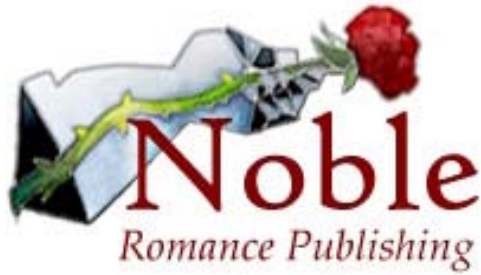


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Little Japan

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Authors' Note: We acknowledge the word "Dotonbori" — as it pertains to the district in Osaka — properly requires a macron diacritical mark (solid bar) over the first "o" to indicate a long vowel sound. However, due to current constraints and non-standardization in ebook conversion software, the diacritical mark may or may not have appeared correctly in your ebook format of choice. In order to improve readability and ensure proper formatting across platforms, we decided to omit the diacritical mark. — J.V. & R.M.

Dedication

To my partner, Jaye, for three amazing years and counting. My life began with you.
And for my horse, Mercy, whose heart was as big as she was.
May she gallop the green fields of forever. — R.M.

Book Blurp

Japan. Land of honor and beauty, crowded streets with neon signs, and exotic markets where ancient traditions still hold fast in modern-day society. As Japanese business people rush about their busy lives, there exists a place in Osaka, Japan where a modern take on the ancient tradition of the geisha thrives.

Kuri and Daichi work at Kingyo Club, a popular host club in the Dōtonbori district of Osaka. After sleeping their days away, the boys' nights are owned by the host club lifestyle and anyone willing to pay the steep price for a few hours of hard drinking and flirtatious companionship. Kuri and Daichi are lovers and best friends, and along with their roommates Sora and Takumi, they look out for one another in an occupation fraught with both physical and emotional danger.

In addition to the endless bottles of fizzy champagne, expensive gifts, and confessions of false love courtesy of regular clients, every now and then comes a customer with even deeper pockets and much darker demands. Gabriel Hartley is one of these men. After a chance meeting, Gabriel targets the stunning Kuri to feed his obsession with seducing and dominating young Japanese men.

The relationship between Kuri and Gabriel dramatically changes when a traumatic event plunges them from the Land of the Rising Sun into the land of powerful sheikhs and servant boys in the dark underworld of exotic Dubai. As Kuri struggles with the heartache of having what's most precious to him ripped away, he helps Gabriel learn important lessons about love, honor, and the power of self-forgiveness.

Chapter One

Gabriel politely shouldered his way through the thick crowd clogging Dotonbori, the bright, neon strip of nightlife paralleling the canal. His flight into Osaka had been delayed. By a few minutes past ten p.m., he'd already checked his luggage at the Dotonbori Hotel halfway down the long block. Now came the time for food, to be followed by a long, hot shower to wash away the exhaustion of travel and the oppressive July heat. Osaka became a sauna in the summer, a string of hot, humid days with seemingly endless rain. At first glance, the crowded Dotonbori district appeared to be a nightmare summer vacation spot, but the vivid little avenue had three things

Gabriel craved and could find in no other place.

Three things, all of which could be found in the small restaurant with the blowfish lantern hanging over the door.

The owner's wife, a tiny little wisp of a woman who bowed low and wouldn't look him in the eyes, greeted and seated him without delay. She asked in her native *Osaka-ben* dialect if he would like the usual, to which he bowed and replied in the affirmative. She chattered at a young woman behind the *sushi* bar, who scurried and hurried and promptly delivered a ceramic bottle of extremely rare *sake* and a matching cup to Gabriel's table. The owner-chef of the Torafugu restaurant grinned and bowed at Gabriel from across the room after his wife finished spouting off the order.

The second of his three requirements arrived on a colorful platter delivered by the chef's wife – neurotoxic blowfish sliced so thin the pattern of the plate showed through the translucent white flesh. The slivers of expertly prepared fish fanned out on the plate like the petals of a chrysanthemum, the Japanese symbol of death. Whether ill prepared or by the slightest accidental slip of the chef's knife, blowfish could be deadly when eaten. Gabriel smiled as he lifted a delicate morsel with glass chopsticks; the danger represented part of the appeal. Nothing like playing Russian roulette with something as basic as food.

His lips and tongue tingled nicely with the aftereffects of the blowfish toxin, the perfect amount left to leach into the fish flesh by the chef. Warmth spread from his heart outward. Downward. Small wonder why the neurotoxic fishes were considered an aphrodisiac.

As Gabriel wagged a finger to catch the chef's attention, the door creaked open and in spilled muggy air, street noise, and quite possibly the third item on Gabriel's list.

Rain-soaked, blondish, shoulder-length hair clung to the sides of an angelic face. Willowy as a cherry blossom branch, the kid didn't look a day over eighteen – a bonus in Gabriel's opinion. A beautiful mouth with full, luscious lips caught Gabriel's attention, but the kid's eyes captured the prize. Their subtle slant betrayed recent Japanese descent; startling green irises flashed like emeralds in the light from a paper

lantern.

A rarity, genetically speaking, but Gabriel had seen the combination once before — light hair, and gorgeous green eyes staring out from delicate Japanese features.

The kid couldn't have been more perfect except for the fact he wasn't alone.

A second, much older Japanese gentleman came through the restaurant door and put an arm around the kid's shoulders. The man leaned close and whispered something to the kid, but became distracted as the owner's wife approached with a cheerful and exuberant greeting.

The kid turned his attention to a large, ornamental tank of koi and caught Gabriel staring. With a smiling smirk, he put his back to Gabriel.

Host boy, Gabriel thought. Half Japanese, half Euro-mongrel, with the Japanese probably on Mommy's side. The kid stood only an inch or so shorter than Gabriel's six-feet-two, gauging by the height of the koi tank. Gabriel pondered for a moment, considered approaching the older man to inquire about the young companion, but he wasn't in the mood for the "nephew game" tonight.

He wanted fine *sake* and deadly *fugu* and to fuck some pretty boy's brains out. Two down, one to go, and he didn't feel like horsing around.

Gabriel folded his cloth napkin and laid it beside his plate, adjusting himself behind the drape of the tablecloth to conceal his erection. Ignoring the boy and the client and the thankfully garrulous chef's wife, Gabriel went to the *sushi* bar and took a seat. He bowed to the owner, Narita, and addressed him in Japanese.

"Good evening, my friend." Gabriel smiled pleasantly, reaching into the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket for his wallet.

Narita looked up from his work and bowed, an uneasy smile on his face. "The *fugu* not to your liking?"

"No, no, of course not! Everything is perfect, as usual. I simply have a question." Gabriel pulled a thick wad of bills from his wallet and slid enough *yen* across the stainless steel bar to pay the bills for Narita's business for at least a year. He smiled, as much as he was able without looking like a dentist's patient, his lips and tongue

somewhat numb. "Do you know the young man over by the koi tank?"

Narita ignored the money and looked toward the tank. In a heartbeat, recognition brightened his eyes, and he drew back and scooped up the *yen*. He nodded. "He comes from the new host club down the street. Kingyo Club. Private, no walk-ins. I have heard some of his clients call him Kuri. Every Friday night, he comes here for late supper with Mr. Hiroshi. Good customers. Quiet, polite, and they pay good tribute for my skills."

Suspicious confirmed, Gabriel felt rejuvenated but anxious, more excited and alive than he'd been in weeks. He beckoned Narita closer with a crooked index finger. "How do I acquire an invitation?" Gabriel tapped the same finger on the shiny stainless bar in the spot where the pile of money had been. "I can keep you comfortably solvent for at least two more years if you can guarantee my admittance."

As he reached under the bar, Narita peered over at the boy. Very casually, he passed Gabriel a blue poker chip with a golden koi emblem emblazoned on its surface. "This will get you in. Money and smooth talking will get you the boy. I hear he is not cheap."

Not cheap. Gabriel chuckled quietly to himself. *Thank you, Daddy and Granddaddy. If only you knew what your small minds and deep pockets had wrought.*

Gabriel dipped into his wallet again, but instead of *yen* he came up with a parchment-colored business card with scalloped edges. He handed the card to Narita. "Ask for Mr. Griffith; he's my attorney. Tell him what you need to keep you solvent and comfortable for the next three years, and he'll take care of you." Gabriel palmed the poker chip and returned his wallet to his inner coat pocket. He bowed to Narita. "Prosperity and happiness to you, my friend."

Narita returned the bow, and Gabriel managed to leave the establishment he now owned *de facto* without so much as a sideways glance toward the kid.

Chapter Two

Two hours and a blowjob later, Kuri arrived back at Kingyo Club. He was tired and his jaw hurt. After his pleasant dinner and tea with Mr. Hiroshi, Kuri had met with another regular.

Mr. Atsushi had apparently suffered a particularly bad day at the office. He'd taken much longer than usual to get off, and Kuri felt like the guy had drilled a hole through his skull, via the back of his throat.

Head and jaw throbbing, Kuri made his way toward the office. For safety reasons, rules stated every host boy needed to check in and out whenever leaving the club's premises. There had been a rash of host boys gone missing over the last year, and though no one talked about the disappearances, they were all on guard. The club remained busy and the money flowed, but hosting had become a dangerous occupation.

Chiasa worked the cashier's office, and she greeted Kuri with her customary shy smile. "We were starting to worry about you, Kuri." She put a checkmark by Kuri's name on the roster board behind her. "Don't go home yet."

