They'd buried their hearts with Kita, and even the irrepressible Juro was quieter than normal.

He slipped into Kei's lap and put his arms around his neck to give him a gentle kiss, but Takeshi just turned his head aside, so he rested his head on the man's chest instead and sat listening to Takeshi's steady heartbeat. It was the sound that helped him get to sleep at night. That and his lovers' arms around him were better than the pills the doctor had given them.

Except that the pills had made it easier to talk to the Kita living in his head.

*I'm still here. I told you forever, didn't I?*

He smiled, thought back, *Yes, you told me forever. I just wish they could have you in their heads the way I do. Maybe they'd feel better if they could hear you like this too.*

*Well, you know how Takeshi is. So stubborn. I try to talk to him, but he just thinks he's imagining things.*

*He doesn't understand it yet, Kita.*

*I know. He just needs more time, that's all.*

*I love him so much. I just wish...he would stop brooding. He scares me sometimes.*

*I know, Hana-chan. But he won't ever be who he was before this happened. You aren't the same person either,*

*you know.*

*I know. I hate that man for what he did to you, what he's done to Juro and Takeshi. I didn't know how to hate before, but I do now.*

*I'm so sorry this happened to the three of you, Hana-chan. If I could change things, make everything right again, I would. You know I would do anything for you.*

*I know. It's just...well...he's so sad without you. No matter how hard I try to make him happy, I can't.*

*Give him time. He'll come around.*

*And Juro.*

*He has you and Kei, so he'll be fine. He's strong. So very strong. He'll help you and Kei. I know he will.*

Akira snuggled against Kei and felt the guitarist's arms wrap around him finally, felt the warmth of his breath in his hair.

"I love you," he told Kei.

"I love you too, Hana-chan," the guitarist replied.

"What are we going to do?" Juro asked from the kitchen where he was making them some tea.

"About what?" Takeshi countered.

"Us. Our band. Our contract. The killer. Everything."

Takeshi sighed, the harder breath rippling through Akira's hair, making some of it fall into his face. It was like looking through blue mist, and the way the sunlight was coming in through the curtains Akira thought he could actually see Kita standing by the TV, smiling at him.

He smiled back.

"I don't know." Takeshi sounded defeated. Dispirited.

*Help him, Hana-chan. Help him for me. Help him live again. You can do it. You and Juro.*

He smiled at the faint shimmer by the TV. His beautiful Kita, the way she always was in his mind, wearing her short, ruffled black dress, long hair done up in a French braid with a pink ribbon at the end, in pink platform shoes with big black bows on the toes. Goth doll. She'd been their doll.

But she was still with them, because she'd promised to be with them forever.

Forever, even if she could only be inside his head most of the time.

Akira sat up on Takeshi's lap. "Well, my parents have our stuff back at their house. I know you can't play yet, Juro, but you can still sing. We could try practicing. Maybe write a few new songs?"

"I...don't think I can do that yet," Takeshi replied in a broken whisper. "Not...not yet..."

Juro joined them, leaning over the couch and pressing his cheek to Takeshi's, his good hand slipping around Akira in a hug that pushed the drummer tightly to the guitarist's body. "Okay, Takeshi. We'll give it a few more days."

Akira looked up at Juro, his eyes full of tears. Not for Kita, who was right there with them, forever like she promised. No, his tears were for Takeshi. For his lover's pain, for their wounded dreams.

Kita was still with them, but she couldn't help them anymore.

They had to help themselves now.

Juro gave him a wan smile, touched warm lips to

his.

The teakettle started to whistle.

“How about I make us some miso, too? We’ve got some instant left.”

Takeshi just shrugged.

“Sure, Juro. I’d like that,” Akira replied, putting on a bright smile because *she* said it would help Takeshi if he was happy.

He was happy, in some ways. Kita was not with them physically, but she was still there with them, happily living inside his head.

“Be back in a minute,” Juro said as he hurried out to get the kettle off the stove, putting it onto the second burner before he got the bowls down.

Pink bowls with the face of a popular manga and anime character. A white cat with a pink bow on its head. Kita had brought them home from Anime Expo.

Everywhere they looked, everything they touched was Kita.

He could feel her everywhere, in everything. He brought one of the bowls to his lips and kissed it the way he would have kissed her.

But it was just cold porcelain. Kita was really gone.

And they had to learn to live without her, hard as that would be, they had no choices.

“The police won’t find her killer,” Takeshi stated out of the blue, his voice flat and as lifeless as the porcelain in Juro’s hand.

“We’ve already figured that out. So where do we go from here?” Juro asked as he put tea bags into

three mugs, using only his left hand because his right arm was bound tightly to his body with a sling. He got the box of instant miso packages out of the cabinet and fumbled it open with his good hand.

"Find him ourselves."

"We can try. I'm sure there must be some way to do it." He tore open one of the miso packs with his teeth and dumped it into a bowl.

"That lady reporter said she was going to do some investigating. Maybe she knows something," Akira offered hopefully.

"Maybe. But she said she'd get in touch with Momma Takei if she heard anything."

"Oh, that's right," Akira said.

Juro got a tray out of the cabinet, loaded the cups and bowls along with three spoons onto the tray and picked it up one-handed.

"There has to be someone that saw or overheard something," he stated as he put the tray onto the small coffee table, smiling at Akira when he leaned forward and helped him.

"I don't think anyone wants to talk. I think something is being covered up. But what?"

The guitarist's question was purely rhetorical, they knew that, but Akira answered him with, "I bet it has something to do with why Kita was killed. If we can find that out, then maybe we can find out what's going on."

"I'd settle for killing him."

Juro turned his gaze on Takeshi, a cold chill rising along his spine at the look in his lover's dark eyes.

Cold. So very cold and emotionless.

He'd only seen eyes like that once before.

They'd belonged to the man who'd killed Kita.

"Kei." He touched the guitarist's cheek. "That isn't the answer."

"I know."

"Then let's focus on finding out why she was killed. Maybe if we find that out, it will lead to the killer."

"Maybe."

"How do we do that?" Akira asked.

"We could hire a private investigator," Juro suggested.

After a moment, Takeshi nodded. "Yes. I think we can pay for it."

"Momma Takei was talking about hiring someone too. We could pool our resources, hire someone good," Juro suggested as he took a seat on the floor at Takeshi's feet.

"That sounds like a reasonable plan," Akira said as he picked up his miso and the spoon and tried to eat it.

"Careful, it's pretty hot," Juro warned as he picked up a bowl and offered it to Takeshi.

The guitarist shook his head and Juro stared at him hard, brows drawn down, his expression stern.

The clash of wills was brief, Takeshi's own stare just as harsh, but he finally relented and took the bowl, taking a sip of the broth. "Thank you, Juro."

"For what? Keeping you from starving yourself to death? I don't need any thanks for that, I've got

purely selfish motives, you know.”

“Do you?”

Juro smiled at him. “Sure! Who else is going to help me take a bath later?”

“Oh, I can help you with that!” Akira offered.

“Yeah, but Hana-chan, you’re too little to help get me out.”

“Getting out isn’t what you’re looking for help with, admit it,” Akira teased. “You want help getting *up*, not out.”

“I get up on my own just fine,” Juro countered, hoping the innuendo would get some reaction out of Takeshi.

Takeshi picked Akira up and put him down on the couch, then he hopped over the back, heading for the kitchen. Or perhaps the bathroom. Juro’s expression brightened and he smiled at Akira, the drummer smiling back just as hopeful that they’d finally managed to break Takeshi’s depression.

“Hey where are you going?” Juro asked.

“To find the phone number of a detective. Then we’re going to search for that contract. I want to see what it really says.”

Akira reached out and put a hand on Juro’s shoulder. “You tried.”

“Yeah, I tried,” he agreed. “But I guess the attempt wasn’t good enough.”

“Give him a little more time, Juro. He’s hurting so much.”

“Yeah, I know.”

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Akira joined him on the floor, the drummer careful of his arm as he got into Juro's lap and kissed him gently, the bassist returning the younger man's kiss.

*My poor broken-winged doves... I wish I could give you the answers but you have to do this on your own, or you'll never have peace.*

*Will we ever have peace. Kita-chan?*

*Yes, Hana, you'll have peace...of a sort.*

Akira shivered, goosebumps rising on his skin

"Are you cold, Hana-chan?" Juro asked as the bassist hugged him close.

He nodded, because it was a lot easier than explaining to Juro that something the Kita in his head said had scared him.

Juro couldn't hear Kita.

Only he could hear her, and what she'd said hadn't been very comforting.

Not comforting at all.

**An apartment in Tokyo**  
**Close to four-thirty in the afternoon**

Because this was a business meeting, Takeshi had opted to wear something a bit more formal and had actually put on the only suit he still owned, a bit dismayed that it no longer fit him properly. He'd lost weight, and the pants had to be belted to keep them where they belonged. He hated wearing suits and it took Juro to get his tie right, but in the end he looked presentable if you overlooked his longer than conservative hair and the fact it was dyed an outrageous shade of crimson. He'd frowned at the black roots showing.

Something else they'd have to go back to doing on their own. Coloring their hair. He'd stood there remembering the last time they'd done their hair, the night before the concert at *Nippon Bokudan*, Kita and Juro crowded into the bathroom with him, Juro trying to keep the sections he always left black out of the colorant while Kita put the agent into his hair and Akira had laughed at them from the doorway.

They'd been so happy. Innocent of what the future held for them.

If someone had told them that would be the last time she colored his hair, the last time they'd crowd into the bathroom and take turns touching up one another's roots, he would have said they were crazy.

He touched the little stickers that adorned the edges of the mirror. White anime kitten faces crowned with a pink bow. A couple of photos. Juro dressed in tattered jeans that showed almost as much skin as they covered, shirtless. Kita had written 'what a cute ass' at the top corner. A picture of Akira clung to the bottom corner of the mirror, stuck there with tape. He was dressed like Hana-chan, asleep on a monorail car, looking more like a child's misplaced doll than a living person in his makeup. A picture of himself was at the top left corner of the mirror. He was in the process of restringing his guitar, right before they were due on stage in at one of the Shinjuku clubs they'd played at a few times.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and didn't recognize the man looking back.

The eyes were dull and lifeless, bloodshot, and the face they were in was thin and wan. It was the face of a stranger.

He sighed and left the bathroom. He had to go, if he was going to be at the sushi bar on time.

He gave one last look at the stranger in the mirror and wondered if he would ever laugh the way he'd laughed that night they'd colored their hair.

Kita's last night on earth.

The last night they'd made love.

But he already knew that answer.

The man he'd been then had died with her at the *Nippon Bokudan*.

**The same day**  
**A sushi bar in Shinjuku**  
**A few minutes until six in the evening**

Takeshi greeted Kita's mother, taking her hands and giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek. "It's good to see you," he told the older woman.

"You look so tired, Takeshi. You need to get more rest," she scolded gently as he led her toward the door of the restaurant.

"We all do. You too."

The woman looked sad, the eyes that so reminded Takeshi of Kita were filled with unending sadness, like his own heart. "She was my baby. My only child. She always said, 'Don't worry, Momma, I'll take care of you.' Now she's gone, and I'm all alone."

He put his arm around her. "No you aren't alone. We'll always be here for you. I promise."

She started to cry then, and he put his arms around her, patting her back gently, his own eyes burning. This woman would have been his mother-in-law. One that he knew would never have nagged him, not have scolded him to find more stable work or to change how he lived. She'd known exactly what sort of relationship her daughter had with him and the rest of the band, and she'd accepted that.

It wasn't only their dream that had been stolen, it was the future of an old woman, the life of a child that

had never gotten a chance to be loved.

A grandchild that would have brightened Momma Takei's heart, given her someone to take care of and love, be company for her when they were working or touring. They'd discussed it as something for the future, after the band was established in a couple of years.

But Kita had surprised him with the news that their plans were going to be put into motion a bit sooner than they'd anticipated, and he'd reacted with anger.

Anger he would regret the rest of his life.

There would be no child for them now.

No grandchild for Momma Takei.

She'd be lonely and heartbroken for the rest of her life, just like they would be.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she pulled out of the rocker's embrace. "You boys need to get on with your lives."

"Not until we find out who killed her and why."

"We might never know," she said despondently. "Not if the police won't do their jobs."

"Let's see what this detective can do for us."

"All right," she told him, wiping her eyes on a tissue from her pocket.

They made their way inside the brightly lit establishment, Takeshi searching for the man they were supposed to meet. He'd said he'd be wearing a grey suit, but that described half the men in the place, most of them salary men, office workers grabbing a quick meal before heading home.

"How do we tell which man he is?" the woman asked.

"I have no idea," Takeshi replied, his dark eyes scanning the room, trying to discover if any of the men were watching the door.

"Do you think we got here first and that's why we don't see him?"

"It might be possible."

Someone came in the door behind them and Takeshi turned to come face to face with a man about Juro's height in a very neat grey suit. He had iron-grey hair, rich brown eyes and offered a ready smile to the rocker. He had a rather battered briefcase in his left hand and wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"You must be Morishita Takeshi," the man said, "I'm Private Investigator Sugita Masao."

Takeshi bowed to the man. "Yes, and this is Takei-san, the mother of the girl who was murdered."

The private investigator bowed politely to them both. "My deepest condolences on your tragic loss."

"Thank you, Sugita-san," Takei Rie said softly, holding the tissue to her eyes as she fought the tears with only limited success.

The investigator looked around. "Perhaps this isn't the best place to conduct our business," he said, addressing Takeshi.

"It was the easiest place for us to meet. Takei-san doesn't live too far from here, and I knew where it was, but if you want to go somewhere else, we can, Sugita-san."

The man shook his head. "Mister is good enough

for me. I know who you are." He motioned to a table toward the back of the place. "We can talk back there. It looks private enough."

"All right, if that's what you want. Sure," Takeshi agreed putting an arm around Kita's mother. He followed the older man to the table and helped her into a seat before he sat down, the PI taking a seat on the other side of the table.

"Before we get started, I'd like to offer you my credentials," the man said to them as he opened his briefcase and pulled out several letters of reference.

Takeshi looked at the top one and frowned. "You worked for my father?"

"Yes, he had me follow Takei Kita, Hideki Juro and Inoue Akira for a few days. He was...concerned that you might be involved in drugs or something dangerous."

Takeshi sighed and put the letter down. If the man had worked for his father, there would be not doubt about his integrity. His father only hired the best. "Well, that answers my question about how you know who I am."

Momma Takei touched the rocker's arm. "We should buy something. It's rude to come into a place like this and use a table without paying."

"I'll order takeout. Juro and Akira need to eat."

"So do you, young man," Kita's mother told him. "You've gotten thinner, and you didn't have any spare meat on you to start with."

The PI listened to the exchange without comment, and Takeshi wondered what he was thinking, if he'd

read the sensational stories in the paper and which side he believed. Them, or the police who'd said that they were not being arrested but they were also not cleared of the crime, as it was still an ongoing investigation.

Then he thought to ask one more question. "Are you still working for my father?"

"No. Not at the moment. He did call me and ask if I was available, but as yet he has not contracted me to do any investigation work."

"He'll want to know if I did it," Takeshi said softly. "That's all he'll want to know."

"And what do you want to know?" the man asked him gently.

"Who killed her!" Rei replied, her hands clasped tightly together. "I want to know who really killed my poor baby..." She pressed her hands to her face and took a deep breath, and Takeshi could tell she was doing her best not to cry.

A cheerful voice broke into the conversation, "Hello. I hope we aren't late."

Takeshi knew the voice and turned to see Juro standing there with Akira, the two younger rockers dressed in leather coats, their hair pulled back in ponytails. Akira was in a pair of hip-hugger jeans that Takeshi was pretty sure had belonged to Kita at one point, while Juro was wearing low-slung black leather pants. At least he'd had the sense to put the sling on over the jacket.

"What are you two doing here?" Takeshi asked.

"Akira didn't want to hang around the apartment

anymore, so we decided to come here. I hope you don't mind."

"Ah...no, that's okay."

The private investigator was looking the other pair of rockers up and down, but Takeshi couldn't tell what the man might be thinking. His expression was carefully neutral, which in itself might be an indication of what he was thinking, because he hadn't smiled at them the way he'd smiled at Momma Takei and himself.

He didn't want to upset his lovers, but he also didn't want the private investigator to change his mind about working for them. He started to say something, but Rie spoke before he had the chance.

"Mister Sugita, I'd like you to meet Inoue Akira and Hideki Juro," she said, politely indicating who was whom even though the detective, having admitted he'd investigated Takeshi's associates, probably knew exactly who they were.

"Ah, yes, of course, the other two young men who make up Mercykill." The investigator rose to his feet and greeted them politely, bowing.

Takeshi was relieved when the pair returned the bow and accepted the invitation to sit with them that the PI gave by moving to a different chair farther around the table.

Juro sat down, but Akira remained standing. "Should I get us something to eat or drink?" he questioned, looking at everyone.

"Nothing for me, thank you."

Juro asked for something to eat, and Rei asked for a

glass of tea while Takeshi waved Akira off politely.

Giving them a smile, Akira went to the counter while Takeshi wondered how well Akira was going to hold up during the discussion.

"We didn't mean to interrupt," Juro said.

"That's all right. This concerns the two of you also," the PI replied before he turned his attention back on Takeshi and Kita's mother.

"So tell me what you want me to do."

"Find her killer."

"A dangerous proposition."

"It might be. We don't even know who the man is."

"But you'd like me to try and find out information that might lead to his capture."

"Yes, that's it," Takeshi agreed.

"Hmm..." the man sat there thinking, his fingers rubbing along the worn leather of his briefcase.

The three of them waited while he thought it over, Takeshi worried that at his age the man might be fearful to take on such a case. It could prove dangerous. That was one thing he hadn't thought about, the element of danger involved in seeking the identity of a murderer.

Akira came back with Juro's food and the ordered drinks, the bassist offering part of his meal to anyone that wanted it before digging in to the eight pieces of sushi with evident pleasure.

Akira sat down, and Takeshi could see how hard it was for the drummer to hold the smile he was wearing in place.

"I'll take the case," the man told them. "I'll try and

find out who this killer is for you.”

“Thank you so much!” Takei Rie said gratefully, as she reached across the table to shake his hand.

“Don’t thank me until you know what I’m going to ask as a fee.”

Takeshi watched the woman’s elation fade, a frown pulling at her mouth.

“This could be very dangerous, you understand. The man is a murderer. Now my normal fee for an investigation is about a half million yen plus expenses.”

“That’s a lot of money,” Juro interjected softly.

“Yeah,” Akira agreed.

“That’s per day,” he explained softly.

Takeshi heard Momma Takei gasp at the exorbitant fee.

“But that doesn’t include the fact that this man might be dangerous, does it?”

“No. To track down a killer is twice my normal rate. Dangerous criminals aren’t normally something I investigate, but this time I’d like to give it a try, just to help you. I’m sorry I can’t do more. I normally ask an upfront fee of one week, but I’ll take three days advance as a retainer.”

Juro pushed his food aside and Takeshi just stared at him. If they were going to pay this man, they couldn’t waste any money. Not a single yen.

Momma Takei was quiet for a few minutes, then she reached into her purse. “I can give you two days today. I...” she bit her lip, “I have some money put aside in a savings account. I can pay you for a week of

your time.”

Takeshi looked at his lovers. Akira looked sick but nodded. Juro just gave him a nod to show he was in agreement. He couldn't let Momma Takei pay for everything. If they could get hold of the money owed to them from the concert, they'd be fine. At least he thought they would.

But they still hadn't located the contract with *Poisoned Dragon*, or the contract that must have been made for their appearance at the *Nippon Bodukan*.

“We're owed a good deal of money from the concert we played at *Nippon Bokudan*, but the police won't release the information we need to get paid. Do you think you can find out how we can get that money?”

“I'd suggest a lawyer, but...” The man's dark eyes returned Takeshi's gaze. “I'll see what I find out. Since she was killed there, it makes sense for me to start there anyway. I'll see if anyone there knows who to contact regarding your payment.”

“Thank you,” Takeshi told him as he reached into his pocket for a blank check. “We have enough to pay you for the rest of the week.”

“I'll do my best to find out who is responsible.”

The man looked up suddenly and Takeshi turned around to find Akira's parents approaching them quickly.

“Oh, I'm so sorry we're late,” Inoue Ai, the drummer's mother, said in a breathless rush as she and her husband bowed. “We missed our train and had to wait for the next one.”

"Yes, we're terribly sorry," Inoue Shun, Akira's father, said as he offered them an apologetic smile.

Akira introduced his parents to the investigator and his mother and father greeted the man politely. "Well now, you tell us how much you need for this. We're prepared to help as much as we can," Mrs. Inoue said.

"Yes, absolutely. We want that man found and turned over to the police," Mr. Inoue stated firmly. "Kita was like a daughter to us, and we want that man to pay for what he did."

Momma Takei dissolved into tears of gratitude as Mrs. Inoue put her arm around the other woman and murmured, "One way or another, we're going to see that this man pays for his crime. Even if I have to spend every yen I've saved, we're going to make sure he can't hurt anyone ever again."

Sugita was watching them all, a bemused expression on his face.

"We're family," Akira explained. "All of us," he added indicating everyone gathered there.

"Oh, I'm late! I just knew I wasn't going to get here in time!" Hideki Eri said as she arrived in a rush. "I wasn't home when you called, Juro! I'm so sorry I'm late. I forgot to take my cell phone to the store with me. As soon as I got your message, I left." She looked at the detective and smiled. "Oh, hello, you must be the investigator that's going to help find that awful man. I hope you get him for us. My brother never did anything bad in his life, and I won't stand for anyone saying he has."

Juro smiled at his sister as she put an arm around him.

They'd hardly spoken to one another since he'd become part of Mercykill, but when she'd heard about what Konda was doing, saw the terrible grief he'd shown at Kita's funeral, watched how they'd supported Kita's mother, how they'd shown so much love...she'd been filled with her own regrets. Regrets that she'd treated her only brother so poorly.

He was entitled to his own life, his own kind of happiness, and she'd told Juro all of that right after the funeral.

"I'm glad you came, sis." He smiled at her and made the introductions between the investigator and his sister.

"I'm glad you called me. Now, tell me what I need to do to help. Do you need money?"

Mr. Inoue shook his head. "We've got that covered for now."

The private investigator nodded. "Yes, the money is covered for now, but before we go any further, I have some papers for you all to sign," Sugita said as he reached into his briefcase. "They explain my fees and exactly what I am willing to do in order to track this man down."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**The next day**  
**An apartment in Tokyo**  
**Ten-thirty in the morning**

Juro opened his eyes and reached for the phone, his hand fumbling across the table until he found it and got it off the cradle. Pushing the talk button, he said, "Hello?"

"This is Sugita Masao."

Juro sat up, looking around the silent apartment, wondering where Takeshi and Akira were.

"Yes, Sugita-san, have you found out anything?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I haven't.

"Oh, well, you really haven't had much time to conduct the investigation. I was just hopeful."

"Well, I'm really embarrassed to say this, but the reason I'm calling is that the police have told me to stay out of the case. They've informed me that anything I do will be considered interference and have said they will have my license revoked and arrest me if I proceed any farther in this matter."

Juro heard what the man was saying, a knot of anger forming in his chest. "We paid you a lot of money! You're telling me you won't help us?"

"Please, Hideki-san, hear me out. It's not that I

don't want to help you, I do. I'd honestly love nothing better than to find out the identity of the man who murdered your handler. Especially after my unexpected meeting with a Detective Konda this morning. What I'm saying is that if I wish to keep my license to investigate anything, I cannot continue on the behalf of you or your families. The police have said if I make any further efforts, I will be arrested."

Juro sat there on the couch as a flush of rage colored his cheeks. "So they're threatening you now too, is that it?"

"I'm afraid so," the PI said quietly. "There's just no way around this, I'm afraid. That detective is determined to pin the murders on the group of you, and keep anyone from finding out the truth."

Juro sighed and closed his eyes. "So what now?"

"Since they've stopped me from even making an effort on your behalf, I will give you the money I was paid back, that's only fair considering the circumstances."

"If you haven't cashed the checks, you can just mail them back. You have the addresses."

"Yes, I do. I'll put them in the mail today. I was considering going by Takei Rie's home and dropping her check off in person. I have business in that area anyway. Do you think she'd mind?"

"I don't think so. You might want to call to make sure she's there. I think she was going to meet with Akira's parents for lunch today."

"I'll call then. I truly am sorry about this."

"Thank you."

"My suggestion to you is that you three young men should hire a very good lawyer and then have him contact me. That way I'm working to assist your legal defense. The police can harass me still, but they can't arrest me for helping a lawyer discover needed evidence."

"Do you really think we need a lawyer?"

"I'm afraid you just might if that police officer has the evidence against you that he claims to have."

"Evidence? What evidence?" he asked.

"He didn't say, just that he had real proof that at least one of you planned and either paid for or committed her murder. He wouldn't be more specific, of course."

"That's not true, though."

"I believe you. I really do. I wanted to help you find who killed your handler, Hideki-san, but it's out of my hands. And I truly am sorry about that."

"What about our money from the concert? Did you find anything out about that?"

"I was told that it is none of my business and that you should ask your handler where the money is. I attempted to explain the situation, and was informed that you'd have to contact whoever is now representing you."

"But we don't have a handler anymore."

"I realize that too, which is another reason I believe you three young men need a lawyer. Someone has to be able to get to the bottom of this mess."

Frowning, Juro sat up. "I guess you're right. We are going to have to get a lawyer. Do you know

anyone good?"

"I think it would be best for Morishita-san to get in touch with his father at this point. I know he is reluctant to do so, but the sort of lawyers that you need won't come cheaply."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"I'll get the check to the Inoues into the mail. If things change, or if Morishita-san decides to follow my advice, I'd be pleased to work on the case. Don't hesitate to call."

"We won't. And thank you for trying."

"Thank you for having enough faith to hire me. Goodbye, Hideki-san."

"Goodbye, Sugita-san."

He pushed the button to end the call and put the phone back on the cradle and sat there, lost in the anger and frustration of the situation trying to figure out what reason Konda had for such dogged insistence that they were guilty. It certainly wasn't true, and he felt that the detective also knew that.

It was depressing. Konda had them boxed in with no way out, almost as if the detective were helping someone to put a lot of pressure on them in the hopes that, innocent or not, they'd confess. Or come apart under the strain.

"Maybe we do need a lawyer," he muttered out loud and went to see if he could find out where the other two men had gone.

He spotted a note on the table and walked over to glance at it.

Akira's handwriting, the note composed with a

blindingly pink marker.

**Juro,  
Gone to buy food. Be back soon.**

**Love you forever and always!**

**Hana**

**PS, don't eat until we get back, we're bringing  
curry.**

He dropped down into a chair, stared at the walls, not seeing them, mind wandering down the corridors of memory until he shook himself out of the past and reminded himself that it was their future that was in jeopardy.

There had to be some way out of the mess they were in, there just had to be.

But his mind kept returning to what the PI had said.

Konda claimed to have hard evidence they were guilty.

And Juro knew the only way that could be true is if the evidence the man had was fabricated.

"We're home!" Akira called out as the drummer entered the apartment with Takeshi hard on his heels.

"Sugita called. Fucking Konda told him if he tries to investigate the case he'll have him arrested," the bassist told them and watched Akira's smile vanish.

"Son of a bitch," Takeshi snarled.

"Now what do we do?" Akira asked the two older rockers, his expression glum as he toed off his sneakers at the door.

"He said we need a lawyer."

Takeshi put the bags of groceries down and leaned against the door to pull his boots off. "He thinks it's that bad?"

Juro nodded. "Konda claims to have evidence against us."

"Bullshit. Any evidence he has against us is as much of a lie as everything else he's said."

"I know that, you know that, but..." Juro shrugged and winced. "Who's going to believe us if he arrests us for Kita's murder?"

"Shit..." Takeshi picked up the bags of groceries and went into the kitchen with Akira and Juro following him.

"What about the money he was paid?"

"He's mailing the money back to Akira's parents, and he's taking Momma Takei's check back to her in person."

Takeshi put the bags down and turned to face his lovers. "What did he find out about the money we're owed?"

"Basically they told him to piss off and insisted our handler needs to contact them."

"Son of a..." Takeshi sighed. "So we're well fucked, aren't we?"

Juro frowned. "It sure looks like it."

"Now what do we do?"

"He suggested we call a lawyer."

"Yeah, we might need to do that if we want to get paid. I don't know how we're going to pay for it, unless he'd take it from what we're owed."

Takeshi noticed Akira staring off into space, his expression bemused, as if he were hearing a totally different conversation.

The way the drummer had been acting since Kita's death, was starting to make he and Juro very worried about Akira's mental state. He'd been smiling more but— there was just something not right about the younger man.

"Aki baby, are you listening to us?"

The chocolate-brown eyes blinked, focused on Takeshi, a smile forming on the man's too-delicate face. "Of course I am, Kei. Why wouldn't I be listening to you?"

"Well, you just looked like you were miles away, that's all."

"Oh, yes, well, I was trying to work out what Kita would do if she was here."

Takeshi nodded. "Yeah, I guess we all do that, don't we?"

Akira nodded, and smiled, the action a bit overly manic, the smile too bright.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Takeshi asked as he put an arm around Akira.

"Oh yes, fine. I was just thinking—"

"Thinking? Thinking what?"

"Well, maybe if we could figure out where that contract went, it might help us at least get our money. I know I left it in the scrapbook, but it's not there, I looked through the whole thing and the contract is gone. I'm not sure what we can do about Konda yet, but if we at least had money, we'd be able to pay rent

next month and stay here. But weren't the phone numbers and name of the executive in charge of our deal on those papers? I mean, they'd have to be, right?"

Juro rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then nodded. "Yeah, I think they were, now that he mentions it."

Takeshi closed his eyes, visualizing the papers. "Akira's right. The name and address are on them." He tried to remember, but he'd honestly only glanced through it and hadn't looked at every page. "He's got a point. The name and phone number are on the contracts."

"Do you remember them?"

Takeshi tried, but all he could remember was the executive's name. "Koiso. Koiso Ito."

Takeshi felt Juro kiss him. "Good, good. Come on, you can do it, Takeshi."

He put an arm around Juro. Relaxing, letting the mental image of the document float to the surface of his conscious mind.

"Get a pen, Akira," he heard Juro whisper.

"Ready," the younger man said.

"Go on, Kei. Tell us the number."

The guitarist read the numbers from the image in his mind, then mentally paged through the document, remembering every detail of the contract that they had signed, wondering why he hadn't thought of doing this sooner.

But the answer was a simple one. His mind had been so wrapped in grief over Kita's loss that he just hadn't thought about it.

“Okay, we’ve got that much,” Takeshi stated with a glance at the clock. “Let’s eat and I’ll call them myself and see if I can get through to this Koiso Ito and get some answers.”

“Well, at least now we’ve got some idea who to speak with,” Juro said as Takeshi started to put their purchases away.

“It would help if we had the original signed copies. Without that, we still have no proof of what the contract says. We’ll need that if we have to call a lawyer.”

“Very true,” Takeshi agreed.

“Didn’t that lawyer we talked to about that first contract keep copies of the revisions he made? I seem to recall he did,” Akira stated, still smiling as he cleared the table so they could eat.

“Yeah you know what, I think Akira’s right,” Juro exclaimed. “I remember his assistant made copies of them.”

“Find the phone number for him. That was on Kita’s cell phone. I don’t think I ever saw it. If we can’t find it, your parents would have it, wouldn’t they, Akira?”

Akira nodded. “I’ll just save time and call them for it.”

The drummer hopped over the couch and picked up the phone, tapping the speed dial that would get his parents if they were home. If not, he’d call his mother’s cell number.

“Hey, don’t stay on the phone chattering. You need to eat while this is hot,” Juro told the younger man.

"I can eat later."

"You're going to come eat with us, okay, Hana?"

"All right, Juro."

Takeshi could almost imagine that things were the same, that nothing had changed as he listened to his lovers talking.

It gave him a sense of peace in some ways to know that, even with Kita gone, he still had the other two men.

"Right. We'll eat, then we can see if he has time to talk to us. We can go get a copy of the contract if he doesn't mind."

"And then what?" Juro asked.

From the living room he could hear Akira. "Hi, Mom. We need the name of that lawyer. Yeah. We need to see if he has a copy of the contract. Okay, I'll wait."

Takeshi frowned. "I'm going to call my father and see if he'll help me. I don't know if he will or not, we haven't talked in months. Not since Kita moved in with us. But...it's worth a try."

Juro patted Kei's shoulder. "Everything will work out. You'll see."

"I hope you're right. We just maxed out our credit card buying food and we won't have much left in the bank once the rent check clears."

"You worry too much, Takeshi. You always have. Just trust in our Fate. Haven't I told you things will work out however the gods see fit for them to?"

He nodded. "Yeah, Juro. But...well, right now it's hard to think any of this is for the better. I..." he

closed his eyes, stood there silently for a moment, "it's hard to think of losing her as part of our Fate when finding her had changed our lives so much."

He felt Juro's arms slip around him, the bassist's cheek pressing to his neck. "Kei, she changed us forever. We'll always have her memory to carry us forward. Love her. Don't forget her. But...we have to move on."

"I know, but it's...hard."

"I know, Kei."

Akira's voice filled the silence between them. "Sure I've got a pen. Right. Okay, got it. Thanks, Mom. I've got to go, we have takeout. Curry rice. Yes, Mom, we've got food. Don't worry. Okay, I'll tell them. Sure. Thanks. Yes, I wrote it down."

The bassist still had his arm around him, holding him, showing affection and love.

From the corner of his eye he saw a streamer of sunlight pouring in through the window, and for a second the tiny motes of dust almost looked like a woman's face smiling at him.

And he realized the face had looked just like Kita.

His imagination, of course. But somehow it made him feel better all the same, that illusion that she was still with them.

*Maybe, just maybe we'll get through all this insane shit okay.*

*Sure we will,* he thought he heard Kita say, then he realized it was just Akira talking to his mom on the phone.

"Love you, Mom, bye."

Akira came bounding into the kitchen, a broad smile on his face. "Mom sends her love and wants us to come and visit when we can. She has a bag of rice and some other stuff for us."

"Great," Juro said.

Takeshi started to pull away from the bassist, but Akira's arms went around him too, the drummer cuddling against him. "This is from my Mom," Akira told him, then rose on his toes to give him a kiss. "And this is from me. Now let's eat because the food is getting cold. We can put the rest of this stuff away later."

"He's got a point," Juro stated.

"Yeah, I can feel it mashing into my thigh, too," he told them.

Akira giggled. "Well, I love you."

"Oh, that's what causes that?" Juro asked. "Well, I must love him too."

The pair broke into laughter and from the corner of his vision, Takeshi could have sworn the woman in the sunbeam spilling through the window was laughing too.

**The same night  
An apartment in Tokyo  
Eleven at night**

They'd spent a good portion of the day after the two had come back from shopping going through the piles of magazines, sheet music and assorted papers cluttering the shelves of their apartment in the hopes of finding either the missing contract or anything that might be a clue in Kita's death.

They'd found one of their older, forgotten songs tucked inside a magazine and a few receipts for purchases that Kita had made, but nothing that even remotely resembled anything that might be a reason for her death. They also didn't find the contract or any indication of where it might be.

They'd spent most of the day in pursuit of information, and had nothing to show for it. Even their call to the lawyer turned into a dead end when the man informed them he'd turned everything he had over to the police at their request.

Konda had beaten them to the information.

But if he had the copies of the real contract, it made even less sense for him to pursue them as the killers.

Juro picked up his cup of green tea and frowned. "I just don't know what to think about any of this. I really don't."

"Me either," Takeshi agreed. "This thing with the cops is... Well, it makes no sense."

"No, it doesn't. Unless they *are* covering something up," Juro stated. "The way Konda acted at the funeral when I implied he was dirty... Well, I think that says a lot. I think they are covering something up. But what?"

Takeshi shook his head. "No idea."

The bassist took a sip of tea and sat there thinking about everything that had happened to them since the night of the concert. "Call me crazy...but, I think someone is out to get us."

Takeshi sat up, eyes full of disbelief. "What? That's just..." Takeshi shook his head. "That makes no sense either."

"Yeah, I know. I guess I'm just paranoid or something. But you have to admit there are things here that make no fucking sense. Like the whole mess with Konda. And Kita being killed like that, by a man no one but us admits seeing. I mean, look at it, Kei. Really look at all of this mess. Why accuse us, or you really, since Konda hasn't really accused me of anything." He gave a wry twist of a smile. "Be hard for him to say I was a killer, since I nearly had my arm blown off, you know. But he did try to get Akira to confess and really, pressuring Akira's like beating a puppy. I'd bet he expected our Hana-chan to crack under the strain."

The bassist went silent for a moment, sighed, "Which really does seem to be happening. He keeps talking to Kita."

But now there was something dark in Takeshi's eyes, as if the man were turning the crazy idea over in his mind, trying to see if that was the missing piece of the puzzle. The part that would begin to reveal the picture. After a few minutes the guitarist shook his head.

"Crazy idea. Forget I mentioned it."

"Yeah, okay."

The strange expression on the other man's face hadn't changed.

"You're seriously considering it, aren't you?" Juro asked.

Takeshi shrugged, picked up his own tea, stood and walked to the window where he stared out into the night. Watching him, Juro could see the tension, the anger as clear in the way Takeshi stood as it would be if the man were ranting and swearing.

"It's late. Why don't you go to bed?" he asked Juro.

The younger rocker frowned. "What? I should go to bed and you'll stay out here alone to brood? I don't think so."

He finished his tea and went to stand behind Takeshi, putting his good arm around the older man, resting his hand over his flat abdomen. "Come to bed."

"No."

Juro let his hand slid down Takeshi's belly until it rested over the man's groin. "I know what would help you relax enough to sleep."

"Don't."

"What, now that she's just ashes, your dick doesn't

work?" Juro challenged, instantly regretting his words.

But it was too late.

He hit the floor hard, dazed. His injured arm banging into the side of the couch hurt a lot worse than Takeshi's fist, pain stars filling his vision with a bright shower of sparks.

"Fuck," he managed to mutter as he felt Takeshi's arms around him.

"Gods, Juro, I'm...I didn't mean.."

"Yeah. Whatever," he replied as Takeshi got him onto the couch. He hissed at the fire of agony coming from his arm and smacked his head into the back of the couch a couple of times to keep from crying or yelling at his lover.

Hands gripped his face. "Don't. You'll hurt yourself."

"Oh, I see, that's your prerogative, is it?" Juro asked sharply. "Damn you, Kei!"

"Shit, Juro, I'm sorry. I really am!" Takeshi said, concern and worry plain to see as he knelt in front of the bassist.

"Yeah, whatever. I made you mad, didn't I? So you hit me. Not like that hasn't happened before, is it?" But he was being unfair to the guitarist and he knew it. He'd pushed, said something cruel in an effort to get through to the other man.

And he'd paid the price for hitting that sore spot in Takeshi's heart. The raw wound that Kita's death had left behind.

Takeshi's arms went around him and the guitarist

started to cry, tears falling onto Juro's shoulder, sliding down to dampen his hair. "I'm sorry, Juro. I'm sorry."

He sighed and put his arm around Takeshi. "Yeah, I know. I had that coming for what I said. But, damnit, Takeshi, we love you too. Don't you know how much you're hurting Akira by pushing him away? It hurts me too that you don't seem to love either of us anymore."

Takeshi sat back on his heels, stared at Juro. "Is..is that what you think?"

Juro nodded. "You haven't wanted to make love with us since her funeral. And it...hurts, you know. It's like you're back to rejecting the idea that you love us. It's almost like, well, it's like you no longer want any part of us now that you've really accepted that she's gone."

"I—" Takeshi hung his head, shoulders slumping, his whole posture that of sad understanding and Juro wanted to go to him, hold him, tell him was it okay, that he understood. But he stayed where he was and let the older man come to terms with how he'd treated them since the funeral.

"I didn't realize—" He raised his head, touched the bassist's face where he'd struck him. "I never meant to hurt you, or to imply that I don't love either of you. It's just—" he looked away, eyes on the window, a sad smile touching his lips. "She was so much a part of my life, Juro. I'll always miss her. And I'll always regret what will never be."

