

8WEEPER8

Bittersweet Revenge



AUBURN IMP

*Published by Mojocastle Press, LLC
Price, Utah*

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Sweepers: Bittersweet Revenge
ISBN: 1-60180-044-4

Copyright © 2007 [Auburnimp](#)

Cover Art Copyright @ 2007 [Dominic Cordoba](#)

All rights reserved.

Excluding legitimate review sites and review publications, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Copying, scanning, uploading, selling and distribution of this book via the Internet or any other means without permission from the publisher is illegal, punishable by law and will be prosecuted.

Available online at:

<http://www.mojocastle.com/>

DEDICATION:

To my favourite demonboi with heartfelt
thanks

SWEEPERS:
BITTERSWEET
REVENGE

PROLOGUE

Waves crashed relentlessly against the coast, driven on by the howling wind behind them. The booming sound they made as they hit the shore together with the mournful cries of seagulls and the moaning of the wind almost exactly echoed the mood of the lone figure that stood on the beach braving the bad weather.

The skirts of the young man's long coat were whipped around his legs by the autumn gale, yet he stood motionless, his hands dug deep into his pockets. He gazed out over the wild, wind-driven water that so matched the flows and eddies of his own soul. To any random passerby, the tears in his eyes could very easily be the result of the salt sting or the harsh wind. Not that there were any passersby.

He drank in the unhappy sounds around him, allowing them to add to his melancholy mood, a mood that was partly caused by mourning and partly by his terrible weight of guilt.

Then another noise joined the mix: the low drone of a passing anti-grav. The sound awoke happier memories, although they still raised a sigh from between his lips.

His mind travelled back to a summer day that wasn't that far distant in time, yet could have been a

thousand years before for all the resemblance it now bore to his current life. He had come here to mourn yet the memory was a happy one, even if somewhat bittersweet.

His soft, shapely lips opened and he murmured a beloved name for the very last time.

Then he lost himself in the memory.

CHAPTER ONE

The sun glinted brightly on the silver sides of the small and streamlined anti-grav. Inside it, together with their smirking instructor, sat two young men, dressed in identical orange jump suits, webbing harnesses and with parachute packs strapped to their backs.

The first of these young men, Tsukimoto Tsukasa, a tall and slender, girlish-looking beauty with chin-length blue-streaked black hair and bottomless black eyes, was eager and excited. His boyfriend, Ono Hiro, just as tall but stockier with chocolate-coloured eyes and his dark brown hair in a short, neat hairstyle, looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but where he was.

"Get your helmets on," the instructor said with a malicious grin. "Drop in five minutes." Both Tsukasa and Hiro hastened to obey him, checking each other's chin straps and parachutes.

The anti-grav's side door slid open and the instructor grinned once again, the expression friendly if somewhat vicious. Tsukasa grinned back and stepped forward quickly and eagerly. His companion followed much more slowly and reluctantly.

"Are you sure this was such a good idea?" Hiro whined as the wind whipped at him.

"You're not chickening out on me now, are you?" Tsukasa enquired sweetly.

"The thought had crossed my mind." Hiro was smiling though, and Tsukasa knew he was going to jump with him.

"Let's go!" the instructor yelled above the combined noise of the wind and the anti-grav's field.

Tsukasa jumped straight away. Hiro followed almost immediately, even though he was yelling his head off as he left the anti-grav.

Tsukasa chuckled, spreading his arms and legs out so he was horizontal in the air, and let out a whoop of pure and unadulterated joy. It was just like being a bird, the wind tearing at his clothing the only real indication that he was actually moving at all. Even the sky seemed a more intense blue up here, less washed out with pollution, and wisps of cloud like white cotton candy added to the beauty of this incredible feeling. He rolled in the air until he was facing the sky.

Above him, Hiro's chute opened up like a huge red and blue flower, but he chose to get much closer to earth before opening his own. Rolling again, he looked down at the earth, then folded his body so he would cannonball for a while. The ground started to rush up towards him and he felt the much-loved feeling of the adrenaline rush running through his blood like a drug. Grinning in delight, he finally pulled the ripcord.

He was pulled up sharply as his chute opened and the earth slowed down in its rush to meet him. He

pulled down on the ropes to one side of his chute just as he had been shown, changing direction slightly so that he would land fairly and squarely inside the drop zone. He landed well, knees bent to absorb the shock, before rolling onto his side once again exactly as he'd been shown. He pulled in his chute, mildly surprised at how hard the wind tried to take it and him along the ground. A short distance away Hiro came down firmly on his ass, cursing luridly as he did so.

Tsukasa chuckled and after pulling in his chute and turning it into a neat bundle that would fit underneath one arm, made his way over to his boyfriend. "What kind of landing was that meant to be? You're not supposed to come down on your ass."

"What the fuck were you doing up there?" Hiro countered as he struggled with his own chute. "Why did it take you so damned long to open your parachute?"

"It's called skydiving, Hiro. I *loved* the freedom up there. Didn't you?"

"Not especially. And the adrenaline high was what *you* loved," Hiro shot back. "We're going to have to have a long talk about your addictions, Tsuki."

He glowered at his lover. "Don't start with that! When it comes to addictions, mine might just harm me alone. Your addiction harms us both."

Hiro grimaced. "Yeah, okay, I know I'm on dodgy ground here, but I would never do anything to harm us, and that's a promise."

He pressed his fingers against Hiro's lips to silence him. He hadn't wanted to bring this subject up at all.

Not now; perhaps not ever. “Shush, don’t make promises that you aren’t sure you can keep.”

Hiro nodded as he removed Tsuki’s fingers and planted a kiss on them. “Okay, but I will promise to keep it within limits that I can afford, how’s that?”

Tsuki smiled wryly. “Quite a lot better, I guess.” He was prevented from saying anything more by the arrival of the pick-up vehicle.

On the short ride back to their floater—a car-like vehicle, the result of the anti-gravity technology that some scientific genius had come up with just in time to stop a third world war over diminishing oil supplies—he was deep in thought. Hiro said he could keep his addiction under control, but he had his doubts. In fact, he was convinced that his lover was already in way over his head. An addiction to gambling was an expensive one to maintain, especially when you lost as often as Hiro did. But he was very much in love with his idiot partner, so he would live with Hiro’s weakness, however much it might cost them both.

* * * * *

When they arrived home, Hiro was not in the least bit surprised when Tsuki grabbed his hand and dragged him off to the bedroom. He knew his lover well enough by now to know that an adrenaline high always put him in exactly the right mood for lovemaking. He smiled as he allowed himself to be pulled along. Tsuki’s dangerous stunts might worry

him at times, but the aftermath was usually nothing short of spectacular.

"Get that ugly jumpsuit off while I get the bath filled," Tsuki said.

Hiro raised a brow in surprise. "You want a bath first?"

"Dear gods, yes! You smell as if you came down in a cowpat and I'm pretty sure I smell as bad!" Tsuki took an experimental sniff at himself and made a face. "Or perhaps I smell even worse than you do."

Hiro chuckled softly, but he couldn't fault Tsuki's logic. They both smelled of sweat, whatever it was that the countryside always stank of and in his case, the miasma left by sheer, stark terror. Grimacing, he stripped off his clothes without further argument while Tsuki ran them both a bath.

He dumped the dirty clothing in the hamper and wandered naked into the bathroom. Tsuki was already in the hot, steamy water smiling wickedly up at him like some erotic fantasy come to life. He lost no time in rinsing off over the wooden slats that covered the drain before joining his lover in the large tub.

Tsuki's hands ran down his sides. "You want me to wash your back?" he asked huskily.

"Mmm." Okay, so it wasn't exactly scintillating repartee, but it was all he could manage with his lover's hands running over his body so possessively.

"I'll take that as a yes, shall I?"

He managed a nod and let the remains of the tension from the jump seep out of his body under Tsuki's skilful hands. His lover washed his back and

hair thoroughly before climbing out of the tub to change places with him.

"I suppose that means it's my turn to wash your back."

"Something like that," Tsuki said glancing back over his shoulder and grinning broadly.

"You're a minx, you know that, don't you?"

Tsuki shot him a look of overdone innocence from under long, thick lashes. "Who me?"

Chuckling, Hiro washed his lover's back and sides and chest and every other part of that lithe form that he could reach before he worked on his hair. Gods, how he loved Tsuki's body: a body that looked equally good in tight jeans or the vintage gothic dresses and corsets he was so fond of. Fifty years ago, he would not have looked out of place in one of the visual kei bands that were so popular at the time.

He smiled as Tsuki leaned his head back to rest on his shoulder, making low noises of appreciation. His lover was beauty personified, and he often wondered what the hell the man saw in him. He was nothing special, with his dark brown hair and eyes of the same uninspiring colour.

"You had enough of bathing, sweetheart?" he whispered against the blue-streaked darkness of Tsuki's hair.

"Yeah, time for bed," Tsuki murmured, although he didn't move.

"It means actually getting out of the bath, Tsuki," he said with a grin.

His lover sighed and clambered out of the bath,

draping a towel round his waist as he did so. He climbed out in his turn and let the water out before grabbing the other towel to dry himself with. Tsuki chuckled suddenly, grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the bedroom.

"You're such a pain at times," he muttered, though without any heat or real meaning in the words. He loved Tsuki just the way he was: effeminate, graceful, daring and sexy as all hell.

Of course, Tsuki knew it. "You wouldn't want me any other way, Hiro baby."

He let out a mock snarl and wrestled Tsuki onto the bed, not that his lover was putting up much in the way of resistance. They landed, laughing, with him on top.

"That towel just has to go," he said and pulled the towel away from Tsuki's slender hips to reveal the whole of that glorious body. His love was as hard as a rock, already dripping pre-come in anticipation of what was to happen. He stared, mesmerised as ever by the fact that this magnificent man loved him in return.

"Then so does yours," Tsuki said and pulled Hiro's towel away before rising up to kiss him deeply. He stopped thinking coherently about then and gave himself over to sensation.

Tsuki rolled him onto his back and shimmied down his body, leaving damp trails with his tongue as he went. He groaned in pleasure as that talented tongue dipped into his navel before licking the very tip of his cock, teasing at the slit. He was suddenly

engulfed in wet warmth as his fantastic lover deep-throated him in one long swallow and he cried out in pleasure.

He didn't realise just how far gone he was until Tsuki pressed the tube of lube into his hand and he stared at it stupidly. His cock was aching with need while his balls were as tight as a drum. He couldn't wait any longer and gasped almost in pain as he clumsily smeared lube onto his cock.

Sighing slightly and shaking his head in exasperated amusement, Tsuki finished the job for him, spreading the lube evenly over his throbbing cock. Hiro went to smear some on his fingers in order to prepare his love, but Tsuki wouldn't let him. "I can't wait for all that," he whispered. "I want you inside me right now."

"Are you sure?" When Tsuki nodded, he gently eased himself into the tight warmth of his lover's luscious body, lifting those long legs up and apart as he did so. Tsuki sighed happily and wound loving arms around his neck.

"Fuck me, Hiro, fuck me good and hard."

Not the sexiest nor the most romantic words in the world, perhaps, but to Hiro they sounded like the purest poetry. He pushed in even deeper before starting to move in the age-old rhythm of love. Tsuki's hips came up to meet him thrust for thrust and his head was thrown back in hedonistic abandon. He would never tire of the sight of his lover in the throes of passion.

"Hiro, oh yeah," Tsuki gasped and he thrust even

harder and faster until the world narrowed down to this one act of love between the two of them. He cried out Tsuki's name as everything disintegrated into pure, unadulterated pleasure and he came deep inside his lover.

There was an answering cry from Tsuki and he felt streamers of warm, white creaminess hit his chest and abdomen before he collapsed against his lover's chest.

"Gods, how I love you," he gasped out and felt Tsuki's gentle kiss against his cheek as thanks. He rolled off his lover as soon as he recovered and used one of the abandoned towels to clean them both off.

Tsuki murmured his name and turned in his arms, quickly settling down to sleep.

Sleep eluded Hiro, however, and he gazed at his slumbering lover with worry deep in his mind. It sometimes seemed to him that he was not good enough for Tsuki, that there was more wanting, something that always remained unsaid. So many times his dark-eyed love refused to let him prepare him properly for sex, had even told him not to bother with lube on a few occasions. But there was no way on this earth that he could ever hurt his beautiful minx, even though he feared that was what Tsuki really wanted him to do.

There was something else eating at him, too. He'd made Tsuki a promise that he'd already broken, and he wondered if their relationship would survive that when Tsuki found out just how much he already owed to the casino.

* * * * *

Tsuki was bored. Hiro had to attend some tedious business dinner or other and he was stuck in their apartment on his own with nothing but a TV dinner or take-out to choose from. He opted for take-out and sat in front of his computer with his carton of noodles. He did some work on the website he was designing for a local company, finished his noodles and decided on a spot of hacking just for the sheer hell of it.

He spent some time surfing the web, mostly in the action sports and extreme sports categories until a gravboarding site caught his eye. Whether it was the possible excitement of finding old friends in a sport he used to excel in or the cocky expressions of the guys in the photograph on the front page, he was never quite sure, but something made him decide to hack the site.

He soon came up against some pretty high level encryption, and that puzzled him. Why would a simple sports site need that much security? He sat back in his chair and studied the encryption codes. Nothing too fancy, and nothing he couldn't crack. Grinning, he started to break into the secrets behind the encryption. What he found there made him stare at his screen in surprise.

No wonder they had felt the need to encrypt their database and server. There was a wealth of information here about an organisation called New Broom and the 'Sweepers' it employed. Cross-referencing to the database, he found names and

addresses of several of these Sweepers. Frowning slightly, he backtracked and typed New Broom in the search engine. Surely such an organisation would have some way of contacting it if it was involved in the business that seemed to be suggested in the database on the gravboard site.

Ignoring the hundred or so hardware stores selling cleaning materials and thinking their name was a really original pun, he finally found what he was looking for. New Broom was the parent organisation of the Sweepers, in reality bounty hunters, who were attempting to bring felons to justice—for the price on their heads. He glanced back to the information on the gravboarding site and realised that the gravboarders involved in maintaining that site must be fairly high ranking Sweepers—if they actually held ranks, of course.

He noted down a couple of the names, those of the webmaster and the next one on the list who seemed to have almost full access to the site. The others he ignored for now, having quickly scanned the list for familiar names from his own gravboarding days. There were none, so he exited the encrypted part of the site and continued reading New Broom's official site.

Seemingly anyone could approach them if they had information regarding the whereabouts of wanted felons with prices on their heads. It was a common enough business in this day and age. The police forces, stretched beyond their limits by both organised crime, eager amateurs, the more than

occasional serial killer and untold numbers of rapists, burglars, drug dealers and petty criminals, had started to put prices on the heads of those they most wanted to see brought to justice. Their ploy had led to several bounty-hunting organisations springing up. New Broom appeared to be one of the more successful of these, not afraid to go up against the real hard asses and even the crime bosses.

He sat back in his chair again, deep in thought. The gravboarders would be the guys to approach if he was interested in becoming a Sweeper. The question was, was he interested? On one hand, it would be exciting and sometimes dangerous work which really appealed to him. On the other, Hiro would throw a fit at the mere thought of it.

Regretfully he leaned forward and switched off the computer, although almost as an afterthought, he did file away the two names and the shared address he'd noted down.

CHAPTER TWO

Hiro stood in the doorway to the main gambling room. The over-decorated and cheesy casino was as crowded as ever with blank-eyed gamblers all trying to make a few extra yen to add to their pay. The fact that most of them lost more than they made did not seem to occur to any of them, but then, wasn't he as bad? He picked his way through the crowd to his favourite poker table and sat down in one of the few remaining places.

The dealer smiled at him as he recognised a regular, and Hiro grinned back. He was soon lost in the game, betting heavily. He won enough hands to be able to take a break and headed for the bar.

The casino owner, Kazuya Soubi, was already standing there and they exchanged a few words, Kazuya seemingly having the sense to realise that Hiro was a good customer and should be looked after.

Kazuya was a good-looking man, Hiro supposed, stocky but with muscle rather than flab and dark penetrating eyes that twinkled with unholy amusement. Attractive, yet somehow repellent, and Hiro felt a frisson of fear run down his spine like ice water. He shivered.

"Is something wrong, Ono-san?" Kazuya was all

sollicitous concern.

"No...at least, I don't think so, unless I'm coming down with something." It was the best excuse he could think of on the spur of the moment, but it seemed to satisfy Kazuya.

"You young salarymen are all the same. You work your fingers to the bone and end up making yourselves ill. You should look after yourself better, Ono-san."

Hiro nodded. "You're probably right, Kazuya-san," he agreed with a sigh. "My partner is always telling me the same thing, when he's not dragging me off to join in some dangerous stunt or other." The barman noticed him then, and he ordered a single-malt whiskey.

Kazuya gave him an appraising look from over the rim of his glass. "I don't believe I've met the young man."

"He's not much of a gambler." And you're never going to meet him if I have anything to say about it, Hiro was thinking. Kazuya was well known for his less than altruistic interest in pretty young men, and his Tsuki was much more than merely pretty.

Kazuya shrugged. "A pity. Perhaps you would care to bring him to the restaurant for dinner at least."

"Perhaps one night I will." He paid for his drink and took a sip.

Kazuya nodded and seemed to lose interest as a party of expensively dressed men entered. "Excuse me, Ono-san, some business associates of mine have just arrived."

Hiro nodded and watched as Kazuya hurried forward to greet his guests. He finished his whiskey and went back to the poker table. Just over an hour later he was passing the office on his way back from the bathroom when a cry, quickly cut off, drew his attention. Curiosity got the better of him, and he peered through the office window. What he saw made him clench his fists in helpless rage. He pulled his head back quickly, but not before Kazuya glanced up.

Hiro made his way back to his place at the poker table, shaking with a mixture of fury, fear and horror. He started playing again, but his mind was no longer on the game and he started losing quite heavily. Deciding to give the night up as a bad job, he stood up and made his way towards the door.

Right now all he wanted to be was safely curled up around Tsuki, and he left the casino quickly. The quiet streets and almost empty train home gave him the time and space to dwell on what he'd seen. It kept playing over and over in his head like a terrifying horror movie, and he shivered in fear.

If Kazuya had recognised him, he was a dead man. He'd been going to the casino for long enough to know some of what the man was involved in. He had even watched and listened, thinking he was being as brave as his lover would have been. What a fool he had been.

Maybe he needed some insurance.

* * * * *

Just over a month later, Tsuki was alone in bed. It was well past four in the morning and still Hiro hadn't come home from the Casino. He gave up on sleep and climbed out of bed, pulling on his robe. He wandered into the kitchen and put the kettle on to boil. The sound of the door opening made him look up.

Hiro threw his keys on the hall table and came into the kitchen. He gave a slight start when he saw Tsuki. "I...er..."

"You thought I'd be fast asleep. I'm so very sorry to disappoint you." Tsuki wasn't in the mood to be anything but snippy with his lover. "So how much did you lose this time? And don't try telling me you didn't lose, because you look like hammered shit!"

Hiro winced at his tone and stared at the tiles on the kitchen floor as if they held the secret of the universe. "I lost quite a lot," he admitted. He glanced up and there was a feverish look in his eyes. "I thought if I kept going, I could win it all back."

"You're just not happy until it's all gone, are you?" Tsuki poured the boiling water over the tea he had spooned into the pot before he turned all of his attention on his lover. During the sleepless hours of waiting, a new and very unpleasant thought had occurred to him, and he wanted the truth now. "Exactly how much do you owe the casino, Hiro?"

Hiro stared at him, his consternation obvious in his expression, which resembled nothing more or less than a startled rabbit. "What do you mean?" he temporised.

"Don't play dumb with me! It was a perfectly straightforward question, and I want an honest answer." Please, he was thinking, please let me be wrong.

Hiro muttered a figure under his breath that he didn't quite catch. "How much?"

"Twenty-five million yen!" Hiro shouted.

A hand went to his mouth in shock. *Twenty-five million?* That was very nearly two hundred and fifty thousand US dollars: more than the two of them together earned in a year.

"Dear Gods," he whispered. "How can we ever pay that much back?" He busied himself making tea for them both rather than follow his first inclination, which was to beat the living crap out of his lover.

Hiro came up behind him and put his arms around him. "Don't worry, Tsuki."

He shrugged him off and turned, snarling, "How can I not worry, you dumb fuck? I know how these places work. They'll only give you so long to pay them back before they take it out of your hide!"

"No, they won't do that," Hiro said with conviction. "I've got too much on the casino owner, Kazuya Soubi. If I went to the police with what I know, he'd never get out of jail again."

"Oh, Hiro, you fucking idiot, if the man is that powerful and a crime boss, he'll kill you before he lets you get anywhere near the police!" He poured out two bowls of tea and handed one to his lover. "If he's an intelligent businessman, he'll let us pay off your debt at so much a month. It'll probably hurt a bit but

it's better than leaving things as they stand."

"It's not up to you to pay off my debts," Hiro said stubbornly. "Besides, I'll probably win it all back in a week or two."

"No! You've got to promise me that you'll never gamble again!"

Hiro stared at him as if he'd just arrived from another planet. "No way! I thought you were the one who liked danger and excitement. Well, now you've got it, and you want to cave in and pay a set amount every month!"

"Excitement is one thing. Owing a crime boss twenty-five million yen and then wanting more money out of him is sheer fucking insanity!"

"You just don't understand, do you? This is *my* adrenaline rush!"

He stared at Hiro for a long moment as he considered again whether or not to punch him in the mouth, then carefully put down his bowl of tea and marched into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. It was better than actually going through with punching Hiro, which he was very likely to do if he saw his lover's stupid face again before several hours had passed.

* * * * *

Hiro didn't dare disturb Tsuki later in the morning. Instead, he took a very lonely shower and dressed for work without waking his lover, stopping only to stare down at his beautiful, sleeping face. "I love you, you

minx, so we'll do it your way." His voice was the barest whisper of sound.

He called home around mid-morning, but Tsuki hung up, obviously still mad as fire with him. He decided a dozen red roses and a slap-up dinner were the way to go, and smiled to himself. Luckily for him, Tsuki's temper—although violent—was short-lived and rare.

The rest of his day was uneventful and routine, yet he found it hard to concentrate. His lover rarely showed his temper the way he had early this morning. Maybe he was right; maybe he should stop going to the casino and simply pay the money back. It would be hard to live without the excitement, but he wanted to keep Tsuki and if this was the only way to do so, then so be it. He remembered his whispered words from the morning and knew that he would keep his promise.

He left work early and headed for the florist by the station, where he picked up a dozen red roses. He continued towards the station and his train home.

A black sedan pulled up next to him. Two men in black suits and sunglasses jumped out and grabbed him. "Kazuya-san wants a few words with you," the taller of the two said.

He struggled hard, but they hustled him into the car and his heart sank. All he could think about was the last time he'd seen or spoken to Tsuki and how they'd fought. Now he very much doubted if he'd ever see his lover again. Kazuya must have found out what he'd done with the information he'd collected

on him, and that meant he was in for extreme pain and probable death.

The roses, dropped in the scuffle, had showered their petals on the pavement where they lay like so many drops of blood.

* * * * *

Tsuki paced the living room floor restlessly. It was several hours past the time that Hiro usually got home, and he was beginning to wonder if he'd finally gone too far and pushed the man away for good this time.

He'd phoned Hiro's office to apologize once he'd got over his temper, only to find his lover had already left. His secretary did mention a trip to a florist on the way home, but he knew that wouldn't have taken his lover all this time.

He sighed, wondering if he ought to call the police. Then again, Hiro was a grown man and they would probably take very little interest in the case.

He thought briefly about the Sweepers, but knew he'd need to give them some proof or better still, money. Besides, there was still the distinct possibility that Hiro had gone to a bar to drown his sorrows.

Feeling somewhat better with that thought, he picked up the clothes Hiro had worn to the casino the night before. As he picked up the pants, something fell out of one of the pockets. He bent to retrieve it, realising it was an envelope addressed to Hiro.

When he opened it and read the short letter inside,

one hand went to his mouth and his eyes widened in horror.

Ono-san,

I'm not sure if you're aware that you owe me twenty-five million yen, but I would be pleased if you would begin to make some effort to pay it back.

As regards that other matter, I am still in two minds about what I should do about it. I could simply let it go; trusting that your memory is not too good, or I could erase it from your mind for all time. You will know what I decide when the decision has been made.

Kazuya Soubi.

Seemingly Kazuya's patience had finally run out and he now wanted his money back. There was also an underlying threat to Hiro about 'that other matter', whatever that might mean.

Then he remembered what Hiro had said about having 'too much' on the casino owner. He almost ran to his computer and called up all the information he could find on Kazuya Soubi.

CHAPTER THREE

Nakamura Shinji, the head Sweeper of New Broom, was still in excellent shape despite his forty-five years. A strict regimen, which included several of the martial arts, swimming and jogging, kept him that way. His job as a Sweeper only made him faster and stronger, even though it had added several scars to his body over the last ten years.

He was sitting at his desk in an office that reflected him. It was upmarket and impersonal, yet furnished with comfortable chairs designed to put visitors at their ease. He was going through a pile of files on criminals that the authorities had recently put a price on. Most of them were aggressive and violent lowlifes, easily caught and brought to justice and the prices on their heads reflected that, but one caught his eye. Apparently the powers that be had finally seen beyond the altruistic mask worn by Kazuya Soubi, but then again, it was only a watching brief for now, and not the apprehend and detain he could have wished for.

Sighing slightly, he put the other files aside and thought about how best to go about a watching brief. If he had an expert hacker on his books, it would help enormously. The few Sweepers who were able to hack well had been stymied by Kazuya's systems on

several occasions. The man was too damned clever to let hackers in on his secrets.

He would need his very best for this assignment if they were to collect enough ammunition to put the bastard away for the rest of his unnaturally elongated life. Unfortunately, his two best were still tying up the loose ends on a rather nasty little drug cartel and probably would be for the next week or two.

However, it wouldn't hurt to approach a few of the people that Kazuya used and abused until Arashi and Kaimei got back. He flicked on the videophone and tapped in a number.

An attractive male face framed by hair dyed the colour of blood appeared on the screen, and intense dark-brown eyes gazed out at him. "Yes, boss?"

"How long will it be before you have the Osaka job cleaned up?"

The man's face broke into a rare smile. "We're pretty much finished. The authorities are checking the identities of those we brought in against their various rewards, so it should be payday tomorrow. You got something else for us?"

"Yes. Get your asses to the office as soon as you get back to Tokyo, Arashi. I'll tell you what it is then."

The smile left Arashi's mouth as swiftly as it had appeared. "Sounds like a big one if you can't discuss it over the videophone."

"The biggest, so don't waste any time getting here."

"We should be with you by Thursday morning no later than ten."

Shinji nodded his satisfaction and cut the connection before leaning back in his chair. He would need to find someone else to make the first tentative approaches or do it himself, but at least Arashi and his partner would be free a lot sooner than he'd expected.

He picked up the videophone once again. This time another redhead was gazing at him, although the long auburn locks were natural in this case. Nathan Williams, one of those that could have easily ended up on a wanted poster himself if the life of a Sweeper hadn't provided him with enough excitement to stay out of trouble.

"Yes, boss?"

"I want you to find a prostitute, preferably male and not too downtrodden. He needs to be working the Kazuya clan's section of the red light district."

Nathan's golden-brown eyes widened. "You want a rent-boy, boss? Why?"

"For the information he might have, of course. Why else would I want him?"

Nathan flushed and apologised. "I'll get out there tonight."

"Thank you." Shinji cut the connection and sat back in his chair. Nathan might be a fucking idiot, but at least things were on the move now.

* * * * *

Nathan was rather surprised that so few of the prostitutes on the street offered themselves to him

until it occurred to him that they might consider him to be one of them. The thought sent a shiver down his spine and he decided he'd better get on with what he'd been sent here to do before somebody decided to hit on him. He was straight, damn it!

He approached a sturdy-looking young man first, who told him in no uncertain terms to get lost as soon as he realised he was not looking to party.