Kuri stopped, his shoulders drooping. "Chiasa, it's after midnight. I had a late night yesterday and a full schedule tonight. I want to go home."

"Well, boss says there's an important client waiting for you in the lounge. A new guy. He's reserved your time and wishes to discuss your wage for three nights, Kuri. You can turn the client down, but —"

"Three nights?" Kuri perked up, not only because of the amount of money such an engagement would involve, but because this meant the boss had ranked the newcomer over Kuri's regular clients. A big no-no, canceling regular clients, unless the power and cash existed to back up the risk. Kuri craned his neck to look around the corner into the smoke-filled room. He couldn't see clearly enough to pick out a new face. "He's in the lounge?"

"Yes." Chiasa nodded. "Boss says his name is Mr. Gabriel."

Kuri sighed. "All right, Chiasa. I guess I'll do this last one then head home."

As he started toward the lounge, Chiasa called out behind him.

"Kuri! Not three separate nights! He wants you for the next seventy-two hours!"

* * * * *

Men and women came to Kingyo Club to be pampered. They had their cigarettes lit, their drinks poured, their conversations stimulated and their egos stroked, all by the most beautiful young men Osaka had to offer. For most patrons, the list of services ended there. But to those with more decadent palates and fatter bank accounts, intimate pleasures could be negotiated.

Kuri strolled through the club, his gaze wandering as he sought his mystery client. Within moments, a handsome man with dark blond hair and blue eyes — American or perhaps Eastern European — made eye contact with Kuri and nodded from a circular booth near the back of the club.

The man wore white linen slacks and a crisp, black dress shirt open at the neck with several buttons undone. A jacket matching the slacks hung on the brass coat rack separating his booth from the next. Kuri knew at first glance the man was no doubt made of money. The suit looked custom made, and on the center of the table sat a bottle of high-end champagne. The man made a subtle nod toward the empty seat across from him at the table.

As he sauntered over, Kuri thanked his ancestors the next three days would be spent with a handsome man and not some wrinkled old crone, especially since he assumed the arrangement included sex. He paused and bowed at a perfect angle of respect, eyes lowered but peeking out from under his long eyelashes. "Mr. Gabriel? I am Kuri."

Gabriel stood, returned the bow, and gestured for Kuri to be seated. For someone who had obviously spent a lot of money for the pleasure of Kuri's company, Gabriel seemed less than enthusiastic, almost stern. As he resumed his seat on the curved, leather bench, Gabriel waved a hand toward the champagne. "If you would, please."

After another courteous bow, Kuri gracefully plucked the champagne from the

chiller. He gauged the price of the bottle at just over six hundred thousand *yen*. Certainly not the cheapest Kingyo Club had to offer, or even merely middle tier, but not quite the most expensive. Apparently Mr. Gabriel intended to make him work for the good stuff. Kuri flashed a smile, fluttered his eyelashes, and turned his head just enough to display his long neck to perfection. The concerted move had helped him become one of the top Kingyo Club wage earners. He maintained the pose as he poured and offered Gabriel the first glass of champagne.

"I hope you'll enjoy your time here, sir. If there is anything I can do to make your evening more enjoyable, please say so."

Gabriel took a sip from the glass, his gaze fixed upon Kuri. "I've reserved the entire top floor of the Dotonbori Hotel to ensure my privacy for the next three days. I would like very much for you to be there with me for the duration of my stay." He lifted the crystal glass to his mouth and drank every drop. "Name your price."

Kuri took his seat, carefully considering the facts. The Dotonbori Hotel had a reputation as the most prestigious on the strip. To reserve a whole floor flaunted both power and money. "Forgive me for being so straightforward, but since you have set the pace yourself, will sex be expected?"

"Yes." Gabriel slid his empty glass across the table toward Kuri. "Whenever I want, however I want. That's the deal, so please don't shortchange yourself. Money is no object."

Kuri hadn't released the bottle — or filled his own glass — before he found himself filling Mr. Gabriel's a second time. Mr. Gabriel's words and the tone behind them set an alarm off in Kuri. He quickly poured himself some champagne then set the bottle down.

Whenever, however. Kuri weighed his options. The way Mr. Gabriel spoke and downed expensive champagne told of a man full of hungers. Such men often proved dangerous. Kuri met Gabriel's blue eyes. "Sex only in the hotel. Nothing out in the street. Three days — whenever, however — four-and-a-half million *yen*. Fifty thousand American dollars. "

Gabriel retrieved his glass from Kuri's hand. "You underestimate how badly I

want you. One hundred thousand, and sex will take place only in the hotel. Do we have an arrangement?"

"One hundred —*fuck* yes!" Kuri sensed the eyes of club-owner Mr. Toshi glare at him from across the room. Bowing his head in Mr. Toshi's direction, he felt flames lick at his cheeks and race down his spine from embarrassment. "I apologize for my outburst, but that's several months' pay. Thank you, Mr. Gabriel. That will be more than enough."

Gabriel smiled for the first time. "I've already made arrangements with your employer regarding your absence. He's being compensated well for any financial loss. If you have no other business to attend to, I'd like us to leave now."

Kuri shot his boss a quick glance and received a single nod in return. He shrugged and offered Gabriel a small smile. "Looks like I'm all yours."

Chapter Three

The top floor of the Dotonbori Hotel contained a total of six suites. Gabriel led the way down the corridor, stopping to swipe an electronic card through a slot next to the door farthest from the elevator. He hadn't spoken a word to Kuri since they'd left the club. The light turned green on the pass card panel and the door clicked. Gabriel opened the door and gestured Kuri inside.

Something about the evening had seemed odd from the start, and Kuri hesitated. The man's general demeanor and the lack of any real conversation had him unsettled, but the thought of nine million *yen* in one swoop got Kuri's feet moving again. As he moved into the room and gave Mr. Gabriel a hard look, he realized he'd seen the man once before.

"You were at Torafuga tonight, Mr. Gabriel."

"I was indeed." Gabriel emptied his blazer pockets onto the top of the room's lone dresser. A full-sized bed took up much of the room, low to the ground and covered with a thick, pillow-top mattress. On a plain white table sat a flat-screen TV, a

telephone, tea and coffee makers, along with a tray of ceramic mugs and small *choko* cups for *sake*. A cube-shaped refrigerator sat under the table.

Gabriel hung his blazer in a small closet, undid a few more buttons on his shirt and reclined back on the bed, propping up on his elbows. "There's *sake* in the refrigerator. Fix us a drink and tell me about the man I saw you with at the restaurant."

"Mr. Hiroshi?" Kuri remained dressed in his black business suit, white button-down shirt, black necktie fashionably loose—typical host boy attire. "He's one of my most constant clients. I met him two years ago at another club, after his wife became ill with cancer. He came for someone to take his mind off things. He chose me because he said I reminded him of his son, who had moved to America to attend college and never returned."

Opening the small hotel fridge, Kuri found a bottle of *namazake*. Non-pasteurized and undiluted *sake*, the crisp pear-and-vanilla drink was one of Kuri's favorites. He poured two small *choko* cups and took one to Gabriel, bowing politely as he presented the drink.

Gabriel took the cup and sniffed. "Very nice." He drank the *sake* and handed the empty cup back to Kuri. "More, please. My name is Gabriel Hartley. I work for the United States government. I come from an extremely wealthy family. I'm gay, but due to certain prejudices in my family, I cannot be openly so. I come here for three or four days every other month. I wish we'd met sooner. You're . . . you're quite beautiful."

"I must be," Kuri said, "for you to stumble only once through your monologue."

Again Kuri poured the *sake* and passed the cup to his temporary master, and then he knelt obediently at the foot of the bed. He'd taken in much more than the words Gabriel had spoken. Gabriel's manner came off as tight, precise and nervous. This man harbored many secrets, Kuri felt sure.

"How would you like me to address you?" Kuri kept his head bowed.

"My name is Gabriel. Just call me Gabriel. And I'd like you to look at me, if you don't mind."

"You have no idea how relieved I am to hear you say that, Gabriel." Kuri looked

up, instantly captured by Gabriel's blue eyes. Eyes truly represented the windows into the soul, and the brief glimpses into Gabriel's had left Kuri with an overwhelming feeling he couldn't quite define. Training kicking in, he pushed back his butterflies and removed one of Gabriel's shoes for a foot massage. "My name is Kuri Wailand."

Gabriel stuffed a pillow under his head, settling back with a sigh.

At the foot of the bed, Kuri slipped off Gabriel's other shoe and both socks and went to work. "I've . . . I've never told a client my full name before. I'm not really sure why I did just now."

"In that case, thank you for sharing." Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment and let out a heavy sigh. "That feels wonderful, but I think I need something more right now." He looked down at Kuri. "Would you undress me, please?"

"Yes, Gabriel." His fingers shaking with the perfect blend of anticipatory excitement and nerves, Kuri slid up the bed on his knees and reached for the first still-fastened button of Gabriel's shirt. He worked quickly and in silence, using the flat of his palms pressed against Gabriel's smooth, warm chest to spread open the shirt.

Gabriel lifted his shoulders as Kuri removed the shirt, and then raised his hips as Kuri moved farther south to relieve him of his trousers and briefs.