"And you think we don't miss her? You think we

don't feel her loss just as much as you do? Oh, Gods, Takeshi, look at us! We're all like the walking dead. We eat, we breathe, but we aren't alive anymore. We're just going through the motions, too numb to manage more than that. We're stuck in limbo. We can't go forward with our lives because we don't know how anymore. We're trapped between Konda and a contract we can't even find. The love we have for one another is all we have left, it's the only thing we can count on right now. And if that goes...we've got nothing at all."

"I *do* love you both, Juro."

"Do you?" the bassist challenged.

Takeshi nodded.

"Then come here and show me, Takeshi. Otherwise it's only words, and words are cheap."

Takeshi moved to the couch and Juro touched his lover's face. Wiped away a few clinging tears. "You ever hit me again, Takeshi, and I swear I'll kick your ass like I did that time in Shibuya."

Takeshi offered his lover a slight smile. "Oh, so you kicked my ass, did you?"

"That's how I recall it. You were the one out cold on the floor."

"I hit my head on a table."

Juro smiled. "That was not a table. That was a roundhouse kick, and it hit right here," he said, as he kissed Takeshi's jaw right below his ear.

"Sorry, I don't remember that."

"Probably because you didn't see it coming, and after it hit you weren't seeing anything," Juro told

him as he kissed his way down the guitarist's throat.

"Hmmm..." Takeshi was relaxing as Juro kissed him, and the bassist slid his hand under the other man's shirt, fingers brushing over his flat belly.

"I loved you even back when you were such a bastard, you know," Juro murmured and nipped Takeshi's throat as his hand traveled lower, Takeshi's groan and the hardness he found there proved they were making some progress.

"I was a bastard, wasn't I?"

"You still are, sometimes," Juro replied as he rubbed the hard shaft under his palm, feeling the anger fading from Takeshi's body to be replaced by a different kind of tension, one derived of growing passion.

Takeshi pushed him away and he almost snapped out something angry until he realized that the older man just wanted to take off his shirt to give them skin to skin access. Or at least as much access as could be had with most of his torso covered by the increasingly annoying sling he had to wear.

He felt the man's hands glide over his shoulders, down his back, the sling stealing away some of the sensations.

Takeshi took his face gently between his hands, his gaze meeting Juro's solidly. "I love you. Always. Forever."

Juro smiled. Nodded. "I love you. Always and forever just like we promised."

Takeshi's lips were soft, their touch almost tentative as if Takeshi worried he might hurt him

somehow.

He pulled away. "It's my arm that's fucked up, not my mouth."

"Well, I hit you pretty hard."

"Yeah. Remind me about that when I've got the use of both hands, okay? I want a bit of payback."

"Wouldn't you rather have something else as payback?" Takeshi asked.

"Well, now that you mention it, yeah, I would, you know."

"So tell me what you want."

Juro was very tempted to tell the other rocker exactly what he wanted, but he stopped himself from blurting it out. Takeshi might be feeling bad about hitting him, but he didn't think that the older man would quietly accept being fucked as payment for punching him in the face.

Takeshi's dark eyes were watching him, one of Kei's eyebrows raised expectantly. "Well, what do you want, Juro?"

He was vacillating, trying to decide if he had the nerve to broach the subject or not when Takeshi stood and stripped off his jeans and underwear, following that with getting Juro out of his own pants.

"Time's up," Takeshi said as he took Juro by the hand and guided him to the couch.

"Guess you're going to decide for me."

"You were taking too long."

"Well, it's a big decision."

Takeshi smiled. "Medium-sized decision, really," he remarked as he wrapped his hand around Juro's

cock and began to stroke slowly.

"Hmm.... About the same size as yours," Juro remarked. "You telling me you're only medium-sized?"

"Just about average, probably."

Juro started to laugh. "Takeshi, you've got a nice big cock. Don't tell me you're average. Average is about six inches, you know."

Takeshi shook his head. "Now that's the kind of stuff I'd expect to hear..." he closed his eyes against the hurt and Juro put his arm around his lover.

"Yeah. It's Kita who told me. Or rather, she told *Hana* and I just overheard them giggling over it."

"I—" Takeshi's voice broke.

"I know, Kei. We all miss her."

He urged Takeshi to sit down, dropped to his knees between the man's thighs and took his cock into his mouth, trying to give solace to his lover. Takeshi's hand on his head, fingers stroking through his hair as he sucked gently, sweeping his tongue across Takeshi's erection.

Takeshi leaned back on the couch, closed his eyes, the burning pain in his chest making it hard to breathe, hard to focus on the touch of Juro's mouth on his erection.

He missed her. But in his self-absorption with his own pain, he'd done hurtful things to Juro and Akira. Things he didn't even realize he'd done. Neglecting his lovers, making them think he no longer cared about them now that Kita was gone.

He'd never meant to give them that impression, but after the initial shock had worn off, after the agony of her funeral, he just hadn't wanted to be with them. Not because he didn't love them. Gods no! He loved them both with all his heart.

But he missed her touch so much, and he had felt as if he were using them, their touches, their kisses in an effort to remember hers. And it had seemed so unfair to them.

What Juro was doing felt good. It really did.

It also brought back memories.

Ones he wasn't proud of. His neglect of both men while he'd been with her hadn't been driven home until the night he'd coated Juro with chocolate.

Heat coiled in his groin and he moaned, fingers tightening in Juro's hair until he eased up, worried he'd pull some out. He'd already hurt the bassist once, he certainly didn't want to hurt him a second time.

The mouth enclosing his cock let go and Juro looked up at him, a frown pulling at the bassist's mouth.

"I guess what you said were hollow words, weren't they?"

He shook his head. "No, Juro. It's just hard."

A hand gripped his flagging erection. "If it were hard, I wouldn't be so annoyed."

"I'm sorry."

"You really don't find Akira or I sexually attractive, do you?"

Now it was Takeshi's turn to frown. "How can you

say that?"

Juro's gaze was on his crotch and the embarrassing evidence that contradicted his words. "I don't know, maybe it's got something to do with the fact you won't even stay hard for me."

"It's not you, Juro. It's me. I—" He touched the bassist's jaw, smiled sadly.

"Not pretty enough for you, is that it?"

"No, damn it, that's not it at all!" he snapped. "And it's not just because I miss Kita. It's not that I don't love you. It's not that I don't want you sexually. I just feel like I've been using the two of you to try and make it better for me. To try and forget how much I missed her touch, her kisses, and that's not fair to either of you, is it?"

Juro sighed and sat back on his heels. "Gods, Takeshi, you are so fucked up in the head. Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and kick your father's ass for what he's done to you."

The guitarist stared at the other man, his expression somewhere between confusion and shock. "I...don't understand."

"No, of course you don't. How could you? You couldn't, could you? Not after that bastard of a man who fathered you made such an emotional mess out of you as a kid. How in hell *could* you understand?" Juro sighed and placed a hand on his shoulder, the honey-brown eyes full of compassion. "Don't you think it's natural to want to be held, to want love and affection after a tragedy? Gods, Kei, it's the most normal and natural thing in the world to want love

when you're grieving."

"I've been selfish, though. Wanting so much from both of you."

Juro's face became sad as the bassist regarded his older lover, the hand he'd put on the older man's shoulder moving to touch his face, the caress gentle, compassionate. "Kei, we're all selfish when we hurt. We get so wrapped up in our own pain we forget to see the pain others feel, we forget about everything but the hurt we feel. You, Akira, me, we're all the same. We want, we need, and we hurt and there's only one cure for that."

"What is it Juro? Tell me."

"I've been trying to show you, Kei. But I'll spell it out for you because I know you've got no common sense when it comes to things like this.

"It's L-O-V-E, Kei. Plain, ordinary, everyday love."

The bassist was smiling at him, but there was still so much sadness in his gaze. Sadness that he'd caused.

New tears, those of love, filled his eyes and he put his arms gently around the bassist, the younger man's good arm going around him in a tight embrace. "I don't deserve you, I really don't."

"Shut up. I want you to stop talking like that. In fact, I don't ever want to hear you say that ever again. Okay?" Juro ordered him, the younger man's voice harsh with anger.

He nodded. "Okay."

"Forever, right?" Juro asked him.

"Forever," he agreed.

His lover's hand closed around his cock, and he rested his forehead on Juro's shoulder, leaning into what he was being offered, accepting the solace of his lover's touch, the petal-soft kisses that moved down his neck and across his shoulder.

"Touch me, Kei."

And he did, his hand gripping the silk and steel of Juro's erection, the pair of them leaning into one another, sharing a gift greater than mere physical contact. It was friendship, understanding and love, all the parts that made a greater whole. A bond that would survive through the pain of their lives now into a future none of them could imagine.

Takeshi moaned as Juro's strong hand guided him along the pathway of desire, his blood warming, touched by his friend's love and he moved his hand in time with the bassist's, matching the pace his lover set.

"I love you," he said as he turned his head to capture Juro's mouth in a passionate kiss, tongues moving in frantic exploration as the passion built between them, their hands working faster along the hard flesh until Juro shuddered, his hips bucking as the younger man spilled himself over his hand.

Juro broke their kiss to whisper, "Forever. Now cum for me, Kei."

Crying out sharply, clinging to the bassist, Kei did just that, his cock twitching hard in his lover's grip as he came, the sound of a woman's whispered *Forever yours, Kei* filling his mind along with the burst of light as the orgasm roared through his body.

Juro kissed him then, the bassist letting him lean against him.

“I love you, Juro.”

“I know, Kei. I know you do.”

After a few moments Juro pulled away from him. “Come on, let’s clean up and go to bed.”

Takeshi nodded mutely, remembering the sound of a voice as he came. Kita’s voice.

Maybe he was starting to slip off the edge of sanity too, and that thought was just too painful to consider, because it meant that Juro would be left facing reality alone.

*Pull yourself together.* He got to his feet and followed Juro to the bathroom. *You’ve got to help keep Aki from slipping over the edge of madness because without him, we have no chance of ever being a band again.*

**The same night**  
**An apartment in Tokyo**  
**Three in the morning**

Takeshi had been unable to sleep. It was becoming his nightly routine to slip out of bed and make his way into the kitchen so he didn't bother the other two with his restlessness.

Everything they'd learned about Kita's death only raised an unending stream of additional questions without ever yielding any answers.

So many questions.

But at the top of the list was the why behind Konda's accusations

Initially it had seemed that his attempts to make him sign a confession was simply a misguided attempt to coerce him into admitting a crime that the detective actually believed he was potentially guilty of having done.

At least it had seemed a marginally plausible excuse for the detective's accusations.

Now he wasn't so sure that the man's belief was really the underlying cause behind his misguided effort.

No, there was something terribly wrong here. An off-key note amid the melody.

Or rather, there were too many off-key notes. Like the supposed contract Konda had seen. The refusal of

anyone at *Poisoned Dragon* to return their calls.

And then there'd been today's latest development. They'd gotten through to a secretary at *Poisoned Dragon*, who'd told them that Koiso-san had died in a car wreck the day of Kita's funeral. When he'd asked her who was the new executive in charge of their contract, he'd been told no decision had been about that yet. He'd then asked about their payment for the concert, and been told that their new handler would take care of it.

But she had no name for the handler either.

So many dead ends.

He rubbed his face and got up to get a drink, opting for a beer instead of something minus alcohol even though he knew Akira would give him a cool stare in the morning and Juro would be mad at him for drinking the last beer in the house because they wouldn't have one to offer anyone that might drop by to see them.

Not that many people seemed interested in being around them lately.

In fact, he realized that none of their friends had come around since Kita died. Oh, sure, there had been phone calls, messages mostly. But no one had actually come to see them.

Just another odd fact to add to the long list.

He popped the cap and sat back down, taking a drink and running over the facts that they had.

Sugita Masao had been told by Konda there was evidence against them.

The only evidence that could prove they'd killed

Kita would be the proverbial smoking gun, and there wasn't one of those. Not one that anybody in Mercykill would have ever held or used. He'd never held a gun in his entire life.

Yet there was the nagging fact that Konda had put so much pressure on him to sign a confession. Saigo was apparently more interested in trying to make Akira accuse him of the murder.

So, how could Konda create evidence that would prove guilt when none existed?

He just didn't have any answers to that.

Question after question, and no answers anywhere.

He got up and paced the small kitchen, restless and agitated. Frustrated with the entire situation.

No matter which way they turned, it was the same brick wall.

A brick wall named Konda.

Why had the cops driven Sugita off the case? Sure, their argument was that they believed the band was guilty—or more to the point, that *he* was guilty—but there was no *reason* for the two detectives to believe that.

None at all.

Takeshi mulled over Konda's demands that he sign the confession, the man's words spinning around inside his head the same way it had been doing for days and nights on end, keeping sleep at bay. Keeping him awake when he should have been sleeping. Keeping him upset.

Keeping him from thinking clearly.

He should have been able to just forget it, put it

behind them and go on.

But he was also expected to put Kita behind him, forget her and move on from that too, and he couldn't do that either.

So many unanswered questions.

And where was the contract that Kita had signed? There was no trace of it anywhere. What had she done with it?

He remembered her saying she'd put it somewhere safe, but damned if any of them knew where her safe place was at, or if she'd even brought it to their apartment. They'd searched everywhere she might have put it in and had come up empty.

He dropped into a kitchen chair again, taking a swallow of the beer. He sat there staring at nothing, the detective's voice echoing across his consciousness with as much clarity as it held when he teetered on the edge of the sleep that refused to claim him.

The hours of conversation kept playing out in his mind, like a movie he couldn't shut off. Their confrontation with the man at Kita's funeral had only added fuel to the fires of suspicion. The entire situation gnawed at his thoughts the way a dog chewed a toy. Nothing made any sense. Not Kita's death. Not Konda's accusations.

Why would Konda lie about their contract with *Poisoned Dragon*?

And why would the detective insist it was money motivating them to kill her? That made no sense either, because the way the contract between them and Kita read, she received only five percent of their

earnings after taxes and fees were taken out. Besides, they all lived together and shared expenses and had never had problems paying bills.

Then there was the cell phone that the police refused to return to them, saying it was evidence. Even their refusal to give them a list of the phone numbers it contained made no sense. How those phone numbers could prove anything to do with the murder eluded him. All the numbers would do is allow them to contact people Kita might have scheduled future appearances or interviews with, maybe discover someone else at *Poisoned Dragon* she'd contacted about the concert money.

They were being denied the ability to make a living, to even pay their bills.

And that only raised another question: Why were the cops making it so hard for them?

Who was the man who'd killed her?

Why weren't the detectives assigned to the case looking for him?

What reason did they have to accuse the surviving victims of the crime of Kita's murder?

When would they get answers?

Restless, he got up and stared out of the window into the night.

Like their future it was dark, the dim glimmers of light – like hope itself – were distant.

He took another drink of the beer and considered.

They'd been waiting for someone to help them, to save them from the mess they were in, but the truth was, no one was coming to help them. No one could

save them.

No one but themselves.

And they didn't have the first clue what to do, where to go, who to turn to for the answers.

If they really wanted answers, they'd have to find someone, anyone, who'd overheard what had happened backstage while they'd been playing.

He finished off the beer and tossed the empty bottle into the trash, then started a pot of coffee.

He leaned against the counter as the pot perked, the rich scent of the coffee filling the tiny space as he stood there, eyes closed, head tipped back to rest on the door of a cabinet, all the hurt of what they'd lost welling up inside him, filling his chest until it was hard to breathe.

But he took a deep breath and fought off the tears that wanted to spill from his closed eyes.

Tears would give him no answers.

They didn't even wash away his pain.

Nothing could.

Except, perhaps, finding out who had killed Kita and stolen their dream.

No, just finding him wasn't enough anymore. He wanted the man to die for what he'd done.

But with Konda and Saigo trying pin the blame on them rather than go after the real killer, it wasn't likely the man in the suit would ever be found, much less brought to justice.

Justice.

It sounded like such a simple word. So neat and clean.

But nothing about the situation was neat or clean.

Takeshi opened his eyes, something hard and dark flickering in their depths.

If the cops weren't going to find the man... then it was up to them to do it. The three of them. Or maybe just the two of them. He wasn't sure what help Akira might offer. The younger man was so nonviolent he might not want to be involved in the search for a dangerous killer. Takeshi knew he could count on the bassist to help him, though, because Juro had as much promised him that help already.

That was when he realized a few things about the bassist.

The funeral. Their conversations.

Hints. Suspicions. But no outright accusations.

Juro suspected something was rotten, but had kept his mouth shut, letting him come to terms with Kita's death first.

Well, he'd come to terms with her being gone. What he hadn't come to terms with was the way she'd died.

A murderer was walking out there on the streets. One who would never be accused, never face trial, never pay for his crime because Konda was bent on finding a way to lock him up for the crime.

Takeshi poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table to think.

*Okay, now what? The cops might be in on this. So what do we do? If the two of us are going to look for this killer before Konda comes to arrest me, where do we start?*

But he already knew the answer to that.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

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Start where it had happened.  
At the *Nippon Bodukan* in Kudanshita.

## CHAPTER NINE

**The next day  
Nippon Bokudan in Kudanshita  
Eight in the evening**

Akira hadn't wanted to come here, but Takeshi didn't want to leave him alone at the apartment. He knew exactly what he'd find when he came home and he just couldn't deal with finding the younger man in a state of near catatonia staring into space and talking to the dead. More specifically, talking to Kita. It was just too...well, it was creepy, because Akira acted as if the woman were around, speaking to him when he thought neither of the other rockers would hear.

Both he and Juro were starting to worry about the overly emotional drummer, beginning to fear he was on the verge of a mental collapse.

But, when he wasn't spooking them by talking to their dead handler, Akira seemed so...normal. Happy and cheerful, almost the way he'd been before she was murdered.

And maybe that was a bad sign, too.

On consideration, he realized he probably wasn't doing much better than Akira was on the sanity front. Not when he kept seeing things and hearing her in his mind.

Since Juro had gone to his physical therapist and then had plans to go visit Momma Takei and search at her place for the contract, he hadn't wanted to leave Akira alone.

Takeshi felt it would be just as inadvisable for the drummer to stay home by himself, alone in the apartment, talking to someone that wasn't there as it was for Akira to come here.

But seeing the way his Hana was acting, he was having second thoughts.

Akira was pale as death when they got off the train at the Kudanshita station, his hand cold in Takeshi's as they walked toward the huge amphitheater.

"I don't want to go in there," Akira whispered as they neared the building.

"You'll be with me, and he won't be here," he assured the younger man.

But as they reached the back door, Akira froze. The door was standing open, people inside moving what looked to be sound equipment, probably setting up for whatever concert was scheduled for that night, or possibly for the following night. Takeshi realized he didn't even know who was going to play, and he'd always known who would be at the *Nippon Bokudan* because he'd followed the concert news with the fervor of a religious fanatic—until recently. Until Kita was murdered.

Akira started shaking his head rapidly from side to side. "No, no, no... Won't go in. Won't."

Takeshi let go of Aki's hand. "Fine, stay out here, then."

Akira 's dark gaze was riveted on the door, pupils dilated, full of unreasoning terror. "Don't go, Kei, please."

The drummer had his hands wrapped around Takeshi's wrist, his grip so tight it was almost painful, the knuckles gone as white as the blue-haired man's face. "Please...Kei...please don't go..."

"For God's sake," Takeshi grumbled, losing what little patience remained to him after so many days of Akira's odd behavior. "Either come with me, or stay here, but I'm going in."

"I c...can't g...go in there, K...Kei."

The guitarist frowned, watched the tears starting, his lips pressing into a tight line of anger that he held in check by force of will.

Akira was getting worse, not better and he was losing his ability to deal with the younger man's odd behavior. More and more the guitarist feared that they would lose Akira to a mental breakdown, and that would put an end to their hopes of ever playing together as Mercykill again.

He needed to go inside in order to find answers, and if Akira wouldn't go with him, then he'd have to go by himself and leave the frantic younger rocker alone outside.

"Fine. Stay out here. I'll be back after I've talked to people."

Akira was shaking his head in denial, his hands still tight around Takeshi's wrist. "I won't let you. We...have to go home. We have to go home now!"

"We just got here, Akira. I'm *not* leaving without

talking to the people here. Someone might have seen the killer. There might be clues to who Kita's murderer is, and we have to find out whatever we can before Konda has us locked up. Now let's go!"

"N...No! I won't. I won't go. Don't want you to go! Please... *Please!*"

The guitarist sighed in exasperation. Reasoning with Akira wasn't working, the other man's emotional state showing all the cracks that he and Juro suspected were there, but had never seen so clearly.

Takeshi was getting a thorough tour of them now, when he had the least patience to handle it, and no one to help him. "Baby, please, this is very important."

But the man just shook his head and held on while tears flowed down his cheeks.

Sighing, Takeshi pulled his arm free of the drummer's grip. "Wait here."

He turned and started to walk toward the door, leaving the smaller man behind, but Akira ran after him, grabbing his arm, bracing his feet and hanging on like a child stubbornly intent on having his own way.

"Kei, *please* don't leave me!"

He turned a hard stare on Akira. "I'm going in. You can stay right there, or you can come inside. We aren't going home until I get some answers."

Akira's eyes were filling with tears. "Don't. Don't go, please."

"Are you going to come inside with me?"

Akira shook his head.

“Well, I’m going in.” He pulled his arm free again and took a few steps away, waiting to see if Akira would come with him. When the younger man just stood there looking stricken, he started to walk away. When Akira didn’t move to follow him he turned and went inside, leaving a tearful Akira standing alone in the alley.

Takeshi looked around and headed for the dressing room they’d used, a ready excuse that they’d left something behind on his lips if anyone questioned his presence.

It was a lie. It was also the truth.

They’d left behind nothing physical that he could find and carry out of the place. No, what they’d left behind was their dream.

And he wanted it back.

No matter what it took to get it, he was going to get them back on their feet and making music again and to hell with anyone that tried to prevent it.

And to hell with Detective Konda and his accusations. The man was an idiot if he actually thought any of them would have killed Kita. A total moron.

Takeshi couldn’t help but remember how the other officers had acted when they’d heard what he’d said to Konda. They seemed as stunned and disbelieving as he’d been by the accusations.

*Yes, there’s definitely something wrong.*

Takeshi reached the area backstage that led to their dressing room and paused, something hard and sharp

filling his chest.

This was the spot where they'd argued. Where she'd told him of the mistake she'd made, the folly of one foolish little mistake they'd *both* made.

*Are you sure?* he'd asked her.

*Yes,* had been her reply.

The anger of that moment became the bitter sorrow of now, hindsight always so clear.

But no one knew what the future held, and he was only thinking about what they were about to do, excited, worried they'd do something wrong, blow their first appearance in front of a big audience.

Their time onstage had been almost perfect, a dream that made the events following even more horrific.

And the nightmare kept going, Konda trying to make him say he'd killed her.

He'd never have hurt her. Not before that night, and not after.

Takeshi's hands closed into fists, fingernails biting into his palms, tears welling up behind closed eyes. He started to shake, pain, anger, remorse, outrage and helplessness, regret. Everything he'd wanted to say to her, do with her was now impossible.

She was dead.

And it was too late.

It was too late to tell her he was sorry.

Too late to tell her all the things he should have said, take back the things he hadn't meant to say.

Scared, confused, disbelieving.

He hadn't been ready for what she'd told him.

## MERVILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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And now it didn't matter. He couldn't tell her he was sorry. Couldn't change anything, because she was dead and he was standing here alone remembering what should have been a happy moment for them both. A moment he'd ruined, too focused on what it would mean for his career, for hers.

Selfish.

He'd been so damned selfish and blind.

They'd stood together on the threshold of a dream, balanced on the edge of disaster, neither of them knowing what the future held in store.

Shattered melody, the dream broken, life carried away on the discordant roar of a gun blast.

"I'm so sorry, Kita. So very sorry," he murmured to her ghost.

But it was too late, and her ghost couldn't hear him.

He stepped away from the place, walked toward the dressing room, knowing he'd have to pass an even more painful spot.

The place she'd died.

The reason Akira wouldn't ever want to set foot in this place again, probably not even to do a concert. The memories would be too painful for the drummer who wore his heart on the outside of his body. Easily driven to tears, laughter, fear.

Hana, their beautiful, gentle Hana.

None of them would ever be the same, their bodies and hearts scarred for life.

Kei knelt down and touched the floor where Kita

had died. He could still smell the blood, see the stains on the floor even though no actual trace of them remained.

Something ruffled the red and black locks of his hair, his imagination turning it into the caress of an unseen hand, lack of sleep playing tricks with his mind. It was just a breeze, probably from someone opening a door somewhere nearby.

But it had almost felt like a hand running through his hair in a caress.

"I love you, Kita," he whispered just in case her spirit was near, could hear him.

Stupidity.

The dead heard nothing.

He caught a whiff of sweetness, perfume.

Kita's perfume.

His eyes opened in shock.

A woman stood just a few feet away. She was in her late forties, hair greying, a sad expression on her face. "You're one of those boys from the band that played here Friday night, aren't you?"

He nodded, got to his feet.

"I'm so sorry about what happened. I told the police everything I know." She sighed. "It wasn't much. I'm sorry it couldn't have been more, but that man shoved me so hard I only got a quick glimpse of him as he ran out."

Takeshi stared. Took a step closer to her. "What did you just say?" he asked, voice hardly more than a whisper.

"Terrible thing, her being killed like that. I really

hope they catch him.”

“You...saw him?”

The woman nodded. “Yes. Tall, in a very expensive suit. Italian designer, I think.”

Takeshi took her hand, held it gently. “Please, tell me what you saw.”

She pulled her hand, and he let go.

“I’m sorry. We didn’t know anyone else had seen her killer.”

“Well, as I said, I didn’t get a good look at him, because he knocked me down as he ran by me. But I do remember he was in a dark grey suit. It felt like silk. I remember that.”

“You’re sure?”

The woman nodded. “Oh, yes, I was here to work on one of the costumes that Dream Scar’s guitarist was supposed to wear that night. I’m a costumer by trade. I specialize in outfits for visual kei bands.” She reached into her purse and took out a card. “You boys looked so beautiful Friday. Especially Hana. He’s so lovely it’s hard to remember he’s a man.”

“Yes, he is beautiful.” He accepted the card, glanced at it.

She nodded. “You love him, I can tell.”

Takeshi nodded, his surprise evident. “I do. But how did you know?”

“Body language never lies,” she replied. “I make it a habit of buying every music magazine that comes out. I have to keep track of styles among the different bands. It’s part of my job to know what’s hot and what’s old news.”

He smiled, forcing it. "I'm sorry to change the subject, but you said you told the police about seeing that man?"

"Oh, yes, I certainly did.

"Who did you speak to? Do you remember?"

"A detective." She frowned. "I'm sure I wrote his name down."

"Konda?" he questioned.

"Why, yes, that's it! Detective Konda. Nice man, very pleasant."

Anger rose up in Takeshi, but he held it in check. Konda had known about a witness, yet he had tried to get him to sign a confession anyway. It made no sense. None.

Takeshi wanted answers, but all he got were more unanswerable questions.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Not Kita's murder. Not the loss of their statements. Not the questioning that went on for hours, not being all but forced to sign confessions to a crime they hadn't committed.

Konda saying that there were no other witnesses, no one else who'd seen the tall man in his expensive suit.

Konda telling a lie.

Takeshi went cold inside.

The woman glanced at her watch. "I'm very sorry, but I have to get to a costume fitting for another band. They're leaving on tour next week. Call me if you want new costumes, Kei. I have to leave. I'm very sorry," she said, bowing her head politely.

"Thank you, Hari-san," he said, remembering the woman's name from his brief glance at her card. He bowed his head politely.

"I really am sorry I can't stay to chat with you longer, Kei."

"I understand, you have to go."

With one last bow, the woman hurried off and Kei was left standing there with even more questions than when he'd arrived.

He was also more determined to find answers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Akira stood there, trembling, caught between fear of being alone and the terror of going inside to face the place where Kita had died.

He took a step after Takeshi, shook his head, one hand going to his mouth. He felt like he was going to be sick. Violently and thoroughly sick.

Stomach heaving, he turned away from the building, stared at the traffic creeping along the street, tried to think about anything but what had happened here. A cold chill crept along his spine, and he shivered.

He put out a hand to steady himself, touching the building. He snatched it back as if he'd been burned and, horrified, pushed beyond enduring, he vomited on the pavement, embarrassment only making him feel worse.

"Hey, what have we got here?" a voice behind him asked.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Akira turned around, swallowing hard as his stomach heaved uneasily.

There were three men, older, bigger, something about their faces, the numerous piercings and tattoos telling Akira he was in trouble, but just why he wasn't sure. Lots of their fans looked like this.

But these men, the look in their eyes, the way they spread out told him they weren't fans.

"Pretty, isn't he?" the man in the middle said.

"Yeah. Fuckable pretty, like a woman."

Akira tried to back away, but a hand struck him between the shoulder blades and sent him stumbling.

Four of them. There were four of them, hard-eyed, smiling.

"Please..." He was begging, just like in school, afraid, his guts gone to water, fear tearing at him.

"Begs like a woman, too," the one on his left said.

A hand tried to touch his cheek and he backed away only to bump into the man behind him. Arms wrapped around his waist and held him fast.

"Oh, God, please...what do you want?"

"What we want," the man who was apparently their leader began, "is to find out what you and your pretty boyfriend are doing here."

Akira stared at the man. "We're musicians...we..."

The man put a hand over his mouth. "Shhh... we know who you are..." he grinned fiercely, "Hana-chan. We want to know why you're here."

The hand was taken off his mouth. "We left some stuff," he said, trying to lie.

The man on his left shook his head. "He's lying."

"Yeah, I know. Didn't think he had it in him to lie to us, knowing what lies will get him," the leader stated. To Akira he said, "Try again."

"I...don't know. Kei wanted to come here..."

A fist slammed into his belly and Akira doubled over, choking, spitting bile, pain-comets shooting across his vision. The man holding him let go and he sank to his knees, vomit burning his throat as he coughed.

A hand gripped his hair, pulling his head back, a hand cracked across his already sore face, bringing tears to his eyes, filling his mouth with blood.

*"Get the fuck away from him!"*

Kei's voice raised in anger, the sound of the other rocker coming their way at a run.

"He won't learn, will he?" one of the men said.

"Nope. Guess he needs another lesson in minding his own business."

Akira recognized the leader's voice. Even dazed, he realized these four knew something about Kita's death from what they were saying even though it wasn't specific, didn't spell it out in clear-cut words.

He got unsteadily to his feet. "Stay away, Kei! Please!"

But it was much too late for him to warn his lover to stay out of what was happening. Fury burned in the guitarist's eyes, the man stalking toward them like an avenging angel, no trace of fear in his expression.

The man that had been holding him grabbed him again, pinning his arms to his sides. "This'll be fun."

We're gonna get to watch your pretty lover get his ass beat."

They were going to hurt Kei.

Akira struggled, the slender drummer attempting to get free, struggling to escape, fighting back for the first time in his life. He couldn't let them hurt Takeshi, his handsome Kei who he loved more than anyone or anything in the whole world.

"Kei!"

Takeshi watched the three men with contempt. "Just let him go and I won't call the cops."

The one in the middle laughed at him. "Like doing that will help you."

Takeshi's eyes narrowed, the man's confidence that the authorities wouldn't do anything raising his suspicions concerning Konda and Saigo's duplicity even higher. Yes, there was definitely something very *wrong* about the pair of detectives.

He was faced off against the men, watching Akira trying to escape the grasp of the man holding him. It was infuriating, the entire situation. Kita's death. Konda and Saigo. Juro almost losing an arm.

When the three men came at him, something inside Takeshi snapped.

And the tiny seed in the center of his soul took root as the dark light touched it.

A fist hit him in the stomach and he snarled, his own fist breaking a nose.

Fists and feet hit him, the rocker giving back as good as he got, Akira screaming his fear and anger

making the treble counterpoint to the sound of flesh being battered.

“Waste the bitches!” the leader of the thugs growled to one of his men as he went staggering back from a lucky kick the guitarist had gotten in on his leg.

*“Takeshi!”*

The guitarist saw it from the corner of his eye. Black. Deadly as a serpent.

Sure death.

His only regret was that he couldn’t save Akira any more than he had saved Kita from her end, and the knowledge hurt.

The man holding Akira screamed as the drummer’s teeth sank into his arm, both of the smaller man’s booted feet coming down on the arches of his feet. Akira was small, but hours of practice at the drums had made his arms and legs stronger than they looked. Something went crunch under one of his heels, the bigger man bellowing and letting him go as he dropped to the pavement, his hands going to a broken foot.

Freed, the drummer ran to try and help his lover, his own fear of fighting, of being hurt, lost when he saw death coming for Kei in the form of a sleek black pistol in the fist of one of the gangers.

The man was trying to get a clear shot at Takeshi, but the fact that the other two men were still exchanging punches and kicks kept him from firing.

Akira knew he wouldn’t let Kei die the way Kita

had. He just couldn't, and if he died to prevent it, then so be it. He would gladly die to save his lover.

It was better than living without him.

Eyes wide with terror, he slammed bodily into the man with the gun. It went off, the bullet cracking into the wall of the building, the thug falling with Akira in a tangle of flailing limbs.

Takeshi felt a fist and a foot hit him at the same time, and he stumbled just as something black skidded by his hand.

He made a grab for it, scrambling across the pavement like some ungainly crab, his hand closing around the hard plastic.

Getting to his feet, he raised the gun, eyes full of rage. "Which one of you shitheads wants to die?" he snarled, the gun rock-steady in his fist.

He saw the man try to grab Akira, but the drummer kicked him in the crotch, the man giving a groan of agony.

"You okay, baby?" he asked.

"I...I..don't know..." was the tearful answer.

"Come here, Aki."

The drummer joined him quickly, pressing a blood-and-tear-streaked face to his chest. He wrapped an arm around Akira, his eyes never leaving the four men who had tried to hurt them, would have killed them.

"He won't do it. Let's get him."

The smile he gave the leader of the thugs was classic Kei, pure contempt, the same sneer he'd

treated Konda to several days ago. "Try me," he said softly.

One of them took a step toward him and he lowered the gun, put a bullet into the man's thigh. He went down screaming.

Akira was trembling. "Kei...God...Kei, please...the police..."

"Shh...baby. Don't worry," he murmured. "I don't think these guys want to talk to any cops about what happened."

The leader stared at him, glanced at his injured men. "Konda will have your ass for this. I promise."

Takeshi's eyes narrowed, his suspicions confirmed. Konda and his partner had to be dirty, but what were they involved in, and why had Kita been killed? He wanted answers, and he was going to get them now, no matter what he had to do. "Don't count on it."

"You're really stupid, you know that? You're going to be charged with her murder, so just take it, or do what you rockers are so good at and go hang yourselves and spare your families the humiliation of a trial."

Takeshi took a step toward the man, rage burning dark in his heart. "Run, or I'll kill you."

The ganger laughed. "Sure. We'll go. But it's not over for you. It won't ever be over for you."

The leader gathered up his injured men and they went limping off into the darkness.

**The next morning**  
**An apartment building in Tokyo**  
**Eleven in the morning**

It was a pair of very sore and aching rockers in the company of a very worried and upset Juro that arrived home late the next morning. They'd stopped to meet Juro at Momma Takei's house and seeing the condition the pair of rockers were in, she'd insisted that they stay the night to rest.

Takeshi, not sure what else to do with it, had hidden the gun he'd taken from the thugs inside a stack of empty flowerpots on her balcony.

Momma Takei had fussed over them, cleaning their cuts and applying salve to the bruises. She'd even taken the time to mend Akira's torn shirt, though he'd decided to come home in women's clothing, using the makeup to hide the worst of the bruises on his face.

The trio rode the elevator up to their floor and went down the brightly lit hallway to find their apartment totally trashed, the door ajar, their things scattered and broken all over the floor, their furniture smashed and torn apart. There was a notice on the door saying that the police had conducted a legal search of the place, but it didn't look like the results of a search so much as the total systematic destruction of their property.

## MERVILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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Konda hadn't forgotten them after all. He'd just been waiting to hit them when they'd least expected it, waiting until the damage would hurt them the most

Akira dissolved into tears, Takeshi swearing luridly, his arms wrapping around his lover while Juro stepped inside to see if anything they owned had survived the destruction. Below the note of the official police search was a second note, this one from the management company that owned their building.

In big, bold words it proclaimed:

**Twenty-four hour eviction notice for non-payment of rents owed.**

## CHAPTER TEN

### **The next two weeks Multiple locations**

They used the last of the money they had to get their things moved. Not that there was much left to move; so many of their most precious things had been destroyed by the police search. Akira cried every time he found anything that had been Kita's broken, and the other pair of men finally sent him home to his mother's house and finished the packing themselves with the help of Juro's sister.

Juro had tried to file a complaint regarding the damage, but as always the answer was the same: they were being investigated for a crime, so that was just the sort of thing to be expected. Angry, he'd tried to get through to a superior officer and was told that someone would return their call later in the day.

The bassist stayed at their apartment until he had to leave for his therapy without anyone calling him back, nor did anyone ever return his call. He tried to get through to someone the next day, but the woman answering the phone simply put him on hold and never came back to the call.

Their only consolation was that their musical instruments were safely stored at the Inoue's' home.

With money so tight and no income from the concert in sight, Akira and Takeshi went looking for jobs. Without college degrees, the jobs they could apply for were far from well-paying, but Akira had worked in cafes before, so that gave him a bit of an edge over Takeshi, who'd only ever worked in his parent's company's mailroom during school breaks.

Not that it really mattered where Takeshi was concerned. His efforts to find a job revealed yet another level of Konda's interference. Anyone checking Takeshi's references was told not to hire him because he was a murder suspect. It wasn't legal to deny him employment, especially as no charges were filed against him, but no employer would touch him.

Inoue Shun, Akira's father offered him some hours at his manga store, but Takeshi turned them down because he didn't want to cause Akira's family any more trouble than they already had. So far the police had been to their house twice to search the place, and while they'd taken nothing nor broken things as they had in the rocker's apartment, it disrupted Ai's work on her manga for hours at a time. With deadlines to meet, Akira's mother couldn't afford to keep being searched.

It was pure harassment, but there was nothing they could do to stop it.

And then Takeshi got a call from his grandmother saying her condominium had also been searched, as had his parents' home and his father's office, despite the fact that Takeshi hadn't seen either of them in almost a year.

Then the call came from his father that if he couldn't keep himself out of trouble with the law, he would find a way to make sure none of his sordid troubles bothered their family again.

It was yet another blow to them, and the three men were already reeling from the constant strain.

The only bright side in all of it was the fact that Juro's physical therapy was going well and he was making great progress, mostly through sheer determination to make the deadline handed to them by *Poisoned Dragon*. But, fast as he was progressing, that deadline was looming and he still couldn't manage to play anything faster than their ballad, 'No More Sun', which he couldn't play all the way through without making several mistakes.

They got a break in the form of a letter from Takeshi's grandmother. She told him how sorry she was that she couldn't do more to help him when she knew he would never kill a woman no matter what anyone, including his father might think. She'd enclosed a check for enough money that they didn't have to worry about paying another month's rent.

Oddly, the letter seemed to mark a minor turning point for the three, as Akira was offered a job at a cafe that afternoon. A job that the drummer gladly took.

Takeshi, still concerned that the thugs who'd attacked them might show up again, decided it was time for him to actually learn how to properly defend himself. On Juro's advice—the bassist had taken karate lessons when he'd been in junior high—he found a dojo and started to train. Since he couldn't get

a job, it at least gave him something to do.

Knowing her brother was in financial trouble, Juro's sister started to come by more often, mostly to drop off random groceries, something that Akira's parents also did once a week, his mother also giving them a small amount of money so they could pay for the phone they had to have.

Momma Takei called them almost every day, the woman lonely and still trapped in the same nightmare they all shared, that Kita's real killer would never be found.

They'd tried to find Kita's murderer themselves, but other than the confirmation from the costumer that she'd seen the man in the suit and their encounter with the gun-toting thugs, they had no clues.