It was the same story with the next guy and the next and he wondered if he was going to have to admit failure and leave the job to somebody else.

A light touch on his shoulder made him jump and spin around to find a young man dressed in a kimono smiling at him. His face was made up to accentuate the femininity of his attire and his long black hair was piled on top of his head and held with pins in a reasonable facsimile of a geisha hairstyle.

"Are you looking for a good time?" this strange vision asked him.

"Are you looking to get off the streets?" he countered.

A shapely eyebrow rose at his question. "If you want to talk *serious* business, this really isn't the place. Follow me."

The would-be geisha led the way off the street, down a dimly-lit alleyway, up a narrow flight of stairs and through a door into a dingy bedroom holding little more than a double bed and a dresser bearing some makeup and tissues. There he turned and gazed at Nathan. "What's the deal?"

"A home, round-the-clock protection and a job if

you want it in exchange for any information you can give us about Kazuya."

The 'geisha' gave a mocking little sniff. "Round-the-clock protection? From you?"

Nathan frowned at that. "No. From two of the best Sweepers in the business."

"Have a seat." The 'geisha' opened a small cupboard and removed a bottle and two glasses. "You want a drink?"

"No thanks, I never touch the stuff." That wasn't actually true. He liked a drink as much as the next man but he needed to keep his wits about him right now. Being in a bedroom with this effeminate man was making him nervous.

The 'geisha' shrugged indifferently and the bottle and glasses were replaced. "I'd offer you tea, but as you can see, I have no kitchen here. Besides, most of my clients want booze." He sat on the bed and glanced at Nathan. "You got a name?"

"Nathan Williams. You?" He had remained standing as the only seat was on the bed and he didn't want to sit on that.

"Little Lotus. That's my street name, and all I'm prepared to give you until I decide what to do. Sweepers, huh?"

"That's right. We have a watching brief on Kazuya."

Little Lotus frowned. "He's not a good man to tangle with. Far too many people wind up dead if they even try. Are you sure your two best can handle that?"

He wasn't at all sure. Arashi and his partner were good but were they good enough? But right now he had to reassure a frightened streetwalker. "They wouldn't be our best if they couldn't. The home being offered is theirs, so you'd never be left alone to fall into your boss's clutches."

The streetwalker lowered his head for a while, then he raised it and asked, "Why didn't they come themselves?"

"They're busy finishing off another job. They'll be back by Thursday."

"I get Thursdays off. It'll look odd if I'm on the street on a Thursday night. Tell them I'll meet them on Friday. I've got a digivid somewhere without all this stuff on. I'll wear pants on Friday." He smiled and stood up to rummage in one of the dresser drawers. "Ah yes, here it is."

He handed over the moving photograph. Nathan could see that even without the geisha clothing and makeup, he looked remarkably like a girl. He wondered fleetingly what Arashi would make of that then decided it didn't matter what he thought. He'd done his bit and found them someone prepared to help so his job was done and he could finally get out of this damned district.

"I'll make sure they get it. In the meantime keep your mouth shut."

"I'm not stupid, you know."

"No, I guess not. Well, I better get back to HQ. No doubt I'll see you again sometime." He turned away more than ready to leave. Such open effeminacy made

him extremely uncomfortable.

Little Lotus sighed, but nodded his agreement. "I hope we will meet again," he said softly. "I actually like you."

Nathan's brown eyes widened in something close to panic but he managed to nod and smile before he fled.

* * * * *

Ikedo Yamahiko—known as Arashi to all the Sweepers for his quick temper, among other things—grinned at his shorter companion, Sanada Kaimei.

Arashi knocked on Shinji's door. He was anticipating this meeting with their boss with no little excitement. If Nakamura-san said the biggest, he meant one of the big league crime bosses that they didn't often get a crack at, and he always enjoyed a challenge.

Nakamura's voice invited them to enter. He pushed open the door and strode into the office, Kaimei close on his heels.

Nakamura sat behind his desk, his body ramrod straight but he could see the tension in his boss and wondered exactly who their target was. It must be one of the ugliest predators in the pond if Shinji was this excited.

"I want you and Kaimei to go to the red light district and make contact with a prostitute with the street name of Little Lotus," he said without preamble.

Kaimei frowned. "Why?"

"Because, in exchange for our protection, he's prepared to sing like a canary about Kazuya Soubi that's why," Nakamura snapped.

Arashi felt his eyes widen in shocked surprise. Nakamura really had meant the biggest. "So the authorities have finally seen the light, have they?"

"Not entirely." Nakamura's tone was disgusted. "They're suspicious, but don't have enough real evidence to get him on anything more than a minor tax felony. We've been given a watching brief in the hopes that we can dig up enough to put him in cryostasis for life. Little Lotus is our first stop. If he can manage to give us some inside information or a schedule at least...well, we can take it from there."

Arashi frowned, perched on a corner of the desk and folded his arms. "So we're looking for the sort of proof that will convince a terrified jury to convict. That's a pretty tall order."

Nakamura shrugged. "We might just get lucky and find enough to convince the authorities that he's worth just as much dead as he is alive."

Arashi exchanged glances with Kaimei. If it came down to bringing in Kazuya's corpse, it would be him that pulled the trigger. It was his ability to kill the scum of the earth without conscience or remorse, among those other things, that had helped to earn him his nickname, which meant tempest or storm, after all.

"That would probably be much safer and surer," he agreed.

“What have we offered Little Lotus?” Kaimei asked as he draped himself over one of the chairs.

“The usual package,” Nakamura replied. “A home, a decent job and, in his case, round-the-clock protection. I’m told he’s a pleasant enough fellow.”

Arashi’s tone was dry as he asked, “Am I right in guessing the home in question is ours?”

“Until Kazuya is finally dealt with one way or another, then yes, it is.” Nakamura wasn’t even vaguely apologetic.

Arashi shrugged. It was nothing more or less than he’d expected. He gave his consent, reflecting that, if Little Lotus turned out to be a prize bitch, the house was big enough to escape him.

Kaimei’s soft voice echoed his as he spoke his own consent.

“Good,” Nakamura stated in a tone of satisfaction. “Apparently, our man will be on the streets of the red light district tomorrow night. He gets tonight off. Here’s a digivid of him.” He handed the moving picture the size of a credit card to Arashi. “Get down there, pick him up and listen to everything he has to tell you.”

* * * * *

Neither Arashi nor Kaimei were enjoying this assignment very much. It was no fun at all, not to mention highly dangerous, to be in the red light district at this hour of a Friday night. Arashi was getting tired of being hit on by both girls and boys

looking to party, and his partner had long since descended into sulky silence.

It didn't look as if their contact was working tonight after all and both of them could think of far better things to do with their time.

Arashi turned round with a sigh. "Come on, Kai, let's go home. He's obviously not out tonight."

"Yeah, but if we don't find him tonight, we'll only have to come back." Kaimei's tone and his grimace of distaste told Arashi exactly what his blond friend thought of *that* idea. He was inclined to sympathise; one night strolling these streets was more than enough. Two would be...no, he just didn't want to go there.

At times like these, he wondered why he'd ever become a Sweeper. The old cliché of it being a tough job but somebody having to do it came to mind and he grimaced at the thought. Yeah, it had its bad times, like tonight, but on the whole it was worthwhile to bring criminals in to face justice. The pay wasn't bad either.

A loud altercation further up the street caught his attention. A young man with hair dyed a vivid shade of violet was being tugged at by a beefy older guy, who was yelling at him that he would be paid for his services after he'd provided them. The young man was struggling hard, but was obviously no match for the bigger man.

Arashi frowned before glancing at Kaimei. "What do you think?"

Kaimei was gazing up the street, his usually sweet

expression stormy. "I think we help him out," he said.

He nodded. "I agree. Let's do it."

The beefy john didn't even see them coming until a gun was pressed into the small of his back. "When are you going to realise that no means no?" Arashi asked him. "Now either pay the man, or leave him the fuck alone."

The john muttered something about fucking pimps and backed off. "He's not worth the money anyway," was his parting shot.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Arashi said, watching carefully until the man walked away to hit on another, younger boy across the street.

He turned his attention to the young man they'd just rescued. He was still very attractive, but just a little on the old side to be in the rent-boy game. "You okay?" he asked as he reholstered the gun.

The young man nodded. "Thanks," he muttered and turned to go.

"Can I ask you something?" Arashi called after him. He turned, the look on his face suggesting he knew all too well what the question was.

"Why do I do it? I do it because I have no fucking choice, that's why!" He stepped closer to them, pushing his loose button-down shirt off his left shoulder to reveal a beautiful chrysanthemum tattoo. "See this? This means I'm the property of the local clan until they decide that I'm not worth bothering with anymore. I'm not quite ready to die yet, so I keep working."

Arashi frowned at the tattoo that acted as an

effective brand. "If you were given another option, would you take it?"

The streetwalker sniffed derisively. "There is no other option."

Kaimei spoke up then, his voice soft. "Is Little Lotus out tonight?"

The rent boy stared. "You haven't heard? He was 'retired' two days ago for talking to the wrong people. And if you're them, fuck off right now!"

Arashi blinked. "You belong to the same clan?" he asked.

"I do now, since they took over this patch."

"Then you'll do." He motioned to Kaimei, who produced a hypo and quickly injected a small amount of sedative into the streetwalker. It was mild enough for him to keep his feet, but strong enough for him not to put up a fight. To anyone else, it would look as if he were drunk and being helped home.

They got the streetwalker to Kaimei's floater and eased him into the back seat before driving away from the hated red light area. As they drove the man became more aware of his surroundings but made no move to escape. Instead, he stared out of the window with a bleak look on his face.

"Talk to us," Arashi invited from the front passenger seat. Cold, honey-coloured eyes were turned on him, and the rent-boy scoffed.

"Yeah, why not?" he said. "You've just handed me a death sentence after all. I may as well take as many of the bastards with me as I can."

He was silent for a long while but Arashi was

nothing if not patient when questioning victims. Finally he spoke up.

"I don't know if it was you guys that originally contacted Little Lotus, but whomever it was got him way too excited. He thought he was going to get off the streets, so he talked to the rest of us about his new friends and how they were going to help him."

"Fuck," Arashi swore. "I'd have thought they'd have chosen better than that."

The streetwalker shrugged. "I was working at the time, but I would have turned whomever it was down. Several others did too, and they've been congratulating themselves on their good sense since the Lotus was 'retired'. I'm guessing he was going to sing like a canary for you in exchange for getting off the streets."

"That was the deal, yeah," Arashi replied. "We can offer you the same deal."

Their passenger sniffed disdainfully. "Whatever deal you think you can offer me, I'm a dead man," he said. "You really think they just let us walk away?"

Arashi took a deep breath, not liking the attitude at all. "I know they don't, and that's what we're trying to change. We're Sweepers. Our target is Kazuya Soubi. We figure if we can bring the boss to justice, the whole damned house of cards will come tumbling down."

The man in the back seat sniffed. "Are you really that fucking naïve? Even if you do manage to capture him, his lawyers will get him off on a minor felony and he'll be back again, meaner than ever. The only

way to take him down is by killing him."

"We don't kill unless we have to," Kaimei said.

"Then you're idealistic fools!"

"Maybe," Kaimei retorted, somewhat stung by the streetwalker's manner, "but we've taken a lot of slime off the streets and put it behind bars or in cryostasis where it belongs."

Their passenger nodded. "Yeah, you probably have. But you've never had to deal with a bastard like Kazuya before. He hides his slime behind a veneer of respectability. Taxes all paid, altruistic handouts to the right charities, he comes up squeaky clean no matter how you look at him."

"That's why we need to find out more," Arashi said patiently.

"And you think he confides in us? Gods, you're pathetic!" The streetwalker was scathing.

Arashi was tired of this, tired of the posturing. "Listen, if you think we're so fucking pathetic, you can just go back to whatever hole it was that you crawled out of and fill it in behind you!"

Kaimei laid a steadying hand on his arm. "We promised, Arashi."

"Yes, so we did. And all we get in return is a mouthful of abuse!"

He turned to face the windscreen again and passed the rest of the journey in stony silence.

They reached their home just over an hour later. The streetwalker gave a low whistle of appreciation at sight of it. "I didn't know you Sweepers made that much money," he said. "This place must cost you a

fortune."

Kaimei smiled at him. "Nope, it's already bought and paid for. But we make enough to live on and then some."

"The offer that was made to Little Lotus still stands if you're prepared to help us bring Kazuya to justice," Arashi said, finally having gotten over his temper.

The streetwalker eyed them speculatively before taking another look at the long, low house. "What was the offer?"

Arashi smiled, sensing a change of heart. "A home, a job if he wanted one and protection from Kazuya's clan."

"That's quite a deal. Where's the home?"

"You're looking at it."

The streetwalker stared. "You two are the protection offered, right?"

"You're not as dumb as you look."

"But you don't kill."

He felt his temper start to rise again until Kaimei put a soothing hand on his shoulder. His blond partner turned to the streetwalker. "As Sweepers, we don't kill unless we have to. Criminals are generally worth more alive than they are dead. That doesn't mean we can't handle ourselves and Kazuya and his minions are special cases."

The streetwalker folded his arms. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that, if we can find enough evidence, we've got full permission to take the bastard out and still get paid," Arashi said. "So do you want a piece of

him or not?"

The streetwalker smiled suddenly, and Arashi realised just why he might have been popular with the johns. The smile took several years off him and made him very attractive indeed. Beside him, Kaimei inhaled sharply. Damn the man and his out-of-control hormones.

"I want a piece of him," the prostitute said. "Do you want me in your home?"

"You wouldn't be here if we weren't willing," Kaimei said, and he wondered just how much innuendo the blond might be putting into that remark.

The streetwalker held out a hand. "My name's Issei."

Arashi realised that, although they hadn't found and saved Little Lotus, Issei was going to be just fine, perhaps even better than the original.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tsuki sat in front of his computer, frowning. There wasn't a great deal on Kazuya Soubi to start with and what there was only told of his charitable works and his love of his wife and three young children. There was nothing at all about his less salubrious exploits. It was disappointing, but hardly surprising.

Deciding to try it from another angle, Tsuki took a look at the casino's website. Interestingly enough, Kazuya's name did not appear anywhere on the page. Delving a little deeper, he was still unable to find any open link between the casino and Kazuya. Frustrated, he sat back in his chair and started thinking outside the box.

If Kazuya really was up to his neck in the running of the casino then chances were, he was a major league crime boss. Perhaps he was looking in entirely the wrong places.

His eyes widened slightly as an idea hit him and he took a closer look at a few of the charities Kazuya supported. Soon he was faced with some heavy-duty encryption and grinned. Bingo! He steadily hacked his way into the encryption, realising that whoever had set it up was damned good. Some of it kept him out for over an hour.

The grin disappeared as he delved deeper and

realised that Hiro was in very real danger from Kazuya. If his lover only knew a tenth of what he was finding, the crime boss would want him shut up permanently. He had to find Hiro, and soon.

Perhaps the Sweepers would help him. With all that he had found on Kazuya, the man must be on a wanted list somewhere and if he was, worth a great deal to them. Mind made up, he went back to the New Broom site and looked for ways to contact the organisation. There was an email link, and he clicked on it.

Thinking carefully, he gave the Sweepers just enough information to whet their appetites, but not so much that they wouldn't want to talk to him personally. Finally satisfied with what he'd written, he sent the email before returning to Kazuya's systems and the information there.

It wasn't more than fifteen minutes later that he received a reply asking him to meet with two of the Sweepers at their office the following day. He wondered whether he should and decided that if Hiro was not home by morning, then he would.

* * * * *

Morning arrived, and Hiro had still not returned home, nor had there been any word from him. A quick phone call to his secretary found her to be just as worried, as he had not turned up for work that day. So Tsuki kept his appointment with the Sweepers.

Standing outside their office, situated in a smart tower in the business district of Marunouchi near Tokyo railway station, Tsuki's brows rose almost to his hairline. To have an office in such a prestigious area and a fine tower like this meant the organisation made some serious money. It was enough to make his adrenaline pump even more than it already was over Hiro's disappearance.

He pushed his way through the revolving door and studied the long list of companies that had offices in the building. New Broom was situated on the tenth floor, so he made his way across the foyer to the elevator.

He had just stepped inside and the doors were beginning to close when a tall man with red hair yelled, "Hold the doors!"

He pressed the 'door open' button automatically, and the man nodded at him in thanks.

As the elevator ascended, he surreptitiously studied the other passenger. It was hard to ignore him, as his very presence seemed to fill the elevator car. He was tall, nearly six feet, and his hair was dyed a deep red and cut shorter on the top and sides than at the back where it flowed over his shoulders like a crimson waterfall. Long legs were clad in tight jeans, and every line of the well-muscled chest was shown to advantage under a simple black sleeveless top. Gorgeous, Tsuki decided. If he didn't already have Hiro, he could easily have been attracted to the man.

As if aware of his scrutiny, the man turned to stare at him, the intense brown eyes coldly contemptuous.

Tsuki flushed in shame at his rudeness and quickly looked away. He was relieved when the elevator reached his floor and he could escape, only to have that relief fade as the redhead stepped out of the lift on the same floor.

One dark eyebrow rose as the redhead took another, closer look at him. "You must be the guy who sent us an email about Kazuya Soubi."

Tsuki nodded. "That's right." *Great start, Tsuki, you've managed to royally piss off a Sweeper already.*

"Wait here," the redhead said and disappeared through a panelled door. Tsuki looked around at the plush surroundings and reflected that there must be a lot of money to be made in the Sweeper business, perhaps even enough to buy Hiro out of trouble.

The door opened again, and the redhead beckoned to him. "Come on in," he said.

Tsuki followed him through what was obviously meant to be a secretary's office, although there was nobody sitting there, and into a large, corner office where a middle-aged man stood behind a desk. The man smiled, although his eyes were watchful, and held out his hand. "Tsukimoto-san? I'm Nakamura Shinji, and this is Ikeda Yamahiko."

Tsuki shook the man's hand, finding the grip to be just right. Not too hard, not too long. It was the handshake of a man you could trust. To his relief, the redhead didn't hold out a hand, perching on the edge of the desk instead.

"Please take a seat, Tsukimoto-san. I'll come straight to the point, I found your email intriguing,

and I'm curious to know why you wanted a personal meeting."

He sat down on the edge of a black leather chair facing the desk. Nakamura sat in his chair and rested his chin on one hand, his eyes never leaving Tsuki's face as if able to read his very soul.

Tsuki took a deep breath; both of these men had the power to get the adrenaline flowing through his veins. He pulled himself together and started to speak.

"I'm a web designer and systems analyst by trade," he began, "but a hacker by nature. That's how I found out about you guys. The encryption on that gravboard site isn't all that hot, to be honest."

He stopped speaking for a moment, wondering if these 'Sweepers' could help him after all. There was nobody else he could turn to, though. He sighed. It was not going to be easy to catalogue Hiro's shortcomings to total strangers, but he supposed it would be necessary to make them understand.

Haltingly he told them of Hiro's gambling debts and his hints about knowing bad things about Kazuya. He showed them the letter from the casino owner and told them of Hiro's disappearance.

He didn't miss the look that passed between them, and his heart sank. It was obvious they thought Hiro was already dead.

"I decided to do a little digging of my own and got into some really heavy shit masquerading as charities. Money laundering was the least of it. If such a man has Hiro he needs to be stopped and Hiro rescued."

Nakamura visibly tensed in his chair and shot a look at Ikeda. "We might not need Issei's information after all," he said cryptically.

He slumped as he suddenly realised that all these people wanted was the knowledge he had dug up. They were just like the police, neither knowing nor caring if Hiro lived or died. "I want justice, and I want Hiro rescued. That's all I ask."

Arashi had listened to everything the hacker had said without comment, trying hard not to get too distracted by his sheer beauty. When he'd finished giving them all his arguments and—it had to be said—a lot of information they had only guessed at before, he stood up. "Thank you very much for the information, Tsukimoto-san, but please let us take it from here. I can promise you Kazuya's days as a crime boss are numbered."

The hacker stared up at him as if he were something particularly nasty that he'd just found on the bottom of his shoe. "I told you, I want to find Hiro and bring Kazuya to justice. Nothing else will do."

"Listen to me," he said coldly, "although I understand your concerns, there is no way you can help us. You're not trained for it and to be frank, you'll be more of a liability than an asset."

The hacker's eyes narrowed. "Then I guess I'll just have to find Hiro by myself!"

He felt his temper begin to rise. Could this young fool not see just how little he would be able to do on his own? "Don't be an idiot. You go up against

Kazuya alone and you'll end up dead." *And that would be an appalling waste.* He frowned at the thought.

The hacker wasn't listening, though. "I'll take my chances," he said, stood up and turned on his heel.

Arashi found he didn't want him to go. Was almost desperate to make him stay and see sense. "Wait. We could use your help in one area, if you're willing."

The hacker turned his head to pin him with his black gaze. "If you think I'm going to sit at a computer hacking for you all day, you're very much mistaken."

Arashi wanted to slap the man. It was like dealing with a recalcitrant five-year-old. He tried hard to keep his voice cool and level. "You have a useful skill there, one that would bring a lot of evil people to justice and stop any more decent people from disappearing like your friend. Why don't you use it?"

The hacker sneered. "Because I can't and won't sit and stare at a computer screen while someone I love is in danger. Or don't you understand the concept of love, Ikeda-san?"

A mocking exhalation of breath was all the reply he deigned to give that particular piece of stupidity. It was Shinji who answered him. "Your courage—while admirable, Tsukimoto-san—will do you no good in this case. In order to go up against someone as powerful as Kazuya, you need both training and back-up, neither of which you have."

"Basically, you go off half-cocked and you're going to get yourself killed," Arashi added.

"You've already said that. The problem is that

without Hiro in it, my life doesn't mean a great deal to me anyway." Then he was walking out of the door.

Arashi's heart sank as he realised there was nothing further he could say or do to stop him. He turned to his boss. "Do we leave that fucking idiot to fend for himself?"

Shinji was thoughtful, and it was quite a few minutes before he answered. "He gave us enough to take to the authorities and get Kazuya on a wanted list so we can finally act rather than watch. However, I don't believe for one moment he told us everything he knows." He sighed irritably. "Rash young fool."

"You want him watched?"

"Yes. Arashi, let's face the facts, the boy's far too good a hacker for us to lose."

Arashi gave a mirthless little chuckle. "Besides which, you want to know what else he knows."

Shinji didn't even try to deny it. "Oh, yes, that too, of course. Follow him, Arashi. Find out where he lives, and keep him well away from Kazuya."

CHAPTER FIVE

The blue flashing lights of three police floaters and an ambulance pierced the starless night and the world-weary inspector from the homicide department gazed down at the bruised and battered body of a young man with dark brown, blood-caked hair.

"Cause of death?" he asked the medical examiner, who'd just finished his work with the body and straightened up, ready to answer his questions.

"He was beaten very severely, causing the probable fracture of several ribs, his cheekbones and jaw, two of his fingers were cut off and then he was shot in the back of the head, execution-style. He's been dead no more than five hours, no less than two. I can't pinpoint anything better than that until I do the autopsy."

The inspector nodded, his heart sinking as he heard about the fingers and the words 'execution-style'. This particular young man had seriously pissed off one of the city's crime lords.

"Who found the body?" he asked his subordinate, who had been conferring with the uniformed cops at the scene.

"Watanabe did, sir. He's waiting to speak to you."

The inspector turned his attention to Watanabe. "Do we know who he was yet?"

Watanabe produced a plastic bag containing the victim's wallet. "According to the cards and ID in his wallet, he was one Ono Hiro, a middle-management salaryman."

"Did he have any family?"

"Not here. He came from Kobe, where his family still live. The local police will deal with that."

"What about a wife or girlfriend?" Now why was the idiot patrolman blushing so furiously?

"No, sir," Watanabe said, "he was single, but there is a digivid of a young man in his wallet, and more vids of the same guy on his cell phone. He might be worth speaking to, if we can find him."

"Let me see him." The unformed man handed over a digivid the size of a credit card and the dead man's cell phone. The inspector stared at a beautiful face framed by black hair streaked with deep blue dye. The young man was wearing some outlandish getup that appeared to involve a tightly laced corset and a short flared skirt that showed off long legs any woman would have killed for. His face was made up like some gothic geisha. He glanced at the vid screen on the phone to see the same young man, this time clad in tight jeans and a blue and white striped top slipping off one shoulder, cooking a meal. No wonder his subordinate had blushed. This wasn't just your everyday boyfriend, but a stunning wet dream captured by the digivid camera.

He forced his gaze away from the vision with some difficulty and checked the cell-phone's memory for contact numbers. Nothing suspicious there, family,

friends, perhaps the man in the vids: he would try them all later.

The last contact listed made him raise his brows in surprise before sighing in defeat. This would go down as another unsolved crime, even though he now knew exactly who had ordered the death of Ono Hiro. Kazuya Soubi had removed the young man as if treading on a bug, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

"Where did he live?" he asked.

"In an apartment in Harajuku, quite upmarket," the patrolman said with a hint of envy.

"Well, let's see if Madame Butterfly lives there and can identify the body, shall we?"

* * * * *

The sound of the doorbell brought Tsuki out of a long reverie partly consisting of memories and partly of how he should go about finding Hiro. He jumped up and raced for the door, wondering if Hiro had come home after all. Wrenching open the door, he got an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach at the sight of the stranger standing there.

"Yes?"

The stranger showed him a police identivid and his heart pounded in his chest. "May I come in?"

"Have you found Hiro?" His heart had stopped trying to escape his chest, everything had gone silent and the world seemed to move in slow motion at the professional expression of sorrowful sympathy that

crossed the police officer's face.

"I really think I should come in."

He automatically held the door wider so the man could enter. Vaguely he noticed the respectful removal of slip-on shoes and went through the motions of providing guest slippers before closing the door.

"You'd better come through." He led the way into the sitting room.

The man gave the room a cursory once over, before saying, "I think you'd better sit down, sir."

The room started to spin and Tsuki grabbed at the back of the sofa for support, but missed. The next thing he knew, he was on the floor and the cop was bending over him, murmuring some nonsense about sweet green tea being good for shock.

"Never mind the fucking tea, tell me why you're here."

"It is with great sorrow that I have to inform you of the death of Ono Hiro." The cop held out a hand to help him up, but he wasn't able to move right now.

"Death?" He repeated the word stupidly. "Hiro is dead? How?"

"Please, Tsukimoto-san, let me make you some tea."

This time he didn't argue as he picked himself up off the floor. He was numb, totally unable to come to grips with the idea that Hiro was gone for good. He sat on the sofa and stared at the pale wheat-coloured wall until the cop returned with a bowl of sweetened green tea.

“Drink that. It will help.”

He took the bowl automatically and drank, shuddering at the sweetness before raising his eyes to stare at the cop. “How did he die?”

The cop fiddled with his own bowl as if not sure how he should answer, or even if he should answer at all. He took a deep breath. “He was shot in the back of the head.”

Tsuki’s eyes narrowed. “An execution, then?”

The cop gave him an assessing look. “You don’t seem surprised, Tsukimoto-san. Why is that?”

He considered how much he should tell the cop, knowing how little the police could do against someone like Kazuya. He decided on the easy answer. “He had gambling debts.”

“I see. Was it a large amount?” The cop took a sip of his own tea as he gazed at him.

“Twenty-five million yen; we were intending to pay it back over time. I guess the casino boss got impatient.” But he knew that wasn’t the reason Hiro had died.

“I’m sorry. Did you know Ono-san knew Kazuya Soubi?”

“Of course I did. He is the casino boss, after all.” He put the bowl of tea down, unable to take any more of its sweetness.

“So you believe he may be responsible for his death?”

Tsuki stared at the unhappy cop. “I’m sure of it.”

The cop sighed and put down his own empty tea bowl. “Thank you, Tsukimoto-san. I have just one

more question. Would you be prepared to identify the body?"

The body. Those two words made it real, made his beloved Hiro nothing more than a corpse. "Yes. Do you want to go now?"

