



## **Hajiri's Pet**

Book One of the Midnight Rain series

Auburnimp and Michael Barnette

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## Chapter One

The rain was coming down so hard it was bouncing when it hit the ground. Not that this was unusual. Tokyo collected rain like corpses collected simvids. Even so, Yakamoto Hajiri grimaced as he turned his coat collar up to stop the water from running down the back of his neck.

Why the hell he had left the warm and dry Mayonaka Yume so early to come out into this he didn't know. No, that wasn't entirely true. He did know and he left because it wouldn't have been wise to knock the grin off that corpse's stupid face.

The submissive fights were fine, even entertaining under most circumstances. An exception being when an arrogant sadist of a Master put a very young, genengineered battlepet against something he didn't have a chance to beat. Like tonight. The kid had been pitted against a cybered up to the fucking lion's mane former fangsoldier turned pet. And the Master of the smaller leopard/human ordered his pet to win, or die. He'd ordered the sleek million corpdollar pet into the ring to fight a battle he was destined to lose so his owner could make the point that money didn't matter to him.

Hajiri hadn't waited to watch the fight. His life revolved around carnage so he didn't want to watch it as entertainment. Instead he pushed and pulled his way out of the crowded Yume until he finally made it to the street nearly half an hour later.

He turned the corner into a dark alley only to have his built-in sensors recognize three darker shadows as people, punks with murderous intent. He eased a hand towards the holster on his hip and the gun that nestled there.

Three sets of neon bright eyes the color of fire burned in the darkness as the trio came forward. The color of their eyes identified their affiliation with a well known Shinjuku area gang, Darkchilde 666. Their height identified them as being part of the enforcer branch known as the Demons.

"Looks like we found us some meat, boys," a sultry feminine voice slithered into his ears, cold and slimy as the scales of a mutie rat's feet.

"Or maybe I did," Hajiri murmured, the gun coming out of its holster and taking out one of the shadows immediately. "You want a piece of me, bitch, come and get it."

A sharp bark of sound, derisive laughter along with a snapping sound sent the pair of taller figures toward him out of the deep pool of darkness, their hellfire-eyes providing excellent targets.

The gun in his hand spoke again and then there was one shadow but it was almost upon him, hand reaching out to grab his wrist and disarm him. A fleeting idea that this might just be his last fight skipped through his mind as a fourth pair of those hell glow eyes appeared right at his shoulder.

*Bastard's got a stealth mode; must be one of their shadowwarriors. But why are they after me? What the fuck did I do to deserve this shit?*

The woman slammed into him, the impact knocking him off his feet, her fingernails tearing his skin, ripping deep, going for tendons. Her manic laughter rang in his ears, and the fierce grin that bared her chrome fangs chilled his bones to the marrow.

Something flashed at the corner of Hajiri's eyes. A white blur of motion swept in and took the snarling leader of the Demons off him. Warm fluid splashed his face and the

gangerbitch screamed and hit the ground, rolling to her feet, one arm hanging limp by her side.

The fourth Demon who'd used his stealth mode to get close to Hajiri lay gasping on the ground, dying in a pool of blood.

The white blur resolved itself into the sleek form of a pale skinned young man, his body cloaked in a fall of hair that caught the dim light, taking on the colors of the neon signs at the front of the Mayonaka Yume reflecting through the downpour.

Laughing the gangerbitch lunged for the slender creature standing over Hajiri, but his nameless savior spun aside, lashing out with a kick that sent the Demon staggering to collide with the wall of the club.

Midnight rain pelted them, the barefooted boy turning to face the ganger. He kicked Hajiri's gun to him. "Will Master kill her or does he desire this boy to do it?"

Hajiri picked up the gun and weighed it in his hand for a moment before climbing to his feet. He was tired and annoyed by the unprovoked attack. "If you want to kill her, kid, go right ahead so we can get out of the fucking rain."

The boy moved, a body fell.

Graceful as a panther, the boy walked to Hajiri and dropped to his knees in the muck at his feet, head bowed, arms crossed in an 'X' over his chest.

"How may this boy please Master?"

Mixing in with the puddles of rain was something dark, not part of the crud covering the street. An iron tang reached Hajiri's nostrils. Blood. The alleyway filled with the scent of death.

Hajiri lifted the boy's chin after putting the gun back in its holster. Big eyes looked up at him from a battered and bloody face. Hajiri recognized the young battlepet who had been ordered to fight the fangsoldier. He noted other wounds, abrasions, black smudges darkening expanses of the pale skin. A puncture that had to be from a knife wound in his side oozed a steady stream of dark fluid that the rain swept away.

"We need to get you patched up. Then I'll think about what will please me. Come." He continued down the alley, the boy following.

If he could save the kid's life he could easily get a million in corpdollars for him and that would buy some class upgrades. *If* he could save him and he wouldn't know that until he got him home.

"You got a name, kid?"

"This boy is known as thirteen alpha twenty-one zeta nine five," the battlepet replied, his voice a whisper so quiet that Hajiri only picked it up over the rain because his enhanced hearing was superior to that of a normal human.

"My prior Master called me Nilhuman." The boy was following him, five paces behind Hajiri, head bowed.

Hajiri's hands clenched into fists in his rage. Damned corpers and their fucking nilhuman shit. Okay so the kid was a battlepet, genetically modified and bred to be a slave; to either fuck or die for their master or mistress, but that didn't make him a nilhuman any more than being a zoner did.

"Well I have no intention of calling you anything of the kind so pick a fucking name for yourself." His words came out harsher than he'd intended but he was furious with those corper pricks and their arrogant showing off. Didn't matter who got hurt or killed as long as they got their fucking jollies.

The boy came to a stop. Wide amber eyes stared at him, gaze showing his shock at the command. "But...only a Master can name this boy."

Hajiri turned to gaze dispassionately at the battlepet. Was he simpleminded? "Am I your master or not?"

"Yes Master, but..." The boy stopped walking, his expression confused, as if he couldn't comprehend Hajiri's wishes. "But... this boy doesn't know any name but those of his former Master's pets."

"Oh. I see. Okay, let me think about it for a while. But first let's get you patched up." Hajiri frowned and scratched his head, as confused in his own way as the battlepet appeared to be. "Why did you help me?"

"You didn't have a pet to help you, and that Mistress had two of them." The pet frowned. "It seemed...right for me to help you. If this boy was wrong then this boy will accept any punishment Master metes out."

Well that was interesting. Battlepets apparently had a sense of fairness in their makeup. Or at least this one did.

"Come on then, before you bleed out on the streets." Hajiri turned towards home again.

The pet walked along behind him, silent obedience personified.

It didn't take very long to reach what passed for home. The money he had made over the years had paid for his cybermodding, and even provided a couple of dingy rooms in the centre of the Shinjuku zone. The roughest, toughest place in the world Hajiri believed.

Not that he was ever likely to see any of the world, other than his brief visits into the corporate landscape beyond the containment wall surrounding Shinjuku, and he hadn't been impressed by that.

An added attraction to his small apartment was being on the third floor with a good view over the street. With a private bathroom tossed in, he was pretty damned comfortable.

The pet knelt inside the doorway near the place Hajiri kept his shoes. Water dripped from the boy's long hair, streamed off his battered flesh to puddle on the worn flooring.

The battlepet touched the water, his look one of dismay. "This boy is sorry for getting Master's floor wet. This boy would be happy to clean up the mess for Master."

"Don't worry about that now." Hajiri crossed the room to the kitchen area and opened a cupboard above the sink. He took out a large first aid kit and placed it on the small table by the window.

"I need to take a look at those wounds," he said, "and I can't do that while you're kneeling in the shoes. Come over here and let me see."

Hajiri had no idea if he was using the right words but he had no real experience of battlepets outside the arena and, if the pet was going to stay for as long as it took to get his wounds healed, he would have to get used to Hajiri the way he was.

The battlepet got to his feet, coming to Hajiri with head bowed, lowering himself to the floor with the same unnatural grace he'd shown before.

*He really is beautiful*, Hajiri decided as he inspected the wound. Now he could see the boy in the light he was quite something with his long, silver hair and huge golden eyes. As he was looking closer, he could see the faint spotted markings from the snow leopard DNA that went into the genetic makeup of his type.

*If I sold him I could get some sweet upgrades but, I dunno, I guess I'm curious as to what makes these guys so special. Let's see if I can save his pretty ass first though.*

The wound was still bleeding sluggishly and Hajiri could see that the battlepet had been lucky it hadn't been a killing strike. As it was, it had come close and he had lost a lot of blood.

Used to doing this for himself like just about any other zoner, it didn't take Hajiri long to clean and dress the wound and apply anti-inflammatory cream to his bruises and scrapes.

"I've thought of a name for you," he said when he was finished. "From now on you answer to Zeshin, or Zen for short."

"This boy will answer to the name his Master has chosen. This boy's name is Zeshin, or Zen for short. This boy will not forget," the pet murmured, voice a velvety whisper of sound that slid into Hajiri's mind and crept along his spine, right to his groin.

Gods, he wanted nothing more than to fuck the boy right there on the floor, but if he did that he could easily kill him and he wouldn't get any money at all for a corpse.

"I'll need to get hold of some clothing for you," he said by way of a distraction from his lustful thoughts. "Until then you can borrow anything of mine that will fit you. We're about the same build."

The boy looked up at him, eyes wide, showing that odd combination of puzzlement and pure confusion. "Master wishes this boy to dress as a Master? This boy cannot do that, it would be..." he shook his head, water dripping from his hair, "wrong."

Hajiri stared at the battlepet in consternation. "You're seriously intending to wander the streets of the zone in just a thong?"

The boy gave him a blank look. "My former Master said only people wear clothing. Animals go naked."

The pet lowered his gaze to his body and frowned, silver eyebrows drawing together in an expression that, despite its serious intensity, made him look even cuter than usual.

"Master finds this boy's body displeasing? This boy is sorry Master is not pleased. How may this boy become more desirable to Master or is this boy the wrong sex to please Master?"

"Yeah, well, your former master doesn't live in the fucking zone. Besides, I don't want other people staring at you."

And that was true. The thought of the leers that Zen would get from some of the dirtbags on the streets made Hajiri unhappy for some reason that he couldn't quite fathom. Then the pet's other question sank in and he laughed aloud. "I've never been worried by the sex of my lovers, Zen."

"This boy will do as Master orders. But all of this pet's value is in its beauty," the boy replied, his voice doing that seductive thing in Hajiri's mind.

Hajiri thought back to the attack in the alleyway and how 'this boy' had taken down the gangerbitch so easily and decided the kid was selling himself short. But that was probably the way he'd been trained by his previous Masters.

"You are a person, not a thing," he said firmly. "Only scumbag corpers refer to us as nilhuman or it. You're in the zone now, Zen, and life is very different here."

"This boy will do as his new and kind Master asks." He crept closer to Hajiri and bowed his head, resting his cheek on Hajiri's thigh. A hand lightly touched his leg, fingers pressing gently as they moved higher up, heading for his crotch. "This boy would

repay Master's kindness in any way Master chooses. This boy loves his Master and wishes to please him."

A spike of lust ran through Hajiri like molten metal at both the words and the manner in which they were spoken. The declaration of love he ignored. Love was not an emotion recognized in the zone. Hate, revenge, rage, desire, these were the zone emotions. The only thing anyone in the zone loved was cold hard cash.

*I wonder if he'll still love me when I sell him to the highest bidder.*

Yet for all his cynicism, Hajiri found himself running his fingers through the silky strands of Zeshin's hair. "Tell me something. Just how quickly do you usually heal?"

"Master can use his boy any way he likes. This boy is not hurt." A slim hand slid the rest of the way up Hajiri's thigh, the tips of the short nails—under which the dark stains of blood from the fight with the gangerbitch showed—brushed over his groin.

"Use your boy, Master. Let this boy please his kind Master."

Hajiri had been a gunwhore for long enough to know when he was being bullshitted and right now he wasn't. The kid really did want to please him and he wasn't at all averse to the idea.

"Okay," he said, "show me how you can please me."

What he really knew about battlepets could be written on the head of a pin with a paintbrush but he'd heard plenty of rumors about their skills and this was a good opportunity to see if truth came even close to those rumors; too good an opportunity to pass up in fact.

*He certainly knows how to turn me on but I wonder how well he can follow through.*

Still damp from the rain the boy rose to his feet, burning golden gaze locked on Hajiri's face. He licked his lips suggestively and stepped away from Hajiri. The amber eyes regarded him, the heat of desire warming their depths. After a moment Zeshin closed his eyes, his arms moving above his head as he struck a dancer's pose.

It started at his fingers, the slender digits moving to unheard music. Spread to his hands, which arched, wrists and then forearms swaying gracefully. Shoulders rolling, head dropping back to expose the slim column of his neck, torso shifting, waist bending and twisting. The pet's hips rolled, the scanty concealment of the thong he wore doing nothing to hide the firm line of a needy erection as the movement of his body reached his legs and he spun, dancing for Hajiri's pleasure.

\*

*This boy wants Master to love his pet. Why don't any of my Masters love this boy the way this boy loves them?*

The puzzle was too hard for him to work out. Too difficult for his mind to grasp so he gave up on it.

He swayed to the song in his head, dancing for his newest Master. He'd had others, his former Master had often reminded him how worthless he was as he recounted the fact that thirteen alpha twenty-one zeta five nine, his little Nilhuman, would never have a Master's love. He was good only for the skills of his mouth, and the tightness of his ass.

Worthless as the thing he was designed to be: a battlepet.

Pretending that his eyes were closed, he peered at his new Master through the silver veil of his eyelashes.

*Handsome. No, that's wrong. He's beautiful.* And that too set him apart from his other Masters. They'd been men—Masters—but none of them had struck a chord in his

heart as sweet as the one this strange new Master sounded within him.

*This boy wants his love. This boy wants to be loved. But this boy is nothing. A created thing that isn't worthy of any Master's love. A nilhuman with no value.*

Masters, five of them he'd been reminded. Four he couldn't recall, except as vague shadowy forms that pleased or punished. The only one he recalled, his most recent prior Master, had lacked the attractiveness of this man who he danced for, who he desired to love him.

*This boy wants a good Master. If only this boy wasn't flawed. If only he didn't need the medicine to make him be good.*

When he'd lost the battle against the bigger pet he'd felt so empty inside. So lost. Hurt. But not because his body was injured. He felt all those things because his Master, the man he'd loved, no longer wanted him. He'd been carried out of the Mayonaka Yume by some of the staff. Big frightening strangers who tossed him into the bin outside where a few dead bodies—pets that had lost their lives that night—had been discarded.

Discarded like him.

Coldness filled him. The hollow spot in his heart only a Master's love could fill remained empty. But he danced for his new Master, hoping he could have this peculiar Master's love. If only he could behave himself without the medicine he always had to take.

Nilhuman. Nothing but a beast. Flawed. Worthless.

Trash.

Words. But they all hurt. Hurt worse than the wounds he sustained in the battle he'd lost tonight.

He turned, undulating to the song in his mind, hips swaying, taking small steps closer to his new Master. He sank to his knees between the man's knees, still rolling his shoulders. Bowing forward he pressed his lips to his Master's knee, asking permission to do more, wanting to take the handsome Master's cock into his mouth and give pleasure.

A hand ran through his hair, its touch gentle, soothing, as his new Master felt its silken length. His chin was lifted and he saw his Master was smiling.

"I've never seen anything so erotic or so beautiful," his Master said, "and believe me, Zen, I've seen a lot of supposedly erotic or beautiful things in my time as a gunwhore."

Gunwhore. The word's meaning eluded him for a moment, then he remembered what it meant. Bodyguard. Whore. The perfect blend of lover and deadly killer.

A battlepet by another name.

But born of parents, not to the cold sterility of lab equipment and the training school.

But could a gunwhore be a Master?

The touch, the way the man looked at him said yes.

He lowered his eyes. "Master is kind to this boy. So very kind." He kissed the man's clothed thigh. Lay his cheek where his lips had touched. "Tell this boy what you wish, Master. This boy will do anything the Master desires. Anything at all."

The smile on his new Master's face grew. "Really? How about taking me in your mouth then?"

He reached for the button and zipper holding his Master's pants closed, waiting for a punishment for daring to touch. He stopped himself, raised his eyes briefly to his Master's face, bowed his head. "Does Master permit this boy to touch him?"

There was a chuckle as rich as molasses and as sexy as sin from above him. "I'm not



sure how you're going to manage *without* touching me. Yes, Zen, I give you my permission."

The battlepet shuddered at the sound of that deep, intoxicating voice. A pulse of white-blaze lust rolled through his body from his groin. He licked his lips, goosebumps rising on his skin, his already hard cock twitching with desire.

"This boy's former Master never let this boy use its paws on his Master's person. This boy was permitted to use only its mouth like the beast this boy is."

He reached for the buttons again, touching his new Master's body, trembling as conditioning by his former Master warred with the wishes of his new Master. He pulled on the waistband gently, urging the concealing garment down, away from the hard cock he could smell, see, almost taste. He licked his lips at the fragrance of arousal musk filling the air. Heat bloomed through his lower body, his anal ring spasming. He wanted to feel his Master's cock, wanted it hot and hard in his mouth, deep and forceful as it plundered his ass.

A whimper came from him as saliva flooded his mouth at the scent assaulting his senses. The battlepet's cock jumped in response to the intoxicating fragrance of this Master's lust.

"I want you to forget your old Master, Zeshin. It's what I want that matters now." There was some harshness in the voice but it didn't seem to be directed at him. And that gentle hand was still caressing his head, playing with his hair, soothing him.

"Yes Master," he replied, daring to press his head into the hand caressing his hair. He rose up on his knees and bent over his Master's lap, his tongue lapping at a crystal droplet of pre-cum.

The taste burst across his tongue, sinking into his brain, scent and taste, the touch of the hand imprinting him with his new Master, writing this man over the former one. Erasing the memory of his scent, the sound of his voice and the appearance of the man who had discarded him.

This man was now his Master, and he would obey only this man until such time as he was given to a new Master.

A groan from above him told him that he was doing exactly the right things while the long fingers of his new Master tightened in his hair.

The taste of pain told him what he did pleased his Master so he swept the tip of his tongue over the tender flesh of his Master's cock, tasting more of the sweetness, the salty tang of his Master.

*This Master must love this boy. This boy needs a Master to love him.*

Tears filled his eyes as he enclosed the head of his Master's erection in his mouth and lapped delicately at the small slit.

"Oh gods, yeah." The words were sighed out of his new Master and the man's hips bucked at the touch.

He closed his eyes, drinking in his Master's scent, the feel of the hard flesh in his mouth. The tip of his tongue teased across the tip of his Master's erection, sweeping in a circular motion around the soft skin, lips clasping the flesh just behind the flaring of the corona.

This was good. It was right. The purpose of his existence fulfilled by the act of giving his owner pleasure.

Warmth suffused his entire body, a wave of pleasurable sensation flowing through

him.

*Being good. This boy is being a good pet.*

A strangled moan came from his Master's lips and the fingers in his hair tightened even more.

Hearing his Master's pleased cry, he took the full length of the man's erection into his mouth, the head of it bumping the back of his throat.

His own body was ready, eager for the feel of a hard cock inside him, precum slipping over the head of his own hardened flesh. He moaned with the need to be used, to be fucked by this new Master. But only if commanded would he relinquish the treat in his mouth.

His Master let him suck for a while longer before using the hold in his hair to pull his head away. "I want so much to fuck you," he said, "but I don't want to open that wound up again."

"This boy promises not to bleed on his Master," he replied, head bowed, tongue darting out to savor the lingering taste of his Master's pre-cum that clung to his lips.

"Then let's take this somewhere more comfortable." His Master rose gracefully to his feet and headed toward an open door that led into the bedroom. "Come along."

He trotted along behind his new owner, head down, submissive and obedient while his entire body quivered with anticipation. He lived for this. Longed for this. To please. To make a Master happy. To be fucked by a Master. Excitement made his erection ache, warmth flooding through his body, heating his blood, readying him to be fucked, his anal muscles relaxing.

His whole life was geared toward being fucked, being used. Every moment of his waking life devoted to training, to obedience. To being owned.

His strange and very kind Master sat on the large bed that took up most of the room and began to remove his boots.

He stood there, watching his Master through the fall of his hair, curious and wanting to see the man's body, but not wanting to make his Master angry for looking. He hadn't been asked to watch, and some bit of memory told him not all Masters wanted their pets to see them as they undressed.

This Master glanced up at him, grinned wickedly and asked, "Are you just going to stand there or are you going to help?"

He hurried over, dropping to his knees at his Master's feet, reaching for the waistband of his pants. He pulled them down over his Master's muscular thighs, heart picking up the beat as that musky, dominant Master smell filled his mind with such desire he whimpered.

His new Master pulled his sleeveless, cropped top over his head, revealing a smooth, but muscular chest with golden brown nipples. His navel had a ring through it with a purple stone hanging on it.

The stone caught his eyes, drawing him to his Master, the tip of his tongue dipping into the man's navel, nuzzling the pretty object as he tasted his Master's skin.

"Pretty Master," he murmured, kissing the smooth skin, running his tongue upward to test his Master's reaction to having a nipple licked. "Beautiful Master."

He was grabbed by strong arms and pulled onto his Master's body. Soft lips found his in a passionate kiss, his Master's tongue invading his mouth to war with his own.

Inbred instinct told him to yield to his Master, to passively accept the invasion, but

he didn't, instead he returned the kiss. He spread his legs, pressed his behind down on his Master's cock, feeling the hardness under him.

He whimpered into his Master's mouth, vocalizing his desire.

His Master's arms tightened around him and his hands pushed at the ruby-decorated thong that was his only clothing.

Wiggling he removed the thong, leaving nothing between himself and his Master's sleek body. He gasped, feeling the hard flesh of his Master's cock directly under his balls, the steely length eliciting another cry of need from him as their tongues touched and tangled.

His Master's hands wandered over his body and when he finally broke off the kiss, it was to murmur, "Beautiful, so very beautiful.

*He thinks this boy is beautiful?* The words were very surprising, but not as much of a surprise as the way his Master's hands caressed him. Touching him in ways the fading memories of his last Master told him he'd never experienced.

His former Master had fucked him. Yes, he had done that, but he'd never been kissed and the touching he'd received stayed at the bare minimum needed to give his Master pleasure. But the man hadn't caressed him, hadn't kissed him the way this kind and beautiful Master did.

He found his Master was watching him, a wry expression on his handsome face. "What the fuck have I got myself into this time?" The question didn't seem to be addressed to him however, and he didn't know how to answer so he kept quiet.

His Master moved one of those caressing hands to reach for a drawer in the nightstand. He removed a tube of lube from it and smiled that wicked smile that spoke of unimaginable pleasures.

He gave his Master a shy smile and rose up from the man's lap to kneel beside him, waiting for his Master to make use of his ass.

"Why'd ya move?" His Master seemed perturbed for a moment before he slapped a hand to his forehead. "Yeah, shoulda figured. They just wanted you to bend over, right?"

His Master didn't seem angry, he hadn't raised his voice, yet something about his words and tone indicated something might be wrong.

He flattened himself on the bed and began pleading, "This boy is sorry for being bad, Master. This boy is sorry! This boy is ignorant; teach this worthless thing what you want from it!"

"Who said anything about you being bad?" Gentle hands pulled at him until he was back astride his Master. "I'm gonna have to ask someone all about you."

He was pulled down for another kiss, the feel of his Master's mouth driving out the worry he'd done something to anger the man who owned him.

Their tongues danced, twining and touching, the sensation flooding him with need, the desire to have his Master's cock inside him, thrusting forcefully into his body, granting him the pleasure he craved.

His Master's hands were no longer caressing him, the man busy opening the lube rather than touching him. A gentle and well-coated finger was pressed against his ass, rubbing round the pucker before easing inside.

Already relaxed, he could have taken his Master's cock and not been troubled by it. The finger made him squirm and he whimpered. "Master, please, this boy wants you!"

"You sure about that?" His Master touched that little bundle of nerves that gave him

so much pleasure and he cried out, shuddering as the sensation left him trembling and wanting his Master's cock.

"This boy is sure, Master. This boy wants his Master's beautiful cock. This boy wants his Master to fuck him."

His Master's hands settled on his hips and eased him upwards before guiding him back down to impale himself on his Master's lubricated cock. He cried out as the hard flesh stroked inside him, igniting the clusters of nerves—enhancements added to make his species more responsive—deep inside him.

He arched into the upstroke, face flushed with the jolt of pleasure rocketing through him, blanking out everything for an instant but the feel of his Master entering him.

"Oh gods, you're perfect!" his Master exclaimed before he seated himself fully and began to thrust.

He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the bed and spreading his knees wider so his Master could fuck him.

Each hard inward motion brought a gasp from him, soft whimpering sounds following the withdrawal.

*Good, so good.* He watched his Master's face, seeing the pleasure the man got from fucking him.

*Master is enjoying this boy's body. Master is feeling pleasure. And he is giving this boy pleasure. So much pleasure.*

Like everything about this new Master of his, even the sexual act was different. He'd never been on top of a Master before and he found the thrust of the Master's cock upward into his body had an added thrill that kneeling face down on the bed didn't give him. He could see the Master's face. See the pleasure suffusing him and it made the ecstasy of being fucked somehow sweeter, more enjoyable.

"This boy loves you Master. He loves you so much!" he panted the words out, riding the cock inside him, traveling up the spiral to the first orgasm that would bond him fully to his new Master.

\*

Hajiri smiled at the boy's words, wondering if either of them actually knew what they meant. But he needed to give Zen some reward for saying them so convincingly. One hand was moved from the boy's hips to grasp his cock and Hajiri began pumping him in time to his thrusts.

The battlepet moaned, the sound a low vibration that rose out of him in a higher note, somewhere between a purr and a whimper. "Master is good, Master is kind. This boy wants to make Master happy. This boy loves Master."

He went on and on, whispering, moaning out his appreciation of Hajiri, his body writhing on the hard cock impaling him.

Hajiri gasped out his own pleasure, the intensity of it surprising him. He was so used to either fucking or being fucked, yet this was a totally new experience. He thrust faster and deeper, his hand speeding up in a counterpoint rhythm.

The battlepet he'd named Zeshin trembled, riding the cock inside him. His whole body tensed, breathing ragged. "Master! This boy loves his Master!" he sobbed as he orgasmed, his cum spurting over Hajiri's hand.

All coherent thought fled from Hajiri's mind as the boy rode his cock and he felt his balls tighten towards climax. The boy's words of love were the last straw and pushed him

over the edge into orgasm.

He cried out as he came. Like the rest of this bout of sex with Zen, it was more intense than normal and he whited out completely as he spurted uncontrollably into the boy's willing body.

When he came back to his senses, it was to the wry thought that he wouldn't be able to sell the battlepet now, not after that.

Hajiri had been a gunwhore for eight of his twenty-five years and yet he'd never felt anything this intense with either man or woman. The battlepet riding him was sex personified and he was fast becoming addicted to the sensations the boy could engender in him. He wanted to try so much with the battlepet, but first he would need to ask Yuki about the species.

He reached up a hand and ran it through the silky strands of silver that made up Zen's hair. The battlepet was so fucking beautiful and completely his.

It excited him.

It frightened him as most situations did not. He'd never been responsible for anyone but himself before.

He was going to have to talk to Yuki very soon.

He smiled up at Zen, completely sated and surprisingly happy. Happiness was not a normal emotion for him. Contentment, yes, happiness was something else.

"Man, that was good," he said, feeling the need to reassure Zen.

The silver head turned into his touch, the boy's reaction like that of a cat seeking to be petted. And the analogy turned out to be more appropriate than Hajiri anticipated, the boy giving a soft rumbling almost purr from deep in his throat.

"This boy loves Master. Master is kind. Master is handsome. Master's cock is glorious," his pet enthused, and the warmth in the boy's voice, the emotions behind the statements sounded genuine.

Hajiri chuckled and slapped Zen's rump. "Okay, okay, don't go over the top." He didn't want to move but, if he was to have any chance at all of understanding the battlepet, he had to speak to Yuki. "Go and get washed up. The bathroom's through there."

Zen scrambled off him, the boy wide-eyed, trembling, face devoid of color. "This boy is sorry! This boy is sorry!" he wailed and cowered on the floor, both arms in front of his face as if waiting for a beating.

"It's okay, Zen," Hajiri said, "I'm not mad at you." He stroked the boy's hair again, trying to calm him and concerned at the lack of understanding between them.

"Master is not mad at this boy?" the battlepet asked, his eyes wary, but hopefulness showing through the fear he'd evinced just a moment ago.

"No, why would I be mad? You've just given me the best fuck of my life, Zen. I guess we need to learn the way each other act and react. Go and get cleaned up while I make a phone call. Okay?" He watched with a smile as the battlepet scrambled to obey, then reached for the satphone on the nightstand. He punched in Yuki's number, pretty certain that the man would still be awake.

Loud music blasted through the connection, the sound muting to allow Hajiri to hear Yuki say, "You dialed so talk." As with most Shinjuku to Shinjuku calls, there were no incoming visuals as there would be in corpland.

Hajiri grimaced. Typical Yuki opening and by the sounds of the music in the

background he was still at some club or other. "Hey, Yuki, it's Hajiri. You're a mine of information on most crap so what do you know about battlepets?"

"Battlepets! What a question. I know they're expensive as shit for one. Why the sudden interest?" the man asked. A roar vibrated through the connection, the sound of a crowd reacting to something.

"You at the Mayonaka still? You remember the fight I walked out on where that battlepet was thrown to a fangsoldier? Well they tossed his wounded ass into the garbage and I found him when he came to my aid against some cybered to shit gangbitch." He paused wondering how much more he should say to Yuki but then remembered the databroker's hatred of corpses.

"He's here now and I dunno what to make of him. He seems like he wants to please me all the time, is convinced I'm angry with him when I make some chance remark and he mentioned medication. Does he need expensive crap to function or something? I was gonna sell him on but now, I dunno."

Muted music filled the connection for a moment. "Did I hear you right, Hajiri? You've got that corper's playtoy at your place?"

Hajiri grimaced wondering how big a fool he really was. "Yeah, you heard right."

"I'll be over in a while. I've got to see this myself." Hajiri didn't have a chance to reply because the call clicked off.

"Oh fucking wonderful," he muttered as he contemplated throwing the phone at the wall. Common sense won out and he replaced it on its stand before heading towards the bathroom for a shower before his uninvited guest showed up.

Wide golden eyes regarded him from a bruise mottled face. Under the bathroom lights he could see that the bruising had begun to fade, the pet's recuperative powers the equal of most zonewarriors. Billows of steam spun in lazy currents through the room, the pet dropping to his knees beside the shower.

"Master's shower is ready," the boy murmured as he bowed his head.

"Thanks, Zen." Hajiri reached out a hand and gently touched one of the bruises on the battlepet's face. Some strange emotion made him wish he could tell Zen there would be no more fights, but he knew that was a lie. There were always fights in the Containment Zone. It was part of life here. Maybe he could ensure that any future fights were of Zen's choosing but even that seemed unlikely. Shaking his head at the puzzle, he stepped into the shower.

Zen got in behind him, picking up the scrubbie and the bottle of shower gel he squirted the soap onto the body scrubber and stepped into the spray of water. He started to gently wash Hajiri's chest, his head bowed, water streaming over his silver hair, plastering it to his slender body.

"You always do this for your Master?" Hajiri asked.

"Yes, unless the Master objects to being touched by an animal," the pet replied softly as he scrubbed Hajiri's left arm.

It felt good to be washed, to stand there and be cleaned like this. "Well I'm not going to complain," Hajiri said with a grin. "But, we need to hurry this up as I'm expecting a visitor."

The scrubbie traveled lower, the pet kissing his chest gently, Zen teasing him as he washed Hajiri's groin. "This boy wanted to give his Master more pleasure." He pouted and glanced up at Hajiri as he added, "Visitors are bad if they make Master unhappy."

Hajiri chuckled. "No, Zen, this visitor won't make me unhappy. I need to ask him some stuff so I know what the hell I'm doing. Once he's gone we can have some more fun."

"Fun? Does that mean Master plans to use this boy for his pleasure again tonight?" Zen sounded hopeful, and his clever hands moved over Hajiri's body, the way the pet bathed him enough to reawaken the former gunwhore's desire.

Hajiri grinned down at the battlepet. "I think I can promise you that. Just play nice with my visitor, ok?"

"Yes Master, this boy will be good." Zen slipped past Hajiri in the shower and started washing his shoulders and back. "Does Master's request for this boy to play nice mean he is to let the visitor use this boy?"

"I wouldn't think so, Zen." It was strange how the thought of sharing the battlepet with Yuki sent a possessive streak running through Hajiri. A dull chime warned him that his water usage for the day had almost been expended.

Zen glanced around. "May this boy know what that was, Master?"