Between the pitiful money Akira was making at the cafe and the small amount of money Takeshi's grandmother was sending to him under his father's nose, they were getting by, though it was tight because of the costs of the karate lessons that Takeshi was taking. Four days into the class, the owner of the dojo refunded Takeshi's money and told him that he was very sorry, but he could no longer allow the rocker to attend.

Takeshi's question regarding why he couldn't study there was met with a very apologetic but emphatic reason. The police had forbidden them to teach a killer how to kill more effectively.

Dismayed, Takeshi had taken his money and located another dojo. When he told them of his

problem they'd nodded, handed him the application and taken his fees with a promise to call him if the sensei chose to train him.

He'd gotten the call the very next morning They'd told him to bring a gei and be at the class promptly at five-thirty the next day to fill out the last of the paperwork, because Yamakazi-sensei had decided to take him as a student.

**Two weeks after the move**  
**Dojo in Tokyo**  
**Six in the evening**

The man's name was Yamakazi Sho and he was about the same height as Takeshi, but the man moved with the assured grace of a panther as he walked across the front of the mirrored wall that lined the dojo.

From the moment he'd seen the man, Takeshi was quite impressed. Not only was the man good looking—which really didn't matter as far as karate instructors went—but he was said to be the best in the city.

And, for some unknown reason, Yamakazi-sensei had taken him on as a student for only half the cost he normally charged. He didn't tell the rocker why, just that he would be pleased to teach him.

It was puzzling, but Takeshi accepted the man's generosity with polite grace and tried not to worry what sort of recompense the man might require later. He would worry about what the cost of that generosity might be if the topic came up.

"So you've decided to learn karate. I won't bother to ask any of you why, your reasons are on the applications and, I frankly don't really care what they are.

“What I care about is your total dedication to this class. If you are late, or if you miss a class, there will be no acceptable excuses. If you are late three times or if you miss three classes, you will no longer train with me. Is this understood?”

A loud, “Yes, sensei,” was given by everyone in the class.

Takeshi looked up and realized the sensei’s eyes were on him. The man just gave him a very slight, somewhat odd smile.

“Everyone line up along this wall,” he told the class as he directed them toward the left side of the large room. “I will pair up experienced students with our new group of beginners. You new students are to listen and obey the person chosen for your instructor with the same respect and courtesy you would give to me. If you wish to learn here, you will show respect for your trainer at all times.”

Takeshi went with the other students and waited.

He watched as, one by one, the experienced students were paired with beginners like himself. But when it came to his turn, Yamakazi-san just smiled and walked past him. He heard some soft murmurs from the other students, new and old alike, and wondered why he’d been skipped. He held his silence and when the last new person was passed off to a student teacher, the sensei himself came back and motioned for Takeshi to follow him.

“You will learn from me, and me alone.”

Takeshi smiled and bowed. “Thank you, sensei.”

The man just laughed softly. “We’ll see how much

you thank me later. Understand, I plan to make your life hell, Morishita-san.

“You need an outlet for the anger filling you, and while the police think that denying you such an outlet will lead to your confession, I know you have nothing to confess other than the fact you are a victim who is being harassed.”

Takeshi stared at the man. “They spoke to you about me?”

“Yes, a police detective named Saigo came and spoke to me. He tried to convince me that you are a hardened killer.” The sensei leaned close to him and whispered, “I can see your soul in your eyes, and what I see is sorrow and a desire for justice. What I don’t see is guilt. You would not have hurt her, because you loved her, right?”

“That’s right.”

Yamakazi-sensei nodded. “I’m never wrong.” He moved closer to Takeshi, so close the rocker could feel the heat of the karate teacher’s body through their uniforms. “You’ve been backed into a corner. I’ll teach you what you need to know. It’s up to you what you do with that knowledge. Understand?”

Takeshi met the man’s gaze and frowned. “I just want to be able to protect us better. We’ve run into some tough customers, and we keep getting hurt.”

“Are you sure that’s all you want from this? To be able to protect Hana-chan?”

The guitarist was staring at the other man now, wondering exactly what he was getting at, and how he seemed to know so much about their problems.”

The man smiled slightly at him. "Don't be so surprised that I know about you, Morishita-san. People have come to speak with me about you. Police. Your father's man." He shrugged. "And you told me about the problem you had with the police at the other dojo you wanted to take lessons from."

The man stepped back and motioned the young rocker to follow him. Takeshi did, the sensei taking him into a private office.

"Close the door."

He did, then stood there as the older man regarded him quietly for a moment. "There are things I know about you, Morishita-san. How I know them doesn't really matter. What I will say is those two detectives are involved in something that has affected the lives of many people." The karate teacher was quietly watching him, the man's expression unreadable.

"You stand at a crossroad in your life. You can let the actions of others pull you along like a river at flood, or you can make a stand. What you decide to do is your choice, and you will live with it the rest of your life. Choose carefully, Kei. Because you'll find that things you do out of passion often become the things you most deeply regret later in your life."

"Why are you telling me this?"

The faint smile didn't waver as the man said, "Because you deserve a chance and a choice. And right now, you have very little of either available to you."

"Is that why you gave me a discount on the classes?"

"In part."

"And the rest of your reason?"

"I've told you I can read your soul inside your eyes. In you, I see strength and determination, but I also see other things. There are dark things growing inside you. Things you fear, that make you feel in ways you are not comfortable with, feelings that confuse you."

Takeshi stared at the man and realized his mouth was hanging open. He closed it and sighed. "How do you know this?"

"I've answered that question. My question to you is, what will you do? These things are part of who you are now. To know fear of one's self is to be lost in yourself. I'll give you a light to see through the darkness in you, but it will be up to you to find the way back."

Takeshi bowed. "I thank you, Yamakazi-sensei."

The man laughed softly. "Don't thank me yet. I'm going to make you work very hard because I know that time is not something you have in abundance.

"Also, you should bring your friends by. I wouldn't mind meeting all the members of Mercykill, and I think they could all benefit from coming here."

"Thank you, sensei, but we can't afford..."

The man cut him off, with a sharp gesture. "I didn't ask for money, did I?"

"No, sensei."

"Right. Now get out of my office. I'll meet you out on the tatami in a few moments."

Takeshi bowed low, then opened the door

wondering exactly why the man was being so kind to him – all of them, really.

“Oh, Morishita-san?”

“Sensei?”

“While you are here, we will call you Kei. Do you mind that?”

“No, not at all, sensei.”

“Good. Now go.”

He closed the door behind him.

**The next couple of weeks**  
**Various locations**

Yamakazi Sho, Takeshi's sensei proved he was a man of his word and took Takeshi as his personal student, working one on one with the rocker during his training sessions. He also had more in store for the guitarist than he'd mentioned, demanding that Takeshi arrive at the dojo before it opened at nine in the morning so he could sweep the floors and do other menial tasks that he told Takeshi were the traditional duty of the master's personal students. The rocker did as he was told with no complaint because he knew that would mean losing the opportunity he'd been given.

As the sensei instructed, he also brought Akira and Juro with him when the two could accompany him. Akira was taught a few simple moves that would allow him to fend off attackers, while the sensei showed Juro a few exercises he promised would help his arm heal faster and aid him in regaining full use more quickly.

They were all happy when Akira found a better paying job, but he refused to tell either of them what it was. The fact that he always left carrying a small gym bag made both older men wonder why he was being so secretive. He wouldn't tell him what he was doing, much less where he was doing it, which made

both of his lovers uneasy.

Uneasy enough that curiosity finally got the better of them.

"Where is he going?" Takeshi muttered as they crossed the street, following Akira at a discreet distance.

The younger man was dressed like a schoolgirl. An underage girl, from the school uniform he'd put on. Small as Akira was, he could get away with pretending to be a fourteen or fifteen-year-old girl.

The question of 'Why?' remained.

And Takeshi didn't think he was going to like the answer to that 'why' one bit.

"I'm not sure."

"But you think you might know?"

"Not exactly, but maybe."

Takeshi glared at Juro. "Spit it out."

"Hey, not until I'm sure, okay? I don't want you getting mad at him over nothing."

Akira went inside one of the nicer hotels in the area and Takeshi's frown turned into a stormy scowl. "I think I can guess now."

Juro shoved his hands in his pockets and sighed. "Yeah. I was afraid of this."

The pair of rockers stalked into the lobby of the hotel, but Akira wasn't there. A glance at the elevators showed one going up.

"Ask the desk clerk. He might know," Takeshi instructed Juro who nodded and walked away leaving Takeshi to watch the elevator going up. It didn't stop until it reached the eighth floor. His eyes

narrowed in anger. Anger at the situation that made Akira even consider doing such a thing. Anger at himself for not realizing the lengths Akira would go to in order to help them.

*I should have expected he'd sacrifice himself to help us. He's so brave to do this, and stupid too. Doesn't he realize how dangerous this is?*

Takeshi didn't think Akira would see being a sex worker as being any more dangerous than going shopping, and that was the scariest part to the guitarist. Akira wasn't thinking about all the stories of girls being beaten, forced to do more than they wanted, or being found dead.

A sick feeling flooded Takeshi's stomach, making him nauseous as he considered all the horrible things that could happen to his precious Akira.

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead on the cool steel that surrounded the call buttons for the elevator, hands closing into fists as he swallowed bile.

A hand gripped his shoulder and he turned a stricken face to Juro.

"I told the clerk that Aki's your sister and you're worried about her, since she's just a kid. The guy is some kind of company executive with a thing for schoolgirls. I told the clerk we wouldn't report him or anything," Juro sighed. "But I really want to. The guy's a real sick bastard. He likes them really young."

Takeshi stabbed the elevator call button. "And if he finds out Akira isn't a girl, he's going to be furious."

"That's what I'm worried about too," Juro admitted.

"Do you know the room number?"

"Yeah. Eight-ten," Juro told him as the elevator doors opened. They stepped in, Takeshi pacing back and forth in the tiny space like some sort of caged cat as they headed for the eighth floor.

It wasn't hard to find the right room.

Takeshi's eyes narrowed at the sounds coming through the door. Soft moaning noises.

Juro gripped his upper arm. "Take it easy, Kei. Don't do anything stupid."

He took a deep breath. "I won't. I just want to get Aki out of there."

"Promise?"

Takeshi nodded and tried the doorknob.

It turned in his hand and he shoved it open.

Akira was on his knees between an older man's spread legs and it didn't take much thought to know what was happening.

Takeshi stalked into the room.

"Who the hell are you two!" the man demanded. "Get out! Go find your own girl."

"That girl isn't a girl," Takeshi snapped, too angry to bother with the story that Juro told the hotel clerk.

Akira got to his feet, eyes wide with horror.

"I paid for her time!"

"I don't care!" Takeshi snarled in the man's face as he grabbed Akira by the arm and hauled him toward the door.

"Takeshi, please. We need the money!"

"I paid for her time in advance! Either leave her here or give me my money back!"

Akira cringed from the look he gave the younger man, Takeshi's jaw working, fury making it hard for him to speak or think.

He wasn't mad at Akira. He was mad at himself for failing to find work. If Konda and Saigo would stop hounding him he could get a job, help pay for rent and food, but no matter what job he tried for they made sure he didn't get it by saying he was being investigated for murder.

"Come on, we're going home."

He dragged Akira toward the door.

"Let me get my shoes."

"You don't need them!" Takeshi snarled as he hauled Akira out of the room and down the hallway. He wanted out of the room, out of the hotel. Akira had been selling himself to help them.

Behind them he heard Juro saying, "I'm really sorry, but that isn't a girl. That's his boyfriend and he's mad."

"A guy! But he's so pretty! I don't believe you! I'm going to do something about this! I'm going to report you to..."

"The cops?" he heard Juro ask as he pushed the button for the elevator. "We're leaving!" he shouted to Juro.

Tears were filling Akira's eyes. "Kei, please! Let me go back and..."

"No! You aren't going to ever do this again, Akira! Not ever!"

"But Kei, we need the money!"

"I'll live on the streets before I'll let you whore

yourself!" Takeshi snapped, hauling Akira into the elevator.

"Idiot, you could have been hurt or even killed doing this! Don't you understand that?"

"I...know the risk, Kei. I love you and Juro, and we need the money."

"No! We! Don't!"

The doors closed and Juro still hadn't joined them, but Takeshi didn't worry that the old guy would hurt the bassist. Juro could take care of himself.

Tears were filling Akira's eyes. "Kei, please! Let me go back and..."

"No! You aren't going to ever do this again, Akira! Not ever!"

"But Kei, we need the money!"

"I'll live on the streets before I'll let you whore yourself!" Takeshi snapped, hauling Akira into the elevator. "Idiot, you could have been hurt or even killed doing this! Don't you understand that?"

"I... know the risk, Kei. I love you and Juro, and we need the money."

"No! We! Don't!"

They rode the elevator down to the lobby and Takeshi dragged Akira out, the drummer barefooted and crying all the way to the train station.

Juro caught up with them carrying Akira's things, telling them that he'd apologized to the man, explaining that Takeshi was the very jealous lover of the *young man* he'd been seeing and that he was sorry for the embarrassment they'd caused such an important personage.

The whole thing was guaranteed to keep Akira from ever doing anything like that again, but it also meant that Takeshi's grandmother was once again their only source of income.

Inoue Shun finally convinced Juro to take a few hours at his store and that helped them a little, while Akira begged his boss at the cafe to take him back. It took the woman who owned the place a few days of repeated visits, but she finally agreed, but insisted he come in dressed as a girl from then on because her customers liked pretty girls, or boys who could pass as girls. Akira eagerly agreed and returned to work as Hana-chan, which drew some of their fans to the cafe and increased business for the owner by a small margin.

And then Momma Takei called to say she'd found Kita's laptop under her couch. Since they were all off of work and Takeshi didn't go to the dojo on Mondays, they left their apartment immediately and caught the first train to Momma Takei's house.

**Five weeks after Kita's death**  
**Momma Takei's apartment**  
**A few minutes before noon**

The three rockers hugged the woman in greeting as soon as they arrived, then Momma Takei helped Juro get his boots off while the other two removed theirs before going into the house.

Though she was smiling there was still sadness in her eyes, and they could tell she'd been crying.

"I was cleaning, running the vacuum and when I started to clean under the couch, I found my baby's laptop. I didn't even know it was here," the woman explained as she led them through the kitchen into Kita's old room. "Kita set up the wireless connection in here, so I brought the laptop in and tried to start it, but it won't come on."

Takeshi nodded as Akira took a seat at Kita's pink and black desk. Kitten face stickers were applied all around the hutch, and a pair of ears and part of a pink bow showed from beneath the laptop.

"Is it broken?" Takeshi asked.

Akira shook his head. "No, I think it just needs to be plugged in. The battery might be run down from not being recharged." He looked up at Kita's mother. "Do you know where the accessories bag is?"

The old woman frowned. "No. I haven't seen the back case for the laptop."

"I could run out and find replacements," Juro offered.

Takeshi shook his head. "We can't afford them."

"I'll give you the money."

"Let's look around here for them. If the laptop is here, it stands to reason the case and accessories should be around somewhere," Akira told them as he slipped out of the chair and went to Kita's closet to see if he could find the carry bag for the small computer.

"I'll go look under the couch, in case it got stuffed too far back to see easily," Takeshi told them as he wandered out into the adjoining kitchen.

Juro sat down on Kita's western-style bed, his good hand stroking over the kitten faces on the pink cover.

"I really wish you boys would have moved in here with me. It would almost be like having her back..." the woman said, her voice breaking.

Juro frowned. They'd actually considered it because their money situation was so terribly tight. But this was Kita's mother, and he wasn't sure how well she'd really take the sexual relationship between the three of them.

More important, he wasn't sure how Takeshi would react to the presence of Kita's mother in the same apartment with them while they were making love. Despite their lengthy chat, Takeshi was still a bit too cool with them both, a fact that Juro regretted. Akira simply accepted, but he could see the unhappiness in the way the drummer would sit and watch the guitarist.

But they were all very stressed by what was happening to them. So many changes, and few of them for the better. He wiggled his fingers and used his free hand to rub his damaged arm. He was healing quickly, the doctors pleased by his progress. Good as it was he'd never be able to play in time to honor their contract with *Poisoned Dragon*. Not that they could even find out who was in charge of them. Repeated calls had yielded nothing. Not a returned call. Not a single name.

"I made you some tea," Momma Takei said as she put a cup down where Juro could reach it.

"Thank you."

"Does it still hurt so much?" she asked, gesturing to his arm.

"Sometimes," he admitted as he picked up the tea and took a careful sip.

"There's an herbalist not too far from here. Maybe you should consult with him."

"Takeshi's sensei is giving me treatments," he told her, smiling as he added, "The tea is very good."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Does Takeshi's sensei seem to know what he's doing?"

Juro nodded. "Oh, yes, very much so. The pain isn't nearly as bad as it used to be, and..." He wiggled his fingers for her. "I'm getting much more control in my hand back."

"That's good," she agreed, smiling at him. "Do you think you'll be able to play soon, then?"

"Maybe a few more weeks, but yes, soon. I tried

playing the last time Akira and I went to his parent's house. I made mistakes, but that's to be expected right now."

"But you managed to play a little?"

Juro nodded.

Akira muttered something that Juro couldn't quite hear right before the drummer backed out of the closet with the black bag that went with the laptop.

"It was in a box. I'm not sure why, but..." Akira put the bag down on the bed and opened it.

The three of them stared at the pile of papers inside where the laptop normally went. The page at very top of the stack said:

### **Poisoned Dragon Records: Recording Agreement.**

"Takeshi, we found the laptop case and some of Kita's papers," Juro said loudly enough for the older rocker to hear.

Takeshi joined them as Akira started to take the papers out of the case. They were clipped together in batches with some of Kita's kitten-faced binder clips.

Takeshi picked up the contract and frowned.

"This is the original one they sent to us. Not the one we signed. This won't do us much good, really, except to show us what Konda is claiming we signed."

Juro just sighed at the revelation. "That might be important for us to have at some point, though," he told them as he took possession of the stapled document.

Takeshi nodded an agreement. "Yeah, it might if they decide to arrest me."

"You don't think they might still do that, do you?" Momma Takei asked. "I know they keep threatening to do that, but..." she shook her head, "they've got no hard evidence. None, so how could they? I mean, everyone knows that the three of you didn't do it. It's so stupid, I just don't understand it."

"Neither do we," Juro told her. None of them had said anything to Momma Takei about their growing suspicions regarding Konda and Saigo. Unlike the detectives in question they weren't going to make any public accusations until they had hard facts, and how they might get those was anyone's guess.

"Who knows," Takeshi replied as Akira handed over another batch of the papers to the guitarist.

"These are emails between Kita and Koiso Ito, our contract manager," Takeshi held them out to Juro and the bassist took them.

"Wouldn't the kitchen table be a better place to look at these?" Momma Takei asked.

"Probably," Takeshi agreed.

"Okay then," Akira said as he headed for the kitchen with the bulk of the stack held to his chest as if he were a schoolgirl carrying books.

Juro smiled as Momma Takei took the cup of tea for him. The three of them followed Akira into the kitchen where the blue-haired rocker was already sorting out the stacks.

Juro took a seat as Momma Takei put his tea down. Takeshi remained on his feet, his behind resting

against the counter.

"I'll get you two some tea while Aki sorts out the papers."

"Thanks," Takeshi said.

Juro glanced at the taller man. "Why not sit down?"

The older rocker just shrugged.

Juro grinned. He knew exactly why Takeshi wasn't sitting down. "Butt still hurt from where he threw you on the floor?"

"Yeah."

"Thought so."

"Lots of these are email printouts," Akira stated as he began to sift through the stack. He put down a small pile that was held together with one of the kitty-face clips. "These are emails between Kita and a few other people. Mostly about stuff she bought online. Probably nothing important there except to show some credit card purchases. There are also receipts for some of our new costumes in that batch. These," he said indicating a very small batch held together with a big pink plastic paperclip, "say these are from reporters and magazines wanting to talk to us."

"I'll go through those," Momma Takei said as she gave Takeshi a cup of tea and set a second cup down where Akira could reach it. "Maybe I can try to call some of those places and get interviews for you. We can't let people forget about you, even if you can't play right now."

She smiled at them. "I might not be Kita, but..." She wiped her eyes with her fingers. "I *will* do everything

in my power to see that you boys make it now that she's gone. She would have wanted me to help. I know it."

Juro got up and gave her a hug, Takeshi stepping in and doing the same thing as soon as he was out of the way.

Akira just gave her a bright smile and added, "You are right, Momma Takei. She would have wanted you to help us."

The drummer stared at the papers at the top of the pile and frowned. "These are all from our contract manager, Koiso Ito. It seems so odd that he would die the day of... well, you know."

"Yes, so much tragedy," Momma Takei agreed. "I'm afraid these interviews are all well past when they were to occur, but I'll still try to call these people. I'm sure they'll agree to speak with you, considering the circumstances."

"And what about those?" Juro asked, indicating another small stack that Akira had set down.

"Those are from Dream Scar's handler, according to the note on them."

Juro reached for those at the same time Takeshi's hand shot out to grab them.

The guitarist nodded to Juro. "Okay, you look at these, I'll go through the ones from Koiso Ito. Maybe we can find a clue about the contract in the ones from him."

"We should still hook up the laptop," Akira told them as he set the last two batches of paper down. "Those are just emails from some of her friends." The

drummer frowned. "I think I better get that laptop hooked up and check her emails, at least. There are probably some that weren't ever answered."

Takeshi didn't seem to hear the younger man, so Juro nodded. "That's probably a good idea, Aki-kun," he said.

The drummer picked up his tea and went back into Kita's bedroom.

The rockers read in silence for a short time. Juro realizing that the batch of email between Hanari Eiko and Kita were not very pleasant in tone. It wasn't anything he could put a finger on, but from the first email where Hanari Eiko, *Dream Scar's* handler, congratulated them on signing a contract with *Poisoned Dragon* through each subsequent brief exchange, there just seemed to be something unpleasant going on. Then he came to an email in the pile he had that made him frown as a cold chill passed down his spine.

Juro turned to Takeshi. "I think I should read this so everyone can hear what it says.

"Okay," Takeshi replied.

"Talk loud and I'll hear you," Akira said from the bedroom.

"Do you have that laptop working yet?" Takeshi asked.

"Not yet. The battery is pretty well dead. Give me a few minutes."

"Okay," Takeshi called back, then took a sip of his tea. "This is good, thank you, Momma."

"You're welcome, Kei."

"Should I read this now?" Juro asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay, it starts off with 'Takei Kita'," he said, then continued, "I saw the interview that appeared in Loud Beats Star Magazine. The whole tone of the interview was very disrespectful of both *Poisoned Dragon* and of my band, Dream Scar. This sort of campaign to ruin our reputation with *Poisoned Dragon* will not be tolerated by any second-rate band like yours.

"Keep saying bad things about us, and there will be problems for you.

"She ends it with her name and title." He looked up at Kei to find the guitarist with a totally mystified expression on his face that he was certain matched his own confusion.

"What is she talking about? We didn't say anything bad about *Poisoned Dragon*. And I don't even remember talking about Dream Scar," he asked the guitarist.

"We didn't. The reporter did, though."

Juro thought about it. "Hey, that's right! He said something negative about Dream Scar."

Takeshi closed his eyes. "He called Dream Scar a second-rate band, and said that if *Poisoned Dragon* didn't start hiring more talent of our ability, they'd never be taken as seriously as some of the other indie labels."

Momma Takei was frowning too. "I remember that article. You boys never said anything about that band. The comments the reporter made were at the end of

the article and he even said they were his opinion, not those of the band he'd interviewed."

Takeshi nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"What is wrong with that woman?" Momma Takei asked as Juro glanced at a second email, this one saying that Akira's wardrobe made him look dumpy, and that Juro was about as convincing dressed as a woman as a sumo wrestler would be.

"This woman is nasty," he remarked and handed the email he'd just read to Takeshi.

"Nasty? She's a bitch," the guitarist remarked as he put aside the small batch of emails he'd been reading. "There's nothing in the stuff from Koiso."

"I've got another one here where Hanari complains about Hana's gown being too similar to one that Iku wears."

From the bedroom, Akira called out, "Ha! That's not likely. I've got fashion sense. He wears the *ugliest* dresses. They're just...ick!"

Momma Takei nodded. "Akira's right. I've seen photos of them, you know. Those dresses he wears...well, he really just isn't that pretty to start with. Not like our beauties Maki and Hana-chan."

Juro smiled at her. "Thank you, Momma."

"Well it's true," the older woman said. "You two are much more attractive than their keyboardist." She winked at Juro. "And you've got much nicer legs."

That brought a smile to both men, and they could hear Akira giggling.

"Maki's got legs! Like in the song by that American band!" the drummer said. "I've got the laptop

working. I'm checking email. But mostly it looks like junk."

Juro flipped to another page. "Oh...shit..." he muttered as he read what it said.

Takeshi moved to look over the bassist's shoulder. "That fucking bitch!"

Momma Takei frowned. "What does it say?"

Juro opened his mouth to read it, but Kei was quicker.

"Takei Kita, I have just been informed that those losers you call a band are to open for Dream Scar at the *Nippon Bokudan*. I hope you understand that I intend to protest this development and will not permit such second-rate musicians as the three you represent to mar the image of my own band. The fact that you have a contract with our label does not impress me in the least, as I know you fucked that fool Koiso Ito so he'd agree to take your band on. I assure you that, should your band take the stage, there will be dire consequences.

"Then she gives her name."

"*She threatened my baby?*"

Takeshi nodded and Juro got up to embrace the stunned woman.

"She never told us," he said. "If we had known, we would have hired a bodyguard for her."

Momma Takei reached out and took the paper from Takeshi's hand. "It's dated three days before the concert." She lay the paper down and stared off into the distance, absently patting Juro's hand while a few tears slid from her eyes. "I guess taking this to the

police wouldn't matter, would it?

"Probably not," Juro agreed with a soft sigh.

Takeshi put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. He turned his gaze up to the older man and saw the cold anger burning in his lover's gaze.

They now had a motive of sorts.

But they still didn't have the killer.

"You better get to your therapy," Takeshi told him. "We'll search for any more evidence or clues."

Juro nodded, finished his tea and smiled at Momma Takei. "Can I use your toilet before I go?"

She nodded. "You know you don't have to ask. You're family. All three of you."

"Yeah, we know," Juro admitted. "But, well, I even ask my sister."

The phone rang and the woman excused herself to answer it.

Takeshi leaned close to Juro's ear and whispered, "There has to be a connection."

"Agreed."

"Maybe we should try to find Hanari, the bitch."

"I think that's a good idea. I'd like to ask her a few pointed questions."

"Me too. Talk to you when you get home."

"Right."

Takeshi joined Momma Takei in the living room and the bassist headed for the toilet. He'd have a lot to think about on his train ride to his therapist's office.

Too much, and none of it good.

Hanari had threatened Kita.

There was cold knot in Juro's belly, the bassist

seeing the answer right in front of them in the threat of 'dire consequences', and the thought of the kind of money Dream Scar could offer a crooked pair of cops to cover up the identity of a hired killer.

All they needed now was solid link between Hanari Eiko and the gunman.

And to get that, they'd have to find someone that had seen Hanari with the gunman, or find evidence that she'd hired him to murder Kita.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**The same day**

**On a train between Momma Takei's house and  
Shinjuku**

**Nine at night**

The guitarist had his head back against the wall, his legs sprawled into the aisle, too tired to care what people thought about him, his mind sliding into a numbness, a grey rain-cloud of apathy that was becoming too common. Tired. He was just so tired, yet he couldn't sleep, the questions about Kita's death, the man that had killed her, the enigma of Detectives Konda and Saigo's behavior not letting him rest.

And now there were all the other enigmas. The emails on Kita's computer. The knowledge that Koiso Ito, their contract manager, had died on the way to Kita's funeral. It was just too suspicious a circumstance for Takeshi to simply accept it as a normal accident amid their long string of bad luck.

It all stemmed from Kita's death, that bad luck. And Takeshi was seriously thinking of it as being the result of direct maliciousness. Juro had voiced the idea to him, and the more he thought about it, the more plausible it became.

There were just too many things happening. Not being paid for the concert. Konda's insistence they were guilty of Kita's death and the way that insistence disregarded the facts.

The gun-wielding thugs that had attacked them at the *Nippon Bokudan* and what they'd implied with their smug assurances that it would be them in trouble if the cops were brought into the picture.

Then there'd been the police search, which had destroyed so many irreplaceable mementos of their lives in a search for some mysterious and totally nonexistent evidence. The fact that whatever they'd been looking for hadn't been present apparently made the police even more destructive. One of the neighbors even said that she'd heard the police swearing about not being able to find 'it', whatever 'it' might be. But Takeshi had a real good idea what they'd been searching for: the gun he'd taken from the thugs that had tried to kill him. Thinking back to the night Kita died, he realized he'd gotten a brief look at the gun as the man had used it to knock him out cold.

And that gun and the one he now had in his possession appeared similar enough to be one and the same pistol.

The fact that he'd taken the gun from those thugs also had him wondering if that wasn't the evidence the police had been searching for. A gun that would carry his fingerprints. A gun he'd used in a shooting.

One that hadn't been reported, or he would have already gone to jail.

Adding Hanari Eiko's threatening emails to Kita—they had found a second one from the night of the concert on Kita's laptop that simply restated the prior message—and a very ugly pattern started to emerge.

The facts spun around in his mind, whirling with the questions in a dance of madness.

So Konda and Saigo were dirty, and the thugs had been watching for them on the off chance they'd show up seeking answers. They'd used the gun, not in an effort to actually kill him or Akira, but to get him to pick it up, then be fool enough to leave it where the police could find it.

He and Juro had worked that much out in some of their late night chats after Akira had gone to bed.

But if that *were* the case, how had they become involved in covering up the killer's identity? Were they stooges for Konda and Saigo? And why? What would turn ganger thugs into bullies working for a pair of dirty cops? And what had turned the cops themselves bad enough to let a killer walk the streets? Was it money or something more? Was there a bigger picture they didn't know anything about?

He sighed. Questions and more questions, and still no real answers.

There had to be someone behind it, someone other than the cops themselves and so far the only other person it might be was the handler of Dream Scar. But did it go deeper than that? Was someone at *Poisoned Dragon* involved too? That would make sense, considering all the problems they were experiencing. They were being ignored, none of their calls were

returned and they'd been totally unable to speak to anyone there, which really made no sense since they were under contract. Unless someone was planning to quietly let them go into breach of contract.

He couldn't see any reason for the pair of detectives to have gotten involved unless it *was* for money, or some other favors.

The emails from the manager of Dream Scar were the best clue they had, but they still weren't proof. But that threat, the demand that they not take the stage under threat of 'dire consequences' had stuck in his mind.

What would make Hanari think her nasty demand that they not play would be obeyed? It would have violated their contract, and made them responsible for a series of serious breaches of multiple contracts, not only with the venue's management, but with *Poisoned Dragon* too.

It would have destroyed them.

Takeshi's expression turned angry when he thought about that; even though they'd played, their band was still ruined.

Juro couldn't play, and they would be in breach of contract in a matter of days. Kita was dead. They'd never been paid for the concert. And their contract manager at *Poisoned Dragon* was dead.

They were truly fucked, and they knew it.

It all came down to those emails, two crooked cops and a quartet of thugs.

But that it was all just so crazy.

Yet... It was the only answer in a sea of questions

they had no answers for, and there were no other leads.

The only way to find out more would be to find the handler of Dream Scar and confront her with their knowledge.

And before they could do that, they'd need to find out where she was.

He sighed. It had six weeks since Kita's death, and they were no closer to finding the killer.

Takeshi sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, the warmth of the drummer a pleasant reminder that there were still some good things left in his life. He pressed a gentle kiss to his lover's hair, breathing in the delicate perfume the younger rocker still wore. Kita's perfume.

The rocking motion of the train had lulled Akira into sleep, for which the guitarist was grateful. Akira had slipped and spoken to Kita in front of Momma Takeshi, and that had led to a lot of tears by the old woman and the drummer. The younger man was exhausted, asleep with his head pillowed against Takeshi's shoulder. He'd put an arm around the smaller man to keep him from slipping to the floor.

Blessed sleep. It took away the pain for a few hours.

*If there were no nightmares of Kita's death to haunt you.  
If you didn't feel responsible for letting her die.*

Takeshi reached up, caressed Akira's hair and hoped the younger man's sleep was dreamless, or of better things than blood and death, though thinking about it, Akira didn't have the same number of

nightmares he did.

Maybe because Akira didn't feel the weight of guilt on his shoulders. He should have protected Kita. Rather than save her, he'd tried and failed miserably.

He could feel the eyes on him. Curious, disapproving, bored. A pair of high school-aged girls were watching him, whispering behind their hands. He heard one of them say something sharp just before her friend got up and crossed the car to stand in front of him.

She bowed, a broad smile on her face. "Excuse me for bothering you, but aren't you Kei-san from Mercykill?"

The girl was cute in a geeky otaku sort of way, her hair in a pair of ponytails held up by clips that featured some anime or manga character he didn't recognize— as if he were an expert anyway. She had on a pair of gold wire-rimmed glasses that were perched low on her pert nose. Still in her class uniform, she had an electric pink purse dangling from her shoulder. She looked all of thirteen or fourteen, but he judged her to be older from her class uniform's style. The purse also had some kind of anime characters on it, but he didn't recognize them either. The thing he noticed most about her was the smile she was giving him, because it was like a bright glimmer of sunlight coming through the clouds over his heart; friendly, but nervous too. It felt good to have someone smiling at them after so much frustration, anger and tears.

Takeshi nodded, gave her the best smile he could

muster and said, "Yeah, that's me."

"And that's Hana-san, right?"

He nodded again, noticing that she'd used the formal *san* rather than the friendly *chan* that was really part of Akira's stage persona. "He's tired."

The girl's smile vanished, a cloud covering the sun. "I was sorry when I heard about Takei Kita. I.." the girl's hands were clasped, fingers twisting in the uncomfortable silence that lingered like an off-key note between them.

"Thank you," he told her softly, understanding what she wanted to say.

"I was there, at the concert. I won a backstage pass in the Dream Scar *Dream Night* contest. Takei-san talked to me, and...well...she was very nice." The girl sighed, her face showing great sadness. "The handler of Dream Scar wouldn't even talk to me, it was...disappointing. And then that man... He was so horrible!" Tears welled up in the girl's eyes.

Kei's eyes widened and he sat up, waking Akira with the movement. "You saw him?"

The girl nodded. "I saw him, and heard him yelling at her."

"Are we at our station?" Akira asked sleepily, blinking and rubbing his eyes.

"No, Aki, we're not."

The drummer noticed the girl. "Hello." He offered her a tired smile and she forced an answering smile through the tears.

Her friend came over, gave the pair of rockers an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry if she's bothering you."

She gets all emotional." She took her friend's hand. "It's okay, Kumi-chan. Come back and sit down. You shouldn't bother them with your silliness. They're having a rough time and don't need you to remind them about such awful things."

"Please, wait," Takeshi said, scooting over on the seat, getting Akira to move too so the girls could sit down beside them if they wanted to. He really wanted to speak to Kumi.

Despite the pull of her friend's hand on her arm, the girl Kumi blushed and sat down beside him, careful not to touch either of the rockers. Her friend remained standing, while her gaze warily traveled over the other passengers in the car.

It was peculiar behavior, as if she were worried someone in the car might be offended, or... Takeshi's eyes narrowed. It was as if she were afraid of someone seeing them taking to the pair of them.

*This has to be paranoia. Why would I think the other girl is afraid to be seen speaking to us? That's just crazy.*

*Then again, maybe it's not. What if Konda threatened them?*

But they had information, and he needed it. Looking both ways in the car, he didn't recognize anyone as being a police officer from the station where Konda and Saigo were at, so it was probably safe enough.

"She was wonderful, wasn't she?" he finally said, his own voice a bit unsteady. It was still hard for him to speak about Kita to strangers, and sometimes he couldn't stop the tears, even when he was just with

Juro and Akira.

“Oh, yes, she was so very nice! Tekei-san gave me a signed promo picture of your band,” the girl blushed, looked down at the floor. “Hanari Eiko didn’t give me anything at all. Not even the things that were promised. Takei-san said she’d try to make it up to me, but...” The girl went silent, and Takeshi could tell she was despondent and heartbroken over the ruined evening.

All her girlish hopes, her joy over being the winner of such a grand prize crumbling into bitterness and tears. Takeshi well understood the crushing hurt that such a horrible experience could leave in place of golden dreams, and he understood she was also feeling her own pain over Kita’s death. The one bright moment in a tarnished night, and it too had been ruined. Ruined by a man who’d destroyed so many hopes and dreams that night. Hers. Theirs. Though she hadn’t known Kita very long, he could see genuine sadness in her expression. Kita had probably been appalled at how Dream Scar and their handler had treated a fan, and knowing her, she’d decided to treat the girl as if the prize she’d won was her responsibility. Or rather, theirs.

Their Kita. Even right before her death she’d been working, showing her love for them by making a new fan, by trying to turn a girl’s tears to smiles of happiness. As she’d often told them, *“Even if I have to personally speak to every potential fan one at a time, I’ll see that you succeed.”*

He touched the girl’s arm gently, knowing how

fans were about such things, she'd always remember what the two of them said and did now. He'd been like that about his own favorite musician as a boy. But the man had committed suicide, breaking the hearts of his fans, the grief of some so overwhelming that he'd unwittingly taken a few of them beyond the final curtain of death, their own suicides noted in papers all over Japan.

The girl's tear-filled eyes met his, adoration and respect lighting her gaze.

"Did you see the man who killed her?"

The girl nodded, bottom lip trembling. He could see the remembrance of fear in her eyes.

"Yes. He was so...horrible. I won't ever forget what he looked like. I told the police about him, the sketch artist even used her computer to make a picture of him, but... They still haven't found him."

Anger seared the rocker's heart. *Another witness. Too bad there isn't anyone willing to listen to us. If we could get people to speak to the costumer and this girl, we'd at least be cleared of any suspicion. No chance of that, though, so long as Konda and Saigo continue to tell everyone it was us...me who committed Kita's murder. Those bastards.*

*They're definitely covering it all up. But for whom, and why?*

*Something is very wrong here. But what? Why did that man kill Kita? Why?*

"Did you hear what he said to her?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. He called her all sorts of awful names," Kumi replied.

"What else did he say?"

Her friend touched Kumi on the arm. "We aren't supposed to talk about this."

Kumi ignored her and replied, "He said she'd stop being your handler or there'd be trouble. He told her that his boss wouldn't stand for anyone getting in her way."

Takeshi frowned, shooting a look at Akira, who looked stunned, his face pale, eyes wide with shock.

"You're sure that's what he said?" Takeshi asked, his mind wrapping around the implications of the girl's words.

The girl nodded. "He sounded... Well, he was very mean. And angry." She twisted her hands in her skirt, biting her bottom lip, her gaze on the floor.

Akira reached out and gently touched her mouth. "You shouldn't do that, you'll hurt yourself."

Kumi's head snapped up, the girl giving Akira the most adoringly sweet smile. "Okay, Hana-san."

Akira smiled back, but Takeshi could see the pain in his eyes as the drummer said, "Kumi, you can call me Hana-chan if you'd like."

"Oh, thank you, Hana-s..." She smiled. "Hana-chan."

"What else did the man say? Did you hear more?" Takeshi probed carefully. He wanted more information, but he also didn't want to scare the girl by being too demanding. But it *was* sounding more and more as if Kumi just might be the only witness to the events leading up to Kita's murder.

The girl's face twisted in a hard frown. "He...was just so...evil. He threatened her...and the rest of you."

"All of us?" he asked.

"What did he say?" Akira asked softly, as the drummer reached across him to gently take the girl's hand. "Please, it might help us if we knew what happened."

Kumi nodded, and Takeshi could see she was returning the gentle pressure of Hana-chan's grip on her hand. "I'm trying to remember exactly what else he said." She looked at her friend as if asking a question. The other girl shook her head, a hard frown compressing her mouth into a tight line.

Whatever Kumi knew, she'd apparently confided it to her friend. "I have to tell them, Yuya. Don't you see, I'm the only one who knows."

Takeshi frowned. "You heard more, then?" he asked.

Kumi didn't respond, the girl sitting there in mute silence. Then she nodded slowly.