The cop nodded and stood up. "It would be best to get it over with."

So you can file it away as another unsolved crime. He rose to his feet. "Let's go, then."

* * * * *

The city morgue was bitterly cold—or perhaps it was just him—and the tiled walls lined with the steel cabinets that Tsuki knew contained bodies were unfriendly and uncaring. It was the worst possible place in the world to see Hiro for the last time. But the cop led him to a smaller room decorated in the manner of a shrine or perhaps a chapel, he supposed it depended on one's faith as to how they saw it. He just saw it as a room.

There was a gurney in the centre of the room on which a body lay, covered with a sheet. The cop lifted a corner of the sheet to reveal Hiro's face. It was battered and bruised, a sure sign he'd suffered a lot of pain before he'd died.

He gazed down at his lover's almost unrecognisable face and nodded as the world fell apart around him. There was no doubt at all now, no hope left. His whole life was lying there dead.

The cop went to replace the sheet, but he stopped

him. "Can I have a few moments alone with him?"

"Of course, Tsukimoto-san, take all the time you need. I'll be in the lobby when you're ready to leave."

"Thank you."

He waited until the cop had gone, closing the door behind him, before he stroked Hiro's cold face. "You idiot," he whispered as his tears began to flow.

There was only the silence of the grave in response. He knelt by the side of the gurney and leaned forward to kiss Hiro's lips for the last time, ignoring their chill. Then he stood up again.

"Now it's my turn to be an idiot, babe. You see, I won't rest until Kazuya pays for what he's done to you. I make you that promise, Hiro. No, more than that, I make it an oath. Only Kazuya lying here in this place will ever appease me."

He stroked Hiro's hair before leaning forward to press a final, tear-soaked kiss to his forehead. "Goodbye, my sweet, loveable idiot. I'm going to miss you so very much."

Then he cried in earnest, the tears falling unheeded down his cheeks to drip off his chin and onto the floor. Memories of his lover chased each other through his mind: Hiro graduating from college with a first in business and a prestigious job already in the bag, being dragged off to go bungee-jumping or skydiving or any of the other dangerous pursuits that he had pulled his lover into, making gentle love to him at night, smiling over their silly private jokes.

It was some time before he left and met the cop in the lobby. By then his tears had been wiped away,

although they had left their mark on his face.

“Could you take me home now, please?”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine.” His voice sounded as dead as his lover, even to his own ears.

“What will you do now?”

Kill Kazuya, he was thinking. Aloud he said, “Try to carry on as well as I can.”

CHAPTER SIX

It surprised Arashi just how quickly and easily Issei fit into their household. He was a quiet young man but when he did speak, it was usually worth listening to. He had, of course, told them everything he knew about Kazuya's involvement in the vice trade, which wasn't a great deal but did tie Kazuya into the business. If they could keep Issei hidden and alive, he would make an excellent witness when and if Kazuya came to trial. He had no illusions. It was a big if.

Kaimei's mahogany eyes followed the ex-streetwalker's every movement, full of longing, and he began to wonder if this time it was more than just his partner's hormones that were driving him. Issei seemed oblivious, however, and treated them both the same, much to Kaimei's apparent sorrow.

Shinji came to see them the day after they'd picked Issei up and had a long talk with the former whore after asking him if he thought Issei would make a good Sweeper. He had to admit that he did think so, as long as he was given the right training. Issei was streetwise, and he was willing to bet he knew how to handle himself.

So now he and Kaimei were training Issei, who was learning fast.

They were in the basement, which had been

soundproofed and converted into a shooting range on one side and a dojo on the other. Today they were in the dojo, and he was putting Issei through karate training. Although the man was learning fast, he still had an underlying anger, which made him try too hard.

"No, Issei. You need to find a quiet space within yourself. You're never going to touch me if you get angry."

Issei snarled and attempted a straight kick, which he easily blocked and, bringing his jujitsu into play, dumped the ex-streetwalker on his butt on the floor.

"Now do you see what I mean?"

Issei sighed. "I can understand it at a certain level, but I can't seem to put it into practice."

"Okay. Let's go back to the basic breathing techniques. Concentrate on them when you're sparring with me."

"And they will help me because...?"

"Because by concentrating on them, you won't be thinking about your anger. Give it a try."

There was another sigh from Issei before he shrugged. "Okay."

He watched as Issei slowed his breathing deliberately concentrating on each inhalation and exhalation. He nodded, satisfied and placed himself in the classic starting position, one arm raised and parallel with his body, the other behind it at waist level and horizontal, one leg slightly forward of the other.

Issei mirrored his stance and tried a roundhouse

kick that he only just managed to block. He returned with a quick succession of jabs that Issei blocked before throwing in a straight kick that connected.

He grinned. "Well done. You see how concentrating helped you?"

Issei returned the grin and nodded. "I'd thought it was because you're better than me."

"Well, I am going easy on you until you know more moves and can link them better, but you're learning incredibly quickly."

"You've been good to me, taking me into your home and giving me the opportunity to earn some money for myself. The least I can do is my best in return. Besides..." The ex-streetwalker fell silent, flushing.

"Besides...?"

Issei raised honey-coloured eyes to gaze at him. "I want the chance to help bring Kazuya down. In order to do that, I need to learn quickly."

He frowned as he thought about the hacker, his information, attitude and beauty. "If the information we got is verifiable, then we should get the go-ahead to bring Kazuya in, at least. I just wish I believed it was all the damned hacker knows."

Issei shrugged. "Well, in all fairness to him, he did want help in finding his boyfriend."

"A boyfriend who was probably dead within twenty-four hours of his disappearance. Our hacking friend refused to accept that, and naiveté is going to get him killed."

Issei frowned slightly, "Can I ask you something?"

Why exactly do you care what happens to the hacker?"

He snorted in self-mocking amusement. "I wish I knew. Sure, he's beautiful, but he's a real brat. I'd lay odds he's been used to getting his own sweet way ever since he drew his first breath!"

Issei chuckled. "You're not that different."

He stared at the ex-streetwalker as if he'd gone mad. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Issei grinned back at him. "I get the feeling you're used to getting your own way too...probably in very different ways, but still enough to make the sparks fly with the hacker."

"Let's get back to the training, shall we?" But Issei's words had struck home and he wasn't able to concentrate, so he called it a day, silently cursing Tsukimoto Tsukasa as he did so.

It was bad enough that Shinji had told him to keep an eye on the man without all these unwanted thoughts, feelings and even dreams about him.

He let Issei go and shower while he had a protracted session with the punching bag.

* * * * *

Kaimei was in their large and homey kitchen cooking a meal and thinking about his obsession with Issei. He had never felt this way about anyone before. He had no shortage of lovers of either gender, but Issei was different. Issei made him feel like a gawky teenager having his first crush. Issei gave him butterflies in the

stomach. Issei invaded his dreams. Wherever Issei went, Kaimei followed.

It was confusing. Normally he was an easy come, easy go lover, quite content with short relationships or even one night stands as his first and greatest love was his work. Arashi had teased him often enough about his hormones and how he was oversexed, but he'd always taken his pleasures where they were offered, unlike his uptight and very possibly frigid partner.

He had often considered how strange it was that although Arashi and he worked so well together, there had never been even a single spark of interest between them. They got on well enough to work and live together, but the idea of sharing a bed had never so much as crossed their minds.

What was even worse was that Issei didn't seem to notice him at all, or at least not as more than simply a friend. For once in his life, he didn't know what to do. Or rather, he knew what he wanted to do, but something about Issei kept stopping him.

These thoughts and feelings went on for several days after Issei moved in until finally out of sheer desperation, Kaimei cornered Issei in the kitchen and blurted out his desires before planting a kiss on the ex-streetwalker's lips.

Issei put up with this, but there was no response. He simply stood passive under the onslaught.

Kaimei pulled away and frowned. "You must know how I feel about you by now, Issei."

Issei fiddled with the ring on his pinkie finger and

refused to look at him. "I was hoping I was wrong."

"I'm not talking about a one night stand here. I'm talking about trying to make it work."

Issei kept his gaze on the ring he was fiddling with. "I know you are. You're too open and honest a person to take advantage of someone."

He sighed, feeling a little guilty at Issei's words. "I wish that were true. I'm no better than the next guy, but you're different somehow."

Issei shrugged and finally raised his head, pinning Kaimei with an intense gaze. "What I meant is that knowing my history, you wouldn't even consider offering only one night."

Kaimei bit his lip, feeling even more uncomfortable. Until this moment, he'd forgotten all about Issei's past. "That's not the reason. It's because I like you much better than that."

Issei shook his head, his expression almost terrified. "Please, Kaimei, don't. I don't want to cause you any pain. I like you too much to want to hurt you, but I can't take this where you want to take it. I'm sorry."

"Am I that ugly or something?"

"No. You're a very attractive man. It's not you, it's me. I'm so sorry."

Issei fled the kitchen, leaving Kaimei to wonder what he was supposed to do now. He'd made a real fool of himself, and now he would have to try and live with the consequences of his own actions.

Arashi found him there. "What did you do to upset Issei so much?"

“I was stupid enough to make a pass at him.”

Arashi shrugged as he filled the kettle. “He’s probably not over-fond of sleeping with men. For all we know, he might be straight and just forced into what he had to do.”

“I forgot all about what he had to do.” He was feeling even more stupid now, but something struck him in Arashi’s words. “I don’t think he’s straight. I think he’s scared.”

Arashi switched on the kettle and turned to gaze at him. “Again, hardly surprising when you consider what he’s been through.”

He shook his head in frustration. “Shut up, Arashi. I feel stupid enough as it is.”

Arashi studied him for a moment. “You’re more than just wanting to get in his pants, aren’t you?”

Kaimei didn’t even try to deny it. “Why did I have to fall for someone I can never have?”

Arashi nodded as if something had been verified for him. “Who said never? Give the man some time and space, Kai. He’s only been here a few days.”

And then his real fears surfaced. “I know, but... What if he’s been put off any sort of contact for good?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Arashi switched the boiling kettle off and turned to gaze thoughtfully at him. “You make us some tea while I go and see if Issei is willing to tell us some of his story yet.”

* * * * *

Issei reached his room and slammed the door shut behind him, not out of temper but the need to hide away from the others—the need to hide from Kaimei.

The gentle kiss the blond Sweeper had planted on his lips was still tingling there, burning like a brand across his mouth. For all his sexual experience, it was the first real kiss he'd ever received that wasn't from his mother.

Reaction set in, and he hugged himself as he shook. Tears burned at the inside of his eyelids and he wanted nothing more than to crawl into a hole and fill it in after him.

He had been so afraid that this would happen and now it had, and he didn't see how he could stay here any longer.

A knock at his door made him jump.

Please, Kaimei, go away.

"Issei? Are you okay?" It was Arashi's deep voice, not Kaimei's tenor tones.

"I'm fine. I... "

"There's tea if you want some." Arashi's tone was neutral, and that was soothing.

Issei pulled himself together. Some tough, streetwise whore he was! "Okay. I think I owe you both an explanation." It would be hard to recall some of his life on the streets, but he knew they would never understand if he didn't tell them some of his story.

"Only if you want to tell us." Arashi sounded so understanding—he only hoped Kaimei felt the same

way.

"I think I need to." He opened the door and shrugged. Arashi surprised him, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing it reassuringly.

"Just remember this, Issei, neither Kaimei nor I have pasts we are exactly proud of, so we're not likely to judge you."

He nodded, not sure what to say in answer to that. He sometimes forgot that other people had secrets to keep and stories to tell. He'd been so wrapped in his own little world of misery and survival at all costs for so long he had overlooked the possible reasons his two new housemates had for what they did for a living. "Let's have this tea, then."

They joined Kaimei in the kitchen to find tea and some snacks put out on the table. The blond blushed as he entered the room, and he felt his own face heat up in response.

They all sat down, and there was silence for several minutes. He didn't know where to start, what he could say to Kaimei to make things right between them.

He took a deep breath. "I came to Tokyo to escape. My father beat my mother, and I left home after I got her to the hospital and she died. I was fourteen. Like any idiot kid, I came to the big bad city expecting to get a job and a home and have a good time in between. What a fool I was."

There was a gasp from Kaimei and a low growl from Arashi as he spoke so unemotionally about his mother's death, but it was the only way he could even

touch the subject without wanting to cry.

"What happened to me was almost inevitable. I ended up sleeping on the streets and when some guy offered to take me home for the night, I was too cold and hungry to refuse. Obviously he wanted 'payment' for his hospitality, and I lost my virginity to him."

He took a sip of his tea, not wanting to look at them, not wanting to see either pity or contempt in their eyes.

"It turned out he was a procurer for one of the local vice lords. Before I knew what was happening, I was working for him and only keeping enough for food and rent for myself. At first it seemed easy. I was young and I guess pretty enough, and I made good money. They let me keep enough for a reasonably good apartment and three square meals a day, so it was okay."

He sighed and took another sip of tea. "Time went on like that, then about a year ago, Kazuya's mob took over. Everything changed. It was work or die and we were all tattooed as his property. Some of us received...special treatment. He likes pretty men, you see. He likes to hurt them and humiliate them."

"When you sell your body, for an hour or a night, and men do what they want with it, you grow to hate the very idea of sex. But when someone does what Kazuya did..." He shuddered. "Then...then it becomes an agony of pain and humiliation." He fell silent, wondering if they could possibly understand.

Kaimei was the first to speak. "Issei, I'm so sorry.

Forget all my stupidity from earlier, please.”

He finally managed to look up to find Kaimei looking extremely uncomfortable and Arashi glowering at the floor.

“Kazuya so needs to die.” Arashi was obviously angry.

“Yes, he does.” Kaimei was all agreement.

“Now you know why I want a piece of him.” He managed a smile for Kaimei. “Don’t worry about earlier. It just came as a shock. You see you’re the only person who’s ever kissed me, apart from my mother.”

* * * * *

Luckily—in Arashi’s considered opinion—things quickly settled down between Kaimei and Issei and they were able to eat dinner together in comfort, talking about everyday things, before adjourning to the living room to watch some TV. They switched on just in time to catch the end of the news.

“In other news, the body of a young businessman was found in thick shrubbery in Ueno Park earlier today. The police have described his death as suspicious.”

He turned the volume on the TV up and listened intently, his heart sinking as he realised who it must be.

“The young man was identified as Ono Hiro, a middle-level manager at one of Japan’s major electronics organisations. As yet, police have no leads

to his killer."

He couldn't believe that. "Bullshit!"

"Ono-san was said to have been shot in the back of the head in typical execution style, but no clue as to why has been turned up as yet. And at the zoo, Zazu the giraffe has..."

He turned the volume back down and turned to stare at Kaimei and Issei. "Shit! I need to go out. I'm not sure how long I'll be."

Kaimei nodded, his expressive eyes sad. "That was the hacker's missing boyfriend, wasn't it?"

"I think so, Kai. Now I've got to stop the idiotic bastard from doing anything really stupid."

Kaimei gave him a sly little grin. "You like him, don't you?"

Arashi stared at his partner. What the hell had got into Kaimei today? "No, not at all, he's a spoilt, stubborn stupid brat, all too capable of doing something rash and getting himself killed."

Kaimei's grin widened. "So if you don't like him, why should you care what he does?"

"Because if he goes off half-cocked, he could ruin all we're trying to do." And that was all it was, no matter what his hormone-driven fool of a partner might think.

"Is he attractive?" Oh, great, now Issei was joining in.

Arashi raised a supercilious brow. "What has that got to do with anything?"

"It's just that if he is and he goes after Kazuya, the bastard will probably put him on the streets after

breaking him." Issei wasn't teasing him; he was telling it like it was in his usual straightforward way.

He thought about the beautiful hacker. "He's much more than just attractive."

"Aha! I knew it!"

"Kaimei, shut the fuck up," Issei commanded. Strangely enough, his partner did exactly as he was told for once.

The thought of Tsukimoto Tsukasa in the hands of Kazuya or working the streets was making him feel sick to his stomach, and he didn't know why. "I'll see what I can do to stop him doing anything foolish."

"Good luck." Kaimei was serious once more.

"I think you're going to need it," Issei added with a sigh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Arashi frowned as he knocked on the hacker's door. Would the stubborn idiot even listen to him?

The door was almost pulled off its hinges as the man threw it open, only to stop short and stare at the sight of him standing there. He was rumpled, unshaven and had obviously been crying.

"What..."

"Can I come in?"

"Why?" But he wasn't taking no for an answer, as he pushed past the hacker and waited for him to shut the door.

Tsukimoto glared at him. "What exactly are you doing here?"

"I saw the news and came to make sure you're not planning anything stupid."

The beautiful man slammed the door shut and stomped past him, his face as dark as a thundercloud. Once he reached the living room he turned to face him, almost snarling in his fury. "Is anything I do any of your business, Ikeda-san?"

"My name's Arashi, and I still want to help you see justice done." And he wanted to slap the damned brat.

"Why?" The man was staring at him as if he was crazy, and he was beginning to wonder himself. What

the fuck was he doing here, anyway?

"Simply because Kazuya is a particularly nasty insect—one with a vicious sting—that needs to be trodden underfoot." It was the safe answer. He didn't want to look too deeply into any other motives he might possibly have.

The hacker snorted humourlessly. "Well, at least we agree on that much."

"Tsukimoto-san, please, help us to bring him down." He had to reach this young fool before anything dreadful happened to him. The things that Issei had told him about Kazuya kept running through his mind, throwing up images of those things happening to the beautiful man in front of him.

"Tsuki." The man had spoken and taken him by surprise, so strong were the images in his head.

"What?"

"My name is Tsuki. Or at least, that's what everyone calls me." He shrugged, managing to make the gesture graceful. "You gave me your name, I gave you mine."

"Okay then, Tsuki. Will you help us?"

Tsuki simply stared back at him. "Help you do what, exactly?"

He sighed; the man was so damned difficult. "Bring Kazuya to justice, of course."

Tsuki rolled his eyes. "Justice, you say? Don't make me laugh. You put Kazuya in jail, and he'll live like a damned emperor until they let him out all of a fucking week later!"

"Not with the stuff you found, he won't." Could

the fool not see? "They'll put him in cryostasis for that."

"I want him dead! Dead like Hiro is dead!" There was a break in Tsuki's voice then, and he wanted to take him in his arms and make the pain go away but he couldn't. He didn't have the right. "Nothing else is good enough. I made a vow to my dead love, and I intend to keep it!"

He shook his head becoming exasperated with the hacker again. "If you can find enough dirt on him, then we can probably get a dead or alive call for him, which means we can kill him legally."

Tsuki appeared to think about that for a moment, and he began to hope that the man had seen some sense at last.

But then the young fool shook his head. "You told me yourself that I didn't have the right training to go after Kazuya with you, that I should let you take care of things. Well, I can't do that."

Those sad black eyes gazed at him for a moment before Tsuki surprised him by adding, "I'm sorry, Arashi."

"You can't do this on your own. Please, let us help you." He was getting desperate by now, and realised that Issei had been right when he said he would need luck.

Tsuki sat down on the sofa, indicating he should take the armchair opposite. "How long does it take to get permission to take him in dead?"

He sighed as he sat down, knowing his answer was not going to be welcome. "It can take months. But you

could use those months to train and be ready when the time comes."

Tsuki took a shuddering breath. "I can't wait months. I want him now; want him dead so badly I can taste it."

"Believe me, I know the feeling." Should he tell Tsuki that much about himself? No, it was all still too raw to touch.

Tsuki was staring at the tatami mats. "Then you should know that I can't wait for official sanction. It doesn't matter to me if they put me in cryostasis. I'll even give myself up so they can. This is all I have left, you see."

Now he was back to wanting to slap the spoilt brat. "You're young, Tsuki. There is still hope, and time can heal all wounds."

The hacker glanced up, and there were unshed tears in his eyes. "Not this wound, it can't. I thank you for your offer, Arashi, and under better circumstances I might even have taken it. I was tempted to apply for a job with you when I found your database. But now...my heart wouldn't be in it."

He stood up, ready to go, knowing there was nothing more he could say or do to change the young fool's mind.

Tsuki stood also, a frown marring his lovely features. "When I came to you for help, you thought Hiro was already dead, didn't you?"

He shut his eyes, knowing the grave mistake they had made there. "I was wrong. Kazuya obviously kept him alive for a day or two. You don't dump a

body in Ueno Park if you want to keep the deed hidden. So I think your Hiro died last night."

Tsuki's hands clenched into fists and his eyes narrowed. "So you *could* have helped me to find him before it was too late. You bastards!"

He knew there was nothing he could say to that. They *had* assumed, wrongly as it had turned out, that Tsuki's lover was already dead. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't nearly enough." But the accusation had been said offhandedly, as if Tsuki's mind was already elsewhere. "You said Hiro's body was meant to be found. Why do you think that was?"

"As a warning to others not to cross Kazuya, at a guess. It's the usual MO of crime lords marking their territory." How he'd love to know what was going on in that beautiful head right now. Tsuki might be a foolhardy and rash young idiot, but he obviously had a brain too.

Tsuki nodded. "I see. Tell Nakamura-san that if I fail, I'll make sure he has the means to find all the information he'll need."

He was getting desperate by now. "Tsuki, please, work with us on this."

A finely-drawn brow was raised at him. "Like you did with me? I don't think so. Now, if you'll excuse me, I would like to be alone."

It was a dismissal, and he knew it. Sighing, he let Tsuki show him the way back to the door. "Goodnight, Arashi, and thank you."

Not sure what he was being thanked for, he turned to stare at the hacker. The lost look in those night-

dark eyes was his undoing, and he leaned forward to catch Tsuki's lips with his own in a quick kiss before pulling away again. "Take care of yourself, Tsuki. We'll watch your back."

But by now, he was speaking to the closed door.

* * * * *

Tsuki spent a restless night both missing Hiro's presence in the bed and wondering why on earth Arashi had kissed him. Under any other circumstances, he would have been very tempted to return the kiss. Arashi was a very attractive man, one that excited him in a way that he'd never experienced before. But he couldn't forgive or forget that the Sweepers had done nothing to help him find Hiro while he was still alive.

When morning finally came, he went out in search of a very special purchase. His first port of call was a sporting gun shop, whose proprietor directed him to a personal protection store two blocks away. Such a place would not have existed in this country until about a decade before, when the gun laws were relaxed and more people on both sides of the law started buying them.

There he spent over an hour discussing the merits of various different revolvers and semi-automatics suitable for a beginner. He discussed recoils and calibres and finally settled for a Beretta, several clips and a shoulder holster. He paid for his purchase and went back to the apartment to make final

preparations and write out his will.

* * * * *

Kazuya Soubi was deep in thought. Young Ono had been a very good customer, and had been quite prepared to pay his debts back at a reasonable amount each month. He prided himself on being a good businessman, and some money coming in every month was better than the big fat nothing he was going to get out of the salaryman now.

But there had been other considerations, and Ono had seen far more than was good for him. He hadn't admitted to seeing anything, even when his fingers had been cut off, but Kazuya had recognised the startled face at the office window that fateful night.

Perhaps Ono would have kept quiet, had kept quiet, but he had to be sure. He knew there had been a boyfriend somewhere, one that Ono had kept well away from him and he started to wonder why. Did this boyfriend know what Ono had seen? Had Ono confided in him?

He racked his brain, trying to remember if Ono had ever mentioned a name or whether they lived together. Suddenly, he smiled. He remembered Ono saying something about his boyfriend and him getting a good apartment.

He picked up the videophone on his desk. A pretty young woman appeared on its screen. "Kiriko, please bring me the casino membership details of all those who have joined in the past year." There was no point

in narrowing it down further and arousing the suspicions of his secretary.

He replaced the videophone and stood up, crossing his daytime office to stand gazing out of the window at the tower blocks of the city.

His secretary did not keep him waiting long, entering and placing a thick file on his desk. "Will there be anything else, Kazuya-san?"

"A cup of tea would be nice."

She hurried away to make him the beverage while he crossed to the desk and opened the file, flicking through until he reached the kanji for Ono. He quickly found Ono Hiro's address and wrote it down on a pad before closing the file, tearing off the sheet from the pad and pocketing it. If the boyfriend was still there, he now knew where to find him.

Kiriko returned with his tea and he gave her the file back, telling her that he didn't need it after all.

When she had gone, he sipped at his tea and tried to remember if Ono had ever mentioned a name. Not that it mattered, but he would have liked at least to know who he was going to be dealing with.

* * * * *

The funeral of Ono Hiro took place on a dull grey day in a Tokyo cemetery with only a handful of colleagues and friends, his lawyer, his weeping secretary and the dry-eyed and silent Tsuki present.

Arashi had turned up more to keep an eye on the hacker than to either pay his respects or to get in the

way. He did wonder where Ono's family was, but his eyes were on Tsuki, who was far too quiet, far too calm.

It was Tsuki who placed the urn containing his lover's ashes in the little niche set aside for it, and it was Tsuki who lit the first incense stick and laid a red rose in front of the shrine. It was also Tsuki who turned away first and walked away before he spotted him leaning against a tree and came towards him. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to make sure you didn't do anything rash." He peeled himself off the tree trunk and studied the hacker.

Tsuki gazed back at him, his expression guarded. "I won't be doing anything today."

He frowned slightly at the word 'today', but then smiled. "In that case, can I buy you a coffee?"

Tsuki frowned at him then. "Why would you want to do that?"

He wasn't entirely sure himself, but something was telling him that this was not a good time for the hacker to be alone. "So I can talk to you."

Tsuki's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I've already told you, I won't do anything today."

He rolled his eyes. "I wasn't even going to mention any of that."

Tsuki's brows rose, but he agreed to the coffee on the condition that they didn't talk about Kazuya.

He agreed to the condition happily enough, and they made their way out of the cemetery and towards the nearest café.

Tsuki ordered a vanilla latte while he opted for a regular coffee, and they found a seat by the window. Nothing was said for a few moments, moments he spent studying the beautiful man across the table while Tsuki gazed out of the window at the passersby until he turned to look at him. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I was surprised so few people were at the funeral." That seemed like it would be a safe enough subject.

Tsuki gave a disgusted little sniff. "Both our families disowned us for being gay. We were both eldest sons and expected to produce grandchildren. When that obviously wasn't going to happen, well, you can guess the rest."

He was somewhat surprised by the repressive attitudes of their families. "Do attitudes like that still exist in this day and age?"

"Outside of Tokyo, they're still quite common. I had a very traditional upbringing, we actually wore kimono and had traditional decor in all the rooms, futons, low tables, kneeling instead of sitting, all that stuff. I rebelled young and had to work to pay my own way through college. Hiro was older when his parents found out, but he was the only son and they couldn't forgive. When they heard about me, they disowned him. They didn't even come today."

"That's appalling." But he was thinking back to his own childhood and knew that things like that could very easily happen, did still happen.

Tsuki shrugged. "The people who cared about him

the most were there. That's what matters, when you come right down to it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." He fell silent again, and took a sip of his coffee. He almost choked on it when he heard Tsuki's next question.

"Why did you kiss me?"

Having recovered, he knew he had to be honest. "Just like today, you looked so lost I guess I wanted to comfort you."

"I see." Tsuki seemed somewhat upset by his answer, so he made haste to reassure him.

"I'd do it again in a flash if I thought it would be welcome. But right now you're in mourning, and it wouldn't be right to take it any further."

Tsuki stared into his coffee, the slightest of smiles playing round his mouth. "Underneath the big, bad Sweeper, you're quite an honourable man, aren't you?"

He smiled at that. "I try to be. I don't always succeed, but I do try."

"I don't, not anymore. I had honour up to here when I was younger." He raised his hand and made a sweeping motion about three inches above his head. "I think when I started college, I tried to break all the rules at once. Some guys there told me I looked like a girl, so I went straight out and bought a dress, women's shoes and makeup and proved to them just how much like a girl I could look if I tried. They shut up after that. Then I discovered gravboarding and the adrenaline rush it provided. I think I'll always be addicted to that rush."

His smile grew. "You're quite a piece of work, Tsuki."

Tsuki actually smiled back at him. "Like you, I try."