Kuri folded the clothes and set them carefully on the floor. "You said you've been coming to Osaka every other month. What drove you to choose me after so many visits? Generally foreigners find one host boy and stick with them, or at least remain loyal to a particular club."

"I have no attachment or allegiance to any of the others, and I couldn't take my eyes off you in the restaurant. You remind me of someone I once knew." Gabriel grazed a hand absently over his own chest and down his stomach. "Take your clothes off for me, please."

Rising from the low bed, Kuri tugged at the knot of his necktie. He slung the tie and his jacket over the back of the chair and started taking off his shirt. "What was his name, this person I remind you of? I can be anyone you like."

Gabriel's gaze remained fixed on Kuri undressing. "His name was Daniel Bailey.

His mother was Japanese, his father British. Like you, he had very straight, light chestnut brown hair with reddish highlights, and green eyes like I'd never seen before. Skin like milk, thin as a rail, and he had a smile that could light up the gloomiest day." Gabriel's stare seemed to penetrate Kuri, as if Gabriel were gazing through him into the past. A soft, wistful smile turned his mouth up slightly at the corners and his focus returned to the present, to Kuri. "I was fifteen years old. He was a year behind me in school, and I was desperately in love with him."

Shirt nothing more than a memory and his trousers open and hanging low off his slender hips, Kuri approached the bed. He slipped one side of the trousers lower, giving Gabriel a generous look at bare skin – Kuri wore no underwear. "Did you ever kiss your Daniel? I can be him for you." Kuri climbed onto the bed and crawled on all fours, trousers falling away as he settled over Gabriel. The subtle change of timbre Kuri adopted with his voice had always worked in similar cases. "Do you think about me every night, Gabriel?"

"Oh God" Gabriel's breath audibly hitched, and his cock thickened and twitched between them. "I never let on to him how I felt, but I couldn't get him out of my mind. I came out to my parents because of him, but they reacted badly. Daniel's family moved away that summer and I never saw him again. He never knew, and I didn't have any choice but to climb back into the closet and stay there." Gabriel slid a hand up Kuri's narrow chest. "My God, you're beautiful."

Kuri felt Gabriel shiver underneath him as if the room temperature had plummeted. So, the iceberg was human after all. Remaining statue-still, Kuri allowed Gabriel to caress the illusion of his youth's desire manifested in flesh. Kuri avoided eye contact during sex with clients as a matter of course, but Gabriel's attention seemed focused somewhere else, *sometime* else. "If he were here now, Gabriel, what would you tell him?"

"God, I'd – " Gabriel bit his bottom lip and moved his hands to Kuri's bare hips, thumbs circling with nervous motion. He looked up into Kuri's eyes, rose-tinted shame coloring his cheeks. "You must think I'm crazy."

Kuri settled his bottom down on Gabriel's loins in a nonchalant, innocent manner and placed his palms on Gabriel's chest. "No. I think you got broken. You stuck your neck out for this boy and had the blade of a *katana* come down so hard you're still running around blind without your head." With his fingertips, Kuri drew imaginary lines along the soft rise of Gabriel's chest. "Now you're looking for a reason to not shrivel up and fall over dead."

"I'm sorry." Gabriel's eyes remained locked on Kuri's, thumbs still rubbing long-simmering anxiety onto Kuri's skin. "I don't feel right dragging you into my problem because you happen to bear a resemblance to someone I barely knew eighteen years ago. You can leave, Kuri. Your fee will be paid as agreed."

"Pfft. Oh, *fuck* no." Kuri sat up straighter and looked down on Gabriel. "So you can go down the street next trip and find another host boy to pay your money to? No." Kuri shook his head. "How many times have you chickened out? How long have you searched for someone like me? Do you *really* think you're ever going to find anyone you want *more* than me?"

"No." Gabriel swallowed hard enough for Kuri to hear. "You're beautiful. Perfect. But you're not real, and in three days I have to return to pretending I'm something I'm not. Why waste your time? What do you get out of this? I have a feeling money isn't your sole motivation."

The shift of control startled Kuri. "I like older men." He hoped to avoid offering further detail, but the immobile gaze from Gabriel gave him little choice. "I never knew my father, and I have no brothers. Mr. Hiroshi doesn't ask for sex. He takes me places, buys me things—simple things like books and ice cream and haircuts. He makes me feel like I have a father. But you . . . when I look at you, I feel something else. Something dangerous. Something I want to touch, even though I know I'll be burned."

"I've worked hard to maintain control over my impulses." Gabriel pressed the pads of his thumbs harder into the sensitive indentions underneath Kuri's protruding hipbones. "Or at least learned how to legally express them. I didn't believe you were of age until your boss produced your official documents; you look significantly younger

than twenty-two. But even so, you're close enough to the flame to make me nervous around you."

"There's nothing illegal about this. You made a fair deal, and the money is good. I'm not screaming rape. What are you worried about?" Kuri shifted slightly, easing the pressure Gabriel's hands had begun to exert. Time to speed up and move along.

"Whatever, however. So what *is* your special kink, Gabriel?"

"Youth. At least, the illusion of youth." Gabriel lifted his hips off the bed at an angle that rode his erection perfectly up the crease of Kuri's ass. "Young, slender and pretty, like you. *Specifically* like you. Like Daniel."

Breath hissed out of Kuri as if he'd been punctured. Head thrown back, eyelashes fluttering, his body bowed like a green cherry branch. "Is that all? For all the money you've paid? You could have had me for half."

"I could have had you for less." The rise and fall of Gabriel's chest came harder, faster. "But I won't belittle what you do and I appreciate hard work. I *told* you not to shortchange yourself, but you did anyway. You need to work on your self-esteem." Gabriel thrust his hips off the mattress, and Kuri felt the warm, wet leakage of Gabriel's pre-cum trickle down his ass. "Jesus, Kuri, I want you so badly"

Kuri decided Gabriel was unlike anyone he'd ever serviced before. He knew he'd be thinking about the man long after this job. He wondered what kind of life Gabriel lived in the States. There were ways to find out. Kuri reached back, spread his ass cheeks apart, and sat. He'd lubed up prior to his most recent appointment, but his effort had gone unused. Brief pressure, exquisite burn, and then bliss. "Tell me about your first time."

Gabriel sucked breath in through his teeth as his fingernails dug into Kuri's skin. "I lost my virginity in an alley behind a gay dance club. I wasn't old enough to drink yet and I couldn't get in, so I hung out around back."

The sight and smells of the alley seemed to rise up around them as memories were painted tangible. Kuri imagined a young, scared Gabriel watching for the right man to approach. "How old was he?"

"Thirty, forty, fifty; I don't know. I was eighteen — anything over twenty-five was old." Gabriel bucked his hips off the mattress, a slick sheen of sweat covering him as Kuri sank deeper onto his cock without complaint. "Fuck, you feel so good."

"Yeah?" Kuri licked his lips. He ran his hands down the length of his torso, careful to twist and turn to display his lithe body in a practiced, perfectly seductive way. His gaze never left Gabriel's eyes. "We aren't so different. My first was an older man, too. Our neighbor. He gave me toys growing up. Money when I got older. His dick as a coming-of-age present, with me on my knees bent forward over his family dining table."

Gabriel's eyes reddened and watered. He slid his arms around Kuri's waist and pulled him closer. "I don't want to be one those men. I just want to be able to love someone and have them love me back."

"You flew halfway around the world." Kuri gasped as Gabriel's dick pulled partially out of his ass. "You came to a place where no one would know you, and you found someone who knows you better than yourself." He sat back, sucking in air as Gabriel sank in again, nice and slow. "There are no such things as coincidence or dumb luck. You found me for a reason."

Gabriel carefully rolled Kuri onto his back without breaking intimate contact.

"I don't want you to be Daniel for me." Gabriel rocked his hips in a slow, gentle fuck. "But can we pretend, just this once, that I haven't purchased your services?" Gabriel placed a line of small kisses along Kuri's neck. "Let me make love to you like it means something."

Not an outlandish or unusual request, but one that disturbed Kuri. Men who wanted nothing more than a quick, nasty fuck were easier to deal with. They fucked, they got off, they left. Easy. Sometimes they showed up another night for more, but most often not, and even when they did they rarely remembered Kuri's name. Gabriel sought something considerably more intimate, and Kuri realized why so much money had been so willingly offered.

Kuri closed his eyes. He'd learned long ago to push guilt over lies aside, but lies

tangled in such deep pain always seemed so much harder to discard. Running slender fingers up Gabriel's back, he nodded. "I'll be yours, for as long as you need me."

The change came on as if a switch had been flipped, and suddenly Gabriel threw himself into the task at hand, intent on Kuri's pleasure. He fucked Kuri with a gentleness belying the tempest Kuri knew surged inside the man. A soft hand, with fingers strong and sure, wedged between their bodies to grasp Kuri's cock, and began stroking in cadence to the easy thrusting of Gabriel's cock in his ass.

Quiet moans mingled with sweet words in Kuri's ear.

"I want to make you feel so good," Gabriel murmured. "You're so beautiful it hurts for me to look at you, and yet I can't bear to look away."

The power of the moment, the potency of the *sake* and a natural, true attraction to Gabriel made it easy for Kuri to forget this was all pretend. He arched his back and swept blond hair back from Gabriel's face. "Your hair color is natural?"