"Really, she can't talk to you about this," her friend Yuya said. "The Detective was very adamant about that."

Kumi looked up at her friend, indecision and fear in her eyes. "Yuya, why haven't the police found that man? Why did they accuse Kei-san of the murder? I told them who did it. Why didn't they believe me?"

The other girl shrugged. "Well, you didn't actually see her killed, for one thing. And really, Kumi, we shouldn't be talking to them. How do we even know they aren't helping the killer?"

Takeshi exchanged a glance with Akira, the drummer's eyes filling with misery at Yuya's words.

Takeshi felt a growing anger building up inside him. Anger he held in careful check as he regarded Yuya. "I bet Detective Konda told you not to talk to us, didn't he?" he asked gently. Whatever underhanded things the detectives were doing didn't involve the girls.

"It *was* Konda-san," Kumi replied while her friend made an angry gesture. "He told both of us not to talk about what was heard. He said that man was out there somewhere still, and it might put us in danger if I talked about the things that he said to Takei-san."

"Sure, sure," Takeshi agreed, "it makes sense. But, well, it would really help us if we knew what happened. We've been in agony not knowing what happened while we were onstage. We still don't know why she was killed. Maybe if you tell us what you know, it will make sense to us and we can go to the police with new information." Not that they would tell the Kudanshita-based detectives anything. No, they'd have to go elsewhere, find someone else to investigate what had happened.

Kumi and Yuya were staring at each other, Yuya shaking her head slowly, her mouth pressed into a firm line of disapproval.

"They have to know."

"No, they don't," Yuya warned. "Someone could be following you."

Kumi shuddered at that thought. "Do you think that man would come after me?"

Yuya nodded sharply. "You shouldn't have talked

to them at all. Konda-san said it wasn't a good idea to speak to *anyone* about it. Especially not to them, remember?"

Takeshi realized something then. "You were there too, weren't you, Yuya? You heard something, didn't you?"

The girl met Takeshi's searching gaze. "I was there, but I didn't hear much. I was...talking to the bassist from Dream Scar."

Takeshi's eyes flicked to Kumi, seeing a hurt look on the girl's face. *So that's how it was? She's not pretty enough for those jerks. They talked to her friend, but not her. What assholes.* Then he took note of the slightly too-pleased expression on Yuya's face and came to another conclusion. They'd paid the pretty girl a lot of attention of the very personal variety, from the smug look on her face.

He wanted to know everything they'd both overheard, but he hesitated. What if the girls *were* being followed by the killer or the cops? Either way, he didn't want to endanger them.

But he also very much wanted to know everything she'd heard.

Akira decided to change the subject before anyone got upset or had their feelings hurt. His gaze went to the purse in the girl's lap and he pointed to it. "My mother does that manga."

"I know," Kumi replied, holding the purse out for both rockers to see that it was the same four characters they'd dressed up as for the anime and

manga convention. It had been signed by Inoue Ai, Akira's mother, with a permanent marker. "Takei-san said she'd introduce us. I'm a fan of your mother's— Inoue-san's—shojo mangas, but Star of Morning is my favorite."

The girl lowered her gaze, hands gripping the purse. "That was all of you dressed like the characters at Anime Expo, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," Akira said.

Yuya took her by the hand. "Come on, Kumi, you're bothering them. Can't you see that?"

"I..."

Takeshi shook his head, "No, really, she's fine. We like to talk to our fans, don't we, Hana-chan?"

Akira smiled at his lover, nodded and turned his most friendly smile on the girls "We do! Kita always..." The smile faded out instantly as tears filled his eyes and Takeshi put an arm around him, giving him a hug, kissing the top of his head.

"Go on, tell them," Takeshi was giving him gentle encouragement, and Akira knew his lover didn't want to lose their tenuous link with the girls. They were the only ones who might have any solid clues about Kita's murderer, clues that he knew Takeshi and Juro desperately wanted.

"She...always said we should remember where our money comes from, because without fans we'd be living on the streets, or working in crappy jobs like everyone else."

He closed his eyes and leaned against Takeshi, because the sad truth was, they were working in

crappy jobs and even though they still had fans, they didn't have a future as a band anymore, and it hurt.

*Hana-chan, don't lose hope yet. Things will work out for the three of you yet. Just hang in there.*

He could see Kita standing beside Yuya, giving him her most encouraging smile.

*Forever?* he asked her.

*Forever always,* was her answer.

Akira smiled.

Kumi smiled back. "Takei-san was so very nice, she really was."

"She sure was!" Takeshi agreed enthusiastically. Akira knew his lover was remembering so many smiles, so much joy and laughter. He saw Takeshi's eyes flood, the guitarist blinking, trying to drive the tears away. Both girls had seen them, he could tell from the tender expressions on their faces as they looked at the guitarist.

Akira caught his attention with a light touch on his thigh. "You didn't get your post-concert party with Dream Scar. Why don't we take you and your friend to dinner sometime?"

"Oh, that's so nice of you to offer, but really, we..."

Takeshi held his hand up. "No, really, we'd love to do it. Not just to make up for what you were promised, but because Kita would have wanted us to do that. We'd like to do it in honor of her memory, too, if you don't mind."

"No, no, of course I wouldn't mind." Kumi smiled shyly and glanced at her friend before continuing. "I just don't want to bother you. I know you're both

probably very sad over, well...such an awful thing. I didn't even know her that well and I cried for hours. So terrible. I hope they catch him."

"So do we," Takeshi stated, keeping his mouth closed over the mess with the two investigating detectives. She didn't need to know what Konda and Saigo were trying to do. It would only upset her more, and he didn't think she needed to be involved, even though she'd seen things.

"Yes, we're very sad. But being able to spend an evening with fans would help a little," Akira told her, reaching across Takeshi to touch Kumi's hand.

Takeshi smiled. "If you'd like, we can go by our apartment and get Juro. He's doing much better and can even use his arm a little now. I'm sure going to dinner with a fan would do a lot to cheer him up too."

Takeshi saw the girl's heart melt, the smile she gave becoming a megawatt outpouring of worship. "Oh, yes! Yes, thank you!"

Fate had taken a hand in leading them to the only real witness to the events leading to Kita's murder and Takeshi would do whatever he had to do in order to get the rest of the information from the pair of girls.

**The next day**  
**An Italian restaurant in Shinjuku**  
**Seven in the evening**

They'd given Kumi and Yuya their choice of restaurant, and they'd chosen an Italian place that none of the three men had ever eaten at before. It looked very upscale, so the trio had dressed nicely, Takeshi actually putting on a suit and tie, Juro putting on slacks and a nice shirt and tying his hair back and Akira putting on one of his nicest dresses.

The girls arrived a few minutes after they did, and they'd all gone inside together, Yuya eyeing Takeshi the way a predator eyed its prey.

That was the point when Akira realized that it was going to be a very long evening for them. Juro seemed to be of that opinion too, because he caught Akira's gaze and frowned.

Takeshi was smiling, but Akira could tell his lover didn't care for the meal he'd ordered, as he'd barely touched it. Or maybe he was just feeling too uncomfortable to eat with Yuya making eyes at him. Juro, on the other hand, had finished most of his food while Akira was still picking at the huge plate of spaghetti in front of him.

They'd kept the conversation to pleasant things common for strangers to speak about. The weather, music, TV shows, the classes the girls were taking at

school and things of that nature, but Akira knew Takeshi was running out of patience with the small talk.

Akira smiled at the pair of girls. "Are you having a good time?" he asked.

Both of them nodded, Kumi covering her mouth because it was full of lasagna.

"The food is really good," Yuya remarked as she dabbed at her mouth with the napkin, trying to keep from smearing her lipstick.

Kumi motioned to Takeshi's plate. "Aren't you hungry, Kei-san?"

The guitarist gave the girl a little shrug. "I had a late lunch."

"Don't mind him," Juro said, "he never eats very much."

"That's right," Akira agreed, even though it wasn't really the truth. When he liked something, Kei was a good eater. But the drummer could tell that his lover didn't care for the meal. They'd take it home and Juro – who'd pretty much eat anything – could finish it later.

The guitarist leaned forward, eager to get on with finding out what the girls knew about Kita's death, and Akira set his foot gently on the arch of his lover's foot to stop him from saying anything.

Takeshi frowned at him, but he just gave the older man a sweet smile and cast a sideways glance at Juro.

"So those guys with Dream Scar treated you real rough?" Juro asked Kumi.

She nodded. "They didn't give me any of the prizes

that I was promised, but," she smiled at the three men, "this is really great. I think you guys are very nice." She looked down at her plate, blushing slightly as she added, "Much nicer than they were."

Yuya swallowed and added an enthusiastic nod. "Much nicer," she agreed, and smiled slyly at Takeshi.

Akira had noticed how she'd been looking at their handsome lover all night. The looks were obvious. So obvious that Kumi had to notice them, too.

He also knew Takeshi. The girl had no chance with him. None. The guitarist didn't engage in casual sex. He never had.

No, if anyone could be called easy it was him, and he wasn't into girls.

And apparently Yuya wasn't into guys who dressed like them, because she hadn't paid any attention to either him or Juro the whole night. Well, not the same kind of attention she was turning on Kei.

"I bet you're really popular with the boys at school, aren't you, Yuya?" Juro asked, leaning a little closer to the girl.

"Sure, but I don't like high school boys. I prefer men," she replied, still watching the guitarist.

"Yuya only dates college guys," Kumi said quietly. "Ones with money."

"You're just jealous, Kumi," the girl replied a bit sharply, her anger evident to all three men.

Akira hid the frown that tried to twist his lips down. That explained a lot about Yuya. She was after Takeshi because it was no secret who his family was.

The papers had written about Takeshi's huge trust fund and the circumstances under which he'd receive it. The girl was chasing money, and that was probably the entire reason she'd agreed to go to dinner with them. She was after what Takeshi could give her if she managed to get her claws into him.

Akira sighed. What the girl didn't realize was that their Kei was immune to feminine wiles, and never had casual sex with anyone. He was too private a person for things like that.

The guitarist was frowning. He suddenly rose from the table. "Excuse me. I'll be back in a few moments."

Yuya started to get up, apparently misunderstanding what the guitarist's intention was in leaving.

The two saw the way Kumi's face fell, and she suddenly put her fork down.

Juro put a hand on Yuya's arm, and leaned in even closer to her. So close his breath was warm on her cheek as he said, "Don't follow him. He wants to be alone."

"I..."

Juro shook his head. "You shouldn't keep pushing him like that."

"I don't know what you mean," the girl retorted a bit stridently.

"Sure you do," Juro retorted softly. "You're embarrassing him with your flirting, you know. It won't get you anywhere with him. He was in love with Kita, and that wound isn't healed."

"Just leave him alone, Yuya," Kumi told the other girl, surprising both of the men with the angry glint in her eyes. "You always have to ruin things! Just leave Kei-san alone."

"You're just jealous!" Yuya snapped back. "I got something you wanted and won't ever get!"

Juro frowned.

Kumi was staring down at her plate as she said, "And what was that? Oh, that's right, you had Dream Scar all to yourself, didn't you? How many of them had you, Yuya? One, two, or was it all four of them?"

Yuya stared at her friend in shock, cheeks red with shame.

Juro saw Akira's eyes widen and he knew he was frowning as Kumi continued to speak in a razor-edged whisper.

"You just leave Kei-san alone. He's a nice guy, not like those creeps in Dream Scar. They never even called you back like they promised, did they? No, of course not! They got what they wanted from you, didn't they?"

"Shut up, Kumi!"

"No. I won't shut up, Yuya. I've been your friend since fourth grade, but you know what I just realized sitting here and talking to these nice guys? I just realized you've never been my friend at all!"

Juro glanced at Akira, wondering what they should do, but the drummer looked to be at as much of a loss as he was.

"Kumi, you can't mean that!"

"Can't I? I took you to the concert and you

abandoned me to go screw with those guys? A friend wouldn't have done that!"

"Well, I'm sorry they didn't think you were pretty! But is that my fault?"

Juro sighed. "Please stop fighting," he requested softly. "I think the staff is about to throw us out."

"I'm sorry," Kumi murmured and continued to stare at the remains of her meal. "Maybe we should go."

"No, please," Akira said and reached across the table to take her hand in his. "We don't want you to go."

"They just want to know about that guy," Yuya said, a nasty tone in her voice. "They aren't your friends either, you know."

Juro frowned. "We'd like to be friends," he told the girls. "But you can't expect sex from us," he added very quietly. "We're not like that, you know. None of us."

Yuya folded her napkin and set it on the table with deliberate care.

"Well, in case you haven't realized it, I'm gay," Akira stated softly. "And in case you haven't figured it out, Kei and Maki are my lovers."

"Told you," Kumi whispered to her friend.

Yuya just sighed, then looked up as Takeshi rejoined them.

"I paid the bill, let's get out of here," he said. "I just saw Konda."

"No? Where?" Juro asked as Kei pulled Akira's seat out to make it easier for the drummer to rise.

"He was talking to the head waiter," the guitarist stated.

"Can't be a coincidence," Juro remarked as he helped Yuya with her seat. Kei was already assisting Kumi, who gave him a nervous smile.

"We'd better leave without you three guys," Yuya told them as she picked up her purse from the table.

But Konda was already walking toward them.

"Get them out of here," Kei told Juro and Akira. "I'll hold him off."

The bassist frowned, but took Yuya by the arm and led her farther back into the restaurant with Akira and Kumi following them.

"We don't have much time," Juro informed them. "Please tell us what you saw the night of the concert."

"We didn't see anything else," Yuya stated.

"Don't lie, Yuya," Kumi said and poked her friend in the ribs. "Tell them."

"All right. I think that man who killed your handler was talking to the handler of Dream Scar. The descriptions are the same."

Juro's blood turned to ice and he looked at Akira. The drummer stopped walking and just covered his face with his hands.

Kumi touched Akira's arm. "Hana-chan? What's wrong?"

When the drummer pulled his hands from in front of his face, there were tears in his eyes. "We already suspected Hanari Eiko had something to do with Kita's death, we just didn't have any proof."

"Come on, we'd better go before Konda-san sees

us," Yuya said as she hurried toward the door.

Kumi glanced at her friend. "You go. I'm going to stay with Hana-chan."

Akira shook his head. "No, you go on, Kumi." He gave her a weak smile. "We're okay. I'll call you, okay? We can go shopping like we planned. All three of us girls."

Kumi smiled and nodded. "I would really like that."

Yuya grabbed her arm and started to drag her friend along. "Come on!"

"Bye-bye, Hana-chan! It was nice to meet you, Maki-san!"

"It was nice to meet you too, Kumi," the bassist said as he took Akira by the arm and headed for the front door at a slower pace than the two girls.

"Do you think Kei is all right?" Akira asked him.

"Yeah. I don't think Konda will arrest him. No real grounds, you know."

"I know, but I don't trust him not to do it."

"He won't. There are too many witnesses here. My guess is that he'll want to keep out of the public eye with anything he does."

"Do you think Yuya was telling the truth about seeing the man with Hanari Eiko?"

"Yes, I do."

They made it out of the restaurant in time to see the pair of schoolgirls hurry around the corner, Kumi walking backward, Yuya dragging her along. When the girl saw the rockers, she raised her hand over her head and waved a frenetic goodbye. Even over the

traffic noises they heard her shout, "Take care! I love all three of you!"

Akira managed a smile and waved back. "I like her a lot."

"So do I," Juro admitted. "But I'm not so keen on her friend."

"Me either," Akira said with a soft sigh. "She's not very nice to Kumi."

Takeshi joined them, slipping his arm around Akira. "He told me to stay away from the girls," the guitarist said as he put an arm around Akira. "He said if we didn't, he might hold us responsible if anything happens to them."

Juro frowned. "Sounds like a threat."

"Yeah, it does."

"Let's get out of here," Akira urged.

"Sure, babe, let's go," Takeshi said as they started toward the train station. He still had his arm around Akira, but few people even glanced at them. With Akira dressed as he was, the slender drummer easily passed as a pretty girl.

"So what did that girl have to say, or did they just not tell you this secret of theirs?" Takeshi asked.

"Oh, no, they told us," the bassist replied. He spun on the ball of his foot and walked backward a few steps. A frown pulled at his lips as he spied Konda standing in front of the restaurant. "Konda's outside watching us and talking on a cell phone. I wonder how he knew we were here, you know."

"I have no idea," Takeshi said as they rounded the corner.

Juro turned around. "Call me paranoid..." he began only to be interrupted by Akira saying, "Hi, paranoid," in an effort to make his lovers smile.

Takeshi hugged the drummer.

"You are such a nut," Juro told the blue-haired man as he reached past Takeshi to ruffle his younger lover's hair.

"And you love me despite it, admit it."

"What's to admit?" Juro countered. "I love you even if you're a loon."

The trio stopped at the next street and waited to see if Konda was still following them. When the man didn't appear, they crossed the next street.

"So what did the girls have to say?" Takeshi prompted.

"Well, here's the bit of information they didn't give you before," Juro said to the guitarist. "Yuya thinks that she saw the man who killed Kita talking to Hanari the bitch."

"Well, that's about what we expected to find out, isn't it?"

"Pretty much," Juro agreed.

"You okay, Aki?" Takeshi asked when the drummer suddenly put a hand to his belly.

He shook his head. "I don't feel very well. Can we go home now?"

"Sure. Let's get to the train station."

"I think we won't ever eat there at that place again," Akira remarked.

"Good thing, that," Takeshi commented. "Because we can't afford it."

"How much have we got left?" Juro asked.

"Enough to get us home."

"You guys should have let me keep that dating service job," Akira complained. "I made good money doing that."

Takeshi glared at the drummer. "The only cocks you're going to suck belong to Juro and me. Period."

"Okay, okay, don't be so mad."

"He's not mad, he's jealous," Juro stated. "There's a difference, you know."

"Well, he sounds mad."

"Just don't do that anymore."

"Never? You're going to be very unhappy, then."

Takeshi sighed and shook his head as if annoyed, but he was smiling. "There's no winning with you two, is there?"

Juro put an arm around the taller man. "Sure there is. You just keep picking the arguments you can't win, that's all."

"Oh. Well, I'll try to choose better in the future."

They were almost to the train station when a police officer on a bicycle rolled slowly past them, the man giving them a long hard look before he pedaled slowly by the three rockers.

"Get the feeling that Konda talked to him?" Juro asked.

"I'd bet on it," Takeshi replied.

"Maybe he is having us watched. All it would take are a few calls to the koban around where we live," Juro said thoughtfully. "Which, now that I'm thinking about it, does make sense. All they'd have to do is

contact the ones nearest the rail stations we use most.”

“Do you think he’s gone to all that trouble?” Akira wanted to know.

“I wouldn’t put it past him, considering the things we know he’s done, and considering he’s got people just about convinced that Takeshi’s a murderer,” Juro said as they got in line to pay for the train home.

A different bicycle cop passed them slowly, this one talking on a cell phone as he coasted along.

“I’d say we’re being watched closely now, but maybe that’s because he wants to know why we were talking to the girls and what they might have told us.”

“From now on when we go out, let’s try to watch to see if the police from the kobans are following us around. I haven’t noticed it before, but that doesn’t mean it hasn’t been happening,” Takeshi said as he put money in the machine to pay for their train fares, the three of them following him through the turnstiles.

The officer on the bike had stopped and was sitting there, talking into his phone and watching the three of them through narrowed and unfriendly eyes.

“Konda’s going to arrest us,” Akira said as they walked away.

“I don’t think so. Not yet, anyway,” Takeshi stated. “He needs evidence, and that’s something they don’t have. He can’t arrest any of us if he’d got nothing to connect us to a crime.”

They lost sight of the officer as they went toward a car of the train.

"I bet there's a cop watching for us at the other end," Juro remarked.

"Yeah, so do I. Let's not talk about anything on the train. You never know who might be listening."

"I wish this was all over," Akira sighed as they got onto the train.

"So do we, baby, so do we," Takeshi agreed.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **The next several days Various locations around Tokyo**

The three rockers scanned the papers and music magazines trying to find places where they might be able to confront Hanari Eiko about the man she'd been seen speaking to: the man that might be Kita's killer. Three days of searching, and several fruitless calls to *Poisoned Dragon* got them nowhere.

The frustration of finding yet another dead end in their quest to identify Kita's killer and find the motive was hard on all three of them, but it weighed heaviest on Takeshi, who began spending more and more time at the dojo and less time with his lovers.

It was on a day when he was particularly frustrated, Takeshi accidentally blurted out their suspicions regarding Kita's killer to his sensei. The man just listened, offering no comment. When Takeshi finished his confession, Yamakazi had simply nodded and sent him home. After that Yamakazi-sensei became a slave driver, working the guitarist so hard that by the time he got home at night all he wanted to do was sleep. On the days that Juro accompanied Takeshi to the dojo for the special therapy the man was giving to him, he too was so

tired all he wanted to do was sleep.

Akira, left alone more and more frequently, found himself talking to the Kita who lived in his mind just to have someone else to speak with, but he didn't mind, because Juro's arm was showing improvement and Takeshi wasn't as irritable when he was numb with exhaustion.

Of course, it also meant they hardly made love, but it was a sacrifice Akira was willing to make if Takeshi was happier.

They went to Akira's parent's house to practice their music whenever they could. Though Juro could go without the sling for short periods of time now, his arm still wasn't strong enough for sustained use, so their practices were always very short and frustrating to the bassist, who was eager to return to their chosen career. Not that it appeared they really still had one, but they weren't entirely ready to give up yet.

Kumi kept in touch with Akira by phone, the two of them chatting about nothing of importance, the girl telling the drummer she hadn't been spending as much time with Yuya since their argument, and admitting to the cross-dressing rocker that she was very upset with her friend's bad manners. Just hearing her voice cheered the drummer up, though, and gave him something to think about besides the boring job and being alone so often while Juro was either at work or gone for therapy.

And Kei, well he was hardly around, and Akira missed him a lot. But he understood that his lover needed space to work things out and come to terms

with the awful mess their lives were in.

A mess that kept getting worse, the drummer opening and reading a letter from *Poisoned Dragon* which threatened them with a lawsuit for failing to fulfill their contract. Yet, when Akira phoned the company and asked to speak with the man in their legal department who'd sent the letter, he met with the usual dead end. No one who answered the phones would pass him through to whoever was in charge of their contract, nor even give him a name for the person who was their handler. The letter insisted that the man had spoken to their handler—oddly without giving the handler's name—and made a claim that they were refusing to come into the studio. When he tried to find out the name of their *Poisoned Dragon*-appointed handler, he couldn't find that out either. Nor would the person answering the phone put him through to anyone who could answer his questions.

He showed the letter to Juro, but the bassist's calls were as pointless, and when the pair went down to the studio in person they were politely, but firmly turned away at the door, the security guards ushering them back outside within moments of their arrival.

As with so many other things, it made absolutely no sense.

They had a contract with *Poisoned Dragon*, yet every effort to honor the contract, to even contact anyone regarding it, was met with a brick wall.

Juro explained the situation to Takeshi, and the man just shrugged and made no further comment, the

guitarist regarding their situation with an almost fatalistic calm.

Akira, depressed by so many problems, made a shopping date for the following weekend with Kumi, who said that she might bring Yuya along. Akira told her that would be okay despite the fact that he didn't particularly like the other girl; she was still Kumi's friend, and for Kumi's sake he'd be polite.

The next day Akira had to work, which made him sad. Takeshi and Juro were both going to be home for a change since the dojo was closed while the sensei was out of town for business.

**An apartment in Shinjuku  
Just a little after four in the afternoon**

Juro dropped a magazine on the kitchen table. "Look at this."

Takeshi picked it up, glanced at the date on the cover. "This is almost two years ago. What's so important about this?"

Juro frowned and pointed to a small notice on the bottom corner. "Look."

Takeshi did, then frowned. "I remember this now. We had a copy of it, didn't we?"

"Yes. I bought it at work today."

The guitarist stared at the magazine. The tiny blurb on the cover read:

**Kyoto Skies guitarist, keyboardist found dead at Sapporo ski resort.**

In even smaller type it said:

**Suicide pact suspected.**

"Think about it, Kei. You read the article," Juro prompted.

"Yeah, I read it. They were found dead from asphyxiation due to carbon monoxide poisoning. They used an hibachi inside a ski cabin they were

staying in. The police claimed it was a suicide, but the newspaper said it could also have been an accident caused by using the grill to warm the cabin because no suicide note was found. What about it?"

Juro just stared at him. "Two things. They just made the big time, so why kill yourself, which is what the cops told people? Why say it was a suicide, not an accident, when they never gave a reason for three members of the band to commit suicide? Second, read the date again, Kei."

The bassist watched as his lover did just that. He could see the man was starting to think about any other significance the date might hold. Takeshi's eyes widened and he looked up at Juro in incredulity. "They were to open for Dream Scar two days later." Anger made his eyes smolder. "You mean—"

"What do you think?" Juro asked before the other man could finish his question.

"I think we need to see what other bands have suffered tragic events and find out if they were ever opening acts for Dream Scar," he snarled, the apathy of the last week fading away in the heat of anger.

"Or if anyone posed a threat to them in some way. I reread that article. The reporter who wrote it said that she felt Kyoto Skies had a good chance to steal some of Dream Scar's thunder because their guitarist was superior."

Kei's blood went cold. "Shit! What was that guy's name? The one that interviewed us right after we signed with Poisoned Dragon?"

"Ise Yuji. He kept flirting with Akira," Juro replied.

"He wrote the article about Kyoto Skies too."

"That's him. Didn't he compare us to Dream Scar too? I seem to remember him saying our voices blended better."

"He also said you were a far superior guitarist than Michio," Juro added. "I think he actually called Michio a mediocre guitarist."

Kei nodded. "Yeah, he did. I wonder...." his voice trailed off and he sat there thinking, Juro keeping his silence while the other man mulled things over.

"You know, I think Ise Yuji is dead too." He got up and went to search through the stack of newspapers that Akira was keeping in case they had to move again. He thumbed through them until he found a news article at the bottom of one page. "There it is. This says he hanged himself in his apartment in here in Shinjuku —"

The front door opened and Akira came in. Shedding his platform shoes at the door, he hurried over to his lovers. "Hello, my loves! You're both home! I didn't expect that."

He kissed Juro and then gave Takeshi a friendly hug and a kiss on the cheek, but Juro could tell the drummer had already noticed their unhappy faces. "How are my lovers today?"

"We discovered a few things while you were at work," Juro told him, then related what they'd been discussing. By the time they were done, the smile had vanished from Akira's face and the drummer had dropped into a seat, his face showing how disturbed he was by their news.

"That's just..." Akira shook his head and stared at the magazines on the table. "It's so awful your mind doesn't want to accept it, but..." he touched the magazines and the newspaper, "it's all right there, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Juro agreed.

"And combined with what Kumi and Yuya told us," Juro shrugged, "it's all adding up to a lot of damning evidence."

"And Konda showing up at that restaurant was no accident either. I think he's having either us or those girls followed. Possibly all of us, really."

"Do you think so?" Akira asked.

"Yeah," Takeshi replied. "I've been thinking about it. How else would they have known about that karate school I went to first? And some of those places I applied for a job wouldn't have called the police to do a background check, so how would they know about the investigation?"

"Newspapers and television, maybe. But the dojo took you as a student, then said they were sorry they had to drop you. That had to be Konda or Saigo," Juro stated.

"So what do we do now?" Akira asked his gaze going from Juro to Takeshi.

"No clue. Unless we can find where that bitch Hanari is, we're at a dead end still."

"It all comes back to her, and those emails and," Juro indicated the things on the table, "this stuff, doesn't it? I'd say she's guilty of something and that's for sure. Her and Dream Scar, too, because I don't

think she's arranged all this herself, do you?"

"No," Takeshi agreed.

Akira sighed. "It's an awful lot of terrible events to be simple coincidence," the drummer said as he slipped out of his chair and went to the cabinets. "I'm going to make us some dinner."

Takeshi shook his head. "Don't bother."

Juro reached out and gripped the guitarist's arm. "You've got to eat."

"Later," he replied. "I'm going out for a while."

Juro sighed. "Kei, please stop running away from us."

The guitarist stared at him, anger in his dark eyes. Then he relented, nodded and sat back down. "All right, Juro. All right."

Akira stepped behind his lover and started to gently massage the guitarist's shoulders. Takeshi sighed and laid his head down on the table, and Juro knew he'd surrendered.

"Let's go out somewhere. Just the three of us. We can have dinner and go do something fun," Juro suggested.

"I'd like that," Akira said. "But can I change out of this dress? I want to wear pants. It's chilly outside, and it was trying to rain when I got to our building."

"What do you say, Kei? Want to go out with your girls?" Juro asked.

The guitarist shrugged. "Anything you want," he answered without any enthusiasm.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes," Akira told him as he left off what he was doing and vanished into their

bedroom.

Juro patted Takeshi on the shoulder. "We'll find a lead and be able to confront them about this, I'm sure of it, so don't worry."

Takeshi reached up and took Juro's hand in his, brought it to his lips and kissed his lover's palm. "I hope you're right."

Juro bent down to kiss the older man. "You'll see. It will work out. I'm certain of it."

Takeshi sighed. "I wish I believed that."

Juro favored him with a wry hint of a smile. "No, you don't, or you would. You just aren't happy unless you're in a state of angst over something. It's why you're a better lyricist than I am, you know."

"Is that it?"

Juro nodded. "Think about it, Kei."

The guitarist did, and wound up looking away from his lover to hide the tears because the song he remembered most right now was 'Bitter Tears', the song he'd written for Kita.

Juro put his arms around him and kissed the side of his face. "Love you."

Instead of answering with words, Kei turned his head and kissed the bassist.

"I'm ready!" Akira said brightly behind them.

"Thank you," Takeshi whispered to Juro.

"For what? Being right?" he snorted, but he was smiling at the older man.

"No, for putting up with a moody bastard."

Juro put on a face that was an imitation of complete shock. "You? A moody bastard? No, I won't

believe that!"

Takeshi saw the mischief in the blue-haired man's eyes as Akira said, "Why, Kei, you're perfectly sweet-tempered. Who called you a bastard?"

"You, several times," Takeshi replied as they headed for the door.

"Hmm..." Akira sounded thoughtful. "Yes, I do recall saying you were a bastard a few times, now that you mention it."

They stopped to put on their shoes, Juro sitting down to do it while Akira balanced on one foot and Kei leaned his behind against the wall.

Done with his shoes, Kei reached for his jacket and checked for his keys.

"You know," Juro began, "I think Aki *has* called you some rather uncomplimentary names."

"Well, Kei doesn't need to worry about that," Akira said and patted the guitarist lover on the butt. "I still love you, even if you are a moody bastard."

"He does have a nice ass," Juro remarked.

"Big cock, too. That makes up for a lot of negative qualities."

Takeshi shook his head and pulled his keys from his pocket. "You two are impossible."

"Better than being a bastard," Juro remarked as Akira started to giggle.

Takeshi sighed and went outside, waiting for the others to join him. "I can see it's going to be a long evening."

"I like a good long...." Akira let the innuendo hang as he smiled up at Takeshi. "Evening."

“Well, I like good long things too, but they aren’t evenings,” Juro commented

“Impossible, both of you.” Takeshi complained as he closed the door behind them.

**The same day  
A sidewalk in Shinjuku  
Seven-thirty in the evening**

The three of them had indulged Akira in a few hours of harmless window-shopping and were wandering aimlessly trying to decide where to eat and what they wanted to do next. Their directionless ambling took them past Yamakaze-sensei's dojo. It was dark inside. Deserted, because the school was closed as the sign said.

"You going to the dojo tomorrow?" Juro asked as they walked slowly past the place.

"Yes," Takeshi replied. The three of them stepped aside for an elderly couple as a scattering of large raindrops pattered down.

"Where do you want to eat?" Juro asked his lovers. "Or were you planning to get soaked first?"

"I bought my umbrella," Akira replied and patted the purse he was carrying. "And I'll eat anywhere that doesn't serve noodles."

"Right. No noodles," the bassist agreed, then poked Takeshi. "Suggestions?"

"How much money do we have?"

"A little more than a thousand yen, more or less," Juro answered. "I get paid day after tomorrow."

"Sounds like noodles or nothing," Takeshi stated as they paused while Akira stared into a store

window. He was looking at a display of designer purses.

"When we're playing as a band again, I want one of those," the drummer told them, pointing out a sleek looking black purse with gold fittings.

"Which one is it so we know what to get you, Hana-chan?" Juro asked, leaning closer to the window and peering at the high-priced items on display.

"That one," the drummer told him, pointing to one at the back.

"Oh, okay." Juro gave the drummer a sideways glance. "You sure about that one? I like the one at the end better."

"Which end?"

"Left, one row lower."

"That's nice too, but it's not the same designer."

"True. But you know, I don't like that other guy's stuff anyway."

Takeshi had joined them at the window. "That's a lot of money for one purse, don't you think?"

"Excuse me," a man's voice said from behind them. "Aren't you Kei, Hana-chan and Maki of Mercykill?"

They turned to find an older man in standing there, his face mostly hidden behind a pollution filter mask and dark sunglasses. Coupled with a 1940s style fedora and a loose fitting overcoat, the man would remain a complete enigma to them, unidentifiable if they ever met him again without all the things that hid his identity. The most noticeable feature about him was his greying hair, and it struck Juro that the

man was much too old to be a fan.

But, as with so many things, Takeshi never forgot a voice, and he didn't know the man speaking to them.

"Yes, that's right," Juro agreed warily.

"Look, I can't tell you who I am, or how I know this," the man said, "but I know you're looking for Hanari Eiko. She's going to be a gala for *Poisoned Dragon* tomorrow evening. A limo from the company will bring her."

The three rockers exchanged startled glances.

"What makes you think we're looking for her?"

The man shrugged, shedding droplets of rain from his coat. "Word gets around."

Juro frowned. "Does it?"

"I knew where to find you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, and that's pretty odd too, don't you think?" Juro asked.

"Yeah," Takeshi agreed.

"Everyone that watches the news knows what's happened to you. Most people just don't care. I do."

"Why?" Takeshi questioned.

"My reasons are my own."

"So Hanari Eiko will be at this gala." Juro stated. "Where is it going to be?"

"I'll give you the information. I have it written down. When she comes out is the best chance you'll have to confront her."

"But how do you even know we've been trying to talk to her? That's what I want to know," Takeshi prompted suspiciously.

"Yeah, I want to know, too," Akira agreed.

The man chuckled. "Let's just say you aren't the only people who've noticed the odd connection between dead musicians, reporters, recording executives, handlers and Dream Scar."

The three rockers gave the man very suspicious stares. "Who told you that, old man?"

For an answer, the man shrugged. "Who have you told? Not many people, right? So it's got to be one of them, doesn't it?"

"We haven't told anyone," Akira stated. "So how can you know?"

The sunglasses were focused on Takeshi.

"Yeah, okay, I understand," the guitarist replied.

"So do I," Juro agreed.

"Well, I don't," Akira muttered and leaned against the building with his arms folded over his chest, his expression a bit petulant. He was starting to feel as if he only knew half of everything that went on, and considering the other two men, it was probably true, because they sometimes left him out of things they thought would upset him.

The old man cleared his throat. "There have been too many incidents for it to be a coincidence, considering that, all totaled almost twenty people are dead."

"Twenty!" Juro shook his head. "We didn't know it was that many."

"No, we didn't," Takeshi said.

The unknown man took a manila envelope out of his pocket and held it out to Takeshi. "This is clippings of every death I feel they have contributed

to, in one way or another. Most of those deaths were anything but accidental, even the suicides were carefully arranged."

"What?" Akira asked, his eyes wide with horror.

"Kyoto Skies. They suicided to protect their family. The guitarist, keyboardist and drummer were brothers. I've heard a rumor that someone threatened to reveal that their father had embezzled millions of yen from the company he worked for, unless they killed themselves. The drummer survived, but he's permanently brain damaged from the carbon monoxide poisoning."

"What about their bassist?"

"He hung himself three months after it happened. The note he left said he couldn't live without his friends." The man shook his head. "You see, they've been killing people for a long time. The first person to die suspiciously was a boy from their high school. He'd played with them for a few months, then left to start his own band. He was found beaten to death in an alleyway three blocks from the school. They never found the responsible person or persons."

The three rockers exchanged glances. "You've got proof of this?" Takeshi asked.

"It's in the envelope. Believe it or not, that's up to you." The man turned away from them, ready to leave.

"Tell us why this matters to you." Juro said.

"Because they murdered my son and the police wouldn't listen to me."

"Who was your son?" Takeshi asked.

“Just a boy who wanted to play guitar and make music.” The man stood there, unmoving, silent. “His name was Genjo. But you would have known him by his stage name of Maemae.”

The three young men went silent exchanging looks of shocked disbelief.

“Maemae? The lead singer of Shadowed Heart?” Juro asked as he stared at Takeshi and Akira. The musician had died accidentally almost four years ago.

The man nodded.

“But they said he...”

“Died accidentally while engaging in a dangerous masturbation practice?” The man shook his head. “My son was killed. Someone choked him to death. He had rope burns as if he’d resisted being tied up, as if he tried to get away, and he was bruised and beaten too. They never put it in the report, the police refused to say it was anything but an accident.”

“Michio...” Takeshi whispered. “I remember the news reports. The guitarist from Dream Scar was reported to be his lover, but Michio denied it, said he didn’t really know Maemae that well and had never slept with him. He claimed that they’d met at a party for *Poisoned Dragon* right after they signed with the studio.

“But I know it was him. Genjo called me before he was killed. He told me he was meeting with Michio, and he told me that he was in love with the other man and had helped them get the recording contract with his label.”

“They killed my boy after he got them what they

wanted, a recording deal they couldn't get without his help." His voice broke, but he didn't turn to face the trio of younger men as he said, "Konda and Saigo, plus two other officers, Matoke Bokkai and Uoya Tae, help them. Uoya handles any calls coming in from families and friends of the victims, or, in your case, she'd be making sure no other officers speak to you. The other officer, Matoke, tries to get on your good side so he can find out what you might know or suspect so they can make sure you're shut up quickly or discredited. I confided in him, and all evidence that might have proved my son hadn't done himself in accidentally was either lost or neatly explained away by an expert, or was totally disregarded.

"Konda and Saigo are the real bastards, though. They knew how Genjo was killed, but they made very sure to turn it into something dirty, as if he'd done it to himself. As if he'd been alone. But there was no way my son could have tied himself up like that, or gotten out of it. And he couldn't have choked himself because his hands were tied behind his back."

"How do you know all of this?" Takeshi asked.

"Because I'm the one that found his body. I found my poor boy." The man's voice broke and he silent for a moment.

When the old man began to speak this time his voice was harsh, full of anger. "If he was engaging in such dangerous practices as the police claimed, what sense would it have made for him to have his hands tied behind his back? He couldn't have done that himself. But those bastard detectives—" the man

slammed his fist into the palm of his other hand in impotent rage, "those bastards know exactly how my boy died!"

"What can we do?" Akira asked him.

Takeshi and Juro were regarding one another, the guitarist holding the package of information tightly, knuckles white from barely contained fury.

The old man did turn then, staring at them from behind the cover of his glasses. "Maybe nothing. But if those bastards do drag you into court, that might be enough ammunition for your lawyer to use."

"I'd still like to know why you brought this to us," Takeshi said.

"I told you, I wanted someone else to know what I know." The old man turned his head away, and they could see a tear slip from beneath his glasses. "Maybe it will help you understand what has happened to you. Maybe you won't lose hope like some of the others have and give in, give up."

Juro stepped closer to the old man. "We aren't going to give up. Far from it."

"That's right! We're going to find a way out of this and make a comeback," Akira agreed brightly. "We won't let them get away with this, will we?"

Takeshi shook his head. "No. No we won't."

Juro added, "We already suspected them of being involved in the deaths of other musicians, and other people, too."

"I tried my best. But I'm just a bitter old man with no hope left. Not until the three of you came along. I'm putting my faith in you now."

Akira's smile faded. "We'll try to get someone to listen, but no one seems to care about our story anymore."

The old man was watching Juro and Takeshi. "Was I wrong to talk to you?" he asked them.

"No," Takeshi replied, his voice soft as velvet, gaze cold and hard as granite. "We'll take care of this now."