* * * * *

Tsuki went through all the papers that he and Hiro kept in the small cedarwood box in the bottom drawer of the desk. His will had been added to it, and it had made him wonder if Hiro had made a will.

He didn't find a will, but right at the bottom of the box he found an envelope addressed to him in Hiro's neat kanji. Trembling slightly, he tore it open and pulled out the contents.

There was a letter and a signed affidavit witnessed by Hiro's lawyer. Frowning, Tsuki began to read the letter.

My beloved Tsuki,

If you are reading this, it is because you've had cause to go through our papers looking for my will. You won't find it here but at our lawyer's. Don't worry, my love, everything I owned is now yours.

I know that I've been a fool and that I should have listened to you about the gambling. You were right, bungee-jumping and skydiving weren't nearly as dangerous. I have realised all of that far too late, beloved, and now I've placed myself in terrible danger and perhaps you as well. I'm so sorry, my sweet minx.

The attached statement made to our lawyer should explain everything, why I'm dead and why you might be in

danger. Please read it and take it to the proper authorities, as I don't believe I will be given enough time.

My biggest regrets are the pain I must have caused you and that we won't get the chance to grow old together.

My greatest joy is that I had the honour to know you and win your love. It was not deserved, my darling, and I have let you down badly, but I'm still so happy that I've had you in my life.

All I ask of you now is to find someone worthy of your love.

*Your,
Hiro.*

Tsuki's tears fell on the letter as he read it. Bitter, useless tears that he couldn't help but cry and that he wiped away impatiently.

He turned his attention to the affidavit and started to read it. His eyes widened in shocked horror and he decided to visit the lawyer the very next day.

One thing was very clear in his mind. Kazuya *had* to die.

* * * * *

Their lawyer, an elderly man in a neat suit and spectacles, didn't seem all that surprised to see Tsuki in his quaint, old-fashioned office the following morning. He had seen the news two nights before, attended the funeral and he held Ono Hiro's will.

"I am so sorry to see you in such difficult times, Tsukimoto-san, and offer you my humble

condolences on your loss." He bowed low.

Tsuki bowed in return. "Thank you, Mori-san. Your sentiments are much appreciated."

"Please take a seat. I assume you have come here to have Ono-san's will read."

Tsuki sat in the offered seat and shook his head. "Not really, Mori-san. Hiro left me a letter telling me pretty much what was in it."

"Nevertheless, it does need to be made official so I can execute it for you."

He sighed. "As you wish, then."

Mori-san produced an official-looking document and began to read from it. It was exactly as Hiro had stated in his letter, everything being left to Tsuki who didn't really want any of it if he couldn't share it with his love. When Mori-san had finished, Tsuki leaned forward and handed him the affidavit. "That's why I'm here."

Mori-san sighed and removed his spectacles to pinch the bridge of his nose before replacing them. "He didn't have the time to take it to the proper authorities, then?"

Tsuki shook his head. "He didn't even try. I found it last night under all our papers in an envelope addressed to me."

"Then you must take it." Mori-san leaned forward across his desk as if to stress his point. "Please, Tsukimoto-san. What you have there is the means by which to end Kazuya Soubi's reign of terror. Put it in the hands of the authorities and they will issue a dead or alive warrant for him."

He frowned. "If that's the case, why didn't Hiro take it? Why leave it locked up for me to find?"

Mori-san bit his lip and sat back in his chair, clasping his hands together on the oak-wood desk. He seemed to be unsure of how to proceed. "When Ono-san came here about a month ago, he was very frightened. It pains me to admit this to you, but he was running scared."

Tsuki thought about that for a moment. "I suppose it must have been soon after he saw...that."

The lawyer nodded. "The next morning, in fact, or so he told me. I think he wanted to get it off his chest to someone he could trust, and also I think he saw it as a form of insurance, should anything happen to him."

"That would make sense." Tsuki stood up and began to pace the office. Could he trust the lawyer with what he intended? There was no one else except Arashi, and he already knew or at least guessed, judging by his visit the other night and his presence at Hiro's funeral. He was tempted to leave it in the hands of the capable Sweeper, but he had made a solemn oath and he couldn't break it.

"I made an oath over Hiro's corpse that I would avenge him. I need to do it myself, not leave it to the authorities."

An expression of great sadness passed across the lawyer's face. "Can I not persuade you...?"

He stopped pacing and slammed the side of his fist against the desk. "No! I'm sorry, but no. I'll leave the affidavit with you. If I don't come back for it after a

week, do whatever you think is right with it."

The lawyer frowned. "A whole week, but..."

Tsuki nodded his decision irrevocable. "A week will be more than enough time for what I intend. Then I will give myself up to you and perhaps that will serve as evidence in my defense. If I don't return, my will is in with our other papers."

Mori-san bowed his head, obviously greatly upset but unable to do anything in the face of Tsuki's determination. He rose to his feet and came round the desk. "As I can't convince you to change your mind, the least I can do is defend you should you need it."

He bowed to the lawyer. "Thank you, Mori-san, I appreciate it."

* * * * *

Arashi had not been able to settle since his visit to Tsuki and their conversation after Ono's funeral. He kept seeing visions of the beautiful hacker being treated the way Issei had been treated, hurt and humiliated. He saw him lying dead and covered in blood. He had to stop him somehow. The question was, how?

He pondered the problem and came up with only one answer: grab Tsuki and sit on him for a few days to keep him out of trouble. He would need to persuade Kaimei and Issei to help him, of course, but that shouldn't prove to be too difficult.

He broached the subject over breakfast two days after his visit to Tsuki's apartment and the day after

the funeral.

Kaimei glanced up from his food to stare at his partner. "Why *are* you so concerned about this guy?"

He knew he was on dodgy ground here, so he gave Kaimei the standard answer. "Why? Simply because he's the sort of rash young idiot who will get himself into all sorts of trouble if we let him and might even cock up our own plans."

Issei poured himself some tea as he mulled over the problem. "So let me get this straight. You want to kidnap this guy, bring him here and keep him a prisoner until he sees sense?"

He frowned. Put like that, it sounded almost criminal. "I don't want to keep him a prisoner. I was hoping that between the three of us we could talk some sense into him, get him to work with us, start training him and get his mind off his stupid oath."

"I guess giving him something else to think about might work," Issei said slowly.

Kaimei was frowning. "What makes you think he'd want to be a Sweeper?"

Arashi shrugged. "Something he said the other night. He said he'd considered applying to join us when he found the stuff behind the gravboard site. I think he might even have the right attitude for the job if given proper training. And you have to admit his expert hacking skills would be extremely useful."

"Perhaps if you made the offer of a day in the dojo and on the shooting range he might come voluntarily," Issei suggested.

"That might work," he said thoughtfully. "Shinji

gave his information to the authorities, so we should get a warrant soon. A day might even do it."

Kaimei sipped at his coffee, then grinned. "I think we should come with you to persuade him, though, just in case he doesn't take the bait. Besides, I want to meet this guy and find out just why you're so fucking obsessed with him!"

He rolled his eyes at his partner's words, but he would be glad if Kaimei and Issei did come with him—just in case they had to grab the fool hacker. "I'm not obsessed."

Issei and Kaimei exchanged a look, which made him reiterate that point. "I'm *not* obsessed!"

"If you say so," Kaimei said maddeningly. Issei merely shrugged and asked when he wanted to leave.

"After breakfast, I think. The sooner we can get him out of harm's way, the better. I keep feeling that the clock's against us."

Kaimei stopped grinning and frowned instead. "Your hunches are usually right on target, so let's leave the clearing up until we get back."

Issei nodded his agreement and it wasn't long before they rose from the table. They climbed into Kaimei's floater as it was the one at the front of the garage and headed for the city.

An hour later, they were parking in the underground garage in the Harajuku district. A ten-minute walk took them from there to Tsuki's apartment.

"Nice," Kaimei commented as they entered the building.

"He works in web design and systems analysing, while his boyfriend was a middle management salaryman. They weren't short of cash," Arashi said.

"So, what floor?" Issei asked as the elevator doors opened and they piled in.

"Fifth," Arashi told him, and Issei pushed the button.

He was nervous in the elevator as he remembered kissing Tsuki when he'd last been here. He was likely to receive a smack in the mouth for that now that the funeral was over, and give Kaimei even more cause for amusement. With any luck, the hacker would simply want to forget it had happened and would keep his mouth shut about it.

They reached the fifth floor, wandered down the hall to Tsuki's door and knocked. There was no reply. They knocked again, with the same results.

His eyes widened and he raced back to the elevator, the others close on his heels. When they reached the entrance lobby he went straight to the concierge desk. "We're looking for Tsukimoto-san."

"I'm sorry, sir, Tsukimoto-san went out about an hour ago."

His heart sank; they had arrived too late.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tsuki patted the Beretta under his jacket as he left Mori-san's office. He had done everything he needed to do; his will was made, and Hiro's affidavit was in safe hands. If he failed, Kazuya could still be brought down and he would still have kept his oath to his dead lover. Now it was time to act.

He glanced at his watch. His meeting with Mori-san had only taken an hour and it was still much too early to go to the casino, where he planned to confront Kazuya. He would spend the afternoon killing time.

He entered a restaurant first and ate a good lunch, then took himself off to see a movie. Early evening saw him in an arcade playing the video games there, and then another restaurant for dinner. He had an ironic little thought about condemned men eating hearty meals, but pushed it aside. There was no way he was going to lose his nerve and break his oath.

Having finished his dinner, he made his way to the casino. It was almost ten, and Kazuya should be there by now.

He filled in the registration forms, paid the membership fee and agreed that he would not play for twenty-four hours. "But I would like to see the place and have a drink, is that permitted?"

"Of course, sir," the pretty girl at the desk said with a smile. "Please make yourself at home."

He returned her smile. "Thank you."

He walked into the casino proper, somewhat taken aback by both the appalling décor and just how crowded the place already was. There would be no denying his crime, as there would be too many witnesses. It didn't matter. This last act was all he had left to do, anyway.

He made his way to the bar, his gaze moving round the huge room as he searched for Kazuya. He had studied his pictures on the Net enough to be able to recognise him on sight. He sighed in irritation as he realised that his prey wasn't there.

Turning his back on the room, he ordered a drink and settled down to wait. He was not kept waiting for long. Kazuya appeared from a side corridor and made his way to the bar. He smiled at Tsuki, a lingering and appreciative expression, before ordering himself a brandy.

Tsuki pulled the gun out of its holster, flicked off the safety and levelled it.

"Araki, take that thing away from him before he hurts himself." Kazuya smiled at him as a muscular man grabbed him from behind and wrested the gun from his hand. "Thank you, Araki. Now, tell me, who the hell *are* you?"

Araki held him in a grip of iron. "Tsukimoto Tsukasa," he snarled.

Kazuya frowned. "Tsukimoto Tsukasa? I've never even heard of you. What reason do you have to try to

shoot me?"

Tsuki still struggled futilely in Araki's grip. "You killed Hiro, you bastard!"

Kazuya's face cleared and he nodded, smiling. "Of course, you must be the boyfriend he took such pains to keep away from me. I can now see why. You're really quite stunning. What on earth did Ono have going for him that he could keep *you*?"

He wasn't prepared to answer that, wasn't prepared to tell this bastard about the love they'd shared.

Kazuya glanced around. People were still gaming as if nothing had happened. The little scene had not even created a ripple.

"Okay, Tsukasa, you and I are going to leave now. Araki here will make sure you don't hurt yourself on the way. We are going to quietly walk out of here without attracting any attention to ourselves."

If the man thought he was simply going to walk out of here with him, he was much mistaken. He continued to struggle in Araki's grip. A large hand descended over his mouth, and he was forced to walk to the door. Nobody even looked up as they passed, all of them quite determined to mind their own business and stay out of harm's way.

He was taken to an elevator that went down to the parking garage under the casino. There he was bundled into the back seat of a limousine floater and Kazuya climbed in after him, grabbing him before he could escape. Araki went round the floater to the driver's seat.

"I think I might need to keep you quiet for a while," Kazuya said and reached into the mini-bar in the back of the car. He pulled out a hypo and stuck it against Tsuki's arm before pushing down on the button that shot something into his veins.

The effect was almost instantaneous, and Tsuki fell into darkness.

* * * * *

When Tsuki came to, he was lying on a mattress on the floor of a room that appeared to be a disused and empty office. He attempted to move, but found his arms were bound behind his back. A pair of highly polished black shoes came into his line of sight, and he gazed up and into the cold, dark eyes of Kazuya Soubi. The man was smiling down at him.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Tsukasa." The voice was urbane, friendly even, and he shuddered before showing his defiance.

"Fuck you!"

Kazuya's smile grew. "No, actually, I intend to fuck you. But first I'd like to know exactly what Ono told you about me."

The drug was still coursing through his blood, making him groggy but not so groggy that he couldn't sense the danger. "He told me he owed you a lot of money in gambling debts. Twenty-five million yen, he said. We were going to pay you back but you didn't give us enough time to even arrange that before you killed him!"

Kazuya's smile turned into a frown and he rubbed his chin. "I see. You honestly believe I had your lover killed over the money? You must think I'm a fool. Where would be the profit in killing him?"

"So if it wasn't the money, why did you kill him?" He knew the answer from the affidavit, but he was curious as to just how much Kazuya would tell him. The man was arrogant enough to admit to Hiro's murder so he might divulge the rest.

The smile was back. "Let's just leave it at the poor boy was in the wrong place at the wrong time, shall we?"

Okay, so Kazuya wasn't dumb enough to further implicate himself. He glared up at him, still quite determined to be defiant.

Kazuya rubbed his chin again. "Now the big question is, what am I going to do with you? I can't let you go—not when you're so determined to kill me—but you'll only keep me amused for an hour or so. What can I do with you after that?"

He glared up at his tormentor. "Just kill me and get it over with."

Kazuya actually looked affronted. "My dear Tsukasa, I would never dream of destroying a work of art. You are a work of art, you know. So very beautiful." He crouched down and touched Tsuki's cheek, making him pull away in revulsion.

"Ah, you don't like me. Understandable, but a pity even so. It might have made things easier for you." Kazuya took off his jacket and started to unbutton his shirt. "Araki, please wait outside."

He heard the bodyguard move, the first time he'd been aware he was even in the room. There was the sound of a door being opened, then closed. He was alone with Kazuya, who was reaching over to undo his pants. His eyes widened in horror. "No!"

Kazuya leered at him. "But, yes, my dear Tsukasa, I did tell you I was going to fuck you."

He flinched away, trying to get free of those grasping hands, but his bound arms were tethered to something and he couldn't get further than the edge of the mattress. Kazuya had managed to undo his pants, and pulled them and his boxers down his thighs and over his knees. "Get off me!"

"What exactly makes you think I'll listen?" Kazuya was smiling, obviously amused by his helplessness.

"I was hoping you had at least a *shred* of common decency!"

"No. I thought you knew me better than that, Tsukasa." By now Kazuya was undoing his own pants, having stripped Tsuki of his despite his struggles.

He covered his erection with a condom and leered at Tsuki. "Now, if you're a good boy and don't struggle too much, this might not hurt at all."

Tsuki kicked out but got nowhere as Kazuya grabbed his leg and pushed it up, opening him to the crime lord's gaze. "No," he whispered as Kazuya pushed closer, his erection pressing against the back of Tsuki's cringing balls and flaccid penis.

His other leg was grabbed and he was jack-knifed, lying painfully on his bound arms. The pain of that

was as nothing to what followed. Kazuya rammed his cock home dry and Tsuki screamed in agony. He felt he was going to be split in half, and still the bastard pushed into him. "Please...oh, gods...please...stop this."

But neither Kazuya nor the gods were listening, and instead the crime lord was withdrawing only to plunge in again hard enough to cause friction burns inside Tsuki's body. He felt tears streaming down his cheeks at the pain and wished he could escape into blessed oblivion, but he wasn't so lucky. Instead, the agony continued for what seemed like hours as Kazuya thrust in and out of him, grunting like a pig as he did so.

He thought it would never end, that he would be consumed by pain until that was all there was left. Finally it was over, and wet warmth flooded him before Kazuya withdrew and collapsed on his back on the mattress, obviously sated for now.

Tsuki lowered his legs and rolled over so he was no longer lying on his bound arms. He felt himself slipping away until a knock at the door brought him back to himself, and he whimpered.

"Boss?"

"What is it, Araki?"

"Kojima-san just called to say that the charity event for the needy children has been rescheduled for the fifteenth."

"Same venue?"

"Yes, the Suntory Hall will be happy to host so prestigious an event."

"Excellent. Tell Kojima-san that the fifteenth is fine. Then come in here." He felt the mattress shift beneath him as Kazuya moved and started to dress. The door opened and heavy footsteps crossed the floor.

"Is everything okay, boss?"

"Yes and no. I'm still not certain exactly how much this bitch knows. Find out for me, will you?"

He was hauled into a sitting position and a heavy fist hit him hard enough to split his lip. He tasted blood and braced himself for another punch. It didn't come however. Instead he heard Kazuya's angry voice hiss, "Not his face, idiot!"

The next blow was to his middle and he doubled over, feeling queasy, before his hair was grabbed and he was pulled upright again.

Kazuya sighed. "Tsukasa, Tsukasa, you're not making this easy on yourself. What did your lover tell you, hmm?"

"Only that he owed you money for his gambling." He croaked the words out, still swallowing blood and trying not to throw up.

There was another blow, to his side this time and his hair let go of so he fell sideways onto the mattress.

"I don't believe he knows any more than that," Kazuya said. "He's not the type to take physical punishment without trying to stop it. Are you, Tsukasa?"

Tsuki felt the tears leaking from his eyes and felt ashamed, but he knew if this continued, he would tell Kazuya everything just to stop the pain. He hurt inside and out by now and didn't think he could take

any more punishment. He shook his head, trying to agree with the crime boss.

Kazuya crouched down until his face was almost on a level with Tsuki's. "Luckily for you, I've thought of a use for you. Araki, get my kit, please."

The big man walked away, only to return a few moments later with a large, carved teak box, which he placed by Kazuya's side.

"I will decorate you with cherry-blossom to denote your impetuous nature." Kazuya was purring as he spoke, the sated purr of a well-fed cat.

Tsuki simply glared up at him. Battered, bruised and raped, he still needed to show his hatred and contempt for the crime boss. "Just kill me and be done with it. You've already taken everything that matters to me."

"Where would be the fun in killing someone who already wants to die?" Kazuya leaned forward until his face was inches from Tsuki's. "No. You are attractive enough to make good money on the streets and that's what you will do until I say otherwise." Tsuki frowned. Was Kazuya a fool? He would slit his own throat the first chance he got.

As if reading his thoughts, Kazuya smirked. "You will be under constant guard, my beauty, just to make sure you stay away from sharp objects."

Kazuya reached into the box and drew out a bunch of bamboo rods with long needles in the ends and inks of various colours, predominantly pale pink. "Hold him still, Araki. I don't want to spoil this."

Araki grabbed him and held him in a vise-like grip

while Kazuya dipped his needles into black ink. The shirt was pulled off his shoulder, and the needles punctured his skin.

Kazuya took his time over the tattoo, wanting it to be a work of art worthy of adorning such a beautiful subject. A subject who was no longer crying out or muttering prayers or curses, but perfectly still under his needles, the only sign of pain the silent tears streaming down that gorgeous face.

The sight of them gave him immense satisfaction. If he couldn't have the beauty's admiration or love, he would happily settle for his pain and humiliation at his hands.

Finally satisfied with his effort, he put the needles away in their box together with the inks and pressed a pad over the new tattoo. "Keep it covered for about a week."

The boy didn't seem to hear, so he grabbed him by the chin. "Are you listening to me, Tsukasa?"

He felt him nod against his hand, and was satisfied.

"Now you bear my mark for all to see, Tsukasa," he said almost gently. "Cherry-blossom for a short but beautiful life, fitting, don't you think?"

"The shorter the better," the ungrateful brat replied.

"Listen to me, Tsukasa. Whether you like it or not, you belong to me until I say otherwise. You will live as I wish you to live, and you will die when I decide you will die. Do I make myself perfectly

understood?"

The only reply he received was a gob of spit that caught him squarely in the left eye.

"You disgusting bastard! Araki, punish him." He wiped away the moisture with his handkerchief as he watched his henchman systematically beat his prisoner into a bloody pulp. He let this go on for several minutes before holding up his hand.

"That's enough. I don't want him either permanently damaged or scarred."

He gazed down at the motionless young man. Battered, bruised, half-naked and bound, and he was still the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. There had to be some way of making him his willing pet.

Then he remembered the research into nanotechnology being carried out as part of one of his 'charities', and wondered if that might just be the answer he was seeking.

When the young man groaned softly and stared up at him with those hate-filled black eyes, he decided to try an experiment. His resolve was even further strengthened when Ono's lover said, "Sooner or later someone will get you and when they do, I'll dance on your grave."

"And who exactly do you think is going to get me?"

"The Sweepers."

He stared down at his captive in consternation. "Why would they be interested in me?"

"Because after you took Hiro, I took a look at your activities and hacked into your 'charities.' Everything

I found I took to them.”

He felt a shiver run down his back as though someone had walked over his grave. The Sweepers were the most successful of all the bounty hunters, and the most dangerous. He crouched down and grabbed Tsukasa by the hair. “You little shit,” he snarled and backhanded him back onto the mattress.”

His mood was not helped when the bitch smiled up at him. “Make the most of the time you have left, because they *will* get you.”

It was almost worth all the pain and degradation to see the look of fear that crossed Kazuya’s face at his mention of the Sweepers and what they knew about him. Even another pull on his abused hair and the backhander across his cheek that had him seeing stars wasn’t enough to wipe the smile from his face.

Arashi and his colleagues would sort this bastard out. He should have left it in their hands in the first place, should have agreed to help them.

The look Kazuya was giving him was pure venom and he shuddered, despite his apparent victory. “Oh no, my young friend, they will not get me. You yourself will see to that. You will be the means by which I will destroy them.”

What was Kazuya talking about? He would never help to destroy the Sweepers; never harm the one person who had tried to warn him of his own stupidity. Thoughts of Arashi kissing him came unbidden and he took a deep, shuddering breath.

“I’m not going to destroy them.” It took all of his

strength to say it and the words sounded pathetic even in his own ears.

Kazuya was grinning evilly. "Oh, but you are, Tsukasa. No doubt you are trusted by them, privy to all their plans and secrets."

"Of course I'm not." Was Kazuya crazy?

"But you could be. In fact, you will be. I'll make a deal with you, Tsukasa. You will not have to sell your body and I will never touch you again if you agree to feed the Sweepers the information I give you."

It was tempting just to keep the crime boss away from him, but then Arashi's gentle kiss and his understanding after Hiro's funeral came to mind again, and he shook his head. "Do what you like. I won't betray anyone for you."

Kazuya sighed. "Damn you, Tsukasa. But then again, we do need a guinea pig for our research." He dug a hand into his pocket and pulled out a small ornamental pillbox. "Hold him, Araki."

Araki's hand gripped his jaw, forcing his mouth open. Kazuya flicked open the pillbox and produced a small red capsule.

He gagged as the capsule was placed at the back of his mouth and Araki shut his mouth again, forcing him to swallow it.

Kazuya was smiling again.

"That is an experimental use of nanotechnology whereby nanites are fused with DNA to produce a hybrid bionanite. If it works without actually killing you it will make you faster, stronger and totally subject to my will."

He gazed up at the crime lord in horror as the first sharp pains of assimilation wracked his body.

"No!"

The only answer Kazuya gave him was a low chuckle and retreating footsteps. The door closed, leaving him alone.

Tsuki wasn't sure if it was hours, days or months later that the agony finally ceased. He was still half-naked, his lip was still tender from being split and as he attempted movement, his bruises popped. Hours since the pill had been forced down his throat, then.

He did a mental scan of the rest of his body and found that his ass was still sore and he hurt where Araki had hit him but other than that, there didn't seem to be any difference for all the pain he had been in.

He attempted to pull his cramped arms apart, but all he succeeded in doing was making the straps bite into his flesh. Either Kazuya had lied to him, or the capsule had not taken full effect yet. He certainly didn't feel any stronger. If anything, he felt weaker by the minute.

Alone on the mattress that had become his prison, he had time to think. Too much time, and his thoughts weren't exactly happy. He had not done what he'd set out to do, and now he had the added worry of what Kazuya had done to him with that capsule and what he might be forced to do to Arashi and the Sweepers.

He curled up on himself, feeling wretched and

guilty, but he knew he couldn't go through what he'd just endured again without telling Kazuya about the affidavit and putting Mori-san in grave danger.

He didn't want to put the Sweepers in danger either, but they at least were trained to deal with it, unlike the lawyer.

That brought his thoughts neatly back to Arashi and the man's kiss. The thought of putting the attractive redhead in danger seemed to break something inside of him beyond repair, and he sobbed as if his heart would break.

CHAPTER NINE

Arashi made his way to the office by train, letting Kaimei and Issei take the floater home. He needed to talk to Shinji and find out if Tsuki's information had been enough to bring Kazuya down.

When he arrived, Shinji looked extremely glum. "Fucking authorities are still hemming and hawing over whether to let us go after Kazuya," he said as soon as Arashi entered, then grimaced. "And now we've got yet another problem. That damned fool hacker has gone after Kazuya alone."

Shinji slapped a hand down on his desk. "Damn the boy! I was hoping you'd be able to talk him out of that."

He sighed and perched on a corner of the desk. "Believe me, I did try. What's the holdup with the authorities?"

Shinji gave a derisive sniff. "Apparently they're still sifting through the evidence. If only a witness would come forward, but of course they won't. They're all far too scared of the consequences."

He sighed deeply, knowing Shinji was right. Nobody was fool enough to put themselves in the firing line. Well, nobody, barring one beautiful idiot. "I always hate this bit."

Shinji nodded glumly. "I know. It's frustrating as

hell for all concerned. The authorities want Kazuya as much as we do, but their hands are tied by red tape. If they don't have enough for a trial, then they need even more to put out a dead or alive warrant. Tsukimoto's evidence was good and more than we expected to get, but possibly not enough to risk a trial. And it's definitely not enough to put out a death order." He fiddled with a pencil from his desk, clenching it until it snapped.

That was more than enough to let Arashi know just how disturbed his boss was. Not that he felt much better, having reached Tsuki's flat too late to prevent him from going after Kazuya alone.

"What do you want to do about our hacking friend?" Shinji was gazing up at him with the oddest of looks on his face.

He frowned back at him. "I don't even know where to start looking."

There was another snort. "Oh, come on, Arashi, think! That bit's simple. You start where he probably will, the casino."

He jumped off the desk and turned startled eyes on his boss. "I must be losing it! Of course that's where he'd go."

Shinji chuckled softly. "I think the only thing you might be losing, Arashi, is your heart."

He turned a cold glare on his boss. "Don't be ridiculous. The man's an arrogant idiot!"

So why did you kiss him? an inner voice was asking.

"I'm inclined to agree with you, but I can see why you'd be attracted." Shinji sighed and ran a hand

through his hair. "There's another reason for you to go to the casino tonight. I want Kazuya to know we're onto him. Shake him up a bit. It might just force him to make a mistake."

He nodded his agreement, an ironic little smile playing round his lips. "Oh, I think he'll notice I'm there. In fact, I'll make certain of it."

Shinji nodded. "I know I can rely on you to do whatever needs to be done, Arashi. Try to save Tsukimoto if you can. I still say he should work for us. Perhaps the death of his lover will make him realise how much we need his skills."

He snorted in mirthless amusement. "No. It's made him even more determined to get Kazuya."

Shinji remained perfectly serious as he said, "Perhaps we should let him pull the trigger if it comes to that. It might make him feel better."

"Or it might make him hate himself for life." He planted both palms on the desk and leaned over it. "We both know not everyone is able to carry out a death warrant. Most people can't kill another human being no matter how vicious and twisted that human being might be. It goes against human nature."

Shinji didn't even blink. "And do you honestly think Tsukimoto is most people?"