Hajiri grimaced. "We're going to run out of water real soon," he said and leaned forward to turn the faucet off. "One thing you need to learn out here in the zone is not to waste water. We get a daily allowance and once it's gone we go dirty or thirsty." He smiled, hoping to let Zen know he hadn't upset him. "Don't worry. We've both showered and I always keep drinking water in the fridge."

"Allowance for water? I don't understand, Master. You don't get to have all the water you want?" the boy gave him a baffled look.

Hajiri laughed without humor. "No. Fucking corpers take it all. We get what's left."

The pet's confusion increased, Zen frowning. "What is a corper?" he asked. He picked up a towel and began drying Hajiri. "This boy is sorry for being stupid, Master, but I don't know that word."

Hajiri smiled. "Not your fault. You're new to the Zone so you won't have heard it. A corper is someone like your previous masters. Lives on the other side of the Wall, is generally rich and always a complete asshole."

For a moment the pet stared at him, expression blank, as if his brain had trouble processing the information. "This boy is stupid and doesn't understand what Master is saying." Though he continued to dry Hajiri, the boy's face still showed a lack of comprehension.

Hajiri sighed and scratched at a cheek as he tried to think of the best way to explain the Zone to Zen, who had no experience of it. "The place where you fought and lost is inside an area called the Shinjuku Containment Zone. The corporations don't have any time for those of us who live here, except for what they can use us for, like gunwhores. In order to keep us in one place they built a high wall round us with only a couple of ways through, heavily guarded ways that you need a pass for." He looked at the battlepet's face, wondering if any of that had gone in or if the boy really was as stupid as he claimed.

The battlepet's face twisted into a grimace and he leveled a strange, almost hostile glower on Hajiri. "Gunwhores are like pets. I remember seeing a gunwhore and a Master fucked him. Pets can't own pets." He swept his eyes over the room. "Where is your Master?"

Hajiri glowered right back at him. "I don't *have* a master. I'm a free man, able to think and act for myself. I'm a zonewarrior now, not a gunwhore."

Zen pouted. "Is a zonewarrior like a battlepet? This boy is a battlepet and can only be owned by a Master."

Hajiri had put up with enough of this shit by now and grabbed Zen by the chin, forcing the pet to look at him. "Listen, kitty boy, I found you, I own you. And if you keep on like this I'll fucking sell you. I'd get a lot of money for you so, if you want to stay here, cut out the crap."

Wide gold eyes regarded him, a hint of fear in their depths.

A loud knock rattled the door, Zen jumping in alarm, hands hooked into fighting position, fingers spread wide and arched claw-like.

Hajiri shook his head at the battlepet's antics as he pulled on a robe. "Settle, Zen. That's the visitor I was expecting." He crossed the living room to the main door and peered at the electronic viewer. Sure enough, it was Yuki, so he opened the door.

The man on the screen was just a bit shorter than Hajiri, his short hair spiked, and colored a bright shade of violet. The man's cybered Mitsuko Rainbow eyes were no longer their usual shade of blue. Yuki had changed the color to a rich violet to match his hair. Dull black synthleather clothed him, the artificial leather stiffened by the armor lining it.

"Let me in, you little whore," Yuki said to the camera, a hard-edged smile curling his sensual mouth.

"It's open, you greedy moneygrubber!" Hajiri snarled back as he pulled the door open wider.

"Using your new toy already?" the man asked, eyeing the robe Hajiri wore, a hand reaching out, fingertips brushing along Hajiri's chest. He stepped into the room, gaze focusing on the battlepet, the battlepet in turn watching Yuki warily.

"My, he's a pretty one. And he's definitely the pet that fought the fangsoldier. I got a very good look at him, I was sitting ringside. He's a battlepet, a fang based one. Snow leopard and human cross, according to the fight info. The jackasshole that owned him said he wasn't worth anything."

Yuki took a few steps closer to Zen. "Yes, he is a damn pretty bit of meat. How's he ride, does he give a good fuck?"

Hajiri grinned at his friend after batting his hand away. "Like a top of the range sports model drives if you must know." His expression became more serious. "He says he's flawed, Yuki, and has to take medication. What's that about?"

"Dunno," Yuki replied, winking at Hajiri, adding, "nothin' better than a sweet riding ass. Pay you for a test drive later if you've still got him."

Zen stared at Yuki, face twisted in that uncomprehending stare.

"Poor baby, he don't understand our talk from the looks of him. Have to talk corp with pets I guess." He stepped closer to Zen but refrained from touching the battlepet. "You wanna know exactly what he is, come and pull his lower lip down so I can see the id-tat he's got. All pets got them, shows batch, type, and serial number. I brought my datacomp so I can look it up on the market and check all the specs and value."

Yuki grinned. "Even get you a techbook if you want it, but that's gonna mean I want to sample the goods."

Hajiri glowered at his friend, surprised by just how possessive he'd become of the battlepet. He stepped closer to Zen and touched his lips, such soft, kissable lips, before easing the bottom one down. The tattoo was there and it was the same number that Zen



had given as his name. "Thirteen alpha dash twenty-one zeta nine dash five," he told Yuki.

The man typed in the alphanumeric, entering it into his datacomp strapped to his wrist. "I'm searching for the specifics, give me a few."

Hajiri nodded, knowing the search would take time, and headed for the fridge. "You wanna beer?" Halfway there he stopped and gazed at the battlepet. "Do you want a drink, Zen?"

"Yes, this boy would like a drink, Master."

"Sounds good," Yuki agreed as he pushed a few buttons on the comp and went back to watching the screen.

Hajiri opened the fridge and pulled out three cold beers. He tossed one in the general direction of Yuki, knowing his friend would catch it, and handed another to the battlepet. "So we're back to my being your Master, are we?"

Yuki opened the beer he'd caught. "That's not a good sign if he's questioning your superiority. I've seen battlepets turn on their owners at the Mayonaka Yume. It's not pretty, and the corpors wind up shredded and off to the nearest ER over the wall." Yuki grinned, "But you probably don't have much to worry about if he attacks you." He winked. "You ain't no softmeat corper."

Hajiri opened his own beer and took a swig. "Damned straight. Why you think the assholes need us to protect them? And that's what the problem was. I think Zen considers gunwhores same as battlepets as they both get screwed over by fucking corpors."

"No shit. Fuckers every one," Yuki agreed.

The pet was staring at Yuki, wearing yet another confused expression. While Hajiri was far from stupid, it hardly took a genius to figure out that the boy hadn't understood much, if anything Yuki'd just said. He sighed and crept closer to Hajiri, kneeling at his feet.

The boy looked from Yuki to him. "Master has the respect of his visitor. The visitor does not look like a pet, therefore the Master must not be a pet," the boy replied.

The violet haired databroker frowned at the screen of his wristcomp. "This is going to take time to sort out, Hajiri. I'm coming up with a lot of information on battlepets, but damn little on his particular kind."

Without stopping to think about it, Hajiri stroked Zen's hair. "Take yer time, Yuki. No sense in being in a damned rush all the time."

"Well you know me, I'm always willing to put my feet up for a while...so long as you've got beer, anyway," his friend replied with a wink in his direction.

Yuki's comp beeped at him and he frowned. "Shit, I've got to go, boss is ordering me in." He grinned and finished off his beer. "I'll send it to your satphone when I've got it sorted." He headed out the door, waving to Hajiri. "If I was you I'd sedate the beast to make sure it don't bite your face off while you're sleeping."

"Yeah, yeah, just like you'd try sedating Mayuke!" Hajiri called after Yuki. The door banged shut, leaving him with none of his questions answered.

## Chapter Two

The Master confused him. He didn't understand some of the things this Master said. And worse than that, he didn't know if this was a Master or another pet.

Disappointed, he crept to a corner while the man locked the front door.

For the first time since he arrived, he studied the place his Master had brought him. The walls were barren, cracked and stained. Dirty. The floor was no better, the tiles broken and faded. He wasn't sure what to make of the sparse furniture. He'd never seen anything like it, the stuff ragged, worn as the rest of the room. Nothing in his experience prepared him for this place or being owned by a man who was—possibly—not a Master.

"This boy doesn't like it here," he whispered and stared at the cold bottle in his hand. He knew there was some sort of drink inside, but he didn't know how to open it. No one had ever given him a sealed container, only cups and bowls to drink out of.

His Master turned to smile at him before frowning at the bottle in his hand. Now that his Master's friend had gone Master spoke in words he could understand. The voice was soft, and sounded like the voices he was used to. "I take it you've never been given a bottle of beer before. Give it to me and I'll open it for you."

He held the container out to the man, wondering what a 'bottle of beer' might be and if he'd like it.

The man took it and opened it but did not hand it back immediately. Instead he asked, "What are you used to drinking?"

"Water," he replied and sniffed at the contents of the bottle. It didn't smell like water and he sniffed again, wondering what 'beer' was exactly. The stuff had an odd aroma and he wasn't sure he cared for the scent.

"When this boy was very good Master would let him have a bowl of milk, but Master only did it once." Zen sighed at the memory of the taste. "This boy likes milk."

"Milk, huh? I think I can manage that." His Master put the bottle on the table and went back to the fridge. He found milk and poured some into a glass. "Here. You were good earlier."

He took the glass and sniffed, put it to his lips and took a drink. He lowered the glass and stared at the contents. "This boy is not sure this is milk. It tastes different." He took another sip and looked at the man who might or might not be a Master. He wore the robe he'd put on when his visitor had arrived, and until now he hadn't realized how threadbare it appeared to be. In fact, even the plastic cup he was using seemed to be old.

His former Master's things didn't seem to be so beat up and old. They were always perfect, undamaged. Even the kennel where he'd been kept was shiny and clean. He didn't understand why everything here was so battered and stained, so dirty.

"Why do you live in this awful place?" He couldn't tell if this man was a Master or not. *Pets don't even live in places like this, do they?*

The man took a drink from the bottle and stared dispassionately at him. "Because, as yet, there is nothing better in my price range. If you want to live back in corpland, I'll happily sell you to a suit. Is that what you want?"

He tried to make sense of what the man had just told him, but words like corpland and suit—except as a piece of clothing that Masters wore—were unknown words to him.

Sighing he looked up at the handsome man. "You use words that I don't understand and other words that I should understand but don't because the way they are used is...confusing."

The man's hand ran through his long red hair, Zen watching the motion, and wishing it was his hand touching the pretty strands. "A suit is a corporate businessman, the sort of guy you've had as your Master up until now. Corpland is the high rises beyond the zone. If you look out the window you can see them."

He couldn't help himself. His mind drifted, lost in watching the motion of the man's hand through deep red hair. He stepped closer, breath hitching, excited, cock rising at the scent of musk in the air.

The lingering odor of sex tickled his nose from the nearby bedroom.

The cup of milk fell from his hand and he flinched, gaze on the spreading pool of wasted treat. His lip trembled, tears flooding his eyes.

"This boy is sorry, Master. This boy is sorry," he repeated as he dropped to his knees, head bowed, waiting for the beating he knew was coming, already sobbing.

There was an exasperated sigh from above him and a damp cloth was pressed into his hand. "Just clean the goddamned mess up."

He nodded and wiped up the floor with quick, efficient strokes of the cloth. When he was done, he crawled to the Master, huddled at the man's feet waiting for the beating.

"This boy is sorry, Master," he whispered.

"Are you always that clumsy? No, it can't be that, you normally move with incredible grace. Or maybe you need your meds." His Master sighed. "You should come with an instruction manual." His chin was lifted and violet eyes stared down into his. There was a half smile twitching the man's lips upward. "So how about you make it up to me?"

"Yes, Master." He nuzzled the robe out of the way and opened his mouth to take the man's soft cock into his mouth, sucking it, tonguing it.

It sprang up instantly at his attention and a gentle hand settled on his head. "I wanna fuck you into the mattress, Zen. Let's move this to the bedroom."

He followed the man into the bedroom and got onto the bed, kneeling, butt in the air, face on the sheets. He sniffed. The lingering scent of their prior sexual encounter brought a whimper of desire from him, his cock twitching, body wanting.

"This boy is ready for his Master," he murmured.

The man removed his robe and sat on the bed next to him, stroking his back. "You're not an animal, Zen, and I'm not going to fuck you as if you were. Come here." He held out his arms.

He sat up, stared at the Master, then moved into his embrace.

*What is this man? Is he a pet? A Master? He's so different. This boy doesn't understand what he is, or where we are.*

Soft lips were pressed to his, a tongue probing its way into his mouth. He opened, submitting to the intrusion. It felt good, that penetration, but there was another sort of penetration he wanted. The kind that brought the intense ecstasy he craved. Orgasm. His body driven to seek such fulfillment by his insatiable desire to please a Master.

But this might not be a Master. And he knew of only one way to be sure. Growling deep in his throat he sent his own tongue into the bigger man's mouth, testing for a Master's response.

He was thrust away from the man's mouth and found himself on his back, the man

straddling his thighs. "Oh no, Zen, if I'm your Master, I do the kissing and the fucking, not you."

"Yes Master, this boy understands." The word, *if* took a moment to sink in. *'If I'm your Master...'*

*If...*

A low growl vibrated from his throat. "You're *not* a Master!" he snarled and shoved at the red-haired man.

Purple eyes narrowed in anger and he found himself pinned to the bed by strong hands holding his wrists. "You wanna play rough we can play rough. I'm happy either way."

"You're no Master. You're not even a battlepet!" he accused and exerted his own strength to toss the man aside. "No Master would let me do this!" He bent down and pressed his mouth to the other pet's, seeking to conquer him with a pet's weaknesses, being dominated and kissed.

The man jerked his head aside, gave an almighty heave of his body and sent Zen sprawling sideways onto the bed. He sat up with incredible speed and an open hand slapped him so hard his ears rang. "Like I said, you wanna play rough we can do that."

Zen froze, eyes locked on the man who'd called himself a gunwhore. His cheek hurt, his side where he'd been stabbed ached. Conditioning told him to surrender. To submit. He belonged to this man.

Yet...this man didn't completely act like a Master.

Instinct didn't want him to surrender. It wanted him to fight, to win.

Training and the deep psychochemical induced conditioning of his responses warred with human nature and the untamed spirit of a wild animal.

Growling he gave a final attempt, launching himself at the man, intending to pin him down and fuck him the way he'd been fucked by his first trainer.

Crashing into a brick wall couldn't have been worse, the man unmoving and unyielding. Zen was forced back into the submissive position on the bed and manacles that he'd not noticed before were fastened round his wrists.

He went quiet, hands held behind him, face pressed to the sheets. This man was a Master without any room for doubt.

Or perhaps he might be a trainer. He'd lost a fight, and his old Master had discarded him. It made sense that a Trainer would have him rather than a new Master.

He felt weight as the man straddled him again and it finally occurred to him that the man weighed far more than someone so lean and slender should. A voice whispered in his ear. "I tried treating you like a human being but I guess that's not going to work. So if you want to remain a slave, that's fine by me."

"But...this boy isn't a human being. This boy is a pet. A bad pet."

The man confused him. Why would anyone treat something like him as a human being? He wasn't a human being. He was an animal, a pet, not a person.

"Yeah, I guess you are," that soft voice said, "and bad pets need to be punished don't they?"

Mouth gone dry he nodded, closing his eyes, turning his head aside. "Yes, Master, bad pets should be punished." A tremor of fear vibrated through him, his mind anticipating the pain that would be given for his misbehavior.

He whimpered as he imagined the terrible things that might happen. Electric shock.

A whip. Beatings. Drugs that would leave him lost inside his own mind. Simvids that could torment him with creatures that tore him apart bit by bit, his body shredded and bloody yet never dying, none of it real, yet the pain was no less agonizing.

The man got off the bed, leaving Zen there to contemplate what horrific punishment awaited him. He opened a closet door and rummaged around inside, closing the door and returning with something hidden behind his back.

"M... Ma..." panic seized him and he couldn't manage to speak coherently, a mewling sound the only thing able to escape his fear constricted throat.

Zen was pulled roughly to the side of the bed, pushed face down. A hard, flat unyielding surface came down on his ass with a loud smack.

A startled gasp was torn from Zen, lips trembling at the pain, eyes tearing.

Spanked. He would be spanked for daring to try to top a Master.

The paddle came down again and again, relentless and merciless, finding all the most painful spots on his ass without doing any real damage. "Just remember you're the one who pushed to play rough."

He sobbed, tears flowing, wetting his face, his butt on fire from the punishment. The jolting pain spread through his body, hardening his cock, making him tremble in helpless submission.

"This boy is sorry! This boy is sorry!" he wailed, a pain orgasm rocking him, leaving him whimpering and breathless.

The pain ceased and a gentle hand soothed his hot ass as his Master sat next to him on the bed. "Prove it."

He rolled off the bed and knelt at his Master's feet, head bowed, arms secured at the small of his back by the handcuffs. He squirmed at the pain of his tender butt, leaned in and took his Master's cock in his mouth, sucking gently, the tip of his tongue dancing over the sensitive head.

That gentle hand now played with his hair, long fingers tangling in the strands and his Master's thighs parted, allowing him better access. "That's good, Zen, very good."

The praise took some of the hurt away, but the tears continued to fall from his eyes, flowing over his lips, flavoring the hardness in his mouth with a different sort of saltiness.

*This boy is a pet. Nothing but a worthless pet. This boy will always be worthless. A no good pet unworthy of the food he eats or the touch of a Master's hand.*

He swirled his tongue over the head, dipping the tip into the slit, lapping at the tiny droplets of flavor that he craved worse than the gnawing hunger for food that knotted his belly.

\*

Hajiri leaned back, enjoying the sensations that ran through his body from his cock while his mind tried to come to terms with what Zen was and was not. There had been a desire for dominance in the battlepet but something told Hajiri that letting Zen top him would not be a good idea, at least, not for a long time.

It didn't matter to him, either way. Sex was sex and the extra stimulators cybered into his nerve endings made sure he always enjoyed it, whether top or bottom.

He wanted to hold Zen, to comfort him but that also seemed like a bad idea, any attempt at even that much equality seeming to confuse the battlepet. He just hoped that Yuki found him some answers very soon.

He continued running his hand through the silken strands of Zen's long hair, the feel of it between his fingers almost like a drug.

He still wasn't sure what he intended to do about the battlepet. The mercenary side of his nature urging him to get as much for the boy as he could while returning the battlepet to an environment he was more used to; the other, more humane side, wanting to keep the boy and give him some sort of a chance at dignity even if it did mean him living in the zone.

Then thought fled for a moment as the boy brought him to orgasm. He arched his back, letting the boy do the work rather than thrust into that skilled mouth.

When he recovered enough from the whiteout of pleasure he pulled on the boy's hair. Not too hard, just enough to get his attention. "Come here."

The boy rose to his feet, showing the perfect grace he'd begun to associate with the boy. He obeyed Hajiri's command, climbing onto the bed and kneeling, lowering himself into a subservient bow, face pressed to the covers.

Hajiri removed the cuffs and pushed the boy onto his back before settling on top of him and regarding him with a frown of concentration. "You're a real riddle, but I guess you don't really know that."

The boy's reddened eyes looked up at him, lips trembling, tears welling up to spill free. "This boy is sorry he is a riddle, Master. He will try to unriddle himself if Master will just tell him what to do."

Hajiri chuckled softly at the quaint turn of phrase before becoming serious again. "Don't you have *any* desires of your own?"

"This boy desires to please Master, that is his only purpose." Zen said it, but there wasn't any real conviction in the words, the tone they were delivered in flat and lifeless. Words spoken by rote with no real emotion behind them. "This boy is a pet, that is the purpose of a pet, to please a Master."

Hajiri shook his head and sighed, knowing bullshit when he heard it. "Did they train you to say stuff like that? Because I can tell you don't really mean it."

"But this boy does mean it, Master! This boy's only desire is to make Master happy!" A quavering sob came from Zen as he added, "But this boy never makes any Master happy. This boy is sorry he is defective and worthless."

This was getting them nowhere fast, Hajiri decided, so he kissed Zen instead, trying to show by that act of affection that the boy did please him. Well, when he was in a bed he did. He stopped thinking about the problems Zen was causing him about halfway through the kiss. Then he stopped thinking at all, pulling away only to say, "I want you."

The pet gave him a puzzled stare. "This boy belongs to Master. Master may have this boy any time he wishes."

Hajiri's satphone rang.

Hajiri reached across to grab the phone without moving off Zen. "Whaddayawant?"

"Bad timing I take it," Yuki chuckled. "Got your info, sending it via net right now. Read it. Some fascinating shit in the docs. Scary shit too. Makes you really appreciate being zoner born and not a pet."

Hajiri sat up. "Shit like what?"

"Well the biggest mindfuck you can think of, for one. They're indoctrinated to be subservient from the time they're old enough to crawl. I'm talking mental and emotional baggage deliberately loaded into their minds. Shit, from what I've been reading most of

them won't even eat if they aren't specifically told to do it by their owner or a designated kennel boss."

Hajiri glanced at Zen, who was still lying on the bed where he'd left him. "Anything in there about masochism?" he asked. "Oh, and can any of this crap be reversed at all?"

"They're trained to react with pleasure to anything their Masters do to them, even punishments. I've read stuff that turned my stomach about how they'll passively accept being murdered. It's sick, Hajiri. Real sick." Yuki sighed. "And as far as breaking the conditioning, for a few it's possible, but they're usually considered to be flawed to start with and from what I'm reading those types aren't common. Most of the flawed ones seem to be battlepets, so that's something in your favor if you're thinking of trying to deprogram him."

Hajiri's eyes widened and he gripped the satphone with both hands. "He said something about being flawed. Hang on, Yuki, let me ask him." He turned to stare at Zen before asking as gently as he could, "Are you a flawed pet?"

Zen turned his head aside, face devoid of color. "This boy is worthless. This boy is flawed, Master. He tries to be good, but...he never is. This boy wants to be good! This boy will be good for you, Master! This boy promises!"

"I heard that," Yuki told him. "Now the question is what kind of flaw? Some of them are just not very healthy, but they're usually destroyed, not sold."

Hajiri thought about it. "He seems healthy enough; his wounds are healing very quickly. What he's saying is he's never good. So he's behaving in ways those corper bastards would not appreciate. He also tried to top me earlier."

"Well he's a battlepet, if he perceived you were another pet he might try that according to the data I've scanned. It says owners of battlepets have to be more careful than owners of the plain ordinary fucktoy variety of pet as I'm sure you can appreciate. Battlepets are dangerous. Some are as dangerous as you, my zonewarrior friend. There are stories of corpors being killed by battlepets that didn't keep up their guard and dominating behavior around them," Yuki told him.

"The idea of a few less corpors in this fucking world can only be a good one!"

"And I expect some payment for the info gathering, Hajiri. I want to fuck that pet of yours. Either that, or I get your ass for two hours."

The battlepet in question lay quietly on the bed, big amber eyes regarding Hajiri, his expression curious.

Hajiri laughed. "You know my ass is well outta your league, Yuki. Be interesting to see if you could tame Zen, though."

"Tame him? Damn, is he giving you that much trouble? I might need help from you then, I'm not the best dom in the world," Yuki admitted. "But you know that since I'm virtually owned by a gunbitch."

Hajiri grinned at Zen while he answered Yuki. "No, a good, hard spanking taught him who's boss boy round here. And as for being owned by Mayuke, you know you love every fucktoy minute of it! Anyways, when you get the chance, come on round and I'll see what I can do about protecting your lily white ass."

"Sounds good and I'm very glad you've noticed how nice and pale my ass is. It happens to be one of my best features according to Mayuke." The man chuckled.

"Oh, one other thing before I go. That pet of yours speaks corp, not zone. So stuff we say ain't gonna register on his widdle biddy brain. Which also reminds me, pets are all

mentally defective. Subnormal intelligence levels. They're bred that way. Keeps them from getting dissatisfied with their lot in life, supposedly. I've seen lots of pets at the Mayonaka, but I can't say I've ever seen any that appeared happy. They all act like things kept in a cage so I'd say the breeding isn't working the way these assholes think it is. Sad really." He gave a bitter laugh. "Sort of like us, but at least we have the illusion of freedom."

Hajiri sat up abruptly, eyes wide. "Yuki! I think you just struck paydirt. That's the fucking flaw, man. He's not mentally defective. Ignorant of a lot of things but definitely not subnormal."

"Too smart for his own good? They're raised in kennels like animals, so how much education you think something like a pet is going to get? I doubt he can even read. Anyway, there's work piling up while I'm treating you to a lot of free data and that don't buy nothing so I'm gonna go. I'll call when I've got time to collect the debt."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks, Yuki."

Hajiri put the phone back on the nightstand before rolling back on top of Zen. He gazed down at the battlepet, troubled by what Yuki had told him.

*Fucking corpers and their fucking stupid games.*

He stroked the battlepet's silver hair, still fascinated by just how soft it was. "Now, where were we?"

"Master was going to fuck this boy," Zen replied, eyes averted from Hajiri's face.

Hajiri took hold of Zen's chin and made him look at him. "Is there something wrong with that idea?"

"No, Master! This boy wants you to fuck him. Please fuck me, Master!" As if to prove the pet's enthusiasm, his cock hardened. But there was something in the pet's gaze, a spark of greater awareness that had been lacking.

Hajiri didn't know what to think anymore. He wanted Zen, yet part of him felt like he was no better than the corper assholes that had made the battlepet in the first place, that he was simply using the boy. He was also wondering just how mentally deficient or otherwise the boy might be. He decided to try an experiment and kept eye contact with the boy as he asked, "Do you want me to keep you or sell you, Zen?"

The battlepet stared at him, as if he didn't quite understand what he was being asked. "Master can do anything he wants to do with this boy."

Another rote answer, trained into him from the way he said it, as if it were a memorized set of words rather than something with a meaning.

Hajiri gave it up for the moment and kissed his pet instead, tongue probing the depths of Zen's sweet mouth, trying for a response that might actually be real and not a result of conditioning.

His pet kissed him, agile tongue stroking along Hajiri's, touching it as if it were Hajiri's cock invading his mouth.

Hajiri had no idea why the battlepet had the effect on him that he did, but he was instantly hard and wanting to be inside that slender body. He tweaked one of the rings that adorned Zen's nipples.

The pet moaned, his tongue twining around Hajiri's, mouth pressing tightly to the former gunwhore's. A low moan, the sound of lust, vibrated through the kiss.

Hajiri broke the kiss, breathing hard, and smiled down at Zen. "You're beautiful and you're mine."



"This boy loves his Master," was the predictable response. Zen put his arms around his neck, the pet's legs going around Hajiri's waist. "Use this boy, Master. Take your pleasure with this boy. This boy wants you."

Hajiri groaned and reached for the lube, swiftly coating his cock. He pressed against Zen's pucker before sliding easily inside the boy. Delicious heat surrounded him and he groaned again. "That feels so fucking good."

Tight muscles clenched around his cock, the battlepet arching, moaning, the sound an enticement as he was penetrated.

Hajiri started to move, a slow, gentle rhythm, which was all he felt he could manage without coming immediately.

"Master, use this boy. Enjoy your pet," Zen moaned, his eyes closing, a faint flush of color warming his cheeks. His arms tightened around Hajiri, the power inherent in the battlepet's arms deceptive. He didn't appear as strong as he really was, but there was no mistaking the power of the slender body under him.

Strong, but not nearly as powerful as Hajiri's cybernetically enhanced body.

Hajiri leaned into him, smiling at the flush on his cheeks. "I am enjoying you, Zen." He leaned in even further and captured those sensual lips again.

*Gods, but the boy was made for sex.* He laughed internally at that thought. *Of course he was—for sex and killing.*

Zen moaned into Hajiri's mouth, body arching into the thrusts, the word, 'Master' muffled by their kiss.

Hajiri increased his speed just a little, thrusting into the boy harder and faster than before, wanting to see him come. He urged Zen to lift his legs to rest against his shoulders by slapping gently on them. That gave him a free hand to toy with the boy's cock.

Body writhing beneath Hajiri, Zen whimpered and cried out with every thrust. The instant Hajiri's hand closed on his erection the battlepet orgasmed, spilling himself over the man's hand.

"This boy loves Master. This boy loves Master!" Zen screamed it as the last few drops of cum left his body. His cock remained hard, the flesh twitching in Hajiri's grip.

Amazed by such a feat, Hajiri kept thrusting into Zen's willing body, calling on his own cyber-enhanced libido to keep going. He wanted to satisfy Zen, to make him want to be his.

"Master fucks so good. This boy loves his Master," Zen gasped, hips bucking, taking up the rhythm of Hajiri's thrusts and meeting him stroke for stroke. "Ah, yes, Master! Master, use this boy! Fuck this boy, Master!"

A fuck-blush reddened Zen's cheeks, the battlepet crying out wordlessly, a spurt of cum spattering his belly. The second orgasm left him gasping, lips parted, eyes dazed but open on Hajiri's face.

Hajiri felt his balls tighten, ready for release, even though he desperately wanted to keep going. A little yellow warning light in the corner of his eye told him that was impossible if he wanted to save some of his strength and he let the human side of his body take over, gasping as he came, feeling as if he was coming forever. "Oh gods, Zen! You're incredible!"

Zen's face and upper body flushed bright red, his cock spilling creamy fluid over Hajiri's hand for the third time. Tears filled the pet's eyes. "Master likes this boy," he

panted, voice quavering. "Master likes this boy?"

Still gasping from their fucking, Zen started to sob, arms winding around Hajiri's neck, clinging to him as his legs spread wider, slipping off Hajiri's shoulder to fall limp on the bed. The battlepet was trembling.

"Master. Master," he wept. "This boy loves you, Master."

With a hiss of loss, Hajiri pulled free of Zen and rolled over so he wasn't crushing the battlepet. He let Zen keep his arms wrapped round him and even pulled him close within his embrace. Holding the boy close he smiled into the darkness of the bedroom. To say that had been incredible was an understatement and he knew that somewhere in there he'd made a decision. "Looks like I won't be selling you after all, Zen. I think I like you enough to keep you."

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The words filled his mind and he started to cry harder, clinging to the bigger man. Holding tight to the Master that was going to keep him.

*This boy wants to believe the Master, but they never keep this boy. They always get rid of this boy, and tell him he's worthless. Sell him to a new Master or throw him into the trash. That is all this boy is—trash.*

*But this boy wants to be owned. This boy wants a Forever Master.*

*Please, Master of All Pets, let this Master keep this worthless pet. Please, Great One, let this be the Forever Master for this worthless and flawed nothing of a pet.*

"Thank you, Master," he got out through the tears.

The arms round him tightened and a gentle hand brushed at the tears on his cheek. "Hey, am I that bad that you need to cry about it?"

"Master, bad? How could Master be bad? This boy doesn't understand. This boy loves Master! Master is good and very kind. Master wants to keep this stupid worthless thing."

This Master still confused him. Kind yet cruel. Some of the words he used were incomprehensible.

And he was hungry, thirsty, and felt the strange *want* that his medicine caused when he didn't get it on time as occasionally happened when a new Master took possession of him.

"Is Master going to give his boy his medicine so this boy isn't bad?"

The new master shook his head. "No, I'm not going to sedate you, Zen. I want to see what you're like when you're bad. When did you last eat? I was thinking that you might want some food while I look at the net."

"Master would give this boy food?" He couldn't help himself, his mouth flooded with saliva at the thought of eating and he swallowed. "Master is kind. Master is good."

*When did this boy eat last? Yesterday? The day before?* He couldn't remember, the past with his last Master already fading into the background.

His master nodded, his expression concerned. "Obviously a while ago," he remarked. "Come on, let's see what's in the fridge."

He disentangled himself from Zen and slipped out of bed.

Zen followed along, his mouth watering at the idea of having any sort of pet food to eat. He wasn't picky and had learned that anything tasted good when you were hungry.

His Master opened the fridge and he peered in past the taller man, seeing a riot of brightly colored containers. Boxes, bottles, jars. And the smell! Food. Lots and lots of

different scents warring for his attention.

"Does Master have pet food for this boy?" None of the containers looked like the pet food he was used to eating.

His master turned to stare at him. "Pet food? No, but I think there's some noodles in here somewhere."

"Noodles?" he asked and looked up at the man. He wasn't sure, but he thought he remembered one of his Masters eating noodles. He knew pets didn't eat things like that. They ate dry kibble, or canned food if they were the favorite pets of a Master. "Are noodles Master food?"

Hajiri retrieved a container from the fridge. "Yeah, I guess they are. Let me heat these up."

Zen smiled. "This boy was given Master food as a treat for being good and winning a fight once. This boy liked Master food. Was this boy good tonight, Master?"

*Stupid question. This boy wasn't good or Master wouldn't have used a paddle on your ass.*

He realized what he'd thought. He'd used 'your' which was a Master word. The medicine must be wearing off. *Then this boy will be bad and master will get rid of m... this boy.* He caught himself about to use the forbidden 'me' and sat down on the floor. Scared he would slip and use one of the forbidden words out loud, he put a hand over his mouth as a reminder to keep quiet.

Hajiri tipped the noodles into a bowl and put them in the microwave to heat up before he turned to glance at Zen. "You can sit on a chair if you want, Zen." He smiled. "And yes, you were very good indeed."