Juro nodded. "We've got nothing left to lose, and a lot to gain."

"I thought so," the old man remarked.

Akira leaned into Takeshi. "You can't mean what I think you mean," he whispered.

Juro squeezed the younger man's shoulder gently. "We'll talk about this at home."

The drummer nodded mutely, accepting what the bassist told him.

"We still don't know where the handler for Dream Scar is, though."

"Check the package," the old man said as he started to shuffle off down the street. "It's all there. Everything you need to find them."

"Thanks," Takeshi told him.

"Don't thank me, young man. I've done you no favors and we both know that, don't we?" he asked.

Juro met Takeshi's gaze. "Let's go somewhere and look at that stuff."

"Home. We need to go home," the guitarist said, as he handed the package to Juro and put an arm around Akira. "We can pick up some takeout on the way."

“Okay, Takeshi. But it better not be noodles. I’m sick of noodles,” the drummer all but whined.

“I promise, no noodles.”

**That same night  
An apartment in Shinjuku  
Eight-twenty in the evening**

The three of them were at the kitchen table, the curry rice they'd bought for dinner sitting half-eaten off to one side while they went through the package of information the old man had given them. None of them had an appetite after viewing some of the photos the innocuous-seeming envelope had contained.

Police crime scene photos in gruesome full color.

The asphyxiated members of *Kyoto Skies*, their faces flushed as if they were still alive and overly warm, stared up from a series of photos.

The magazine writer, Ise Yuji, hanging from a light fixture in his apartment. Strangely enough, there wasn't any piece of furniture close enough for him to have climbed on to have stepped off of or kicked out from under him, and the fingers of one hand were trapped under the loop of rope around his throat as if he'd been trying to fight the rope that killed him.

Maemae, his body wrapped in ropes, hands tied behind his back in what, to Takeshi's eyes, looked more like the work of a master of *nawa shibari*—rope bondage—than anything a person could possibly do to themselves. Studying the photo that Akira couldn't even look at without feeling ill, Takeshi and Juro

could see just how complex the rope work was as it crisscrossed his body. They could also see rope burns and bruises all over the singer's flesh as well as the clear ligature marks around his neck.

"I'm no detective," Juro stated softly, "but if he choked himself, where's the rope that was used? It says this is exactly how the body was found, right?"

Takeshi nodded. "I was wondering that same thing," he said as he picked up a second picture that had been taken from a different angle. "No rope around his neck, so how in hell could he have done this?"

"Like the old man said, he didn't."

Akira wrapped his arms around himself. "They're going to kill us, aren't they?"

The two older rockers exchanged frowns.

"No, baby, they aren't," Takeshi said, trying to sound reassuring as he slipped out of his chair to kneel down beside the smaller man and embrace him.

Juro got up and put his arms around the frightened drummer. "We won't let anyone hurt you, Akira."

"It's not just me," the drummer whispered. "I'm afraid they'll kill the two of you."

"Not going to happen," Juro stated firmly.

"That's right," Kei agreed as he looked up at his lover, giving him a smile. "Those guys aren't us."

"He's right," Juro agreed. "I think that old man realized we're fighters, you know. He seemed to think we could do something with this stuff."

"Yeah, he did," Takeshi agreed as he glanced at Juro, who shrugged at the unvoiced question of, 'I

wonder why that was,' from Takeshi.

"This all just scares me. Especially since Konda showed up at the restaurant," Akira explained. "How did he know we were there?"

"Yeah, I've been wondering about that, too," Takeshi admitted.

"You don't think they're following us, do you?"

"No," Takeshi replied. "If they were, they'd have known where to look for that gun, and they didn't, obviously."

"Good point. So if they aren't following us, then how did he know where to find us?" Juro asked.

"I'm not sure, but I'd love to know."

"Maybe he's following Kumi," Akira suggested, glad for a change in subject, even if the conversation was still on the unpleasant topic of their ruined lives. It wasn't as if they had anything good to talk about anyway.

*Don't be that way, Aki-chan. You know it's going to get better. I promised you that, didn't I?* the Kita in his head reminded him.

He closed his eyes as Takeshi started to caress him and Juro leaned down to give him a soothing kiss. Normally he liked to have his eyes open to watch them when they made love, but the photos and things on the table were sure to ruin the mood for him if he had to see them.

He loved both men so much, and the thought of them dying, of them all being killed the way Dream Scar had done to so many other people terrified him.

He started to tremble, not from the awakening

desire he should have been feeling as Takeshi and Juro tried to take his mind off the awful things they'd been looking at, but from the fear that someday people would take horrible pictures of them. Pictures from which their dead eyes would stare out at their families.

He covered his face, because just closing his eyes wasn't enough. He could still see the terrible images. Such awful ways to die.

So many lives ruined. Beautiful men, musicians like them. Men who had died because of ambition, jealousy and greed.

He started to cry, and not even the soothing murmurs of the Kita in his head or the touches and kisses of his lovers could get him to stop.

They were going to die too. Like Maemae, the members of Kyoto Skies and who knew how many others. They were all going to die...just like their Kita.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**The next evening**

**The offices of *Poisoned Dragon Recording Company*  
in Shibuya**

**A few minutes before eight in the evening**

There were dozens of people arriving for the gala at the recording studio. A gala that, as it turned out, was being held in honor of Dream Scar's millionth record sale.

It irked all three men that such murderous people were garnering so many accolades from the company that they'd signed a contract with. A contract no one would even contact them about except to tell them they had breached it and were now in default and facing legal action.

They'd finally decided that the situation was probably being handled by someone on the inside of the company who wanted their contract negated, who wanted to see them go down into the obscurity from which Kita's efforts had lifted them.

Someone working with Hanari and Dream Scar to ruin them.

Akira huddled against Takeshi, trying to get warm. It was chilly and damp from several days of rain and from the smell on the air, it was going to rain again

before morning.

"Cold?" his lover asked and put an arm around him as Juro pressed closer to him on the other side.

"A little," he admitted as Kita waved at him from a reflection in a shop window. He smiled at her but didn't wave back, because he knew it upset both Takeshi and Juro when they saw him interacting with her. No matter how hard she tried, Juro just couldn't hear or see her, and Takeshi stubbornly refused to admit that he could see her, even to himself.

"I could go find someplace to get hot drinks. There must be some place around here with takeout food," Juro suggested.

"No. We're going to stay right here until we see that bitch."

Juro sighed. "They might have already arrived."

"I know. But I want you here until it starts."

"All right, Kei," the bassist agreed. "I just don't want any of us getting sick, that's all."

"We'll be okay, Juro."

"It's not you or me I'm worried about. It's our Hana here."

"I should have worn my coat," Akira remarked softly as Takeshi started to stroke his back gently, trying to warm him. He was in low-slung jeans and a cropped top that left a lot of his flat belly exposed, and now that the sun was gone, he was getting chilled.

Takeshi took his leather jacket off and offered it to the shivering drummer without comment, his dark stare held by the activity at the front of the building

that held their recording company.

"We should be able to just walk in there too," Juro remarked sourly. "It's so unfair."

"Unfair?" Takeshi turned the single word into a question. "What does that mean, anyway? Nothing in life is fair. We all know that, don't we?" the man asked, his tone full of barely constrained anger.

Akira put Takeshi's jacket on, enjoying the warmth that lingered from the man's body, then he wrapped his arms around his lover and held on tight as he wished he could find a way to make their lives good, the way they'd been when Kita had lived outside his head.

*Give it time, Hana-chan. I know this is hard for you, for all of you, but I promise that it will get better. It's just going to take time.*

He sighed and pressed his cheek to Takeshi's chest, listening to the steady beat of his lover's heart.

The three men stood shivering outside the building and waited for a chance to finally confront Hanari Eiko.

Hours passed and Takeshi finally allowed Juro to go find them something hot to drink or eat, the bassist returning with cups of takeout miso that they drank as their vigil continued.

Eleven came and went, with a slow progression of guests departing, the numbers of departing partygoers growing larger as the midnight hour approached.

"She's not going to come out here," Juro finally said, fighting a yawn.

"That bitch won't leave until the party is almost over. I think she loves the attention too much to leave before then."

"That paper said it ends at midnight." Akira did yawn sleepily.

"We'll go soon. I want to give them a little longer."

"Sure, Kei," Juro replied as he huddled up closer to Akira, who gave him a smile.

"Look, why don't the two of you head home? I'll come home later."

"Nope. You stay, we stay," Juro told the guitarist.  
A limo pulled up at the curb.

"Why do I get the feeling..." Takeshi said as he started across the street, the other two right on his heels.

They weren't even completely across the street before a woman stepped out of the building. She was wearing an expensive designer dress and shoes, diamonds glittering at her ears, throat and wrists.

All three of them remembered meeting her briefly before the concert.

Hanari Eiko. Dream Scar's handler.

Kei reached her before she reached the safety of her car.

"What do you three want?" she asked.

"To find out what you know about Kita's murder. That's what," Juro told her.

Takeshi stepped closer to her. "Who is he?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Everyone knows who killed her, Morishita."

Takeshi glared at her. "You also know I had nothing to do with it!"

Juro was staring at her, anger in his eyes. "We know what you're doing. We know."

Her dark eyes were full of contempt. "But do you know what *you're* doing?" She poked Juro in the chest with one red-nailed finger. "I don't think you do, or you wouldn't be speaking to me like this. You know your handler can do things to ruin your career."

"We don't have a handler, and you know it!" Juro retorted as the woman tried to walk past them.

"Really? You should look at your contract. I'm sure you have one," she said, her mouth twisting into a smirk of smug satisfaction. A possibility since she'd helped to arrange their downfall. "*Poisoned Dragon* has assigned you a new handler, just as it states in the contract."

"Our contract says that Kita is our handler."

"But she is *dead*, remember? Dead and gone." Her smile turned cruel and she made a shooing gesture with her hand. "Now go away before I have my bodyguard make you go. I don't feel like discussing your contract. Call me tomorrow and I'll decide if you'll be recording an album. I'm too tired to even think about that right now."

She pushed past Juro, only to wind up face-to-face with Akira. "You'll decide?" the drummer asked. "As if you have any say in it!"

"But that's just the point. I have *everything* to say about it," Hanari replied nastily. "Whom do you think is your handler, hmmm?" she asked, her eyes

sparkling with pure delight. She gave him an acid smile and leaned down to regard the little man. "Me, that's whom. Isn't it just too wonderful? Me, the handler of Mercykill." She started to laugh. "I'm sure you can appreciate the humor in that."

Akira's eyes widened. "You? That *can't* be right. We would never agree to that."

"Yes, me, and it is right, and what you would and won't agree to hardly matters, I've got the contract."

"You damned bitch!" Takeshi growled as he took a few steps toward her. Juro grabbed him by the arm and he froze, his whole body shaking with rage.

She spun around to confront Takeshi with a bright, mocking smile. "Don't get any ideas, any of you. Your bitch of a handler signed the three of you over to *Poisoned Dragon* the day of the concert. Didn't do her any good, though since she got murdered—by you," she said to the guitarist, "for her betrayal of your band, of course." She looked the guitarist up and down, gaze bright, almost manic. "Too bad she wouldn't agree to having you dump the losers you're with. You'd have made a good addition to Dream Scar." She licked her lips. "Handsome and tall, and I can tell you've got the right heart for this business." She waved her hand dismissively at the other two rockers. "Not like those twerps."

Takeshi's stare turned incredulous.

"I think she's saying you've got the right attitude to become the same kind of murdering bastards they are," Juro told his lover.

The woman just gave a little satisfied smile.

“Too bad we won’t be making you the offer. Michio likes things the way they are.” She sniffed and brushed at a raindrop that had fallen on her arm. “I really only agreed to be your handler because that fool Ito wanted you at *Poisoned Dragon* despite every protest we made about how crappy you really are. But he’s gone too, thankfully,” she was smiling as she said it. “You’ll be receiving a notice of contractual breach in a day or so, since I have no intention of letting you near the studio. Go back to sweeping floors or whatever menial tasks you did before you decided to pretend to be musicians.”

Hanari was so busy telling the pair of musicians off that she forgot the third member of their band. Behind her, Akira was standing there, face white, eyes wide with horror and outrage.

“Well, enjoy the pitiful lives you’ve got left,” she said as she turned to go to the car.

Akira was in her way and when she set a hand to shove the slender drummer out of her way, he exploded in fury.

“You *bitch!*” he shrieked and slapped her so hard she stumbled. He took a step closer to her. “You *murdering bitch!*”

The pair of older men stood there staring at Akira, too stunned by what Hana-chan had done to react.

But not everyone was shocked into immobility. The door of the limo opened, and a man got out. “Hit her again and I’ll break every bone in your body,” he snarled as he stalked toward them.

Akira turned at the sound of the voice to see a tall

man with eyes cold as an Arctic wind coming toward him. He froze where he stood, unable to believe, unwilling to comprehend, unaware that he was in any danger until Hanari shoved him to the pavement.

"You fucking dog!" she snarled angrily as she rubbed the fiery mark on her cheek. "I should let Goro beat you to a bloody pulp!"

"My pleasure," the man replied as he stepped toward the drummer.

Juro stared in disbelief, his face gone as white as Akira's. "Son of a bitch..." he whispered in shock, not able to accept what he was seeing.

Takeshi stared. The man was...

"*You bastard!*" Takeshi roared as he went for the man who'd brutally killed the woman he loved. He slammed bodily into the woman's bodyguard just as the man was about to kick Akira, the pair of them going down in a tangle of arms and legs, exchanging furious body blows and kicks.

"That's it, he goes to jail now!" Hanari yelled at the pair of rockers as she gestured wildly at the pair of men rolling around on the sidewalk. She reached into her purse and pulled out a cell phone.

"No!" Akira shouted at her and grabbed for the phone. It fell to the pavement and the drummer stomped on it as she clawed at him with her nails. Juro shoved her, and she almost fell.

"You two are going to pay for that, you really are!" she shouted as her bodyguard and Kei fought.

"You bastard," Kei repeated as he rammed a fist

into the killer's teeth, not caring that he was bleeding from a cut inside his own mouth. He didn't feel the fists hitting him. Didn't feel anything at all but hate.

Juro tried to get close enough to the two men to get a grip on Takeshi, but one-handed it wasn't going to happen, and he almost got kicked in the face when he tried. He pulled the sling off and tossed it aside, then made a grab for Kei, getting hold of his lover's belt and pulling as hard as he could

He was still kicking at the man as Juro pulled him off the bodyguard. Only then did he notice that the man's hand was under the coat of his dark suit. He shuddered and fell back against Juro as he dragged him away.

"Take it easy, Kei. This isn't the time or the place. Not here, it isn't."

"Okay, okay," the guitarist agreed. He was breathing hard, but he still didn't feel the places where he'd been hit, or the sore lip he'd have in the morning. He was too angry, too filled with fury. Everything they'd suspected seemed to be true.

Worse, the killer had been right out in plain sight of the police the whole time. There was no possible way that Konda and Saigo didn't know who Kita's killer was and any last doubts that the rocker harbored regarding their guilt were gone. The cops were in this right up to their lying mouths.

"Are you all right, Hanari-san?" her bodyguard asked, but his cold stare never left the guitarist.

"Yes, Goro," she replied, turning a cool look on Akira. "But if you ever see these three near me again,

you have my permission to do whatever you like to protect me. It's obvious they're dangerous, all three of them. In fact, I think if we ever see them again, you should just shoot them in self-defense."

Kei was glaring at them both, his face dark with fury, but he'd almost stopped trying to get free of Juro's grip.

"Not here," Juro murmured by his ear. "Not now."

Hanari gave the rockers a satisfied smirk. "Why don't you boys just go home and turn on the gas, or hang yourselves? Think of all the embarrassment you'll save your families that way. I'm sure the police will have something to say about this unwarranted attack on me. And then there's that contract with *Poisoned Dragon* that you've refused to honor, even though your bassist is fine, as we can see right now."

Juro just glared at her and held on as tightly to Kei as he could, all too aware of how much his arm was aching and praying to any divine power that might care to listen that he hadn't just done permanent damage to himself trying to control Takeshi.

"You're going to court over that contract you won't honor, and I've begged and begged you to come to the studio, too. I've got letters that prove how diligent I've been in my efforts."

She shook her head with mock sorrow. "I tried so hard to tell that fool Ito you didn't have what it takes to be *Poisoned Dragon* recording artists, that he be better off leaving the three of you playing those ratty dives in Shinjuku, but he wouldn't listen." Hanari smoothed the skirt of her dress.

"You damn bitch!" Kei was sneering at her. "You won't get away with this!"

She regarded them with contempt. "Won't I?" She laughed softly. "Looks like I already have. Now be good boys and go die quietly somewhere out of the way. You really are going to be an embarrassment to your families if you keep up your pathetic efforts. Better for you to die quietly with dignity than drag your relatives' names through the mud."

"You'd like that, but we're not going to let you do this to us!" Akira told her firmly.

"Oh? And what will you do to stop me? No one is going to listen to you anymore. No one. I promise you that."

"We'll see about that!"

She gave Akira a little smirk of superiority. "Oh, yes, we certainly will, won't we?"

Hanari turned and started for the car. The man following her paused long enough to grab for Akira, but the slender drummer dodged and before Hanari's bodyguard could make a second attempt, Kei got between them, his eyes full of barely constrained hate.

"Touch him, and..."

The man just smiled. "And what? You'll kill me?" He laughed in Kei's face and patted the side of his body where he had his pistol hidden. "I think not."

"Goro, stop fucking around with that fool and come on!" Hanari ordered.

"Not here! Not like this! And sure as hell not now!" Juro snapped at the guitarist. "Not when he's got all the cards, Kei."

There were a couple of security guards watching them from inside the building, and Juro pointed them out to the guitarist, who nodded his understanding. They couldn't afford for any of them to go to jail. Not now.

Akira grabbed Takeshi's arm and pulled, urging him away from the place. "You're going to get us arrested, Kei. Please, let's just go home. There's nothing we can do."

"Listen to your little bitch," Hanari told them. "He's right, you know. There isn't anything you can do. Nothing." The woman waited for the driver of the limo to open the door for her.

The man smirked at them, amusement in his cold eyes. "You lead such sad lives, why not just end it and save your parents the heartbreak of going into so much debt? It really would be best for everyone, you know. Wouldn't you be much happier with your dead whore?"

It was all the pair of younger men could do to keep Takeshi from going at the killer a second time when he called Kita a whore. He subsided when Juro gasped at the pain in his arm.

"You act as if we're going to be arrested at any second, which is funny, since there's no *evidence* we've done anything wrong," Juro countered as he and Akira wrapped their arms around Takeshi, making sure he wasn't going to lose his temper again.

"Oh, I don't think you'll be arrested," the woman told them as she paused at the open door of the limo, the driver waiting quietly, head averted from what

was happening as if to show he wanted no part of what was going on.

Hanari's smile was full of triumph, the pleased grimace of a predator who'd dined richly on favored prey. "Breach of contract is serious, you know. And who will blame me for not wanting to represent you after such a spectacle? Attacking your handler when she's done so much for you." She made a mockery of a sorrowful expression, her eyes glittering with pleasure as she continued. "It's no wonder I won't represent you. And after this little display of assault reaches the news...well, I think you won't have to worry about salvaging a music career because you're washed up. All three of you. And once the suit for breach of contract makes the papers and TV, that will assuredly put an end to your attempts to replace Dream Scar in the eyes of our fans, won't it?"

"We weren't trying to replace them. We just wanted to play our own music, for our own fans."

The woman gave a dismissive sniff. "Of course. That's why you said all those awful things about us to the reporters."

"You're fucking crazy!" Takeshi snarled. "We never said shit about them to anyone and you know it!"

Juro hissed softly in his lover's ear, "Don't, Takeshi. Let her talk. She's confessing to us now. Hear her out."

Takeshi just nodded, going silent and letting the bassist speak.

"We know what you've done," Juro told her in a

calm tone. "We know everything."

"But who will believe you? No one. No one at all," the woman told them as she slid into the limo.

Kita's killer got in after her, paused as he reached for the door. "This isn't over," he said quietly as a few raindrops started to fall.

"No, it's not, is it?" Juro asked, meeting the killer's cold stare without a trace of fear.

The man just smiled, and there was a fierce joy in his eyes as he said, "I'm looking forward to it. I really am."

"So are we," Takeshi replied, no longer trying to escape the restraining holds that Juro and Akira had on him.

The man was laughing as he closed the car door, the vehicle quickly pulling out into traffic as another spate of raindrops pattered across the pavement.

"Bastard," Takeshi swore as he pulled Akira close, kissed the top of his lover's head. "I'm proud of you," he told the drummer.

"Why?"

"Because you actually hit her for what she did."

"It was wrong for me to hit her."

"No, baby, it wasn't wrong at all. It was the most right thing you've ever done in your life."

"But...she's a woman... I..."

Juro shook his head. "No, Hana. Don't you feel bad for hitting her. Kei's right. That was the right thing for you to do."

Akira stepped into the circle of Takeshi's embrace and began to cry. "They killed Kita...they..."

Takeshi held the drummer as Juro moved closer. "Forever and always," the bassist murmured. "No matter what, right?"

"Always and forever, no matter what," Takeshi agreed.

"No matter what," Akira repeated. "But what are we going to do? What can we do against such people?"

Juro was staring at Kei as the man who'd murdered their beloved Kita sped away in the car.

Neither of them spoke, but from the expression on their faces they were thinking the same thing.

The man was a dangerous killer, and he needed to be stopped.

Hanari Eiko and Dream Scar were just as guilty as the gunman, and Hanari's words were all the proof they needed to confirm their own belief in the handler's involvement, although the fact that Kita's murderer was also her bodyguard would have been just as damning even if she'd said not a single word to them

She'd arranged Kita's murder, somehow arranged to have Kita's signature put on a different contract that made her their handler, and then she'd simply not let them know about any efforts *Poisoned Dragon* had been making to contact them regarding their obligations.

She could tell the people at the recording studio whatever she chose, and they'd be none the wiser because they didn't know about her Machiavellian scheme to engineer their downfall.

A scheme that had started with Kita's murder.

But now they understood. Now they knew the truth.

Juro's honey-brown gaze went darker, showing the anger he felt.

His arms around Akira, Takeshi just nodded, the two of them making a silent decision.

If no one else was willing to do anything, then the two of them would.

They no longer had anything left to lose but their own lives, and considering that any hope for a happy life was already ruined, their future no longer mattered. And dying to avenge so many people, to get revenge for Kita, seemed a small price to pay for such vengeance against Hanari, her bodyguard, Dream Scar and the crooked cops who'd helped them. Especially when all three of them knew that Hanari, her private killer, Konda, Saigo and the members of Dream Scar would keep killing, and getting away with their crimes.

"Let's go home. We've got to figure out what to do now," Juro said.

Akira looked up at the sky as the rain started to fall in earnest, the tears of Heaven mixing with those on his face. "No one will help us, will they?" he asked.

"No, baby," Takeshi replied softly.

"It's up to us, like that old man said," Juro told him.

The drummer gave a sad smile. "I won't help you kill, but I won't stop you either, so I'm going to be just as guilty under the law and in the eyes of God."

“Aki-kun, think about this,” Juro said softly as they started for the train station. “Maybe it’s the hand of destiny that’s brought us here. Maybe it was our fate to stop them.”

The Kita in Akira’s mind peered at him from a plate glass window. *You know what they’ve done, Hana-chan. Will you honestly feel sorry for them when they’re killed?*

*No, Kita, I won’t. I’ll feel sorry for us because we’ll be just like them all in the name of the love we feel for you, and that is just so wrong.*

*They have to be stopped, Aki.*

*I know. And I know we’re the only ones who can do it, it’s just... I don’t want Kei to be a murderer.*

*Sometimes the things we most want aren’t the things we get. Sometimes they aren’t even the things we need, Hana-chan. Just remember, when the time comes, don’t take the easy way out. Even the darkest moment can change into a bright future if you give it a chance.*

*Okay, Kita. I’ll remember what you said. But it’s hard to imagine anything darker than our lives are right now.*

*Dawn is a long way off yet, Aki. Just hang on and don’t give in. Dawn will come, I promise.*

He had to believe Kita, because there was nothing left for him to believe in: their dreams were like ashes blowing on the wind and there was no way to get them back that he could see.

*Forever, right?* he asked the ghost in his mind.

*Forever and always,* she agreed.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**That same night  
An apartment in Shinjuku  
A few minutes until two in the morning**

Despondent and unhappy, the three of them arrived at their apartment. They'd hardly spoken on the ride home, and the bassist and drummer could see the black mood that was closing around Takeshi, the wall between them a few bricks higher than it had been. The terrible words spoken to them by Hanari was a bitter poison poured into the guitarist's already wounded heart, and nothing they could do or say would ever make things right for him.

No, only one thing could ever do that, and the knowledge of that cure left Akira cold inside.

The pair left Takeshi sitting alone in the dark on the couch and went into the bathroom to clean up.

"He isn't going to try and get help from the police, is he?" Akira asked as he pulled his cropped top off and tossed it aside.

"No. Why should he? They've made it very clear they won't do anything to help us, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Akira agreed softly, then sat down on a small bench in the room. "Why is God doing this to us?"

Juro knelt in front of Akira and took the man's delicate face into his hands. "God isn't doing anything to us, Aki. It's not the devil, either, so don't even mention him. This is the work of an insane bitch, a couple of homicidal bastards, and a few crooked and greedy cops, okay?"

The drummer just nodded. "Why does God let things like this happen, though?"

"People just do bad things sometimes," Juro explained as he eased his arms around the smaller man and knelt there with his chin resting on Akira's head. His arm hurt, but Aki's pain and confusion were a lot more important to him than the hurt of his body.

Aki and Takeshi were everything he had in the world, and he'd do anything and everything he could to make their lives right. Unfortunately he couldn't see a single way to make any of this right. He knew what Takeshi needed to put him at peace, but the way to peace for the guitarist wasn't going to change their lives for the better, because the only thing that would appease the older man was revenge. That would carry an even heavier price than they were already paying.

But at least that would be something they had done, rather than something that had been done to them. It was an action they could take themselves, rather than being the passive victims.

It was also something that they really had no means to carry out. They didn't know where any of the people lived, only where they worked, and killing Hanari in front of *Poisoned Dragon Recording Company*

wasn't any more an viable option than gunning police Detective Konda down on the steps of the Kudanshita Police Station.

Not that they'd ever discussed it, but Juro knew what was in his lover's mind and the encounter with Hanari tonight would only have served to make Kei's desire for bloody-handed revenge even more acute.

"I just wish this hadn't happened to us," Akira said as he laid his head on Juro's shoulder.

"So do I, Hana-chan. But it has, and all we can do is go forward and deal with the things that life has thrown at us." He rocked back on his heels and sat there studying the beautiful man, seeing a return of the sorrow and pain that had been less and less apparent in recent days. Juro brushed a lock of blue hair from his lover's face and kissed him tenderly, the drummer wrapping his arms around Juro and returning the kiss.

Takeshi opened the door of the bathroom and found Akira seated on the bench with Juro kneeling on the floor in front of him, their arms around one another, the two sharing a languid kiss.

He stepped closer to them and put a hand on Juro's shoulder. "How's your arm?"

"It hurts," the bassist replied as Juro tilted his head to regard him. "What about you?"

"I'm okay," he answered, not being fully truthful, but didn't want to worry either of them.

He leaned down and kissed the violet-haired man gently. "I'm sorry. I...wasn't thinking. If I had been, I

wouldn't have fought you so hard." His lips were still touching Juro's as he made the apology, and he ended it with another kiss, doing his best to show the bassist how sorry he really was.

"It's okay," Juro told him, "I want to tear that fucker's head off too, but that just wasn't the place, you know."

Kei sighed. "Yeah, I know. I'm glad you kept your cool, or we'd probably already be in jail."

"Yeah, probably," Juro agreed as he let go of Akira and stood, the drummer watching them expectantly.

Takeshi caressed his youngest lover's face and smiled gently as he leaned into the touch like a cat who wanted affection. He knew what they both probably wanted from him, but he just wasn't in the mood to make love. Not after what had happened, what they'd learned.

"I love you," he told the drummer, then turned to the bassist and said, "You too."

Juro gave him a little nod and a slight smile. "We know, Kei." Juro put an arm around him and gave him a quick kiss. "And we do understand, don't we Aki?"

"Yes," Akira agreed, putting on a bright smile that was out of sync with the sadness in his eyes. "Let's take a look at you. I'm sure you're all bruised up."

Kei shrugged, but took his shirt off so the younger pair could look him over.

"That asshole must have fists like bricks. You're beat to hell, Kei," Juro said after a moment of examining him.

"I'll get some of that ointment we used last time," Akira said as he went to rummage through the medicine box that was on the bathroom shelf.

Juro pulled the bench away from the wall. "Sit down and let us take care of you, Kei."

He complied and let them apply the ointment, their touch on his injuries bringing his mind back to how he'd gotten them, and from whom.

They knew who the murderer was. Now all they needed was where he could be found along with the rest of them, because they were all going to die, even if he had to kill every last one of them himself.

He felt his lover's gentle hands as they rubbed the ointment onto his skin and reached out to pull Akira into his embrace, kissing the younger man gently, the slender drummer molding himself willingly to the guitarist's body as he deepened the kiss. Juro's breath was warm against his shoulder as the bassist kissed him there and whispered, "We need you, as much as you need us, Takeshi. Don't forget that no matter what happens, we love you."

He broke his kiss with Akira to give the bassist an equally intense kiss that left them both breathless.

He closed his eyes and let his lovers smooth the ointment across his skin, enjoying their gentle touches and the way Akira kissed him any time he showed an indication that what they were doing hurt.

Akira gave him another of those sad-eyed smiles and brushed gentle fingertips across the sore place on his cheek, where the man's fist had left a bruise. "My brave Kei," the younger man murmured and kissed

him. "No matter what, I'll always love you."

He hugged the drummer tight, his face pressed into his lover's perfumed hair. "Forever."

"Forever," the pair of them agreed.

He remembered another voice, a higher, sweeter voice promising to love him forever, but that voice had been silenced by Goro, Hanari's bodyguard. Taken from him—from them—because of a woman's insanity. Hanari *had* to be insane, it was the only thing that could explain her actions.

But it didn't excuse them.

So many people dead, not just Kita, but others. Maemae. The members of Kyoto Skies, a few reporters and Ito, their contract manager, all dead because of Hanari and Dream Scar.

Insane, thrill killers, sociopaths, it didn't matter.

It had to be stopped.

The police weren't going to stop it. They were helping to cover it up, so that left only one option.

He had to do it himself, somehow.

*I can't drag them into this mess any deeper, Akira started to kiss him again, trying to entice him out of the mood they both must realize had claimed him. Whatever I decide to do about this, it has to be me alone. Akira doesn't need to be part of such terrible things, and he'll need Juro once I'm not around anymore.*

*Somehow I have to find them and kill them. All of them.*

The seed of darkness that had taken root inside his soul was close to bearing fruit, a deadly and final growth that would send him out onto the stage of hate and blood, where Dream Scar already played

their songs of death.

Dream Scar would take one more person down into the darkness with them, but this time it would be someone making a willing sacrifice to see that their days of killing people came to an end. A permanent one.

*I wish I could help him, Akira told the Kita in his mind as she watched them with sadness in her gaze from the bathroom mirror.*

*You are helping him, Hana-chan, but you have to make sure he doesn't make any mistakes that will cost him his life.*

*Mistakes?*

*He's going to try and leave you and Juro behind and if he does that, he's going to die. You can't let him go alone, Akira. When the time comes, you have to go with him. You and Juro both.*

*Of course we do, the drummer agreed. We promised him forever, didn't we? And if I don't go, you can't be there either, can you?*

*No, I can't.*

*Okay, Kita. But I don't know if I can kill anyone.*

*You won't have to, Hana-chan. Kita's eyes went dark until they were solid black and they grew bigger until he felt like he might fall into them and be lost forever in their lightless depths. Her face took on an ashen pallor, the locks of her hair began to move as if tugged by the wind. But it comes down to that, I'll help you. They've done awful things, things worse than any of you know about. Terrible things. And they haven't stopped. They won't ever stop unless someone stops them.*

## MERVILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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The way Kita looked scared him, because he'd never seen her change like that before, her appearance so altered that he hardly recognized her. But he reasoned that, being dead, she wasn't exactly human anymore.

*What have they done, Kita?*

*I can't tell you. All I can say is that, no matter what, you have to be brave and do what you have to do, Hana, because it won't be just your lives at stake.*

The drummer held tighter to Kei and closed his eyes. *I'll do whatever I have to do, he promised her. Even if I have to actually help them kill people.*

The image in the mirror faded. *Remember you said that when the time comes, Akira.*

*I will.*

**The next day**  
**The Shibuya shopping district**  
**Three in the afternoon**

Akira was doing his best to put on a bright and cheerful face for Kumi and Yuya, but he didn't think he was fooling either girl in the least. Not if Yuya's pointed looks and Kumi's obvious attempts to get him to smile were any indication.

"Oh, let's go in here," Kumi said as she took his hand and led him toward an ice cream parlor.

"You and sweets," Yuya complained as she followed them both. "You're going to rot out your teeth and then the few boys that pay any attention to you won't even want to talk to you anymore."

Kumi just shrugged. "And I think you worry too much about boys," she countered.

"I bet Hana-chan cares about what the boys think of *her*," Yuya argued.

"Juro brings me ice cream if I'm unhappy," the rocker replied, trying to find a way to keep them from getting into another argument. They'd had two in the last three hours, nothing major, but listening to them quarreling wasn't his idea of a fun time. Especially when he'd hoped to forget his own worries for a while.

At least it didn't seem that there were any police following them. Maybe it was only Kei that they

watched, or maybe dressed as he was they just didn't recognize him. He'd gone all out and dressed like a normal girl rather than in his highly visible gothic style clothes.

"You've got such nice legs," Kumi remarked as they waited their turn to order. "I wish mine were more like yours."

Akira smiled at her. "Playing drums gives you strong legs, but I think Maki's legs are nicer."

"Do you shave them or get them waxed?" Yuya asked. "I mean, they have to be hairy."

Kumi frowned at her friend. "And yours aren't?"

Akira sighed. "Do you two have to argue? I thought we were supposed to be having fun."

"Oh, don't mind Yuya. She loves to pick fights. I figured out that she does it because it makes her feel better about herself."

The other girl just glared at her friend. "And hanging around with me makes you feel like you've got a chance with men."

"See what I mean?"

It was their turn at the counter, and they left off their squabbling long enough to order their ice cream. Once they were served, they took their orders and headed outside.

Akira regretted saying Yuya could come along. He was already unhappy to start with and didn't want to spend his whole afternoon listening to Yuya's sniping. But it was too late to do anything about it. Next time, however, he'd tell Kumi he'd rather just go out with her and leave the sour-tempered Yuya home.

"I think we should stop fighting and just try to have a nice time now. Agreed?" Kumi asked.

"Yeah, whatever," her friend responded.

Akira sighed while Kumi stared at Yuya.

"Okay!" the other girl said as she sipped her frozen drink.

Akira stepped away from them because Kita was waving to him from a nearby window. The girls followed him, and they stood there looking at the displays of glassware, the girls wandering away as they started chatting about the kind of dishes it would be nice to have when they had their own places to live.

Akira peered at Kita, seeing that she wasn't exactly herself. Her eyes were creepy big like they'd been the previous night and her face had that dead-pale look that reminded him she wasn't alive anymore. He was just about to ask her what was wrong when a pair of men shoved rudely past him.

"Stupid bitch, get out of our way," one of them muttered.

He turned to say something to them about being so nasty when he realized with a shock who they were. For a moment he was frozen to the spot, unable to move, or speak.

Most people wouldn't recognize them. Not without their makeup and extreme costumes. Dressed the way they were right now, it was probable that even their fans wouldn't know who they were any more than they'd realize he was Hana-chan from Mercykill.

But he'd seen them before the concert at *Nippon*

*Bokudan*, and he knew who they were because he had more reason to remember their faces than they'd had to remember his. He took a few steps after them, wondering why they were here. Sure, this was Shibuya and they were in the biggest shopping area of the district, but it just seemed too much of a coincidence.

What were the odds that Iku, the keyboardist, and Naoya, the drummer, from Dream Scar would be shopping at the same time he was there with Kumi and Yuya?

More to the point, what was the chance they'd show up in the same place at the same time as he and the girls were there?

He freed himself from his shock and hurried after them, hampered by the crowd of shoppers.

By the time he caught up with them, Iku had Yuya by the arm and was starting to urge her along. "Come on, it will be fun."

Naoya had hold of Kumi. "Yeah, we're sorry about how mean we were the night of the concert. We'd like to make it up to you."

"But we're shopping with a friend," Kumi argued.

"Yes, Hana-chan from *Mercykill* has been very nice to us," Yuya told them, her mouth twisted into an ugly sneer.

"What are you doing hanging around with one of those losers?"

"Unlike you, they've been nice to me, now let go!" Kumi said as she tried to pull away.

"Hey, you just leave them alone," Akira said

sharply as he offered Kumi a reassuring smile. He couldn't believe even these guys would try something with so many people around.

"Go fuck yourself, *Hana-chan*," the Dream Scar keyboardist sneered.

"Come on, you shouldn't be seen in his company. I have it on good authority that the three of them are going to be arrested for some very serious crimes," Naoya stated as he looked the Mercykill drummer up and down.

"That's a lie!" Akira retorted. He wanted to help the girls get free, although watching Yuya, he could see how smug she was about the whole situation. She was actually enjoying the whole thing and was going willingly with Iku.

But he wasn't enjoying it, and he wasn't going to stand by while two vicious murderers led the girls away. Yuya was innocent of the sort of men she was dealing with and even if he didn't like her all that much, he wasn't going to let a couple of killers just drag her off.

"Come on," Naoya said as he tried to force Kumi to go with him.

Akira grabbed Naoya's arm. "You let her go!"

The man backhanded him to the ground, which got the attention of several passersby. "Hey, what are you doing?" a man asked.

"These are my sisters and they're running around with a bad crowd," Naoya said. "That's *Hana-chan* from Mercykill, so you have to understand why we don't want them being with this guy."

"I'm not his sister!" Kumi declared as she struggled to get away.

Akira got up and tried to get his friend free of the bigger man. He was shoved to the ground.

"Help!" he shouted as the man started to drag Kumi away.

When he got up to chase them, someone else grabbed his arms from behind. A voice whispered softly into his ear, "Let's all go for a nice ride, shall we?"

He knew the voice. Ice filled his mind, spread to his body and held him imprisoned in a terror greater than any the young drummer had ever felt.

"So pretty and delicate. I'm going to enjoy breaking you." The voice murmured the words as if speaking a tender endearment.

"Let me go..." Akira gasped out through the terror. He was trembling and he could feel something hard pressing on his lower back.

"See how much I want you, Hana-chan?"

He was being walked forward, his movements stiff as those of a child's doll, his mind screaming in terror, his breath coming in panicked gasps as nausea gripped him.

"Please...."

"Yes, that's it, beg. I love it when my lovers beg. It makes their last moments of life so sweet," he whispered the words into Akira's ear. "Just think about it. My cock inside you as you gasp for breath, right at the verge of dying. They say that is the best orgasm you'll ever feel." A tongue swept the curve of

his ear and Akira closed his eyes, a strangled sound coming from him.

“Oh, yes. So exciting. I can’t wait to fuck you.”

Akira could see a car waiting for them at the end of the sidewalk. Yuya seated inside, the girl looking more sullen than scared. It was Kumi’s terrified gaze that drove the situation home.

They were going to die. All three of them.

“Kei...” he whimpered.

But Kei wasn’t there. Kita was.

Her eyes huge pools of darkness, bloodless face distorted in a hate-filled snarl; this was the angry, dead Kita. The Kita that wanted revenge, who promised to help him, to protect him.

The bonds of fear broke as the ice in his veins became cold as a blizzard’s touch and the Kita in his mind whispered, *Fight him, Hana-chan. Don’t let him steal you from Kei. Fight him!*

“Let me go!” the rocker snarled and started to struggle as the cold grew so intense he felt as if his body were on fire.