He sighed gustily. "I honestly don't know, but I don't want to find out the hard way."

Shinji rubbed at his eyes as if tired. "Just do what you can to extricate him from this mess. If you can't, then we'll all have to live with the consequences, won't we?" He smiled suddenly. "And I still say you

care more than you want to let on.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever.” He wasn’t prepared to do this with his boss or anyone else. He knew he cared too much about Tsuki, but he also knew that he didn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell with the beautiful hacker.

Shinji was still talking. “Get to the casino about midnight. I can’t imagine much happening before then.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I hope you’re right.”

Shinji frowned. “Believe me, Arashi, so do I.”

* * * * *

Arashi pushed open the main door to the casino just after midnight. He showed his membership card, acquired when they first got the watching brief on Kazuya, and strolled into the gaudy main room.

It was packed with people intent on losing their money, but there was no sign of Tsuki or of Kazuya as yet. Sighing out of worry, he ordered a beer and leaned against the bar, eyes watchful for any sign of either of the two men.

It was just before one when Kazuya finally turned up. Interestingly enough, he didn’t have his usual bodyguard with him, but instead a slighter, smaller man tailed him, hand poised for quick access to the gun under his tuxedo jacket.

Kazuya stopped, frowned and then crossed the room, people parting before him just like the Red Sea

supposedly had for Moses. When he reached the bar, he stared at Arashi. "I've not seen you in here before."

He shrugged. "I'm a new member. I'm surprised you know all the faces in this large a crowd."

Kazuya's frown deepened. "It's not that. You simply don't seem the normal type to want to join a casino." He smiled and extended his hand. "But I'm being incredibly rude. I'm Kazuya Soubi."

He ignored the outstretched hand and shrugged. "I know exactly who you are. You're quite the celebrity."

"I'm assuming you're one of our young musicians who just made good," Kazuya said as he withdrew his hand. "It would account both for the appearance and the lack of manners."

"To assume makes an ass out of you and me'," he quoted mockingly. "I'm no rock star. I'm a Sweeper."

He had the satisfaction of seeing a look of concern cross Kazuya's face before the cold eyes narrowed. Kazuya's voice when he spoke was bland, however. "Are you really? How fascinating. Do you have a wanted poster for one of my members?"

Arashi smiled. "Not as yet, but one never knows. I mean, this is the perfect sort of place for criminals to hang out, now, isn't it?"

"I really wouldn't know..." Kazuya paused, obviously waiting for a name.

"Ikeda Yamahiko, that's Ikeda-san to you." He was being deliberately rude, hoping to get some sort of reaction out of the crime lord.

Kazuya smiled. "Then I will have to be Kazuya-

sama to you."

He couldn't help it, he laughed. "Lord Kazuya? I know you take an interest in charity work, but isn't that pushing it a bit?"

Kazuya smiled again, a singularly unpleasant expression. "It's not the charity work that counts here, Ikeda-san. It's the fact that I own the place."

"A strange business for such an altruistic man, surely." He didn't like Kazuya's attitude at all. The man was like a well-fed cat playing with a mouse.

"Not at all, I am able to direct some unfortunate gambling addicts to one of my pet charities, Gambler's Aid."

He risked a direct hit. "Did you send Ono Hiro to them?"

Kazuya's attitude changed immediately and he leaned in closer, hissing his breath through his teeth until he sounded just like the snake he really was. "What do you know about Ono Hiro?"

Arashi shrugged, seemingly indifferent. "Only that he was a member here and that his body turned up in Ueno Park a few days ago. The news said it looked like an execution and that he'd been beaten quite badly beforehand."

"How sad," Kazuya said easily, but his eyes were wary now. He'd given too much away and he knew it. "It was a tragic loss of an esteemed and valued member. We often exchanged pleasantries."

"Then he probably mentioned his boyfriend to you." Arashi wasn't quite so sure how far to push this particular subject.

Kazuya ordered a brandy and took a sip of it before replying. "I think he did mention a young man in his life. He never accompanied him here, though. Do you know the gentleman?"

Arashi smiled despite himself. "We've met."

Kazuya pulled away slightly, a smile curving his lips also. Suddenly he seemed in charge of the situation again. "And do you like him?"

He knew he had to be careful, so he thought about all of Tsuki's less endearing qualities. "Not really. He seems like a spoilt, arrogant brat to me."

When Kazuya's smile grew, his heart sank. "Then you won't care that he's now in my hands, will you? Quite a pretty little toy, but doubtless I'll break him soon enough."

He felt ill, knowing he was too late again, that Tsuki had already been here and fallen into Kazuya's cruel hands. He kept it all hidden behind an impassive mask, however, and swallowed the last of his beer. "You really ought to be careful what you say to people, Kazuya-sama. I do believe your slip is showing."

He glanced round the crowded casino. "And on second thought, this is not somewhere I want to be seen after all."

Kazuya's smile had faded. "I think that's a good idea, Ikeda-san. We wouldn't want you to get into any trouble here." He waited until Arashi had moved away before asking, "By the way, do you know anything about a missing prostitute with strangely coloured hair who answers to the name of Issei?"

He stopped, trying not to stiffen up in his shock before turning to gaze imperiously at Kazuya. "Do I look desperate enough to need a prostitute? Perhaps one of his clients didn't feel like paying him and dumped his body somewhere. Is he another of your 'charity' cases?"

He was pleased to see Kazuya frown again. "Umm, yes, I took a bit of an interest in the lad."

He raised a brow. "Obviously not nearly enough if he's disappeared. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Ikeda-san." Kazuya's tone was mocking again.

He had to stop himself from almost running from the casino. Not only was Tsuki in Kazuya's hands, but Issei might be in danger too. He'd been a fool to come here, and yet... He stopped suddenly, turned around and waved to Kazuya with a smile before leaving the casino for good.

He was pretty certain Kazuya would have him followed, so he took the train to the office instead of going straight home.

CHAPTER TEN

Neither Kaimei nor Issei were able to sleep while Arashi was at the casino so when the videophone rang, Kaimei picked it up immediately. "Hello?"

Arashi's face appeared with Shinji's office for a background. He listened for a while as Arashi told him what had happened, frowning in concentration before saying, "Okay, Arashi. Did you throw your tail off?"

Arashi shrugged. "Well, I think he knows I'm here."

Kaimei frowned. "I see."

"Bring Issei and all the boards and meet me at Roppongi, will you? I should have thrown him by then."

"Yes, that's fine. We should get there in about an hour. Wait a minute, bring what?"

"The boards, Kaimei, we might need to use them to get through tight spots where floaters can't follow."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, probably a good idea except...hang on."

He glanced across at Issei who had moved position from his inelegant sprawl across the sofa to sitting up straight and listening alertly. "Can you board?"

Issei blinked. "I used to be able to, but it's been quite a while. Why?"

“I’ll tell you in a moment.” He spoke into the videophone again. “Yes, but rusty. Bring them anyway? Okay. Yeah, got it... See you in an hour.” He put the phone back on its base and turned thoughtfully.

“Get your shoes on, Issei, we’re going out. We might need the boards to get from my floater to wherever it is we’re going after picking Arashi up. Are you up to that?”

Issei shrugged. “I guess it’s like learning to swim. Once you can do it, you never forget how.”

He smiled and sat down to pull on his own shoes before heading for the garage, his floater and their gravboards. Luckily they had a couple of spares. He dumped the boards in the trunk of the floater just as Issei joined him.

They climbed into the floater, and he opened the garage doors and pulled out onto the street.

Issei was silent for a moment or two before turning in his seat to gaze at him. “Why do I need to come along if you’re simply picking up Arashi?”

He turned a corner before sighing. “Arashi went to the casino and is pretty certain that his conversation with Kazuya earned him a shadow. That wouldn’t normally matter to him, except that Kazuya mentioned you.”

Issei frowned. “I see. So Arashi thinks the bastard is onto me being with you?”

“Yes. He also wants to know if you can help him.” He glanced across at Issei to find that hard, closed-off look that the ex-streetwalker often wore when

unhappy about something.

"Help him do what?" Issei didn't sound as if he wanted to be too helpful.

He took a deep breath. "Apparently Kazuya let him know he's got the hacker. He probably wants to know if you have any idea where he's being held." He didn't like the fleeting expression of sympathy and remembered pain that crossed Issei's face.

"I see. So where are we going to meet him?" Issei rubbed unconsciously at his tattooed shoulder and shuddered.

"Roppongi was where he suggested."

Issei frowned again. "Has this thing got any kind of phone?"

He glanced across at him, frowning himself now. "There's a cell in the glove compartment, why?"

Issei was shaking his head. "Roppongi's no good. We need to be at Nihonbashi, it's much closer. What's Arashi's number?"

He gave Issei the number to Arashi's mobile and brought the floater to a halt as Issei punched in the number. There was no point going towards Roppongi if they needed to be heading in the other direction.

"Arashi? Good. Listen, you need to make for Nihonbashi rather than Roppongi. Yes, that's right. If I'm right and nothing has changed, it's a lot closer to where we want to be... Yes, I think so. Okay. See you in a while." Issei put the phone back in the glove compartment and settled back in his seat. "Let's go."

Kaimei grinned and shook his head before restarting the floater and heading in the direction of

Nihonbashi.

* * * * *

Arashi changed direction and made for the nearest station. His tail seemed to have vanished, but he wanted to be absolutely sure before going anywhere near Issei. It was bad enough Tsuki was in Kazuya's hands without the bastard finding his missing prostitute.

Once he was certain he was alone, he bought a ticket and stepped onto the platform. There was a train due in five minutes, so he hovered near the entrance to make sure nobody else was getting on here.

The train pulled in with no sign of anyone so he stepped on it but still watched until the doors had shut and the train pulled out. Only then did he finally relax and sit down.

He was tired, both from the lateness of the hour and from his conversation with Kazuya. It didn't help to know that he had another difficult conversation and hopefully a rescue attempt before he could even think about going home to sleep. The carriage was empty so he managed to doze, even if it was with one eye open, for the short time it took the train to get from the station he'd boarded at to Nihonbashi and felt somewhat better for it.

He got off the train, walked swiftly to the historic bridge and waited in its shadow. Ten minutes later Kaimei's floater appeared. It stopped by his side and

he climbed into the back seat, moving a gravboard as he did so.

"Drive, Kaimei. The last thing we need is a parking ticket." The floater pulled away and Kaimei started to drive in a vaguely circular pattern around the streets behind the bridge.

He turned his attention to Issei. "I think you know what I'm going to ask you. I'm sorry."

Issei nodded. "You want to know if I can help you find the hacker. I think I can, as long as my memory isn't playing tricks on me."

"Well, at least we know Kazuya is safely at the casino right now," Kaimei said.

Arashi raised a brow. "Do we? I left there nearly two hours ago, he could be anywhere by now."

Kaimei slapped his hand on the side door. "Damn! You're right. So what did he say to you?"

He repeated his conversation with Kazuya almost verbatim. Neither of them interrupted him and when he had finished, Issei's face had cleared slightly.

"If he told you he's got a new toy, that means the hacker is still alive," the ex-streetwalker said. "And if he's still alive, I think I know exactly where he will be."

He leaned back in the seat, surprised by how relieved Issei's words had made him feel. Of course, there was no telling what sort of state Tsuki would be in if they found him, but at least he had some hope he was still alive.

Kaimei put a hand out to touch Issei's arm. "It might help you to talk about it."

Issei's mocking snort made him think it would do anything but, so he added, "Just the location will be fine, Issei."

* * * * *

Issei felt like a complete fool. He'd been taken off the streets in order to help these guys, and now he was stalling because his past made him feel so uncomfortable. Perhaps Kaimei was right, perhaps saying it out loud would ease it to manageable proportions, and he owed the blond that much anyway. Since he had turned him down he'd never even attempted to make another move, but he'd seen the sadness in those chocolate-coloured eyes.

He took a deep breath. "I think you need to know what we're likely to find," he said. "Kazuya likes pretty men, likes hurting and humiliating them, but you know that already. What you might not know is how he does it."

He stopped speaking as memory threatened to overwhelm him. When he started speaking again the other two had to strain to hear his words.

"I was lucky, really. I'd been on the game for some time when Kazuya took over—about eight years—so long enough to know just how rough men can play. He didn't pick on all of us, just me, Little Lotus and a couple of other pretty ones.

"We were taken separately. Little Lotus was the first. When he came back, he was a mess. Bruised was the least of it. He'd been raped and tattooed. He got a

lotus flower, of course.

"Then he picked me out for some reason. I was a year or so younger then, perhaps attractive, I don't know. Why he picked me is a mystery to this day. I was bundled into his car, and we headed towards the waterfront. I remember coming past the Nihonbashi, but I think we were travelling south. It's hard to remember, as his hands were all over me already."

Arashi visibly shuddered and he drew his own conclusions about the man's feelings for the missing hacker. He wondered if he should go on, or just let Arashi see for himself.

"Go on," the redhead said quietly.

Kaimei, meanwhile, had turned the floater round and was heading back to the bridge; from there he headed south towards the waterfront.

"We got to this warehouse on the waterfront and there was a side room with nothing in it but a mattress..."

Suddenly he was back there, bound and helpless as Kazuya stripped the clothes from him, had him beaten, raped him and tattooed him. He shuddered and came back to the present. He took a few deep breaths before he could continue.

"I...I was given a chrysanthemum to represent death. He said it was a reminder for me that life on the streets is short." He was horrified to find that he was crying, and turned his face away from the others to hide his tears.

Arashi tapped his shoulder and passed him some tissue, which he took gratefully. He wasn't sure if

he'd imagined it or if it was his own reaction, but Arashi's hand seemed to still be shaking.

He turned his attention to the landscape outside the floater as he tried to remember the route Kazuya's driver had taken so long ago. They were driving along by the water's edge now, with the Rainbow Bridge in the distance. His eyes widened. "Kaimei, stop!"

Kaimei brought the floater to a halt and turned to stare at him.

"I've just remembered. We turned off before we got this close to the bridge. We need to back up about half a kilometre."

"Are you sure?" Kaimei was frowning at him but he knew he was right.

He nodded. "Positive. I remember seeing the bridge as we turned, only it was a bit further away."

Kaimei turned in his seat and backed up the mercifully traffic-free street. He'd gone around five hundred yards when Issei said, "Here! Turn right into that side street."

The floater turned, and he stared at the building at the end of the dead-end street. He closed his eyes on remembered pain and nodded. "This is it. We're here."

Kaimei climbed out of the floater and stared at the darkened warehouse in front of them. "Are you sure this is the place, Issei."

Issei joined him and stared hard at the building. "Yes, I'm quite sure."

Arashi squeezed Issei's shoulder. "Do you want to wait out here?"

Issei shook his head. "No, thanks, but no, it's time I faced my demons. Going in there again is one way to do it."

"Do you know where the door is?" Kaimei was still not certain that Issei's memory wasn't playing tricks on him.

Issei nodded and led the way to the side of the building. There was a small door there. Arashi glanced at Kaimei, and he grinned as he pulled a selection of lock picks out of the pocket of his jeans. "Stand aside, gentlemen, genius at work."

Arashi rolled his eyes, but got out of his way. Issei watched the road.

Five minutes was all it took to get in, and he frowned at Issei. "No security?"

Issei shrugged. "There's nothing in the place worth stealing. It's just where he brings people to torture them."

"I hope you're right." Kaimei pushed the door open and came to a halt as he peered inside. There was a wide-open space that was completely empty to his left and to his right there were three doors, the furthest of which had light streaming out from under the bottom of it.

"There's someone here," he whispered. Arashi brushed past him as silent as a ghost, pulling his gun out as he went. The redhead headed straight for the far door.

Kaimei glanced at Issei, who shrugged and

followed Arashi. There was nothing left for him to do but tag along.

Arashi reached the door and kicked it open. There was a muffled exclamation from inside, then Arashi was asking, "Where is he?"

Kaimei reached the door to find Arashi pointing a gun at a large, muscular man that he recognised as Kazuya's primary bodyguard. The man looked stunned and merely pointed at another door leading off from the far side of the room.

Issei came in behind him and gasped. "Araki!"

"Hello, Tomokaze. The boss is very keen to find *you* again." There was an unpleasant expression on Araki's face.

"I'm quite sure he is." Issei had quickly recovered from his shock and his tone was Arctic as he said, "Arashi, if you want to do the world a favour, you'll use that gun."

Arashi sighed. "I can't, Issei, there's no warrant for him, more's the pity."

Issei nodded. "Then give me the gun while you go and find his prisoner. He's through that door."

Arashi seemed to consider his options, then to Kaimei's intense surprise, he handed the gun to Issei. "Don't shoot him till we come back. That's an order, Issei."

Issei nodded again before cocking his head at Kaimei. "He'll need your help, probably."

Frowning, he followed his partner into the other room and stopped short at what he saw there.

Arashi was running across the room to a mattress

on which lay a bound, bruised and half-naked young man. The clothes the poor bastard was still wearing were torn, his shirt hanging off one shoulder to reveal a lint pad taped to it. He was tethered by his arms, which were bound from wrist to elbow to a hook in the floor next to the mattress.

"Tsuki, you idiot, what the hell were you thinking?" Arashi was untying the tether as he asked the question.

"Arashi?"

Kaimei was amazed that Tsuki could still speak at all judging by the state he was in. His body was covered in bruises, there was blood seeping from his anus and, when he turned his head, there was more bruising and a split lip.

"Yes, it's me." Arashi produced a knife and cut through the thin leather straps binding Tsuki's arms behind his back. Then he was massaging them gently. As the circulation returned to them, Tsuki cried out in pain.

Kaimei stepped forward and picked up Tsuki's boxers, attempting to pull them over his feet. Tsuki whimpered and kicked out, so he backed off again. Kazuya sure had done a number on this poor bastard.

Arashi was still talking gently to the hacker. "It's alright, Tsuki, Kaimei's a friend."

But the young man buried his face in Arashi's shoulder and murmured something that sounded like, "Don't look at me, please."

"We need to get you dressed and out of here," Arashi said. "Please, Tsuki."

He'd never seen this gentle side of his partner before, never seen him so patient with anyone. He smiled to himself. Arashi could say what he liked, but he cared about this Tsuki guy. It wasn't even surprising; under all the bruising it was still obvious that this was a very attractive young man.

Kaimei had known for some time that Arashi wasn't interested in women. Several events in their time as partners had proved it beyond doubt, yet strangely they'd never been even remotely attracted to each other. He had brought home a string of lovers until Arashi had told him to take his activities elsewhere, and he knew the redhead considered him an oversexed freak. Yet now that same man was as tender as a lover with the damaged hacker.

Tsuki took a painful breath and nodded against Arashi's shoulder. Arashi glanced over to Kaimei and nodded. He took a hesitant step towards the hacker's legs, not really wanting to be kicked again.

This time the poor guy was still, apart from some shuddering as he eased his boxers and pants onto his legs. As soon as the clothing reached his knees, the hacker grabbed for it and pulled it up his thighs until he was covered once again.

"Are you able to stand?" Arashi asked.

"I think so." Slowly and in obvious pain, he clambered off the mattress and got to his feet. Arashi put a hand out to help, but it was shrugged off as Tsuki made for the door. When he reached it and saw who was in the other room, he shuddered and would have fallen if Arashi hadn't caught him.

"Issei, do you think you can pull that trigger?" Arashi asked.

"Oh, yeah!" Issei sounded very certain.

"Then kill that slimeball. I don't much care whether there's a warrant or not!"

Kaimei stared at Arashi. Then he looked again at the state Tsuki was in, remembered what Issei had told them, and kept his objections to himself.

There was a loud report, and the gun moved in Issei's hands. The bodyguard sank to the floor. He crossed the room to where the man had fallen and felt for a pulse. Issei had made no mistake, and there was none.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Arashi said calmly.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tsuki was never sure afterwards how they got him out of that place and into the floater outside. He was drifting in and out of consciousness by that time as the shock of multiple abuses finally caught up with him and was only dimly aware of helping hands easing him into the vehicle.

To his relief, the blond and the one who had shot Araki climbed in the front and he was left with only Arashi for company. He leaned against the older man, feeling safe while he was there.

Then Kazuya's words came back to haunt him and he pulled away sharply to curl over on himself in mental rather than physical pain.

Luckily Arashi didn't question him or make any move to touch him again, and the ride passed in silence.

He slept for part of the journey, only waking when the floater came to a halt in front of a house he didn't know. "Where are we?"

"This is where we live," Arashi told him. "Kaimei—he's the blond one—and I bought it between us. Issei moved in a short while ago."

Tsuki frowned. "So why am I here?" Part of him knew he wasn't making much sense, but the rest of him couldn't be bothered to worry about it.

Arashi spoke gently to him. "We brought you here so we can look after you while you heal. We can call a doctor out if necessary."

"You shouldn't trouble yourselves. I'll be fine at home." His frown deepened as Kazuya's words and the probable effect of the pill ran through his head again. "I...I'm not someone you should have around. Take me home, please."

But Arashi was shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Tsuki, but I'm going to have to insist that you stay here for what remains of the night, at least. We're all tired and none of us needs to drive any further tonight."

"Tell me where the station is and I can get the train." What was it about Arashi that made him want to argue with the man all the time?

Arashi sighed and climbed out of the floater. He went round the back of it and opened the door on Tsuki's side. "Get out, then. The station's about three blocks that way." He pointed towards the front of the car.

Tsuki attempted to climb out of the car only to have his legs collapse under him. The next thing he knew, he was scooped up in Arashi's arms and carried towards the house.

"No...Arashi...please...I can't be here." But one hand was clutching the front of Arashi's shirt as if he'd never let go.

He was carried into the house, down a hallway and through a door at the end. He was then placed gently on a bed and told very firmly to stay put. For once, he didn't argue. Arashi disappeared and he looked

around him.

It was a nicely furnished if impersonal bedroom, and he guessed it was the guest room. With a few personal touches, it could be made very homey. The bed was large, soft and comfortable and he rolled onto his side, wincing in pain.

His body felt like one big bruise, his shoulder was still throbbing from the tattoo and inside him he could almost feel the tiny bionanites doing their work, whatever that might turn out to be.

Arashi returned with a basin of warm water, a towel and a first-aid kit. "Let me deal with those bruises and check for broken ribs."

"Okay." Tsuki didn't protest as he was urged to sit up, even though his ass hurt like hell.

Arashi frowned as realisation came. "Shit. I'm sorry, Tsuki, I should have remembered. Can you bear to sit up for a short while?"

Tsuki nodded and was passive while Arashi helped him out of his shirt and bathed his bruised body. "Have the authorities given you the go-ahead yet?"

"The stuff you found should be enough to convince them that he needs a reward on his head. Let me take a look at that lip."

He was quiet as Arashi dabbed anti-inflammatory on his lip and the bruise on his cheek where Kazuya had backhanded him. When that was done, he said, "If you should need to find him, he'll be at a children's charity function at Suntory Hall on the fifteenth. I overheard him and Araki talking about it."

"That's useful to know. Thank you. Now try to get some sleep. I've got some pyjama pants you can borrow." Arashi frowned suddenly as he thought of something else. "You were bleeding. Will you need a doctor to stitch you?"

Tsuki shuddered at the very idea. "No. I'll heal. Please, just leave it."

Arashi picked up the basin, towel and first-aid kit. "I'll get you those pants, then."

While Arashi was gone, Tsuki eased his pants off, wincing as he did so. He pulled his boxers down and was relieved to see very little blood on them. He'd just pulled them back up when Arashi came back with the pyjama bottoms.

"Here." He held out the garment, and Tsuki took it. "Try to rest. There's no need for you to get up in the morning, so sleep in as long as you like."

Tsuki nodded. "I'll try." He eased himself into the borrowed pyjama bottoms and crawled into the bed, curling into a foetal ball. "Thank you, Arashi."

"No problem. I'll see you later." Then Arashi was gone, and he was alone with his fears.

At least he hadn't mentioned the contents of the affidavit so perhaps he wouldn't lead the Sweepers into harm after all. He had enough to come to terms with without having that guilt to bear. But then the bionanites were still buzzing through his veins and arteries, assimilating themselves with his cells and turning him into some sort of freak.

He slept, but his dreams were not pleasant.

* * * * *

It was nearly lunchtime when Issei knocked on the guest room door. He was bearing a tray with some rice balls and tea on it. When Tsuki called for him to come in, he opened the door and placed the tray on the bedside table.

Tsukimoto didn't look as if his sleep had done him a lot of good; his face was still badly bruised and he had dark circles under his eyes.

"You should eat," he said in his matter-of-fact way. "There's a bathroom across the hall when you've finished. I've put a clean towel in there for you."

The hacker sat up and winced slightly before picking up the tea bowl. "Where's Arashi?" Then he noticed something else. "And where are my clothes?"

Issei smiled. "In the laundry for the pants, but there wasn't enough left of your shirt to make it worth saving. As for Arashi, he and Kaimei have gone to collect some of your things."

Tsukimoto frowned. "They took my keys?"

He nodded, still smiling. The man sounded really pissed about that.

"I was going to go home today."

That effectively wiped the smile from his face. "You can't."

The hacker stared at him as if he'd gone mad. "What do you mean, I can't?"

Issei pulled up the bedroom chair and sat astride it. "When Kazuya finds Araki dead and you gone, that's the first place he's going to go looking for you."

Tsukimoto glared at him. "So you're telling me I'm a prisoner here?"

He sighed. No wonder Arashi got so pissed off with the man. "No. I'm telling you that you can't go home until we get Kazuya under wraps."

"Oh. I see." Tsukimoto took another sip of tea. A thought seemed to strike him as funny and he chuckled. "I hope they're not too shocked by my wardrobe." He sobered again. "And I hope they bring my makeup."

Issei smiled to himself as he suddenly realised that this young man was like Little Lotus had been, as happy in women's clothes as in men's. It made sense; he would make a stunning woman. "I've lived on the street for far too long to be shocked."

The hacker reached over, grabbed a rice ball and started nibbling on it. "How did you guys know where to find me?"

Issei sighed and stared down at the pale blue carpet. "We were able to find you because I've been in that place and in the same condition as you. That's why I found it so easy to shoot Araki. I know he's responsible for most of your bruises."

Tsukimoto put the half-eaten rice ball down and frowned. "Kazuya and Araki did all that to you too?"

"Yes." He pulled his sleeve down to show the other man the chrysanthemum tattoo before quickly covering it again.

"I'm sorry," the hacker whispered.

Silence fell between them for a moment or two and he stood up ready to go when Tsukimoto's voice

stopped him. "What's your name?"

"Issei."

"Just Issei?"

"Watanabe Issei, if it matters. Issei will do."

"Then I'm Tsuki. Tsukimoto...Tsukasa." He was surprised to see tears in Tsuki's midnight eyes. "Please...call me Tsuki. He called me Tsukasa, and I never want to be called that again."

Issei nodded his understanding. "I can understand that. I never used my real name after that either. Issei was my street name and is somehow less sullied than my original name, even though I had to sell my body."

Tsuki sighed. "Again, I'm sorry."

"Why, it's not your fault." He studied Tsuki carefully. The hacker seemed nervous, pleating the sheet between his fingers and frowning. "What else did the bastard say or do to you? I'm not trying to pry. It just helps to talk sometimes."

Tsuki glanced up at him his eyes desperate. "I need to get out of here, Issei. I need to be well away from any of you."

He sat astride the chair again, leaning on the back and regarding Tsuki curiously. "Why?"

Tsuki shook his head and sighed. "He said...he told me I would be the means by which he would bring the Sweepers down. I don't want to cause you any trouble, so I need to leave."

Issei cocked his head to one side as he wondered what had got Tsuki so nervous. "I see. Can I ask you why you should care about any of us?"

Tsuki flushed under the bruising and he drew his own conclusions. "I just don't want that on my conscience."

He smiled in what he hoped was a soothing fashion. "Don't worry about it. Although he's dangerous, there's also a lot of spiteful bluster to Kazuya. He'll always say what he knows will hurt the most. And we can look after ourselves."