Gabriel, not missing a beat with his hips or hand, smiled down at Kuri with a curious expression. "Yes, the carpet matches the drapes as you may have noticed, and I'm not so vain to risk hair dye anywhere near my nethers." He chuckled and kissed Kuri's chin. "Do you approve?"

"Yes, I do. Very much." Kuri smiled. "Blond hair here is nearly always stiff from chemicals. Not soft, like yours."

The pace kicked up a notch, Gabriel's thrusts becoming quicker, deeper, the fingers curled around Kuri's cock gripping tighter. Gabriel jerked him off in earnest, tugging hard enough to pinch Kuri's foreskin together over the head of his cock on the upstroke.

"Want you to come for me." Gabriel ran his tongue across Kuri's lower lip. "Want to feel your insides tighten up and flutter around me."

"Fuck!" With one hand clutching Gabriel's hair, Kuri reached back with the other to brace himself on the wall behind the bed. He tightened his inner muscles, and the rub of Gabriel's thick cock on the rim of his sensitive asshole did the job of setting him off. Kuri had been known to come simply from a light fingering of those receptive muscles,

and as he squeezed them again around Gabriel's girth, white light exploded behind his eyes and he gave a strangled cry. "Gabriel!"

Gabriel hissed, and Kuri let himself go, felt the warmth of his own cum spattering his stomach, heard the slick noises of Gabriel's fist urging out every last drop. As the inner spasms continued like powerful aftershocks, Kuri sensed from the increased force of the cock sawing in and out of his ass that Gabriel's climax drew near.

The muscles in Gabriel's neck tightened. He released Kuri's spent cock and used the same hand to hitch up Kuri's left leg. Sweat dripped from Gabriel's brow despite the chill of air conditioning in the room. He slammed hard, repeatedly and deep, into Kuri's ass. "Feels, oh fuck, oh *fuck*, God, please let me come inside you"

Pushing back against Gabriel's thrust, Kuri clenched his ass as tight as he could and screamed, "Yes! Yes, do it!"

"Oh, sweet Jesus." Gabriel moaned, his entire body seizing, muscles rigid, and Kuri could feel the thick cock in his ass pulsing as Gabriel shot his load. Hips jerking, Gabriel's lower half thrashed like a man in the throes of dying until finally he collapsed, dead weight on Kuri's body.

The crush of a man bearing down on him after orgasm was something Kuri enjoyed, a time when his clients were at their most vulnerable. No matter how rough or sweet, they were his and his alone for as long as they lay there with their softening dick up his ass, and he reveled in the sensation. Kuri gently brushed the hair from Gabriel's eyes and watched as life slowly crept back into lips, fingers, eyelids. "You have the face of an angel when you're not full of stress."

Gabriel placed a small kiss on Kuri's cheek. "And you have the body of a devil." Gabriel chuckled. "I feel much better. Thank you."

Thank you. So simple, so often overlooked. Kuri smiled and kissed Gabriel's nose with affection he never wasted on clients.

Chapter Four

Sleep felt good.

After seven days straight of working shifts stretching into the early morning hours, Kuri felt like he'd gone to heaven. The sheets were soft, the air conditioning a godsend against the killer summer heat, and Gabriel's strong body provided comfort Kuri couldn't deny. He woke up nestled against Gabriel's chest. Gabriel had his arm coiled possessively around Kuri's waist, and only with concentrated effort did Kuri manage to wiggle free without waking him. Had he not needed to piss so badly, he would've waited.

Once off the bed, Kuri padded into the bathroom and pushed up the toilet seat. He didn't bother closing the door. He'd barely gotten the flow going through his waning morning wood when he startled, surprised by Gabriel standing in the bathroom doorway.

Gabriel moved behind him, arms curling around his waist, palms skimming over Kuri's hipbones then downward, his chin resting on Kuri's shoulder. "You have a very beautiful cock."

No one had ever done *that* before.

The flow stopped as Gabriel's warm fingers reached the base of Kuri's erection. A sound so soft Kuri wasn't sure he'd made it himself fell from his lips, and he put his hand over Gabriel's and guided the grip. Gabriel's thumb pressed down insistently as if coaxing Kuri on, and with great effort Kuri forced himself to urinate.

He concentrated on his aim. "Most foreigners are too afraid to do the things they really want. They come here with big money and bigger talk, and they brag of their prowess when they have an audience at the club. But behind closed doors they fuck like they're in bed on Sunday afternoon with a bored girlfriend. You're different, Gabriel. You're not afraid of what you want."

"Between both sides of my family," Gabriel said, keeping steady aim with Kuri's cock even as he softly stroked him, "I have more money than God, but the one thing I can't buy with my fortune is time. Life is too short not to experience everything you can afford." Gabriel tapped Kuri's cock in the air to shake off the clinging drops, and Kuri

felt a light kiss touch the nape of his neck, warm breath tickling the spot afterward as a laugh brushed against his skin. "Yours is my first uncircumcised cock, Kuri, so you'll have to pardon my fascination."

Kuri blushed and chuckled. "I consider getting cut sometimes. Lots of host boys have the procedure done. Westerners almost always prefer cut guys, and the look has become very popular with Japanese girls." He leaned back against Gabriel and shrugged. "Maybe I ought to call a doctor and —"

"Don't." Gabriel moved his hand along the length of Kuri's dick, paying special attention to the foreskin. He rolled and stretched the pliant skin between his fingers. "You're perfect just the way you are. I don't understand the obsession Japanese youth has with Americans. You bleach your pretty, shiny black hair until it feels like straw. You wear makeup, and you even go so far as to have surgery to change the shape of your incredible eyes. You bake yourselves under sunlamps to tan your beautiful light skin." Gabriel kissed a trail across Kuri's shoulders, and his persistent, talented hand on Kuri's cock brought Kuri close to completion. "And we look at you and think you're the most beautiful people on earth, as our young people try to emulate *you*."

A whisper of warm breath ghosted the back of Kuri's neck and he felt Gabriel shiver and shudder against his back.

"I could be content just to look at you," Gabriel said. "To touch you so intimately is nothing less than a gift."

Kuri knew Gabriel was about to paint his back with cum and the thought made him gasp, his own cock jerking in anticipation. "We all look so much the same; it's hard to stand out. Even *my* hair would be darker if I let it go completely natural." He pressed back and felt Gabriel's cock, hard as concrete and leaking like a sieve. Kuri allowed himself a satisfied smile for a job well done. "Come on me."

"Oh, Kuri." Gabriel's hand stuttered on Kuri's cock.

Kuri felt the splash of wet heat spatter the small of his back, dripping slowly downward. "Want you so bad; you're making me crazy."

The moment the heat trickled down the crack of his ass, Kuri lost control. Legs wide and close to giving out, he shot one thick stream after another.

Big, strong hands gripped Kuri's shoulders and spun him around, and Gabriel kissed him with a ferocity skirting a line between desperate and dangerous. The intensity of the action seemed wholly consuming, unashamedly claiming, a not-so-subtle exhibition of one man taking full possession of another, and when Gabriel finally came up for air, Kuri tasted blood.

Panting, Kuri swiped the back of his hand along his lips and came away with a streak of crimson. Usually, such an occurrence would be cause to leave. Mr. Toshi would never fault one of his boys for turning down a client when such dangerous play erupted. Kuri licked his split lip and glared at Gabriel, who looked like a lion with prey cornered. Positions established, this presented a challenge Kuri wasn't willing to give up. "I'm hungry. Take me to breakfast."

Gabriel chuckled darkly and swiped a thumb across Kuri's bleeding lip. "And you call *me* dangerous."

Chapter Five

The Dotonbori Hotel had gained renown for its sumptuous breakfast buffet, a generous mixture of both Japanese and Western dishes. Fully expecting to eat breakfast there, Kuri raised a surprised brow when Gabriel guided him by the elbow out the front door of the hotel instead of into the elevator leading to the basement breakfast hall.

At least the rain had stopped. The heat and humidity outside didn't feel as thick and cloying as the day before, and the sun shone brightly. Warm, but not stifling. The only remnants of the previous day's downpours consisted of random puddles congregating in the gutters.

Gabriel paused when they hit the pavement, hands on hips, looking one way down the narrow street and then the other. He appeared so much more relaxed than last night, Kuri noted. Dressed in well-worn faded jeans, a white polo shirt and white

sneakers, Gabriel exuded an aura of being comfortable in his own skin. A far cry from the uptight wreck of a man he'd been the night before. Kuri had first noticed the change with the surprise visit in the bathroom this morning, and now the difference exuded from Gabriel's every pore.

"Any suggestions?" Gabriel smiled at Kuri. "This is your turf, not mine."

"Aizuya. It's one of the best restaurants in the city and has amazing *takoyaki*. You do like octopus, don't you? They start serving early." They walked to the end of the block, and Kuri flagged down a taxicab. As the vehicle pulled close to the curb, he leaned in through the front window and gave the driver instructions. He drew back and opened the rear door for Gabriel. "After you!"

Gabriel climbed into the cab, slid to the opposite side, and patted the empty seat next to him.

The cab took off as soon as Kuri hopped in. The streets of Osaka bustled with a throng of business people and foreign tourists. The relatively short ride went slowly, but Kuri didn't mind. He'd begun to truly enjoy Gabriel's company.

"What do you do back in the States?"

"I work most of the time, which includes frequent travel to your beautiful country." Gabriel slid an arm around Kuri's shoulders and fiddled with his hair. "I spend time with my family when I have to, enough to qualify as a 'good son,' but other than that I have very little in the way of a social life." He smiled. "I'm enjoying my time with you."