“Now, now, my beauty,” the man said as he closed his arms more tightly around Akira. He was strong, taller than the slim drummer. “Don’t struggle. Not yet.”

The images of Maemae’s sightless eyes staring up from the crime scene photo filled the cross-dresser’s mind. The memory of the way the singer had died at the hands of the man who was holding him captive broke something inside of the drummer, Kita’s voice growing louder until he could no longer hear the

nasty whispering voice.

*Fight him, Hana-chan. Don't let him take you from Kei. Kei needs you and he needs you so very much. If you die, Kei will die too!*

That was the final impetus Akira needed, the threat that Kei would die turning his fear to anger.

*"Let me go, you bastard!"* he screamed as he kicked wildly and tried to bite the man holding him, the heel of his right foot thudding sharply into the man's shin.

Cursing, the would-be kidnapper's grip weakened and Akira broke free, spun around and hit the other man across the face with his purse. He shuddered as he found himself looking at Michio, the guitarist from Dream Scar. Maemae's killer.

*"You bitch!"* Michio snarled, eyes full of rage he made a grab for the smaller man, fingers closing in the top of Akira's dress. He pulled and cloth ripped, but the movement had dragged Akira closer and he backhanded the drummer to the ground.

For a second, Akira could only see pain stars spinning in his vision, but a dark shape amid the glitter caused him to react violently, the drummer kicking with both feet. There was an enraged howl and then Akira was scrambling to his feet trying to run, to get away.

He was tackled to the pavement as a police whistle sounded down the block.

*"This isn't over by a long shot, bitch,"* Michio snarled in his ear. He was grabbed and yanked to his feet.

*"Hey, what are you guys doing! Police! Police!"*

It was a woman shouting for help. Finally one of the bystanders taking a hand in the scene unfolding.

The guitarist made a last grab for him, but Akira somehow got out of his reach.

"We're not done with you, bitch. Not by a long shot!" the man growled and shoved his way through the people crowded around, none of them willing to try and stop him.

Akira saw the police coming and realized that he didn't dare stay to speak with them. They'd likely arrest him for being in a street brawl, and that was the last thing they needed right now. Not when there would be no one to tell Takeshi and Juro what had happened to Kumi and Yuya.

He darted into the nearest store and hurried for the far exit on the other side, heading for the train station, trying to hold his torn dress together as he fled the scene.

Tears were running down his face, blood smeared his mouth from a torn lip and he was starting to hurt.

But the only thing that mattered now was getting home to tell his lovers what had happened.

Kei and Juro would know what to do. He ran, the only thought left to him was that Kei could make it right somehow.

**An apartment in Shinjuku  
Five-twenty in the afternoon**

Takeshi and Juro were in the kitchen going over the information from the old man when the door of the apartment opened.

They both looked up, their faces going from glum to shock when they saw the drummer. He was bloody and bruised, makeup smeared from crying, his dress torn and dirty.

"Shit! What happened?" Juro asked as they both hurried to their lover.

Takeshi took Akira's face in one hand and looked at his torn lip and swollen cheek. "Who did this to you?" he demanded.

"M...Michio..."

Takeshi's eyes narrowed in rage. "That bastard!" he grated out between clenched teeth.

"K...Kei..." Akira started to sob, crying so hard his legs gave way and the guitarist lifted him into his arms. He held on, face pressed to his lover's shoulder.

"I'll get some ice and that ointment," Juro said as Takeshi carried their younger lover to the couch.

He sat down with Akira in his lap and just rocked the younger man, letting him cry. He wanted to know what happened, but at the same time he knew he'd get no answer from Akira until the man had cried out the pain.

I wonder where the girls are? he was just asking himself when Juro returned with a damp towel, the ointment and some ice in a bowl.

"The girls aren't with him," the bassist remarked and that brought a louder wail of grief from the drummer.

"Shit!" Juro said as the two men realized what must have happened.

"Those bastards. Those bloody handed fucking bastards," Takeshi swore and started to rub the drummer's back slowly, trying to calm him down.

"I tried..." Akira wailed. "I...t...tried to stop them b...but...there were three of them and M...Michio grabbed me...fr...from behind..."

"Shhh..." Takeshi soothed as he held Akira close, the drummer clinging to him and weeping uncontrollably.

"Let me see your face, Aki-kun," Juro murmured gently. The drummer shook his head and held more tightly to Takeshi.

"Please, baby, let him see how bad you're hurt," Takeshi urged.

Akira raised his head and Juro gently started to wash the blood off Akira's face.

"H...have to help..."

"Don't try to talk, baby," Takeshi told him and kissed the top of Akira's head. "I want you to calm down first. You can't talk when you're so upset."

"Got...got to...help..."

Juro frowned. "Don't talk. Let me clean your face up."

Takeshi kept kissing Akira's hair, continued to caress him in an effort to ease the fear, his own anger close to flashpoint as he felt how hard the younger man was trembling.

Juro soon had Akira's face washed. Akira's lip was still bleeding sluggishly, so he held a piece of ice to it until the bleeding was completely stopped.

The tears had slowed, Akira's breath hitching on an occasional hard sob by the time Juro began to apply cream they used for their injuries on the drummer's swollen lip and bruised cheek.

"I love you, baby," Takeshi murmured to Akira.

"I love you...t...too."

"So what do we do now?" Juro asked as he closed the ointment and set it aside.

Shhh..." Takeshi murmured as he caressed Akira, trying to calm his lover. He met Juro's gaze and just shook his head slowly, trying to convey the idea that questioning Akira just yet wasn't going to do anything but upset him.

"G...got t...to find...g...girls..." Akira sobbed.

"We will, but you have to calm down and tell us what happened, okay?" Takeshi said softly.

Akira nodded, pressed his face to Takeshi's shoulder and held on tightly, his tears gradually slowing until he could manage to speak haltingly.

The two men remained patient, Juro joining Takeshi in petting Akira in an effort to ease the terror they could both see he was suffering from.

"M...Michio, Iku and Naoya g....grabbed us.... Don't think....Y...Yuya was scared."

"Well, she wouldn't be, she is a fan and probably thinks it's just a game."

"We should have told them about those guys," Juro remarked.

"Yuya wouldn't have believed us," Takeshi pointed out.

"True."

"G...got to help them..." Akira stammered out through his tears the way he always did when he was extremely upset.

"Right now the only thing we're going to do is get you calmed down," the guitarist stated firmly.

"M...Michio said he was g...going to k...kill me, they might hurt the g...girls."

At that Takeshi's eyes went cold, his face setting into an expression that would have scared Akira if he'd been looking, and did make Juro stare at him with something approaching wary respect.

"What did he say?" Takeshi grated out.

Akira repeated the threats that Michio had delivered, which sent the drummer into another round of hysterical crying and altered the already murderous look on the guitarist's face into something almost approaching the demonic, the man's jaw clenched so tightly that his teeth creaked audibly.

The three of them getting the shit beaten out of them was becoming too commonplace for the guitarist. The threats that Hanari had made against them and now this latest incident were the last straws for the outraged man. He was determined that this would be the very last time any of them were the

victims of such an attack.

His whole mind turned inward to study the problem of how to deal with the people who had ruined their lives.

Takeshi got to his feet, Akira cradled in his arms. "I'm putting him to bed, I want you to stay with him," he told Juro.

"Where are you going, Kei?"

"Nowhere, but I need to work something out and he needs to sleep for a while. He's exhausted."

Juro's honey-colored eyes regarded the older man for a moment. "Okay. But you do not leave this apartment without us. Understood?"

Takeshi nodded and carried Akira into the bedroom.

If they were going to get the girls back, he had to think things out with greater care. He'd made plans based on revenge with no prospects of survival but the kidnapping changed everything.

First and foremost, they had to save the girls.

After that was accomplished—and only then—would he be able to get what he wanted. And what he wanted was nothing less than the deaths of every last person connected to Kita's murder.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**The same day  
An apartment in Shinjuku  
A few minutes until midnight**

It had taken a mild sedative to get Akira to finally stop crying, and he was drifting in and out of nightmare-etched sleep. When he'd wake up, Juro would pet him and speak softly to the distraught younger man until he slid back into an uneasy sleep.

Between rounds of soothing Akira, Juro spent his time dozing or wishing that Takeshi would come to bed. But he knew better. The older man would sit up all night, brooding and angry, too frustrated by their helplessness to do anything else.

He'd slipped out of bed while Akira was asleep to talk with Takeshi, making the suggestion that they give the police one last try.

But as usual, the cops wouldn't even listen to them; the one officer that Takeshi had spoken to at their local koban told him to stop wasting their time. Another officer at a different koban told them to stop playing games because only the families of the missing girls could file a missing person's report.

Juro even made an effort to get a cop to listen, but it too was met with stubborn insistence that it was probably just a prank and to stop bothering the police.

It seemed as if every cop in the city thought they were making a false report to get attention, and even a call to Kumi's mother had yielded nothing. The woman wasn't worried about her daughter at all, because she'd called to say she was spending a few nights at Yuya's home. Yuya's parents just hung up and said not to call back, that they were perfectly aware that Yuya was out with friends and wouldn't be home for a couple of days.

And what could they do, if no one else would listen?

It was just another example of how much power the bastards had, and how little they could do to get out of the whole stinking mess.

Like animals in a trap, there was no way out for them short of self-destruction, and Juro wasn't ready to lie down and die.

Not yet.

But the fact remained that they still had no way to regain any control of their lives, because they were mired too solidly in the plot against them and without some way to retaliate, there would be no escape.

Being resigned to a course of action was one thing, but attaining the means to successfully achieve that course of action eluded them. They didn't know how or where to find any of the members of Dream Scar, Hanari, Konda or any of the other people who were

active in their downfall.

Worse, even if they did get to the people responsible for destroying their career and their lives, what chance did they stand? They were facing police officers and at least one hardened killer in Goro. They were just musicians, and in the long run, success at revenge would not restore what they'd lost.

He blinked away tears and cuddled Akira close to him, wishing that Takeshi would come to bed because in his heart, he knew their time together was coming to an end.

Sad and lost in his own black thoughts, Juro became aware that someone was knocking at their front door and he felt as if a bucket of concrete had been poured into his chest. Akira's arm around him went from a gentle hold to a terrified grasp as the drummer came awake in a panicked state of mind.

"Easy, Hana," he murmured, trying to keep the younger man calm even though he himself was about as calm as a dog in a cage full of tigers. He stroked Akira's back, as much to soothe his lover as to give him something to do with his shaking hands.

None of their family ever came to visit them so late, and none of the friends they'd had before Kita's death—some of whom might have shown up so late—even bothered to call them anymore. Not with the police making so much noise over their possible involvement in Kita's murder. Other than the police, he couldn't think of a single person that would come to their door so late at night.

"Do you think it's Konda?" Akira sat up and stared

at the doorway of the bedroom as if he expected the police to come storming in to arrest them.

"You wait here. I'll go see who it is," Juro said.

"I'm scared."

"Don't be," Juro told him before placing a gentle kiss on his cheek and leaving the room.

Takeshi was leaning with his back against the front door when the bassist entered the tiny front room. He looked up at Juro and held out an envelope.

"This was taped to the door," he said, voice a strangled whisper.

The bassist took the envelope and watched Takeshi walk into what passed as their kitchen. There was the oddest expression on his face, but he didn't say anything else. He opened their fridge and got out a bottle of beer, popped the top and dropped into a kitchen chair, his gaze focused on nothing.

The man looked like he was in a state of complete shock.

Juro pulled a sheet of paper out of the envelope. There was writing on the page. Very neat and prettily rendered katakana.

He stared at the paper and realized what it contained.

The addresses of Hanari Eiko, two of the four members of Dream Scar and the home address of the *Poisoned Dragon* contract executive who'd sent them the notices saying they were in breach of contract.

At the bottom of the note were the words,

**The only real sin is knowing about evil and**

**doing nothing to stop it.**

He took a seat by Kei and lay the paper down on the table.

“Where did this come from?” he asked.

Kei just shook his head.

“You don’t know?”

The man’s face was deathly pale, and there were tears forming in his eyes. He just looked at Juro, then turned away and sucked down more of the beer without replying.

“Kei? What is it?” he asked, placing a gentle hand on his lover’s arm.

Again the only reply he received was that slow headshake.

Juro looked at the paper again. There was something terribly familiar about the handwriting, but he just couldn’t place it.

Aki padded out into the room and Kei snatched the paper off the table, shoving it into his shirt.

Juro frowned. Takeshi was acting very strangely, and it bothered Juro that he didn’t know what was troubling the older man. “You aren’t making any sense here, Kei. You really aren’t.”

“Was it the police?” Akira asked, his large eyes searching the apartment for any sign of police officers.

“No.” It was the first thing that Kei had said since Juro had come out.

“Someone left—” A foot collided painfully with his shin and he stared at Kei, wondering why the older

man didn't want him to tell Akira about the paper.

"Someone had the wrong apartment," Kei said, his dark eyes challenging Juro to contradict his lie. It mystified the bassist, but he played along with Takeshi, figuring that the older man didn't want to upset Akira with the realization that an unknown person had just given them a partial solution to their current dilemma. While they didn't have a definite location on where to start looking for the girls, they at least had locations of some of the guilty parties.

They'd been given the pathway to revenge. All that remained was for them to embrace destruction and walk into the darkness.

He raised his eyes to Akira, beautiful Akira, whom he loved, then he looked at Kei, the ache in his chest turning to sharp pain. He loved them both, and knew they couldn't escape the fate looming nearer with every passing second.

Kei would not be satisfied until he'd avenged Kita's murder.

Neither, really, would he.

And revenge would permanently end any chance they might have of being a band again.

Not that such a possibility existed anymore. No, Hanari and the man handling their contract had permanently ended any future they once had as musicians as surely as her bodyguard had ended Kita's life.

But whether the location to which the girls had been taken was on the paper or not, they had no idea. But it was at least a start.

Akira was watching the two of them, puzzled but accepting of Takeshi's excuse. "Are we going to bed now?"

"Soon, Aki," Juro replied.

"Why don't you go ahead and keep it warm for us?" Takeshi suggested. Juro knew the man wasn't planning to go to bed. No, there was something going on behind his lover's eyes. Something unpleasant and deadly was happening inside Takeshi's mind—or perhaps it was even deeper, the man's very heart and soul being consumed by hate and anger.

The drummer frowned. "Okay," he replied, drawing the word out, making it very apparent that he was still confused by Takeshi's behavior.

"We'll be along soon," Juro told him.

"I'm going to take a shower first," the blue-haired man stated and vanished into the bathroom.

"Now what?" Juro asked the guitarist as Takeshi pulled the paper from inside his shirt and looked at it as if he were regarding a poisonous snake coiled up in the center of the table.

"I don't know," Kei replied and got up to toss out the empty beer bottle before he pulled a second one from the refrigerator.

Juro pulled the paper to himself and regarded the list of addresses. "Are you sure you don't know?" he asked softly.

Takeshi spun around to glare at him. "I told you I don't fucking *know*!" He slammed the beer down on the counter, snatched the paper off the table and stalked for the door.

"Kei! Where are you going?" he asked as he got up to follow the older man.

*"Out! Leave me the fuck alone!"*

He didn't even pause to put his shoes on, just grabbed a pair of his boots and slammed the door as he went out.

Dripping water, wrapped in a towel, Akira came out to see what was going on. "Where's Kei?"

"Out," he replied and went to clean up the beer spilled across the counter.

"Oh." Akira sat down and stared at Kita. She was standing in the little entry space of their apartment with her hand on the door.

*He hurts so much and he won't even talk to me. He can see me, but he won't talk to me, and that makes me so sad.*

*I know, it makes me sad too.*

A hand touched his shoulder. "Are you okay, Aki?" Juro asked him.

He nodded. "No, we're... I mean, I'm just worried about Kei. This stuff is all so bad and there's just nothing any of us can do to change it, is there?"

"Give Kei some time. I think he's trying to work out what we're going to do."

"I guess planning the deaths of so many people isn't going to be easy, is it?"

"Not for us, no," Juro agreed amazed at how easily Akira was talking about committing a series of terrible and violent crimes, and it drove home just how much the three of them had changed since Kita's death. If anyone had asked him if he thought Akira would be capable of hurting anyone, his answer

would have been a firm denial.

"If we were like them, it would be different, you know? But we're not, so the how of it is hard to figure out."

"I don't know if I can do it," Akira admitted softly. "But whatever happens I'll stand by you both, no matter what."

Juro hugged the smaller man. "I think that's what's making Kei hesitate. He doesn't want us involved."

"Well, we are involved and that's that," the blue-haired man replied. "When they killed Kita and ruined our lives, they made sure of that."

"Yeah, I know that and you know that, but Takeshi still wants to protect us from this somehow. He loves us and wants something that he cares about to survive this tragedy, but I think we both know the truth, don't we?" he whispered into the drummer's ear.

"Yes."

"Now we have to make him understand that there's no way out for us, either. But I still want to know if you'll be able to go through this with us."

Akira looked at the sad-eyed Kita staring at him from the living room. This time she looked more like an actual ghost, a transparent apparition that he could clearly see through.

"I'll do whatever I have to do, Juro. No matter what it is, because they have to be stopped. If we die..." his voice broke and he clung tighter to the bass player. "Well, we don't have any choices left, do we?"

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*Don't be afraid, Hana-chan. We'll all get through this, I promise,* Kita told him, then, after waving to him, she vanished through the door. He knew where she was going.

*Keep him safe for us, Kita.*

*I will.* She sounded far away already.

*"We might as well go back to bed."*

Akira nodded. *"You're right. He won't be back until late."*

**Stairwell of an apartment building in Shinjuku**  
**A few minutes later**

Takeshi stood at the foot of the stairs to their apartment building, lingering in the shadows, tears running down his face, the paper with the addresses clutched in his hand.

He'd hurt Juro with his words and anger and he regretted it, but that was always how it was with him. He said things before he thought them out and he managed to hurt someone he loved, and then felt like a total ass about it.

The problem with doing that now was there wasn't much time left for them and he didn't want to leave them with bad memories.

Just as he was left with memories of his last words to Kita right before they took the stage.

*'Pregnant? How could you have been so careless? This wasn't in our plan for now. You weren't supposed to get pregnant for two more years. We'd all agreed!'*

*Careless words spoken  
Can't be taken back  
Broken dreams  
Can't be mended*

He'd wanted a child so much. A child with Kita. One they'd raise together, the four of them.

He'd wanted their band to be successful first.

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Now there was no Kita. No child. No band. No dreams.

And there wasn't going to be any future for him.

Probably none for Akira or Juro, either.

His fingers on the paper tightened. It wasn't possible, he knew that, but the writing looked so much like Kita's that it had jarred him into a state of semi-crazed denial.

But it wasn't her handwriting. It couldn't be.

He shoved the paper into his pocket and started down the street.

He had work to do, a plan to form.

And no idea how to go about the murders of so many people spaced all over the city.

**An apartment in Shinjuku**  
**A few minutes until seven in the morning**

Takeshi's eyes opened to a world washed in violet; Juro's hair across his face and the first tints of daylight seeping in around the edges of the blinds. The phone was ringing and he tried to get up to answer it, hampered by the fact that there was a warm body lying on top of him, and a head pillowed on his shoulder.

Akira and Juro.

He glanced at the clock by the bed and then pulled free, waking both of his lovers as he hurried for the phone.

"Hello?" he asked.

"Morishita Takeshi?" The voice was digitally distorted, unidentifiable. His heart started to hammer in his chest. There was only one reason to use such a device. It meant that he would have recognized the voice speaking to him. His eyes narrowed, and he concentrated on the voice.

"Is this Morishita Takeshi?"

"Yes, yes, this is he."

"Listen carefully, I will not repeat this information."

"I'm listening."

"You will go to the Kudanshita Police station tomorrow morning. You will be there promptly at

nine to sign a confession for the murder of Takei Kita. If you fail to arrive on time or if you do not arrive at all, the bodies of Kumi and Yuya will be found in a trash bin three blocks from your apartment, and you will be arrested for their rape and murder."

"Do you understand these instructions?"

"Yes." His voice stayed calm, hiding his emotions, and for once in his life he was grateful for the ability to distance himself from what he was feeling.

"Good. Be at the police station to sign your confession, or be charged with the rape and murder of both girls. Your choice."

There was a click, and the guitarist put the phone receiver down. His hands were shaking, frustration and rage a toxic mix in his veins.

"Motherfuckers..." he growled out.

"Who was that?" Juro asked as he walked into the living room.

"I'm not sure, but I think that was Michio. They have the girls."

"Shit," Juro muttered as he sat down on the couch.

"So I was right?" Akira asked as he joined them. "Their kidnapping is our fault."

"No, Akira. It's not our fault," Juro told him.

"He's right, Aki baby. This isn't our fault at all. It's those assholes. Dream Scar, Konda, Hanari, the whole fucking bunch of them," Takeshi replied, his voice shaking with the fury burning inside him.

Akira touched Takshi's face. "What happened? What did he say?"

"He said I have a choice."

"A choice?" Juro questioned, looking from Akira to Takeshi.

"Yeah," The guitarist let out a bark of humorless laughter. "He said I had a choice. I could confess to Kita's murder or be charged with the murders of Kumi and Yuya." The guitarist started to pace their tiny living room, too agitated to stay seated.

"*What!*" Akira shrilled in outrage, his eyes wide in disbelief, face gone bloodless at the news.

Juro shook his head. "This just keeps getting more sick and twisted, doesn't it?"

Takeshi nodded mutely and dropped onto the couch, pulling a crying Akira into his lap and rocking him slowly as one would rock an upset child. It was something he'd spent a lot of time doing in the last few weeks, and for some reason it also helped him to keep his own anger and frustration contained, though sometimes that was only by the barest margin.

"So you confess to murdering Kita or you're charged with the kidnapping, rape and murder of the girls?" Juro questioned.

"Yes."

Akira screamed hysterically and started to wail in denial, slipping into a new well of grief.

Takeshi murmured a soft, "Shhh, baby," into his ear and kept rocking him slowly his own anger growing with each anguished sound that came from the drummer but he kept his cool outwardly rather than add more anguish to what his hyper-emotional lover was already experiencing.

He kissed the younger man and started to pet him

gently, his gaze imploring Juro to come and help him. Catching his meaning, Juro scooted closer to add his caresses and kisses to the effort.

“So what are you going to do?” Juro questioned.

Takeshi leaned back and held Akira close, his own eyes staring across the room at nothing as he murmured softly to the drummer, “Shhh...Aki, shhh, my Hana-chan. Don’t cry.”

After a few minutes, he turned his head to regard Juro. “He didn’t say that the girls would be set free if I confessed, Juro. What he did was offer me a choice of which crime I’d be charged with; Kita’s murder, or theirs.”

“Shit...” the bassist whispered. “So...what do we do?”

Takeshi shook his head. “We don’t do anything. This is up to me.”

“You aren’t going to confess!” Akira sobbed out bitterly. “I won’t let you!” he gripped Takeshi’s shirt and held onto him tightly.

“I know that. It won’t do any good.”

“So we’re backed into a corner with only one way out,” Juro stated, grim-faced.

“Not we, *me*.”

“Bullshit,” the bassist told him. “We’re all in this, Kei.”

“Yes, we’re all in this, but you aren’t going with me.”

Juro glared at him. “And how do you plan to stop me, Kei?”

“He’s right. We’ve got to try and find Kumi and

Yuya before they're hurt by those assholes," Akira said. "I'd rather we all die trying to do that than us just sit here while they hurt Kumi and Yuya!"

Juro was looking at him, anger darkening the bass player's gaze. "He's right, but I think we all know it needs to go farther than that. Just rescuing them isn't enough, is it, Kei?"

The guitarist shook his head. "I won't involve you in this. Either of you."

Akira's hand came down hard on his chest. "But we *are* involved, idiot! They've taking everything from us! Everything! And now they're going to take you too, and I won't let them!" He pulled out of Takeshi's embrace to stand there in front of his lovers, tears running down his sorrow-twisted face. "They've taken everything from me! *I hate them! God, how I hate them!*"

Takeshi exchanged a look with Juro, the bassist nodded.

"Okay, Aki baby, just calm down," Takeshi said as he got up from the couch and took the younger man by the hand. "Both of you come with me. I've got some things to show you. I...was going to try to do this alone before the girls were grabbed, but now, well, I guess we'll be doing this together."

The two men followed him to the kitchen, Takeshi urging them to sit while he got some papers down off the top of the fridge.

"I've worked out how to do this, but it's going to take precise timing and a lot of luck."

He spread out a map of the train routes and both of

the younger men noticed there were red dots marked on the paper.

He saw Juro look at the places that were marked and then the realization of what they must be filled his lover's eyes.

Akira looked up. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Maybe. What do you think you're looking at?" he asked.

"Where some of them live?"

"That's right, Aki baby," Takeshi agreed.

"So you've figured out the routes we have to take and the time it takes between them?" the drummer questioned.

The guitarist just nodded.

"That's where you went the other night, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How long will it take?"

"Too long, but we're going to do this in the middle of the night, so there will be fewer witnesses around. That's why I said it was going to take luck, too."

"You think that going late tonight will give us a better chance?"

"Yes. If they'd demanded I go into the police station now and confess, we'd be fucked even more than we are, but for some reason they've delayed it to Monday morning. I already know that Konda and the other cops work days and go elsewhere to sleep, unlike most of their colleagues, who just about live at the Police Station."

"Hmm... that's odd for cops, I bet most of their coworkers live in the station."

“Probably.”

“If I was one of the people they work with, I’d be curious about something like that,” Akira remarked. “I mean, it is odd for a cop not to live where he works.”

“Maybe some of them are, but it really works out better for us because I couldn’t think of any way we could get in there, kill the four of them and get back out alive.”

“Would have had to make that our last stop, then,” Juro said, “and we probably wouldn’t have gotten anywhere near them.”

Akira was staring off into space, and Takeshi realized the drummer was probably talking to his phantom Kita again.

Akira had always been sensitive. It was one of the things that had actually attracted Takeshi to the younger man, that ability to so readily show emotions that Takeshi himself had difficulty showing in any way other than through the songs he wrote.

Since Kita’s death, though, his Akira was becoming more and more visibly unstable, and that bothered him so very much because he didn’t know what to do to help him. Now, under the circumstances, he didn’t think that instability was going to matter.

At the least it might prove a benefit to the drummer if they were arrested.

One mention of Kita to a psychiatrist and Akira would be considered incompetent to understand what he’d done. At least, that was Takeshi’s hope.

He just wasn’t sure if it would be best for Akira,

considering he and Juro might very well wind up dead.

*Maybe it really is better this way. We'll all die together, and I won't have to worry about Akira totally losing his mind and ending his life in some terrible institution.* It wasn't really a comforting thought. The idea of Akira, his beautiful Hana-chan, dying in his arms was the bitter consolation he would spend his last few hours with, because there was no better outcome possible for them now.

"So what do you know about the places we're going to?" Juro asked.

"Most of the streets are all but deserted in these areas. They're all out in nice suburbs, so things are quieter and there aren't as many people on the streets late at night. On Sunday I bet it will be even quieter, since most people will be asleep long before we start."

"Right. So where *do* we start?"

"Well, Naoya and Iku live together. Since Naoya was one of the kidnappers, I'd say we should start at their house."

"Right."

"And if they aren't there?" Akira asked.

"Then we make sure to find out where the girls are being held from one of those bastards," Takeshi replied, his voice harsh as the light in his eyes.

"But what if they won't tell us?" Akira asked.

Juro turned a hard-eyed look on Akira. "They'll tell us. There are ways of getting people to talk even if they don't want to, you know."

The drummer nodded slowly, his face losing most

of its color so that the bruising stood out starkly in shades of blue and purple.

Seeing it only reminded Takeshi just how much he wanted to kill the men they were going after.

Akira's gaze went distant and unfocused, and Takeshi knew he was talking to his illusion of Kita. He blinked and looked up at them. "Michio will have them," he said with such conviction that he and Juro exchanged worried gazes.

"Why do you think that, baby?" he asked.

"He'll be the one that has Kumi and Yuya because he likes to gain people's trust before he shows his true face. He'll have them." The chocolate-brown eyes closed. "He'll kill them the way he killed Maemae, because he said that's what he was going to do to me."

"Shit..." Juro whispered and dropped into a chair, his face turned to Kei.

"He won't do it yet. He's probably terrifying them first."

"He gets off on fear," Akira told them, his voice a hollow whisper. "My fear excited him."

Tears slid from Akira's eyes and Takeshi dropped to his knees beside Akira, put his arms around the smaller man and looked up into his eyes. "Don't cry, baby. Please. You're with me, and you're safe, okay? I won't let him hurt you, I swear."

Akira nodded, but he put his hand over his mouth and Takeshi could tell he was fighting not to break down.

"Baby, we need you for this tonight, but if you

can't do it—"

The hand dropped away from Akira's mouth. "I have to," the drummer said, his voice still so soft that it was hard to hear him despite how near Takeshi was to the younger man.

He went quiet again, nodding as if he were answering another person, Kita again, and Takeshi just pulled his half-mad lover closer.

"We'll be all right, Kei," the drummer murmured as he started to caress the guitarist's back. "I just know we'll be fine."

"Sure we will!" Juro agreed brightly, smiling for them both. "We're like the good guys, you know?"

Takeshi managed a smile. "That's right," he concurred. "We *are* the good guys, aren't we?" He knew that it wasn't going to be that easy, though, but anything he could say to reassure Akira, even lies, was better than seeing the fear on his lover's face.

Akira smiled through his tears. "We have justice on our side. We'll win."

"All right," Takshi said as he got to his feet again and turned to the map. "Let's see if we can work this out. We start with Iku and Naoya. Depending on what they tell us, we either go to wherever the girls are, or we hit Hanari and see what she knows."

"Right," Akira agreed as he wiped his eyes and tried to stop being so scared. Kei and Maki would be with him when they had to face Michio. He'd be okay. And Kita was with him too, so he wouldn't be alone.

*That's right, I'll be with you.*

He could hear her, but he wasn't sure where she was, so he looked around the kitchen trying to see her reflection somewhere. He caught motion across the front of the fridge, but she was moving too fast.

"Why Hanari next?" Juro queried.

"Because killing Goro will give us at least one more gun, and we might need that before we have to face the cops."

"I've never used a gun," Juro pointed out.

"It's easy. Just like the arcade games we used to play."

"You were much better at those gun games than I was," the bassist reminded.

"Yeah, but you'll need it. I'd bet those cops have guns even if they aren't supposed to have them."

"You're probably right."

Akira found Kita. She was standing right behind Kei. Not a reflection, but a freestanding shape standing there on the other side of the table, nodding as Takeshi outlined their plan. Under the bright lights of the kitchen she was difficult to see, only her face really clear. Her eyes were big and dark, pools of nothingness that weren't like eyes at all. Scary, like she'd been the day Michio attacked him.

But she didn't scare him, because he understood why she was like that now. The more angry Kei got, the scarier Kita became.

*Are we really the good guys?* he asked her.

*Yes, Hana-chan, we are,* she replied as she nodded solemnly. *Just remember what I told you before. You have*

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*to help them. You have to protect Kei, or he might die.*

*I don't want him to die.*

*I know that. He doesn't want you to die either. He loves you so much, Akira. You and Juro both.*

*As if to confirm Kita's words Takeshi leaned over and kissed him. "Forever."*

*Akira smiled. "Yep."*

*Kita's eyes were sad as she said, *Forever and always.**

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**That same day  
An apartment in Shinjuku  
Ten minutes after seven in the evening**

It was the only good feature about the crummy apartment they'd taken. The bathtub was old like the building, and it was big. Big enough to make the slender drummer feel like he was practically in a miniature swimming pool. Of course, being on the small side helped.

Akira sighed and leaned back in the tub, enjoying the dim candlelight from the strawberry-scented candles. Combined with heat of the water and the caress of the strawberry foam that surrounded him, he found the experience relaxing and after the stressful events of earlier, he desperately wanted to relax.

The only thing better than a hot bubble bath was a hot lover, but that didn't seem to be something he'd have tonight. Not considering the additional plans that the older men were making out in the kitchen. Plans they were formulating because they'd insisted on doing it without him present.

Kita covered her mouth and giggled from the candleglow reflection on the tiles. *Takeshi's about as hot*

*as you can get.*

"Yes, he is," Akira replied softly, glad that she'd come to distract him from the direction his thoughts were trying to take. A direction that would soon become all too real, one that would end with blood, death and more pain. "But he hasn't been in the mood much lately. Those terrible people have done so many awful things to us that he just doesn't feel like it."

*Yes, they have. But... Well, you know he's always been moody, even before all this happened. Lots of artistic types are, you know. That hasn't really changed so much, the image on the tiles told him.*

"True. I just wish...well...you know..." He sighed and touched a bruise on his arm, able to see the fingerprints of the man who'd grabbed him. Michio had done that to him. He touched them and wanted to cry, not because of the pain but because the men had Kumi and Yuya, and who knew what they might be doing to them?

He closed his eyes and felt Kita's gentle touch on his face as a few tears slipped free.

*Don't worry. They'll be fine. No one has really hurt them yet.*

"You're sure?" he asked.

*Of course I'm sure.*

"Does Kei love me?"

*What a silly question. Of course he does. With all his heart,* the Kita in his mind replied without hesitation as she kissed his bruised cheek.

"And Juro?"

*Now, you know the answer to that! Yes, he loves you very much.*

"I wish we could make love one last time before..." he started to sob quietly.

*I know. But, well, you might be in for a surprise.*

"A surprise?" Akira asked and realized that Kita was gone. He wiped the tears from his eyes and frowned. "Kita? Where did you go?"

The bathroom door opened and Akira saw Takeshi standing in the doorway. "You're still here?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Juro?"

"He said he was going to make us something to eat. Are you hungry?"

Akira stared at the bubbles floating in the tub. "I don't think I should eat. Not...considering what we're going to do tonight."

"You should try and eat something. It might be a long time before we have a chance to eat."

"I'll just throw up if we..." he sighed and closed his eyes. "I don't think it's a good idea. The water is so nice and warm, I think I'll just stay here."

"Smells like strawberries, too," Juro commented from behind the guitarist. Akira watched as Juro put his arms around Takeshi, and smiled as the bassist splayed his hands over the taller man's lower belly, moving them down slowly. Juro was grinning at the reaction his hands were having on Takeshi, the guitarist visibly relaxing except for the one place that showed an increase in tension.

"I thought you were going to cook us something to eat," Takeshi murmured, actually leaning back into Juro's embrace.

Watching them made Akira smile. They were both so handsome, and he loved them for so very many reasons. His cock rose, going hard, his body wanting the touch of his lovers.

“Well, I couldn’t decide what I wanted. Then I saw you standing in the doorway and realized what I wanted a taste of,” Juro remarked as he kissed along the side of Takeshi’s neck.

The guitarist sighed. “Oh. Should I guess what it was you’ve decided on?”

“Sausage,” Juro replied and Akira saw him pressing his hands more firmly to the erection he could see beneath Takeshi’s trousers.

“Do I get some of that sausage too? You know it’s my favorite meal,” the drummer said as he rose out of the water, bubbles sheeting down his slender body, dripping off his erection.

He heard Takeshi’s groan and Akira grinned when he saw what Juro was doing to the guitarist with the palms of his hands, but Takeshi’s eyes were on him, traveling over his body as if he were a man starving and the drummer were a meal.

“Speaking of sausage,” Takeshi groaned, eyes going half-lidded with awakened lust.

Akira swallowed, mouth gone dry at the sight of his lovers. Takeshi was actually pressing his ass into Juro’s crotch, something he’d never seen the older man do, not even once.

“I think you should just stay right where you are,” Juro instructed as he walked Takeshi into the bathroom and kicked the door shut.

Akira smiled, giving Takeshi a smoldering look that told his lover exactly what he wanted. Sex. Now. But he obediently sat back down in the tub and watched as Juro guided Takeshi closer.

The pair of men started to shed their clothing while Akira watched them with lust-bright eyes. Juro was using his right hand to slowly unbutton Takeshi's shirt, his fingers a bit clumsy, yet he was slowly revealing smooth skin for his caresses.

The slow teasing was wringing soft pleased moans from the guitarist that went right to Akira's groin, his cock aching fiercely with desire.

Akira watched the display, licked lips gone dry. His heart was pounding, cock twitching and he started to get out of the tub to go to them, but a snap of Juro's fingers froze him where he was, the normally easygoing bassist's demands sending a flare of heat through him.

He'd never seen Juro take charge like this, and he found it very exciting. Of course, Juro had fucked him many times, but there was something different in having him act dominant and so controlling.

Akira stared as Juro kissed Takeshi, the guitarist touching and caressing the younger man's body. The movements of his hands over Juro's skin was so erotic, so very sensual, and Akira felt his already erect cock twitch. He wanted to touch Juro's smooth skin too, wanted to take Takeshi's cock into his mouth and drive the guitarist wild with passion the way they were driving him mad with need.

Juro was watching him, a wicked gleam in his eyes

as he kissed down the side of Takeshi's throat, his teeth catching the light as he smiled, then nipped the guitarist. Takeshi's groan of reaction brought a soft wanting cry from Akira that made Juro's eyes glitter even more.

It was deliberate, and Akira abruptly realized that this was the *plan* they'd made while he was in the bathroom. They hadn't been concocting anything to do with their goals for the night, or rather they'd just added a goal: to make him crazy with desire for them.

And it was working.

They were both so handsome, and seeing them kissing, caressing each other with such a blatant demonstration of passion was the most wonderful, sexy and arousing thing Akira had ever seen. At the same time, he'd never been so frustrated in his life. He wanted them, wanted to touch and taste and kiss, and he wasn't even allowed out of the tub.

He reached beneath the water and gripped himself, started to stroke his own erection slowly as Takeshi's shirt fell to the floor, Juro's joining it an instant later as Takeshi lowered his head to suck and nip his way down Juro's body.

The honey-brown eyes fell on him, and Juro shook his head. "Oh, no, you don't. Put those hands where I can see them, Aki."

"But..."

"Do it!"

The crack of command in the bassist's voice shocked Akira and sent blazing heat through his body from the spontaneous inferno it had created in his

groin. He didn't know what was going on here between Juro and Takeshi, but whatever it was, he wanted some of it for himself.

Juro snapped his fingers and Akira obediently put his hands on the side of the tub.

"You're being mean," Akira accused and heard the raw passion in his own voice.

"Yess..." Juro groaned out as Takeshi bit one of his nipples. Akira didn't know if he was just voicing his pleasure at what Takeshi was doing, or if it was Juro's answer to him.

Akira watched as Juro got Takeshi out of his pants, the guitarist stepping out of them, his hands and lapping tongue, his nipping teeth moving over the bassist, pulling quiet sounds of desire from the violet-haired man.

The drummer licked his lips, wanting a taste of what his lovers were sharing, savoring without him as he sat in the cooling water of the tub, his aching cock surrounded by the soft tickling dance of the foam and the small waves caused as he moved.

"This is so not fair," he complained.

"He does have a point," Takeshi murmured as he dropped to his knees in front of Juro, his hands skimming down the bass player's firm thighs before he unbuttoned and unzipped his lover's pants.

"Hmmm..." was the only reply Juro gave.

The drummer splashed water at them, the drops making a glittering pattern like tiny crystals across Takeshi's muscular back. "You better come over here and play with me too, or I'm going to get mad at both

of you!"

Juro just gave him a soft laugh, while the guitarist shook his head.

"I hate both of you," Akira muttered and started to reach for his erection.

"You were told not to do that," Juro reminded him.

"Why are you being mean?"

"Just watch for a bit," Juro told him.

Akira sighed and watched Takeshi strip the bass player's jeans off and then, still on his knees at the violet-haired man's feet, he opened his mouth to take the head of Juro's cock into his mouth.

Eyes wide, Akira watched Takeshi as he sucked and licked Juro's thick shaft, a soft whimper of desire coming from him at the highly arousing sight of the proud Kei on his knees giving head to Maki. They were so beautiful Akira had trouble breathing, couldn't speak. Nothing he'd ever seen, no yaoi manga, no anime or porn video could compare with the sight of his lovers giving and receiving pleasure.

Juro's good hand rested on the guitarist's shoulder as he leaned forward to watch what was being done to him, his long violet hair loose and falling over his face like a veil.