Tsuki shut his eyes in pain or defeat, Issei wasn't sure which. When he opened them again, Tsuki changed the subject. "I'm really looking forward to a shower."

Issei chuckled. "If you'll take my advice, you'll take a salt bath to help you heal up."

Tsuki nodded thoughtfully. "You could just be right. A bath does sound good."

"I put a packet of salt in the bathroom. Put plenty in the water."

The faintest of smiles crossed Tsuki's features. "You're a very practical man, Issei."

He smiled in return. "I've had to be."

* * * * *

"So, what do you think he'll need?" Kaimei's voice brought Arashi out of his retrospection and back to a sense of his surroundings. They were in the bedroom of Tsuki's apartment and he'd been staring at a digivid of Tsuki and his boyfriend in happier times. It should have bothered him that Tsuki was wearing a gothic Lolita dress of the style that had been

fashionable fifty years before, but it didn't. The dress and the makeup suited him to perfection, and he looked just as beautiful as a woman as he did as a man.

He thought about the bruises and split lip marring his face and spoke without thinking. "He'll want his makeup."

Kaimei turned to stare at him. "His what?"

"His makeup." He pointed to the digivid as evidence and almost chuckled as Kaimei stared.

"Wow! Do you think he'll want a dress as well?"

Arashi shook his head. "I very much doubt it at the moment. Just pack him some jeans and tops, toothbrush, razor, pyjamas. All the usual stuff."

"You're no fun at all, Arashi." Kaimei opened the top drawer of the dresser and pulled out a small pile of underwear. "I hope these are his and not the dead guy's."

"You and me both." Arashi wandered into the bathroom and had the same problem. Two toothbrushes and two razors faced him, and he decided to buy new rather than upset Tsuki further.

"How tall was Ono?" Kaimei asked as he opened the wardrobe. "Ah! Doesn't matter, there are a load of business suits on one side and jeans, pants and some of those dresses on the other."

He found a bag under the bed and dropped the underwear into it together with the stuff Kaimei was pulling out of the wardrobe. If these *were* the brat's clothes, he had good taste. "Okay, that should be enough for a few days. Let's get out of here in case

Kazuya comes calling."

Kaimei frowned and looked around. "You know, Arashi, if he does come here, he's quite capable of trashing the place and everything in it just out of spite. I think we should take everything we think is Tsuki's. Especially stuff like digivids and his dresses and jewellery."

"Yeah, okay, you're probably right. Grab the stuff while I look for another bag." He found what he was looking for in a closet together with a gravboard. He threw the bag onto the bed for Kaimei to pack while he inspected the board. It was high quality, making him think that Tsuki had been good at the sport. He tucked it under an arm as he looked around for all the digivids he could find.

He dropped them on top of the clothes in the second bag. Swept a jewellery box and a pile of makeup from the surface of the dresser into a carrier bag and looked around. "I think that'll do for now. Let's go."

Kaimei nodded and zipped up the bags before glancing up and smiling. "A board? Good one too, by the looks of it."

Arashi nodded. "Useful to have, and a good one that I'm not prepared to leave here for anyone to find. Come on!"

Kaimei picked up the bags and headed for the door, Arashi right behind him, wanting to get out of the place before Kazuya found out where Tsuki lived. They locked the door behind them and a few minutes later, they were packing Kaimei's floater with Tsuki's

things.

When they arrived home, Issei told them that Tsuki had drunk a bowl of tea and eaten half of a rice ball and was now in the bath. Arashi, having left the board in the garage, took both the bags and the carrier and put them in the room they'd given Tsuki. Then he knocked on the bathroom door.

"You've got clean clothes and stuff for when you come out of there," he called.

Much to his surprise, the door opened and Tsuki stood there wearing just a towel and a mass of purplish bruises. There was something different about the hacker since his ordeal, and he spent a couple of seconds trying to work out what it was. Then it hit him. The dark eyes were devoid of anything even approaching life. "I put it all in your room."

"Thank you. Do you have anymore of that anti-inflammatory stuff? My face is a mess."

He nodded. "Yeah, I'll get it for you. I brought your makeup too, so you can cover the worst of it."

Tsuki stared. "You did what?"

Arashi frowned. Here came the arguing again. "Let me get the cream, then we'll talk."

"Fuck the cream. You went through all our things?"

He sighed. Tsuki was obviously going to be *really* difficult. "If Kazuya gets spiteful, he'll wreck your home, so we saved as much as we could in the time we had."

"I see." Tsuki said no more, but moved towards his

bedroom instead. Walking was still difficult for him, judging by the slow, careful steps and the slight limp.

Arashi went for the cream. When he came back, Tsuki had put on a pair of jeans and was looking at one of the digivids. "It was good of you to rescue stuff like this. Thank you." The voice was devoid of emotion and the fight gone.

"Let's put this on your face." He opened the cream and spread some across his bruised cheek and dabbed a little on the still-swollen lip. Tsuki sat passive and silent while he worked, and he began to be seriously alarmed. "Are you okay?"

"Not really." Tsuki glanced up then and sighed. "I'm sorry to have caused you all this trouble. I just don't want to cause you anymore."

"You won't." But deep down, Arashi was wondering if that was actually the case. He knew he was already deep in trouble but that wasn't really Tsuki's fault. And he didn't think that the hacker meant that kind of trouble anyway. There was something going on in Tsuki's mind, and he couldn't help but wonder if it meant trouble for them all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Date-san, the spokesman for the justice office, was a very formal and upright man but Shinji still couldn't bring himself to like him very much. Perhaps it was his very formality that made him want to grit his teeth when in the man's company, or maybe it was because they always had to wait for him to make a decision.

Today he was even more stiff and formal than ever, and there was a pursing of his lips and frown between his brows that showed how unhappy he was.

"Good morning, Nakamura-san."

"Good morning, Date-san." They both bowed to exactly the correct depth, then Shinji invited his guest to take a seat. "What can I do for you today?"

Date-san perched on the very edge of a chair. "I have the warrant for Kazuya Soubi in my possession. Unfortunately, my office wants him alive."

That explained the unhappiness then, and his estimation of Date-san went up a notch or two. "I see. Is his poster going up on the boards?"

The pursing of Date-san's lips became even more pronounced. "No," he said shortly. "It has been decided to let your organisation handle it, as you were given the original watching brief."

"Unusual," he commented.

Date-san took a deep breath. "It is hoped that whoever got far enough into Kazuya's security to give us as much as we have will be prepared to stand as a witness. That is the condition for not putting the poster up."

Shinji sighed. "You'd better prepare the posters, then. The young man brought the information to me in the hope that we could help rescue his boyfriend. We failed him badly on that, so we can hardly expect him to jump through hoops on our behalf."

"Was that the young man who was found in Ueno Park?" Date-san asked.

Shinji nodded. "That was the boyfriend, yes."

Date-san leaned forward in his chair. "Then surely your young friend has even more reason for wanting Kazuya in cryostasis. It would be a perfect opportunity for him to get some...payback."

"It would, of course, and I will do all that I can to persuade the young fool to stand as a witness. I just don't hold out a lot of hope."

Date-san sat back again, although still not fully in the chair. "Hmmm. I understand that you've been protecting one of Kazuya's streetwalkers. Would he make a good witness?"

"Yes, I believe he would make an excellent witness." He frowned and leaned forward across his desk. "Wouldn't it be better, more...definite to raise a dead or alive?"

Date-san frowned. "Of course it would. But we don't have anything even remotely concrete enough

to be able to go down that route. If anything else should make itself known in the meantime, then things can be changed."

"Yes, I suppose so. Thank you for giving us this opportunity, Date-san. Rest assured I shall do my utmost to bring Kazuya to justice, and to persuade both our star witnesses to testify against him."

Date-san rose to his feet and bowed again, forcing Shinji to follow suit. He saw the man out and then picked up the videophone.

"Hello?" It was Kaimei's face that had appeared on the screen.

"Kaimei, can you round everyone up and get them to the office, please? We've got a warrant on Kazuya."

Kaimei punched the air. "Finally!"

Shinji sighed. "Don't get too excited, Kaimei. They want him alive and it hasn't been made official, so no posters will go up."

Kaimei frowned. "You mean they want it done by us, and quietly?"

"It all hinges on the hacker giving us more and standing as a witness, and Issei having the courage to stand."

A look of utter disgust descended on Kaimei's pretty features. "You want us to bring Tsuki into the office with us?"

"Yes, absolutely. Get here as soon as you can we have a lot to plan and discuss."

"Okay. We should be there in the next hour or so, depending on the traffic."

That's fine." He cut the connection and sat back in

his chair, wondering if this new development would persuade Tsukimoto to confide in them or whether he would still insist on trying to do things his way.

* * * * *

Issei sat quietly as Arashi, Kaimei and his new boss discussed ways to get to Kazuya and bring him in. The three men didn't seem particularly excited about the prospect, and he could understand why. Bringing in Kazuya without starting an all-out gunfight with an army of his goons would be well-nigh impossible.

What really bothered him though was Tsuki's dull-eyed acceptance and lack of argument. He knew what the hacker had been through, but he thought it was something else bothering him, something far more profound, although he couldn't say what it might be.

"Tsuki overheard talk of a children's charity function at the Suntory Hall. He wouldn't be able to take too many of his people to that without giving rise to questions," Arashi was saying.

"When is that happening?" Shinji asked.

"On the fifteenth, apparently."

Their boss frowned. "Hmmm. That only gives us a few days to come up with a plan."

Kaimei shrugged. "We've worked to far tighter timescales."

"Not with a target like Kazuya, we haven't." Shinji was choosing his words carefully.

His heart sank as he realised that there had to be terms and conditions attached to this warrant and

that those terms and conditions probably had something to do with Tsuki and himself.

"Why are there no posters?" Arashi asked.

Shinji fiddled with a pen. "Date-san thought it better to leave it to us rather than making it public property and involving other bounty hunters."

Arashi's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What does the old fidget want in return?"

Shinji sighed. "He wants Issei and Tsuki to testify against Kazuya."

Issei closed his eyes on his pain as he realised he would have to face his abuser in court. When he opened them again, Tsuki was shaking his head.

It was Arashi that got angry. "Is the man totally sadistic? He's expecting them to face Kazuya in court?"

"Yes." It was very obvious to him that Shinji was no happier about the idea than Arashi was.

"Yes, he's totally sadistic or yes, he's expecting them to face him and tell the world what he did to them?"

He glanced over at Kaimei, surprised by the anger in the usually easy-going Sweeper's tone.

"I don't think he's sadistic. I think he's being careful because his hands are tied. From what he said earlier, he wants Kazuya dead as much as we do. We just don't have enough for a dead or alive call."

Arashi jumped off the desk and began to pace. "Perhaps Tsuki can find more, or..."

"No, Arashi. We would need something really damning, and we simply don't have it." Shinji was

looking at Tsuki as he spoke, but the hacker wasn't meeting anyone's eyes.

It was then that Issei began to wonder if Tsuki really did have the means to bring Kazuya down, and simply wasn't saying anything.

Tsuki was torn between letting them know about Hiro's affidavit and the fear of getting them all killed. Kazuya's words were still playing in his head like a tape loop, and the idea of being responsible for their deaths was almost more than he could bear.

He was surprised by how much they had all come to mean to him. Cool, calm Arashi with the hidden fire, sensible and hurting Issei and gentle, caring Kaimei. Even Nakamura-san had been nothing but kind to him. He couldn't allow himself to become the cause of their downfall at Kazuya's cruel hands.

And there was still the little matter of the pill that Kazuya had forced down his throat, and what it might turn him into. If he was going to turn into some kind of monster, he'd rather turn on Kazuya than any of the Sweepers.

"I told you all I found," he said in an emotionless monotone. "I thought it would be enough." He hadn't lied in either statement. He had thought he'd given them enough and he had given them everything he'd found by hacking. "I could try again if you like."

"No, Tsuki, we'll go with what we have," Nakamura-san sounded sympathetic and he finally glanced up at him. "Will you be up to facing Kazuya in court?"

He would hopefully do much better than that, but he nodded. "Yes," he said, even though he knew he'd never have to.

"What about you, Issei? I know it's a big thing to ask of you."

Issei took a deep breath. "It won't be easy, but I think I can testify against him."

"Good. Then we need to decide how we're going to do this. I agree that a charity function seems like an excellent opportunity if we take him either on the way in or the way out."

After a few moments thought, Arashi said, "On the way in would be better. If we try it when he comes out, his goons may well be waiting for him outside. He can't take them into the place, so the lobby seems like a good place to grab him."

"I agree," Kaimei said, "although even without his hired thugs, he's not going to be easy to take down."

"I'll help," Issei said. "You offered me a piece of him, after all."

Tsuki felt four pairs of eyes fix on him and looked up. "Count me in."

* * * * *

Arashi waited on the ground floor of the richly-panelled foyer with Kaimei. Tsuki and Issei were behind two of the pillars, not immediately visible to Kazuya but ready and able to come up on him from behind if necessary. He had the warrant in his pocket and they had done all they possibly could with such a

difficult assignment.

It should go well and without too much of a struggle, but something was telling him that things could easily go very, very wrong. He had an uneasy feeling in his gut, and he usually found these feelings to be correct.

He ran over the plan again in his mind, looking for flaws. He and Kaimei would approach from the front while Issei and Tsuki came up behind, effectively blocking escape. It wasn't foolproof, but it should be enough—and yet that damned feeling wouldn't go away.

When Kazuya finally appeared, he understood why. The bastard was flanked by two goons, both of them wearing shoulder holsters, judging by the bulges under their jackets.

Kazuya stopped short at the sight of him and smiled nastily. "You again? If you don't stop hounding me, I shall take out an injunction for harassment."

"You might have trouble doing that, as I have a warrant for your arrest."

Kazuya's reaction was not quite what he had expected. The man laughed. "A warrant, you say? What for exactly, tax evasion?"

"No, it's for money laundering, fraud on a grand scale, running bogus charities and earning money from prostitution, among other things."

Kazuya was still chuckling. "Dear me, somebody has been busy, haven't they? Should I hazard a guess? He does seem very fond of you people, after all."

He frowned, not comprehending. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"He's talking about Tsuki," Kaimei said with a frown on his own face.

"That's right," Kazuya agreed urbanely, "dear Tsukasa warned me you would—now, how did he put it?—ah, yes, you would bring me down one day."

He heard the word 'warned', and it sowed a seed of doubt in his mind until Tsuki snarled and ran forward, lunging at Kazuya. Issei came forward also, having no choice in the matter, and delivered a perfectly timed and executed roundhouse kick to one of Kazuya's bodyguards. The other had time to draw his gun and aim it at Tsuki, but then he hesitated, afraid of hitting his boss.

Kaimei jumped forward and the bodyguard chose the easier target, turning the gun on his blond partner and pulling the trigger. Kaimei yelped in pain and grasped his right shoulder with his left hand.

Meanwhile, Kazuya had Tsuki on the floor and was twisting his arm up behind his back.

He'd pulled his own gun and trained it on Kazuya. The whole business had taken no more than ten seconds.

"Shoot me and I'll break his arm. Matsushita, put your gun away! When they come out here to investigate, we're the innocent party, understood? Now get that damned warrant."

The bodyguard nodded and put his gun back in its holster, stepping forward to relieve him of the papers with a nasty grin.

"Oh, Tsukasa, what am I going to do with you? You're far more trouble than you're worth, but I suppose I'd better deal with you suitably."

Tsuki was wincing in pain, but behind that was frowning perplexity. "You said I'd be stronger and faster."

Arashi didn't have time to ponder that cryptic remark before the doors were flung open and people came streaming out to see what was going on.

When Kaimei had seen Tsuki and Issei come forward, he had felt obliged to do the same. The bodyguard had turned immediately and fired a shot. There was a burning pain in his right shoulder, and he couldn't help but cry out in agony.

Issei had knocked the other guard unconscious and shot him a look that said clearer than any words, "What the fuck were you thinking?" before he came over to steady him.

Although in pain, he was frowning at the little exchange between Tsuki and Kazuya. What had the hacker meant about being stronger and faster? Was there something else he wasn't telling them?

He glanced at Arashi; he was frowning down at Tsuki, who looked to be almost in tears. There was something more than a twisted arm making the hacker so unhappy, but he didn't have time to figure it out before the doors to the auditorium were thrust open and security men and charity patrons came pouring through them.

"Are you all right, Kazuya-san?"

“We heard a gunshot.”

Kazuya let go of Tsuki and smiled benignly at the crowd. “Nothing serious has happened, ladies and gentlemen, just some street punks who were intent on robbery. You might want to take the gun away from the redhead. I think he shot his friend by accident when he jumped me.”

Arashi’s gun was taken from him, but that didn’t worry Kaimei unduly. Ballistics would prove that it hadn’t been fired, unless... He frowned suddenly, wondering if Kazuya owned the police force, too.

One of the charity patrons was saying, “We should call the police, Kazuya-san.”

Kazuya was all smiling benevolence and waving hands. “No, no, there was no harm done. Let them go.”

The crowd and the security men gasped at Kazuya’s goodness, but Kaimei saw the crime lord say something quietly to his bodyguard before heading into the auditorium on the wave of people.

They were left alone with the smirking bodyguard, who drew his gun once more and motioned them towards the doors with it. They were to be taken away and killed quietly.

Tsuki climbed to his feet and rolled his shoulder to ease his twisted arm. His head was down, and he looked disgusted with himself.

They walked slowly towards the doors, knowing they had to get away and quickly. He kept glancing at Arashi, waiting for his signal. It came when they reached the steps.

Arashi's hand pushed down in a quick and fluid motion and they started running down the steps to the street and the alleyway where they'd left his floater.

"Forget the floater, Kai, the boards will be quicker," Arashi called.

Kaimei nodded once in acknowledgement and used the remote to get the floater open. Behind him he could hear a lot of shouting and cursing, and the sudden roar of hovbikes being started.

Arashi was almost throwing their boards out of the floater in his haste, and the others lost no time in starting theirs. Arashi glanced at his shoulder. "Can you do this, Kai?"

"I can do it. Let's go!"

Then they were speeding away on the boards with the roar of hovbikes behind them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The four young men sped down the traffic clogged street, manoeuvring their gravboards with the precision of experts. The roaring of hovbikes was audible over the traffic noise only because of their own sense of panic as they fled from the gunmen. Their faces were more serious than that of the average boarder, older, more experienced and yet still beautiful with youth. Anyone getting close enough to look into their eyes would have seen underlying sadness, a grief that would never quite go away.

Arashi, their natural leader, had to get them to the office and the safety it would provide. It was sheer luck that all four of them could not just board but do it well.

Kaimei, his shoulder-length blond hair streaming in the wind, stumbled slightly due to his wound and was immediately righted by Issei, his chin-length hair, dyed a vivid violet, whipping round his face in the wind created by his sheer speed. They continued on at a breakneck pace.

Arashi led them onwards, his hair dyed deep red, the top spiked with the long ends flowing behind him, he was followed closely by the fourth member of their little group, Tsuki, who had caused all this, a beautiful young man with short, blue-black hair

wearing full makeup in an attempt to cover the heavy bruising and split lip that still marred his face.

Behind the four of them came the two men on hovbikes, also weaving through the traffic in an effort to keep up, their intent deadly judging by the guns strapped to their bodies.

They reached a crowded pedestrian area and slowed down to a walk, picking their boards up and vanishing into the crowd.

"Do you think we've thrown them, Arashi?" Kaimei asked softly, his gentle eyes showing every nuance of emotion and his pain.

"Not for very long," he told him, shooting a sour look at Tsuki. "Satisfied now?"

"I thought it would help," Tsuki said sadly.

"I know what you thought," he snapped, "and I told you from the start, it would get you nowhere."

Tsuki became belligerent. "Then why did you rescue me?"

His eyes narrowed as he regarded the hacker. "Because our boss seems to think you're of more use to us alive. I can't *imagine* why!"

Tsuki hung his head and kept quiet, knowing he was in the wrong, having to live with the fact that his stupidity at the Suntory Hall had led them all into danger and got Kaimei wounded.

"Leave it for now, Arashi," Issei suggested. "Let's get to safety first."

He nodded, his eyes still on Tsuki. Gods, but he was beautiful, even battered and bruised. He leaned forward and murmured in the lovely man's ear, "If

we manage to get out of this alive, I'm going to give you the hiding of your life."

Tsuki's eyes widened. "Promises, promises," he said with a sneer.

Arashi simply snorted and led the way through the crowded precinct towards safety. Tsuki had acted rashly on two occasions now, but there was no way he would have left him behind and not just because he was useful to them. He had to face the facts. Even though he was a rash, foolhardy, spoiled brat, Tsuki had managed to crawl into his heart and stay there.

They lost the hovbikes and their riders, Kazuya's men knowing better than to create a scene in a crowded shopping precinct, and made for the nearest station. Two hours later they were safely home, and Issei took Kaimei off to one of the bathrooms to bind his wound.

Arashi was left glaring at Tsuki. "Are you going to tell me exactly what's going on, or do I have to take it out of your hide?"

There was a flash of the old bravado as Tsuki snapped, "You wouldn't dare," but it was quickly gone, and Tsuki had backed away a pace.

All the frustrations of the past weeks came bubbling to the surface and he followed Tsuki who was still backing away down the hall towards the safety of his room. He stalked him like a hunting cat, never taking his eyes off that lovely face. Finally Tsuki turned and ran, slamming his bedroom door behind him.

He heard the key turn in the lock but he was too

angry to let a little thing like that stop him and kicked the door in. "I asked you a question, Tsuki, and I want it answered."

Tsuki stood facing him, although he could see the hacker was shaking. "Just leave me the hell alone."

"Not until I get an answer."

Tsuki made an attempt to get past him, but he grabbed him easily and wrestled him back onto his bed. Finally losing his temper completely, he pushed and pulled at the hacker until he had him over his knees. Then he started to spank him hard despite his struggles and curses.

"I've..." *slap* "had..." *slap* "enough..." *slap* "of that..." *slap* "attitude!" He slapped him some more until his hand stung too much to continue, then stood up, dumping Tsuki unceremoniously on the floor, and paced the room.

Tsuki stayed kneeling on the floor, head hanging. "I...I...was...afraid," he stammered out between little gasps. "He...he...said I...would...be the...one...to bring...you...d...down."

He spun round and crouched down by the side of the weeping hacker. "Talk to me, Tsuki. Help me put him away for good, or better still, kill him."

Tsuki sniffed hard and brought up a hand to wipe at his eyes. His makeup had run and his face was bruised and blotchy from crying, but he was still the most beautiful thing Arashi had ever seen. Before he knew what he was doing, he was cradling the hacker in his arms and rocking him like a child.

Tsuki cried for a while, clinging to him as if he

would never let go, before lifting his tear-stained face and saying, "Okay."

Tsuki had felt safe in Arashi's arms, but he knew they were anything but safe while Kazuya still roamed free. Perhaps if he gave them the affidavit, it would be enough to get them the death warrant they needed.

"Hiro was killed because he saw something. He told me he had too much on Kazuya, but I ignored it, thinking he meant the sort of stuff I found, like money-laundering or embezzlement. That wasn't what he had, though. He was witness to a terrible crime."

Arashi helped him off the floor and he sat down rather gingerly on the bed. Arashi sat next to him and took one of his hands. "Take your time, Tsuki. I know this must be hard for you."

Glad of that understanding, he leaned his head against Arashi's shoulder. "He knew Kazuya had seen him, so he tried to protect himself by going to our lawyer and writing out a sworn affidavit about what he'd seen."

He felt Arashi stiffen beside him and wondered if the man was going to hit him again. It would be no more than he deserved, after all. "What was it he saw, Tsuki?"

He bit his lip. "Do I have to say it? The affidavit is safely with our lawyer. Mori-san was the person I was trying to protect at first. Then...but that comes later."

"Mori-san is your lawyer?"

"Yes."

Arashi took a deep breath. "Tsuki, I don't want to rush you on this, but we need that affidavit. Can you arrange with your lawyer for Shinji to pick it up from his office?"

Tsuki nodded. "I guess so. What will he do with it?"

Arashi shrugged. "Take it straight to the justice office, I imagine. If what Hiro saw is that bad, it will be just the proof they need."

Tsuki felt stupid. If he had given them the affidavit in the first place, none of this would have happened, and he would still be human instead of some sort of biomechanical *thing*. But he had been too wrapped up in getting revenge for Hiro to see anything beyond that. "It's bad."

Arashi tightened his clasp on his hands. "Enough for a dead or alive posting?"

He nodded again and grimaced. "Easily."

"Make the call then, Tsuki."

He did as Arashi asked and padded down the hall to the living room and the videophone there. Five minutes later, and the deed was done. Mori-san was apprised of Shinji's appearance and requested to hand the affidavit over to him. Mori-san looked relieved at the news.

He went back to his room to find Arashi still sitting on his bed and staring at his clasped hands. "There's something else, isn't there, Tsuki?"

He couldn't tell him. He didn't want to see that face contract in horror at what he'd become. "There is

nothing else concerning Kazuya that I know of."

To his surprise, Arashi didn't push him, instead asking what Hiro had seen.

Tsuki took a deep breath. "Kazuya and some 'business associates' were making a snuff movie in the casino office. Their victim was being slowly tortured to death. Hiro said in the affidavit that he looked to be no more than fifteen or sixteen, and he believed him to be from somewhere like the Philippines or Timor. Probably an illegal immigrant, so chances are, there's people smuggling going on too."

Arashi frowned. "Why would he be stupid enough to do something like that in the casino office?"

Tsuki shrugged. "I guess he thought nobody would look in. Hiro only did so because he heard the kid cry out before he was silenced."

"But he had the place where he took you and Issei."

He took a deep breath. "The casino office is decorated to resemble a dungeon and has all the...implements required."

"I see. So it's not used as an office at all?"

"No. Apparently Kazuya conducts all his business from his daytime office, and I doubt if there is anything more incriminating there than the casino memberships."

"Why didn't you tell us about the affidavit before this?"

He hung his head in shame. "I didn't find it until after Hiro was killed, and I'd already made a vow to

avenge him by then. Besides, you hadn't helped me when Hiro was still alive, so I saw no reason to help you."

Arashi sighed. "That was a terrible mistake for us to make, Tsuki, and I'm sorry. We honestly believed he was already dead by then. Did you really think about joining us before all this happened?"

"The thought crossed my mind, but then I realised how much it would worry Hiro, so I gave up on the idea." He took a deep breath. "And now it's too late."

Arashi glowered at him. "And I still say there's something you're not telling us."

He shook his head. "Listen to me. I'm not a Sweeper, not one of you, so I don't have to tell you every damn thing that happens to me! When you have your warrant and Kazuya is dead, I'll go home and we'll forget all about each other. That's the only way it can be."

Arashi stood up quickly, and he winced as the redhead strode over to stare at him with those intense eyes. "You are such a brat, Tsuki. There's nothing to stop you from becoming a Sweeper now, yet you're still snapping and snarling like an untrained and abused dog!"

He hung his head. "I would become a Sweeper if I could, but I can't. I...I would be too dangerous to have around."

Arashi sighed but nodded. "Okay, Tsuki, have it your own way." He took a step or two towards the broken door before turning to ask, "By the way, what did you mean when you told Kazuya that you'd

thought you'd be faster and stronger?"

Arashi had heard that then, and now he was going to be even more disgusted with him. "Gods!" he gasped and sank to his knees, burying his face in his hands.

Tsuki's reaction had been the last thing that Arashi was expecting. He crossed to where the hacker was kneeling and drew his hands away from his face to find that he was weeping. "Tsuki, please, tell me what's wrong. I might even be able to fix it."

"You can't. Nobody can. It's too late."

Tsuki's words weren't making any sense to him, but he hated seeing the dark-haired beauty in such distress, so he did the only thing he could think of and held Tsuki close while he cried.

It was only a short step from that to lifting Tsuki's chin and kissing him. Tsuki's arms went round him like a lost child's, and he returned the kiss hesitantly before turning his head away with a muttered, "Sorry."