Gabriel was good-looking, powerful, all of which enticed Kuri. All host boys dreamed of someday falling in love, and Kuri had done so with another host boy named Daichi. But the lifestyle rode roughshod on the soul, with true happiness often plastered over with expensive gifts and far too much champagne.

"I am having a good time with you, Gabriel. I don't usually spend so much time with one person."

Gabriel looked at Kuri with curiosity. "Do you enjoy what you do, or is it simply out of necessity?"

"Hmm Hard to say." Kuri looked out the car window, watching the world streak by much as his life seemed to do lately. "I started because of the tales of good money, and to get paid for dating and drinking seemed like a good idea. They were right about the money. I make more in a month than most normal jobs I qualify for pay in a year. The pleasure of sex and companionship is good, mostly." Kuri shrugged. "If I suddenly came into money and could quit tomorrow? I don't know — maybe I would."

"Perhaps — "

The driver pulled the cab sharply to the curb and craned his neck to announce their arrival. Gabriel paid the fare, along with what Kuri viewed as an exorbitant tip.

Gabriel, his hand on Kuri's neck, guided him into a kiss. "Perhaps we can both pretend these next few days are simply a vacation."

Kuri allowed Gabriel to kiss him again. Deep and intense. Kuri wondered if Gabriel ever did anything that wasn't. Nervous at his growing attachment to the man, Kuri grabbed Gabriel's hand and tugged him toward the door, putting the brakes on the intimate moment.

After following Kuri out of the taxi, Gabriel paused on the walk, smiling as he looked at the building. "I like it. Simple and peaceful." Gabriel nodded toward the wooden structure.

The place looked lost in time, colorful and quaint and adorned with fresh flowers, without the garish neon and loud advertisements of the Dotonbori district. Kuri appreciated the calm simplicity, and Gabriel recognizing those qualities pleased him.

"It's probably the most peace money can buy in Osaka." Kuri let go of Gabriel's hand and walked to the entrance, where a young woman dressed in a colorful, cheerful *kimono* greeted them. She led them to a table and handed them each a menu. Kuri had been to Aizuya many times and knew their offerings by heart. He didn't want to appear to be rushing Gabriel, so he made a show of looking through the menu. "I think this is one of the things I'd miss most about Japan. Food from other places always seems so heavy and complicated. Eating is really a pleasure here."

Gabriel peeked over top of his large, foldout menu and grinned. "I could make a dirty comment, but I'll be a gentleman since it's so early in the day."

Kuri snorted and knocked his menu into Gabriel's. "Too late! You already made comment enough!" Kuri set his menu down and propped his chin up with one hand. "We should go to Tennoji Park after breakfast. Have you ever been? The garden is one of my favorite places."

"To be honest, I haven't seen much of Osaka, save for the Dotonbori strip and government offices. I usually don't stray too far from the hotel during my leisure time." Gabriel set his menu on the table. "You order for us. I have an adventurous palate."

Kuri nodded and began putting together a mental list of all the menu items not to be missed. When their waitress arrived, he rattled off a generous order, which included everything from the traditional breakfast *miso* soup and choice bits of *sushi*, to the more extravagant *takoyaki* and tuna *domburi*.

"Maybe we can swing by my place first," Kuri said as the hostess departed. "I don't have a change of clothing with me. I wasn't really expecting to spend three days away."

Gabriel cocked his head. "Are you sure? I would assume there is some rule about allowing clients to know where you live. Mr. Toshi made clear the importance of your safety to him."

A busboy arrived with a pot of tea. After the young man left, Kuri poured. "I've already broken a few of Mr. Toshi's rules today."

Gabriel lowered his voice. "How so? If I've done something to break the rules, please tell me. It's not my intention to cause problems for you."

"Mr. Toshi gives us guidelines, but ultimately it's my decision as to what I will and will not allow." Kuri sipped his green tea, watching Gabriel over the rim of the small cup. The airy lightness of the room seemed to thicken.

Gabriel turned his teacup in slow circles on the surface of the table, looking into Kuri's eyes with a fixed and steady gaze. "If you would tell me what guidelines have been violated, we might be able to avoid any further infractions."

Kuri knew he had to say something to save the mood. He didn't want this to end just yet, and Gabriel struck him as a runner. Kuri chose his words with utmost care. "Mr. Toshi cares about his boys. He used to be a host boy too, you know? Sometimes, customers get rough. A few boys go missing every year." Kuri took a breath, recalling a young man who had disappeared six months prior. "He tells us if a client draws blood or makes us uncomfortable, we are allowed to walk away from the deal, but . . . I don't want to. You do something to me, although I haven't figured it out yet."

The hostess picked that of all moments to arrive at the table with their breakfast. As she took her time to arrange all the platters and utensils with precision, Gabriel's struggle to remain silent showed on his face, in his eyes, by his hand turning the teacup faster.

Finally the hostess left, and Gabriel leaned toward Kuri. "The kiss this morning. I drew blood. I'm sorry; I won't let it happen again. I got carried away."

A soft, familiar voice came from behind Kuri. "Won't let *what* happen again?"

Kuri's eyes widened with near panic as he watched Gabriel's gaze lift to look over Kuri's shoulder. His heart raced as the one person Kuri simultaneously longed for most and dreaded to see now appeared at the table.

"Daichi, always so nosey!" said Kuri, turning slowly to face Daichi—his lover and best friend.

Daichi looked fantastic, as usual. He wore the dark suit all host boys wore, but he'd been in the business long enough to make the look his own. Hair as blond as Gabriel's but spiked at all angles, silver earring in his left ear, designer sunglasses perched on the top of his head, shoes polished. Daichi reeked experience and success.

Kuri cleared his throat to make sure he hadn't swallowed his voice. "Gabriel, this is my friend, Daichi. He works at Kingyo Club, too."

To say Gabriel looked uncomfortable would've been the understatement of the year. He stood and offered a polite bow to Daichi, but Kuri could sense intense emotion roiling beneath the surface of Gabriel's controlled demeanor.

"My pleasure." Gabriel gestured toward one of the empty chairs at the square table. "Please, join us." He set his gaze on Kuri. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to visit the restroom."

Gabriel smiled, but the look in those stormy blue eyes clearly said to get rid of him. He strode away without further comment.

Daichi took the proffered seat and folded his arms on the table, leaning in toward Kuri with a wary look. He spoke barely above a whisper. "Are you all right?"

Kuri ducked his head and kept his own voice low, but with a sharp edge. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. He's just different. Are you here with a client or checking up on me for Mr. Toshi? Either way, I've got this under control!"

"I'm here checking up on you for myself." Daichi grabbed one of Kuri's wrists with clammy fingers. A hazard of the trade; fever often resulted from repeated nights of no sleep and excessive drinking. Daichi frequently juggled two or more girls at a time when he hosted and had become an expert at stringing them along. He didn't even *like* girls, but he had them lined up every night like planes on a busy airport runway. "Mr. Toshi wouldn't tell me anything. Just said you have a very important client, a foreigner with too much money, and that you wouldn't be home for three nights. I've been looking for you for hours. I—" Daichi slumped back in the chair. The pressure on Kuri's wrist slacked off, but Daichi didn't let go. "After what happened to Aki, I get scared when I lose track of you. I got worried."

Kuri couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. He covered Daichi's shaking hand with his own, caressing. "I'm sorry. I should've left a note. It all happened so fast. Daichi, you should go home and rest. Better still, go see the doctor first and get a vitamin cocktail. You don't look so good."

Daichi looked up. Kuri could tell by the expression on his face that Gabriel was returning to the table.

"When will you be back?" Daichi cocked an eyebrow.

"Two more days." Kuri gave Daichi's hand a squeeze. "And I promise I'll come home as soon as he's gone, all right? I have your number on speed dial until then if

something happens. And Daichi, I'm serious — no clients tonight. Go home. Sleep. Let Takumi and Sora take your clients. Yui can go one night without her prince. The last thing you need is the girl and her friends all over you tonight, wearing you out."

"Right." Daichi laughed as he stood, still holding Kuri's hand. "For two million *yen* a night, I'll let her fuck me in my sleep." Daichi's eyes flicked toward the rear of the restaurant; he bent quickly and kissed the back of Kuri's hand then grinned. "I don't think I'd notice the difference. Two days, Kuri. Not a minute more, or I send the police."

Daichi waved and took off in a rush.

Resuming his seat across from Kuri, Gabriel's gaze tracked Daichi until the front door closed. He then began to sample the food as if nothing at all had happened. "I'll have the hotel concierge arrange for a shopkeeper to send clothes to get you through the rest of my stay. We'll be returning to the hotel when we're finished with our meal."

"Of course." Kuri peered over his shoulder, but Daichi was gone. For half a moment, Kuri considered chasing after him. He let out a controlled, shallow breath and steadied his nerves.

"Good." Gabriel turned his focus to the food, which he picked at without much enthusiasm. Finally, he pushed the bowl of *miso* soup away and set down his flat-bottomed spoon. He seemed nervous, unsettled. "I'm feeling things for you that I know I shouldn't. I know that sounds irrational and it no doubt is, but it's the truth." Gabriel glanced toward the door. "Your friend. He's more than just a friend."