"God..." Akira gasped. "You're both so... beautiful."

Juro smiled at him and tapped Takeshi on the shoulder. "I think he's ready, don't you?"

Takeshi nodded, rose gracefully to his feet and gave the bassist a long exploring kiss that left Akira trembling with desire. Then he was being scooped out

of the tub and wrapped in a thick towel, the guitarist kissing him with such intense need that he was left gasping and breathless.

"Love you," Takeshi said after he'd broken the kiss.

"Fuck me, please, Kei."

The guitarist smiled. "You can count on it."

Takeshi lay Akira down on the bed, Juro moving past them so that he was near the wall. Juro took Akira into his arms and started to caress and kiss him as Takeshi discarded the damp towel, leaving the younger man as naked as they were.

For a moment he just stood there, watching the younger men, his cock hard and aching, his chest aching too. They were beautiful, and he loved them.

And by tomorrow they might both be dead.

The thought raced from mind through body and damped the desire, his erection losing some of its rigidity.

"Oh, no, you don't," Juro remarked as his hand closed around Takeshi's cock.

"I..."

Juro crawled closer to him, Akira sitting up to regard him with eyes already filling with tears.

This was probably their last time together, and he was about to spoil it.

"Don't cry, baby," he told the younger man.

"I want you, Kei. Please don't go away."

"Don't worry," Juro told the drummer. "Our Kei's not going anywhere."

The bass player's arms went around him in a tight embrace, his cock pressed to Takeshi's thigh, the touch returning a bit of life to his own failed erection.

"I'm sorry..."

Juro's fingers touched his lip. "Shut up, Kei. You suffering from a limp dick was not in the plan for tonight. You aren't to think about anything except what we're doing. Do you understand?"

"Juro..."

The fingers on his lips pressed down and Juro shook his head, a flash of anger turning his honey-gold eyes darker. "Shut. Up," the bassist growled out. "You listen to me. We're going to make love, all three of us, even if I have to wrap your dick in duct tape and use chopsticks to keep it hard."

Takeshi found a smile and offered it to Juro, trying to placate the annoyed violet-haired man. "Okay, okay."

"I love you, you know."

Takeshi kissed the younger man. "I know."

"The only things you get to think about are cocks. Mine and Akira's, understood?"

Akira wrapped a small hand around his dick and Takeshi closed his eyes, nodding in answer to Juro's order, focusing on the sensation coming from the hand around his flaccid penis. He felt it stir at the sensation of the strong fingers enclosing it.

"Just cocks, Kei. Nothing else."

"Yeah."

A mouth covered his and he parted his lips for the invasion of a very demanding tongue, a startled gasp

coming from him as a hand closed in his hair and pulled, making sure he continued to pay attention to his lover rather than the depressing knowledge that this was their last time together.

He wrapped one arm around Juro and held him, the other falling gently on Akira's back, sliding along in a loving caress.

His lovers. Two men that he couldn't exist without.

Tears fell from his closed eyes and he felt teeth close on his bottom lip, a flash of pain punishing him for evincing the distraction of bad thoughts.

Emotions welled up inside him, threatening to drown the fragile desire they'd begun to awaken in him Fear. Sadness. Love. So much love that he could never properly express, couldn't find the right words to voice.

Juro's hands touched him, moving down his back, over his ass and thighs, seeing the fire of lust, finding only more tears.

Kei lowered his head to rest it on Juro's shoulder, a quiet sob coming from him.

"I love both of you," he got the words out though his voice shook.

"I love you too, Kei," Juro murmured into his ear as the bass player curled a hand around his balls and rolled them slowly, seeking to arouse him.

Bitter pain filled him then, because this had been his idea and he was going to fail them. And he didn't want it to be this way. Didn't want to go into the dark embrace of death without giving this to them one last time.

"Shhh..." he heard Juro murmur. "Shh...Kei. We love you."

"I know."

"Then think about that. Think about love."

"I am," he whispered.

"I know what he needs," Akira said and Takeshi could hear the smile in the drummer's voice.

Wet heat closed around his cock, and he gasped as it slammed back to complete hardness in the span of that shuddering breath, Akira's skillful lips and tongue working him from morose impotence to trembling need with a few skillful strokes of his tongue.

He gasped, the sound captured by Juro's mouth as the bass player kissed him, his tongue invading, seeking to conquer the black sorrow in his heart. It was like the kiss of sunlight after a long sickness, the pair of men chasing away the dismal prospect of the bloody and terrible things they must do out of his mind, replacing them with what he really needed, a taste of life, of hope.

His eyes snapped open as he was bodily hauled down onto the bed, Juro's mouth never leaving his, locked in a passionate kiss as long violet hair tickled across his chest and a talented mouth stroked his cock, chasing away the melancholy that had invaded his soul.

He hated seeing Takeshi the way he was, so lost in despair that he couldn't enjoy their love, couldn't just let go and feel what they were doing to his body,

unable to accept their expression of love for him.

He looked down at the handsome man that he loved so deeply, touched his face, kissed him and whispered, "Let go, Takeshi. Just let it all go."

"Trying to," his lover replied, voice tight. He could see so much conflicting emotion warring on the man's face.

"We love you, Kei."

A hand slid through his hair, fingertips brushing across the nape of his neck, and he kissed the guitarist, putting every bit of his feelings, all of his need and passion, his love into it, tears dampening his eyelashes.

He could hear the sucking and little pleased sounds coming from Akira, felt a groan tremble in his vocal cords as their older lover responded, his body finally responding to their combined assault.

The sucking noises stopped and he felt another sound vibrate down his throat, a groan of loss. He glanced to see Akira reaching for a bottle of lube, watched through the strands of his hair as the drummer poured the liquid into his hands and warmed it, the younger man finally wrapping his fingers around Takeshi's straining erection to stroke the slick fluid over the entirety of his cock.

Watching that, seeing the intensity of lust heating Akira's gaze, the way the younger man licked his lips and then bent to blow across the purpled head of Takeshi's cock brought a groan up from the depths of his own building need. Heat surged through his balls, threatening to explode and vent his passions, his cock

jumping sharply against Takeshi's hip. A shudder passed through him at the brief contact of overly sensitized flesh and his lover's skin.

Takeshi touched his cheek, kissed him, a hand wrapped around his cock and he threw his head back, his intake of breath sharp, his hips bucking hard, driving his cock into the encircling hand. He gritted his teeth, fighting for control.

"So beautiful," Takeshi murmured into his ear, the guitarist finally with them, ready and willing to partake of what they so willingly offered.

A hand brushed through his hair, lips touched his and he felt another, smaller hand grasp his balls while Takeshi continued to pull slowly on his cock.

Then he'd been released, his lovers moving into position on the bed, Akira on his knees, ass presented for Takeshi, the blue-haired man smiling at him. "Come over here, Juro, so I can have you in my mouth."

"No," Takeshi said as he sat, looking at Juro.

Akira actually pouted. "But I wanted a cock to suck."

Takeshi was regarding him with the strangest look on his face.

"Not this time, baby. I want to do something a little different this time."

"Oh?" Akira sat down and just regarded the pair of them, patiently waiting to find out what was going on.

Juro was waiting too, waiting for Takeshi to tell them what he wanted.

"I want you to fuck me, Juro."

The violet-haired man felt his heart lurch and suddenly he couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

"You're kidding, right?" but he knew his lover was totally serious, he could see it in the older man's eyes, read it in his face.

"No, Maki," Takeshi replied, leaning close to press his lips to the stunned bassist. "I'm not kidding. I...I've been thinking about it, and I want you to fuck me."

Something bright, painful and shimmering filled Juro's heart and he threw his arms around Takeshi and kissed him with frenetic joyous passion, both of them breathless and shaking with emotions run wild by the time it was over.

Akira had crept closer, touching them both, and Juro turned to give the younger man a kiss at the same time Takeshi did so, their skulls bumping and making the drummer giggle softly before he turned his head to kiss Kei, then Juro in turn.

Akira grabbed both their cocks in his small hands, stroked them with a fierceness that left them both dazed and moaning, then he got to his knees and wiggled his behind. "Fuck me, Kei."

It was all the invitation the guitarist needed. He rose to his knees, got into place and sank himself into the willingly offered butt, Kei's pleased groan going right to Juro's groin in a spike of white-hot lust.

He watched his lovers, Akira's face changed by the pleasure of being fucked; the younger man, already too beautiful for a man, became a vision of heaven,

face lit by the love he felt for Takeshi.

Juro got behind Takeshi, who changed the angle of his own body, bending over the smaller man he was fucking as Akira folded his arms so that he was tilted forward a bit farther, his head resting on a pillow.

Juro caressed the older man's hips, kissed his shoulders, bit down lightly and smiled when Takeshi moaned.

Akira was whimpering, eyes wide open and glazed with passion. The drummer was watching them both. His body twisted and head turned so he could see them.

"You're sure?" Juro asked the guitarist.

"Yes. Completely sure," Takeshi answered, his voice tight as he pumped himself into Akira.

Juro watched them as he poured some lube over his fingers, his body feeling hot and tight, need searing along his nerves, the touch of his long hair across his own ass as he moved almost like a caress.

The bassist slipped in a well-lubed finger into the guitarist's butt and felt Takeshi jump, heard the harsh gasp from Akira as the reaction drove Takeshi deeper into the drummer's body.

"You don't seem too sure."

"It felt...strange."

"Bad?"

"No," the guitarist replied, as he thrust slowly into Akira, spread his knees farther apart and bent forward a bit more to give Juro better access.

The bassist gave the older man a bit of time to accustom himself to the sensation of having

something inside him, then added a second finger.

"Just do it, Juro. Akira won't last much longer."

"Will too," the blue-haired man he was fucking retorted, voice slurred with the pleasure he was feeling.

Takeshi wrapped a hand around the drummer's bobbing cock and felt the smaller man's entire body tense, his hips bucking in reaction. "Won't," he countered as Akira moaned loudly and tried to thrust into the hand.

"You aren't ready, Takeshi."

"Bullshit. Fuck me, Juro," he growled and slowed his own pace inside their younger lover to make it easier for the violet-haired bassist to gain entry to his own body.

He shivered at the thought, not sure how it was going to feel, anticipation and a bit of trepidation mingling, distracting him from the pleasure he was feeling with his dick sunk so fully into the smaller man in front of him.

"God, hurry up, Maki!" Akira groaned as Takeshi stopped stroking the drummer's cock.

Takeshi glanced to see what Juro was doing, but he felt the touch of a cock head at his ass just as he turned to look and he froze, unmoving, inside of Akira.

"Please..." Akira whimpered.

"Shh...baby, give us a chance to catch up with you," Takeshi said as he caressed his lover's trembling flanks, the drummer rocking back, trying to get some action.

"You ready," Juro asked the older man.

"Yeah, Maki. I'm ready."

Juro pushed forward slowly, felt Takeshi shiver, his ass parting under the pressure, his head entering the heat.

"Oh, God..." he groaned as the tight ring clenched around him, so tight he had to stop or hurt the other man. "Kei.... God, Kei."

A hand slid along his thigh in a caress. "Do it," the guitarist choked out as he rocked forward into the drummer.

Juro moved to keep the contact he had, and then Takeshi's backstroke impaled the guitarist on his erection and the jolt of being completely encased wrenched a sharp cry from him that was echoed by Kei's voice.

"Move with me," Kei urged as he started to thrust into Akira's body.

Juro gripped his lover's hips and timed his thrusts to Kei's, the guitarist pinned between his cock and Akira's ass.

"Oh...gods..." he heard Kei moan and Juro smiled, knowing exactly what the guitarist had just experienced as the sweet point inside him was stroked fully for the very first time.

They were moving together now, the rhythm perfect, Takeshi felt as if he were burning, caught in the heat of the sun, his cock deep inside Akira, a cock filling him. He was lost between the dual points of pleasure, thoughts unraveled, mind alight with a

passion greater than anything he'd ever felt. Overwhelming and all-consuming.

"Love you both," he managed to drag the words out of the inferno engulfing his brain, his lower body spreading heat, a roaring blaze of ecstasy through him that transformed into whirlwind destruction as he burned and fell to ash into the arms of Akira, held from behind by Juro.

He was shaking with the intensity of what had happened to him. Fucking and being fucked, giving and receiving at the same time was a more powerful gift to himself than he'd known it would be, and he couldn't stop shaking. Not even when Juro's spent cock slid free, not even after they'd lain him down on the bed, started to kiss him. The flickering heat shifted and danced inside him, wrapped him in a warm blanket and he sighed, content and relaxed in his lover's arms. For the first time since Kita had died, he felt completely alive. The cynic in him tried to point out that the only reason he felt so alive was that he would be dead in a matter of hours.

He firmly took the cynical half of his mind, shoved it somewhere dark and shut the door in its face.

"You okay?" Juro asked.

In reply, he gripped the bass player's face between his hands, stared into his eyes for a moment, then kissed him passionately.

It was all the answer Juro needed, the younger man smiling and returning the kiss at the same time.

Akira cuddled against him, reached over and put a hand on Juro's hip.

They lay there in one another's arms, Akira crying softly, his tears damp on Takeshi's chest while Juro caressed the guitarist's belly and thighs, all three of them lost in the post-coital lethargy of their sated bodies.

"I love you," the bassist murmured and kissed him, a few tears falling onto his face.

Takeshi caressed Juro's cheek, smoothing away a tear. He gave Juro a smile, his entire expression one that clearly conveyed love. "What's that for?" he asked.

"Because you've given me a wonderful gift, and I won't ever forget it, Kei."

He pulled the man's head down and kissed him tenderly. "I should have done this a long time ago."

Juro smiled. "Yeah, well, now that you've let me fuck you, I'm not going to let you go back to being top all the time, you know."

"Sure, Juro. Whatever you want." But in their hearts, they were all pretty sure this was the last time they'd ever make love together.

Instead of dwelling on death he chose to focus on life, his cock starting to stiffen as he reached for Juro.

"Twice?" Juro questioned.

"Why not? Unless I've worn you out."

Juro laughed and Akira giggled, the drummer's awakening cock already pressing Takeshi's hip. "Well, if he's too tired for you, I'm certainly not."

"You? Wear me out?" Juro scoffed. "Not a chance of that happening. You know I've got a tireless cock."

"Sounds like a challenge to me," Takeshi replied as

he wrapped his hand around Juro's hardening dick. If they were going to die, Takeshi wanted it to be the best night they'd ever have together.

"Yep," Akira agreed. "And it takes both of you to keep up with me, so I'm going to—" he giggled, "come out the winner, no matter what you two manage."

Takeshi shook his head at the bad pun and Juro was laughing as he reached for the drummer. "You are in for a lot of trouble now, Hana-chan."

"Oohh...I like trouble," Akira said, his voice a sexy purr.

"Do you, now?" Takeshi asked him as Juro leaned across him to kiss Akira.

"And what are you going to do if I say you get to be in the middle this time?" Takeshi asked their blue-haired lover.

Akira smiled. "I'd say 'Oh, baby, I love it when you talk dirty to me.' That's what I'd say."

"He's such a brat, don't you think, Maki?"

"Totally spoiled, but you know, I like our Hana-chan that way."

"Yeah, so do I," Takeshi agreed as he sat up to kiss the bassist. Then he actually grinned, able to feel real unreserved joy for the first time in weeks. "Let's get him."

"After you."

Squealing in mock-terror, Akira tried to bolt from the bed, only to be caught by his lovers and pulled back down, the three of them laughing and wrestling, bodies entangled.

## MERVILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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*"Help!"* Akira yelled and struggled while the pair of older men held him helpless and tickled him. He was laughing so hard he could hardly breathe, his struggles in vain because they were stronger than he was and he really didn't want to get away from them. He wanted them to hold him down and make love to him forever.

But their forever was coming to an end, and he could see Kita was standing off in one corner of their cramped bedroom watching them with a smile full of love and sorrow on her face as star-crystal tears slid over her transparent cheeks.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### **A condominium in Shibuya Ten minutes to eleven**

They'd left Akira down the block at a late night cafe despite his protests because they didn't want him there in case they had to pry information out of the two members of Dream Scar. They walked to the condominium together, neither of them speaking, both of them hoping they'd find the girls here unharmed, which would eliminate the need for them to search further. They attracted only passing glances from the few people they saw on the street, probably because the neighbors around here were used to seeing people in leather and makeup.

They stopped in front of an upscale building painted in pale salmon and white.

"This is it," Juro stated. "Second building, third floor."

Takeshi just nodded and they walked into the courtyard past a splashing fountain to the stairway.

Their feet rang hollowly on the stairs as they climbed to the third floor and started to read the numbers fastened to the doors.

They stopped at door eight. Inside, they could hear

a TV turned up a bit too loudly. Someone was home.

Takeshi raised an eyebrow, then stepped to the side of the door that held the knob so he'd be able to step in quickly once it was opened, yet be unseen by anyone using the tiny peephole above the number. Juro gave his lover a wry smile and knocked before he too stepped aside, going to the hinge-ward side of the door.

It opened, and before the man who was standing in it could do more than gasp in shock, Takeshi had shoved him backward out of the doorway with such force that he went down on his ass hard, actually sliding back several feet on the polished marble floor.

Juro stepped in behind Takeshi and closed the door, locking it just in case Akira decided to follow them. They didn't want the younger man walking in on them if they were forced to use unpleasant means to get an answer from whoever was in the apartment.

The sound of squealing tires and gunshots came from the TV, loud enough that no one would be able to hear what was going on inside the apartment.

"Where are they?" Takeshi demanded.

The man's eyes were violet like his hair, and he started to get up, but Takeshi kicked him back to the floor as a loud burst of gunfire came from the TV set.

"What the fuck do you two assholes want!" the man demanded, staring up at them. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Where are the girls?" Takeshi demanded.

"What girls? What are you talking about?"

There was a flicker of fear in the man's eyes.

"You kidnapped two girls, remember?" Takeshi asked, his voice barely audible over another roar of sound from the TV.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the man snarled and started to get to his feet.

Kei kicked him in the face and he fell backward on the tiles, blood spattering the floor, the guitarist kneeling down to grab the front of the shirt he was wearing. "Kumi. Yuya. Where?" he demanded as he reached behind him under his coat and pulled the pistol from the waistband of his pants.

The man stared at Takeshi, eyes wide with fear as he said, "Oh, my God...you're Kei..."

The guitarist smiled coldly. "That's right," he agreed, his voice an icy purr as he set the business end of the pistol against the other man's forehead. "And you're Iku, soon to be a very dead man if you don't tell me where those girls are."

"I...don't know...what you're talking about..."

"Iku, who's at the door?" a man's voice called from somewhere inside the apartment.

The man opened his mouth to answer and Kei shoved the business end of the pistol into his mouth, shaking his head. "Shhh...."

Juro stepped past Kei and the Dream Scar keyboardist, going down the short hallway past the kitchen toward where the noise from the TV and the voice he'd heard had come from.

Juro reached the end of the entryway and peered around the corner.

There was one man in the living room seated in front of the too-loud TV. “*Iku?*” he shouted, trying to get an answer. When he didn’t, he got to his feet and started for the front door.

Juro stepped out into his field of view and walked toward him.

“Who the fuck are you?” The man was just about the same height as Juro, his hair streaked with shades of gold.

“Someone who wants to know where two girls you helped kidnap were taken.”

“Fuck you, I’m not telling you shit!”

“That’s too bad,” Juro told him as he crossed the room.

The man bolted for a hallway at the other end of the living room and Juro followed, jumping over the couch and going after the other man at a full out run.

But the man had a good head start, a door slamming closed ahead of him.

Juro slowed his steps, going more carefully down the hallway because he didn’t know if there might be more people in the apartment, or if the guy he was following might have a weapon. His heart was racing, hands shaking from the fear and adrenaline surging through him. He paused at the closed door, took a slow breath, trying to calm himself a little, then he touched the doorknob. Anything could be on the other side of the door. Anything up to and including his own death.

Kita’s murderer could be on the other side of the door waiting for him with a gun.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a coil of wire, tightened his grip on the twisted wire in his left hand, feeling the bite of the braided steel as he turned the knob.

The door was yanked out of his grasp, pulling him forward off-balance as a hand grabbed the front of his leather jacket and propelled him violently into the room.

He fell to his knees, turned, driving himself to his feet just in time to see the man he'd been chasing coming for him, the gleaming silver of a blade catching the dim light.

He blocked the incoming death with his weaker right arm, twisting his body the way he'd been taught, stepping to the outside of the attack, the steel wire whipping across the other rocker's face.

Cursing, the other man backed away, touched his cheek and snarled at the blood. The dim light coming in through the blinds showed a black streak, the blood dark as the man's soul in the faint light.

The Mercykill bassist recognized his attacker finally. Naoya, the drummer of Dream Scar.

"You bastard!" the other rocker growled angrily and went at the Mercykill bassist, the knife in his hand sweeping in front of him in a deadly arc that would have gutted Juro if it hit.

But the bassist was quicker, the high-heeled boots he was in no hindrance to him at all as he evaded the low sweep of the blade. The instant it was past his middle he stepped in, the instep of his right foot slamming with bone-jarring force into the other man's

groin.

Screaming weakly, the knifeman dropped the blade he'd been using and doubled over, his face meeting Juro's knee with an impact that shattered his nose and brought another scream from the injured man.

"You son of a bitch," Juro snarled as he kicked the knife out of the other man's pain-loosened grip. Stepping across him, Juro straddled the other man's back, whipped the wire around his throat and drew it tight, his actions so swift the drummer had no chance to do more than react to his own pain.

From somewhere close, Juro heard a gunshot and a scream.

Kei, doing a bit of his own questioning.

Juro shoved the man facedown on the floor and straddled his back, his head close to that of his victim as he pulled the bass strings tighter.

"Don't..."

"Why? Because you're innocent? Because you aren't scum deserving of death for all the lives you've ruined?" He pulled the wires hard.

There was a second gunshot. Kei again. It had to be Kei, offering up shattered melody revenge to the people responsible for Kita's murder. For so many senseless deaths for the sake of warped pride and greed.

"I'll tell you where they were taken."

"Kumi and Yuya?" he asked.

"Yes. They're in Suginami." The man spilled out the entire address.

“So helpful,” Juro whispered into the injured man’s ear as he pulled the wires tighter, his knee braced against Naoya’s spine.

“Said...you’d...let...me live...” the man gasped as the wires grew tighter and tighter cutting off his ability to speak, to even breathe, his face darkening as the blood stopped moving.

“Funny, I don’t remember saying that,” Juro murmured into his ear as he hauled back on the bass strings, the man’s struggles growing weaker by the second.

When the body under him had ceased to resist, when he felt the life fade, he let the wires go and stood. His heart was beating so hard his whole body was shaking, his chest feeling as if it couldn’t contain it. His breathing was fast and shallow, sweat dampening his whole body.

He looked at his hands. Hands that had mastered an instrument capable of creating beauty, hands that were now an instrument of death.

His eyes closed, head lowering, the wires falling from his fingers.

Bass wires used to kill.

He’d killed another human being. Another man. A musician like himself.

But no, that wasn’t right. The man hadn’t been like him at all.

Their lust for fame, their drive to be the best band at all costs – even the cost of lives – had set them apart from the members of Mercykill.

They’d been driven by jealousy, greed and a

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sociopathic disregard for the lives of those they felt stood in their way.

Mercykill was driven by the result of that disregard for life.

What drove them was the desire for revenge.

And Juro had just gotten a little piece of that revenge.

He'd killed, yes. He'd become a criminal as bad as those he hated.

But to him, the reason behind what he did justified the act, however horrible. He could mourn the path he'd taken, but he couldn't mourn the fact he'd killed this man who'd caused them so much pain, who'd destroyed others with the same casualness with which most people killed roaches. If it meant he'd go to hell like Akira seemed to believe, then so be it.

There was one less bastard to hurt people left in the world.

And then he recalled the words on the paper.

**The only real sin is knowing about evil and doing nothing to stop it.**

Well, they were trying to stop it now, so maybe killing wasn't a sin in this case.

He picked up the wires he'd dropped and put them back into his pocket just as Kei walked into the room.

"The bastard died before I could get any information out of him!" the guitarist told him angrily.

"Don't worry, Kei, I've got it. Let's go," Juro said as he headed for the front door.

They met Akira outside the cafe, the drummer pale

and scared. "What happened?"

Takeshi shook his head. "Don't ask, baby."

"What about the girls?"

"They're in Suginami. Don't worry, I know exactly where we're going," Juro told him as they headed at a rapid walk down the street.

It would take them a little over an hour to get where they were going, but it shouldn't matter too much. There was no one among the living to warn the criminals that justice was on the way.

**The same night**  
**A luxury home in Suginami**  
**Twenty minutes after midnight**

The three men stood at the back door of the luxury home, crouched down between a bushy wisteria and some green hedges that surrounded the patio area and a hot tub from which faint wisps of steam still rose. It was off, but from the lingering traces of steam, it had been in use recently. The whole neighborhood was very quiet, but they could see lights on inside the house, upstairs and on the ground floor also.

“What do we do now?” Juro asked in a whisper.

“We go in fast and do what we have to do,” Takeshi replied.

“What about me?” Akira asked.

“Follow us in, but stay back. Once we’ve got the situation under control, I want you to find the girls. They have to be here somewhere, but I don’t want you putting yourself in danger,” Takeshi told the younger man.

“All right, Kei,” the drummer replied and put his arm around his lover, giving him a hug. “Please be careful. I think... Well, they might have guns, too.”

“I know, Aki-baby. That’s why I want you to stay back until we’ve got it under control.”

“What should I do?” Juro asked.

"I want you to kick in the door. You're better at those hard kicks than I am. Once it's open, I'm going to go in. You wait until I clear the first room, whatever it is, then come in behind me."

"Right," Juro agreed.

"Hana-chan, you wait until we're clear of the first room, then you follow us, okay?"

"No, it's not okay, but we're out of options, aren't we?" He looked up and saw Kita of the scary eyes standing beside the wisteria, her image clearer than he'd ever seen it off of a surface, as if Kei's anger were making her stronger, most substantial. Or perhaps it was because her murder was to be avenged, finally.

He blinked, stared. There were other shadows and forms taking shape in the small garden. Dim, barely seen at the edges of his vision. He shook his head and they were gone.

Takeshi looked at his blue-haired lover and saw that far-away stare. Kita again. Always Kita. He touched Akira's cheek to bring him back to them, saw the drummer blink, his gaze back with them in the real world. "Yes, baby. I'm sorry, but we already know calling the police won't help. Konda and Saigo have completely discredited us. There's nothing else we can do except what we're doing, or walk willingly into a police station and tell them that I killed Kita."

Akira's face went harder, anger flashing in his gaze. "I won't let you do that."

"Even if we did," Juro began, "I don't think they're going to release Kumi and Yuya. The girls know too

much, so we'd have sacrificed ourselves and they'd still be found dead somewhere. I think you know that. Akira."

The drummer closed his eyes and nodded. "I just...wish there was another way." When he opened his eyes. Takeshi could tell the drummer wasn't completely with them, the blue-haired man's attention on the ghost of Kita that he carried in his heart.

"So do I," Juro agreed, putting an arm around the smaller man. He kissed Akira. "Be brave. We need you, and so does Kumi."

Akira nodded and gave Takeshi a kiss. "For luck," he told the guitarist.

Takeshi nodded and gave Juro a quick kiss before he rose and strode quickly across the brickwork patio with Juro right behind him.

"We move and we move fast. We can't let them have a chance to kill the girls," he told Juro.

"Let's just hope they haven't already killed them."

"If they have..." He left the thought unfinished because they both knew what would happen to Akira if the girls were dead.

They also knew what would happen to the guilty parties regardless if the girls were alive or dead.

None of the members of Dream Scar, not their handler, not any of the four police officers were going to survive the girls by more than a few hours at most.

But then again, neither were they.

Akira stayed where he was, hidden in the shadows

of the bushes, his heart hammering in his chest so hard it hurt.

*Don't be afraid, Akira. I'm here.*

He gave Kita a nervous, uneasy smile that was more a grimace of fear than a true smile.

He saw Takeshi give Juro a nod and the bassist nodded back, stared at the door for a heartbeat, then spun in place, his foot coming around to hit the door right between the doorknob and the deadbolt. The doorframe splintered and the door swung inward, Takeshi already moving, gun out as he shoved the broken portal aside, moving fast.

"What the hell!" someone inside the house shouted.

There was a loud crack and then Juro was inside, following Takeshi.

Mouth dry, palms damp with sweat, shaking with fear deeper than any he'd ever known, Akira darted from concealment and ran toward the house, the apparition of Kita flowing along beside him.

Another shot roared through the night's peaceful quietude from somewhere inside the house as he reached the back door. He hesitated. Scared of what he might see, scared of what his lovers had become under the pressure. Coal became diamonds under the right kind of pressure. Lovers became murderers when put under pressure from which there was no escape and God help him, he understood why they had to do this. He understood, but it still hurt so very much to see them so changed, to see the men he loved become such violent killers. It was as if strangers were

inhabiting the bodies of the men he loved more than he loved his own life.

Gasping for breath, not because he'd run to the door but from the fear gripping him, Akira stepped into the house as he heard the sound of another gunshot somewhere above him, followed by a thump as something fell to the floor.

He glanced around and realized he was in a kitchen. A man in the uniform of a koban police officer was lying between the refrigerator and the kitchen table amid a spreading pool of blood.

Akira didn't want to look, but he couldn't stop himself when the man reached out to him. His eyes were open, and he smiled at Akira. Blood ran from his mouth.

"Beautiful angel...take me down to...hell..." he choked out, then his hand fell and the light of life went from his eyes.

"Dear God..." Akira gasped as he recognized the man as an officer who worked at the koban close to their old apartment in Tokyo. That revelation showed him just how far the web of corruption had spread inside the police force.

A motion at the corner of his eye drew his attention; he saw Kita looking at him with eyes that were wells of endless night. *Don't come apart now. They need you, Hana-chan. Kei and Maki can't do this without you.*

He nodded and crept from the kitchen, finding another body sprawled out in the living room. This one was also in a policeman's uniform. He recognized

the man from the Kudanshita police station. Officer Matoke. The man who'd put him in the room the day Saigo had tried to force him to say Kei was a killer.

And now Kei *was* a killer.

Tears blurred his vision.

*You don't have time for this*, Kita told him from the reflection of a mirror. *Find those girls*.

There was no sign of either Juro or Kei, so they must have gone upstairs. He took a deep breath and started searching the rooms on the ground floor.

They'd found no one else on the ground floor, and now they were searching the upstairs rooms one at a time. Takeshi nodded and shoved the first door open, the guitarist rushing past him with the gun in his hand.

He stepped in after the older man, his own hand wrapped around the gun they'd taken from Matoke. The cop didn't need it anymore, and they just might have a use for it very soon.

They were in a bedroom, the bed neatly made, though there were personal possessions from someone scattered around the room. A glossy, burgundy-red bass stood in one corner, and he guessed it must be Soschu's room.

Kei glanced into the closet and the adjoining bathroom, but it was empty.

"Let's go."

They used the same procedure with the next room, finding this one had been set up as a computer room, or someone's office. There were a few CD-ROMs in a

case by the PC, and a scattering of papers on the desk.

Takeshi picked one up and glanced at the printed katakana before he looked through the rest of them. “Nothing. Just some cheats for a computer game.”

Juro nodded and peered into the closet, but all it held were some coats and a couple of boxes.

“No sign of the girls here. I wonder if they’ve been taken somewhere else already.”

“I hope to hell not, those cops going for their guns didn’t leave us anyone to question.”

Takeshi motioned him out and they went to the next door, moving carefully. It was quiet in the house, which left Juro wondering if the two cops had been at the house as guards while everyone else had gone elsewhere with the kidnapped girls.

At the guitarist’s nod, Juro shoved the next door open and Kei went in, taking all the risks. Juro didn’t like it, but there was no arguing with Kei on a good day, and this was a far from being a good day.

When nothing happened, he stepped in behind his lover and looked around.

Posters covered the walls. Posters of Dream Scar. There was a black dresser on one wall, and on top of it was a wig stand on which sat an ornately curled blue-black wig. Beside it was a red guitar, the color several shades brighter than the red bass in the other room. Beneath the bigger objects was a cluttered mess of smaller things that were so jumbled it was hard to identify what any of them were.

“Michio’s room,” Takeshi remarked as he opened the closet door.

Juro was looking at the cluttered mess on the dresser. Makeup, a few sex toys, a pair of red velvet gloves and a few odds and ends made up the bulk of the junk covering the dresser. Something pink and white caught his eye and he picked it up. A small kitten with a pink bow on its head. He turned the tiny porcelain statue over in his fingers and almost dropped it.

"What's wrong?" Takeshi asked him.

"Look at this," he said, anger making his voice tight.

Takeshi took it and turned it around in his hands. "This was Kita's," he stated softly. "Why is it here?"

Juro motioned to the things on the dresser. "I get the impression these are souvenirs from people whose lives they've ruined."

He touched the guitar. "Look at their posters. Michio's guitar and Soschu's bass are the same color in all the posters. This one is a cherry red."

Takeshi touched it. "I think it belonged to Kyoto Skies." He touched the wig. "Recognize this?"

Juro looked at the wig and tried to think of where he'd seen one like it.

"Maemae. That bastard," Juro snarled. "These are trophies of his murders."

"I think it's a combination of trophies and souvenirs, like you said."

Juro touched the mess, seeing ruined lives. "God, if each one of these is a life..."

Takeshi's gaze was steely as he nodded. "Then he's killed a lot more people than we realized."

“We need to find this son of a bitch,” Juro stated.

“One room left here, then we get Akira and go pay a visit to Hanari. If anyone knows where he’s taken the girls, it will be her.”

Akira had found a well-hidden door at the back of a ground floor closet. Pushing against it revealed a set of stairs leading down. He took the steps carefully, heart pounding out a fast beat against his ribs as he crept along.

At the bottom, he found a dimly lit room with bare concrete walls and floors. The air was heavy with a terrible smell, like something gone rotten, and he put a hand over his nose. It didn’t really help much; the stink was stuck in his nose and even putting his sleeve over his mouth and taking very shallow breaths couldn’t fully hide the awful smell.

He looked around, wondering what the smell was coming from.

There were heavy beams across the ceiling, from which hung a variety of chains. There were also a number of chains hanging from the walls and the room held an assortment of strange furniture—furniture which his mind refused interpret as far as how they might be used because there was nothing pleasant-looking in their forms.

Off to one side was a table covered with neatly laid out items of torture that he quickly looked away from.

One half of the room was curtained off, and he quickly walked past the horrible objects to see what was on the other side, though he wasn’t sure he

wanted to know.

What he found was a futon thrown on the floor, and a pair of naked girls lying facedown on it.

Kumi and Yuya were bound, their bodies wrapped with nylon ropes that made intricate patterns across their torsos and their thighs. They were both blindfolded, and gagged, effectively cutting them off from any sensory input that would have given them any sense of self-control or hope.

They were face down on the bed, their knees bent, backs arched, hands tied to their ankles in a pose that would leave their bodies cramped and in pain once they were released. And from the sounds of their breathing and the bluish tinge to the ends of their fingers, they'd been in the pose far too long.

The blue-haired rocker frowned at the intricacy of the bindings. Whoever had done this had to be a practitioner of *nawa shibari*, the art of erotic bondage because the bindings were simply too complex, too artfully rendered to be anything but true *nawa shibari*. But unlike a proper master of the art who would never do harm to their subjects, both girls had been left tied too long and were showing signs of damage, their skin very pale from the inability to move, their hands and feet bluish from lack of proper circulation.

Seeing them bound and helpless brought back the threat that Michio had whispered into his ear, and the picture of Maemae filled his mind.

Maemae tied, choked to death.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered to the girls. "I'm going to try and find something to help get you free."

Those knots are too complicated for me to untie.”

He heard a whimper that sounded like Yuya, and saw Kumi trying to nod her head.

*Tell them not to move. The way he has them tied is dangerous, it could choke them to death if they move too much.*

“Don’t move too much, it will tighten the ropes,” he relayed to them.

There was a thin mist rising from the floor, drifting like tatters of lace around the room. He frowned.

*Don’t be afraid, Hana-chan. I’m here. But you need to get the girls free soon. They’re both tired, and the ropes are starting to choke them.*

Yuya made another soft, pleading sound.

Akira looked around frantically for something he could use to cut the girls free before anyone came down here and caught them. He didn’t want to remove the blindfolds or the gags until he could get them free because he feared they might start yelling the minute their mouths weren’t impeded. Rummaging in the nearest drawers revealed a selection of sexual toys, some that made him frown due to their extreme nature.

In the third drawer he located he found a collection of other things that turned his frown into a wide-eyed and horrified stare. There were knives in the drawer, but that wasn’t what finally made him back away, struggling not to vomit, tears slipping down his face.

*Now you understand, Kita’s voice told him as she placed a gentle hand on his cheek, the touch soft as velvet, colder than ice. She was hovering beside him*

amid the mist which was rapidly thickening. He could now see other faces, other people appearing and disappearing as the mist moved like the ebb and flow of the sea. Girls, young men, even a few small animals, a kitten with eyes as big and black as Kita's were, a round-bellied puppy with a gaze composed of midnight.

He nodded swallowing hard, finally understanding where the horrible smell came from, not wanting to look in the drawer anymore, though he knew he'd need one of the knives to set the girls free.

*Don't be afraid, Hana-chan. Remember I'm here with you. I'm here, and so are the others.*

*I'm not afraid. It's just so...*

"Hello, beautiful," a voice said from behind him and he went still as a frisson of pure terror inundated his entire being. "Have you come to play with me?"

Akira stood there, his back to the Dream Scar guitarist, hands clenched into fists as the fear filling his soul transformed to revulsion that grew into a core of blackness to match Kita's eyes. He was shaking, trembling as something filled him, something angry and cold as glacial ice, yet it was gentle as the fall of cherry blossoms on his face.

*Don't be afraid, Hana-chan. Not of him, and not of this. This is part of you now, like I am.*

He felt himself being filled, his body becoming a focus for something outside of himself, his mind was still his own. *This is because of what they did to us, isn't it?*

Yes.

*Don't be afraid of me, of us, Hana-chan. We're here to make sure he won't ever hurt anyone again,* a new voice said inside his mind. Male and velvet soft, sweet as Kita's own voice in his head.

Akira knew the voice, knew the man it belonged to and he let go of himself, surrendering to the presence in his mind.

He turned around, his eyes gone solid black. "Sing me a song, lover," he said, but the voice wasn't his, it belonged to a musician long dead.

Michio's eyes widened and the man took a step back. "Who...who are you?"

Akira took a step forward, a smile warping his mouth into something unpleasant, his features blurring, changing, taking on a deathly bluish pallor. "Have you forgotten me already?" the voice purred from his mouth, seductive and so very different from the drummer's own tones.

Michio backed slowly away, his gaze full of terror as mist started to rise from the floor, half-seen forms swirling in the unnatural fog. Indistinct at first, the shapes grew more clear, becoming people, animals, victims of his twisted appetites.

But it was Akira he couldn't take his eyes off of, the man becoming a little taller, changing into the image of another man. One he remembered clearly. One he'd brutally killed after making declarations of undying love.

The apparition took a slow step toward Michio, the man backed into a corner with no where to go, stood

there shaking his head in denial.

“You’re dead. Dead.”

“Yes, lover. And I’ve missed you. I remember your last words to me. Do you?”

Michio looked for a way to escape, but he was surrounded now, ghosts on all sides blocking his way out.

“No? Well, let me refresh your memory.”

Akira stepped closer. “You said you’d love me forever.” A soft laugh slipped through the drummer’s lips. In the voice of a man long dead, he added, “Michio, come love me forever in hell.”

The murdered ghosts closed around the guitarist, pulling at him with their hands, ripping away tiny pieces of his soul with every touch, each caress while the phantom kitten clawed at his legs, and the puppy bit his feet.

Michio began to scream, the sound high-pitched and full of fear as each of the ghosts carried off bits of his tainted soul.

Fear to match the terror he’d inflicted on each and every one of his victims.

“And so is justice served,” Maemae said through Akira’s lips as he reached out and plucked the last tiny bit of soul from the dying guitarist, ending a murderer’s deadly song forever.