Zen eyed the chair, then his Master. *He is testing this boy. Master is watching and waiting for me to make a mistake so he doesn't have to feed this boy. This boy isn't going to make that kind of a mistake.*

*And this boy had better be very careful because this boy keeps using me and you which are forbidden to anyone but a Master. Do not be a bad pet!* he admonished.

He walked to the table and sat down on the cracked tile floor beside the chair that looked to be used most often.

The microwave pinged and Hajiri dug the bowl out of it, tipping the contents onto two plates. He put the plates on the table and sat in the chair next to where Zen sat on the floor. "Zen, I would feel a lot more comfortable if you would sit on the other chair to eat."

Zen stared at the Master, looked at the indicated chair, then back at the Master. He crept on hands and knees to the chair, turned his head and regarded the Master.

*Another test. What should this boy do? Pets don't sit at tables. Animals don't eat anywhere but on the floor.*

He reached for the chair, pulled it out by one leg, knelt there staring at it. *He wants this boy to sit in a chair? No, that's not right. Pets don't sit at the table.* Trembling, sweat dampened his skin, his lips parted on a little whimper as the panic and fear grew.

Shaking, he got his feet underneath himself and gripped the chair. Creeping onto the seat, he found a way to kneel in the chair.

The room spun in his vision and he started to shake violently as the conditioning he'd undergone warred with the order his new Master had given.

*This boy doesn't belong in a chair! This boy doesn't belong here! I'm not supposed*

to be here!

Hajiri frowned as he picked up his chopsticks. "I'm sorry, Zen, my fault. I should have realized you'd be more comfortable on the floor. Eat on the floor if you prefer."

Zen left the chair as though he'd been scalded by the seat, crawling to kneel by his Master's chair. He pressed his cheek to his Master's thigh and tried to ignore the hunger gnawing at his belly.

*This boy failed the test. He sat at his Master's table and now he won't be fed.* Tears threatened to fall but he held them behind his closed eyelids and tried not to notice the wonderful smell of the food his Master was eating.

*How many times has this happened? How many times have I gone hungry kneeling at the feet of a Master having his dinner?*

He felt the tears trickle from beneath his eyelids to dampen his lashes and spill down his cheeks. Even his mind betrayed him, slipping into the use of Master's words for himself. I and me, you and your. Pets were never allowed to say them, never supposed to think them.

And yet, he did it consistently, despite the training, the beatings, the medicine. He couldn't stop being bad.

Hajiri reached across the table for Zen's plate and passed it down to him together with a set of chopsticks. "I thought you were hungry. So eat."

Zen put the plate on the floor, eyeing the chopsticks. He knew what they were, had seen Masters use them often enough just as his new Master was using them. But pets ate out of their dishes because animals didn't use utensils for eating.

He got on his hands and knees and lowered his head to take a small bite of the noodles, waiting for his Master to play a cruel joke and take the good food away.

It wouldn't be the first time such a joke had been played on him, and he expected something to happen that would take the food from him before he could eat it.

Hajiri stared at him for a moment then shrugged and continued eating his own food without comment.

Zen ate carefully, making sure not to get the sauce from the noodles on his face, or let his hair get into the bowl because he didn't want to be punished for making a mess of himself. Master had water limits and they'd already used most if it.

He fought the urge to gulp the meal down the way he would do in the kennel with his kibble. In the kennel he worried the food would be taken away if he didn't finish quickly.

But this wasn't kibble, it was Master food and the urge to take big, messy bites was very strong.

*This tastes so good. I wish there was more. I... No, this boy wishes there was more.*

He'd never gotten enough food to keep himself from being hungry within a few hours. And many times in the kennel of his most recent Master he'd only been fed once during the day, just enough to keep him alive.

He finished the last bite of the noodles, licking his lips, using his fingers to get the last bits of sauce out of the dish.

Hajiri was still watching him, having finished his own meal. "Are you still hungry?"

"Yes, Master, this boy is hungry."

He turned his face up to look at his handsome Master, giving him a little pout and making sad eyes the way he'd been trained. He reached his hands toward the man without touching. Sitting up and begging the way he'd been taught.

Something flickered in Hajiri's eyes, some undefined emotion that could have been either pity or anger. "New rule, Zen, you do not beg for food, you simply ask for it. I will never be angry with you for asking for food."

He stood up and went back to the fridge. "Would you like more of the same or something different?"

Zen lowered his hands, trepidation making him hesitate to speak. He lowered his head. *This boy made Master mad again.*

He whispered his apology from behind his long hair which had fallen over his face. "This boy is sorry for making Master angry."

Hajiri dug another container out of the fridge and dumped it in the microwave before turning to smile at Zen. "I'm not angry, Zen, at least I'm not angry with you."

It made no sense. If Master wasn't angry with him, why did he sound so upset? There wasn't anyone else there, so who else could his Master be angry with but him?

*This Master confuses this boy. But he has given this boy a good name. A nice name, and he feeds this boy. If only this boy wasn't so stupid he might be able to understand the nice Master.*

He reached out and touched his Master's ankle with his fingertips, wondering if he should try to make the Master happy with more pleasure, uncertain if that would make the Master happy or angry. "This boy is sorry he makes Master unhappy. This boy will try not to do it anymore."

Hajiri squatted down in front of him and touched his cheek. "You don't make me unhappy, Zen. You make me very happy." He bit his lip and frowned though not at Zen. "I'm very different to your other Masters and I expect different things from you. It will take time for us to understand each other but one day I believe we will."

"This boy will try his best, Master." He turned his head and gently licked the man's fingers, wrapping his tongue around them, pulling the index finger into his mouth and sucking it. If his Master didn't get angry or resist the touch of his tongue he'd try touching something more intimate.

Hajiri smiled and leaned in to drop a quick kiss on Zen's brow. The microwave pinged and he stood up to dump more food on a plate, which he handed to Zen. "More noodles but a different flavor this time."

Once Zen had been given the plate, his Master sat down in front of a glowing screen in the corner and started to read what was on there.

Master food tasted so good, unlike the bland, nearly tasteless kibble he was used to eating. He couldn't keep himself from gulping the meal. He licked the plate, being sure to get every drop of the sauce and every scrap of the noodles.

Done and not sure where the plate should go, or if he should leave it, Zen cautiously picked it up and set his plate on the table beside his Master's plate and chopsticks.

He crawled over to kneel beside his Master, staring at the patterns filling the screen.

Words. They were words, but he could only read a few of them. Battlepet being the most often repeated word he knew how to read.

Hajiri reached out a hand and absently stroked his hair. "I'm hoping this will help me to understand you better." The hand stilled as he read a particular passage. "Dear gods! No wonder you don't sit on chairs and liked the food I gave you so much."

Zen looked at his Master. "Pets are not people. Animals do not sit in chairs. Pets are animals and are therefore forbidden to sit on chairs," Zen stated, adding, "This boy is a

pet and it is forbidden for it to sit on a chair.”

He pressed his cheek to Hajiri’s thigh, “This boy liked the Master food he was given by his kind Master. This boy will never forget that Master gave him such nice food.”

Hajiri resumed stroking his hair. “Do you really *believe* that or is it the training speaking?”

“This boy is a pet. This boy must obey the rules of being a pet or this boy will be destroyed. This boy doesn’t want to be destroyed,” Zen replied. He didn’t want to be put to sleep, but the risk was always there. Disobedience wasn’t tolerated but sometimes he just couldn’t help being bad. Like earlier, when he’d mistaken Master for a pet. He shouldn’t have attacked the Master, but things the Master said made him doubt his superiority.

Hajiri turned to stare at him, his purple eyes flashing. “If anyone even attempts to destroy you they will have me to deal with!”

“This boy belongs to Master and only Master can destroy m...this boy.” He cringed inwardly at the slip of almost identifying himself as ‘me’ rather than as ‘this boy’ the way pets were trained to do. When you were a pet there was no ‘me’ allowed. *Me* implied being a person, having self-determination, and that was something no pet was allowed.

*Great One, Master of All, why did this boy have to be born a pet? Why is this boy an animal?*

He was glad his Master couldn’t see the tears burning his eyes.

Hajiri lifted Zen's chin. He was smiling. “Did you almost say me? That's good, Zen. And I promise I will not destroy you.”

He wiped away Zen's tears with a gentle finger. “No more kennels, Zen, no more training. Yes, I am your Master and that's not going to change but I refuse to treat you as if you have less worth than a cur.”

“It is a forbidden word, Master. Pets are animals.” He tried to lower his gaze but couldn’t, his Master’s hand prevented it. “This boy will not say that word again. He promises.”

A smile still played around his Master's mouth as he said, “Okay, let’s make up some new rules for you. You do not have to say this boy all the time. Use I or me. I will not be angry over that. You call yourself 'this boy' but a boy is not an animal, Zen. I'm happy to keep you as my pet but I'm also happy to see you act like a boy and not a whipped dog.”

Zen thought his Master’s words over, but there was a flaw, even his former Master’s dogs were referred to as ‘good boy’ or ‘good girl’ when their handlers walked them.

“But boy and girl are for pets, aren’t they, Master?” he asked, looking up at the violet eyed man, confused again by the things this man said.

Hajiri chuckled. “Yeah, I guess in a way they are. Okay, let's leave it at that for now. I don't know about you, but I'm tired. Let's get some sleep.”

“This boy will do anything Master wants to do.” He followed his Master into the bedroom, getting onto the bed when the man patted it to show he wanted him up there.

He lay down beside his new Master and closed his eyes, head resting on his Master’s chest, the powerful arms around him, holding him close.

Exhaustion he hadn’t felt until he lay down claimed him and Zen was soon asleep.

### Chapter Three

Judging by the quality of the light coming through the window it was mid afternoon before Hajiri awoke. A glance at the digital clock on the nightstand confirmed this belief and he sighed and stretched.

The pages of data on battlepets that Yuki had sent him made for horrifying reading and the likelihood of a very trying day ahead.

*How do you explain to someone brainwashed into thinking they're an animal that they can't wander the zone in a thong?*

He reached for a packet of smokes and lit one as he mulled over the best way to go about getting Zen into some clothes.

Glancing at the battlepet Hajiri noticed a pair of golden eyes watching him from behind a veil of silver hair. If it weren't for the open eyes he wouldn't have realized Zen was awake.

The stillness didn't unnerve him in the least. With the enhancements he had he could be just as silent and motionless. He smiled at Zen. "Did you sleep well?"

"This boy slept well in the arms of his handsome Master," the battlepet agreed and sat up, a shy smile curling his sensual mouth.

Hajiri couldn't help but preen at the word handsome. He knew he was vain but he felt he had a right to be. He'd paid enough for his enhancements. Besides which during his time as a gunwhore he had been one of the most sought after ever known in the zone.

He smiled back at the younger man. "We're going out to buy you some clothes today."

"This boy likes going to the pet shop to get nice clothes," Zen told him, offering the man a bright, happy smile. The first one Hajiri had seen on the boy's face. He slipped off the bed and crept over to kneel at Hajiri's feet. "This boy needs to use a potty box, Master."

Hajiri stared at him, entranced by the smile. Then his words sank in. "Do you know how to use a toilet?"

The smile was lost as the battlepet's face twisted into a pained, unhappy frown. "This boy doesn't remember, Master. If this boy learned he has forgotten."

Hajiri smiled reassuringly at Zen and climbed out of bed. "Come on. I need to go too so you can copy what I do."

The pet padded along behind him, the boy's steps almost soundless. He trailed Hajiri into the bathroom then tipped his head to one side as he gazed up at Hajiri. "Master is very nice to this boy. Why is Master so nice to a dumb pet?"

Hajiri turned to smile at him. "You've given me no cause to be nasty, except the once and I really don't think you're that dumb."

He lifted the toilet lid and positioned himself in front of the bowl. A moment or two later he had relieved himself and turned to Zen. "Now you try."

Zen complied, managing not to make a mess. "Thank you Master for showing this boy how to use the Master's potty bo...umm...*toilet*."

Wondering just how they would go on when Zen needed to shit, Hajiri smiled at the battlepet. "You're very welcome. Now we need to find you some of my clothes that won't

actually drown you and take you shopping."

The pet peered into the toilet. "And a box for me?" Then it appeared that what Hajiri had told him sank in. "Clothes? Master is taking me to the pet shop for new pet costumes?"

Hajiri's smile grew at the use of the word 'me' in Zen's speech. He was already tired of 'this boy' all the time. "No, not to the pet shop. Pet costumes aren't very practical here and you'd get cold in winter. We're going to buy you clothes like mine."

The boy stared at Hajiri, incredulity evident. "But...those are Master's clothes. This boy can't dress like a Master, it's not allowed!"

Hajiri turned the pet to face him. "I'm that strange master, remember, the one that allows you to eat when hungry and dress warmly when it's cold. And I say it *is* allowed now."

He put his arms round Zen and pulled him in for a kiss to reassure him.

The pet returned the kiss, eyes closing, body pressing tightly to Hajiri. Zen's cock instantly hard, a moan telling him the pet was ready for anything he wanted to do.

Hajiri smiled into the kiss and considered throwing Zen across the bed and fucking him silly until common sense reasserted itself and he pulled away. He gave Zen an assessing look as he mentally measured him. There wasn't much difference in height and they were both slender of build so some of his clothes should fit.

He headed for the dresser and dug out a pair of jeans and after a moment's thought, a wine red muscle-back that should set off Zen's coloring to perfection. He might want to cover Zen's body from the view of others but he still wanted them to see just how beautiful he was. "Here, put these on."

The battlepet picked up the jeans and shirt. Zen began to tremble, and he bit his lower lip, amber gaze on Hajiri, the pet appeared the way someone would who expected to be struck for even touching the garments.

"It's okay," Hajiri said soothingly. "Come on, I want to see what you look like in them."

Zen put the jeans and muscle shirt on, pulling his long hair free of the shirt to let it fall down his back. The pet looked at himself, ran a hand over his chest and belly in a sensual motion that drew the former gunwhore's eyes. Zen glanced up at Hajiri, "Master wants this boy to hide his body?"

Hajiri nodded and smiled. "You're mine and I don't like sharing."

*Oh damn! Yuki. He'd promised his friend a fuck with the boy. Now he was regretting the payment he'd agreed to.*

"Unless I say otherwise, I'm the only person who will see your beautiful body from now on. That doesn't mean that you can't look sexy though."

Zen gave his Master a shy little smile, and lowered his head, hiding behind the drape of his long hair. "Master is handsome and kind, and this boy loves Master very much. This boy promises to always love and protect the handsome and kind Master."

Pleased by how well things had gone so far, Hajiri dressed himself in soft synthleather pants and a purple crop top that matched both his eyes and the amethyst in his navel. He picked up his satphone and keycard and motioned towards the door. "Okay, let's go. We'll get something to eat on the way."

Obedient as always, Zen followed Hajiri to the door. He paused, looking at the shoes. "Master, is there something this boy can put on his feet? The street is very dirty



and things this boy stepped on hurt them last night.”

Hajiri clapped a hand to his head and shook it. "What *was* I thinking?" He glanced down at Zen's bare feet. They were a size or two smaller than his at a guess and ill-fitting shoes or boots would make his feet hurt even more with the blisters they would rub up. "I've got some sandals that should help. We'll buy you some shoes and boots while we're out."

He passed a pair of backless flip-flops to Zen. "Try those."

Zen put them on and stood there grinning and looking down at his feet. "Master is very kind to this boy. This boy loves his kind Master and this boy likes his new shoes. This boy is grateful that Master takes such good care of him."

*Okay so they were back to 'this boy' but at least Zen seems happy*, Hajiri reflected as he closed the door behind them and led the way down three flights of steps to the street. It was as crowded as it always was at this time of day with people buying groceries, clothes and other items of a far less innocent nature.

The battlepet pressed close to Hajiri as they moved through the crowds, Zen clinging to him as if he might be afraid. His gold eyes watched in all directions, eyes darting from person to person.

"So many people, and none of them dressed the same. Are they Masters or pets?" Zen wanted to know. His attention was held by a pair of men who were both heavily armed and visibly enhanced, their bodies a mix of human and machine. The pet appeared fascinated, Zen turning to look at them after they'd passed by.

Hajiri thought about his answer for a moment, wanting to phrase it in words Zen would understand. "Most are Masters, or Mistresses, some are slaves and all of us are prisoners."

He held Zen's gaze with his own. "And even the children here are dangerous so be careful."

"Children?" Yet again the pet seemed confused. "What is that, Master? This boy doesn't know what a children is."

Hajiri laughed. "They are the young of the people you see around us, not yet fully grown. Children means more than one of them and child is just one."

The battlepet nodded. "One is child, more than one are children. They are half-sized humans. This boy will keep that in mind, Master." Zen stayed quiet for a moment then asked, "How did they get to be that size, Master? Were they made that way in a lab like this boy?"

Hajiri's laughter continued. "No, they're made the normal way, by sex between a man and a woman."

He watched the zoners on the street, ready for any false moves. They got as far as a shoe and clothing store and Hajiri ducked inside. "I want good boots, and some house slippers to fit him," he told the clerk as he indicated Zen, "and some clothes."

The woman behind the counter eyed Zen then turned a megawatt smile on Hajiri. "Ohhh, that a pretty one. I haven't seen him 'round. Where you find him, Hajiri? There more like him somewhere?" She licked her full lips and leaned across the counter to expose the curve of full breasts adorned with a riot of floral tattooing that glowed under the lights of the store.

Hajiri grinned back at her. "You wish."

The battlepet turned his gold eyes on the woman then sidled closer to Hajiri.

"I'd pay money to have a taste of that fine meat. Come on, what he goin' for?" she asked, holding out her hand to Zen she added, "Come here, pretty. I wanna pet you."

"More than you could ever afford, babe," Hajiri told her. "Now just find him some gear, will you?"

"How you want him styled? Whore, gunwhore or he you own personal bitch?"

Hajiri stared at the woman, his amusement fading fast. The idea of Zeshin being styled as *any* kind of whore was abhorrent to him for reasons he couldn't quite comprehend. "None of the above. Zonewarrior."

The clerk looked Zen up and down. "Him, a zonewarrior?" She gave a disbelieving snort and motioned toward the back of the store. "What you want's over that way. If you wanna play dress-up and make-believe, that's your biz. Jes don't you come cryin' around here if he gets his face blown to red ruins."

She chuckled. "Zonewarrior. You gone soft in the brain, Hajiri, you think anyone take that toy of you's for a killer."

Hajiri glared. "When you's seen him in action, bitch, then you can judge. Until then, keep that fucking scar of a mouth locked up nice and tight."

The woman returned his glare but chose, wisely, to keep her mouth shut.

Hajiri followed Zen to the back of the store. House slippers would be easy enough to find, it was what the battlepet wore on the street that would matter. "See anything you like yet?"

"This boy likes anything the Master likes," he replied, but the words sounded, yet again, like a rote response.

The battlepet's keen eyes were taking in the offered clothing, shining bright as a child turned loose in a candy shop. Zen tentatively reached out to touch a floor length coat of synthleather the color of dried blood. His fingers didn't quite reach the coat, his hand dropping back to his side.

Hajiri grinned and nodded his agreement. "Yeah, good choice, it would suit your coloring and it looks to be strongly made." He took a closer look at the coat, noticing the built-in bullet resistant panels. "Try it on."

Big eyes regarded Hajiri for a moment. The pet took the coat off the hanger, his hands shaking. He slipped it on over his borrowed clothes. The bottom hem brushed the floor hiding his feet and the fact he wore only flip-flops. Put a pair of thick soled zonewarrior's boots on his feet and the coat would be the perfect length.

"Does Master approve?"

Hajiri grinned at the battlepet. "You look good enough to eat, Zen. I like it on you, very much. We just need to find you some proper boots and a selection of pants and tops and you'll look really sexy."

Color flooded Zen's face and he lowered his head, that shy little smile making another appearance on his mouth. "This boy is happy he pleases Master. It makes me happy to please m... this boy's Master."

Hajiri smiled to himself at the signs of individuality and ego breaking through Zen's conditioning. When he threw it off completely he would be unstoppable. "Okay, let's see if we do as well with the boots and the rest of your clothing."

"Yes Master, this boy would like to find boots for his feet. He likes the flip-flops Master gave him, and would like to keep them too if Master will let him." As he spoke Zen's gaze roved the store, the bright colors and variety of things available distracting

him from his own slips of speech. He'd used 'he' and 'him' and not corrected the mistakes. Zen's attention was held by the riot of things available for sale, the bright colors and shiny metal objects drawing his gaze.

Hajiri watched at this new sign of self-expression and sufficiency with some amusement. Zen was showing the very first signs of thinking for himself, something he would need to do if he was to live in Shinjuku. It would be interesting to see what else he picked out for himself. "Sure, you can keep the flip-flops. But find something stronger for your feet and some clothes for under the coat."

The pet bounded off as soon as Hajiri stopped speaking. He pulled something out of a display and held it up for his Master to see. In his hands was a delicate black lace shirt patterned in roses. Zen was grinning. "Does Master approve?"

Hajiri was beginning to enjoy this shopping trip with Zen. The battlepet had seriously good taste. "Oh yes. I definitely approve."

Zen turned the shirt over to his Master and searched through the rack, finding a second, similar shirt—done in dark grey and lavender—this one of orchids—which he offered for Hajiri's approval.

Hajiri nodded with a bright smile. "Just don't forget the pants and boots."

The battlepet nodded, his expression very serious as he picked out two pairs of armored synthleather pants. One pair in black, the other in a deep grey to match the shirts he'd chosen. He searched through the boots, picking out a pair of knee high heavy duty boots in dull black. They were armored like the coat and pants. There were latches up the outsides, the steel dulled by a black coating so they wouldn't reflect any light.

"Has this boy done all right, Master?"

Hajiri nodded again and grinned at his battlepet. "You've done very well, Zen, wise choices, all of them. Now, do you want slippers for when you're inside or would you prefer to go barefooted?"

"This boy has never worn shoes in the house, but if it makes Master happy, then this boy would like to wear slippers for his Master."

The woman behind the counter chuckled. "Some zonewarrior he's gonna make. You can't make somethin' like that fight; they just ain't got the ability to hurt no one."

Hajiri sighed in irritation and turned to stare at her, his eyes bleak. "Never heard of a battlepet then, have you, bitch?" He turned his attention back to Zen. "I don't mind at all about the slippers, Zen, as long as you don't wear your boots in the house."

A pair of zoners entered the store. The men were both taller than Hajiri, their black, red and gold clothes marking them as part of the Lotus Triangle gang. A gang rumored to be funded by the Red Lotus Corporation. They wore their guns in plain view just as Hajiri did, the two moving with the peculiar ponderous grace of heavily modified humans.

"Battlepet? Where in all fuck would *you* get one of those?" the store clerk asked, her tone telling him she didn't believe a word of it.

"This boy promises Master he will not wear his boots in the house," Zen replied, his eyes following the men who'd just entered the store.

Hajiri nodded to Zen's words but answered the woman. "It's amazing what you can find in the trash. How much," he asked the woman, his gaze never leaving the two who'd entered the shop.

“Three hundred corp for the coat, one fifty each for both pairs of pants. The shirts are fifty each, in z-script, fifteen in corp.” She ignored the men who’d come in, and the pair went directly to the display of coats, apparently ignoring his Master.

But there was something about their behavior that tripped an internal alarm inside Zen and he kept his head down. Surreptitiously peering at them through his long hair he discovered that the two men were carrying out a careful surveillance of his Master. They were taking turns glancing in their direction without appearing to do so, using their peripheral vision to keep track of his Master’s whereabouts.

He moved closer to his Master, ready to intercept any attack made by the men. Not sure if his Master knew they were being watched, he brushed his fingertips over the back of his Master’s hand.

*What do those men want? Are they going to attack my Master? Why would they do that?*

Why ceased to matter as the taller man reached for his gun.

Zen shoved his Master, trying to knock the man to the floor as he launched himself across the room, an enraged roar erupting from him, drawing the man’s attention away from his Master and focusing it on him.

He collided with the man, taking him to the ground, the gun going off, blasting hunks of ceiling tile away as they hit the floor.

As they rolled across the floor Zen saw Hajiri's gun was out and pointing at the second of the two men. "Don't even think about joining in if you want to draw a pension from your corper bosses," his Master said.

The gun in the would-be killer’s hand went off, tearing a hole into the counter. The clerk screamed and ducked as another bullet blew off a second chunk of the checkout counter.

A fist hit him in the jaw. Zen growled, turning his head and biting, barely missing the knuckles with his sharp teeth as the man pulled his hand back to hit him again. The blow didn’t land, Zen discouraging him with a knee to the groin that left his opponent gasping, weakened by pain.

Zen struggled for possession of the gun, the man he fought stronger, but not as fast. He let go of the gunman’s wrist and slammed both fists, left then right, into the guy’s face, dazing him. He raked his claws across the man’s right wrist, shredding flesh, making the gunman drop his pistol.

Fists hit his face, his claws found flesh, ripping, tearing, the ganger voicing a burbling scream through the remains of his throat. Grabbing the gun from where it fell, Zen rolled to his feet and fired the pistol four times into the man’s face.

The ganger shuddered and died as Zen turned and shot the second ganger at close range, downing him with two bullets to the face.

He hurried to make sure his Master was all right, reaching the man’s side right before the thump of a body hitting the floor.

His Master put an arm ‘round his shoulders and squeezed gently before grinning at the clerk who was emerging from behind the counter. "Now *that's* a battlepet," he told her. "Yous need to get out more and see one in action. And just total the fucking bill instead of going through the list. I'll pay in corp."

“Battlepet? Shit, that was amazing. Sure, corp. Umm...with the damages to the ceiling let’s just make it an even thousand.”

"Is Master hurt?" he asked, paying no attention to the woman behind the counter. His only concern was his Master who he dared to put hands on, making sure he wasn't hurt or bleeding, fingers running over his owner's body to search for injuries.

Hajiri handed the woman some plastic while grinning at him. "Not a scratch on me. But next time leave me some of the fun."

Zen lowered his head. "This boy is sorry for not letting Master have fun."

He wasn't sure why his Master would consider fighting to be fun, but he'd already noticed this man seemed to be very different than the Masters he'd known in the past. For one thing he hadn't run for cover and screamed for help when the men attacked them. He'd stood his ground and been ready to fight.

Not that Zen needed any help. "This boy thanks Master for being so brave and not running away."

His Master stared at him and blinked. "I'm a zonewarrior, Zeshin, not a soft corper. I don't run from *any* fight."

Zeshin tilted his head to regard his strange Master. There was no doubt in his mind that the man *was* his Master after the events of yesterday. But seeing a Master carrying a gun, willing to fight rather than running for safety and leaving him to do the fighting came as an additional surprise.

Yes, he had seen the man fighting before, but hadn't realized it wasn't a simple panic reaction to being attacked on a darkened street by the woman and her two battlepets.

"Master, what exactly is a zonewarrior? This boy doesn't know the word so he would like an explanation of what one is."

The clerk chuckled again. "You got some work comin' with that one! Thanks for the biz and the clean-up."

Hajiri nodded to her and left the shop, Zen hard on his heels. He indicated the area around them with a sweep of his hand. "This is the zone. To give it its full title—the Shinjuku Containment Zone. It was formed out of an area of old Tokyo that fell on hard times and everyone below a certain income or skill level was herded here. Many died of disease from the cramped conditions and even more starved to death. Only the strong survived.

"The years passed and cybermodding became available. It was expensive but a way for people to make some money. First as guinea pigs, then as more people got the enhancements, as paid bodyguards, assassins, whatever would earn money enough to eat. The gangs that existed before the containment area was formed gained a lot more power and control of the area once they started going cyber. They have a lot of power here now, but they usually don't fuck with us zonewarriors too much, unless they see a way to make money out of it.

"The corp wars nearly destroyed everything, Shinjuku, Tokyo, all of it. The Corporations actually went to war with each other, but being the shitheads they are, they hired people from the zone to do their killing for them. The legacy of that little bit of madness are the gunwhores and zonewarriors.

"Gunwhores are paid bodyguards and whores that are owned by their fuckbroker. They do what their clients want in bed, and protect them when needed.

"A zonewarrior doesn't belong to anyone. Not a fuckbroker or a gang, has a lot more hardware than the average ganger and is available for hire by anyone who pays enough."

Zen took it all in, listening attentively as his Master lectured him on the history of

this place they were in. None of these were things pets were taught, not even battlepets and he found it almost as fascinating as the people on the streets were.

Zoners, and they lived here, in the Shinjuku Containment Area. The Shinjuku Zone. And where he'd lived before was Corpland. Home to places like the Aoki Corporation's enclave. A huge structure that not only housed the corporate offices but served as home to all its workers. A building that held everything, places to work, eat, shop, be entertained and live all within a single massive structure. Each enclave almost a world unto itself.

He looked at the crumbling buildings, the cracked and dirty streets, sidewalks badly in need of repair or replacement. The air was a murky shade of yellow grey. The sky obscured by the same haze that lay outside the windows of the Aoki enclave building where he'd lived so recently.

And before that he'd been in the corporate building belonging to NeuroTech, and before that...? He'd been owned by a manager of public relations for Biogen-Newstar, a company that had closed their Tokyo division and sold off all their assets, including him.

The rest of his life before then was a blur of disjointed memories, broken images like torn pictures, none of it with meaning.

Those places in Corpland were all shiny and new, nothing worn, or broken. But here everywhere he looked things were broken, damaged. Old and crumbling.

"Why doesn't anyone fix the streets or buildings, Master?"

Hajiri sighed, his eyes sad. "We would if we could, but we never get hold of the materials to do it with. All that sort of stuff is kept on *their* side of the wall."

Zen frowned. "Why? Why won't they sell the stuff to fix things, Master? Don't they want the people here to have nice places to live, and jobs and money?"

They were being watched. Not with the same intensity the two men at the store had shown, but there were lots of curious stares as they passed people. Lots of people. The sidewalks crowded with pedestrians.

The thing most absent Zen realized were vehicles of any type. Not a single hovcar, or wheeled vehicle moved along the broken streets. Nothing but people, walking, sitting on steps, leaning against walls.

"Where are all the hovcars, Master? This boy doesn't see any and has me wondering," he looked up at the taller man, "do you have a hovcar, Master?"

Hajiri shook his head and grinned. "Man, you ask a lot of questions. Not that I mind, it shows you're interested. They don't sell the stuff to fix things as they say there is a shortage of it and what there is they need. They don't give a fuck if we have jobs, money, places to live or anything else. You've heard the word nilhuman often enough, I'll bet. Well that's what we are to those assholes.

"As for a hovcar, no I don't have one. Don't want one either. I do have a beautiful bike though."

*Master is called a nilhuman? But how is that possible if he is a Master? Zen considered the conundrum only momentarily. The corpors like my former Masters are different kinds of Masters than mine, that's all. Just like normal pets aren't the same as battlepets.*

"A bike? Will Master take this boy for a ride on his bike someday? This boy likes going for rides." He'd always enjoyed it when his former Masters would take him for rides in their limos or company cars, but he wasn't exactly sure what a 'bike' might be.

Hajiri chuckled, the sound as rich as molasses. "As long as you don't mind speed on these bumpy roads, yeah, I'll give you a ride."

"Master is very kind to this boy. This boy is happy Master likes him so much."

His Master smiled at him. "Okay, you don't like chairs yet, so eating here isn't going to work. We'll get takeout and eat at home."

He stopped by a stand selling noodles of every imaginable flavor—none of it containing anything resembling real meat—and ordered two or three portions of several different types.

Zen sniffed, mouth starting to water at the savory aromas of Master food. It smelled so good compared to kibble, which didn't have much smell or taste.

"Master is very kind," he said as he peered into the noodle stand watching the frenetic activity as containers and bowls were filled with noodles and various sauces and bits of other substances he couldn't identify.

His Master gave the stall owner some plastic and was handed four very large bags full of containers. He grinned at Zen. "This should keep us from going hungry for a day or two. Let's go back."

Zen smiled at his Master and followed the man through the crowds back to the building where they lived.

An older man, his hair a crest of violet that stood over glowing neotoos of serpents and roses that covered the rest of his head and face, stepped away from the side of the building. His lean form was clad in dark grey and green synthleather so new it squeaked as he moved. A pair of emeralds glinted from his left ear, the stones as fake as the leather he wore.

Zen watched him carefully, but detected no threat in the way he moved, though he too had that odd, inhuman grace displayed by the gangsters he'd killed at the clothing store. Cybered, like so many people he'd seen today. Like his Master.

The man greeted his Master with the barest trace of a smile. "Firedance sent me to ask you about a job. She's got a suit that's paying big for a retroactive dehire over the Wall. You interested?"

His Master raised a brow. "Might be if the pay's right. What's the tag?"

"Middle management type taken in a grab and run hiring from Coldwater Design Group. Architect firm housed in the MultiCorp Building. It's the one with the Tokyo All Company Mall on the ground floor," the guy explained, his gaze roving over Zen.