Kuri stiffened. He ran fingers through the back of his hair. "We're close. He got me into Kingyo Club."

Gabriel began to speak, but halted when a large group of people came bustling into the restaurant with boisterous laughter and chatter. The hostess greeted and seated the new arrivals at nearby tables.

"We should go as soon as you're finished." Gabriel pulled his wallet from his jeans. He left a thick stack of bills on the table, tucking the money under the corner of a plate.

"I've angered you." Damn. Usually they didn't start professing their jealous love until the third or fourth visit. Kuri couldn't remember a man doing so on the first date, ever. Girls, sure. Girls became enamored fast and with ease. He almost felt bad for them, but men? Kuri needed to handle this situation with a delicate hand. "I'll have our food wrapped to go."

Chapter Six

Gabriel closed the door behind them, and after a cursory glance Kuri noticed maid service had already come and gone. The room looked tidy once again, the bedclothes smoothed and tucked in. Gabriel walked to the small refrigerator located under the table, squatting to open the door. He stuffed the box of wrapped leftovers from breakfast into the appliance and rocked back on his heels with a heavy sigh.

"I've never had this happen to me before, Kuri."

Kuri dropped his weight against the door jamb, arms crossed over his chest. The ride back had been painfully quiet, and Kuri had the feeling he'd just cheated on a lifelong relationship. He wanted to tell Gabriel to fuck off right then, to give him back his money and leave. This sort of affection felt dangerous. He chewed on his lower lip. "He won't bother us again. I told him not to."

"I've never had a relationship last more than a few hours." Gabriel pushed the refrigerator door shut, turned and sat back against it, eyes closed.

"It has only *been* a few hours."

Gabriel plowed on as if he hadn't heard. "I refuse to date women to appease my family, and as long as my parents are still alive I can't see men openly. My so-called *relationships* at home have consisted of picking up men in out-of-town bars and renting hotel rooms to fuck them in. Those are easy, and it's just physical. Most of the time I don't even know his name, not even a made-up one." Gabriel opened his eyes and looked at Kuri, but quickly averted his gaze. "I got bored and started making side trips here while in Japan on company business. A little role-play to purge the boy from

school out of my head, to get him out of my system. Seemed like a good plan, but things didn't work out quite the way I expected. Seeing him over and over again only made things worse. Instead of tarnishing his image so I could push him aside, this has only made me long for him that much more. Now I ache for the purity of the love I felt for him. What I *thought* I felt for him. I was fifteen years old – what the fuck did I know about love?"

Gabriel ran a hand down his face. "And then I met you. At first it was the way you look; I've already admitted that. Now . . . now I don't know. There's something about you, or maybe I've changed, or maybe I'm just so *fucked up* at this point I can't tell the difference." He shifted on the floor, grabbed his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and opened it, fishing out most of the bills. He tossed the money into a messy pile on the floor a few feet away. "I gave you this chance once already. You might want to take me up on it this time. You're free to go. Mr. Toshi will get a glowing report. As far as he needs to know, I got called back to the States unexpectedly for business."

Gabriel went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Kuri stared long and hard at the money.

Gabriel went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Freedom, a snag and a skip away.

Kuri took a deep breath and looked toward the bathroom. He didn't know this man, so why should he care? Gabriel represented just another meaningless man in a long line of meaningless men. Tomorrow night there would be another one, another the night after that. Sure, he could feel for Gabriel, but the man's insecurities were not his problem, though they threatened to be if he stayed. Kuri scoop up and pocketed the money.

The shower started.

Biting his lip, throat tight with some emotion he didn't understand, Kuri slipped out of the room.

Chapter Seven

The elevator opened onto the ground floor of the hotel, and Kuri took off at a dead run. He didn't stop until he crashed into Daichi's arms at Kingyo Club.

"Hey, hey!" Daichi put his arms around Kuri and held him tight. "What's wrong? I thought Mr. Big Spender had you for two more days?"

Incredibly thankful the club was empty – patrons wouldn't begin arriving for another hour or so – Kuri tucked his head under Daichi's chin and clung to him. "I did. He got weird, Daichi. He acted possessive from the start, but he got worse once he met you. He started rambling on about his feelings. When he gave me the option to bail out, I did."

Daichi grabbed Kuri by the upper arms and stepped back, looking him over with cautious, narrowed eyes. "If he hurt you, Kuri, I swear – "

"No!" Kuri went slack in Daichi's grip. "No, he didn't hurt me. He just started to creep me out, and what worried me even more were the feelings I was starting to have for *him*. I can't explain."

"Come." Grabbing Kuri's arm with one hand, Daichi snagged a bottle of champagne from an ice bucket on the main bar and headed for the back of the club. He tugged Kuri into a rounded, crushed velvet sofa in a quiet, less congested area in the rear where there were no tables in the center of the floor and booths were round, high-backed, and set well apart for privacy. The booths were designated "special seats," where for a premium hourly rate a client could purchase the undivided attention of his or her host.

"You like him?" Daichi uncorked the champagne bottle with a well-practiced technique, not spilling a drop. He handed the bottle to Kuri. "Tell me everything. What did he do to creep you out? You said he was being possessive. Are you sure he didn't hurt you?"

Kuri took a quick drink. "Just little things. Always having some sort of physical contact, being very precise on what he wanted me to do. He came into the bathroom

this morning and — " Kuri's cheeks felt touched by flames. "He came up behind me while I was taking a piss and he . . . it was so wrong, Daichi, but part of me liked it."

"And he *what*?" Eyes wide as saucers, Daichi grabbed the bottle from Kuri's hand and took a swallow.

"He held it for me!" Kuri burst out laughing. "And then he jerked me off and *God*, Daichi! I came so damn hard! What's *wrong* with me?"

"He held your . . . while you . . . ?" Daichi put the bottle to his mouth again and guzzled until he foamed over. Sputtering, he swiped the back of his other hand across his mouth while handing the champagne back to Kuri. "I think we may need another bottle. What else did you do with him, or don't I want to know?"

"We definitely need another bottle." Kuri tipped his head back for another drink. The bubbles snapped at his tongue, promising to steal away the strange sense of loss. Some nights he would drink up to five bottles of champagne at the request of clients. One shared bottle barely registered. "Actually, the rest was pretty sweet. He's just so wounded. I mean, I know they *all* are to some degree, but I felt for this guy. Shit. He's probably sitting in his room right now, sad and alone. I feel like a dick for bolting."

Daichi put an arm around Kuri and pulled him close, kissing his hair. "You can't help all those sad fucks any more than I can, Kuri. Better to walk away. Who knows what kind of whacko this guy is? Just because he throws money around like confetti doesn't mean he isn't dangerous." Daichi nuzzled against Kuri's neck. "I'll go grab a few more bottles, and we can go in one of the back rooms. I never did get any sleep, but my first appointment tonight isn't until eight, and you don't have any. You let your old friend Daichi help you forget all about the crazy Yankee."

Kuri's eyelashes became wet with blinked-back tears. The toll of the entire week came crashing down, hard. "I can't remember when we had any time to ourselves. Gabriel paid me for the three days; we should take advantage and spend that time together." Kuri crawled off the sofa and he headed toward the private rooms as Daichi went for the bottles. Used for wealthy clients who wanted privacy for necking and petting, or for host boys who had passed out, the rooms had locks on the doors but

were monitored from the main office. Kuri didn't care. Everyone at the club knew he and Daichi lived together and were lovers.

A knock came at the door and Daichi slipped in, the necks of three champagne bottles clutched together in the fingers of one hand. He closed the door behind him. The room had automatic lighting, just a soft amber glow conducive to the room's usual purposes. Daichi set all but one bottle on the small table next to the futon and took a seat next to Kuri. He popped the cork, took a quick swig, and handed Kuri the bottle. "I told Mr. Toshi you were having a tough time and needed the attention of a friend. It's too late for me to cancel my girls for tonight, but I took off tomorrow and the next day."

Kuri winced and took the bottle. "He wasn't mad, was he? I hate to stir up problems." After several long swigs, he passed the bottle back to Daichi. "If you want, I can help with your girls tonight. Maybe we can get them drunk fast and send them home early."

Daichi handed the bottle back to Kuri without drinking. He stood and removed his suit jacket and laid it over the arm of the futon. He began unknitting his tie, running his tongue across his bottom lip. "That might be fun, teasing the girls together. Yui is bringing a new friend tonight, a host club virgin." The tie came off, and Daichi untucked his white dress shirt and unbuttoned in slow motion, hips swaying almost imperceptibly. "Right now, you and me. Daichi knows what you like. You won't even remember the crazy man's name when I'm done with you."

Kuri's gaze drifted to Daichi's slim hips and flat belly. "Huh? What man?" Kuri grinned, threw off his jacket and took off his trousers. He kicked off his footwear and removed his shirt last. He lay back on the futon. A terrible thought crossed his mind. "Shit. Daichi, we didn't use a condom. Fuck! You'd better, then. I don't want to take any risk. Fuck, how could I be so stupid?"

"Oh, my beautiful, reckless Kuri." Daichi removed his shoes and socks, and after sliding out of his trousers and briefs he dipped into his pants pocket, pulling out a standard issue foil-wrapped condom and packet of lube. He knelt at Kuri's side. "Tell

me what you want. I want to make you feel good, to make you happy even if only for a few minutes."