He wanted the hacker too much to put up with that and he growled as he forced Tsuki's head back and kissed him again, this time a lot less hesitant about it and more demanding of a response. Tsuki's mouth fell open welcomingly under his, and the whole thing became a lot less about comfort and more of passion.

He continued the kiss for several moments, letting the pleasure between them build up until they were both aching with need. "I want you so much," he gasped when they finally came up for air. "Please,

Tsuki, let me make love to you, even if it's only once."

He gazed into those bottomless eyes and found they were full of sadness. He expected Tsuki to refuse when he saw the pain in them, so it came as some surprise when the hacker nodded his agreement.

He rose to his feet, drawing Tsuki up with him and kissed him again before glancing at the broken door. "I think we'd better take this to my room," he said. "I really don't want Kaimei or Issei bursting in on us."

"Okay," Tsuki said.

He took hold of the hacker's hand and led him down the hall to his own room. Tsuki looked about him with a small spark of interest, but it quickly died as whatever was troubling him came back to take over again.

He kept hold of his hand and led Tsuki over to the bed, which was big enough to take both of them in comfort. Once there, he stopped and gazed at the hacker. "Are you sure?" he asked. "I don't want to hurt you after what Kazuya did to you."

"Don't...don't think about that now," Tsuki whispered. "I want you; you want me. That is all that matters."

He pulled the man close and kissed him again, not having to stoop too much to do so as Tsuki was almost as tall as he was.

Tsuki gasped into the kiss and his hands moved to Arashi's belt, undoing it deftly. Arashi grabbed his hands and stopped him. "You're always so impatient."

"I know. Please, Arashi, don't keep me waiting. I

want you too badly. I want you to erase the memory of...him."

Arashi let go of Tsuki and sat down on the bed to pull off his shoes. Tsuki was gazing at him with a kind of hungry desperation as he removed his own clothes. The bruises on his body were beginning to fade and were now yellowish-brown instead of the vivid purple-blue they'd been when he'd first come here.

Arashi stopped undressing to watch the unveiling of that long, lean body and felt his own need quicken into something resembling impatience. He pulled off his clothes quickly and patted the bed beside him. Tsuki pulled off his shorts, leaving him in no doubt as to just how much the hacker wanted him, and sat astride his lap before kissing him again.

He returned the kiss avidly, rolling them both sideways onto the bed as he did so. It had been a long time since he'd done this, his fear of sex having been almost as great as Issei's thanks to an abusive uncle and his disinterest in women. He had found many men attractive, but very few had actually made it as far as a bedroom as he had to be in control, unable to go through what his uncle had put him through again. Perhaps this would provide the forgetfulness they both needed.

Tsuki's hands were exploring his body and when he broke the kiss to look at him, he was smiling slightly. "You're gorgeous," he whispered.

"And what are you?"

Tsuki shook his head. "I'm too skinny."

Arashi rolled his eyes. "Tsuki, you brat, I am not going to argue with you at this moment. Just take my word for it, you're beautiful."

Tsuki actually blushed at that before tucking his head under his chin to hide his face. He dropped a kiss on top of the idiot's head before starting his own explorations.

Little gasps and moans let him know when he was touching the right places, which in Tsuki's case seemed to be just about everywhere. He chuckled softly and bent his head to suck on the skin where Tsuki's neck reached his shoulder, putting his own mark on that luscious body in a show of possessiveness he'd never felt before.

Tsuki arched his body and gasped out his name as he offered up his throat for further marking. He was only too happy to oblige.

When he'd finished with Tsuki's neck, he moved down his body to suck on already erect nipples. The hacker was thrashing his head from side to side by this time and moaning out his name and little pleas for more.

He had a sudden wicked thought. Tsuki deserved some payback for making him worry, arguing with him all the time and being a prize brat. It was only fair if he made the impatient young fool beg. He smiled to himself as he travelled lower, dipping a tongue into Tsuki's navel, which made him giggle and try to flinch away. Ah, a ticklish spot, worth remembering for future reference.

He moved even lower, kissing and sucking the top

of Tsuki's thighs without touching the weeping cock standing proud from its night-black nest. He smirked as Tsuki uttered a cry and dug his fingers into his shoulders trying to guide him to that pretty cock of his. He dived beneath it and sucked at Tsuki's balls instead.

Tsuki cried out, "Arashi! Please! Stop teasing me!"

He came away from Tsuki's balls to ask, "What is it you want me to do, Tsuki?"

"Suck me or fuck me, I don't care which it is!"

He gazed up the length of Tsuki's body and into his lust-filled eyes. "Well, you'll need to make up your mind, won't you? Which is it to be?"

"Arashi...!"

He moved away from Tsuki's body and smiled down at the frustrated hacker.

"What?"

Tsuki's eyes narrowed. "You bastard!"

"If you've only just worked that out, you're slower than I thought. I've waited a long time for this, Tsuki; I can wait much longer than you can."

"What do you want from me?"

"Let's see, now. For starters, I want you to beg me to take you, and then we'll see."

He caught the movement of Tsuki's hand coming off the bed out of the corner of his eye and pinned it down before he could do any damage.

Tsuki gave a disgusted hiss. "Okay, I'm begging you, please don't leave me out here, Arashi."

He grinned and shook his head. "That's not nearly good enough."

"Bastard!"

A sudden thought struck him and he frowned. He hadn't needed lube for so long, and now he didn't have any. He took a look at the top of the nightstand and was relieved to see a tube of hand cream there. He reached over and grabbed it.

Tsuki's face cleared as he saw the tube and he smiled up at him.

He smirked down at the hacker. "Oh, this doesn't mean I'm going to give in to you."

Tsuki pouted before asking, "Then why pick it up?"

"Brat!"

"Bastard!"

He wondered if they would ever stop arguing. Even in the throes of passion, they were fighting each other. Something of this must have showed on his face, as Tsuki reached up and touched it gently. "I'm begging, Arashi. Please."

He couldn't help himself; he bent his head and captured those kissable lips with his own in a passionate meeting of mouths and tongues. Tsuki was passive, letting him plunder his mouth as he would and it excited him enough to forget his desire to make the brat beg even more.

He pulled away and took the top off the tube of hand cream, spreading a liberal amount over his fingers before moving down the bed again.

Very gently and carefully he inserted one finger into Tsuki's body, watching his face for the slightest suggestion of pain. There was none. Instead Tsuki

hissed out, "Yessss!"

Encouraged, he inserted a second finger and Tsuki arched in pleasure as he found his sweet spot. A third finger soon joined its fellows and he began to gently finger fuck the thrashing hacker.

"Gods! Arashi, please! I need you inside me! I'll beg all you want, only please fuck me."

Tsuki's words and the gasping little moans that punctuated them went straight to his groin, and he couldn't wait any longer. He withdrew his fingers and smeared more hand cream on his aching erection before lifting Tsuki's legs and positioning himself at his opening. "You really want me?"

"Arashi...! Damn you! Yes!"

He winked down at his lover and entered him as slowly and gently as he could. There was a clenching of muscles around him so hard it hurt, but then Tsuki made an effort to relax and he was able to seat himself in his body.

Tsuki gave a little cry, but the look on his face was enough to convince Arashi that it wasn't from pain. Slowly he started to move.

"Deeper, Arashi, and harder, please!"

He stopped moving altogether then and glared down at the brat. "Who exactly is in charge here, you or me?"

Tsuki gazed up at him, pleading with his eyes. "I can take it."

"I'll be the judge of what you can or cannot take. Now shut up, unless you want me to make you beg again."

Tsuki shot him a disgusted look, but subsided. Arashi moved again, adjusting his position slightly until Tsuki gasped. That was obviously deep enough, he thought with a grin. Then he began to move in earnest, unerringly catching that sweet spot with every thrust. Tsuki's hands came to rest on his butt, silently urging him on, and by now all he could do was obey the unspoken demand.

"Touch yourself, Tsuki, I want to see you come," he gasped out.

And for once the brat obeyed him, moving one hand to pump himself in time to Arashi's thrusts. The sight of Tsuki pleasuring himself nearly sent him over the edge, but he managed to hold back until he saw the creamy white streamers of Tsuki's come splatter the man's chest and belly. Then he let go and the world turned into his own private fireworks extravaganza as he came deep inside that glorious body.

When he'd recovered enough to roll them both over and withdraw from Tsuki's body with a hiss of loss he held the hacker close and murmured, "You're mine now."

To his intense surprise, Tsuki started crying again. "I only wish I could be," he whispered through the tears.

He raised himself onto one elbow and stared down at his lover. "Are you actually going to tell me what's wrong?"

Tsuki wouldn't look at him. "I can't be yours. You don't want a monster."

He frowned wondering what the hell had got into the brat this time. "You're not a monster."

Tsuki shrugged. "Perhaps not, but I'm not human, either."

"What do you mean, you're not human?"

"Kazuya forced a pill down my throat. It contained bionanites that he thought would make me faster and stronger...and his slave. I don't know what they might be doing to me instead."

He realised that he'd lost to Kazuya after all, and it hurt more deeply than anything he'd ever experienced. He did what came naturally to one of his nature; he lashed out with cruel words. "And this is what you wanted to keep from us? You came into our home knowing this? Get dressed and get the hell out of here!"

Tsuki curled in on himself as Arashi's anger washed over him like a tidal wave. It had been a mistake to give in to his feelings and let the man take him, but he'd so wanted to have his last experience one he could treasure rather than feel disgusted about.

He sighed, wiped his tears, swung his legs out of bed and sat up. Slowly he began to dress, with only Arashi's back for company. He was nearly done when Arashi moved suddenly and pulled on a robe. Then he came over the bed and grabbed him by the wrist in a grip of iron. "Come on, you're going to tell the others what you've just told me."

He struggled in that strong grip. "Please, just let

me go. I don't want to cause you any more trouble."

But the redhead wasn't prepared to do that. "It's a bit late for that, isn't it?"

He let Arashi drag him down the hall to the sitting room where Issei and Kaimei now were. A doctor had obviously been out to tend to Kaimei's shoulder, for it was professionally bandaged and the blond's arm was in a sling.

He swallowed hard and stood there, silent and ashamed, as Arashi told them his terrible secret.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Shinji glanced up at the kanji above the door. The lawyer's office was an old-fashioned one-story building not an office in a prestigious block and he wondered about that as he rang the bell. It had been good of Mori-san to get out of his bed and agree to meet him in his office so early in the morning.

The door was opened by an aging, bespectacled man who peered intently at him. "Yes?"

"I'm Nakamura Shinji."

If anything the peering became even more intense before the man nodded and opened the door wide enough to admit him. Shinji bent to remove his shoes, but a hand on his shoulder prevented him.

"This is my office, not my home, Nakamura-san."

He acknowledged the desire for him to be comfortable with a nod and brief smile.

"You'd better come through to my office. Please, tell me, is Tsukimoto-san safe?"

He followed the lawyer through a front office and through a door into a smaller, cluttered and homely office. "As safe as he can be under the circumstances. He really is a rash young fool, though."

His words were heartfelt, but he was surprised when Mori-san sighed in sympathy. "I have often remarked it," he said. "But I'm glad that he's safe at

least. I take it his plan to take out Kazuya by himself came to nothing. Please take a seat while I find the document."

Shinji sat in a comfortably upholstered chair. "Oh, he tried. Got himself badly beaten, raped and tattooed for his trouble."

Mori-san gasped as he sat down at his desk. "He seemed well enough on the videophone."

"He's healing nicely, but still wearing quite a lot of makeup, I'm told."

Mori-san gave him a sly look. "Actually his mascara had run when he spoke to me, as if he had been crying."

Thinking about Arashi's disgusted report on the events of last night gave Shinji a good idea of why Tsuki might have been crying. Frankly, the idiot deserved all he got. "I imagine one of my Sweepers was a little upset with him, especially as he could have told us about this affidavit days ago."

Mori-san frowned. "May I ask you something, Nakamura-san? Are you intending to employ Tsukimoto-san as a Sweeper?"

He sighed as he remembered the other part of his conversation with Arashi. "I would do so in a heartbeat if I thought he'd accept. The problem is he came to us for help, and we let him down rather badly."

Mori-san nodded and his face cleared. "You and I are adults who know too much about the ways of the world of crime. Tsukimoto-san was an innocent until he was forced to get involved. We might despise him

for his naivety and childish vows of revenge, but he does have both courage and conviction. He would make an excellent Sweeper with the right motivation.

"There's something else, too. He needs something to keep him occupied, as I believe him to be suicidal since Ono-san's death."

Shinji sighed. "I'm not a charity organisation, Mori-san. We don't offer counselling."

Mori-san smiled. "No. But you do offer action and danger, the very things Tsukimoto-san craves."

He smiled wryly. "Well, I will offer him the chance to train with us again, but I don't hold out a lot of hope that he'll accept."

Mori-san gave him that sly look again. "One thing I've learned about Tsukimoto-san over the last year is to always expect the unexpected from him. He's full of surprises."

No kidding, Shinji was thinking, and the surprises were not always pleasant. It was time to change the subject before he blew a gasket thinking about Tsuki's less endearing qualities. "So, do you have the affidavit, Mori-san?"

"Yes, of course." The lawyer stood up and crossed the office to a small safe. He opened it and extracted a document. "It is completely in order and I'm quite prepared to come to the justice office with you in order to verify my signature and speed things up."

He was intrigued by the lawyer's obvious desire to see justice done, and asked him why.

A cloud crossed Mori-san's features as he said, "I liked Ono-san and I like Tsukimoto-san, so call it my

little part of their revenge.”

* * * * *

Tsuki was expecting the same disgust, anger and abhorrence from Kaimei and Issei as he'd received from Arashi, so it came as quite a surprise when Issei said, "I doubt if Tsuki had any choice in the matter, so why are you so angry with him?"

"He lied to us, Issei. He considered himself Kazuya's thing, and yet he let us bring him into our home, lay ourselves open." Arashi gave him a little push that sent him stumbling across the room.

"Stop it, Arashi! As I remember it, he never wanted to come here in the first place. He wanted to get a train home, only he was too weak and you carried him in here." Kaimei too seemed unfazed by what Arashi had told them, and he could make no sense of it.

"But I'm a monster, no longer human," he murmured.

"No, Tsuki, you're a victim, not a monster," Issei said soothingly. "Come and sit down, and I'll make us all some tea and we can discuss this like civilised human beings."

There was an angry scowl on Kaimei's face and he stopped Issei in his tracks by saying, "Don't bother to make Arashi any tea if you want civilised conversation. Besides, he's got a broken door to fix before he goes back to bed!"

Tsuki gazed at the blond in consternation. He

wasn't particularly tall, had his arm in a sling after taking a bullet in the shoulder and yet he was facing Arashi down as if he knew he had this fight won.

Arashi held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, I'll go fix the damned door, but when that...whatever he is turns on you, don't say I didn't warn you."

Kaimei's eyes narrowed and he stamped a foot. "Just go, Arashi, right now!"

Tsuki hunched over himself in pain at the cold words Arashi had used to describe him after his earlier tenderness. Kaimei came to his side and urged him to sit down with soothing words and gentle hands. He didn't want him to hurt his shoulder any further, so did as he was told.

Issei arrived with a tray of tea and handed a bowl of the aromatic liquid to him before sitting next to him on the couch.

"I should warn you both now that it's just about to become very noisy," Kaimei said as he picked up his own tea. "I'm sure Arashi will vent his temper on the tools and the door."

Tsuki ventured a question. "Why don't you turn on me too?"

There was the sound of hammering and a curse from down the hall, so Kaimei stood up and closed the door, muffling the sound somewhat. Then he answered the question.

"We both saw the state Kazuya had left you in, so we know you didn't take that stuff voluntarily. Therefore you're not to blame."

Tsuki was still confused. "But Arashi is right, I'm

not human anymore."

"Who's to say what is human and what isn't?" Issei asked. "Is Kazuya human? By species, yes, but by any code of conduct, no."

"I just wish I knew what these...things are doing to me." He felt relaxed enough with these two now to admit his fears to them. "When he'd given me the pill and Araki had forced me to swallow and they left me alone, I was suddenly in terrible pain everywhere. Every part of my body hurt, from the top of my head down to my toes. He said they would make me faster and stronger, but last night proved that was a lie."

"It may be that they take longer to assimilate fully," Kaimei suggested.

He shook his head. "This is going to sound crazy, I know, but I could feel them multiplying inside me and penetrating every cell. I don't feel that anymore, so whatever they've done to me is finished."

"What exactly did Kazuya say to you?" Issei asked, then winced as something heavy was flung down the hall.

He thought back, trying to remember the exact words the crime boss had used. "He told me he needed a guinea pig and had Araki hold my mouth open. He put the capsule almost down my throat, then my mouth was closed and I was forced to swallow. Then he told me it was an experimental fusion of nanotechnology with DNA and that it would make me faster, stronger and totally his."

"Dear gods, you must have been terrified," Kaimei said his expressive face full of sympathy.

“I still am. I...I am hoping that these bionanites, as he called them, will be his downfall and make me powerful enough to kill him. Then I can join Hiro.”

Issei shot him a look. “Don’t talk like that, Tsuki, there is always hope.”

The door was flung open and Arashi appeared looking as angry as ever. “The robot’s room is ready.”

“Hope, Issei? I don’t think so.” He stood up and managed to walk past Arashi without either wincing or crying. Instead he glanced up at the mended door and murmured a thank-you as he made his way towards it and the sanctuary of the guest room.

Kaimei waited until Tsuki was safely in his room before turning on Arashi. “Well, even if he is a robot, he’s just given you an overdue lesson in manners. What possessed you to turn on him like that after he trusted you with the truth?”

Arashi was unrepentant. “Oh, come on, Kai. The truth’s had to be dragged out of him every step of the way! Did you know his boyfriend wrote out a sworn affidavit that could have gotten Kazuya a dead or alive poster on him days ago? I had to beat that out of him!”

He stared at his partner wondering if he knew the man at all. “You did what? Kazuya beats the crap out of him and you feel you have to join in?”

Arashi shifted uncomfortably. “It wasn’t like that.”

Kaimei glared at him. “So what was it like?”

Arashi spread his hands and shrugged. “I put him over my knee like the spoiled brat he is. Then he told

me about the affidavit and arranged with his lawyer to have Shinji pick it up. Then I asked about what he'd said to Kazuya at the Suntory Hall and he burst into tears. I wanted to comfort him. One thing led to another, and we ended up in my bed."

He shook his head in disbelief. "So you fucked him and then started treating him like shit after everything else he's been through? You are one cold-hearted bastard, Arashi!"

Arashi shook his head at Kaimei's outburst. "You don't understand. When he told me all that, I knew I'd lost him to Kazuya after all."

Kaimei rolled his eyes. "And you call *him* an idiot? He needs you now more than ever, Arashi. He's scared and suicidal."

Arashi grimaced, then yelled, "Then why couldn't he trust me?"

Kaimei sat down next to Issei and gazed up at his partner. "He probably knew you well enough by now to realise he'd get exactly this reaction from you. You're just as big a brat in your own way as you say he is."

* * * * *

Issei slept late into the day after being up nearly all night, first with Kaimei and the doctor, then with the aftermath of Tsuki's and Arashi's little drama. He had been thinking about what Tsuki had told them and thought the hacker needed to find out exactly what had been done to him.

Kaimei standing up to Arashi had been another surprise in a night full of them, and he smiled at the memory. Kaimei was like a little fighting cock without an ounce of fear.

No, he'd been the one to fear when he'd been shot. It didn't matter how much he tried to hide from his own treacherous feelings, Kaimei had sneaked into his heart with that kiss. Now he didn't know what to do about it.

Sighing wearily, he climbed out of bed and headed for a bathroom. A piss and a shower later, he felt more like facing what remained of the day.

Neither Kaimei nor Arashi were around. Either they hadn't surfaced yet or they were already at the office waiting for word on Kazuya. He headed up the hallway to Tsuki's door and knocked.

It opened and Tsuki stood there, fully dressed but with no makeup on. The bruise on his cheek was almost completely gone, and his split lip had mended with no trace of the damage showing.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked.

Tsuki shook his head. "I don't think I could face food just yet. Tea would be nice, though."

Issei smiled. "Okay. Come and keep me company while I make it."

Tsuki padded down the hallway after him obediently enough, and even helped to make the tea. When they were at the kitchen table drinking it, he raised the point about Tsuki needing to find out exactly how the bionanites had affected him.

"Surely you heard. I'm part machine, therefore I'm

a robot." Tsuki's tone was ironic, but there was no humour behind it.

Issei wondered if he should repeat what Arashi had said to Kaimei before they had all finally gone to bed.

He chose his words carefully. "Arashi strikes me as someone who's never had much time or inclination for showing his feelings except in anger."

Tsuki sniffed in self-mocking amusement. "Every time we come into contact we argue, but strangely I always feel safe around him. Or I did, 'til this morning."

Issei chose his words carefully. "It can't have been easy for him to finally have a taste of what he wants only to have it snatched away from him again."

Tsuki gazed down at the tabletop. "He said I was his, but when I told him I was afraid of what I might become... well, you saw the result."

He nodded and took a sip of his tea before continuing. "So you need to find out exactly what it is you have become, don't you?"

Tsuki glanced up. "How's that going to help me?"

Issei had his arguments ready and smiled as he enumerated them. "Several ways I'd have thought. First and foremost, you'll realise you're not a monster or a thing. Secondly, you'll know that you never have belonged to Kazuya and never will. Thirdly—if you actually care anymore—you'll be able to prove to Arashi that you're still very much a human being."

Tsuki stared at him and there was a tiny spark of life in his eyes, the first Issei had seen since meeting

the man. Then it died again. "Suppose these things do turn me into a monster?"

Issei shrugged. "Well, what I know about nanotechnology could be written on the head of a pin with marker pen, but I do know the medical profession has been using it to aid healing for the past decade. So you're not the only one with a body full of nanites."

Tsuki shook his head. "Not like these, they haven't. These are hybrids, meshed with DNA in a lab. Who knows what sort of DNA was used?"

There wasn't much he could say to that except, "I doubt if Kazuya had any hand in their making. Researchers on the whole look for ways to aid humankind, not turn us into monsters."

Tsuki frowned. "I don't think I healed any quicker than normal."

"Yet you think the nanites are fully assimilated?"

Tsuki nodded. "Yes. I was in agony for a few hours at that warehouse, then for the next day or two I could actually feel them multiplying and doing their stuff—but I've already told you all this. Anyway, as far as I can tell, the process has stopped."

He nodded, the events of last night now making more sense. "So you thought you could take Kazuya on, as he'd believed you'd be faster and stronger?"

"Yes."

He was thoughtful for a few moments. Tsuki didn't strike him as a coward; after all, he'd had the courage to take on Kazuya twice now. "I still say you should try things. What about taking some time in the dojo?"

You can spar with me if you like."

Tsuki frowned and shook his head. "What if I accidentally hurt you? I can't do that, Issei."

He shrugged acknowledging the force of that argument. "Well, there are several punch bags down there. I could time you on them." He frowned as another thought struck him. "Have you been eating?"

Tsuki sighed. "Not really. I haven't had much of an appetite lately."

"That might be what's slowed the nanites down. They probably need fuel and so do you, if you're going to train. And don't even think about arguing. Now, what do you want to eat?"

Tsuki had been surprised by how hungry he'd been. When Issei put a platter of eggs, rice and mackerel in front of him, he had eaten all of it. When he was full, he could feel a slight buzzing in his body and had the urge to do something physical. "So, where's this dojo?"

Issei grinned at him. "Come on, I'll show you."

He followed Issei down some stairs to a basement he hadn't even realised was there, and found it was kitted out as a dojo on one side and a shooting range on the other. His brows rose. "Nice."

"If you like it, you could stay," Issei suggested.

His mood darkened as Arashi's words came back to haunt him. "No, I couldn't. We both know why."

Issei sighed. "He'll calm down eventually. Of course, whether or not you can forgive him is another matter."

He stared. "Forgive him? For what? Telling it as he saw it? He was right to be so angry, Issei. I should have confided in him long before I did, both about the affidavit and the bionanites."

Issei cocked his head to one side. "Maybe. But I can understand why you didn't."

"Oh?"

Issei picked up a gi from a pile on a shelf and pushed Tsuki towards the changing room that doubled as a shower. "From what I've heard, that affidavit is a very dangerous document, and I don't think you wanted to put us in danger."

Tsuki changed into the gi as he called through the door, "Yes, that's it exactly, plus my oath to Hiro. I have to be the one to kill Kazuya."

"I could say 'get in line', but I won't, as you made a solemn oath."

He stepped out of the training room in his gi and started warming up. His body was still buzzing, and he found it hard to get through the warmup exercises. Common sense prevailed, however, and he finished the routine before heading for the larger and longer of the two bags.

He gave it some punches and kicks, putting the moves together fluidly the way he'd been trained as a boy. Behind him Issei gasped, and he stopped and turned to find out what was wrong.

Issei was staring at him. "You...you became just a blur of movement. I've never seen anyone move that fast."

His heart sank. If he was faster and perhaps

stronger, then Kazuya hadn't lied to him, which meant that he might still fall under the power of the crime boss. And he wasn't even out of breath. "Dear gods! What have I become?"

Issei shook his head. "Don't do this to yourself, Tsuki. If you were Kazuya's thing, you wouldn't have attacked him last night. Chances are, if you'd eaten, we'd have brought him in."

He sighed, knowing Issei was right. "I can't seem to do anything right."

"Well, you got that bit right." Tsuki spun round at the sound of Arashi's deep voice, only to see the man's eyes widen in shock. Realising he must have moved too fast, he hung his head, not wanting to see the contempt in the other man's eyes.

"Shinji wants us all at the office in case word comes in on the affidavit. It went to the justice office first thing this morning so we're just waiting authorisation now." Arashi's voice was cool, matter-of-fact, much as it had been when he had first approached the Sweepers.

Tsuki could have wept, having heard and experienced a softer, gentler side to the redhead. "I'll get changed," he said and disappeared into the shower. He could still hear their voices from the dojo, especially when Arashi raised his.

"He already knows where everything is so the damage is done."

To his surprise, Issei raised his voice in return. "He hates Kazuya more than you ever could and with more reason."

He paused in the act of pulling up his jeans, realising that Issei had stated immutable fact. He did still hate Kazuya, would never be his thing. He finished dressing quickly and rejoined the other two, his head now held high.

Arashi frowned at him, but didn't say anything while Issei gave his arm a quick squeeze of encouragement.

"Let's go, then," was all Arashi said and Tsuki followed the redhead up the stairs, feeling rather like a naughty schoolboy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“How long do you think they’ll take?” Arashi asked impatiently.

Shinji glanced up to find both the redhead and Kaimei had come into the office. Kaimei’s soft mouth was set in a disapproving line and Arashi was deliberately ignoring him. He frowned, wondering what had happened to make the two young men so angry with each other. It was rare for them to disagree, let alone act like this around each other.

“Not long. A sworn affidavit with the lawyer authenticating his signature and adding his opinion of how scared Ono Hiro was should give them plenty of reason to go for dead or alive at the same price. In fact, I think we need Issei and Tsuki here ready.”

“Tsuki’s not a Sweeper,” Arashi snarled.

Kaimei rolled his eyes. “Nevertheless, he has a right to see justice done. Go and get them, Arashi.”

Shinji sighed as Arashi left the office in something suspiciously like a sulk to collect Issei and Tsuki. He knew Arashi was volatile at times, but his change of heart towards the hacker was far too much of a u-turn to be just a fit of pique. “Okay, Kaimei, what’s going on?”

The blond Sweeper grimaced. “Arashi’s pissed at Tsuki.”

It was his turn to roll his eyes. "I can see *that* much. What I want to know is why this time? Is it the delay over the affidavit, or something else?"

Kaimei pushed himself off the wall he'd been leaning on and started to pace. "It's something else, but I'm not sure how much I should say."

"Now what?" He was becoming exasperated with the hacker himself, but Tsuki was too useful to allow him to just walk away after he'd seen his boyfriend avenged.

Kaimei turned to stare at him. "What do you want to do about Tsuki, boss? I'm not trying to be deliberately evasive here, but I need to know before I can go on."