The pet returned the stare, some indefinable thing making Zen uneasy.

His Master nodded but there was no smile on his face. Instead, he looked the other man up and down as if trying to figure out if he were stupid. "I asked the tag, friend. What's the going rate on dehires from Firedance?"

"Pays good, and in corpdollars. You've got to get into the Aoki tower. Firedance's client put up two mil, she's taking her half mil share for brokering the killjob, which leaves you one point five corpdollars for your cut," the zoner replied. His smile didn't waver as he added, "That's enough to buy you another pretty toy with some left for an upgrade."

Zen reached out and took his Master's free hand. "This boy is hungry, Master," he put a pet's whine into the statement, but his ulterior motive was to get his Master away from the man and out of the conversation. He wasn't sure what they were discussing, many of the terms were incomprehensible to him, but something told him his Master

shouldn't be talking to this stranger.

His Master stared at the broker's runner. "You want me to get into the Aoki tower, kill some poor schmuck and have the Lotus on my tail for life all for one point five? Get real, Shoubi! No fuckin' deal."

The man sighed and turned to leave, saying, "We've got access codes and a netrider to cover your movements already onboard for the job, but fuck it. If you don't want it, hell with you, Hajiri. Go back to being a gunwhore if you don't have the guts to play with the big boys. I told Firedance coming here was a waste of my time 'cause I know you ain't got the balls for a killjob."

"Hey, Shoubi, wait up. Tell Firedance if she's prepared to talk serious money for the fact it's the Lotus I'd be going against on behalf some tinpot little crapola corp I'm prepared to listen. Less than two straight, I ain't interested."

"I'll let her know. She's got your satphone number, she'll call if it's a go, if not, well, get used to being jobless," Shoubi replied.

Zen slipped his free hand into his Master's and pulled him toward the stairs trying to get him away from the stranger. "I don't like him, Master."

His Master pulled his hand out of Zen's hold and gave him the bags of food before turning back to Shoubi so fast he was almost a blur. He grabbed the other zoner by the neck and forced him up against the wall, his feet dangling above the ground. "Tell Firedance from me, next time she wants to broker a deal, she sends someone who speaks respectful. Now get your sorry ass outta my face." He let the man go and returned to Zen without a backward glance.

*This Master is very different. I think I like him the best of all my Masters, even if he did spank me.*

\*

Hajiri let them both into his apartment and slammed the door shut behind them. Why the fuck had Firedance sent Shoubi as messenger boy and why was some small time corp trying to take on the Aoki interests? It didn't make sense. The Aoki family consisted of the most powerful corpers and crime lords in the eastern hemisphere. *Nobody* took them on lightly.

He smiled reassurance at Zen as he took the food from him and put some of it in the microwave to heat. The rest went into the fridge for another meal.

Zen opened the bags of his clothes and pulled them out, setting them on the dilapidated couch. The pet ran the lace shirts through his hands, pressed his face to them and held them as if he were holding a beloved pet. A soft hum of sound, a quiet purring came from him. He pulled the stiffened artificial leather of the pants and the coat out of the bag and smiled at Hajiri.

He selected the grey and lavender shirt, took off the shirt that belonged to Hajiri and slipped into the lace. His nipples hardened visibly, a shiver passing through him. Goosebumps rose on his skin. The smile turned to a grin as the pet wiggled out of the pants he had on and donned the dark grey synthleather. He ran his hands over his thighs, very obviously relishing the feel of the stiff material.

"I've worn this sort of clothes before, but not since my training days at the kennel where I was bred." He had a beatific smile on his face. "Armored clothing is the sort of thing a battlepet wears when his Master might be in danger. I've never gotten to wear any for my Masters until you," he said, his eyes full of adoration.



Hajiri chuckled as he dumped the heated up noodles onto plates. "You look damned good in them too."

He put the plates on the table, leaving it up to Zen as to where he ate. He sat down and picked up his chopsticks just as his satphone beeped at him. Sighing he flicked it open. "I'm eating here."

"And you can't do that without no damn money," a woman's voice said through the connection. "So tell me, you want money, or you want to sit on your ass, Hajiri?"

Hajiri grimaced at the phone. "We talking serious money now, or you gonna continue with the crap?"

"The only way I can offer more is to chop my cut down and I'm already fucking paying the netrider outta my part so what the hell you want me to do, Hajiri? I got to have my cut, and one point five is a damn good offer for someone that spent years whoring for a living," the woman argued. "But if you dumb ass don't want that one point five mil in fucking corpland dollars, then good luck finding better offers in the future. You ain't never done a major job like this one, and you won't get no offers later. Not from me you won't."

Hajiri's eyes narrowed. "Whoring and killing, remember, but yeah okay, you've made your point, Firedance. Quit your bitching, I'll do it tonight if everything's set up for it. Just a couple of points, don't send Shoubi 'round here until he learns a little respect and why is some dumb minor leaguer taking on the big boys?"

"No Shoubi, got it. I'll send one of the other boys in the future or I'll just call. As far as I can tell the guy Aoki lifted from Coldwater is their top PR manager. I guess Aoki is looking to bring in fresh talent, rumor on the street says they've fired most of their talking heads with a lead pink slip. Guess they weren't happy with the popularity dive they took after it came out they'd stolen the game engine from a rival videogame corp."

Hajiri took a bite of his noodles while digesting those facts. "So Coldwater can afford a killjob rather than a rehire? Something stinks in this, Firedance, but I want an upmarket residence so consider me hired."

"Well you shoulda said so! Shit, Hajiri, I know people. Workbroker remember? Everyone come to me sooner or later for somethin'. I can contact people, have them call you 'bout available livin' arrangements. Will that sweeten this deal enough to keep you from gettin' so pissed off at me?" she asked.

Zen sat on the floor with his noodles, not eating, his eyes on Hajiri.

Hajiri grinned. "Find me a good place big enough for two that costs less than the one point five and I'll be your friend for life. Any other details or do I play it by ear?"

"Sending details to you phone now. The netrider don't want no meet, they just wanna do the job. I'll get on locating you a broker with properties in you price range including the bribe you'll have to pay. You won't get no pay until after the job since it's just gonna go into an apartment anyway."

Zen crept closer and lay his head on Hajiri's leg. "Don't go, Master," he whispered.

Hajiri stroked his hair but kept talking. "If I'm going tonight, no time to collect anyway," he chuckled mirthlessly, "and if I get my ass burned you'll be a rich woman."

"Oh sure, and the Aoki Corp coming to get whoever brokered the deal? Do us both a favor, come back alive," she urged, laughing a bit at what he'd said. "Besides, there aren't that many zonewarriors left in the killjob business no more so just don't get yourself dead, okay?"

He glanced down at Zen, smiling. "Got me something worth living for now, I'll be back to collect, babe." He cut the connection and put the phone down in favor of chopsticks. "What's wrong, Zen?"

"This boy doesn't want Master to go." The pet sounded petulant and the pout of his lips only added to the spoiled brat image he presented. He wrapped his arms around Hajiri's calf and pressed his cheek tightly to Hajiri's thigh. "Please stay home with me, Master. Please. Those are bad people. Master shouldn't go."

So the battlepet was uneasy too? There was no choice though and Hajiri would go. One less suit in the world was fine by him. He lifted Zen's chin and gazed down at him. "I know, Zen, but I need to do a job. You want somewhere better to live, don't you?"

"Master, you are all this boy cares about." Wide amber eyes met Hajiri's gaze. "This boy loves you, and if something happens to Master... Please don't go. This boy...I..." He fell silent, head bowed, shoulders shaking, a soft cry of misery coming from him.

Hajiri knew there was nothing he could do to reassure Zen. He had the same uneasy feelings himself. Going up against the Aoki was never a great idea if you had the desire to reach old age. But he needed the pay and he needed to get out of this dive he called home, so he would do the job.

He stood up, deciding food could wait until later, and scooped Zen up in his arms, carrying him towards the bedroom.

The battlepet wrapped his arms around Hajiri's neck and gave him a kiss rife with desperation, as if he might be thinking he could use his sexual skills to prevent Hajiri from going out on the job.

Hajiri returned Zen's kiss, wondering as he did if his felt as frenzied and desperate to Zen. He laid the battlepet down on the bed and stripped off his clothes. His own soon followed and he joined Zen on the bed. "You don't need to worry about me, Zen. I can take care of myself."

"The night you claimed this boy Master wasn't taking very good care of himself. This boy had to help. And today Master could have been hurt, so this boy neutralized the threat to keep Master safe. Take this boy with you, Master. Let this boy protect you."

Hajiri shook his head. "No, Zen. I'm not letting you go back there to be retaken and put in an arena to fight to the death."

Where the hell had all these possessive feelings come from? He had no answer except that he wasn't prepared to let Zen go.

"And what happens to me if you don't come back, Master?" The pet's tone wasn't whining now, it came out hard edged, demanding, bordering on anger.

Hajiri didn't have an answer for Zen's question. *He's proved he can take care of himself twice now. And he was bred to fight. Fight and fuck, they're what he does best.*

He sighed deeply, not knowing what he could say to make the boy stay here where he would be safe. "I will come back, that's a promise." He kissed Zen again to prevent further argument.

The pet met Hajiri's kiss eager and passionate, Zen's lips parting for penetration, legs winding around Hajiri's waist.

Hajiri explored Zen's mouth with his tongue while his hands swept over the pet's body. He enjoyed the feel of smooth, silken skin and the sleek muscle tone beneath it.

*I think I'm falling in love with him. Gods, I must be out of my mind!*

Responsive to every touch, each caress of Hajiri's tongue inside his mouth, Zen

moaned. His legs tightened around Hajiri's waist, fingers digging lightly into his shoulders.

Hajiri broke off the kiss and gazed down into Zen's huge amber eyes. "Damn, you're beautiful."

Blushing, Zen smiled and averted his gaze. "Master is kind. This boy loves his handsome and very kind Master."

*I wish I could believe that was true and not something you've been brainwashed into saying by rote.*

Hajiri bent his head to take one of the pierced nipples into his mouth.

A groan came from the pet as he arched into the touch, displaying his pleasure. "Oh, Master. Master, that feels so good. More please. This boy wants to feel your cock inside me. Please, Master."

Hajiri wasn't going to argue with that request and reached for the lube with a smile. "Always so impatient."

"This boy loves his Master. This boy wants his Master to be happy and enjoy this boy's body. That is what this boy is for, Master's pleasure." That puzzled look was back on the pet's expressive features.

Hajiri paused in the act of smearing lube over his cock. "What about your enjoyment, your pleasure?"

"This boy enjoys everything Master does," Zen replied. "This boy wants Master's cock. Please, Master, put your cock inside me and fuck me until you cum. This boy wants to see Master cum, to feel the hot fluid inside and know that Master enjoys this boy."

That was the third time in a row that Zen had used me to describe himself rather than this boy. Hajiri smiled at the thought of the boy developing his own personality. "If that's what you want," he said and lifted Zen's legs until they rested against his shoulders.

He placed the head of his cock against the pet's puckered opening and eased his way into the tight, clenching heat of the smaller man's body.

"Ah, yes Master!" Zen cried out, the tight ring of muscle relaxing to let him enter easily.

Hajiri's cock sank into Zen's body as if they had been made specially to fit each other. He sighed at the pleasure of the feeling before beginning to thrust.

The pet cried out softly with each thrust, voicing his enjoyment of what Hajiri was doing to him. "This boy loves Master. Fuck me, Master! Fuck your boy."

"I'll never let you go, Zen. You're mine now. Mine for good," Hajiri wanted to say forever but knew that was a ridiculous thing to say in the zone, where life was both cheap and short.

"Yes, this boy belongs to Master. But what is for good? What does that mean, Master?" the pet asked, expression guileless.

"It means until the day one or both of us dies," Hajiri told him.

"Dies?" Zen repeated the word, his eyes flooding with tears that spilled out to pour into his hair. The pet clung to Hajiri. "No, no, no!" he wailed. "This boy will protect Master! This boy won't let Master die! This boy won't allow it! This boy will kill anyone that even tries to hurt my Master!"

A fierce light burned in the pet's eyes. "No one hurts my Master! No one!"

Hajiri smiled at the battlepet and wiped away the tears with a gentle finger. "Hey, I'm talking years from now, Zen. I've no intention of dying young."

"This boy won't let his nice Master die! He won't!" Anger burned in the tear-filled eyes. "I won't let anyone take my Master away! I won't I won't!" His arms wound around Hajiri, the pet holding him tight, the embrace showing signs of possessiveness in the power of the arms, the assertion Zen would let no one hurt him.

Hajiri returned the embrace, his head full of confusion and some stronger emotion that made him want to protect Zen in return. "And I won't let anyone take you away, Zen. You're mine."

"This boy belongs to Master. No one can take him away. This boy will kill anyone that tries to take him away from his nice Master." The pet raised his head and captured Hajiri's mouth for a desperate, hungry kiss.

It was time to stop talking, Hajiri decided, and let actions speak for themselves. He thrust harder and deeper into *his* Zeshin, while holding him in a lover's embrace.

"Master," the battlepet cried out the word, body writhing under Hajiri, the muscles inside the pet's body clasp his cock in a firm embrace as Zen clung to him. "This boy is yours! This boy is yours for good and forever."

Zen's words had a profound effect on Hajiri and one of his hands went to Zeshin's cock and stroked it in time to his thrusts as he leaned forward to kiss the battlepet. "Zen," he murmured into the kiss.

Zen gasped, his cry swallowed by Hajiri. The pet moved with the pleasure, writhing under Hajiri, face flushed. His cock spasmed in Hajiri's hand, a spatter of cum landing on the pet's belly, though Zen's cock remained hard.

Hajiri broke off the kiss in order to thrust both harder and faster, his hand moving in time on Zen's cock. He should be used to this, he'd spent enough years as a gunwhore, and yet when he made love to Zen he lost himself in the pleasure. It was the difference between fucking and making love and he could deny his feelings no longer. "I love you, Zeshin," he cried out.

"This boy loves Master! This boy loves Master!" The pet screamed it as he came a second time, face flushing, eyes tightly closed, tears flowing from under his eyelids. His fingers gripping Hajiri's shoulders.

Hajiri held Zen as if he would never let him go but it was so intense a feeling that he couldn't hold back any longer. "Going to...going to..." Hajiri's climax was like the end of the world where all he had to cling to was the battlepet. It was so powerful that he blacked out for a second.

When he came to his senses, he was still holding Zeshin as if he was the only sane thing in a world gone mad. Or maybe it was him that had gone crazy.

A gentle hand stroked his hair, the caress that of a lover. The pet's eyes remained closed, his body relaxed, the faint trace of a smile on his lips. "Does Master really love me?" he asked in a barely audible whisper.

Hajiri knew he had to tell Zen the truth. "Yes, Zen, I'm pretty sure I do."

## Chapter Four

13Alpha-21 Zeta9-5 whose new name was Zeshin held his Master tight and tried to think of some way he could prevent the man from going to this 'job' thing alone. He feared his Master would be hurt, or worse, that he would die and not return.

And though he was just a pet, he couldn't allow that to happen. He had a duty to protect his Master, and if he remained here in this rundown hole of a dwelling, he couldn't perform that duty.

A Master who'd just said he loved his pet.

*He wants to be my Forever Master. He said that's what he meant when he said 'Mine for good'. For good meant forever. For as long as we live. For as long as I live.*

He pressed his face to his Master's shoulder and breathed in the scent of the man's skin. Sex and male sweat, the lingering odor of synthleather and gunoil. The taste of salt on his lips came partly from his Master, partly from his own tears.

*I won't fail him. I won't.*

But what could he do? He was nothing but a pet and if his Master told him to stay, he had to obey that order.

Zen wanted to scream out his frustration, instead he whispered, "Take me with you Master. This boy will be good. This boy won't get in the way. Let me go so I can protect you."

Hajiri held him close. "I can't, Zen. What if they have a chip in you that means you can't get back out of the building?"

"And what if you don't come back!" Zen argued. "This boy can't live without his Master! Better if this boy is with you, than to be left here alone! I'd rather die protecting you than stay here alone!" Trembling, he pulled out of his Master's arms, fighting the desire to stay there, to cling and weep. Fighting the urge to obey, to do what his Master ordered he bowed his head and whispered, "This boy doesn't want you to go!"

He was pleading, begging his Master not to go though he knew he'd lost that argument even before his Master did sex with him. Before his Master professed his love.

"You said you love me. You said you're my Forever Master, but you're going to go away and you might not come back!" He didn't whisper this time, but he wasn't quite yelling either. "Please don't leave this boy alone, Master."

Hajiri shook him, worried by Zen's mounting hysteria. "Stop it! What makes you think I can't look after myself? I'm a zonewarrior not a soft corper like your other masters were. I can take care of myself."

Zen felt his lips start to twist into a fang-baring snarl as he was shaken. The anger that tried to form evaporated in a flash of mind-dulling pain that flashed like a nuclear fire through his entire body, whiting out his vision. Whimpering he felt himself go limp in his Master's grasp.

"This boy is sorry," he mumbled. "This boy is sorry, Master. This boy will be good. This boy will behave. This boy is sorry for being bad, Master."

Tears filled his eyes and he left his head bowed, shoulders slumped. Unable to look at his Master, unable to face the man's wrath, he shook in a fit of terror and the echoes of the pain that had ripped through him.

*This boy was bad again. If this boy continues to be bad, Master won't keep me. He will hate me and get rid of me. This boy doesn't want to lose his Master. He wants a Forever Master.*

"This boy is sorry. He is sorry for being bad," Zen sobbed.

Hajiri shook his head. "It's not bad to want to help me, Zen, nor is it bad to have an opinion. But you were in real pain there. What happened?"

"This boy did something bad. This boy won't do it again. This boy will be good," Zen replied, unable to stop shaking or end the tears pouring from his eyes.

Panic rose in him. Bad pets were gotten rid of. Bad pets could be put to sleep. Terminated. Killed. The shaking of his body increased as the harsh reality sank deeper. Terror filled his mind, sent his heart racing as his training and the chip in his head that governed his behavior took control of him. He didn't really understand what the 'chip' was, but he knew there was a thing inside him that caused the pain that punished him for being bad.

*This boy was bad. This boy was bad. This boy shouldn't be bad. Master will get rid of this boy. Master might put this boy to sleep.*

"Please, Master, please don't get rid of this stupid pet. This boy will be good! This boy promises to be good! Please don't get rid of this boy, Master! Please don't put this boy to sleep! This boy will be good! This boy will be good!" He held his hands out to his Master but didn't quite touch him, too afraid that he would be punished for that also.

Hajiri stroked Zen's hair, attempting to soothe him, before gathering him close again. "You think I would put you to sleep? No, Zen, I'll never do that, no matter how bad you think you are. I might spank you but I'll never kill you. That's my promise."

"Master is kind. Master is good. This boy loves his Master," Zen sobbed and clung to the man who was his new and—so far—best Master. "This boy loves Master."

He closed his eyes and held tight to his Master Hajiri, unable to stop crying. Hot sparks and flares of pain danced along his nerves, the after effect of disobedience, of daring to show his fangs to his Master.

"This boy is bad. This boy is always bad. This boy doesn't mean to be bad, Master. This boy wants to be good. Give this boy his medicine and he will always be good. Please, Master, give this boy the medicine so he can be a good boy."

He was begging, pleading with his nice Master for the medicine that would assure his good behavior. He didn't know how long he'd been without the medicine, but he knew if he'd dared to show fangs to his Master it had been far too long.

Hajiri continued to soothe him with a gentle hand through his hair. "Zen, flashes of temper don't bother me. I don't think you snarling at me is bad. But I do think they've put some sort of pain chip in you that activates when you show your fangs. It's the only thing I can think of that would cause you pain. When I come back we'll see about getting it removed."

Zen wasn't totally sure what his Master was talking about. He'd heard his former Master mention a chip too so he asked, "What is a chip, Master? This boy doesn't really know, but he's heard the word before. This boy just knows that when he is very bad the pain comes to remind him to be good. This boy will be good, this boy promises."

The hurt had faded to a memory that urged him to be good or be punished. He already knew he'd be bad and suffer the pain again if his Master didn't give him the medicine that helped him be good.

But the Master had said he didn't care if he snarled or showed anger. And that confused him.

"Master doesn't care if this boy is bad, yet Master spanked him for being bad." He hiccupped and pressed his face to his Master's shoulder. "This boy is confused."

Hajiri frowned and scratched his head before smiling and nodding. "Let me get to the net and I might be able to show you a chip." He untangled himself. "I didn't spank you for 'being bad'. I spanked you for trying to top me. I'll never let anyone top me again."

"This boy is sorry he tried to do that, Master. This boy was..." he sighed, "confused. This boy thought you were some kind of pet. This boy won't make that mistake again, he promises."

*This boy is still confused. This boy doesn't understand this Master. None of them has ever acted like this one does. Master of All what should this stupid pet do?*

He crept off the bed and curled up on the floor, shivering at the cool touch of the cracked tiles. His Master left to look at the screen of words in the other room.

*He's going to leave this boy. He's going to go to the place where this boy's former Master lives. Why would he go there? Is he going to kill my former Master? Is my former Master going to kill him?*

*No, that makes no sense. My old Master didn't kill people, he let his battlepets do the killing for him.*

*Master shouldn't go there. He shouldn't.*

*But he will.*

*This boy can't let him go alone. He can't.*

*But this boy has to, he doesn't have a choice.*

Torn by duty to his Master, and his Master's order that he would have to stay, Zen lay on the floor, tears falling from his eyes.

He was bad if he followed, and bad if he stayed.

Unhappy he crawled out of the bedroom to where Hajiri sat reading the words that moved over the screen. He lay his head on his Master's bare thigh, turning just enough to press his lips to the man's satiny skin.

"This boy loves Master," he whispered.

That soothing hand descended on his hair yet again and began stroking just before Hajiri let out a satisfied huff of breath. "Zen, look at this picture. That thing is inside you and causes you pain when you don't act the way your former masters wanted. I don't want you to act that way, Zen. I want you to be what you can be—strong. And the reason I want this for you is because I love you."

Zen heard the words but the ones that registered most clearly in his mind were the last three: "I love you." He looked at the image on the screen seeing a bland looking square with small gel-coated filaments dangling from the bottom. The thin filaments looked almost like the tentacles of a jellyfish he'd once seen floating in a tank at the home of one of his former Masters.

He leaned closer to the screen. "That is the thing that tells me when I'm bad," he said, trying to understand how a bit of plastic with the tentacles of a jellyfish could hurt him so much. But it didn't matter. What mattered were those three special words his Master had said.

He smiled, kissed his Master's thigh, slid an arm around his Master's leg and snuggled closer to the man's warm body. "This boy loves his nice Master. This boy has

never had a nice Master before, and no Master has ever loved this boy. This boy is happy to be loved by such a good and kind Master."

Hajiri returned his smile and gave his hair a last stroke. "I want you to be happy, Zen. That's why we're going to take that chip out of you. I know someone who can do it."

He grinned down at Zen. "You hungry now? I have to eat before I go."

Zen shook his head. He wasn't interested in food. His Master was going away and leaving him behind.

Maybe if he could give him a good reason not to go, his Master would change his mind.

"Don't go, please?" he whispered, kissing the man's thigh, daring to put his hand on his Master's limp cock. "Don't go, Master. This boy will make you feel very good if you stay."

Hajiri sighed the sound irritable. "Zen, I have to go. This is my way of earning money and I've promised to do this job."

He stood up and put his cold noodles into the microwave to heat up. "I won't be gone more than an hour or two."

Zen lapsed into silence. After a moment, he slunk into the bedroom and lay down on the floor. Scared and upset, he couldn't even watch his Master getting ready to leave.

*What if he's hurt? What if my former Master is there? What if he's attacked by battlepets or fangsoldiers? He moaned as if he were in pain, torn by warring commands. Stay as his Master wished.*

*Go and protect his Master as his training demanded.*

He heard Hajiri clear his plate away and come into the room. Listened to him dress in synthleather and strap on a gunbelt. Heard him tuck blades into his clothing.

An empty void filled his belly. A throbbing ache filled his head.

There was a brief touch to his head, a quick kiss and then he heard the door close behind his Master.

The only Master who'd said the special words, "I love you," had just walked out and left him there alone. What would happen to him if his Master never came back?

The thought made his belly hurt, bile rising in his throat at the thought of being alone, of never seeing his nice Master again. Of never hearing his Master say, "I love you," ever again.

He moaned, miserable and trapped between the order he'd been given to stay and his duty to protect his Master.

He sat up, eyes gone wide an 'O' of realization parting his lips.

His Master had told him to stay, but he hadn't said those all important words. He hadn't made it a command. Hadn't said, "I order you to stay." Or anything like it.

Zen went into motion, scrambling around the apartment he pulled on his new clothes and boots then searched for anything he could use as a weapon. Scurrying frenetically from place to place, Zen found a couple of knives tucked under the mattress and a small pistol that was tucked into an old noodle box in the fridge.

Moving at a pace no real human could match, he raced out of the apartment, glad that his Master hadn't set the door lock to hold him inside and that he knew how to close the lock behind him.

He bounded down the stairs and out of the building and stopped. Which way should he go?



Holding his nose into the air, he sniffed, taking in the strange smells, the polluted stink of the atmosphere, trying to decipher one odor from all the others.

But it was no use. He didn't have the same acute olfactory abilities of a wolf-cross battlepet. Determined not to let that stop him, Zen glanced around, trying to decide which way to go.

He didn't know where his Master had gone, but he did know where he would be later. The Aoki Corporate enclave.

And that he *could* find.

He took off running heading in the direction of the corporate tower at a distance eating trot.

If he hurried, he might arrive in time to find his Master. To make sure he did this job of his and didn't get hurt, wasn't killed by the terrible Aoki fangsoldiers guarding the place.

He hadn't gone four blocks before he came to a sudden stop, his keen eyes catching a familiar figure. His Master going inside one of the rundown places. Garish neon bathed the sidewalk in a riot of color, the sign barely understandable to him.

*A drinking place like my last Master went to so much. If this boy waits, Master will come out and then this boy can follow him.*

He moved closer to the building, stopping at some other place and leaning against the wall, trying to be inconspicuous, his fingers wrapped around the pistol in his coat pocket.

*Master said it was dangerous out here, so this boy better be careful.*

He didn't have to wait long. A few moments later his master left the place in the company of a woman.

Zen followed them, keeping his distance so his Master didn't spot him. Tracking instinct of the snow leopard kicking in, urging him not to spook his prey.

He followed his Master and the female, passing with easy grace through the crowded streets, down a darkened alleyway, his innately superior night vision proving useful in the depths of the unlighted area.

The pair of them kept going until they approached the high wall that surrounded the zone.

Zen eyed the barrier, the wall towering some forty feet into the air, wondering how they would get through, unsure he could get to the other side.

But he had to get through, or he couldn't do his duty and protect his Master.

Hajiri and the woman entered another building, even more rundown than most in the zone. He waited, watching the door of the place from across the street, but this time they didn't come out.

He darted across the street and entered the building to find himself in a small room. A man behind a dilapidated counter glanced at him, but showed little interest. He frowned. His Master was nowhere to be seen, but he could smell his owner's scent and sniffed the air, trying to discern where he'd gone.

With only one door behind the counter and a couple of ratty elevators exiting from the room, that left very few options.

He took a step forward, following the traces of his Master's passage. It led him to the counter.

"What do you want?" the man asked.

"I'm looking for someone."

"Aren't we all?"

Zen frowned. "A man and woman came in here; I want to know where they went."

The guy shrugged. "No clue."

He put his hands on the counter, planning to hop over and follow his Master's fading scent through the door but the man behind the counter shoved him backward. He landed in a fighting crouch, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

"Shit, go ahead. I'm not about to tangle with a fangsoldier," the guy muttered and stepped aside.

Zen didn't argue the distinction between a battlepet and fangsoldier. If thinking he was one of the crude fangsoldiers got him past the man then that was just fine. He hopped over the counter and went through the door. Beyond it lay a narrow dimly lit corridor and the scent of his Master and the female he traveled with. He took a deep breath, face twisting into a puzzled expression. The female's scent was somehow familiar, but he wasn't able to identify exactly where he remembered the scent from.

A growl rumbled deep in his chest. He didn't know why, but her scent seemed to speak of danger to his Master.

He broke out into a lope and hurried after the pair, determined to save his Master, no matter the cost.

The corridor dipped down and then started to climb again. Ahead of him, Zen could see his Master and the woman. She opened a door onto a deserted plaza and the pair moved cautiously out of the corridor.

Before Zen could follow them a zoner in full battle leathers stepped out of a door Zen hadn't noticed and into his path. "Pass?"

Zen blinked at him. "Yes, I'd like to pass. I'm following that woman and my Master."

The zoner glared at him. "Smartass, huh? Where's your pass? No pass, you go back."

He could see his Master and the woman crossing the plaza and if they got out of his sight he might lose them.

"I can't go back, I have to follow my Master," Zen reiterated and tried to step past the man blocking his way.

The guard grabbed him by the arm, a prelude to hauling him back. "Listen, bast..."

About to lose sight of his Master, Zen struck, hitting the man in the belly with his foot. As the guard folded, he slammed his knee into his unprotected face and followed it up with a fist to the back of the guard's head, just at the base of his neck.

The man dropped to the corridor, limp as a broken doll.

Zen ran for the door at the end of the corridor, shoving it open and running outside.

\*

Hajiri came to a halt outside a tower block one away from the Aoki Tower. He glanced at the female netrider. "You sure everything's set?"

There was something about the unknown woman that he neither liked nor trusted but Firedance had provided her and he did trust the broker.

She gave him a bright meaningless smile. "It's all fixed. Trust me."

He snorted. "You know something, bitch, as soon as someone tells me to trust them is right about when I stop trusting. You fuck me about on this and I'll personally skin your ugly hide. You get the drift?"

The woman held out her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Too much time data crunching and not enough with people, I guess, so I don't know the correct protocol. Everything is set, there shouldn't be a problem."

Hajiri gave her a long, considering glower. "My promise still stands so if you're lying to me, it's your funeral."

"I'm not lying, it's all set." She reached inside the little purse slung over her shoulder and pulled out an Aoki Corporation access card, the red lotus on the gold background was unmistakable.

"This card IDs you as a maintenance worker, you can go anywhere through the guts of the building using the access corridors. An insider has left a uniform for you in a bucket right inside the employee's locker room near the entrance." She handed over a small datacomm. "This will lead you to your target through those corridors to the floor where he now lives. It's a killjob, so don't fuck up. I'll be in here," she motioned to the Genetech building they were standing beside, "in their cafe tapped into the Aoki net. I'll help you get out if you're discovered, but only after the job is done. So if you fail, you get no help from me. I'll also be riding through the Aoki net so I can unlock the doors your passcard won't activate. If needed I'll take out any security measures that get in your way."

Hajiri studied the card for a moment before pocketing it. The forgery was excellent and if this bitch was as good as she said she was there should be no problem with its embedded chip. The datacomm was slipped into another larger pocket and he was all set to do the job.

"Well if you've fucked up, bitch, I've still got my old ID," he told the woman. "I'll give you ten minutes to get to your own position before I go in."

She turned a charming smile on him. "Give me about a half hour. It's not easy to get into the Aoki net."

Hajiri eyed the woman suspiciously, wishing it was Yuki, who he could trust, doing the netriding on this job and not this stranger. "Half an hour but no longer."

He watched as she slipped into the Genetech building and comforted himself with the thought that he could waste that half hour in the mall without attracting too much attention.

The Genetech ground floor mall was around the corner and he reached it without any incidents, going into the cool, crisp, pollution free air along with a crowd of shoppers off the street. Even dressed as he was in synthleathers he fit in with the crowd of young people who were dressing in imitation zoner clothes. The only difference being their guns were purely for show, not one of them was carrying a working weapon.

Hajiri peered into the windows of several stores, looking at expensive and fragile electronics favored by the corpors, clothes, and costly jewelry that would have piqued the interest of professional heisters, but did little to rouse his interest.

Bored he made his way to a cafe inside an ebook store and ordered a latte while he killed time waiting for the woman to get in place.

The minutes ticked by as Hajiri watched the crowds of people flowing by, women with small children, teens acting like gangers, all flash and arrogance. The clock in the store told him his time was almost up so he finished his latte, dumped the empty cup into a recycle bin and headed out of the mall.

More crowds, everyone nicely dressed—even the gang posers—in new clothes,

everything new and clean. He found the back entrance to the Aoki tower in a narrow access way. The entrance where all lower level employees came and went was guarded by a pair of gun emplacements—typical of a corporate enclave worried about rivals attacking them—that looked to be AI controlled. The ID the woman had provided worked with no problems and the maintenance uniform was where she'd said it would be. He put it on over his leathers and headed for the access corridors, just another poorly paid worker doing his job.