**The same night**  
**The luxury home in Suginami**  
**Ten minutes after one in the morning**

Juro and Takeshi entered the last room to find nothing but a collection of musical instruments and a few small amplifiers. A scattering of paper, some crumpled, others laid out neatly showed them what the room was used for, so they gave it only a perfunctory search.

But even that was enough to reveal that the other band was guilty of more than murders, they were also guilty of stealing songs. Takeshi muttering in anger when he found one of their own half-completed tunes—one they'd thought destroyed in the police search—lying with some others.

He shoved the paper into a pocket. "Let's go find Akira and get moving. The girls aren't here, and we need to hurry if we're going to find them before Michio has a chance to kill them."

"Right," Juro agreed as the pair of men went in search of Akira.

Akira had summoned up the courage to take one of the knives from the drawer of horror and used it to cut the girls free, being careful not to nick them with the very sharp blade.

It had taken a lot of effort to get them past Michio's

corpse and up the stairs. The Dream Scar guitarist's face was terrible to behold, his eyes rolled up into his head, lips a shade of blue as if he'd died from strangulation, the skin of his face starting to blacken.

"Th...this is her fault." Kumi sobbed as they struggled up the steps. Both girls were having trouble walking, their feet swollen and numbed from being tied for such a long time.

Akira helped them as best he could, trying to steady them up the steep and too narrow stairs.

"Aki!"

Kei's voice carried to him.

"In here!" he called back. "I've got them!"

The light coming in from the closet dimmed as Takeshi filled the narrow doorway. An instant later, the guitarist had scooped Kumi up and carried her out of the awful place, Juro coming to get Yuya, even though picking her up made his arm ache.

With the girls safe in the living room, the older men went to find something they could wear. The girls couldn't be left at the house, not with three dead people and the things down in that basement. The police would eventually arrive, and neither of the girls wanted to be found there.

"I didn't know they'd hurt us!" Yuya wailed. "I didn't know!"

"Shhh.." Akira murmured as he handed them the clothing that his lovers had brought. "Put this on."

"She told them where we'd be, Hana-chan," Kumi blurted out, a bit of anger coming through her tears as she clung to the slender drummer and tried to walk in

the flip-flops they'd found by the back door. They were too big, but with her feet swollen, they were better than her own shoes would have been. He wasn't much taller than Kumi even in the elevated boots he was wearing, and with her feet hurting so much, it was hard for her to stand.

"They said they were only teasing when they grabbed us," Yuya sobbed out, her arms wrapped tightly around her body.

"It's all over now. Come on, put these clothes on and let's get you both out of here," Akira murmured soothingly as he pulled a shirt over Kumi's head. The girls were both having trouble with their hands for the same reason it was hard for them to walk, but Takeshi didn't think any of the damage was permanent.

Yuya was crying, shaking so hard she couldn't even move, the shock setting in now that they were safe.

"You have to help me get clothes on you," he told the weeping girl. "Please, I can't do this without your cooperation." He tried to get a shirt over Yuya's head, but the girl slapped at him. He gave up on Yuya and focused on Kumi. She seemed more lucid than her friend.

"Kumi, help me with her. Please, I have to get both of you out of here. We don't know if any of the others are going to arrive or not."

Kumi nodded. "Yuya, come on. We have to get dressed and get out of here."

The girl shook her head violently and slapped at

Kumi.

Akira frowned, his mouth set in a grim line. "We have to get out of here," he told her firmly. "Now put this shirt on!"

Yuya went quiet as Takeshi entered the room. He knelt down in front of her, took the shirt from Akira and gently grasped Yuya's wrist. He slipped her arm into the sleeve of the T-shirt, repeating the process with her other hand, then pulling the shirt over her head. He put a pair of jeans on her in much the same way, his movements slow, gentle.

When both girls were dressed, they got them moving, Takeshi carrying Yuya most of the way to the train station.

They got them on a train that would take the girls home and then quickly boarded the train they'd have to take to get where they needed to go: Hanari Eiko's house in Chiba City.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### A luxury home in Chiba Two in the morning

The street was quiet in this area of Chiba, the trio of rockers walking past a few houses. It was a beautiful street full of older homes. The smell of jasmine filled the cool air.

Takeshi grasped his lovers' hands and drew them into the shadows between a couple of buildings. He turned to face them, his hands tight on theirs. For a moment he just stood there, looking at his lovers, their faces shadowed and mysterious, made even more beautiful by the night.

"We may die here."

Akira's bottom lip trembled, but he didn't deny the possibility.

"We might, but we already knew that might be the outcome of tonight, you know," Juro agreed, tilting his head to regard Takeshi quizzically. "Why bring it up now?"

"Because if either of you want to back out..."

"No." Akira stated softly, his grip on Takeshi's hand tightening.

"Don't look at me," Juro said. "I'm in this with you to the end."

Takeshi sighed, pulled both men close, kissed Juro, then Akira, and then just stood there holding them both. His head bowed between theirs, he whispered, "I love you both so very much. I know I haven't shown it, I know I've been a bastard to you both, but I really *do* love you both so very much."

"I love you too, Kei. You too, Aki."

"Forever," Akira told them both.

"Forever and always." Takeshi held them close, breathing in the mingled scents of his lovers, taking in and savoring it, letting the memories of what they'd done earlier wash over him. "No matter what."

"No matter what happens," Juro affirmed.

Akira kissed them both. "Forever means no matter what."

"Yeah. It does."

Takeshi felt them press closer to him, their hands on his body, clinging to him as if he were an anchor and a storm were coming.

In a way, it was true. A storm was coming. One of blood and fear that could very well sweep them all away on a wave of destruction they would not survive.

Takeshi kissed the drummer's soft hair and breathed in the sweet scent of the perfume that clung to the younger man. Kita's perfume. It reminded him of why they were standing there in the darkness on their way to kill.

"You know, he's right." Juro gave both his lovers a kiss.

"Time for our last song," Takeshi told them.

"Right," Juro said as he pulled out of their group embrace, reached up and caressed the older man's cheek. "Don't do anything stupid, Kei."

"You either," the guitarist growled.

"Me?"

"You."

"Yeah, you. Don't get shot, okay?"

"Not a problem. I've done that before, and that was enough for me."

Akira looked up, wishing he could see some stars, but there was just too much light pollution from Tokyo and the surrounding metro area to allow even a faint glimmer through.

Kita was floating along with them, her form clear in the darkness. Streamers of pallid mist trailed in her wake, and the nearer they got to the house of their enemies, the thicker the ghost fog around her became until it was swirling around the three men.

To Akira it felt cold, but lacked the dampness of true fog. The touch was actually soothing to the drummer despite the chill, because it was part of Kita. She was there with him, so he wasn't afraid, even though her face was scary once more. She gave him her ever-sad smile, and drifted closer to him, her translucent arms wrapping protectively around him.

*Keep him safe, Hana-chan.*

He didn't have to ask her who she meant by *him*, because he already knew it was Kei whom he would have to protect: somehow.

He watched the mist flow over Kei, lingering on

the guitarist as if caressing him, a few streamers wafting along Juro's back to wind around him as if seeking to embrace the bass player.

They walked down the street and stopped in front of a house. It was smaller than the one in Suginami had been and it was dark, only a small glow on the porch to light their way as they went up the brickwork walkway to the door.

"What now?" Juro asked.

Akira looked up at his taller lovers. "I ring the bell and wait until someone answers."

"No. Not you," Takeshi countered, his mouth in that hard line that both other rockers knew meant he was going to be stubborn about it. "If Goro comes to the door, I don't want you in front of it."

"I'll do it." Juro started for the door.

Takeshi grabbed his left arm and stopped him. "No."

"He won't open the door for you, Kei, and if he does, he'll have his gun ready. He might not recognize me, and even if he does, I'm no threat to him."

"He's got a point," Juro said.

"Yeah, I know, but..."

Akira pushed the button for the doorbell, ending the discussion.

Juro and Takeshi stepped out of the line of sight from the door and waited.

After a few minutes Akira pressed the button again, mashing it repeatedly to get the attention of the people in the house.

A light came on and the door opened to reveal a tall broad-shouldered form in the doorway.

Akira turned his face up to the man. "Wagota Goro?"

The man stared at Akira. "Yes. What do you want, who are you?"

Kei stepped in front of Akira, the gun in his hand aimed directly for the man's face. "Vengeance," he said coldly as the man backed quickly into the house, his eyes full of terror.

Akira and Juro followed them into the house, the drummer pulling the door closed behind them and pressing the button to lock it.

Goro was backing away from Kei slowly.

"That's far enough," the guitarist stated.

"I agree. Put the gun down, nice and slow," a voice said from their left.

It was all the distraction that Goro needed. He lunged for Kei, taking the more lightly built guitarist off his feet. The gun going off sounded like a cannon in the relative quiet, the bullet impacting the wall and blowing a hole through the plaster. A hard blow to the rocker's forearm took the gun out of his hand.

The two men were kicking and punching, fighting to gain the upper hand, while Akira and Juro stood there, helpless to go to Kei's assistance under the threat of Saigo and the gun in his hand.

"You three are done for!" Saigo told them as he approached the bassist and drummer. "Did you honestly think you stood a chance against us?"

The bassist met Akira's gaze.

"Move!" the detective barked, motioning with his gun for them to enter the living room.

The rockers exchanged glances. Somewhere upstairs they could hear people moving around, voices speaking, a man and two women.

"I said *move!*" Saigo roared the last word at them.

"Sure, whatever you want," Juro replied softly as he walked in front of Akira.

The drummer darted in the other direction, and Saigo made the mistake of following the movement with his eyes.

Screaming loudly, Juro launched himself at the detective, the man too slow to get his gun trained on the younger man before they both hit the back of the couch and went down in a wildly flailing tangle of arms and legs. The only lamp in the room was knocked off a side table and went out with a shatter of breaking ceramic and glass.

Threads of mist drifted up from the floor, the moon-pale tendrils thickest around Kita, who was between her killer and Kei, trying to protect the guitarist. But the only one in the room that could see the mist or Kita was Akira. Kei was lying dazed on the floor, the bigger man getting to his feet.

Akira's heart seemed to go dead in his chest as he saw the man reaching for the gun that Kei had dropped.

Kita was grabbing for Goro with insubstantial hands, trying to keep him from picking up the pistol. *Help me, Hana-chan! I'm not strong enough alone! Don't*

*let him kill our love! Please, you have to stop him.*

Akira nodded solemnly and stepped into the place where she stood. The cold touch of the dead invaded him, but he had no fear of it, because it was Kita and he had to save Kei, whom they both loved more than life.

*Forever*, he told her and reached out to grab one of Goro's wrists.

The man turned, fist poised to strike. His eyes widened in horror as he saw Akira, but it wasn't the drummer's face he was seeing. It was Kita's, her black eyes bottomless wells that looked straight into his soul and reached out to draw him into oblivion.

"What... Who are you?" the man asked, his voice a hoarse whisper rife with an emotion he'd seldom known. Fear ate into his icy killer's nerves with a bite like salt on frozen ground.

"Death," the slender drummer said in a voice that wasn't his own as coils of the mist surrounding him wrapped around the man's throat, more of it invading his nostrils. He opened his mouth to shout and the cold fog slid down his throat as he stumbled backward against the wall. Eyes wide and bulging, the man clawed at his throat and face, trying to pry the mist away, but there was no escape.

Goro's knees buckled just as Kei got unsteadily to his feet. He stumbled, regained his balance and went to the gun. He picked it up and stumbled to Goro, put the end of the pistol to the man's forehead. He set his jaw and pulled the trigger.

Takeshi's back was to Akira as he said, "You're

avenged, Kita."

A slender hand touched his arm, and Takeshi jumped at the icy cold, shuddered as he finally understood the full truth, closed his eyes because he didn't want to accept it.

"I love you, Kei," the voice he remembered so well told him. "Forever and always."

"Forever and always, Kita..." His voice broke, and the hand on his arm became warm again and slipped away. He turned around just in time to catch Akira and keep him from falling into the spreading gore on the tile floor.

Juro approached them, his left arm holding the right one close, his eyes full of pain. Saigo was lying battered and bloody, but very much alive on the floor.

Kei shoved Akira into the bassist's arms and walked over to Saigo. The man was just coming around when Takeshi aimed the gun at his head.

"Don't kill me! I swear Konda and I can get you out of this mess!" the dirty cop said.

Kei offered the man a frigid smile. "Thanks, but we've found our own way out." Kei pulled the trigger. He heard Akira let out a soft sob, Juro murmuring something he didn't catch as the sound of rapid footsteps came from the stairs. Kei scooped up Saigo's gun, checked the safety, and turned to see who was about to join them.

Hanari entered the dimly lit room and stopped when she saw the shadowy form standing so still a few feet from her. Then she saw the dead men.

"It's over for you," Kei told her.

The only thing she had time for was a sharp intake of breath before a bullet punched into her deceitful heart. Gasping, she fell at the foot of the stairs, her eyes full of shock as she gasped out, "Morishita...."

He crouched down beside her, dark eyes without the slightest trace of compassion or remorse as he regarded the dying woman. "Now who's the loser?" he asked her, his voice cold as glacial ice.

"Who are you? What do you want?" a woman's voice demanded from upstairs. It was one they both knew from their numerous—and dead end—calls to the police in Tokyo.

"I've called the police!" a man's voice added. Soschu, the Dream Scar bassist, they all knew his voice.

Kei turned to glance at Juro. "Coming or staying down here?"

"I'm going with you." Juro hugged Akira. "Stay here, Hana-chan."

Akira wiped the tears away and nodded.

Juro touched the younger man's face, wiping at the damp tracks of his tears. "You'll be okay down here alone?"

Akira nodded and gave the bass player a wan smile. "Yes."

The pair of rockers headed up the stairs together, Takeshi with Saigo's gun in his hand, Juro with his twisted bass strings out and ready.

"I'll take care of the bitch cop, you find Soschu."

"Right."

They reached the top of the stairs and were met

with gunfire, six shots in rapid succession, none of which hit anything but the wall because they'd ducked out of the line of fire the instant they'd seen the man standing at the end of the short corridor.

"Now what?"

Kei shrugged and stepped into the hallway, firing off a single round. There was no return fire.

"Revolver. Let's move before he can reload."

"Right."

The pair moved quickly, Juro entering the room on the right, Takeshi taking the room on the left.

Juro found himself facing Soschu, the Dream Scar bass player frantically trying to reload the revolver. There were bullets scattered across the floor, the man on his knees scrambling around, trying to get the bullets into the cylinder with hands shaking so hard that just picking up the bullets was nearly impossible.

He rushed into the room and kicked the pistol out of the man's hand. The bass strings in his right hand sang a sharp discord as he whipped them around the other bass player's throat.

"God...please..."

"I'm not God," Juro told him his voice an emotionless murmur of sound as he drew the braided wires tighter.

The man struggled, but he couldn't budge Juro, who had him well pinned.

Somehow it seemed right— a sort of karmic balance— that he should be the one to kill Soschu, the Dream Scar bassist. He drew back harder on the

wires, the man clawing at them, trying to get free.

A single shot cracked loudly across the silence, and the man under him gave a whimpering cry of terror.

Kei walked in, motioned Juro away with the hand not wrapped around the gun, but Juro didn't move.

The guitarist knelt down, put his head close to Juro's and whispered, "We agreed I'd do the killing, remember? Akira's going to need you."

Juro kept the tension on the strings, his jaw set. "None of us will go free, Kei."

"Juro...Maki...please. You agreed."

The man he was choking had gone still, but he could still feel the weakening efforts to breathe.

"Right. But you know it won't matter."

"It might. Now go and get out of here. Take Hana-chan and get out of here."

"Running won't help us."

"Maki..." the name was a plea.

Juro kissed his lover, tears blurring his vision. He let go of the wires, pulled them free. "We said forever, Kei."

"Yeah, but forever has to end sometime."

A hand stroked over his hair, lips brushed his. "I love you."

"Don't forget me or Kita."

"We won't."

Juro hurried out of the room. He was halfway down the stairs when he heard another gunshot.

Akira was at the bottom of the steps when Juro came down alone.

"Where's Kei?" he asked, looking up the stairs, worried.

"He's not coming." Juro took him by the arm. "We're going, Hana-chan."

"Going? Going where?" the drummer planted his feet and wouldn't budge. "I'm not going anywhere without Kei!"

The bass player grabbed Akira's arms and stared into his eyes. "This is what he wants, now come on!"

"No! I am not leaving him!" The drummer wrenched himself free of Juro's hold and bolted for the stairs. "Kei! Please, no!"

Juro grabbed for him as something crashed loudly into the front door.

*"Open up! This is Konda!"*

"Shit," the bass player snarled and ran for the front of the house just as something heavy hit the door. He had just gotten into place with his back to the wall at the end of the small entryway when he heard the door splinter inward.

Konda rushed into the house and Juro kicked the first thing he saw, which happened to be the hand holding the gun. It went off, shattering more plaster as Konda lost his grip on it. Juro grabbed the man's jacket and bodily hurled him into the room, the bigger man slamming down onto the side of a chair with a pained grunt.

The bassist didn't give the cop a chance to recover from the impact. Juro slammed into the man, his hand closing around the detective's wrist in an effort to gain control of the gun. The bass player kicked the

man in the gut and Konda gasped, his hold on the gun lost as the younger man spun, sweeping his feet out from under him.

Konda hit the floor hard, his breath knocked out of him, his eyes just inches away from the dead gaze of Goro. Beyond him, he could see Saigo laying near the couch, Hanari at the foot of the stairs.

Juro held the man pinned face down on the floor as he fumbled the handcuffs out their case on the man's belt. There was a single gunshot upstairs and Juro flinched – had it been Kei ending Akira's life? – but his hold on the dirty cop was relentless. There was nothing left to lose now. Nothing at all.

Detective Konda's dark eyes were filled with terror as he realized everyone else was already dead, the room awash in gore. "Please. I'll see that you aren't accused of killing the others, just let me go. I'll help you get a recording contract. I've got connections! You know I've got connections. They'll give you a big contract! Everything you could ever want! Please." He struggled to get free, but Juro had the man's arms pinned behind him and was putting the detective's own handcuffs around his wrists. Done, he pulled the man to his knees.

He heard footsteps on the stairs. More than one person, and he felt relief wash over him. Kei hadn't killed Akira, then.

*So we die together. It's better this way.*

"You should have opted for that quiet place and the bullet. Either way, it's time to get clean," Juro whispered into the detective's ear. "I think we had

this discussion before at Kita's funeral. I warned you then, but you didn't listen."

"I remember. I'll come clean. I'll tell people what happened, get you off the hook for killing the others."

"But then you'd be lying, and you'd still be dirty, wouldn't you?" Juro asked him as he pulled the strings from his bass guitar from his pocket and slowly started twisting them together.

"I'll admit my guilt freely, on TV, in court at my trial. Just let me live. I'll take my punishment."

"Sure you will, but the one thing you won't have to worry about is a trial," Juro told the cop as he put the wires around the man's throat.

"Juro."

He looked up to see Kei standing there, the pistol in his hand, death in his gaze.

The guitarist put the end of the pistol to Konda's forehead. "Let him go, Juro. He's mine."

"Kei..."

"No! Move!"

Their eyes locked.

The bassist scrambled out of the way, skidding in a pool of gore on the floor, and coming up hard against Akira, who staggered, the slender drummer standing amid the carnage, face white as snow, eyes wide and full of horror.

"Oh...Kei...God...Kei..." the drummer breathed, the sound barely audible.

Kei didn't even look at Akira. He just stood there with the gun pressed to Detective Konda's forehead

watching the crooked cop shaking in fear. He felt nothing. Nothing at all. His dark eyes were cold, hard and unfeeling as granite.

"Please," Konda whispered, pleading. "I'll get you off, make sure you're cleared of their deaths. We can say it was self-defense. I'll get you out of this."

A hard-edged smile curled Kei's mouth, but there wasn't any humor in the expression, his gaze unchanged. "No."

"Ple..."

There was a loud crack, and the remains of Detective Konda crumpled to the floor.

"Oh...God," Akira moaned and buried his face against Juro's shoulder, the bassist wrapping his arms around the smaller drummer as if he wanted to protect Akira from the whole world.

Now they really were killers, and Kei had shown no mercy to the men that had taken Kita from them. None at all.

The bitter ashes of sorrow clogged up his lungs, filled his mouth and all he could do was press his face tightly to Juro's chest and cry, the Kita in his head gone silent, leaving him feeling more alone than he'd felt since her funeral.

Takeshi was their lover and they loved him still, regardless of what he'd just done. Even after all this, it couldn't be any other way. They'd been through so much together; the loss of Kita, the police conspiracy to cover up the real reason behind her death, the knowledge of all the murders, the contract tampering,

lies and deceit, the hell they'd gone through at the hands of so many people leading to this inevitable conclusion.

"It's over," Juro said, still holding Akira as the drummer wept, his whole body shaking from reaction, Juro trembling too from what he'd helped Kei do.

"Is it?" Kei asked, voice dead as their dream.

A tear trickled down Juro's cheek as he realized exactly what their actions would earn them. He looked at the ceiling. There was blood overhead, too, the whole place spattered with gore.

He understood what their options were. Limited to a pair of grim choices, neither of which he was ready to make alone.

"We should leave..." Akira whispered softly. "Find a place to hide."

Kei shook his head. "You go."

"Not without you," Juro replied. He knew that running wasn't one of their choices. It wouldn't do anything but delay the end result, whichever end result they finally chose. "We agreed to stick together, no matter what. That was what we agreed on."

"Not now," Kei stated emphatically. "Go, get out of here. I did this, I'm the one that will pay for it. I'll make sure it all falls on me."

Juro looked at Akira, the drummer shook his head and clung to him, moaning out his wordless grief.

"We won't leave you to take the fall for this, Kei. Together forever, remember?"

The two younger men stepped through the blood

to put their arms around Kei, Hana no longer caring about the blood soaking into his gown. He'd never wear it again anyway.

It was over. Their dream. Probably their very lives.

Over like a sweet melody that lingered in the mind, but would never be heard again.

But the nightmare, that would only end when death's hand pulled them into the darkness that ended all songs.

They could hear the sirens clearly, but they didn't move.

Two choices.

Live out their miserable lives apart from one another in prison.

Die together.

"I'll let the two of you decide what we're going to do now," Kei murmured as he lowered his head to rest his chin on Akira's head. He closed his eyes, breathing in that scent, Kita's perfume sweet and delicate, like the man leaning into his body.

He would spend his last moments with them, being held, holding them. Him the killer, they the innocent victims of a revenge he couldn't live without, wouldn't live past the realization of his final moments on the stage of life.

That was how the police found them when they burst into the house, guns drawn, ready for anything but what they found.

Juro with one arm wrapped around a weeping Akira, the other around Kei's waist, both of them

pressed close to the guitarist, who had one arm draped around Juro's shoulders, his fingers stroking through Akira's blue hair. All three rockers were wearing similar stage costumes to the ones they'd been in the night Kita had died. The contrast of their costumes and the carnage wasn't lost on the police officers, nor was the fact that they were standing in the cooling blood of their victims.

Kei still had the gun clutched in his hand, blood spatters across his cheek, adding a splash of red over the white makeup he'd put on.

"I love you both," he whispered.

"Forever," Juro agreed and pulled Akira closer, shielding the drummer from the cops with his body.

Mercykill had played their last concert. But instead of music, this had been a concert of death and blood played for revenge.

Kei looked at the police, eyes hard, cold as ice, not a trace of remorse in his soul. He couldn't feel guilt for killing the people that had taken his Kita and their unborn child away from him.

And fear was something he just couldn't feel anymore. Not for himself.

"*Put the gun down!*" one of police officers screamed, fear, adrenaline, a dose of pure horror making his voice shrill.

Kei looked at Juro, his beautiful violet-haired Maki, asking what he should do. They could all go into death now and join Kita. Erase the stain of their actions and end the embarrassment their parents would surely suffer if they went to trial. Death would

let them avoid what would happen if they were taken alive.

Suicide by cop. They could die as they lived: together forever.

It would be a fitting end, all their pain and sadness washed away on the tide of blood that had begun their fall into darkness.

"Don't do it, Kei," Juro murmured. "We've still got a chance."

Akira touched his arm. "Please. Please don't."

He'd let them decide, and they'd chosen life.

More pain and suffering.

He'd heard suffering was good for the soul.

But he wasn't sure he still had a soul anymore.

The gun fell to the carpet with a muted thump and the police rushed in, slamming all three rockers to the bloody floor.

Akira's sharp cry of pain as the cops knocked him to the floor brought a snarl of rage from Takeshi. "*Don't fucking hurt him! I'm the one! Me! I did this! They came to stop me!*" he shouted, making a confession that he hoped would spare his lovers any more pain. A confession he prayed would see them released, freed.

*He had been the one that pulled the trigger.*

*He was the one responsible for the actions of the other men.*

*He was the murderer.*

*Not Juro, who'd only been defending himself.*

*Not Akira, who'd done nothing but follow them.*

*Him.*

*He was the one.*

But the police weren't listening as they fastened the handcuffs around their wrists.

Juro's honey-brown eyes met Kei's. "Don't do this, Kei."

"Too late. I already have," the guitarist said flatly as he was hauled to his feet, the hands hurting, cruel in their anger.

"You three are as good as dead," one of the officers snarled. "Killing police."

Kei met the man's angry gaze. "They weren't cops, they were criminals playing their dirty games right under your noses. They deserved what they got."

"Well, you sure as hell will get what you deserve," the same officer snapped into the guitarist's face as he shoved Kei toward the door so that the slender man stumbled and cracked his shoulder painfully into the doorframe.

"Don't we all?" the guitarist growled back.

He could hear Akira crying, afraid and so very alone as they hauled him away.

"I love you, Kei!" the drummer said through his tears.

"I love you, too, Akira. Be sure you tell them who did it! Both of you!"

"This is bullshit!" he heard Juro say angrily. "They were all murderers. Nothing but killers and criminals, every last one of them!"

"Shut up, you murdering little bastard. Konda and Saigo were right about the three of you all along."

"Blind fool!" he heard Juro snap. "Fucking blind fools, all of you."

## MERCYKILL: SHATTERED MELODY

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They dragged Kei out into the first bloom of dawn,  
soft pink and pale lemon painting the new day.

A cloud blushed a pale rose petal pink, making it  
look like the face of a woman.

She was smiling.

And Kita, their dear Kita was finally avenged.

“Rest in peace, baby,” Kei whispered as he was  
shoved roughly into a car.

## EPILOGUE

**Back to the present day  
Toyko Prison Facility  
Two in the afternoon**

The entire time Kei was speaking the man had listened quietly, saying nothing, asking not one question.

"I see," he began, still studying the three young men, his face blank and bland.

"He doesn't believe us either, Kei," Juro commented.

"No one does," Akira sighed and tried to lean against his lover. Restrained as they were, he couldn't reach Kei, his lover, his life. A sob broke from him and the tears welled up, spilling in crystal sorrow from his eyes.

"No," Kei agreed, "they don't." He wanted to hold Akira, kiss his tears away, tell him it would be all right. But he couldn't touch his lover, chained to the concrete under him, knees sore, legs numb, aching.

Caged, awaiting a trial that could end in nothing but death.

No, it wasn't going to be all right. Not ever again.

He bowed his head, fighting his own tears.

They had their revenge. His revenge.

But the cost had been too high.

He looked at Akira. His Hana, a flower of incomparable price, unsurpassed beauty. Pale, wan, too thin. Lost and alone in a sea of misery.

His fault.

He had to make them believe. Make the man understand, want to help them, get at least Akira out from beneath the sentence of death their actions – his actions – had brought down on them.

“Please believe me,” he begged, all pride gone. If Akira survived this fiasco that their lives had become, it would be enough.

The man offered them a flinty smile. “Oh, but you see I do believe you.”

“What?” Juro breathed his head coming up, a glimmering of hope lighting his eyes.

Even Akira heard the reply, the words cutting through the darkness of utter hopelessness that had bound him since their arrest.

“If we didn’t believe you, I wouldn’t be sitting here.” The man regarded each one of them in turn, his gaze piercing, as if he could see through their skin into their very souls. “I can get you out of this mess, but you have to agree to work for a special sort of...organization.”

The three rockers looked at one another, but it was Akira who asked, “W...what k...kind of...organization?” his voice breaking as he tried to speak through the constriction of fear choking him, his heart pounding in his chest, the battering wings of hope

seeking freedom.

The man's smile warmed slightly. "We call it Perseverance, and what we do is eliminate the competition."

Juro blinked, stared at the man. "And by that you mean...?"

"What he means," Kei said, "is that we become killers for them."

"Blunt, but correct," the man agreed.

Kei strained at the chains holding him, anger burning in his dark eyes. "No fucking way!"

The man held up one hand. "Please listen," he said. The razor edge of command in his tone froze the young guitarist.

"Your assumption, while correct, is incomplete. We aren't the shady criminal syndicate your mind is making us out to be, I assure you. We aren't part of that organization you stumbled across so unwittingly in your search for answers, and vengeance." He paused to let that sink in, then continued. "Perseverance is a covert organization, it's true, but our purpose is to counter the rising power of crime cartels— so called crime corporations as well as the rising number of terrorist groups. Our operatives are responsible for saving the lives of countless people. And your job with us would not just be killing. You'd be doing something much more important than simple murder."

Kei shook his head. "And you expect us to believe you?"

The man regarded him quietly for a moment, then

his elegantly suited shoulders twitched in a shrug. "We've been helping you since we discovered you were on the trail of the man who killed your handler. You see, we've been trying to make the connection between him, the handler of Dream Scar, the record company that releases their albums, and a certain crime corporation here in Tokyo. You helped us put those pieces together and you brought Takei Kita's killer to justice which, even now, the police believe was nothing but a revenge killing that went bad and took out four of their colleagues. And, of course they are right about that, aren't they?"

Juro glanced at Kei, the guitarist replying with a quiet, "Yeah."

"So what do we get out of this?" the bassist asked. He was as bloody-handed in this as Kei, even if he hadn't done the murders himself.

"Because you proved to be of so much assistance to us—unwittingly, of course—we are willing to help extricate you from this predicament."

"And what do you want in return?" Kei questioned.

"I've already told you, you will come aboard and work for us."

The three exchanged looks, none of them looking very pleased, Akira ashen with new terror. It was a Devil's deal. Be saved from death and learn to what? Become killers in the name of the same dark justice that had driven them for months? It really did seem like a bargain with the Devil.

"So we help you...do what? I want to hear it

spelled out in plain language," Juro stated.

The man sat back in his chair. "I've told you, but let me repeat it so what we are asking is perfectly clear. You will help us break up criminal organizations and in exchange for your help, we get you out of your current predicament."

"So we'd be doing for you, what we did for ourselves? Finding killers, tracking down people that have killed someone?" Kei asked.

"That is the plan, yes."

"Why us?"

The man's smile came back, but it wasn't very reassuring. "All three of you show promise, and have some innate skills not very commonly found. You managed, with only limited help from us—and without knowing we were assisting you—to bring down a very dangerous organization.

"Of course you'll need extensive training, but we're willing to see that you get that training...if you agree." He rose to his feet. "You've got a few days before your trial to think it over. But don't wait too long. Once the trial starts, you'll be beyond our reach and at that point we can't help you."

"Wait, what if we say no?" Juro asked.

"You committed a series of murders," the man said, then gestured at the grey walls of the room, motioned to the chains binding them, forcing them to kneel on the hard concrete. "The least you'll get is permanent residence in prison."

"And the worst?" Juro questioned.

"Murder, especially multiple murder, can carry a

death sentence.”

Akira sobbed softly, his head and shoulders sagging. Only the chains kept him from collapsing totally. “I didn’t kill anyone...I...never wanted anyone to die.”

Takeshi closed his eyes. *This is my fault*, he told himself. *Akira is going to die because of me. So will Juro.*

And this man was offering them a way out. But the price was so high. Probably too high. If he alone could say, *Yes, I’ll do it*, he wouldn’t have hesitated. But to ask Akira to learn the skill of murder, that was asking too much of the sensitive and very emotional younger man. And it wasn’t right to ask it of Juro either, even if he’d already managed to kill someone.

“Think about it,” the man urged as he started toward the door.

“Kei...” a sobbing plea from Akira that tore the guitarist’s heart.

Akira had never wanted them to become killers. But the fear in his voice told Takeshi his lover didn’t want to live a slow death in prison, and being in a cage the rest of his life would kill Akira as surely as a bullet or being hung. He had to make a choice. Risk them all being sentenced to death for what they’d done, or accept what the man offered them.

The older rocker sighed, turned and raised an eyebrow at Juro, asking silently what they should do.

Juro nodded.

“We’ll do it. Get us out of here.” Kei said.

The man’s smile was warm, friendly. “Excellent. Welcome to Perseverance.”

## AUTHOR'S AFTERWARD:

For those of you interested in the meanings of Japanese flower language (Hana Kotaba) you can try searching the Internet. I'd list websites but they come and go so quickly that trying to put a list of good sites into a book would be pointless.

For those of you wondering about the excessive treatment that the police and prison guards subjected the individual members of Mercykill to during this book, the punishments and abuse are loosely based on documented cases by both police and prison guards that have been published in Japanese Newspapers or are documented in such sources as Amnesty International's case files.

Mercykill: Shattered Melody was written to a soundtrack that includes numerous visual kei and rock bands and solo artists. The following bands figure prominently in my playlist: [Dir en Grey](#), [Buck Tick](#), [L'Arc en Ciel](#), [X-Japan](#), Hyde, Klahu, Miki Shin'ichiro, [Ayumi](#) (jpop) Weiss, Gackt, [Miyavi](#) and select songs from Joan Jett, Dokken, Metallica, Aerosmith, Poe, Sevendust, Drowning Pool, Iron Maiden, Billy Idol, Pat Benetar, Velvet Revolver, Ozzy Osborne and others. The author wishes to thank all these bands for the inspiration they've provided over the years, and especially for the inspiration that went into this novel.

At the time of this writing, the eight million yen

per album deal translates to about 69,000 in US dollars. Not a lot of money, considering most bands take one to three years per album, but keep in mind most bands make their real money touring, not from album sales.

Coming Soon to Mojocastle  
Press...

## Mercykill: Killers

Kei, Juro and Aki have become agents of Perseverance. Agents of justice, working in the shadows of the law. Now all they have to do is learn to kill, and survive their first mission. But this isn't just any mission, and the boys of Mercykill find themselves going up against one of the most horrific criminals in Japan.

# A Taste of Another Hot Series By Michael Barnette...

## From Through Neon Eyes: Zoner

He waited for the person he had hired for the evening with a mixture of anticipation and just a tiny thrill of fear.

“This one’s supposed to be the best, right?”

The soft, soothing voice of his Environmental Control and Security Unit—the NeuroTech EnCoSet 2400, the newest in personal environmental maintenance and personal security—replied: “Yes, Mr. Jessman.”

The man got up from his chair, his lightly muscled body pale in the artificial sunlight that radiated from the overhead lamps. Real sunlight was considered too dangerous, the outside air too polluted for safety. But the company provided everything he wanted; fresh air, and clean, safe place to live. The company even had an enclosed court for tennis, and a par three golf course in the bottom level and a full gym complete with pool, whirlpools and saunas. All this was his

without *too* many soul-wrenching fears....

Ever since he'd been 'recruited' away from the Megalli-Loran Corporation—recruited being the current term for the kidnapping of key personnel from another corporation these days—he had been on edge. MLC wouldn't simply take the loss of their Chief of Computer Research and Development quietly. But he'd been taken from MLC by a skilled 'hiring team' from NeuroTech over three months ago and there hadn't been so much as an attempt to 'retroactively de-hire' him by the MLC's notorious anti-personnel team. And NeuroTech was paying him far better than he had expected—even better than MLC had done, which was an added bonus.

He paced the floor, his reflection flickering eerily in the large sections of bulletproof glass that covered the windows of his spacious apartment. Fifty-eight floors above the ground, the only chance to come in through that way would be via helicopter, and the winds at this elevation in the heart of the Centralized Corporate area were too strong for a helicopter to navigate with impunity. And the glass, tough as it was, wouldn't hold up against his greatest fear: a rocket launched grenade or missile. But then, those would have to be launched from a nearby structure, and the closest structure was another corporation's tower.

The buzzer alerted him to the presence of someone seeking entry into the NeuroTech Corporate Enclave.

"Visual off, he commanded the telecom unit." A green light on the control center flashed to the warm orange of standby mode as he began to dress. "Yes?"

"You have a visitor, sir," the voice of the front desk

security officer said. "Your visuals are out, is there a problem, sir?"

"No, no problem. I'm not dressed for a public appearance. You understand."

There was a slight pause, then the guard replied, "Of course, sir."

Jessman wondered what the man was thinking then. If the person he'd requested was all he had been led to believe he or she was...well then, maybe the guard was jealous. Or maybe not.

"Do I let him in or not, sir?"

*Him.* A man, then. He shivered a bit in anticipation. Jessman hadn't been with another man in a good many months, not since before his arrival at NeuroTech, and the thought of another man sent a thrill of eagerness through him.

"Does he have the security key?"

After a moment's silence, the guard's voice relayed, "Yes, sir, he does."

"Then send him up."

Jessman checked his reflection in the mirror beside his door. His short, dark hair was neat, his forest-green silk shirt and pants were immaculate and spoke of an affluence that was the norm for a highly regarded researchers for a major corporation.

He checked his teeth, perfect and white, the best implants money could buy—some of his own teeth having been lost when the 'hiring team' had subdued him those many weeks ago. NeuroTech had even been even been kind enough give him the facial-sculpt that made him even more physically attractive than he'd originally been. Not that he'd been unattractive, but he had been a fool to struggle when

NeuroTech's hiring team had come for him. After he'd actually managed to punch one of them, the men hadn't been gentle in subduing him, their team breaking his nose and jaw, which cost him those lost teeth.

He greatly appreciated NeuroTech's generosity in repairing the damage, since MLC hadn't updated his look in several years and he'd still been wearing the cheekbones and chin that had been popular five years ago. Not only had NeuroTech made the cosmetic physical changes, they'd added the latest in neurological hardware to sweeten the deal even more. Jessman now had the best available piece of thoughtware NeuroTech had to offer; and the interface was cool-wired directly into his brainstem. Now he could jack into the Net or an entertainment simvideo without any static coming over a warm-wire like the one he'd been given by MLC. Though they'd been a very good company to work for, their thoughtware interface couldn't compare with what NeuroTech—who specialized in such hardware—had at their disposal.

Yes, all in all he'd made out quite well when NeuroTech had proactively hired him away from his former employers. He'd even gained a higher salary and been put in charge of his own research lab, something that hadn't been in the foreseeable future at MCL.

The door chimed and the EnCoSet's gender neutral voice spoke, "You have a visitor."

Jessman's heart jumped.

He took a deep breath, hurried to the couch and sat. "You may let him in."

There was a soft click, and the door swung soundlessly open.

He was smaller than Jessman had anticipated, maybe five-seven, and he was dressed all in dully gleaming black leather. His hair was the color of cornsilk and fell in a mass of tight braids over his shoulders, down his chest almost to the archaic looking gunbelt that rode his slim hips. Fastened in the wild tangle of braids were dozens of tiny silver bells, a riot of feathers and neon bright glass beads the shade of a simvideo summer sky.

“Hello, Mr. Jessman.” His voice was a dulcet tenor, bordering on a baritone. Low and sexy.

Jessman stared, his eyes widening. This wasn't what he had expected. Not at all.

Watch for the Through Neon Eyes Series, Coming in January to Mojocastle Press!

## MICHAEL BARNETTE

Michael Barnette once played drums and second lead guitar in a small metal band called *Demondreams*. He wrote the lyrics to most of their original songs and could frequently be found hanging out at local music stores playing guitar with a silver Mercury dime given to him by his grandfather. He now resides in a small midwest town.

Michael has never been to Japan, although he very much wants to go there some day.

Michael welcomes comments at:

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To find out about upcoming books and contests join Michael's Immortal Heroes chat group.

[http://groups.yahoo.com/group/immortal\\_heroes](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/immortal_heroes)