Shinji frowned. This was becoming more intriguing—and worrying—by the minute. "I want to persuade the young idiot to join us. I have wanted to since he first came to us."

Kaimei took a deep breath. "Then I guess you have a right to know before you make that decision. Kazuya forced some kind of pill down Tsuki's throat, and he's afraid it has made him less than human."

"What kind of pill?" He knew there were drugs out there that could make your worst enemy seem like your best friend.

Kaimei shrugged. "Bionanites, whatever they are. Kazuya told him they would make him stronger, faster and totally his and it's got him terrified in case he gets us killed."

"Well, he did get you shot, didn't he?"

"That was hatred and lack of training rather than a

deliberate ploy to get me hurt."

Shinji sighed again. "So he's afraid he's some kind of spy?"

"Yeah, I think so. There's more, though."

He sat back in his chair. "You'd better tell me all of it, Kaimei."

He listened carefully as Kaimei went over the events of the night and morning and found it hard not to smile. No wonder Arashi was so furious and it was almost amusing to see the rollercoaster ride his emotions were taking him on. Almost, but there was the added damage this could do to Tsuki to consider also.

When Kaimei had finished, he asked just one question. "Why did you and Issei stick up for Tsuki?"

Kaimei shrugged as if it were obvious. "Tsuki's been the victim in all of this. First his lover gets kidnapped, then turns up dead, then Kazuya rapes, beats, tattoos and drugs him and now the one person who he believed he could trust has turned on him. Besides, underneath the attitude, he's an okay guy."

So young Tsuki had two friends at least, he thought. It was good to know, and the bionanites should help the hacker rather than hinder him if he did become a Sweeper. Which was a big if, with Arashi acting like a spoiled child, and he found he wanted to bang their heads together.

He changed the subject, talking to Kaimei about everyday things while they waited for both Arashi and the authorities to show up.

Date-san was the first to arrive, his usually

impassive countenance showing his excitement. After the normal exchange of bows, he reached into his case and extracted the changed warrant and a single poster of Kazuya with the words 'Wanted, dead or alive, reward twenty-five million yen' underneath a recent photograph of the crime lord.

Shinji raised his brows at Date-san. "So we're actually talking money now?"

"Yes, it is all official. The posters are going up as we speak, but I feel sure your people are closest to being able to bring him in."

He suddenly realised that he'd misjudged Date-san over the years, that the man was just as eager to bring the evildoers to justice as he was but that his hands were tied by the legalities necessary in any civilised country. He smiled and had the satisfaction of seeing the expression returned.

"Thank you, Date-san. We believe we can have this case closed very swiftly. We were simply waiting for the authorisation to go ahead."

Date-san inclined his head. "I am certain that you will make no mistake, Nakamura-san." A sly little smile crossed his features, to disappear as quickly as it had appeared. "Cryostasis is a very expensive necessity, not as expensive as prison, but still much more expensive than a bullet."

"I agree wholeheartedly, Date-san."

Date-san bowed once more and left the office just as the sound of voices heralded the arrival of the rest of the team required for this task. Arashi was first through the door. "Did we get it?"

As answer, he handed Arashi the poster and watched as the man's eyes widened. "Twenty-five million?"

There was a muffled curse from Tsuki, and everyone in the room turned to stare at him. He was shaking his head, his expression stunned.

"What's up?" Issei asked him.

"That's exactly how much Hiro owed to Kazuya. Gods, how ironic!"

Kaimei couldn't miss the look of concern that crossed Arashi's features. The man could fight it all he liked, but he'd fallen hard and fast for Tsuki, and he was quite convinced by how upset the hacker had been early that morning to know that he felt the same way about Arashi. Neither of them were likely to admit it at this juncture, though.

And he had his own emotional problems to deal with. Although Issei had been very caring and solicitous over his wounded shoulder—after calling him all the idiots under the sun, that was.

He resumed holding up the wall and watched as the others arranged themselves around the office to discuss ways of finding and killing Kazuya. Arashi was in his usual perch on the corner of Shinji's desk, Tsuki dropped into a chair and Issei leaned on the back of another.

The plans went back and forth for far too long, nobody too sure where to find Kazuya, let alone how to kill him.

"It's obvious," Tsuki said finally and bitterly.

“Sooner or later he’s going to want to see the results of his experiment. He’ll come looking for me, probably at my apartment, as he’ll realise I’m no longer wanted here.”

Shinji nodded. “That is a distinct possibility, and would be the perfect place to mount an ambush on him.”

“I want to be the one to pull the trigger.” Everyone turned to stare at Tsuki, who merely looked defiant.

“You can’t,” Arashi snapped.

“Oh? I feel pretty certain I can.”

“What Arashi meant,” Shinji said before the redhead could explode, “is that it wouldn’t be legal for you to kill him. If you pull the trigger, you become a murderer, pure and simple.”

Tsuki turned his black gaze on him. “So even now you won’t help me?”

Kaimei decided he’d had enough of Tsuki being everyone’s victim and spoke up. “We can help you, but if you want to pull the trigger, you need to be a Sweeper.”

“Kaimei!”

Arashi was obviously seething, but he didn’t care. Tsuki wasn’t going to turn against them, would never betray them. “I’ll even partner with him, as my partner is being such a jerk at the moment.”

Tsuki shook his head. “I can’t become a Sweeper, much as I’d like to. I can’t risk Kazuya getting to all of you through me.”

“He won’t have the time,” Issei promised.

Kaimei realised something and prised himself off

his wall to go and crouch by Tsuki's chair. "I can't think of a better Sweeper," he said to the hacker. "Through all of this, you've tried to protect others with no thought to your own safety. You actually care about people, Tsuki, and you need to in order to be a good Sweeper. Your oath to Hiro is a nobler reason than I ever had."

"Or I," Issei agreed.

But Tsuki had glanced up at Arashi to see sneering contempt on his face, and stared down at the floor after that.

"I would be honoured if you would join us as a Sweeper," Shinji said seriously.

The hacker looked up quickly. "You mean that?"

"When you know me a little better, Tsuki, you'll realise that I never say what I don't mean."

He could have kissed Shinji for that as he felt rather than saw Tsuki straighten up next to him. He rose from his crouch a little awkwardly due to the sling on his arm, but still managed to get to his feet without any difficulty.

"I will speak for him." He said the formal words needed from two other Sweepers to accept a new member. He glanced at Arashi, but the redhead simply glowered at the floor.

"If it is allowed..." Issei began, but was interrupted by Arashi.

"I will speak for him."

Tsuki turned startled eyes towards the redhead, as did everyone else in the room. Kaimei smiled at his partner.

Arashi rolled his eyes in return. "Well, it beats having to train a new partner!"

Arashi could say what he liked, could use all the excuses he could muster, but Kaimei knew his partner wanted to keep Tsuki in his life.

"Tsukimoto Tsukasa, stand forward."

Tsuki got out of the chair and stood in front of Shinji's desk.

"By the power vested in me by the Justice Office of this country, I hereby proclaim you a registered bounty hunter and Sweeper in the employ of New Broom. Repeat after me. I promise to uphold the law of the land..."

"I promise to uphold the law of the land..."

"To fight on the side of justice..."

"To fight on the side of justice..."

"And to kill only when all other options are closed to me."

Tsuki took a breath. "And to kill only when all other options are closed to me."

His boss reached into a drawer and produced Tsuki's license, which he handed over to the stunned hacker. "Issei, we've been through the formalities, but you'll need your license too."

Issei unwrapped himself from the chair he'd been leaning on and stepped forward to receive his license in turn.

"Welcome to New Broom, both of you. Now get yourselves to Tsuki's apartment and wait for Kazuya to show up."

Tsuki was staring at his license. He looked around

and asked, "Now do I get to pull the trigger?"

"We'll see," was all Arashi would say on the subject. "Let's go."

* * * * *

Arashi felt like a damned fool. He knew in his heart that Tsuki would never dream of betraying them, was terrified of doing that very thing. No, it had been the reminder of what Kazuya had done, and the fact that Tsuki hadn't trusted him enough to tell him before they'd made love that had hurt enough to send him over the edge into stubborn rage.

Kaimei and Issei had taken Tsuki's side and he knew exactly why that was. He'd been the one in the wrong, the one who should have comforted his lover instead of trying to throw him out.

Now he didn't know what to do to make things right again. He'd never been very good with his emotions, and now he was paying for it.

Then, seeing, or rather not seeing, the speed and grace with which Tsuki could now move had brought home to him that although he'd been changed, Tsuki was still very much a human being, and a beautiful one at that.

The way Tsuki had stared at him in shocked amazement when he'd seconded him told him exactly what he'd managed to achieve with his fit of temper.

But the damage had been done now, and they didn't exchange two words on the way to the armoury at the far end of their suite of offices nor all

the way to Harajuku on the train.

Tsuki had picked out a Beretta, which was a good choice for someone unaccustomed to using a gun every day, and was now walking towards his apartment building with a very determined look on his face. Arashi had no doubt at all that the hacker would be able to pull the trigger if Kazuya turned up.

And that set him to wondering how long they might have to wait for the crime boss to show up. What if he sent one of his minions? What if he didn't come at all? But such speculation did them no good and he kept it to himself.

When they reached the apartment, he was somewhat surprised that Tsuki had to use his key to get in. He was even more surprised when they stepped inside to find the place exactly as Kaimei and he had left it.

"Doesn't look as if he's been here yet," Kaimei said.

"I wonder if he'll come at all." Now they were here, he was less certain that Tsuki was right.

"He'll come here," Tsuki said with certainty. "He's given us enough time for my...talent to appear, and for you to throw me out as some sort of monster. He'll be here sometime today, especially when he hears about the posters."

Issei was in the process of heading for the kitchen, but he came to a halt as Tsuki spoke. "He's right. Kazuya will try to use him as some kind of *human* shield." Issei glanced at him as he stressed the word 'human', and he sighed. He was really going to pay for that temper fit for a long time to come.

"Where do you keep your tea, Tsuki?" Issei asked.

"It's on a tray on the counter next to the kettle."

Issei vanished into the kitchen, and Arashi turned to find Kaimei staring at him. "What?"

"Normally about now you'd have some kind of hunch," his partner said.

He sniffed in derision. "Not this time. Tsuki seems to have had it for me."

"You know something, Arashi, if we're going to work together as a team both you and Tsuki need to lose the attitude. You don't behave this way with the rest of us, just each other."

"Shut up, Kai." But his partner's words had struck home. It was true both he and Tsuki could get on well with both Kaimei and Issei, even after the rocky start he'd had with the ex-streetwalker. He turned away to glower at a rather beautiful flower print on the wall.

Issei returned with a pot of tea and four bowls and they drank it in silence. He always hated this bit; hated the waiting.

When finally the doorbell rang, he almost jumped out of his skin. He glanced at Tsuki, who had calmly stood up and was now heading for the hall.

"Be careful." The words had come unbidden and he wasn't sure if Tsuki would even acknowledge them.

The dark head nodded once, and Tsuki was walking down the hall.

Tsuki took a deep breath to calm himself, then opened the door. Kazuya was a wild-eyed mess, his

suit rumpled and his hair unkempt as if he'd been dragging his hands through it endlessly. He was alone, his usual backup having apparently deserted him, and he pushed past Tsuki and into the hallway where he turned to glare at him.

"Just what the hell did you do, Tsukasa?"

Tsuki calmly shut the door. For the first time since his fateful argument with Hiro over his gambling, he felt strong, in charge. "I didn't have to do anything. It was Hiro that brought you down." He spat out the words, managing to get a wealth of contempt into them.

Kazuya shook his head. "Ono, you say? No, he wouldn't have had the courage..."

His hand went to the gun in his pocket as Kazuya insulted his lover's bravery. "He had the courage to sign a sworn affidavit in front of our lawyer. It was his insurance against your spite. He knew if you killed him, I'd find it."

He watched with some satisfaction as Kazuya seemed to recoil. He was obviously thinking back and finally said, "That little shit! He suffered dreadfully without saying a fucking word!"

His hand twitched on the gun, and he flicked off the safety as he remembered the mess that Hiro's body had been in. "That's right. So did I, without saying anything either, if you remember. You shouldn't have killed him, you bastard."

"You're probably right, but those bionanites should kick in soon, and I doubt if your Sweeper friends will want to kill you, so you're coming with

me." The crime boss grabbed his arm and started to drag him towards the front door.

He remembered the speed with which he'd moved in the dojo and wondered if the damned bionanites had managed to make him stronger, too. He pulled away and found he could free himself of Kazuya's grip with almost contemptuous ease. He pulled the gun out of his pocket and levelled it at the crime boss.

"They've already kicked in, you asshole, and this time there's no Araki to save you. This time I'm the one with backup. And I am so fucking tired of being your victim." He pulled the trigger and blew a hole in Kazuya's chest at pointblank range.

Eyes wide in shock, Kazuya slid down the wall leaving a trail of blood as he went. He watched emotionlessly as the crime lord died before putting the gun back in his pocket.

"I kept my oath, Hiro," he whispered. He'd done all he'd needed to do; there was nothing else for him. All that was left was emptiness, and darkness that swallowed him whole.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The sound of the shot brought Arashi into the hallway in a flash, terrified of what he might find. Issei and Kaimei were close behind him, and it was Issei that went over to Kazuya to make sure he was dead.

Tsuki was collapsed in a dead faint across Kazuya's legs, but appeared to be otherwise unhurt, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Tsuki's eyes flickered open, and he frowned. "What happened?"

Arashi gazed down at him, drinking in his beauty. "You passed out. Are you hurt?"

"No." Tsuki tried to clamber to his feet. "I feel weak, though."

"That's because you haven't been eating properly," Issei said from somewhere behind Arashi.

Tsuki's frown deepened. "Of course," he said quietly.

Arashi raised a brow in query. "Of course?" he repeated.

"You really don't want to know." Tsuki glanced around. "I made a mess of the wall. I'll have to redecorate."

It was his turn to frown, as it seemed to him that Tsuki was in a state of shock. He decided to humour

him. "We need to get that to the proper authorities first." He indicated Kazuya's body with a flick of his head.

Tsuki frowned direly, obviously confused. "How do we do that?"

"We have a backup team," Kaimei said. "Can I use your videophone to get them here?"

"Sure." Tsuki tried again to get to his feet, but fell back with a muttered curse.

"Let me help you." Arashi didn't wait for an answer; he scooped the hacker up and carried him back to the living room, where he laid him down on the sofa. "Stay there and rest for a while."

"Thank you." Tsuki wouldn't look at him, though, and he suddenly realised why.

"You used your speed, didn't you?"

Tsuki shook his head. "No. I used my strength. He tried to grab me to use as a shield against you guys. I couldn't bear him touching me again, so I broke away from him. I couldn't have done that...before."

"So he got two out of three right," Issei commented. "He was stupid to think they'd change your personality, though."

Tsuki glanced up at Issei, fixing him with a desperate look. "Was he? How do we know?"

Issei shrugged. "It's obvious, really. If you'd been changed enough to make you his slave, you'd have gone with him willingly. All the other stuff has already manifested itself."

Tsuki lost that desperate look and actually smiled at the ex-streetwalker. "You're right. Thank the gods."

But he still wouldn't look at *him*, and once again he realised exactly what he'd lost with his fit of temper.

Kaimei had finished on the videophone. "Cleanup will be here within the hour, and the boss says to stay put, as he's coming with them."

"Wants to see for himself, does he?" Arashi asked.

Kaimei shrugged with his good shoulder. "I guess. He didn't say, just that we were to wait here for him."

An ambulance came to rest outside Tsuki's apartment block and two 'paramedics' climbed out with a body bag on top of a gurney. Shinji tucked his own floater in behind the ambulance and climbed out.

When he and the 'paramedics' reached Tsuki's apartment, quite a crowd had gathered in the hallway outside, probably disturbed by the gunshot. Flashing his ID at them, he said, "Move along, please, people. There's nothing to see here."

The ID seemed to reassure Tsuki's neighbours and they began to disperse. He knocked on the door in the coded number and spacing of knocks to let those inside know it was the cleanup team.

The door opened a crack and Issei peered out at him before opening the door wide enough to let them all in. The Sweepers dressed as paramedics started to deal with Kazuya's body but he stepped over it and headed further into the apartment after the ex-streetwalker.

He found Tsuki lying on the sofa, obviously exhausted, with Arashi standing guard over him like a mother hen with only one chick. Kaimei was sitting

in an armchair, and he could see by the pinched look on the blond's face that he was still in pain from his wound.

He decided against congratulations, as his Sweepers didn't seem in any mood for them. Instead, he stood by the door and took a close look at each face in turn. Taking down Kazuya had taken its toll on each and every one of them, and he knew they all needed to rest and be given the space to heal, both physically and mentally.

"The four of you are now officially on vacation," he said. "I've booked tickets for you all on the bullet train to Sendai, and you will stay in the rest house there until you are ready to work again. I will decide how long that is likely to take, and I want to hear no arguments."

He glared around as if daring them to argue with him. Nobody did. Even Arashi stayed silent for once.

"Good, then that's settled. The train leaves at five this evening. Kate and Nathan are at your house packing your things and will arrange to have them brought to you at the station."

"You're not leaving us any choice at all, are you?" Arashi sounded disgusted, but Shinji knew the man well enough to recognise the tiredness in his voice.

"No, I'm not. You've all been far too wound up over this business. Kaimei needs rest for his shoulder to heal, and the rest of you need to unwind."

"We could rest at home," Kaimei suggested.

"Until the next case rears its ugly head? No, Kaimei. I want you well away from the whole

business until you're all fit enough to do your jobs properly once more. I have arranged for Hiraka-san to get in supplies and have the place cleaned and aired for you all, so you're going. Does anyone else have anything to say?"

There was silence and he nodded satisfied. "I'll collect the pay and have it put into your accounts, so none of you have anything to worry about. Tsuki, I'll need your bank details before you go."

"Tsuki should get most of it," Issei said. "He did most of the work, after all."

Shinji nodded. "I agree. Tsuki will receive ten million, the rest of you five each."

"No cut for the company?" Arashi asked.

"Not this time. Now, do you guys need a ride to the station?"

* * * * *

Not only had Shinji taken them to Tokyo station, he'd also bought them all a large and expensive meal that they had managed to finish with some difficulty. It was strange how hollow Issei felt, and he imagined the others must feel much the same way. He wasn't sure if this 'vacation' was such a great idea. None of them were in the mood to enjoy it.

But despite his misgivings, a floatervan pulled up at the station, unloaded their luggage and drove off again. Sighing at the inevitable, he picked up his cases, only to have two porters rush forward and load the lot onto trolleys, which they wheeled to the

platform their train would leave from. Shinji had done them proud, he supposed, but he couldn't relax enough to enjoy it yet.

Their boss handed him their tickets just as the train pulled in, and he was surprised to see they were for first class seats.

"Get used to it," Kaimei said with a quick grin. "You have money now."

They climbed aboard the train and found their seats with their luggage already stowed in the racks above them. He sat down and glanced out of the window to see Shinji visibly relax when the train started to move.

Mag-lev technology had made the famous train even faster than before and they hurtled through the countryside at well over three hundred miles an hour. Tsuki gave in to exhaustion and fell asleep, his head coming to rest on Arashi's shoulder automatically. The redhead looked a little surprised, but slipped an arm round Tsuki to hold him in place.

Kaimei also had his eyes shut, but the slight frown between his brows told Issei that the blond was in too much pain to actually be deeply asleep. That turned his thoughts inward, as he wondered what on earth he was going to do.

He glanced up to find Arashi's intense gaze on him and he realised that he'd never looked beyond bringing Kazuya down. Now he had his freedom, money and a job that he thought he would be able to do well, and he wasn't sure what to do about any of it. Most of all, he wasn't sure what to do about

Kaimei.

He was intelligent enough to realise that he was in love with the pretty Sweeper, but he was still scared of physical contact, having had such negative experience of it, and Kaimei was a tactile man by nature.

Arashi leaned forward so he could speak softly without disturbing the other two. He still held Tsuki in place, and the hacker showed no signs of waking up. "You've given all of us the benefit of your advice throughout all this, so now I'll return the favour. Take it slowly and as far as you're able. Kai will be happy enough to know you care for now." He leaned back again, but Arashi's eyes were still fixed on him.

Suddenly Issei felt like a fool. He was letting his own fears get in the way of what he wanted. He glanced round at Kaimei to find that frown still between his eyes. Leaning forward, he kissed it gently and was surprised when it eased. He took one of the blond's hands in his own and held it all the way to Sendai.

* * * * *

New Broom's rest house was a two-story post-war structure with large windows and a magnificent sea view. Under normal circumstances, Tsuki would have been delighted with it, but he felt anything but normal right now.

Hiraka-san, the caretaker of the house, and her husband had picked them up at the station and

driven them here, but now they were gone, having taken their luggage in and pointed out the fully stocked cupboards and fridge and the four made-up beds in separate bedrooms.

Issei immediately busied himself in the kitchen, making them all tea and a light meal while Arashi took Kaimei's cases upstairs for him. The blond glanced at the TV, but then decided to put some soft music on instead.

Tsuki supposed he should take his own cases upstairs, but he still felt numb and too exhausted to make the effort.

Arashi returned, took one look at him and carried his bags upstairs too, and that just made him feel worse. He wondered why he was here when Arashi couldn't trust him, and he felt so empty. What was the point of being a Sweeper if his heart wasn't in it? He couldn't see any reason for going on. Hiro was dead, and Arashi hated what he now was. All he could see was loneliness stretching out before him like a never-ending road.

Arashi returned and flung himself in a chair without even glancing at him, and his depression deepened even more. He'd been such a fool to think that killing Kazuya would make anything right again.

Issei called to them from the kitchen and he wandered towards it to find tea and sandwiches laid out for them all. He sat down, knowing he needed to eat to keep the bionanites in his body healthy, but he had very little appetite and had to force down one sandwich.

There was no happy ending for him, and he might as well get used to the idea as quickly as he could. He was a fast and strong freak and as such, useful to the three other men at the table, but that was all.

He excused himself and climbed the stairs to his room where he threw himself across the bed without bothering to undress. He was asleep in minutes.

* * * * *

A storm blew in overnight, exactly reflecting Arashi's mood. It wasn't Kazuya he'd lost Tsuki to, but his own dark anger. Anger that he still felt for all the deception, half-truths and downright lies that he felt the hacker had subjected them to.

Another part of him wanted to take Tsuki in his arms and kiss away the look of misery that had descended on the hacker's face since he'd shot Kazuya and realised that it didn't change a thing. The brat was so damned naïve!

He climbed out of bed, showered and dressed and descended the stairs. The fierce gale was still blowing outside and he shivered, wondering if he was causing it with his mood.

There was a delicious aroma coming from the kitchen and he entered it to find Issei busily cooking and Tsuki sitting at the table.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Arashi. Breakfast is nearly ready."

Tsuki said nothing at all, his attention fixed on the pepper pot for some reason known only to himself.

Arashi frowned. "Where's Kaimei?"

"He's watching the TV," Issei told him. "Apparently we're big news."

"How's his shoulder?"

"Healing nicely." Issei turned from his contemplation of bubbling pots to gaze at him challengingly. "Tsuki and I have agreed to be partners."

Arashi was surprised enough to speak without thinking first. "I see. You realise you'll have your work cut out for you trying to drag information out of him."

Tsuki stood up abruptly and left the room.

"You just can't let it alone, can you? You know as well as I do that his silence was a misguided attempt to protect the rest of us." Issei was glowering at him.

Arashi grimaced as he realised that their new recruit had spoken nothing but the truth. "You're right," he said with a sigh. "I'll apologise over breakfast."

Kaimei entered the kitchen then. "What have you done to upset Tsuki this time?"

He sighed again. "Opened my big fucking mouth and put my foot straight in it."

Kaimei rolled his eyes. "Oh, your usual morning exercises, then. Don't worry, he's going to partner with Issei, not you." His partner's tone was scathing.

Arashi frowned at his partner. "Why am I being made to feel like the villain here?"

"Perhaps because you need to forgive and forget," Issei said as he served food onto heated plates. "Now

make a start by telling Tsuki his breakfast is ready."

Muttering to himself, he headed out of the kitchen and tracked Tsuki down in the living room where he was staring at the TV screen. Kazuya's death seemed to have stirred up a veritable hornet's nest of activity, and the police had been quick to arrest several of his henchmen and raid the casino, where the proof of Ono Hiro's affidavit had been found in the 'office' there.

Arashi turned the TV off and tried to find the right words to say. "Don't dwell on it, Tsuki. I know nothing can bring your love back to life, but it's time to move on."

Those dead eyes fixed on him then. "Exactly how do I do that?"

He thought hard about the question, realising that they all had their own individual ways of dealing with the aftermath of tough and messy cases. "You try and find inner balance," he said eventually. "Over time the pain becomes less agonising, less raw."

Tsuki took a deep breath and nodded before going back into the kitchen. He followed him in, and breakfast was surprisingly easy to get through.

It was after lunch that the sparks flew again, when Arashi yelled at the brat. He and Kaimei were playing chess while Issei read a book, but Tsuki was sitting and staring at nothing. It was wearing on his nerves. "Snap out of it!"

Tsuki immediately jumped to his feet and headed for the door. "I need to get out of here, need time alone to mourn. I...I never had the time before."

He nodded, realising that the healing was finally beginning. "Don't take too long. I don't want to go out looking for you in that weather."

Tsuki didn't answer, simply grabbing his coat and shutting the door quietly behind him. The silence he left behind was a tangible thing. It was Kaimei who finally broke it. "You were very hard on him through all of this, Arashi, and he's feeling so lost at the moment. You don't think he intends to do anything stupid, do you?"

Strange how that thought pricked at him. Tsuki was a spoilt brat of a man, but he'd gotten used to him being part of their little group by now, and his exit had left a gap that could be filled by no other.

"No," he said, hoping he was right. "He's stronger than that. Much stronger. Let's face it, he's proved it enough times."

EPILOGUE

The figure on the beach shook off the memories like a dog shaking off water as a light touch on his shoulder brought him back to the present.

He had obviously been standing here for a long time, as the early autumn dusk had snuck up on him as easily as the man that now stood at his side.

He turned and offered the newcomer a tentative smile, knowing how angry the other still was. His heart lightened considerably when it was returned.

Arashi smiled neither easily nor often. He gazed into those intense dark eyes almost fearfully and felt the adrenaline begin to pump round his body, producing the much-loved feeling of butterflies in his belly and the tension of a stiffening cock beneath them.

"Have you finished your mourning now?" Arashi asked quietly.

He swallowed down on the sudden lump in his throat and nodded before pulling a hand out of his pocket and reaching out to touch Arashi's face, hoping that the man wouldn't pull away or show his contempt for such a gesture. "If I'm honest with myself, I'd already finished it long before we came here."

Arashi nodded. "Perhaps, but you still needed to

draw a line under it before you could move on."

He took a deep breath before turning to take a last look at the angry sea. "Yes," he agreed, turning his back on the shore and walking towards dry land and the future.

It might be an uncertain and dangerous future, but one that was rich with possibilities. When Arashi's arm went round his shoulders, the possibilities multiplied to fill his lonely heart with the hope that was so long overdue. The hope intensified when he heard Arashi's low chuckle.

"I still say you're a brat, Tsuki."

Then Arashi had pulled him close and was kissing him as if he was never going to stop. He clung to him almost desperately, needing so badly to belong to him and him alone.

Around them, the storm subsided.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

It might seem strange to Westerners that the tattoos that Issei and Tsuki were given were so humiliating and embarrassing for them.

In Japan, tattoos are still regarded as low class or even worse, as a sign of Yakuza membership. They are still uncommon amongst Japanese teenagers for these very reasons.

This is quite sad, as Japanese tattoos are some of the loveliest works of art that anyone could have on their skin.

AUBURNIMP

Auburnimp has been writing since she was fifteen. Her characters are always strong, feisty and often impetuous enough to get into dangerous situations rather like their creator.

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 simply go where 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 frequently subject to change without notice.