Once inside the dimly lit, pipe and cable clogged access corridors he checked the datacomm for the right way to go. Aoki Corp obviously thought this guy was worth the trouble as he was located on the fortieth floor, top middle management levels. He found the maintenance elevator and headed upwards.

Reaching the right floor, he looked for the door into the corper's part of the level. The part with carpeted foyers, tinkling waterfalls and lush plants fronting the living quarters.

The door was opened for him by the netrider and he strode through it, looking for the right apartment. Finding the correct number, he brought out his gun, screwed on the silencer and knocked.

A soft chime sounded and a deep masculine voice asked, "Yes, who is it?"

"Maintenance," Hajiri called softly. "A routine check as you're a new occupant."

"Well crap, no one called to tell me there would be a worker up here. Hold on, I need to get dressed."

"Sorry about that, sir. They were supposed to let you know earlier. I guess someone had too much work and forgot."

On a killjob every second counted. And the seconds were ticking away.

The door opened to reveal a guy in a suit. The wrong guy. Not the guy he'd come to kill.

"Get busy," the man growled out, stepping aside to let Hajiri into a living room that smelled of real leather. A couch stood opposite a widescreen digital TV. Two men sat on the couch, both of them ignoring Hajiri as he came in.

Another man, slim and elegant, stood behind the bar at the end of the living room. He was wearing a brightly colored woman's kimono, his hair pulled up in an elaborate style, his face powdered geisha style.

Hajiri's eyes narrowed, recognizing the gunwhore as one that had gone missing a month before. There were too many people in this room and none of them were the man he'd been sent to kill. It stank of a set-up but why was the Aoki family interested in him?

Then he recognized one of the men on the couch as the grinning corper that had put Zen in the arena and then had him tossed into the trash.

He was in serious trouble.

"Have a seat," the same corper told him, gesturing to a chair. "We're going to have a chat about certain property of mine which you have in your possession."

It was time to play dumb, although Hajiri couldn't imagine getting out of this with his hide intact. If he got out alive at all.

*I'm sorry, Zen, I didn't mean to break my promise.*

He gave the corper a confused frown. "What would the likes of me possibly have that is yours?"

The man gave him a smile cold as an Artic wind. "You know what you have. I want

it back. Simple trade. I get what's mine, you get to keep your pitiful existence," the smile became a grin, "But you'll be working for me from now on."

Hajiri sat in the chair that had been indicated and crossed his legs, appearing to be at his ease but watchful and aware. "Work for you? What as?"

"As whatever I decide you'll be for me, that's what," the corper replied. "Midori, get the zoner a drink. Anything he likes."

The gunwhore behind the bar gave Hajiri a smile that he could see was forced, as much a mask as the artful makeup covering his face. "What would you like, Hajiri-san?"

Hajiri nodded politely to the gunwhore. "Whiskey, straight up with a twist," he told him.

Midori wasn't a bad guy but Hajiri didn't think he'd be on his side in this situation. He wasn't sure enough if this was a full contract job for the gunwhore or a one nighter.

Either way Midori was unlikely to break his broker's contract.

He gazed at the corper, not able to remember the last time he'd set eyes on someone quite so ugly. With the vast amount of cosmetic tech around he'd expect the guy to get a decent makeover.

"Okay, let's negotiate. I need to know what work you're expecting me to do before I make any decision. You never know, I just might find death to be a more agreeable option."

The corper's smile didn't waver as the man who'd opened the door for Hajiri stepped beside his chair, leaned down and whispered, "Let me explain a few things for you..." A hand closed on his shoulder, fingers digging into his flesh, the grip powerful enough to hurt, despite his enhancements. "Mr. Aoki doesn't negotiate. He tells you what you'll do and you do it, or life gets unpleasant."

Hajiri shook his head. "Seems like a huge fuss over something thrown out as trash. I still want to know what this job is though, and if you don't remove your clammy hand from my shoulder, I'll have to do it for you."

If he could get them angry enough, they would kill him quickly.

Midori brought him his drink, giving the goon a winning smile. "Why do you want to be so mean, Goro-san? He just needs time to get used to the idea of working for Aoki-sama, that's all." He turned the smile on Hajiri, "Isn't that right, Hajiri-san?"

"Look at what it took for Aoki-sama to bring me to heel. But here I am, grateful for everything Aoki-sama has done for me, despite my initial foolish resistance."

There was a message in there, Hajiri realized. Not only was Midori trying to help him as best he could but he was also unhappy with his own contract.

He smiled back at the gunwhore hoping he was picking up the right cues. "Yes, that's mostly it. To me negotiation is stuff like pay."

Aoki laughed. "Pay? You just don't get it, do you, zoner? What you get is what I decide to give you. I might be letting you live if you tell me where my pet is. Then I'm going to ask you to do a few things for me. Simple things, really. Like letting my boys fuck that nice ass of yours while I watch." He grinned, the expression just as cold. "Or maybe I'll have you fuck Midori."

The gunwhore actually smiled. "This boy will do whatever Aoki-sama asks him to do."

Hajiri took a sip of his whiskey. The 'this boy' reminded him forcefully of Zen but he remained outwardly cool and calm. "Fucking Midori would be an honor," he said, "I just

hope your boys don't leave us *both* disappointed. Nothing worse than watching a poor show."

The door gave a soft chime then flew inward, doorframe shattered, hinges broken. Midori dove for the floor as Goro turned at blinding speed, his pistol coming up fast.

A bullet slammed into his forehead, splattering the wall with gore.

"Son of a bitch!" Aoki shouted as he bolted off the couch, body moving in slow motion compared to the flurry of silver haired death that had entered the room.

"Die, you fucking pig!" Zen screeched, his voice an animal's cry of hate.

Hajiri stared at the infuriated battlepet in astonishment before a slow grin spread over his face and his gun came out of a pocket. The fools hadn't even searched him for weapons. "Midori, you harm one hair on his head and I'm afraid I'll have to kill you."

Midori, the gunwhore, glanced at Hajiri as if he might be insane. "I don't even have a weapon, Hajiri. I'm nothing but a pet now."

Eyes blazing with anger, Zen fired two shots, taking out the corpses in the room. "Is Master all right?"

Hajiri stood up and pulled Zen into his arms. "I'm fine now, Zen."

He gazed down at Midori. "Now's your chance to get the fuck outta here. You gonna or do you want to live like an animal the rest of your life?"

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Zen pressed his face to his Master's chest, cuddling close, a wary eye on the rooms beyond the living room. He knew this place. It belonged to his former Master and was one of the places he liked to take people when things were going to get messy.

His former Master enjoyed death so long as it was someone else doing the dying.

"I'm chipped with a restraint. I try to leave and it drops me with the pain." Midori waved them out, "This was a total set-up from your broker on down so you've got no one watching your back. It's the way they got me. Go. Get out if you can."

"I'm not leaving you here with three corpses to pay for," Hajiri said. "Where's the chip located. I can try jamming it." He pulled off the overalls before digging a piece of high tech equipment out of one of his coat pockets. "This is one of Yuki's so it should work."

"Are you crazy? You don't have that much time," Midori replied as he got to his feet and shoved Hajiri toward the door.

Zen turned a narrow-eyed stare on Midori. "Touch my Master again and I'll kill you," he warned, pushing himself between the pair of men.

"Zen," Hajiri said softly but with a note of warning, "you will *not* kill Midori. He's a friend." He glanced back at the gunwhore, now pet. "Who was your broker?"

"If Midori does not hurt Master, this boy will not hurt Midori," Zen stated. "Master should go before the bad people come back and try to hurt him."

"That bitch, Firedance," Midori said. "Now get the hell out of here, Hajiri, before they do the same to you."

"This boy will keep his Master safe," he promised. He took his Master's hand and stepped out of the apartment into the hallway. He didn't pause as he led his Master past the elevators toward the end of the corridor, the pistol in his fist leading the way.

His Master glanced back once before he followed Zen. Midori gave him a sad wave from the doorway. "Get that bitch, Hajiri. Get her for all the gunwhores and zonewarriors she's fucked over and sold into slavery in this tower."

His Master nodded once. "She's already dead, Midori, she just doesn't know it yet." Then he squeezed Zen's hand. "I hope you know where you're going."

"This boy knows where he is taking Master, and that is out of here. This boy does not want Master to be hurt." Zen hurried along, opening a service door at the end of the hall and leading his Master inside. "My former Master came this way several times. He doesn't like to be on the security cameras and there are none in here."

He grinned at his Master. "No one cares what the cleaning staff does so long as they're actually working. That's what he used to say to the other Masters and Mistresses who went to parties with him in that apartment."

"Now I understand why you got gunwhores confused with pets. In *this* tower that's all they're allowed to be."

"Midori is a pet that belongs to my former Master. He isn't a battlepet, he's not allowed to handle weapons. Only battlepets and guards have that right, but this boy wasn't allowed any weapons either, until he went into a fight at the Mayonaka Yume. Master never trusted this boy with weapons." At that admission Zen giggled. "My old Master was right. He said this boy shouldn't be trusted not to hurt him. He said this boy was bad and never to be trusted. This boy *is* bad a lot, but my new Master doesn't think I'm bad. My new Master loves me, even when I'm bad, so this boy is happy."

He led his Master down the narrow corridor and through another door, into a darker passage that was barely wide enough for his Master's shoulders. Pipes and cables added to the almost claustrophobic feel which Zen, having lived his life in kennels, didn't notice.

"Oh I think you're bad, Zen, but in a good way." The redhead followed in silence for a moment before he said, "Midori used to be one of the best gunwhores in the business. He taught me a trick or two. A real gunwhore negates the need for any other sort of bodyguard but your former Master was too much of a fucking idiot to understand that."

"He threw this boy away and now this boy belongs to a better, kind and loving Master," Zen said as he left the narrow corridor and exited into a very dimly lit room from which a series of service elevators could be accessed. "This boy is very happy his former Master was a fucking idiot."

Zen pushed the elevator call button and smiled up at his Master.

"We go down to B3 and from there this boy can take Master out through the service exit my former Master used when he wanted to go partying with the trash."

Hajiri raised a brow. "Trash, huh? I think your former master was the biggest piece of trash I've ever laid eyes on."

"This boy's former Master was a coward and an arrogant asshat. This boy loves his new Master because he's not afraid of anything, not even this boy."

Zen pushed a different button the instant one of the elevator doors opened. "In case anyone is following us they'll think we got on the first elevator. The one I'm calling now is the express elevator that only goes to the basement levels. The rest require transfers at different access lobbies."

Hajiri nodded. "Sounds good to me, but let's just hope that you're not chipped the same way Midori is."

Zen frowned. "This boy's former Master used to take this boy out of the tower all the time. If this boy is chipped it would have hurt him to be taken out, wouldn't it?" he asked, sounding unsure.

His master looked thoughtful then he grinned. "That's a good point. He needed you able to leave so you could fight at the Mayonaka Yume. It would be pointless if you were in pain."

Zen smiled. "Master is very clever. This boy loves his clever Master."

The elevator door opened and two janitorial crew members stared in wide-eyed amazement at Zen and his Master.

The gun in Zen's hand came up, aimed at the two men, shifting back and forth between them so fast they couldn't follow it. "Make a sound and I'll kill you," he snarled.

Both men held up their hands in surrender. "Sorry, guys, but I can't have you sounding any alarms," Hajiri said as he knocked both of them out with the butt of his gun. "Okay, Zen, let's get the fuck outta here."

"This boy wishes Master would fuck him," he replied, picking up on the most important word his Master had used before the rest of the sentence registered. "Yes Master, this boy will get us out. This boy is sorry for being so stupid."

Hajiri chuckled. "I don't think you're particularly stupid, Zen."

"Master is very kind to his stupid boy," Zen remarked as he dragged the men out of the elevator. Smiling he shoved them behind some canisters of cleaning fluid, moving the limp pair easily. He got into the elevator and smiled at his Master before pushing the B3 button.

The elevator bumped into motion. Zen stood there beside his Master. Smiling he turned, rose on his toes and kissed his Master.

His Master's arms went round him and held him close as he returned the kiss. When they came up for air he grinned. "Remind me never to leave you at home in future."

Zen laughed, but there were tears in his eyes. "This boy will do that, Master. Master makes this boy happy. Leaving this boy made him sad. Please don't do anything to make this boy lose you. This boy dreamed for all his life about a forever Master and now that he has one he never wants to lose him."

The arms around him tightened and his Master bent to nuzzle at Zen's neck. "I can't promise not to get into dangerous situations as that's part of living in the zone and I need to earn money the only way I can, as a zonewarrior."

"Then never leave this boy behind, Master. This boy promises to keep his Master safe." He clung to his Master, held him tight and raised his face to kiss the man he loved more than his own life. More than he'd ever loved any Master who'd owned him.

His Master gave him the kiss he craved but pulled away as the elevator ground to a halt. "Time to go."

"Me first," Zen stated and stepped out ahead of his Master, gun drawn, eyes scanning the darkness of the basement. He frowned and shoved his Master down as a song of lead played across the open doors.

He didn't hesitate, rushing out, moving at full speed, darting and dodging the incoming fire. He reached the closest of the three security people and shot him in the face. Something bit his shoulder, stinging, but his Master was in danger and he was nothing but a pet.

Behind him a second gun barked out its song of death and another guard fell to the ground in a spray of flesh and blood.

To his credit the last guard didn't run, standing his ground and dying at the claws of the battlepet as he vainly tried to reload his pistol.



Zen grabbed his Master by the arm, "Run, Master, there are more coming!"

The sound of heavy footsteps told Zen that normal cybered corpsoldiers weren't the only things coming for them. He could hear heavy tread of armored corporate troops coming their way, but the howling that broke out told him there were fangsoldiers heading for them too.

His Master grabbed him and swooped in for a quick kiss before turning to face this new danger.

"Run, Master. There are too many of them!" Zen grabbed his Master's hand and pulled, trying to get his owner moving.

Luckily his master appeared to have reached the same conclusion as he started running, Zen leading him toward the way out that would get them out of the tower.

The howling got closer, the fangsoldiers gaining on them.

"Please, Master, you have to go faster!" Zen urged.

His Master quickened his pace easily keeping up with Zen.

Zen reached the exit his former Master had always used and grasped the door, trying to get it to open without any success. The sound of the pursuing fangsoldiers had gotten much closer, the patter of bare pawfeet showing how close the hunting pack had gotten.

Zen kicked the door with no appreciable damage to the steel sheathed exit. "Master, this boy can't get it to open!"

"Let me try." His Master kicked hard and the door buckled. "If we do it together, maybe." He stepped back a pace before kicking the door closer to the magnetic lock holding it closed. The door groaned. "Help me, Zen."

Zen hurled himself at the door just as the pack of fangsoldiers bellowed in excitement, their prey sighted.

The already damaged door gave way, the steel buckling under the combined assault of the pet and his zonewarrior Master. "Run, Master."

His Master grabbed his hand and darted through the door into the building's underground car park. It was dimly lit but a patch of deeper darkness showed where the street access was. They ran towards it just as howls of outrage and pain reached their ears.

Halfway up the ramp blinding pain ignited through Zen's skull and spread instantly to his entire body. Whimpering he collapsed to the ground as his body was assailed by pain so intense all human thought vanished.

Yowling he writhed and gnashed his teeth, claws scrabbling uselessly on the concrete. Froth formed at the corners of his mouth and his eyes rolled wildly not focusing on anything.

His Master scooped him up and continued running until he was clear of the exit and halfway to the tunnel under the wall. "I'm glad this synthleather is thick," he muttered as Zen's claws scratched at him.

Zen's arms went around his Master's neck and he clung to him. The pain had faded almost immediately after his Master had carried him out of the building, but the terrible ache in his head made him want to hide somewhere dark and quiet.

"Masssther," he said the word, but didn't think the man could understand him, his voice thick and slurred, his tongue felt clumsy, as if it didn't know how to move for speech.

"I'm here, Zen. Not far now. Just hold on, okay?"

"M..." but he couldn't say more, the agony he'd experienced had left him exhausted, his thoughts sluggish and unfocused. Unable to do anything else he just held tighter and let his Master carry him out of Corpland.

They reached the streets of the Shinjuku Containment Zone and Zen signaled his Master to put him down. While he didn't fully understand the Zone, he understood enough to know that showing weakness could get them in trouble.

"I want to pay a certain broker a visit," his Master said, "preferably before she finds out what happened tonight. Can you manage for a while?"

He nodded, not quite able to manage human speech and unwilling to make any of the animalistic mewling or yowling noises he'd used while in pain. He felt ashamed that when he'd been hurting he'd acted like nothing but what he was, an animal.

His Master smiled at him, his violet eyes warm, and ran a hand across his cheek. "I owe you my life, Zen, or my freedom, at least. Thank you."

Zen kissed his Master's hand, still unwilling to try and talk. He touched his throat and shook his head hoping his Master would understand the ability to speak had deserted him.

His Master nodded and continued to smile at him. "Pain robbed you of speech for now? Okay, let's go pay Firedance and her cronies a visit."

He clung to his Master's hand, wrapping both his own hands around it and pulled the man's arm close to his chest. He stared up at his Master's face, willing his throat to emit sound, mouth working in vain.

Frustrated he could manage nothing but a growl that ended in a soft mewling sound, Zeshin gently set his teeth on his Master's hand, trying to warn him not to go anywhere that might be dangerous. He wouldn't be much help in a fight, not with his head feeling as though there were a knife embedded in it.

His Master frowned. "I wish I knew what you're trying to tell me. Let's try nodding and shaking head answers. Do you have any problem with helping me kill that bitch broker?"

Zen shook his head, hanging onto his Master's arm. He wanted to ask the man to wait, to give him time to recover. He felt sluggish, distanced from everything around them. The only thing he could focus on was his Master and that was no way to enter any sort of fight.

"Wahwahg..." he choked out, another frustrated growl following the gibberish yowling.

His Master frowned then nodded. "You need some time to recover?"

Zen held tighter to his Master's arm and nodded vigorously, wincing at the shooting pain that blazed through his head with the motion. "Mmmmaaassstrrrr."

"Okay, we'll wait a little while but not too long. I don't want her knowing we got out of there or that one of the Aoki clan is dead until it's way too late."

He pressed close to his Master, his forehead resting against the man's chest. "Mmmmaaassstrrrr."

Hajiri stroked his hands over the long, silken strands of silver hair. "Hush, Zen, get your strength back."

Zen let go of his Master's arm and slipped both arms around his Master's waist, leaning against the hard-muscled body, breathing in his Master's scent. The nose-tickling chemical traces of someone carrying lots of enhancements, the faint scent of synthleather

and the sharp muskiness of a male human. All of it tinged with the stink of oil, metal, cordite, fear and death from their fight.

He closed his eyes, relaxing in the embrace of his owner. His Forever Master.

“Thiss boooeee loveess hissss fooveevrrr Mmmaaaasssterrr.”

## Chapter Five

Hajiri waited impatiently for Zen to recover, which didn't take quite as long as he'd expected. Once he was assured that the battlepet was up to another fight he headed for Firedance's place.

He was seething with hate for what the bitch had done, both to him and Zen, but also to Midori and countless others, now trapped as sex slaves in the Aoki Tower. She had a lot to pay for and he was going to make sure she paid, her and anyone with her, including the fucking netriding slut.

He strode through the streets until he was a block away from her building. Then he slowed down and glanced at Zen, a silent presence at his side, as he tried to decide if the battlepet was recovered enough. "You ready for this?"

"This boy was bred ready to obey and fight for his Master," Zen replied in the softest of whispers. "This boy will do anything for his Master."

Hajiri nodded, satisfied. "Okay, but just remember the woman in charge is mine. You can kill anyone else you like."

The pet frowned. "This boy will obey Master's order." It didn't take a genius to figure out that the battlepet wasn't happy with that command; a sullen expression darkened his pretty face and an odd gleam lit his eyes.

Hajiri stopped in his tracks, grabbed Zen by the shoulders and spun him round so they were facing each other. "The only reason I ask you to leave her to me is because Midori is a friend of mine and he can never get out of that fucking tower."

His battlepet nodded. "This boy already said he would obey his Master. This boy doesn't care about anyone but his Master. He just wishes he could tear the lying bitch to pieces for almost taking his Master away from him."

Hajiri thought for a moment before coming up with an answer that might just appease Zen. "If there is a second woman there tonight, it will be the one who led me into that trap. She's yours. Okay?"

"The woman who led you to the trap?" His amber eyes narrowed, the gleam intensifying. "Yes, she's an acceptable target for this boy's fury." The pet followed him into the building, his hand wrapped around the small pistol.

Smiling to himself at Zen's impassioned words, Hajiri led the way up the stairs and along a dimly lit corridor until they were standing outside a particular apartment. He didn't bother knocking, instead using his enhanced speed and strength to kick the door off its hinges as he pulled his gun from its holster.

He was faced with a room full of people, all of whom were scrabbling around for weapons. Two shots in quick succession from his gun and two from Zen's disposed of the bodyguards and he glared across the room at Firedance. "You lied to me, bitch."

She stared at him in opened mouthed horror. "N...now le...le...let's try and...t...talk this o...over," she stammered, terror almost depriving her of the ability to speak.

Hajiri glared at her. "You lied to Midori too, didn't you? How many others did you fucking lie to?"

Firedance's gaze went to the four people she'd relied on to protect her, desperation

making her look for help that wasn't going to be forthcoming from any of the corpses the pair of them had just created.

Her eyes left the bodies and went to the face of the woman seated motionless in the corner. The other woman's face was as pale as her own and beads of sweat stood out on her forehead, her mouth moving in a nervous twitch.

"I can give you money, Hajiri. Lots of money," she offered, the same fearful desperation showing in her face mirrored in her voice. "You'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams. Rich enough to buy your way out of Shinjuku if you want."

A forced smile moved her lips, but her eyes showed nothing but stark fear.

Her gaze moved to Hajiri, her motions slow, shock setting in. The realization she was a bullet away from death evident in her pallid complexion and the way her body began to shake. "You could even work for me, be my new bodyguard, you and that pet of yours. I can make it worth your while, I swear I can."

Hajiri shook his head in disbelief. She was still playing him for a sucker. "Nobody will ever work for you again, bitch." He glanced at the other woman and recognized the netrider from earlier. "Zen, that's the bitch that led me into the trap. She's yours to play with."

The netrider cringed, pale and wild-eyed. "Please, don't hurt me," the woman pleaded as the battlepet stalked toward her. Zen had almost reached her when the woman screamed and bolted for the door. Zen leaped, taking her down after she'd taken a couple of steps. Another scream ended in a choked cry and abrupt silence.

Zen stood up and moved to Hajiri's side. Blood covered his hands, dripping from his clawed fingertips.

Firedance, already pale, turned ashen at the savagery evinced by the battlepet's attack on the netrider. "Please, whatever you want, just don't kill me."

Hajiri kept his gaze on Firedance rather than watch Zen attack the netrider. When he spoke it was almost gently. "You know, Firedance, you have to be the world's biggest fool. You could have built up the best damned stable of gunwhores and zonewarriors. Hell, if you'd played straight you'd even have a battlepet working for you. But you got greedy for Aoki money, didn't you? Greedy enough to send gunwhores into slavery and betray other zoners to the fucking suits. And where has your greed got you but dead?"

He stepped forward and clasped her head between his hands. He could break her neck or he could squeeze slowly. Visions of Midori as he'd last seen the gunwhore assailed his mind and he began to squeeze, wanting the broker to suffer for what she'd done to his friend.

"Please, I didn't have a choice!" Firedance cried out, her hands taking hold of his wrists, eyes pleading, filling with tears. "Please, Hajiri! Please! They've got my daughter!"

Hajiri stopped applying pressure but kept hold of her head. "Why should I believe anything a lying bitch like you says?"

"Because I'm zone born! I'd never sell out my people to fucking suits if I had any choice," she replied through the tears. "Only a fool does shit like this. Have you ever heard that I was a fool, Hajiri?"

Hajiri eyed her. "Not before I spoke to Midori."

He glanced at Zeshin. "What do you think, Zen, is she still lying?" There was a distinct possibility that the battlepet could smell lies.

The battlepet hurried to his Master's side, sniffing the air, golden eyes narrowed in concentration. "She's scared, Master, but this boy doesn't smell a lie." He looked up at Hajiri, "But this boy is no wolf or dog, so he could be mistaken."

Hajiri was still dubious but decided to let Firedance talk at least. "What happened, and when and how many of us have you betrayed because of it?"

"They took my girl. In order to keep her alive I had to do what they asked. I would get a call, they'd tell me who they wanted to acquire. First it was Midori. Then Sundown, Jack of Swords, Gunnerdog, Violetblade and Crymson," she replied. "Aoki suits told me they didn't care how I got them who they wanted, just that I'd do it or get my daughter sent back to me one piece at a time. That's how it went. They were all hand picked. Like you."

Hajiri closed his eyes and snarled. Hand picked was right. It looked like the Aoki clan were taking the very best off the streets and locking them away in their tower. "The one who was waiting for me is dead, as are his goons. He was the one who once owned Zen here. I don't know how high on the ladder he was though."

"Then I'll never see my daughter again." Tears spilled from her eyes and she turned away. "Go on, Hajiri, take your revenge. Kill me. I've got no reason to live. It was made very clear that if anything happened to him my daughter would be killed for the betrayal."

Hajiri frowned at her in irritation. "Oh, come on, Firedance, you said you weren't a fool! Do you honestly think they've kept and fed a zone kid? She was dead meat the moment they took her."

Her lips trembled. "No, that's not true. I...I talked to her just yesterday. She said she wanted to come home...she..." The woman's voice broke and she covered her face with her hands, sobbing. "She was alive... I just wanted to get her back. I just wanted my baby..."

Hajiri shook his head and sighed, actually feeling sorry for the woman. "Artificial intelligence, baby, they would have used A.I. I'm sorry. But it might be worth seeing if the bastards come back for you."

"What does it matter? She was all I had, Hajiri. Of everything I've done she was the only thing in my life that mattered. The money is nothing without her. Neither is my life. Go ahead. Kill me. I've got nothing to live for anyway." Grief overwhelming her she turned a tear streaked face up to Hajiri. "I don't care anymore, Hajiri. Just do it. Kill me. Take your revenge. I've got it coming. I know I do."

Zen padded on silent feet to Hajiri's side, his gaze on the door. "I hear people coming, Master."

Hajiri nodded his agreement. Footsteps could be heard approaching down the hall. He dragged the sobbing woman out of the line of fire before taking up a position in an alcove to the right of the broken door.

Zen vanished behind the couch to the left of the door.

The first person through the door made identifying the intruders easy: the red lotus flowers printed on her white skirt left no room for doubts. She carried a pistol in her fist, and she moved warily.

Hajiri remained still and silent as the grave, waiting to see how many more of the gang would come through the door.

Two other women followed the first one in, a sleek very attractive man bringing up

the rear. A leather collar with a dangling leash showed him to be a pet to the one or all of the women, but his fist held a gun and that made him dangerous.

"Looks like she's out of business already," the first woman remarked. "Spread out, see if Firedance is here. If not we have to find her. Boss man wants her alive if possible, but dead works too."

Zen peered around the side of the couch, gaze on his Master, waiting for the signal to attack.

Hajiri nodded at Zen then shot the man immediately. Before he could fire again the gun was knocked out of his hand by one of the women. Snarling Hajiri leapt at her, hands clenched into fists.

The leopard-boy fired at the second woman who'd entered but she managed to dive and roll out of the way, the bullets shattering plaster on the far wall.

The woman who'd been the first to enter fired several shots at Hajiri. They all missed the zonewarrior. Screaming in rage, she tried to shoot him again with no better results. Enraged she slammed into Hajiri, her body hard as a concrete wall. Cybered to a high art degree to match his own, they struggled for a second, bodies straining, the woman kicking him in the belly to escape his grip.

Somehow Hajiri managed to hang on to her, even though he was gasping from having the air knocked out of him by the kick. Angry, he freed one of her arms and punched her hard in the mouth, drawing blood from a split lip.

The woman staggered and one of her teammates moved in on Hajiri, the two of them circling, waiting for an opening.

Behind him Hajiri heard Zen snarling, the sound of breaking furniture and shattering glass told Hajiri that Zen was fighting the last of the women. An enraged yowl tore the air, followed by the sound of something else breaking. A blur of motion at the edge of his vision along with the report of a gunshot very close to him was immediately followed by another yowl of anger.

*If anything should happen to Zen...* The thought made Hajiri see red and draw his second pistol from a pocket. He shot one of the circling women in the face, buying himself the time to see what was happening to the battlepet.

Blood dripped from beneath the battlepet's coat, leaving bloody streaks on the floor as he and the woman fought for possession of the large pistol in the woman's hand. His teeth were bared in a fierce snarl, one foot coming up to catch the ganger bitch across her gun arm as he twisted his body.

"Fucking loser shit," the remaining female ganger fighting Hajiri snarled as she lunged for him.

Hajiri brought the pistol up and shot her too, tired of all the fucking posturing and wanting to make sure that Zen, his battlepet and lover, survived.

Zen had escaped the woman's hold. He was scrambling to get out of the line of fire, moving so fast no human could have followed his passage.

But the ganger wasn't exactly human anymore and the pistol in her fist followed his moves, coming to bear on Zen.

Hajiri didn't even stop to think about the consequences, he jumped on her, taking her to the floor where they rolled around fighting for her gun.

A gunshot roared over the sound of their struggle, something with the impact of a sledgehammer striking Hajiri squarely in the back, knocking his breath free and sending a

sharp, searing pain across his nerves.

Hajiri shook his head, trying to clear it, the sharp pain in his shoulder telling him what must have happened. The bullet had been slowed by his bullet resistant clothing and had been stopped by his shoulder blade where the damned thing was probably lodged.

A fist hit him in the jaw while he was trying to recover from the gunshot.

"You bitch," he snarled. As he regained his senses he realized he was still clutching his own pistol. Using all the strength he had left he twisted it until the barrel was pressed against her chest and pulled the trigger. She shuddered once and died.

Silence wrapped around the room, only the smell of blood and the stink of cordite remaining to tell of the pitched battle that had been waged in Firedance's office.

The broker herself lay dead in one corner, shot between the eyes, a pistol clutched in her cooling hand.

A soft whimper drew Hajiri's attention. Zen, his battlepet, crept toward him on hands and knees, his face a bloody mask of pain.

Hajiri moved towards Zen, unable to manage much more than a crawl himself. He reached his lover and cradled the wounded battlepet. He placed a gentle kiss on his forehead before saying, "We need to get a doc to you."

"Master is hurt," the pet murmured, touching Hajiri's face, his fingers red with blood. "This boy is sorry he didn't protect Master." Zen bowed his head. "This boy is such a failure."

Hajiri shook his head. "No, Zen, you're not a failure. Master is sorry he didn't prevent *you* from being hurt. Give me a moment or two to recover then I'll get us a doc."

Zen nodded and huddled close to Hajiri. He seemed to doze off for a second then his eyes flew open and he said, "This boy wants to protect his Master. This boy is worried that more of the bad people come here looking for Firedance. If they find Master they will hurt him."

Hajiri thought about that for a moment. When the Aoki's gangers failed to return, more would be sent to find out what happened. It would be ironic if they had survived all that had happened tonight only to get themselves killed by such a simple mistake. "You're right, Zen. We'll go to the doc rather than bringing her here."

The battlepet got to his feet, drops of blood falling to the floor beneath him. "Lean on me, Master," he urged. He took one of Hajiri's hands and guided it to his shoulder. "This boy is strong, he can help Master."

Hajiri chuckled. "I can walk, Zen. I just want to take a quick look round. Bitch owes me some money for tonight."

He crossed the room, stepping over a couple of corpses on his way, and took a look at the wrist architecture on Firedance's body. Smiling to himself he removed it. Yuki could get at the funds she had stashed and there might be enough to pay him for the info on battlepets. He found he didn't want to let Yuki fuck Zen after all.

The sound of rapid footfalls coming along the hall sent Zen scurrying toward the doorway, his blood covered hands arched, ready to use his lethal claws. A low challenging yowl erupted from between lips parted in a feline snarl. Drops of blood spattered in a slow rain to the floor beneath his feet.

Hajiri grabbed his guns and, having rapidly checked the ammo clips, faced the door. The expression on his face was bleak.

A pair of young men came to a skidding halt right outside the door. "Shit, don't



shoot us!”

Hajiri recognized them as some of Yuki’s errand boys. Young and ambitious, the two of them were working their way up the food chain as messengers. If they were very lucky they might make the jump to rent-boys and from there to the coveted position as gunwhores, one step away from being zonewarriors, the top of the heap. If they lived that long.

Hajiri let out his breath and lowered his guns. "It's okay, Zen. They're not enemies, even though it's a very convenient arrival."

He smiled at the two young messengers although there was little humor in the expression. "Care to explain, boys?"

“Yuki got a call from some guy named Midori. He sent us here to beat the fuck out of Firedance and find out why she sold you for meat,” the taller of the two replied, his gaze never leaving the battlepet.