"Fuck me, Daichi. I want to see your face looking down at me when I come." Kuri heard his voice crack, overly emotional. Gabriel had left a mark on his soul, and even though the man was likely on a plane headed for America by now, Kuri couldn't stop thinking of him. He forced himself to focus on Daichi, on words he'd only thought but never spoken. "I love you."

With as much speed and practiced skill as opening champagne bottles, Daichi had his cock sheathed in latex and lubed up nice and slick. He climbed onto the futon between Kuri's legs, parting his thighs with a gentle, caressing hand. Daichi readied himself with long strokes and smiled. "I have always loved you, Kuri."

Kuri beckoned Daichi closer with open arms. "Life just seemed easier if I didn't say it out loud." He pressed his lips to Daichi's ear, his breath trembling with emotion. "But I didn't want another night to pass without you knowing."

Kuri canted his hips and drew his parted knees to his chest, opening himself to his lover.

Daichi looked into Kuri's eyes. He positioned himself at Kuri's entrance, sliding the slippery head of his erection around the rim of Kuri's hole, teasing. "I wish we were someplace other than here. Someplace beautiful, where there wasn't such sadness on the other side of a flimsy door. Maybe someday I can take you there."

"One day there will be a happy ending for us, but it won't be built on fairytale love and champagne." The sensation of Daichi's cock teasing the tight ring of his hole was enough to make Kuri break into a sweat. "I need it, God, I need it. Please!"

Daichi gave Kuri what he wanted, surging his hips forward, entering Kuri fully in a slow, delicious glide. He trembled in Kuri's arms.

"Every time with you is as the first," Daichi said. "So tight, so warm, and so perfect."

Kuri's body arched involuntarily, and he threw his head back onto an ornamental pillow. He connected with Daichi in ways he'd never done with anyone

else. Even this simple, noontday fuck felt like medicine for his soul. He curled his fingers into Daichi's blond hair. "You save me, every time."

"Maybe you should listen to me more often." Daichi thrust deeper, harder, faster, exactly the way Kuri liked when in need of a healing purge. With a gentle laugh, Daichi added, "My mother named me well."

"Yes, I know, *Great Wisdom*. Don't let it give you a big head!" Kuri laughed, feeling better already. He kissed Daichi, slow and with purpose, and then smiled and drew back with a final flick of his tongue to Daichi's upper lip.

"Too late, my love." Daichi tilted his hips and came at Kuri from a different angle, fucking him quick and shallow, the head of his cock bumping repeatedly over Kuri's prostate. "I already know I'm the best. We may need to ask Mr. Toshi to widen the doorways." Daichi's eyes fluttered closed for a moment. "Mmm, feels so good."

Despite wanting to lose himself in sensation, Kuri kept focused. He didn't want to miss the moment of Daichi's climax, the moment when the steel behind that angelic face broke and rapture took over. Either he was too stressed or Daichi really was that skilled, because Kuri snapped first. A lick of fire ran from his balls to his dick and back into his belly. He bucked his hips and his back undulated while he grappled at Daichi's shoulders, fighting for a hold tight enough to keep them both on the futon. Kuri broke, splashing the release of pain and love over sweating skin.

"Oh, Kuri," Daichi whimpered. He pulled out quickly, removed and tossed the condom into the wastebasket. Fisting his cock with one hand, he knelt between Kuri's thighs, his other hand clutching Kuri's hip. "You turn me on like no other. God, Kuri, fuck —"

Daichi moaned, hand stuttering over his cock, and Kuri watched as Daichi leaned forward and mingled his seed with Kuri's own.

Kuri palmed his lover's cheek, his thumb caressing just under Daichi's eye. They stared at each other, both too spent to speak. Daichi crawled beside Kuri and they held each other tightly, drifting off to the sounds of the waking club outside the flimsy door.

* * * * *

Heavy knocking on the door startled Kuri awake, and Daichi stirred beside him as Mr. Toshi called out their names.

"Just a moment, Mr. Toshi," Kuri shouted, flustered. "We'll be right out! Daichi, wake up!"

Daichi yawned and stretched. He pushed himself into a sitting position and looked around, squinting and bleary-eyed. "Where the —?" He smiled at Kuri with an almost shy expression. "Oh. That was so perfect I thought I had dreamed it."

Mr. Toshi's deep voice called again from outside the door. "Ten minutes, Daichi. Your ladies called to say they are on their way."

"Thank you, Mr. Toshi! I'll hurry." Daichi gave Kuri a quick kiss on the nose then stood and started to dress. "Kuri, you still want to work the girls with me tonight? If you're tired and want to go home, I'll understand."

"Are you kidding me? I'm not letting you out of my sight." Kuri scrambled to get his clothes on. "Besides, I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight until you get in anyway."

Daichi finished dressing first. He moved in front of Kuri, running his fingers under Kuri's shirt even as Kuri buttoned up. "We should go and wash up, but I like the idea of you being all sticky with my cum under your shirt." He tucked in his shirttails and grinned. "Don't let Yui and her girlfriend get too touchy."

"Oh God, you know how she is better than anyone." Kuri straightened Daichi's tie and kissed him. "I bet it turns her on. Now, come. We need to get a head start on drinking to deal with this."

Music washed over them as soon as they opened the door. This early, the clientele consisted mostly of tourists here for their first host club experience. Closer to midnight, tired tourists left to make room for regular customers. Champagne flowed, but Kuri could tell his friends hadn't consumed more than a bottle or two. Not a glassy eye in the house yet.

Kuri brushed a tiny piece of lint from Daichi's shoulder. "Where do you usually meet her?"

"You were right in calling her a princess," Daichi said as they approached the main bar. He waved at one of their roommates, Sora, another faux-blond host boy who worked the bar until midnight most nights before hitting the floor himself. Daichi turned to Kuri. "You want something stronger? I like to pre-load on good Russian vodka before she shows. Takes less to warm me up, so I have a good buzz and don't have to take a piss every twenty minutes like with champagne."

Kuri gave Daichi a careful once-over. "She must be a winner. You don't usually have a problem turning on the charm for anyone." He fished around in his jacket for the crumpled pack of cigarettes he recalled stuffing in a pocket the night before. He smiled when his fingers connected with cellophane, and then he held the pack out to Daichi. "Smoke?"

Holding two fingers up to Sora and waving off Kuri's cigarette offer with his other hand, Daichi said, "She's a handful. I really can't stand the bitch, but for two-and-a-half million *yen* a night, I suffer." He smiled. "Vodka significantly improves both my tolerance of her and my acting skills."

"Yeah, as long as you don't need to get it up for her. Between fucking my brains out earlier and the alcohol, you're doomed if she wants to take a slide down the pole." Kuri tapped out a cigarette and like clockwork Sora leaned over the bar with a lighter. He caught Sora's eyes briefly. The shy but sexy expression on his pretty face reminded Kuri how easy and often the close-knit bond of host boys ventured over the line.

Kuri snapped out of his Sora daydream. "What's Yui's friend's name?"

Sora served the drinks. Daichi thanked him with a nod while handing one of the glasses to Kuri, and then he took a generous drink of his own.

"Her name is Natsuko. Hopefully she won't be as fucking irritating as Yui." Daichi lifted his drink to take another swallow, but stopped and gestured toward the front of the club with his glass. "Her Majesty and lady-in-waiting have arrived. Drink up, my friend. It's going to be a long night."

* * * * *

Yui must've been trying to impress her friend because her usual four hours became six, including time in the special seats. Kuri realized early on that Daichi's heart wasn't in the show tonight. Between their mutually flirtatious banter and rivers of expensive alcohol, they managed to keep smiles on their faces, and, as a result, on Yui and Natsuko's.

Kuri escaped the evening's festivities with minor fondling and a few kisses. Daichi suffered a bit more with some mutual masturbation shielded by the drape of the tablecloth. With the mood Daichi had fallen into, Kuri thought Daichi might never get hard enough to come, so he slipped out of his side of the booth and back in next to Daichi under the pretense of cheerleading him on. Yui never realized Kuri's tongue in Daichi's ear provided the nudge Daichi needed to get off.

Normally they saw sunrise before finishing a shift. A normal night consisted of the host boys spilling out onto the empty street to walk or ride their bicycles home. Those unable to stagger or balance a bike, Mr. Toshi ended up driving home — boys too exhausted, too sick, already hung over, or still drunk. At two in the morning, the street teemed with people, which seemed somehow strange.

Kuri and Daichi walked past the Dotonbori Hotel on the way to the apartment they shared with Sora and another Kingyo Club host, Takumi.

Daichi slipped a hand into Kuri's and laced their fingers together. "You looked up. You're wondering if he's still here."

"I can't help it, Daichi. I've been thinking about him all night." For just a moment, Kuri thought he felt Gabriel's gaze on him. He hastened his steps, wanting to get by the place in a hurry. He dreaded the thought of the next client who might wish to use the hotel for an off-hours rendezvous.

Their apartment was located over a fruit market just a few blocks from the Kingyo Club. The place was clean and uncommonly spacious, but Kuri wished they'd

thought out the rental with more consideration. The fruit stand tended to open just about the time the boys arrived home from work ready to crash. Arriving so long before daybreak this morning, the place seemed eerily deserted and quiet. The first trucks from farms outside Osaka wouldn't arrive for several hours.