The second young man said, “Yuki thought you were trapped or dead because of Firedance. He’s mad as hell.”

"He's not the only one." Hajiri's smile turned into a look of sorrow. "They told her they had her kid even though the brat's probably dead meat by now. Zen and I need a doc. And tell Yuki we're both safe and Zen needs a chip or two removing."

\* \* \* \*

His Master apparently knew the two men, so Zen relaxed, no longer worried he’d have to fight and kill them to protect his Master.

Not that he’d done his job very well so far. He’d let his Master get hurt. Worse, his Master had been forced to save his worthless life during the fight.

Depressed he crept closer to his Master, the scent of his owner’s blood reminding him how poor his performance had been during the fight. His Master had gotten hurt, and that was unacceptable.

He knew he’d be punished for his failure later.

Failure always meant being punished and no matter what his Master did, it would be well deserved. He’d yet again proven how worthless and unreliable he was as a battlepet.

The first young man spoke up. "Well Yuki knows good docs, so going to him might be a good idea. He's really worried about you, Hajiri. Said he was concerned you might be trapped in corpland with no way out after he talked to Midori."

The other young man—darker skinned with techhair in bright blue, chromed teeth and neon violet eyes—turned his attention from Hajiri to Zen. “Yuki says he’s a battlepet. He doesn’t look like he’s worth much, in or out of a fight.”

Zen visibly wilted at the remark. *He is right, I am worth nothing to my Master.*

Hajiri frowned at the darker boy. "You ain't seen him in action, asshole. So, unless you wanna do a round with him, shut the fuck up." Then he answered the first young man. "Yeah, I think you're right. And that was the idea. Bitch trapped a few good gunwhores and zonewarriors with them. If Zen here hadn't shown up, I'd be in the same position, chipped with no fucking way out."

The darker boy stepped away from Hajiri, “Sorry, didn’t mean to offend you, Hajiri.”

The first errand boy glanced at his companion, “You ain’t ever learned to keep your mouth shut, have you, Clear?” He frowned at the carnage behind the pair, then said, “Best get our asses out of here before more of the Aoki death squad gets here. I don’t

want to tangle with their ugly selves, too much bangbang shit for my half cybered ass.”

Zen closed his eyes. *Tired. This boy is so tired. But this boy has to stay awake to protect his Master.*

The darker skinned guy led the way down the hall, reaching the steps and starting down.

Hajiri slipped an arm round Zen's waist and followed, leaving the lighter-skinned messenger boy to bring up the rear.

“You two gonna make it to Yuki’s?” the guy behind Hajiri asked as they reached the bottom of the stairs. “I’m only askin’ since that pet of yours is leaking his life out on the steps.”

“This boy is fine!” Zen retorted sharply, annoyed that someone would say he wasn’t strong enough to keep up with his Master. He loved his Master; he refused to fail him anymore, ever.

Hajiri turned his head just enough to glare at the boy following them. “He’ll live. We both got pretty banged up but nothin’ lethal.”

“Bleeding’s gonna be lethal for him, but he’s your prob, not mine,” the younger man told his Master.

They reached the street, the lights of the night time zone a riot of glaring color except in the alleyways, which were wrapped in Stygian gloom.

Lightning split the sky, the boom of thunder rolling, drowning out the drone of people clotted around them, filling the sidewalks and streets like a living river.

Zen stepped closer to his Master as the first drops of rain started to fall. He felt cold inside. And tired. So very tired. But he wasn’t going to give in to the pain and weariness. He wouldn’t fail his Master.

His Master stopped glaring at the boy and turned his attention to Zen. “Where’s the blood coming from, Zen? I might need to staunch the flow.”

Zen undid a buckle on his coat and held it open for his Master. “On the left side. Master, one of those Red Lotus bitches stabbed this boy.”

Hajiri peered at the wound. “Long and not too deep by the look of it, but it’s bleeding every time you move.” He pulled his shirt out of his pants and tore a strip off, wadding it and handing it to Zen. “Keep that tight against the wound till we get to Yuki’s.”

Zen frowned but did as he was told. *This boy’s Master gave me part of his shirt to make the bleeding stop. None of my former Masters would have done that.*

“Thank you, Master,” he murmured and gently butted his head against his Master’s uninjured shoulder.

Neon violet eyes regarded him for a moment before his Master spoke. “You’re mine, Zen. I’m never going to sell you, put you in the trash, make you fight in an arena or let you go. I’ll fight by your side, and the gods help anyone that harms you. I know that confuses you now, but you’ll get used to the idea in time.”

He looked up at the man who he hoped might be his Forever Master. “This boy loves his Master.”

“Ummmm, I hate to break up this touching display, but we aren’t that far from Firedance’s place and there could be Red Lotus shitwads in the area,” the younger messenger said.

“Yeah,” the darker one agreed. “We told Yuki we’d stick with you until you got somewhere safe, namely his place, but that don’t mean I want to risk my skin yapping

this close to Firedance's place."

Hajiri grinned and nodded, but kept an arm round Zen's waist, holding the pad of cloth in place as he quickened his pace.

They hurried through the crowds, which were rapidly thinning as the pattering of rain turned into a cold downpour. Lightning flashed and the thunder boomed overhead.

Zen kept pace with his Master's longer steps, hurrying along with the two other men. He didn't know them, and he didn't trust them, but his Master apparently did and that was enough reason for him to go along without protest.

They changed streets, hurrying through a wide plaza adorned with half dead trees, then turned toward some of the tall buildings—almost like the corporate structures of Tokyo proper—though these were just as in need of repair as everything else in Shinjuku.

"Fucking rain," the darker one muttered as they entered one of the tall buildings. The lobby area was full of soaking wet people, all of them taking refuge from the growing storm outside.

Hajiri ignored them all and headed for the stairs as the elevators had long since ceased to work. "Nearly there, Zen," he murmured.

He gave a mute nod, too tired for more than that. He had to focus on keeping his legs working because he couldn't feel much of anything beyond the bone deep weariness filling his mind with a mind numbing buzz.

The steps went on forever, climbing and climbing until Zen thought he'd reached the clouds from which the rain kept falling. They could hear the booming of thunder, which had been joined by the scream of rising wind.

"Oh, whoopee! Typhoon season, just great," Hajiri remarked as he finally opened a door onto a landing.

"Is this a safe place to be, Master?" Zen asked as the messenger ahead of them shoved open a door on the tenth floor landing and stepped out into a corridor that was lit by the flicker of aging biolumines.

Hajiri nodded and smiled at the battlepet. "Probably one of the safest places in the zone."

"Yuki's a total coward, he wouldn't live somewhere that wasn't safe," the younger man with them replied as his companion stopped outside an apartment door that showed its armor through scratched and battered paint. The messenger hammered on it with his fist, shouting, "We found him! Open the damn door!"

The door opened to let them in, a heavily armored woman smiling at Hajiri over the dark skinned man's head. "Well you're alive at least," she remarked as the group of them moved past her.

Hajiri stopped beside her and grinned. "Yeah, thanks to Zen here deciding to follow me, and Midori having the presence of mind to call you. How are you, babe?"

"Good, but I can see you've been through the sharp end of the grinder." She motioned Hajiri into a side room, bellowing, "Yuki, call the doc, Hajiri and this pet of his are hurt."

"I'm on it," the databroker shouted from a side room.

"So very efficient," the woman remarked.

Hajiri sniggered. "You're always so kind to Yuki. When we've seen the doc I've got a proposition for him."

"For Yuki or the doc?" the gunbitch asked as she motioned him toward a steel table

that looked cold as ice. "Put your pet there."

Hajiri gave her a look. "For Yuki, of course. With Firedance gone the Zone needs a killbroker everyone can trust. Those of us that aren't Aoki zombies anyways."

Zen regarded the table with a sense of dread. He'd seen things like it, and never under circumstances that could be considered part of his good if foggy memories. They meant pain and fear. Punishments.

"This boy will be good, Master," he whispered, wide-eyed and trembling, making no move to go closer to the table.

Hajiri came back to his side and took one of his cold hands in his own warm one. "It's okay, Zen. I can't promise that the doc won't hurt you a bit but nobody's going to do anything nasty, that I *can* promise. You're safe here."

"Safe?" He looked from his Master to the strange woman, trying to get his mind around the word unsure if anywhere in this world of his new Master's was truly 'safe'. Though the concept of 'safe' wasn't something he'd personally experienced all that often in his short lifetime. Nothing about a pet's life, especially a battlepet's existence, could be deemed 'safe' when a Master could choose to send you to your death or toss you out with the trash anytime he wanted too.

But as applied to a Master, he knew how to enact the word. Zen stepped closer to his Master and sank to his knees beside the man. "Master is hurt. This boy will protect his hurt Master."

"Loyal, isn't he? Or is it bred, trained or chipped into him?" the woman asked.

Hajiri's free hand ran through Zen's hair, soothing him. "Some of all three from what Yuki found out for me. And it didn't make for comfortable reading. When I think about what was done to him it makes me want to wipe that whole stinking Aoki clan off the face of the fucking planet!"

Zen pressed his head into his Master's hand, enjoying the touch, the petting. It felt good, eased some of the pain, washed away a little of the tiredness. "This boy loves his Master," he murmured and touched his owner's palm with his lips in a light kiss.

"He came out of one of their breeding programs, did he? Well, they pay for only the best, so he's probably worth more money than your cyber and mine put together," she stated, her gaze on Zen.

"But it's not just them, Hajiri," she continued. "There are pet breeding facilities all over the world."

She stepped closer, leaning down to peer at Zen. She smelled of wine, a faint, floral perfume and the barest trace of female musk. She also smelled of guns and leather, of blood and death, like his Master.

Like he did too at the moment. He met her gaze, watched her, wary and ready to protect his Master if she made any threatening move.

"You know, I don't think he's Aoki bred. He's too refined and elegant to have come out of their labs. They breed mostly for power. They really haven't learned that pets and fangsoldiers aren't the same."

Hajiri frowned at her. "Do you know more than we found on the tech, Mayuke? I know the Aoki chipped both him and the gunwhores they've trapped. They can't get out of their fucking tower without being in a world of pain which gives the Aoki goons enough time to round them up again but I think something as beautiful as Zen is way beyond their capabilities."

"I won't lie and say I know a lot, Hajiri. But all pets typically have a maker's mark somewhere it's not apparent, like on a tooth or inside their bottom lip." She motioned to Zen, "Open your mouth, sweetie."

He glanced at his Master, waiting for permission.

"Go ahead, Zen, Mayuke won't hurt you."

He opened his mouth and the woman gently lifted his head, peering at his teeth before pulling down his bottom lip to check the tattoo. He could have told her it was there, but she hadn't asked.

"Here it is, Hajiri. See it? If he came from an Aoki lab he'd have a lotus tattooed there. This is done in very expensive neon ink. A rainbow behind a red kirin. I'm sure Yuki could find out what lab this is."

Hajiri merely glanced at the mark before giving a good impression of a battlepet's growl. "He does have feelings, Mayuke! And Yuki already looked at the mark. That's where we got the info we did."

His hand was back in Zen's hair. "He talks about being flawed and being on meds to stop 'being bad'. The only thing I can see as a possible flaw is the fact that he's starting to think for himself and he sometimes uses I and me instead of this boy. Me, I like that but I bet corpors don't."

"No, they wouldn't. A pet that can think for itself is dangerous, especially a battlepet." She smiled at him and Zen managed a slight twitch of his lips that almost made a smile.

"I'd bet he's one of the high end ones, not the cheaply bred stuff you sometimes find out here. His training isn't going to be easy to break, Hajiri. He might always be a liability."

A soft buzz came from the other room. "That will be the doc, I'll go let him in, you just take it easy until we get back," Mayuke told his Master.

Hajiri nodded but did not sit down in any of the chairs. "I'm going to need to get our clothes fixed," he muttered angrily. Then a thought seemed to occur to him and he called out, "Yuki! I got Firedance's wrist architecture. You wanna see if you can get the funds she owes me outta it?"

Yuki entered the room, "No need to shout, I'm right here." The databroker reached out for the wristcomp that his Master had gotten from the dead woman. "Pass it over and I'll see what I can do. She owed you a lot of money, but I'm taking my cut for breaking her codes if I can do it."

His Master grinned. "I'll do better than that, Yuki. If there's enough in there we split it fifty-fifty. If not, you keep whatever's left. It'll just go to waste otherwise. Think you need to fill her shoes too. We can trust you, well as far as we can trust any money-grubbing broker."

"Fifty-fifty then, but I feel like I'm stealing," Yuki replied, and smiled at his Master. He glanced at the wristcomp then moved to a chair and sat down to look it over. "There's blood on it," he remarked then pulled a jack from his own datacomp and attached it. "This could take a while."

Mayuke entered with an older man behind her. Zen watched the newcomer and wondered what was wrong with the man's face. There were odd lines in his skin, like a shirt that had been left lying in a wad his face was full of wrinkles.

Hajiri nodded to the man. "Evening, doc, sorry for dragging you outta bed. Had a bit

of trouble with the Red Lotus gang."

The strange wrinkled man just nodded and motioned his Master to the table. "Fortunate for you that I live in this building. There's a minor typhoon raging out there and under no circumstances would I have ventured out on a night like this, no matter what the monetary incentive might have been."

The man had an odd accent, a strange way of saying things that had Zen listening, wondering where the doctor might be from. With his bushy grey hair and eyebrows and his oddly pale skin he couldn't be from Japan.

"Don't blame you there, doc," Hajiri said as he removed his coat and shirt with a slight wince and laid face down on the table. "Gunshot to the back. Not sure if the bullet's lodged in my shoulder blade or not."

Zen stood beside his Master, watching the doc warily as he examined his owner's back.

"Nothing too serious as gunshots go. Good for you that you've got bone density increases or you might be a dead man headed for the meatmarket right now."

"He's not seriously hurt?" Yuki asked, glancing up from his comp to look at Hajiri.

"As I said, for a gunshot, no, this isn't much more than a scratch to someone like Hajiri-san here."

"Master is okay?" Zen asked, seeking the doctor's reassurance.

"Well, not okay, but not that badly hurt." The man looked at Zen, eyes moving over him carefully. "Why, I do believe this is a pet of some sort," he remarked.

Hajiri snarled even as the doc was tending to his wound. "If that knowledge ever gets out on the street, I'll gut you myself," he promised.

Zen frowned and wondered why his Master had gotten so angry over a statement of the truth by the doc when he hadn't shown the same reaction when Yuki and Mayuke mentioned it.

He loved his Master, but the man confused him.

"You have no need to worry about that," the doc replied. "I assure you, any secrets are perfectly safe with me. If they weren't do you think for a moment that Mayuke would trust me in her home?"

Hajiri winced slightly as his wound was bathed, examined and the bullet dug out before being closed up with plastic skin. "Sorry doc, I wasn't thinking straight, but he's the reason we tangled with the Aoki and their minions earlier tonight. I don't want them finding him."

"No worry there, Hajiri-san. I'm the model of discretion. Besides the Aoki's have done nothing to endear me to them or their lot of ruffians and goons."

Zen observed the doctor as he worked, fascinated at how quickly and efficiently the doc repaired the damage to his Master.

"All done," the doc stated and gave his Master a gentle pat on the arm.

"From the amount of blood covering your boy here I'd hazard a guess that he is also wounded."

*Master will be all right. Master is alive. Master is safe.*

Zen dared to touch his Master's arm, leaning in close to rub his head on the man's cheek, a soft rumbling purr coming from deep in his chest.

\*

Hajiri liked the doc, even trusted the man to a point, but he didn't want anyone

getting word back to the Lotus. Then again, what the doc said made sense, especially when one remembered his raped and murdered daughter. "Sorry again, doc, I spoke without thinking. It's just that Zen is important to me. Not only that but, with a few minor modifications, he's got the skills and intelligence to make a good zonewarrior—for our side."

He eased himself off the table and mentally blessed his enhancements. Not only had they saved his life tonight but they also reduced the pain to a bearable level. "You might be able to answer a question about the meds he's been given."

"Well there's more than enough time to work on him, Hajiri-san. I don't think you'll be venturing out into this storm, unless you have a desire to be battered about by howling winds and rain and flying debris."

The doc patted the table. "Up here, my boy," he urged before adding, "He's quite a pretty one, even with all the blood covering him you can't mistake him for anything but a genetically engineered work of art."

The battlepet stared at the table, expression wary, distrustful. He looked at Hajiri as if hoping his Master wouldn't order him to get on the table.

Seeing Zeshin's apprehension, Hajiri smiled reassuringly at him. "It's okay, Zen. The doc won't hurt you more than he has to. I promise."

When the battlepet climbed onto the table, Hajiri resumed his conversation with the doc. "Agreed, but while he's subservient and submissive with me, gods help any bastards who try to harm me. And I think there's real intelligence under the conditioning. I'd like him able to use it."

"This boy is sorry he failed to protect his Master," Zen murmured, his head bowed.

"There there, it's all right," the doc reassured as he started to ease the battlepet out of the coat he had on. "I don't have much experience working on pets of any sort, but if you say he's intelligent, I'll take your word on it."

The doc got Zen out of his coat and frowned. "Well he's certainly lost a lot of blood, but that's all right, I've got a good deal of blood replacer with me. I can mix up a batch once I've done some testing and closed up his wounds. I'd hate to use the wrong sort of replacer and risk poisoning his systems."

Hajiri wanted to hover and watch the doc but he finally realized that he needed to sit down before he fell down. He sat in a chair close enough to the table to allow him to hold one of Zen's hands. "Can you check him over for chips while you're at it, doc? I know he's got at least one."

"I will run a standard diagnostic. That should tell me what has been done to him, including any controller chips or memory dampeners. I hear those are both commonly installed in pets."

He shook his head, fighting off the exhaustion that was creeping up on him now he knew they were safe. "Yuki, Mayuke, you got room for us while this blow goes through?"

"Of course." Mayuke grinned and winked. "But it'll cost you when you're feeling better. You know I love a good three way."

Hajiri rolled his eyes. "I already owe Yuki for the info on Zen. So it may have to be a four way, babe."

Mayuke grinned. "Well so long as you don't mind your little pet getting a workout, I don't mind waiting." She eyed Zen speculatively, "I wonder if he could top Yuki. I'd like

to see it.”

“Oh, thank you so much! Here I was entertaining the thought of fucking his pale ass while Hajiri put you through your paces,” the databroker said, his annoyance at her plans evident in his tone.

She laughed, “Always the dreamer, aren’t you, Yuki?”

Hajiri glanced at the doc. “So can you help us with the chips and deprogramming?”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ve never tried deprogramming a battlepet, so how effective my efforts might be, I can’t say. Nor, to be truthful, can I say I won’t somehow damage him in the effort. I have to see how the chips are implanted before I make any promises regarding them,” the doc explained.

Hajiri sighed in frustration. “There are definite signs of a personality coming through and with the meds he was on and his talk of being flawed, it makes me wonder if his batch were either something rather special or a complete mistake.”

“Well perhaps Yuki over there could do a more careful investigation of his lot numbers when he has the opportunity,” the doctor suggested as he removed the pet’s coat and dropped it to the bare floor.

Beneath it, Zen’s clothing was saturated with blood.

“He’s bled quite a lot. He’ll definitely need that blood replacer,” the doctor informed Hajiri as he removed the makeshift bandage covering the wound.

Hajiri peered at the wound and winced in sympathy. He’d been right. It wasn’t deep enough to kill but was deep enough and long enough a slash to have bled out profusely. He squeezed the hand he was holding reassuringly.

“I know you’ll do whatever needs to be done, doc. As it is, I owe him both my freedom and my life.”

“I think a mild sedative might be in order, Hajiri-san. He seems rather anxious and I really don’t want to be bitten or clawed.”

“This boy doesn’t bite or claw doctors or his Master. He’s not allowed,” Zeshin remarked, the battlepet’s words whispered so quietly Hajiri barely caught them despite his enhanced hearing.

The elderly doctor sighed. “I know he said something, but I don’t know what knowledge he imparted to you. I’m afraid that, unlike my younger former colleagues, I never had my hearing improved upon.”

Yuki glanced up from the datacomp he was working on, “He said he doesn’t bite doctors.”

“Ah, thank you,” the doctor said as he removed a few supplies from his bag and went to work on Zen’s injuries.

“There you go then, doc. He won’t harm you.” But to make sure that the words he spoke were the truth, Hajiri took hold of Zen’s hands and held them in his own. “It’s okay, Zen, you’re safe.”

The pet lay there still as a corpse while the doctor inserted an IV into his arm then handed the bag of bluish fluid to Hajiri. “It’s some universal blood replacer.” The doc gave Hajiri a little smile, “I’d forgotten I’d brought it with me.”

He peered at the pet and nodded to himself. “He might not feel too good for a day or two while the stuff works its way out of his system, but the alternative might be dying from blood loss at this point. He’s in poor condition because of that. Next time, young man, you should use some wound sealer on him rather than letting him bleed like this,”



the doctor instructed, his tone a bit harsh as he continued to work.

Hajiri snarled at the doctor, his worry over Zen making him rude. "If I'd been carrying any I'd have used it, but the events of the night took all of us by surprise. For starters Zen shouldn't even have been there." He scowled at the battlepet as he spoke before remembering that if Zen hadn't turned up he'd be a helpless prisoner in the Aoki tower.

Or dead.

He made a mental note to always carry wound sealer in future, no matter what the mission.

Yuki frowned at Hajiri. "You're still thinking like a gunwhore, Hajiri. It'll get you killed if you don't remember you're a zonewarrior, not a pretty fucktoy out having fun. Besides, don't most gunwhores carry wound sealer in case a client is hurt? I mean, I thought they did, but I'm probably wrong. That stuff is a bit expensive."

The doctor snorted at that and peered into his bag, taking out a very small bottle and studying the label. He twisted the cap and a sharp odor, like burned meat, filled the room. "How much is this pet worth? By comparison I'd say it would be a small price to protect this sort of an investment."

Zen gave a soft whimper as the doctor poured the contents of a small bottle over the wound in his side.

Hajiri shook his head. "Okay, okay, I should've been carrying the fucking sealer. Anything else you and the doc here want to bitch about, Yuki?" Zen's whimper doused his brief fit of temper like a bucket of iced water. "I'm sorry, Zeshin, I shouldn't have put you through this."

The hand in Hajiri's squeezed his fingers gently, the pet's jaw muscles jumping as Zen tried to stay silent. The large dose of wound sealer did its job as the doctor pressed the edges of the injury closed. In a moment it was done, the deep cut chemically sealed better than any old fashioned stitches could manage.

"This stuff needs to cure, so I'd advise he do nothing strenuous for a few hours at least. Ideally he should rest until this evening," the doctor explained, his gaze still on the newly closed wound.

"Don't worry, doc, I'll make sure he gets some rest for the day," Hajiri said. "What do you want to do about the chips?"

"I'll need a little more equipment than I brought with me to determine exactly what they've used," the doctor told him, a frown tugging the man's mouth. "And as I said, he needs rest." The doc regarded Hajiri for a moment, evidently thinking something over. "He does have a controller chip, that much I am certain of, though what type I can't say for certain. As to whether I can remove it or not, I don't want to risk such delicate surgery, or electronic intervention, when he's so weak. You do realize that disabling a controller chip isn't going to be like flipping a switch. And tampering with any type of control chip is dangerous, young man. He's probably lived under their influence his entire life, so I'd like to make sure your pretty friend is strong enough for the shock of having it shut down."

"It might be a good idea for me to try and locate more specific info on controller chips before the doc tries to mess with Zen's, don't you think so, Hajiri?" Yuki asked.

Hajiri scratched his head as he thought about that. "Yeah, you're right, Yuki. I'm tired, wounded and not thinking too straight, right now. Let's get all the info we can

before we do anything. I just want him to be free of the Lotus, is all."

Hajiri as he'd been a week before might have argued for Zeshin to be free of all restraints, for him to be completely free, but he'd gotten used to the battlepet as he was and found that he rather liked being the beautiful boy's Master.

"Nothing to do right now but wait then," Yuki told him as he regarded Hajiri over the datacomp. "You know where the guest room is. Get some sleep and maybe by the time you wake up I'll have what the doc needs to free your boy from the Aoki controller chip."

Hajiri nodded in response to Yuki as he eased Zeshin off the table. "I'll make sure we both get some sleep, doc. I'm too damned tired to do anything but sleep right now anyway. Come on, Zen, let's go to bed."

"This boy can sleep on the floor by Master's bed?" the battlepet mumbled the question, his dull-eyed gaze lifted to Hajiri's face. He was pale, his lips almost colorless. Too much blood lost.

Mindful of the wound in the battlepet's side, Hajiri scooped him up in his arms, ready to carry him into the guest room. He staggered and almost fell. Damn! He'd forgotten his own wound. But he had enough strength to get them both to the guest room, especially when Mayuke stepped forward to take some of Zen's weight from him.

"Floor be damned. You're sleeping in the bed," he told Zen sternly. "It's plenty big enough for two."

Between them he and Mayuke eased Zen onto the double bed in the guest room. It was Mayuke that pulled Zen's boots off before doing the same for him.

"Now both of you rest," she said firmly but with a twinkle in her eyes. "If Yuki does take over the brokering business he's going to need you two in tip top shape!"

Hajiri lifted the covers and draped them over the battlepet before crawling into the bed next to him. "Yes, Mayuke-sama," he said with a huge grin. The gunbitch grinned back and left the room shutting the door behind her.

Zen rolled onto his side, rested his head on Hajiri's shoulder and snuggled against him, a contented sigh coming from the pet. He felt cold against Hajiri, yet he wasn't shivering. "This boy loves Master," he murmured, a soft rumbling sound coming from him after he stopped speaking.

Zeshin was purring, his fingers gently stroking along Hajiri's belly the way a cat would knead whatever lay under its paws.

Hajiri slid an arm round the battlepet's side carefully, conscious of his wound. "Good. I'm getting fond of you too." Too fond maybe but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Emotions were something that Hajiri usually kept under tight control. He knew he had a short fuse on his temper at times but he was coolly indifferent to most people. That lack of passion had served him well as a gunwhore but had seemed to desert him in his dealings with Zeshin. The battlepet had got under his skin from the moment he'd seen him pitted against a fangsoldier in the arena and left in disgust at the unfairly weighted contest. He was fooling himself if he thought he was keeping Zen just because he would make a good zonewarrior. No the battlepet had clawed his way into Hajiri's heart somehow.

Hajiri knew that Zeshin wanted him to be his 'Forever Master' and he began to think that he just might want the same thing. After years spent carefully avoiding the tender

emotion it had snuck up on him after all.

He listened to Zen's purrs and finally admitted the truth to the battlepet. "I love you too, Zen."

In response Zen purred louder, his clawed fingers gently pressing against Hajiri's skin, more a tickle than anything dangerous, though the claws could have shredded his flesh if the battlepet meant to hurt him. "Master loves this boy, so his boy is very happy," the battlepet managed to get out, though the words were distorted by his efforts to purr and talk at the same time.

Chuckling at the strange mixture of words and purrs, Hajiri pulled Zen closer and kissed him on the nose. "I'm happy too, happy that we're both still alive and free of that damned tower." His expression darkened as he thought of the gunwhores, like Midori, who hadn't been so lucky. There was nothing he could do for them now but make sure that word got onto the streets not to take any job at the Aoki tower.

"This boy is happy that Master is alive and safe. This boy will always love his Forever Master, no matter what." Zen pressed himself tightly to Hajiri, gave a contented sigh, and, still purring, he settled down to sleep.

Hajiri tried to make himself as comfortable as he could, which meant favoring his wounded shoulder as he prepared to sleep. But sleep eluded him for some time as he pictured tough Midori dressed up as a geisha and being used as a sex slave. It made his blood boil and the fury prevented sleep from coming. He shuddered as he realized that Zeshin had been the only thing to save him from sharing that fate. Even though the battlepet had disobeyed him, he couldn't be sorry that he'd followed him and come to his aid despite the danger to himself. He stroked a hand down Zen's side, glad he was here and glad the battlepet was his.

Slowly Hajiri's eyes closed and he descended into peaceful, dreamless sleep.

## Chapter Six

“So he was made by an underground pet breeding lab, not one of the quasi-legal places over on the mainland in Hong Kong or Taiwan,” his Master’s friend Yuki informed.

Zen cuddled closer to his Master, his cheek pressed to his owner’s thigh as he listened to the databroker and his Master talking. They’d gotten up a short time ago and come out into the living area of the big apartment to find Yuki waiting for them. The databroker was excited and eager to talk.

The smell of rice and something savory filled the place, but as yet they hadn’t been offered anything to eat. He didn’t know what was being cooked, but it smelled very good. Much better than the food his Master had bought for them yesterday and that food had been better than anything he could remember eating in his life.

*Was it only yesterday that he gave me that nice food? Was it just yesterday that he made this boy so happy by fucking him? A frown tugged his lips. Was it just yesterday that Master almost got killed?*

His stomach rumbled and he fought the whine that rose at the back of his throat. Hunger gnawed at his middle and he felt chilled despite the soft sweatshirt and pants he’d been given by Mayuke.

*Master is busy, he doesn’t want to hear me complain that I’m hungry.*

His belly snarled louder and he wrapped his arms around his Master’s leg, closing his eyes against the emptiness inside him. Anytime he’d ever been hurt he’d felt this way, hollow and cold. The hunger tearing at him with demands he couldn’t satisfy from the confines of a cage where food came once a day or not at all.

“Apparently this Kirin logo is tied to a place that most usually makes fangsoldiers. They seem to have gone into the battlepet breeding business as it’s far more lucrative. Unfortunately their battlepets are—” Yuki paused, and Zen heard the man scratching the fine stubble on his chin. “Well, I discovered a few complaints about their Series One battlepets. Seems they were prone to turning on their owners and ripping them limb from limb while they were asleep. I’m sure you know how they fixed that particular difficulty with their product.”

His Master chuckled without humor. “They’d have wiped them out and started again at a guess, and by drugging later editions up to the eyeballs.” His hand came to rest on Zeshin’s hair and stroked it gently. “I’d prefer not to have to do that with Zen.”

The hand stilled for a second as his Master twisted his body to yell in the general direction of the kitchen, “Is that food nearly ready, Mayuke? Zen and I are both starving to death here!”

Mayuke’s head appeared round the door. “You yelling don’t make it come no quicker, Hajiri. Be about ten minutes. If I find you’re skeletons on the floor when it’s done I’ll know I was too fucking late!”

Her head was withdrawn again and his Master grimaced. “Bossy bitch,” he muttered.

“I heard that, Hajiri!”

“Crap I forgot the hearing implants you got done!” His Master switched his attention back to Yuki. “Did you get a chance to look at Firedance’s data yet?”

Yuki smirked, "You better be careful, Hajiri. Mayuke's been making plans on how you're going to repay us and if you get her too annoyed it will just go harder for you."

The slim databroker stretched and yawned, then went on, "And yes, I did get into Firedance's wristcomp, but we were discussing your pet. It's not just the drugs, Hajiri, it's the chip. That's really what makes him what he is. Without it, he might almost be a normal person."

*Normal? A...person, a real person, not a pet? I could be a Master?*

A dull ache filled the back of his head and Zen gave up on that line of thought. He might have a 'Forever Master' but he was and would always be nothing more than a pet.

Zen sighed and closed his eyes, letting the soothing touch of his Master's fingers in his hair ease the hurt in his skull.

His Master frowned at the databroker. "What do you mean by 'almost', Yuki? Are we talking just the genetic stuff here or something crazy?"

"Some of the batches came out with sub-normal intelligence. It's the animal in the mix, like the fangsoldiers. No one would ever say they were the brightest stars in the heavens." Yuki studied the screen of his datacomp. "And most of them are more animal than human once the chip's out."

Zen shuddered at that. *I don't want to be an animal. Master wouldn't love this boy anymore if he isn't any better than a beast.* He held tighter to his Master and this time the whimper did escape him, a faint mewling sound that brought embarrassed color to Zen's cheeks.

"This boy doesn't want to be an animal. This boy wants to keep loving Master and being his good pet."

His Master's friend frowned at him. "He doesn't seem too bright, Hajiri. Taking that chip out might do more harm than good in the long run."

"He was bright enough to save my ass last night," his Master growled. "He deserves to be given the chance to think for himself!"

"And what will you do if he reverts to being nothing but an animal, Hajiri? Tampering with that chip is no guarantee he'll be able to think for himself!" the databroker argued, his voice soft, gentle. "I know how much he's coming to mean to you. Is his mental autonomy worth losing how he feels for you?"

Zen pressed his face to Hajiri's leg. His Master was angered with this Yuki person. He could smell the rage in the air, feel it humming through his Master's body where they touched. He wanted to say something to make his Master happy, but he couldn't think of anything that could make his Master's anger go away.

Instead he reached for his Master's pants, in the hope that pleasuring him would take the rage away.

His hands were slapped away but with no real force. It was more in the nature of a reminder. "Not in public, Zen. I'm not angry with you so you don't have to please me or distract me."

His Master smiled down at him, the expression the most tender he'd ever seen on a Master's face. "What do *you* want, Zen? Do you want to live as a pet or as a zonewarrior?"

Zen met his Master's kind eyes. Dared to reach up, despite the slap, and touch his owner's face, the caress gentle. "This boy wants whatever Master wants," he replied, the answer the only one he could give.

*This boy is a pet. That is all this boy has ever been. All he can ever be.* Fear of the unknown, of the possibility that his Master would discard him if he was nothing but an animal, left him shaking.

His mind grasped the implications of what his Master offered and he shuddered at the realization. His Forever Master wanted him to be more than a pet.

*Maybe he doesn't want to be my Forever Master after all. What if Master sees this as a way to be rid of me?*

He pressed his cheek to his Master's thigh. "This boy wants to always belong to his Master. This boy doesn't want anything else."

Being owned by a Master was Zen's idea of safety. He'd been thrown away once, he never wanted to experience that sort of fear ever again.

That soothing hand was in his hair again. "You'll belong to me no matter what you decide. I'm not letting you go now I've found you, Zen. You're mine, whether as pet or zonewarrior."

Yuki snorted at his Master's words, the sound mocking derision that sent a flash of anger through Zen. "And what if he no longer wants you once he's able to think for himself, Hajiri? He won't be a pet anymore, he'll be free of the constraints set on him by the chip. Hell, he might not even want to have sex with men once the chip is gone, did you think about that?"

"This boy will always love Master!" Zen told the databroker defiantly as he moved his hand from his Master's cheek to the man's hair, enjoying the silky feel of it between his fingers.

"And what if you don't when that chip is gone!" Yuki argued, his tone harsh, the sound grating on Zen's nerves.

"Shut up or I'll bite you!" Zen snarled, rising to his feet, a low growl rumbling in his chest, fingers flexing, claws catching the light, menace incarnate.

Yuki paled. "Shit..."

Pain lanced through Zen's head, nausea gripping him at the same time.

*Disobedient. I'm... more pain. This boy is disobedient. This boy will make his Master angry.* He sank to his knees, arms wrapped around himself.

"I think that proves he has a mind of his own, Yuki," his Master said to his friend, a smug grin on his face. Then the expression changed to a frown as he glanced his way. "Zen, are you in pain?"

"It doesn't matter," he grated out, fighting the hurt in his head just to be able to respond to his Master's question. The smell of the food he'd so recently enjoyed made his stomach heave and roll and he was glad of the fact he hadn't eaten yet or it might well have wound up on the floor.

*Be good. This boy must be good. The pain goes away when this boy is good. Threatening a Master is being bad. Don't be a bad boy.* He took a few deep breaths, inhaling slowly, then exhaling. Sweat rose on the skin of his forehead and beaded his lip and he could smell the stink of pain rising around him like a foul cloud.

The pain wasn't abating though. Instead of going away as it normally did, it grew steadily, until he couldn't keep the mew of agony from sliding between his clenched teeth.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

"Master...help...help..." he gasped out as he sagged to the floor. "This boy...will be

good...this boy will be good...Master..." He had started to whine, the soft mewling coming from him an embarrassment, but he hurt too much to care anymore.

Gentle hands scooped him off the floor and he was cradled to his Master's chest.

"Yuki, I don't care how much it costs, get the fucking doc here! Now!"

"On it," the databroker replied as he punched a few buttons on his datacomp. Zen listened to the machine as it made a series of sounds that faded into the distance as the pain increased.

Zen's world collapsed, the only thing important after that was the feel of his Master's arms around him and the sound of his voice.

"Hush, it'll be okay, Zen, I promise," the words to him were soothing but when his Master spoke to his friend the tones were harsh. "For him to be in this much pain it has to be a leaking chip, Yuki. We may not have any choice about removing it."

He didn't hear Yuki's reply, nor did it matter. What mattered were those arms, that warm chest, the scent of his Master surrounding him. So long as his Master loved him, the pain was unimportant.

He felt them moving, his Master's arms cradling him, carrying him and that reassured Zen.

The touch of his Master faded away and he was flying, floating in a red cloud of stinging insects, or poisonous vapors. He couldn't see, couldn't hear. Wrapped in the ugly redness, the horrible pain that tore at his mind, ripped with gnashing fangs at his flesh.

The red cloud faded, darkness creeping in to take its place.

*This boy doesn't want to die. This boy wants to live. This boy wants his Master! MASTER! PLEASE, MASTER! I'm scared. Please come and find me.*

No sense of where he was, what was happening to him pierced the impenetrable gloom. The worst part was not being able to hear or see his Master. No sense of his Master's presence reached him through the blackness.

He felt nothing. Was nothing.

Floating helpless in the Void.

Lost.

Alone.

*Is this death? he wondered. Is this how my life ends? I find my Forever Master and then lose him. So unfair. So terribly unfair. I discover love and the only bit of happiness I've ever had and it's snatched away from me before I can even savor it.*

\* \* \* \*

Hajiri quickly followed Yuki down two flights of stairs, clutching Zen to him as if he were the most precious object in the whole world. To Hajiri he was.

The doc opened his door immediately and led them through to a room that was kitted out with all kinds of fancy equipment that Hajiri had no name for. Reluctantly he laid Zeshin on the steel operating table but kept a tight hold of one cold, clammy hand.

*Dark Lady, don't let him die, please don't let him die. I know I'm no better than anyone else in the zone, but he's the best thing that's ever happened to me. He made me feel something other than anger or contempt for the first time since I was a child. Don't take him from me, please.*

Aloud he said, "Whatever it takes, doc, whatever it costs, just keep him alive."

"I make no promises," the man replied as he connected several leads and other things to the battlepet. "Money cannot buy life if the Dark Queen of the Underworld chooses otherwise."

Yuki snorted. "I didn't realize you believed in the Dark Lady, Doc."

"Doesn't everyone who's lived here in this godsforsaken Hell we call the Shinjuku Zone?"

Yuki shrugged, "Well a lot of people claim to have seen her, but I personally don't believe in any god or goddess of the dead."

Hajiri eyed the databroker for a second, a sneer curling his top lip. "That's cos you live a protected life, Yuki," he said without rancor. "Those of us who live at the sharp end see more of the Dark Lady than is good for us." But he couldn't really blame Yuki for being what he was and he didn't need to antagonize the closest thing he had to a trusted friend. "Don't worry about it."

*And please, Lady, don't take Zeshin from me.*

The doc turned on a small medcomp and studied the screen for a moment, his face twisting into a concerned frown. The thing showed a mass of red and amber lights, only a single green one glimmering amid the data flow. "This isn't good at all. The chip is burning out and it's trying to take your pet with it. I must admit he might already be well beyond my ability to save him. He might be paralyzed or his entire mind may be gone. He's alive for the moment, but the chip *is* trying to kill him."

Hajiri dropped Zen's hand as his own clenched into fists. He shut his eyes on the agony that the doc's words had caused, like an acid on his heart. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

He calmed himself with a considerable effort. "I'm sorry, doc, but please do what you can for him. I..." he bit his lip, "I don't want him to die."

"I do what I can," the man replied, visibly cringing in the aftermath of Hajiri's shout. Pale and shaking he turned to work on the limp pet on the exam table. His hands were trembling as he turned and lifted one of Zen's eyelids to peer beneath it.

He clucked his tongue, then motioned to the still form on the table, "Turn him over, the chip is in the back of his neck and if I'm to remove it I'll need access."

Taking deep breaths to calm his temper, Hajiri eased Zeshin onto his front. He lifted the battlepet's long, silver hair to one side to give the doc the access he required to the back of Zen's neck.

Luckily he wasn't squeamish and could keep an eye on what the doc was doing. It wasn't that he didn't trust the man, it was the fact that Zen had become so important to him and he needed to know the battlepet would survive.

The doctor picked up a small electronic instrument and set it on the back of Zenshin's neck. He moved it down slowly, frowned then moved it upward, all the while peering at a small screen in the device. Faint shadowy shapes filled the screen and after a moment Hajiri figured out that what he was seeing there were the vertebra in the pet's neck.

"I thought the chip would be somewhere in this vicinity, but I can't seem to locate it," the man admitted as he moved the scanner higher.

A blocky square no bigger than a fingernail invaded the screen, its edges hard and well defined while its middle was fuzzy, blurred, as if the image were smeared. "Ah, there it is, right at the base of the skull. And it's in bad shape, as I suspected. It's melting



down.”

The old man lifted his gaze from the screen to Hajiri, “I will do my best to save him, but that chip—” he clucked his tongue and shook his head sadly but said no more.

Hajiri closed his eyes on the pain that lanced through him like a flaming arrow. Where had all these emotions come from? He'd known Zen for less than forty-eight hours yet the battlepet had somehow become the most important thing in his whole damned life. It was so fucked up but he couldn't deny the strength of his feelings.

*What the hell is happening to me? Why do I care so much? I hardly know him and so far he's been little more than a badly trained animal. Well, out of a bed he has.*

*But in a bed...*

*That must be it. I must care about him because of the great sex.*

Slipping his finger beneath the scanner, the doctor placed it over the exact spot the chip occupied in Zen's neck. He put the device aside and picked up a blue pen, which he used to mark the spot where his finger rested.

“I will have to extract the chip; there is no other way at this point. The chip is breaking down, pouring signals into his brain that are intended to kill him.”

The doctor motioned Hajiri to back up then he dipped his hands into some thick goo in a container. After that he slid his hands into some thick gloves, donned a headset that covered his eyes and placed the tip of one finger over the mark on Zeshin's neck. A dim red light was emitted from the tip of the glove's index finger. The light cutting through the pet's skin, the doctor used his left hand to gently separate the wound so he could cut deeper.

Hajiri watched closely, knowing that even one tiny slip, the slightest false move on the doc's part could mean his lover's death. He kept hold of the thick mass of Zen's hair, its silken smoothness, somehow soothing him.

He wanted to ask the doc many questions but knew that was not a good idea right now. The fewer distractions the old man had the better. So he kept his questions to himself and simply watched the doc work.

The doc stopped cutting. He picked up a pair of oddly made clamps and used them to spread the flesh of the wound. He leaned in closer, peering at the bloody wound he'd made. The doc gave a nod and picked up another device, this one also equipped with a screen, which he placed over the cut.

The screen came to life, the device giving off a faint hum. “Chip puller,” he told Hajiri. “It isn't the best made, of course, but it's what I have,” the doctor admitted.

Hajiri stared at the doc in consternation. “That's not very reassuring, doc. Please, if you can't say anything positive, don't say anything at all.” If the dumb bastard couldn't follow that simple instruction, he was very likely to hit him, or worse.

“I am trying to be honest with you, *zonewarrior* Hajiri. I know what happens when someone lies to a man such as yourself,” the doctor replied as he removed the surgical gloves he'd been wearing and then touched a few tiny buttons on the chip puller with the tip of the pen he'd used to mark Zen's skin.

Through it all Zen lay on the table still as a corpse, the only sign he still lived the steady throb of his pulse visible on the side of his neck along with his rapid breathing.

Hajiri ran his free hand, the one not holding Zen's hair out of the way, through his own hair and grimaced at his lack of control. “I'm sorry, doc. You're right. I'd rather hear the truth than comforting lies. I'm just worried.”

Worried didn't even begin to cover what he was *really* feeling. Terrified might be closer to the truth but he didn't want to examine that. He'd never felt so dependent on another's safety in his entire life. Not even his mother had been this important and he hadn't really mourned her death.

The chip puller's hum grew louder, the sound ending in an abrupt snap.

Screaming loud as a wounded leopard, Zeshin came up off the table, leaping easily over Hajiri's head, twisting in mid-air to land facing them.

His eyes were wide, staring, full of confusion, expression showing both pain and fear.

Hajiri reached out a tentative hand. "Zen?"

A low growl rumbled through the air, the battlepet's lips lifting in a snarl. No trace of the boy Hajiri loved remained in the distrustful gaze that moved from him to the doc.

"I'm so sorry," the doctor murmured as he stepped away from the dangerous creature.

Hajiri's eyes narrowed as he regarded the battlepet. "Zeshin, stop that shit right now!"

He hated treating his lover like that but had a feeling that it was the only way to get through the pain and fear to reach the young man behind the big cat.

Amber eyes narrowed in animalistic fury, the battlepet crouching, hands becoming claws, the boy ready to spring.

"Be careful, Hajiri-san, your pet has reverted to what he was at birth, an animal, and he no longer recognizes any Master," the doctor warned.

Hajiri was furious at the doctor's words. "He's not a fucking animal!"

Taking a slow and careful step towards Zeshin, Hajiri held out his hands, palm upwards, in a gesture meant to show both lack of harmful intent and the fact that he was unarmed. "Come on, Zen, stop this crap right now. You're scaring the doc."

He edged closer until he was facing the infuriated battlepet. His arms went round Zen and Hajiri pulled him close and kissed him.

The pet struggled for a moment before going limp in Hajiri's embrace, the soft lips he'd been kissing going from stiff, snarling resistance to pliant response.

Hajiri prolonged the kiss, his tongue seeking entrance to Zeshin's mouth and, once there, tasting the battlepet's unique and delicious flavor. When he had to break away to breathe he still held Zeshin in his arms. "It'll be okay, Zen. The doc took the thing causing all that pain out." At least he hoped the damned chip was out.

"M...Master?" the pet mumbled, the word slurred into bare comprehensibility.

Hajiri's arms tightened and he smiled. "Yeah, Zen, it's me. You going to let the doc fix the wound he had to make in the back of your neck?"

Zeshin shook his head, gasped and clutched at Hajiri. "Something's...wrong...feel so... strange...dizzy..."

Zen's eyes rolled back in his head and he crumpled bonelessly into Hajiri's arms.

Hajiri scooped him up and gently placed him back on the operating table. He glared across at the doctor. "Did you fuck up, doc? The chip is out, isn't it?"

The doctor picked up the chip puller and showed it to Hajiri, revealing a badly melted chip on the underside of the device. "It's out," he stated, "but he still called you Master, so there could be a second chip somewhere. Either that or it's deeply ingrained conditioning that could be overcome with time."

The physician frowned. "Let me check for a second chip, and get that wound closed. We don't want to risk infection that close to his spine."

Hajiri relaxed enough to actually chuckle. "I've no problem with him calling me Master. Is the dizziness normal, doc, or is something causing it? And you may as well close up that nick in his neck while he's unconscious."

"I'll close the wound, but I must insist that I check to make sure I didn't miss a secondary, or even the primary chip." The doctor picked up the scanner and moved it along the battlepet's neck, watching the screen for any trace of a second chip.

It took a short time but he finally located a very tiny aberration in the bones of the pet's neck. A dark spot about half the size of the chip he'd removed. "This chip isn't damaged," he remarked. "I strongly suspect the chip I took out wasn't installed by his creators."

Hajiri thought back to what Midori had said about being chipped to prevent him ever leaving the Aoki tower and what had happened to Zen when they had left. "I think you're right, doc. That was probably the Aoki restraining chip and it got damaged when we left the tower. Do you want to remove the original chip?"

"I would say that's up to you, Hajiri-san," the doctor remarked as he studied the chip through the screen of the scanner. "This is a much more complex connection, I'm not positive the nanites in my chip remover can sever all the neural interfaces." He peered at the chip puller's screen, studying the display carefully. "Frankly, Aoki chips are laughably substandard compared to the state of the art controller chips used by the real battlepet breeding companies. The puller readout makes me think it might be possible to remove this chip, but I'd still be a bit uneasy about the whole procedure."

Hajiri chewed on a thumbnail as he thought things through. As far as he knew, Zeshin had only been owned by various members of the Aoki clan. The only other input to the battlepet's self-image was from his trainers who, especially if employed by the Aoki, would have a 'master's' best interests at heart. It was very possible that Zeshin was created to think for himself, to have intelligence and use it together with his fighting abilities. It would certainly make him an unstoppable force but also a dangerous one for the soft corporers to handle. But Hajiri was no soft corper and felt quite capable of handling Zen as he had been created, dangerous and exciting.

"Leave the chip alone, doc, especially if it's going to do more harm than good by removing it. It will be interesting to see what difference removing the Aoki chip makes."

The doctor set the scanner aside and offered Hajiri a wan smile, the man visibly relaxing in the wake of Hajiri's decision. "Thank you for making the better of two choices. I must admit I wasn't terribly sure how this would go if you wanted this chip removed. It's a very complicated connection and I'd be terrified that something would go wrong. While my life isn't much as lives go, it's mine and I'd like to retain my presence among the living as long as possible."

Hajiri grinned wryly at being called on his earlier behavior. "I'm sorry for yelling at you before, doc. Thank you for what you've done today. I guess all that's left to do is seal the cut in Zen's neck. Oh, and pay you, of course!"

"Yuki-san has promised to pay me for the services I've rendered you and your pet," the doctor told Hajiri as he opened a tiny vial and poured it over the wound in Zeshin's neck. He pressed the wound closed. "The wound sealer will keep it closed while it heals."

The doctor let the cut go and met Hajiri's gaze. "My suggestion to you is to go easy

with him until you are fully certain he's recovered from the effects of the Aoki controller chip burning out. He suffered a great deal because of this thing and he will need time to adjust to its loss as well as heal from the recent wounds to his mind *and* body." The doctor removed the chip in question from the puller and held it out to Hajiri.

Hajiri took the chip and stared at it in horror and dismay. The surface was bubbled and cracked, and the chip looked to be badly damaged. "They put this heap of crap near his brain stem? Were they trying to kill him?" He looked up from the chip to gaze at the doctor. "What do you think, doc?"

"I think it was intended to prevent him from escaping the tower based on what you've told us regarding the pain he experienced when he left the tower. I'm sure when his former master took him out some sort of shielding might have been involved that protected him. Without that, he would have suffered pain via direct neural stimulation through the connections in that chip. Fortunately, the connections appear to have burned out before the chip's full destruction sequence actuated. Your little friend was very lucky. If the chip was more robust I suspect he wouldn't have any functional brain left."

Any possibility of a rescue attempt for Midori and the other trapped gunwhores became even less possible in light of the doctor's words and the evidence Hajiri was holding in his hand. The Aoki would rather kill their captives than ever let them go and Zeshin had been lucky to get out alive. It was a sobering thought.

Hajiri handed the chip back to the doctor with a grimace. "I knew the Aoki were bastards but this is beyond that." He gave a dry humorless laugh. "All our technology but we still think like barbarians when you come down to the wire."

"And none worse than the upper echelons of any corporation. They play at being gods, but in the end they too become food for the worms," the doctor replied, voice solemn, full of bitterness and old pain.

Zeshin made a soft sound, almost like the mew of a leopard kitten, his clawed fingertips scratched along the surface of the exam table.

Hajiri was at his side in an instant. "It's all right, Zen, you'll be fine now."

\*

He lifted his head, his sight blurred, head aching so bad he suspected that someone had struck him with a building. The back of his neck hurt too, and he wondered if someone had tried to cut his head off with a dull sword. It might explain the terrible pain if someone had tried and failed to decapitate him. He couldn't help the soft cry that left his clenched jaws at the sound of his Master's voice.

His Master. His handsome, kind, perfect, wonderful Forever Master stood there, looking down at him.

Opening his mouth to speak, to tell his Master that he loved him, but instead of words, he made a pitiful mewling sound that brought a flush of embarrassment to his cheeks.

His Master frowned, though at the doctor rather than him. "Zen?"

"As I said, it will take some time for him to recover. He's been through quite an ordeal, Hajiri-san. A chip burning out and trying to take him with it has likely given him a headache of titanic proportions," the doctor informed.

Zen wanted to tell them the doctor was right. He felt as if his skull had been turned inside out and not returned to its proper form, as if, perhaps, some of his brain were hanging outside of his head, drying in the air.

He swallowed, lay his head back down and heard another of those animal sounds escape him. Tears filled his eyes. He wanted to be a man like his Master, wanted to be human, but no matter what he did, the animal always showed itself.

“Maaaaeeooooow.” His best effort to say ‘Master’ was thwarted a second time by the inside-out feel of his brain.

Warm and gentle arms enfolded him and his Master's soothing voice said, "It's okay, Zen, I'm here. Don't worry. And once you get over the pain of that damned chip being removed, you should be fine again."

“Mouwarr,” he tried again, but still couldn’t get his vocal chords and mouth to obey him. He pressed his head against his Master’s shoulder and did the only thing he was able to manage to show his appreciation for his Master. He purred, the sound rumbling deep in his chest, vibrating up his throat.

His Master smiled at the sound and held him even closer before glancing at the doctor. "How much damage had that chip done, doc?"

“No way of telling without extensive testing. Right now I’d rather not even attempt any tests. He’s had quite enough upset for a few days,” the doc said. “Let the existing chip sort itself out, and see how he is after that. If luck is with you, he might be all right. The chip in there seems to be far superior to that crap the Aoki installed. What he needs right now is rest. Take him home, or back to Mayuke’s place if you prefer, and let him sleep and recover. That’s the best thing you can do for him.”

Zen wanted to say he felt fine, but he really didn’t feel a bit fine. He actually felt worse than he had the night his Master found him in the trash. In short, he felt worse than garbage and just wanted to curl up somewhere quiet and dark until he felt better. Preferably somewhere soft, cradled in his Master’s arms.

He wanted to let them know he at least understood their words, but even so simple a thing was denied him, his ability to speak lost as a result of whatever had happened to him. He had to believe that it was a temporary condition brought about by whatever the chip had done to him. He didn’t fully understand what they were saying, but that wasn’t anything unusual. He heard the words but simply didn’t understand what his Master meant by damage from a chip or what the doc was talking about when he spoke about the chip and it sorting itself out.

His head ached, but he took comfort in the feel of his Master holding him. To him those arms around him meant everything, the pain bearable so long as he had his Master.

Anything was bearable if he had his handsome Master who loved him.

His Master glanced up and nodded at the doctor's words. "I hope Yuki and Mayuke can put up with us for a bit longer. I really don't want to have to get Zen home when he's like this. And I think we could both do with a rest."

“I’m sure they won’t mind, but—” the doctor cast a speculative look at Zeshin, who glanced at the doctor before pressing his face to his Master’s shoulder.

“He might do better being alone with you,” the doctor suggested. “Fewer people means he can focus his attention on you alone and that might help him recover.”

Hajiri grimaced. "Normally I'd agree with you, doc, but it's a long fucking walk home when Zeshin's in this state. I trust Yuki and Mayuke to give us some space. I'd love to go home but we've got no way of getting there."

The doctor seemed to be mulling something over. “You’ve been wanting to get out of that rat’s hole where you live, why not ask Mayuke about moving into the building? I

know there are a few empty places here, though they aren't on the upper floors, they're still far enough above the street for them to be relatively safe from break-ins. To be honest, the whole building is safer than that rundown pit where you live just because there are so many upper echelon killers living here." He smiled. "Mayuke, for instance."

Zen didn't really care where they went, he just wanted to get away from the talking. It hurt his head to try and follow what was being said. Since his head already felt as if it had been exploded and hastily reconstructed with nothing but cheap tape and a few drops of glue, he gave up making the effort to understand the words hammering at his mind. He let the sounds wash over him, closing his eyes and thinking about nothing but the feel of his Master holding him.

Hajiri stared at the doctor, obviously thinking the man's suggestion over. He smiled suddenly.

His gaze fell on Zeshin and the smile died.

"I'll have a word with Mayuke before we leave, doc, and thanks again for everything."

The old man nodded. "I wish I could have done more, but I just don't have the complex equipment needed to handle this sort of thing very well. I do my best but I'm no cybermodder with all their advanced gear. In the end that might be your best bet. Find one of the highend modders, maybe someone like that Kami no Freesky, or the Lightlord and have one of them fix him up."

Zen wanted to speak, wanted to tell his Master that the talking and lights hurt his head, but all that came out was an animal's pitiful whimper.

"Ah yes, you'll need this," the doctor stated and rummaged through a cabinet. He handed the Master a bottle. "I'd guess he hurts a great deal. Give him one of these every twelve hours for the pain until he stops whimpering like that."

Hajiri glanced at the label, nodded and headed for the sink. He came back with a glass of water and shook one of the pills into his hand. "Here, Zen, take this, it will help with the pain."

"The Lightlord built most of my updates. He's not cheap but I trust him more than Kami no Freesky. His knockoffs always seem to have some weird wiring in their fucking heads."

Zen did his best to take the pill from his Master's hand, but his fingers wouldn't obey his commands and act the way a hand did. All he had were paws, the same as any four-footed beast.

Tears welled up in his eyes and he turned his head away, ashamed.

"I haven't heard anything negative about the Freesky, but you'd know better than I would where such things are concerned," the doctor replied. He sat down heavily on a nearby chair. "Age is a terrible burden, young man. The mind continues to be willing, but the body soon tires, especially after the sort of stress I've endured today."

"I'm sorry, doc. Let me get this pill down Zen's throat and we'll be out of your way."

Hajiri flicked the pill from palm to fingertips and popped it into Zen's mouth. He held the glass of water to the battlepet's lips. "Swallow, Zen, then we can get you somewhere quiet to rest."

Zen obeyed, swallowing the water, coughing a bit when it didn't want to go down at first. Not only were his voice and hands disobedient, the rest of his body seemed unable to function properly.

Reduced to being an animal, he pressed his face to his Master's hand and gave another soft whimper, opened his mouth and gently bit the hand then licked it, trying to show affection.

"So sad," the doctor murmured. "He wishes to communicate but seems unable to manage it as a human would. He is doing the same thing a pet feline will to show love."

Zen whimpered and clung to his Master. He wanted to speak, wanted to tell his Master that he loved him, but no words would form, his mouth feeling as clumsy as his fingers.

\*

Hajiri was quite willing to strangle the damned doctor at that point. This wasn't an animal. This was his Zeshin. His lover. *And pet*, a nasty little internal voice added. "Yeah, he needs to rest. Come on, Zen."

Hajiri took Zen by the hand and led him out of the doctor's apartment, up the stairs and along the corridor to Yuki's door. He knocked, beginning to feel the stress take its toll on him. All he wanted to do right now was curl up with Zen and sleep.

The door opened, a slender, younger man clad in actual leather regarded him through a pair of outrageous blue eyes. The man's eyes scanned him up and down the way only another zone born killer would. Dark hair fell in a tangle of braids tipped with ribbons black as his hair, ribbons that glittered with a wealth of synth diamonds.

Zonewarrior or gunwhore, either way, the man wasn't anyone Hajiri had ever seen in the Shinjuku Zone before.

He stepped aside and held the door for them. "You'd be Hajiri, Yuki's waiting for you in there," he said and gestured toward the kitchen.

Hajiri nodded his thanks to the unknown young man and headed towards the kitchen, hand still firmly attached to Zeshin's. There were still great smells emanating from the room, reminding him that he needed to eat soon to keep his implants at optimum performance.

Mayuke turned in her seat at their entrance, took one look at them, frowned and headed towards the stove. "You two need food before sleep. Now sit and eat."

Hajiri grinned ruefully. Nobody in their right mind crossed Mayuke and he liked to think he still retained most of his sanity.

Zen dropped into the chair and lay his head on the table, but his eyes moved to the stranger who'd followed them into the room. The stranger stood there with his arms folded over his chest, watching them with those too bright eyes.

Hajiri could see the wary tension in the battlepet's body language. See it in the stare of his amber gaze as he watched the zonewarrior without so much as blinking.

Yuki sighed and shoved Firedance's wristcomp aside. "If it's any consolation, Hajiri, you're presently a wealthy man." He gestured at the blue-eyed man by the door. "This is Knightblade. He's an associate of Midori's. He'd like some details on where you last saw the gunwhore."

The man shook his dark head, the synth gems sparkling like a million stars in the midnight field of his hair. "Not associate, former boyfriend. And I'd like to get him out of the hands of those Aoki bastards."

Hajiri nodded his thanks to Mayuke as she placed a bowl of thick udon in front of him. "If Zen wants to eat on the floor let him. He's too hurt to be human and I'm too fucking tired to care."

He turned his attention to Knightblade. "Midori talked about you a couple of times. I got the impression that you hurt him rather badly. So why the sudden concern now?"

Knightblade ran a hand over his hair and sighed. "I was protecting him from some shit I'd gotten into. At least I thought I was, but in the end, he wound up in the hands of the damn Aoki bastards anyway. I love him, and I want him back."

Zen slipped to the floor and tried to use the chopsticks that Yuki had left with the noodles. He gave up, and sat staring at them, his eyes filling with tears.

Knightblade moved from the wall, crouched beside Zen and looked at him intently for a moment. "Pretty, aren't you?"

Zen averted his gaze from the stranger, his expression showing distress, as if something about the zonewarrior scared him.

Hajiri snarled almost as well as Zen could have done, as fiercely possessive emotions took hold of him. He rose swiftly to his feet, knocking his chair over in his rage. "Stay the fuck away from him, Knightblade."

The man rose with the dangerous grace of something almost as feline as Zen. A cool smile curved Knightblade's lips. "Just admiring your pet, Hajiri. No offense intended." He tipped his head to one side, a speculative gleam in his eyes. "He's a battlepet. Snow leopard human cross. They're damn rare since most of the snow leopards have gone the way of the dodo and democracy."

He turned to look at Yuki. "You're right, he's worth a shitload of corpmoney, even banged up the way he is."

Yuki gave a half smile, and nodded. "So we'd guessed, but I wanted an expert opinion."

Knightblade laughed and took a seat at the table. "I'm hardly an expert."

"You've been a trainer—"

A sharp gesture silenced Yuki. "We don't talk about that, remember, Yuki?" the blue-eyed zoner said harshly.

Zen crept closer to his Master, the sound of the other man's anger sending him to his Master for protection, or perhaps he sought to protect Hajiri. Since Zeshin couldn't speak, Hajiri couldn't tell what the battlepet intended.

Hajiri ran his hand through Zen's hair as he gazed from Yuki to Knightblade and back again, his cyberviolet eyes narrowed, his mind full of suspicion. "Midori didn't end up in the Aoki tower due to your crap, Knightblade. I spoke to him while I was in there. He went there same way I did, through Firedance's brokerage. Her kid was taken which was why she did it. Midori was hired as a gunwhore as were others who are trapped there. So all your talk of love sounds like so much shit to me."

He swiveled round to glare at Yuki, still suspicious due to the talk of money and trainers. "Don't break my trust, Yuki. Zen is not for sale."

Yuki frowned. "I have no intention of playing you like that, Hajiri. You'd kill me, that is, if Mayuke didn't do me in first."

Knightblade sat staring at Hajiri. "Might sound like shit to you, but you don't know what happened and that's fine. You don't need to know." The man got up. "Since there's nothing more for me to learn here, I'm going. Watch your back, Hajiri. The Aoki don't forget when they've been wounded, especially if it was zone trash like us that did it."

Yuki got to his feet. "I'll show you out."

"I know my way," the other zonewarrior said and walked from the kitchen.



The battlepet relaxed the instant the door closed. Zen lay his head on his Master's thigh and closed his eyes.

Hajiri ran his hands through the long silver hair and sighed. He felt more at ease with Knightblade's departure but he knew the zonewarrior's parting words were true. For the sake of the battlepet at his feet, he'd made some very powerful enemies. Even so, he wouldn't back down from the coming fight. If he had to live in the Zone he would help to clear it of Red Lotus trash.

Mind made up he wondered if he would actually help Knightblade to free Midori. Hell, why stop with Midori? Crymson and the others deserved their freedom too.

He took a couple of mouthfuls of udon and smiled through his tiredness. It wasn't as if he'd ever expected a long life anyway.

## Chapter Seven

Hajiri finished the food without really tasting it. Thoughts of Midori and the others trapped in the Aoki tower jostled with worry about Zeshin and the attitude of Knightblade in his mind and all he really wanted to do was curl up round Zeshin and sleep. There was no way he was going to make it to his apartment, let alone get the battlepet there.

Zen had scooped up the food and eaten it with his hands, the chopsticks beyond him in his present state. Perhaps they would always be beyond him. Nothing could be taken for granted until he recovered from the removal of the Aoki chip.

Mayuke took his half finished meal away and stared at him, one hand on her hip. "You ain't going nowhere today, big boy," she said sternly. "There's the double in the spare room. Use it."

Smiling his thanks at the gunbitch, Hajiri nodded to Yuki and stood up, swaying from exhaustion. "Come on, Zen. Bedtime."

The pet stood, moving to stand beside Hajiri. Zen touched his cheek to Hajiri's arm, bumped it with his nose then pressed himself to Hajiri's side, wiggling under his arm.

"Maaaaaerrrr," Zen trying to speak, got only a growling sound out, but Hajiri understood, the pet had tried to call him Master.

Hajiri helped the battlepet by holding him close to his body as they made their way from the kitchen to the spare room. It was a twenty foot journey that felt like a hundred miles given the state they were both in, but somehow they made it and collapsed onto the bed.

Hajiri pulled Zen into his embrace and closed his eyes, letting his worn out body relax at last. He took a quick scan of his cyber readings and was relieved to find them all nominal. One less thing for him to worry about.

The pet cuddled against him, fingers digging gently into Hajiri's body, a very faint purr coming from the battlepet that faded quickly to nothing as Zeshin fell into a deep sleep.

Hajiri wanted to follow Zen's example but although his body was relaxed, his mind refused to slow down enough to stop pelting him with replays of the previous night's events and those of earlier today. The lost look in Midori's eyes as he told him he couldn't leave the tower, Firedance naming the others in the same predicament, Zen bleeding his way to Yuki's apartment, the damaged chip that had tried to fry the battlepet's brain, the doctor's somber words. Hajiri wanted to scream in frustration.

Beside him Zeshin whimpered in his sleep and shook as if shivering from cold, or perhaps the memory of intense pain plagued the slender creature in his arms.

Hajiri put an arm around Zen and ran a hand down his back. The battlepet didn't feel too cold or too hot, just a warm presence snuggled up to his side; a soothing presence that finally convinced Hajiri's mind to leave all his problems until morning and close down for what was left of the night. He closed his eyes and drifted off.

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A soft click, a faint sense of motion as the door swung open brought Hajiri to instant wakefulness.

Yuki peering in at him, a wan smile serving as an apologetic greeting. "You gonna

sleep all day or did you want to come out and join the living?"

Hajiri grunted which Yuki could take as a return greeting if he wished. Then he tried to move only to find Zeshin was sprawled over him like a blanket. "If I can unwind Zen, I'll join you."

The smell of cooking food seemed to reach Zeshin, because he lifted his head and sniffed the air, turned his gaze to Hajiri and tried to speak, a pitiful meowing sound coming from him rather than human speech. His face colored, cheeks turning red and he pressed his face to Hajiri's chest.

"He's no better then?" Yuki asked, but it was clear he didn't really expect an answer because he gave Hajiri a sad smile. "Give him a bit more time, he might recover. I mean, he *does* seem embarrassed."

"Yeah." Hajiri found that he didn't want to talk about Zen's current condition to Yuki or anyone else. He turned so he could look at Zeshin. "You hungry, Zen?"

For a moment the battlepet stared at Hajiri, then he tipped his head to one side, a quizzical expression on his face. "Maaaiiooow. Maaaerrr. Maaeeeerrr." He pressed his cheek to Hajiri's and rubbed against it, a rumbling purr coming from him.

Hajiri smiled the expression wan. "I guess that's a yes. Okay, Yuki, we'll be right out. I'd like to know if I can afford a place in this building, real leather clothes and all the rest." He pulled Zeshin into his arms as he spoke and, once Yuki had gone, kissed the battlepet.

The battlepet's lips parted to admit Hajiri's tongue, slender arms and legs wrapping around him in perfect compliance, a quiet purr came from Zen.

Hajiri groaned deep in his throat, knowing they didn't have time to take this further before Mayuke came in after them or sicced Yuki on them again. Reluctantly he broke off the kiss. "Let's go and eat."

Zeshin made a pitiful sound but let Hajiri go. The clothes the pet still wore did nothing to conceal the stiff rod of his cock. Zen wanted him, but like a good pet he obeyed his Master and hopped out of the bed to crouch on the floor, head lowered, waiting for his owner to lead the way.

Hajiri crouched down in front of the battlepet and reached out a hand to stroke Zen's hair. This animalistic behavior was beginning to really bother him. "Act like a man please, Zen, not a beast." He said the words gently, not wishing to upset the battlepet.

Zen visibly cringed, opened his mouth and then closed it without uttering a sound. He turned his head away, blinking rapidly to try and hide the tears Hajiri could see filling his eyes.

"Hisss weee ssssweee Maaeerrr."

Hajiri shook his head and mentally kicked himself. "I didn't mean to upset you, Zen. I just think you should stand up instead of crouching here."

Zen got to his feet, his head and shoulders bowed, gaze averted from Hajiri. Damp trails marred his cheeks, a few tears sliding from his eyes as Hajiri watched.

Hajiri sighed but decided that they would have to deal with this one battle at a time. He rose to his own feet and tilted Zen's chin until the battlepet had to look at him. He smiled reassurance at his pet as he wiped away the tears. "That's much better. Oops, nearly forgot." He dug the bottle of painkillers out of his pocket and shook one into his hand. "This should lessen the pain."

Zen lowered his head the tip of his tongue darting out to delicately lick the pill from

Hajiri's hand before daring to press his cheek to Hajiri's palm.

Hajiri smiled at the gesture but the smell of cooking and his rumbling stomach made him take Zen by the hand and lead him into the kitchen.

Mayuke gave him a quick smile as she placed a platter of fish and bowls of rice on the table. Then she took a closer look at them both. "You look a hell of a lot better this morning, Hajiri. So does Zen. Get some food inside the both of you and you'll be as near going concerns as I can make you."

Zen waited until Hajiri seated himself, then dropped to the floor beside him, the battlepet's head coming to rest in its usual place against Hajiri's thigh.

He gave a quiet sigh, wrapped his left arm around Hajiri's calf and closed his eyes.

Mayuke put some fish into one of the bowls of rice and put it in front of Zen without any comment.

Hajiri smiled at her for that and helped himself to some of the fish. "Where's Yuki vanished to?"

"He's doing a bit of research on battlepets. I think he said something about trying to get better specifications on your boy there," Mayuke replied as she looked at the pet on the floor.

Zen bent to the food, sniffed and started to eat from the wide bowl, gulping the food down as if he might be worried someone would take it away from him. Between gulps he would lift his head, glance around the room, then return to his meal, the battlepet eating as if he expected the food to vanish

Hajiri began eating his own food and nodded. "Good. I need all the help I can get if he's to survive in the zone." He glanced down at Zen with a smile on his face. "We hadn't really worked on table manners yet." The smile died as he glanced back up at Mayuke. "I just wish he'd talk to me again. That way I'd know he wasn't damaged beyond repair."

"It's been less than a day, give it some time Hajiri." She bent and patted Zeshin's shoulder, the pet lifting his head and glancing at her. "At least he's alive, you should be thankful for that much."

Hajiri nodded. "I think he understands what I say to him, at least. And yes, I'm very thankful he's alive." He frowned at his food. "Is it too much to ask to have him back the way he was this time yesterday?"

Mayuke gave him a sad smile. "Life in the Zone, Hajiri. Nothing lasts. You should realize that and be grateful for the time you had with him before the chip went bad." She turned, gave the pet one last pat and headed out of the room. "I'll see what Yuki's found out, if anything."

Zen finished the food and lifted his head to look at Hajiri. A grain of rice clung to his nose. He appeared so young and innocent, his eyes wide and guileless as he regarded Hajiri.

Hajiri had to chuckle at the sight. At that moment Zen looked adorable. He leaned down so he could lick the grain of rice off the battlepet's nose. "You're too cute for words at times. I want you back, Zen, so hurry up and get better."

Hajiri didn't even have a chance to blink, the pet's arms encircling his neck, his soft lips closing on Hajiri's in a quick kiss.

"Boooooe loovths Maaathster."

Hajiri smiled. That had been a recognizable if somewhat mangled sentence. His smile grew into a grin in his delight. "I love you too, Zen." And he did. If last night had

achieved anything at all it was to make him realize his own feelings.

Zen pressed his face against Hajiri's shoulder, fingers gripping Hajiri's clothing, the pet clinging to him. "Maaathster," he murmured, his warm breath tickling across Hajiri's throat.

Hajiri pulled Zen onto his lap and sat holding him in very contented silence.

Zen snuggled as close as he could, a rumbling purr sounding as he clutched and released Hajiri's shoulders, kneading him the way a cat would, nuzzling Hajiri's ear and delicately licking his earlobe.

"Boooooe loovths Maaathster. Maaathster niiiice thooooo hiiiiisss boooooe."

Hajiri just knew he had to have an idiotic grin on his face when the door opened to admit Yuki. Somehow it simply didn't matter. Zen was attempting to speak properly again and was still his.

Yuki smiled at Hajiri. "He's trying to talk and you're going to split your face in half if you wear that silly grin much longer," Yuki warned.

"I found you something. Take a look," Yuki urged as he took a seat at the table, and put the datapad down turning it so Hajiri could see the screen.

"Boooooe loovths Maaathster," Zen repeated, whispering in his ear.

On the screen was a picture of several young battlepets, all of them with the same silvery hair and greyish mottling that Zeshin had down his back. "Take a real good look at the one on the far left, near the back."

The pet in question had his face turned toward the camera, the big gold eyes and expression showing curiosity, rather than the duller-eyed disinterest of the other young pets.

Hajiri didn't need to be a genius to figure out that he was looking at a younger version of Zeshin. He compared the young battlepet's interest with the dullness of the other pets. "That must be what they meant when they told him he was flawed. They didn't want intelligence, something that could think for itself, they wanted blind obedience."

"He does rather stand out, doesn't he? Now page down to the caption under the picture."

Under the photo the caption said: *All pets show typical behavior except subject 13Alpha-21 Zeta9-5, a young male that shows atypical intelligence and has recently begun articulating sounds more in keeping with human speech than those of his batchmates. Recommend continued observation prior to using standard enhancement chip and interface.*

Hajiri frowned in concentration. "So if they followed the recommendation, all that is in Zen's head now is a normal chip, whatever that might be? It would explain the dulling down of his intelligence with the use of sedatives."

"I suspect they used a special chip with him, since there was a recommendation against installing the standard chip until he'd been observed longer," Yuki explained. "If he was smart, maybe they put him to a special use, or had to dumb him down with a special chip backed up by behavior mod drugs."

Hajiri grimaced in disgust. "Well we know for a fact they were forcing drugs down his throat. And when he's not in pain due to nearly having his brain fried, he is intelligent."

"Most people don't want sex toys that can think; they just want them obedient and fuck-happy. Battlepets are supposed to be both of those things, and able to fight other

pets like them,” Yuki remarked. “I’d think all battlepets are supposed to be clever, but maybe your boy here was too smart.”

Hajiri ran his hand through Zen’s hair and grimaced. “He certainly knows how to fight and before the Aoki chip tried to kill him, he was as bright as they come. He’d simply never been taught to act as anything but an animal when it came to stuff like eating.”

He thought back to their shopping trip and smiled. “He knows exactly what he likes to wear too. Or he did.”

“I’m trying to find more information on him specifically but that’s not going to be easy. The place that made him has security tighter than a virgin’s ass,” Yuki explained. “I only got that picture because someone sent it to a pet collector who posted it in an unsecured area. He apparently owns one of Zen’s litter mates.”

The pet in question had his head resting on Hajiri’s shoulder, fingers clutching his shirt, a soft purr vibrating through his sleek, totally relaxed body.

Hajiri smiled, the expression just a little mangled due to his stress over Zen’s condition. “Thanks for looking so hard, Yuki. Anyway, do I have enough credits to buy me a place here or am I still as poor as a second-rate wannabe?”

“You’re disgustingly well off by standards out here,” Yuki replied with a grin. “You could buy a bottom of the barrel fuck-pet, do some upgrades to yourself and have money left over for a place here.”

“Boooooe loovths Maathser. Maaathser noo wooreeee. Boooooe ookaaee,” Zen said and patted Hajiri’s shoulder. “Haarrd thaaalk.” He stuck his tongue out, pointed to it, sucked it in and added, “nooo woork goood.”

Hajiri’s eyes widened in shock, both at Yuki’s revelation and the words that Zeshin had attempted. “Well one thing’s for sure, he’s still bright, just having trouble talking as yet.” He ruffled Zen’s hair as he glanced across the table at Yuki. “Can you arrange for me to buy a place here? I’ll talk to the Lightlord about upgrades later when I know how much I can spend. Oh, yeah, that reminds me. Are you going to take Firedance’s place? We need a broker we can fucking trust for once.”

Zeshin leaned into the petting, the purr getting louder.

“Yes I’ll see about getting the places that are available opened up so you can take your pick. Some cost more than others, the higher up the tower you go the more pricey it gets,” he explained. “As far as taking over Firedance’s place as a killbroker, I’ve been thinking it over, but I haven’t decided. I’m going to discuss it with Mayuke first, of course.”

Yuki grinned. “I don’t go take a piss without her permission these days.”

Hajiri chuckled. “I guess if you’ve gotta be pussy-whipped, you couldn’t find better than Mayuke to do it. But she needs someone she can trust to give her jobs too. Firedance was fine until the bastards took her kid.”

“Like I said, I’m thinking it over. But being a killbroker’s a lot of work, Hajiri, and I don’t know if I want all that work.” He winked and grinned. “Might cut into my personal time and we both know how I hate that.”

Hajiri glanced down at a still purring Zeshin. “And I know exactly what *you* want but you’ll have to wait until we get home.”

The battlepet sat back and managed to look shocked. “Boooooee iss goood. Boooooe no assk Maathser foor noothins.”

"Yes, I think he's going to be all right, Hajiri," Yuki stated with a smirk.

Hajiri grinned. "He's certainly smartass enough!" He stood up bringing Zeshin up with him. "Thanks for everything, Yuki, and please thank Mayuke for me. For now I'm going home." He frowned as a thought occurred. "That is if the Red Lotus bastards didn't find my place and trash it."

"You shouldn't go back there. At least not alone, with an injured pet. You know they'll be watching for you, maybe even waiting inside by now," Yuki told him, a worried frown tugging at his mouth. "You *know* those bastards won't leave off until they've settled the score with you."

Hajiri snarled. Damned interfering bastards. But Yuki was right and he had to deal with the idea that anything that was in his old apartment was probably gone for good. "I see a lot of shopping in our future, Zen. Clothes, furniture, a new home, the works."

Rather than sit back down he went to the counter to make some tea for them all. "Could you arrange for someone unknown to take a look for me?"

"Sure. I know a few people that would go if I asked. Low profile zoners. I'll get on that and get someone over there." Yuki's fingers clattered rapidly over the keys of the datapad. "I sent a text message. The person I'm sending doesn't like any face contact, not even by vidphone."

Zeshin padded closer to Hajiri, crouching down nearby, head tilted back to watch him make tea.

Hajiri nodded. "That's good. Means they probably don't know whoever it is, either." He sighed irritably as he poured boiling water into the teapot. "They never knew me until Zen and I found each other. Fuck!"

He carried the teapot over to the table and set it down before searching in the cupboards. "Where does Mayuke keep your tea bowls?"

"Over the stove," Yuki replied.

Zen crept under the table looking forlorn, eyes brimming with tears. "Thees boooeee sooowee, Maaasther."

Hajiri found the bowls and brought them over to the table before hauling Zeshin out from under it and placing him firmly on his lap. "It's not your fault, Zen. Those assholes think they own the zone as well as the corper areas. It's about time they found out how wrong they fucking are."

He glanced across the table at Yuki. "If Knightblade *is* on a vendetta, I'll give him all the help I can. It's about time we cleaned house and got the Red fucking Lotus off our streets."

\*

Zen rested his head on his Master's shoulder, closing his eyes. His head ached terribly despite the pill his Master had given him, but he was being held by his Forever Master and that made it bearable.

He listened to his Master and Yuki talking about the bad people of the Red Lotus. And they *were* bad people. Anyone that tried to hurt his Master qualified as bad.

And bad people who tried to hurt his Master had to die. That was the rule as he'd been taught. If his Master was in danger, he had to protect his Master, no matter what.

"Boooeee heelp Maaasther," he said. "Boooeee heelp keel theeem."

His Master's arms tightened around him and he received a smile. "Yeah, you can help, Zen, but not until you stop hurting and are well again."

“Boooee lovths Maasther,” he murmured and gently licked his Master’s chin. He stopped himself, changing the delicate touch of his tongue to a light kiss.

“And that’s my cue to step out and get some work done,” Yuki stated as he picked up his datapad and the tea and headed out of the kitchen. “Go get some rest or play with your pet. I’ve got work to do if you’re going to move the hell out of here.”

His Master chuckled. “I might just do that, Yuki. Thanks again.”

He lifted the tea bowl to his lips and swallowed the contents before holding the last bowl to Zen’s lips. “Drink up. It should help a little.”

Zen obeyed his Master and drank the tea. It warmed him inside and made him aware that he’d been cold.

He wanted to talk more, wanted to tell his Master that everything would be all right, but speaking made his head hurt too much so he cuddled against the man’s broad chest and contented himself with being held by his beloved Master.

And he did love his Master. His Forever Master who wouldn’t sell him, who hadn’t thrown him into the trash like garbage when he’d been hurt.

He clutched his Master’s shirt and held tight. “Boooeee lovths Maasther.”

It hurt to talk, it hurt so much, the pain almost blinding him, but he forced the words out, made his mouth function despite the fact his tongue felt thick and didn’t want to move to make the words properly.

His Master rewarded him with a beautiful smile. “You gonna drink some more tea or would you like to go back to bed and rest?”

“Gooo bed wif Maasther,” he answered and slipped out of the man’s lap, taking his Master by the hand and trying to lead him to bed. Admittedly it wasn’t sleep he wanted, it was pleasure to take his mind off the ache in his skull.

His Master laughed out loud at his determination. “Yeah we can do that too, if you’re up to it.” He let Zeshin lead him to the bedroom His Master’s friends had let them use.

The instant they were behind a closed door, Zen reached for his Master ready to remove his owner’s clothes as his cock went hard under his own pants.

He wanted his Master. Wanted the pleasure that would blot out the pain, even if it was only for a short time.

His Master smiled and helped remove first his clothes and then Zeshin’s. “Easy does it, Zen. We’ve got plenty of time.” Then he frowned as he glanced at the nightstand. “Damn! No lube.”

Zen didn’t waste any effort on words. He raced out to the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets until he found a bottle of oil. He grinned and hurried to his Master, offering the bottle to the taller man.

“Boooee iss good?”

His Master laughed aloud as he took the bottle and placed it on the nightstand. “Oh yeah, very good, but I’m hoping you’ll be even better soon. We’d also better hope that Mayuke doesn’t find out what we’ve been using her cooking oil for!”

Zen nodded, flinched at the way the room spun and reached out to take hold of his Master’s cock, stroking it. His own cock ached for release, and they hadn’t gotten started yet. “Boooeee waanths,” he said, hearing it come out as the needy whine of a pet, and it bothered him on some level. Irritated him that he sounded so desperate, so needy.

But he was a pet, so how else could he sound? Certainly not like a Master. Pets wanted sex the way most people wanted food, or enough air to breathe. For him sex was



everything. Sex and protecting his Master were all that mattered.

*Why do I feel like there should be more to my life than that?*

"Don't worry, you'll get it." His Master drew Zeshin close and kissed him with a great deal of passion and quite a lot of skill.

Zen moaned into the kiss, his erection pressed tightly to his Master's thigh. Helpless under the onslaught of his Master's evident passion, he trembled and wound his arms around the taller man's neck.

He was owned. Loved. And that was all that mattered to him in the whole world.

Yet a desire for something more tickled at the back of his mind. Exactly what that might be he didn't know, but the feeling that life could be something more, something greater wouldn't leave him.

He was scooped off the floor and backed towards the bed where he landed under his Master who hadn't stopped kissing him.

Zen whimpered his need, reacting to being pressed to the bed, his body willing to submit, his cock twitching, body wanting his Master, wanting to be filled, to be fucked. He held tight, returning his Master's kiss with equal passion.

His head still hurt, but the only thing of importance to him right now was the touch of his Master's hands, the feel of their bodies touching, the thrusting of his owner's tongue in his mouth.

He wanted this, wanted it because he loved his Master and because he'd survived the horror of the darkness that had tried to swallow him up.

His Master pulled away from Zeshin's lips but only so he could move his mouth to one of his nipples while talented hands skimmed over his skin, awakening even more need.

Zen arched into the touch of his Master's mouth, the feeling of those strong hands caressing him. The soft cry of a pet suffering under the emotional lash of desire slipped through his parted lips.

"Maasther! Ah!" he cried out, hands clutching at the broad shoulders of his Master.

Owned. This man owned him. Pets were owned, and he was a pet. A pet with the skill of a killer, but a pet none the less.

But that tickle at the back of his mind wouldn't stop. *There should be more than this*, it told him. More than sex and fighting, and being obedient to the man who owned him.

He chose to ignore the funny feeling, let himself get lost in the sensations of his Master's touches, his kisses.

His Master pulled away to fix him with his purple gaze. "You're hungry, aren't you? Don't worry. So am I."

"Yesss, Maasther! Booeewanth Maasther," Zen gasped out, his hands stroking his Master's shoulders and upper arms, feeling the man's power, his strength.

Of all his former owners this one was most worthy to be called his Master as the zoner was just that, a master in every way.

His Master smiled down at him and stroked his cheek. "You're so beautiful, Zen. I'll never let you go."

His Master's words brought tears to his eyes and he held on to his owner tightly. "Boooooee lovth Maasther. Boooooee lovth Maasther," he said.

"Hush, don't try to talk yet. I can see it hurts." His Master resumed stroking every part of his skin. Gentle movements designed to elicit the most pleasure.

Zen sighed at the sensations, the feel of his Master's hands as they touched him, caressing him, gentle, avoiding his wounded side.

*Master loves me. He really is my Forever Master. He loves me. He does.*

He cried out louder as his Master's caresses brushed over his belly and he squirmed wanting to be touched in the place that would give him the most pleasure.

"Pu...pu...reeze," he managed, trying to use the begging word all Master's loved to hear from their pets.

His Master chuckled softly and touched the very tip of his finger to Zen's balls, stroking them lightly, before he stopped teasing and took Zen's hard cock in his hand. "Is this what you want?"

"Ah yesss, Maasther! Boooooe lovths Maasther!" he cried out, his hips bucking with the feel of that strong hand grasping his erection in a firm, grip.

The hand pumped him just a little before his Master reached for the bottle of oil on the nightstand. He flipped it open and spread a liberal amount on his fingers before teasing them at the crack of Zen's ass.

Zen whimpered, wanting more than a finger to enter him. "Purrrreeze," he begged, trying to ask his Master to fuck him, but unable to form the words with a mouth that refused to work properly.

His head hurt still, but the anticipation of pleasure made it easy to forget about that.

"Maasther, purrrreeze!" he begged again, as that little bit of his mind told him he should be fucking his Master. He shook his head and drove that idea away. Pets didn't fuck anyone but other pets, and his Master Hajiri couldn't be called a pet. He'd received an undeniable demonstration of that particular truth.

His Master gave him a stern look as he inserted a second finger. "I'm not going to fuck you dry, Zen, so please be patient for a little longer."

Zen cried out, writhing on the fingers impaling him, rolling his hips, trying to get his Master to touch the good place inside.

A third finger was added and all three probed deeper into Zen's body.

Lightning flashed, pleasure burning across his mind, filling his body. Zen cried out sharply, hands clutching his Master. Body arching into the incredible feeling as those wonderful, clever fingers found the spot again, Zen shuddered.

"Master!" he moaned, pleasure erasing the awkwardness that plagued his mouth as it numbed the pain in his skull.

His red-haired Master smiled at his first properly spoken word and removed his fingers just long enough to coat his cock with oil. Zen's legs were spread wide, opening him to his Master's gaze, before they were eased over Hajiri's shoulders and the fingers were replaced with a cock.

Zen gasped, body shuddering the hardness of his Master's cock sliding deep, stroking across the special place inside him, giving pleasure.

"This boy loves Master," he said with perfect clarity.

His Master smiled down at him. "I love you too, Zen." Then he was thrusting harder and deeper.

Passion-flame heated Zen, his mind and body filled with intense pleasure, each stroke of his Master's cock sending him higher on the upward spiral leading to climax.

His Master groaned out loud as his thrusts became almost desperate then liquid warmth was flooding him, the sensation enough to send Zen over the edge. He cried out,

body shaking as a few splashes of cum spattered his belly.

"Master, I love you," he groaned as his body reacted to the slow thrusts of his Master's cock inside him, his cock still hard and wanting despite the climax he'd just achieved.

\*

Hajiri rolled over onto his back bringing Zeshin with him. That had been intense, an affirmation that they were both still alive and as safe as they could be for now. He smiled lazily up at his big cat boy. "I think you're feeling better already, Zen, and I'm not finished with you yet. But, let's slow things down a little, shall we?"

He stroked his hands down Zeshin's sides, careful to avoid the long knife wound, and up again, enjoying the feel of silken skin under his fingertips. "Ride me, Zen."

Zen grinned and nodded, showing enthusiasm for the request. "This boy will be happy to ride his Master," he said, and matched words to actions, his hips rolling, thighs tensing, the muscles of his anus clenching Hajiri's erection.

"This boy will make Master feel good, he promises."

Hajiri grinned up at him. "You always do, Zen." The battlepet was the first partner he'd ever had that could keep up with him. Having been cybered and trained as a gunwhore first of all, he was able to orgasm again and again. Most of his clients had ended up begging for mercy. But Zen was also specially enhanced in a different way, and could keep up with him easily. His grin grew as he thought about all the fun they would have together.

The pet rode him, lifting up, sliding down, the pace slow, meant to make it last, meant to torment and tease, the pet trained in the arts of loving a man the way he'd also been trained to kill.

"Does Master like this?" the battlepet asked, rolling his hips as he sank down on Hajiri's cock.

Hajiri moved his own hips so he was meeting Zen halfway. "Yeah, I like it. You have a great body, Zen, and you know just how to use it."

*But then so do I, my young friend, so do I.*

He knew he should be thinking about the logistics of cooking oil and bed sheets but he couldn't work up the enthusiasm. He wasn't Yuki so a tongue-lashing from Mayuke wasn't going to bother him all that much, unless she got physical, of course.

His pet was moaning constantly, a soft hungry sound that changed to an almost growling purr of enjoyment as they moved together in the rhythm of pleasure.

"Master is handsome. Master is perfect. I can't help but love such a Master," the battlepet told him.

Hajiri laughed. "I paid a lot of money to be handsome and I'm far from perfect but I'll look after you as best I can. That's a promise."

He would too. The idea of anyone, even if it wasn't the fucking Aoki Corp or their Red Lotus minions, taking Zeshin away from him was painful. His hands tightened on Zen's hips as if to reassure himself that the battlepet was real and solid.

"And I'll take care of you too, Master. And that's a promise," his pet replied, tone as solemn as it could be when intense passion turned it into a part purr part growl of need.

Zen leaned down and kissed him, hands resting on Hajiri's chest, anal muscles clasp his cock pleasantly.

Hajiri smiled into the kiss at the use of 'I' instead of the more usual 'this boy'. He

pulled away just long enough to say, "I know you will. You proved it last night." Then he resumed kissing Zeshin.

The pet's lips parted, allowing Hajiri's tongue to delve into the warm sweetness of his mouth, their tongues touching, caressing.

Hajiri groaned softly as their tongues danced. He'd never believed he would find someone who could satisfy him and he'd thought love was for idiots. But Zeshin had proved him wrong on both counts.

His arms went round his pet and held him close.

Zen's hands touched him, caressing his chest, the heat of his body clasp Hajiri's cock as the battlepet moved on top of him, driving both of them closer to completion. "Master, Master, this boy loves you."

"You're so damned good, Zen. I must have done something right in another life to deserve you." Hajiri stopped hugging Zeshin so he could reach his nipples, which he tweaked before moving one hand down to Zeshin's cock.

A whimper came from the pet as Hajiri's hand closed around his cock. "Master, I..." Zen shook his head. Sucking in a sharp breath he said, "This boy loves his Master."

Hajiri decided to try an experiment. He would be happy to get rid of the 'this boy' phrase in Zen's vocabulary. "Ah yes but this boy's Master could be anyone, couldn't he?"

Zen stared at him, blinked, and stopped riding Hajiri's cock. His expression evolved into one of puzzled confusion. "This boy's Master is you, not anyone."

Hajiri shook his head and gave a wry chuckle. "Then try saying it like this—I love you, Master. I promise I won't be offended or angry."

Zen smiled, gave an enthusiastic nod. Cheeks flushed with passion he said, "I love you, Master." He rose up on Hajiri's cock and sank back down in time to the words, "I love my Master. I love my Master."

Hajiri smiled up at his pet, Zen's words filling him with a strange contentment. "I love you, too, Zen, with all my heart."

His battlepet bowed his head and pouted, trying to look cute and innocent, but failing because he just ended up looking edible-sexy. "If you love this boy, why aren't you fucking him hard and fast, Master? This boy enjoys it when Master uses his pet the way this boy was intended to be used."

Hajiri's smile changed to a frown. "I'll decide how I'll fuck you and how I'll use you." Zen's words had annoyed him enough to flip them both over and bend the pet almost double as he thrust home more forcefully. "But if you're in such a godsdamned hurry..."

Zen cried out, wide-eyed, startled by Hajiri's aggression. He smiled, clutched at Hajiri's shoulders, face flushing as an orgasm roared through his body. "Master! Master!" he gasped, his body rocking beneath Hajiri.

Hajiri slowed the pace again and grinned down at Zen. "Feel better now?" He kept the pace slow and tortuous, just to let the battlepet know who was in charge.

"I love Master," Zen replied, breathless and trembling under Hajiri. "This boy belongs to the best Master any pet could have. This boy..." Zen shook his head. "I love you, Master Hajiri."

The pet had dared to use his name, rather than simply the title of 'Master'. Yet his name had sounded so good coming from Zen so Hajiri wasn't angry so much as surprised. He wondered if he really wanted a pet or if he would prefer Zen to be more of an equal. He was a strong fighter and would do well in the zone so that wasn't an issue. No, it was

what Hajiri really wanted from him in bed that mattered and he really wasn't too sure on that point.

Zen cried out as Hajiri thrust into his body, the battlepet urging him on with gentle touches, the light scrape of fingernails that could have shredded his skin and didn't. The pet's breathing was rough, the pet nearing another orgasm. "Be merciful to your boy and fuck him, Master Hajiri," he panted.

Hajiri couldn't argue with that so he set about giving Zen exactly what he wanted by upping the pace again. He felt his own orgasm mounting as his balls tightened in readiness. "Oh gods, Zen, I *do* fucking love you."

"I love my Master's fucking," the pet replied as he shuddered under Hajiri the battlepet gasping as his body arched beneath Hajiri. "I love Master Hajiri! I love you!" he screamed as his body tensed and bucked under Hajiri, a fuck-blush spreading across his face.

The tight heat clenching round his cock, Zen's words and the absolute beauty of his face as he came was enough to push Hajiri over the edge into orgasm. "Zen!" he screamed, his hold on the boy tightening as both his vision and mind blanked for split seconds and his world narrowed down to bliss.

"I love you, Master! I love you!" his pet sobbed. Tears streaking his face, he clung tightly to Hajiri.

When his brain and body seemed to be in the same place again, Hajiri rolled them both onto their sides, not wanting to crush Zen with his greater weight from his enhancements, yet lethargic and sated enough to want to doze for a while. "I love you too, Zen," he murmured.

The pet cuddled against him with a contented sigh. "No matter what happens, I'll always love you and stand beside you, Master Hajiri."

That comment jerked Hajiri back to wakefulness with a jolt. 'No matter what happens.' And a hell of a lot could happen. He'd made enemies of the Aoki Corp and Red Lotus now, several of the best gunwhores the zone had to offer were still trapped in the Aoki's damned tower under pain of having their brains fried, and Midori's 'boyfriend' wanted his aid in rescuing them. Life had suddenly gotten much more dangerous.

But for once in his life, Hajiri wouldn't be facing the danger alone. Not with his loyal pet and lover at his side.

The soft rumble of Zeshin's purr filled the room the way the warmth of love filled Hajiri's heart.

Yes, together they *could* face the dangers of life in the Shinjuku Containment Zone. Face them and, fate willing, they would win.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Auburnimp is the pen name of Tracy Boyall. She is the author of two successful series Fallen Angels and Sweepers and the co-author of the Dragonhope books.

She has been writing since she was fifteen but it is only in recent years that she decided to see what publishers thought of her work. Her characters are always strong,

feisty and often impetuous enough to get into dangerous situations rather like their creator.

She has recently become a partner in an e-publishing house, Shadowfire Press, where she is responsible for finances and customer service.

She has been a knife-thrower's target, an exotic dancer, a drummer, a homeless wanderer and many other things due to a desire to go wherever life takes her.

She now lives in a small house in a large English city with four resident cats and one frequent visitor.

She is female and has blue eyes; anything else is often subject to change without notice.

Links:

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\*

Michael Barnette began his writing career as a poet and moved up to writing erotic fiction in 1997. A five time nominee for the Gaylactic Spectrum Award, Michael has also been a finalist for the Lambda Literary award.

Once a resident of Coconut Grove and South Beach in Florida, Michael relocated to Georgia where there were fewer gunshots and yard to yard searches for suspects to disturb the writing muses. He has since moved on and now lives in a modest sized town in Colorado where he has a spectacular view of the mountains.

To find out more about Michael's works visit these sites on the internet.

Links:

<http://www.michaelbarnette.com>

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