Daichi tugged Kuri up the narrow flight of stone stairs that ran between the fruit market and the florist next door. He opened the door to their apartment, fairly dragging Kuri inside. He shut the door and leaned back on it, smiling. "You need more forgetting, that's what it is. Sora and Takumi won't be home for hours and it's quiet outside. We should take advantage. Come here."

"You can barely stand!" Kuri pulled off his tie and let it drop. His jacket came off next, and then he stumbled into Daichi and started undressing him. "I can't wait to get a shower."

"That's the best idea I've heard all night," Daichi said, helping Kuri to finish stripping them both. Once their shoes and clothes lay in a heap, he slipped past Kuri and began backing down the hallway leading to the bedrooms and bath. Daichi grabbed his own cock and gave a few shakes. "Come on, little boy, I got some candy for you"

Little boy. Kuri thought back on Gabriel again for the millionth time that night. His cock jumped as Gabriel's image flittered through his mind, before he could force the picture out. *Where was Gabriel now? Was he with another host boy, or had he returned home to his unhappy life?* Daichi's happy catcalls drew Kuri back to reality, and he put on a smile. "You're a wicked creature, Daichi."

Daichi pulled Kuri into the bathroom and flipped on the light, shutting and locking the door behind them. He turned the shower on and adjusted the water. "I'm not wicked." Daichi stepped into the tub and extended a hand to Kuri. "I just can't get enough of you."

After the initial shock, the chilly water felt like salvation against the clinging summer heat. Kuri pressed his back against Daichi's chest, allowing the cool water to run over his face to wash away more than just the sweat of the day. "I'd be lost without

you. I can't imagine what I'd do if I didn't have you to catch me." He turned, suddenly desperate to kiss Daichi. He slammed him against the tile and slipped a hand between Daichi's thighs. "Let me pay you back."

The look on Daichi's face as he nodded was enough to make Kuri instantly hard. No one wore lust and want any closer to the surface, or any prettier, than Daichi.

"Tell me you love me again," Daichi said. "Promise you'll tell me every day."

"Do you doubt without the words?" Kuri trailed his fingers down Daichi's chest as he sank to his knees. Looking up, he brushed one cheek against Daichi's erection and lapped the firming length with his tongue. "I love you. And I swear I'll *tell* you that I love you, every day of my life."

Daichi put his hands on Kuri's head, fingers caressing Kuri's hair. "You're too good to me." Daichi gasped at the brush of Kuri's tongue over the head of his cock. "God, you're going to make me come so fast."

"I don't need to put on a dress and talk like Yui, do I? Because I would, you know." Kuri chuckled, pressing the pad of his thumb to the small slit on the tip of Daichi's cock. He rolled his thumb back and forth, opening the slit a fraction before dipping in with the pointed tip of his tongue.

"*Oh*," Daichi said with a distinctive purr. "I may take you up on that. You would be very pretty in a dress." He gave a little thrust of his hips. "But no talking like Yui, or I'll have to keep your mouth stuffed with cock to shut you up."

"And that's supposed to deter me?" Kuri rolled his tongue around Daichi's dick, sucking in the shower water as if lapping syrup from a *dango* skewer. "I've had to wear a *kimono* before. Easy access!" Kuri closed his mouth around Daichi and took him down to the root without pause, what little gag reflex he'd once had long gone.

Daichi laughed. "I knew you were going to say that!" He sagged back against the shower wall with bent knees. "Make me come, Kuri." Daichi twisted his fingers into Kuri's hair. "Want to see it all over your beautiful face."

Those lewd words had been spoken to him by dozens of men, but whispered by Daichi they sounded like raw, erotic poetry. Kuri renewed his effort. He sucked harder,

made his lips a tighter fit, relaxed his throat to allow deeper penetration. Daichi flexed against the back of his throat and Kuri drew back. He looked up, smiling. "I'm all yours."

"Oh God, Kuri, here it comes." Daichi moaned, his entire body shuddering. "Fuck, fuck, I love you." Having ejaculated so many times in the past day, Daichi's offering spurted sparse and thin, leaving little more than a few wet streaks on Kuri's face. But the orgasm itself seemed no less powerful, and Daichi's thighs trembled as he began a slow slide down the tile wall.

Kuri nestled against Daichi, his head resting on Daichi's chest as the shower washed away all evidence of their activity. "I could fall asleep right here, but we might shrivel up or drown."

Daichi took a bottle of scented body wash from the corner ledge of the tub and poured some into his hand. Arms around Kuri, he began to lather his lover's shoulders and back. "This might be overstepping my bounds, but I'd like you to promise me something."

"This sounds like it's going to be heavy. Is it the champagne talking?" Kuri stole the soap and lathered his hands to wash Daichi.

"No, it's not the champagne." Daichi sighed. "I don't want you to accept any more clients who want you more than a couple hours. I was so scared when you went off with . . . with that *American*." He pressed a small kiss to Kuri's soapy shoulder. "You said you loved me — that changes everything."

Kuri's first instinct told him Daichi's request seemed overly protective. The demand would cut into his funds, into his ability to be top host boy. But as he started to offer a reply to deny the request, he saw the fear written in Daichi's eyes, the worry drawn in the tightness of his lips. Kuri nodded. "All right. I'll tell Mr. Toshi tomorrow — no more extended after-hours clients. Will you do the same for me?"

"I will, I promise." Daichi kissed Kuri's shoulder again. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you, Kuri, and you know how risky those types of clients can be. I

couldn't bear to lose you." Daichi shivered. "We should rinse and get to bed. It'll be nice to snuggle and sleep by ourselves in a quiet house for change."

Daichi spoke the truth; having said the words changed everything. Kuri felt as if a choking hold had been released, and his heart pounded hard for Daichi.

Chapter Eight

Gabriel pulled the silver Chevy Impala into a spot in front of the professional building where his psychiatrist had a private office. His former shrink only had an office at the hospital, not a private space. This setup provided far more discretion and less stress. Unlike the hospital, no eyes bore into his back as he headed for the psych wing. Here, in the nondescript brick building filled with doctors of numerous specialties, dentists and orthodontists, Gabriel could simply loiter in the hallway before opening his doctor's office door. Leaving posed a greater challenge, but this particular doctor had always been sensitive to Gabriel's neuroses and obsessions and would check the hallway first before Gabriel ventured out.

The week since he'd returned from Osaka had been difficult. Work had been extraordinarily busy due to escalating problems in the Middle East. In addition, Gabriel hadn't truly recovered from the devastating loss he'd occurred on his trip. He'd hoped Kuri would be the one. Perhaps the young man would've worked out had Gabriel not pressed and pushed. The hours Gabriel remained in the hotel room after Kuri left had been a real eye-opener.

He decided no greater horror existed than to stare into a broken mirror and see the devil smiling back with his own face.

Monster. With a shard of broken, quicksilvered glass he'd carved the word into the inside of his left forearm, good and deep. Dark dress shirts in the ensuing week covered the healing gouges as thick scabs began to form. A little extra penance for him, wearing long-sleeved shirts in black, navy and forest green in this terrible summer heat.

He hadn't left the high temperatures and sweltering humidity behind him in Japan. The weather — like his mood — remained oppressive.

He entered the building and took the elevator to the third floor, but he had to wait in the hallway before entering Dr. Shultz's office while a very pregnant woman wrestled with a whining toddler outside an obstetrician's door. Finally, after the woman managed to haul the kid into the elevator, Gabriel slipped into the office.

Dr. Norman Bartholomew Schultz had only one office worker — his wife. The pair of them had been in business for twenty-eight years and knew each of their clients as people first, patients second. Dr. Schultz had a very high patient retention rate, and only a stroke of dumb luck had allowed Gabriel to wrangle a slot.

Mrs. Schultz smiled as Gabriel came in the door of the small outer office. "Punctual as always, Mr. Hartley. Norman is in his office. Can I get you some coffee first?"

Gabriel returned the smile as best he could under the circumstances. "No thank you, ma'am. Water would be nice, though. It's hotter than the hinges of Hades out there today."

The side door opened and Dr. Schultz joined them. An average-height man, but rather round at the middle, his thick white hair and soft blue eyes gave him a Santa Claus-ish look. "I have a few bottles of flavored water in my office. Why don't you come sit down, Gabriel?"

After entering Dr. Schultz's office, Gabriel took a seat on the couch facing the big leather easy chair. He knew the drill after two years of minimum twice-per-week visits. Dr. Schultz went to a small refrigerator beside his desk and took out a cold bottle of orange-flavored vitamin water. He handed the bottle to Gabriel.

Gabriel didn't have a lot of wiggle room in his schedule today so he got down to business, bypassing pleasantries and small talk. "I went to Japan again last weekend."

Dr. Schultz snapped on his audio recorder and took a seat. "How did it go for you?"

"It started off well enough." Gabriel shrugged. "Then it went to hell in a hand-basket pretty damn quick. I met someone, got too fucking attached too quick, made an ass of myself and scared him off."

"Another host boy, I presume?"

Gabriel nodded.

"You've had weekends with them before. What drew you to this one in particular?"

"I don't know." Gabriel took the cap off the water and took a long drink. "He looked a lot like Daniel, of course, but then many of them have been close. That wasn't it, at least not entirely. He . . . I was upfront about what attracted me to him, and he didn't look at me or treat me as if I were a freak or a criminal. That made me want him even more, and then like a jerk I got crazy possessive when a friend of his showed up. He got scared, I mean *really* scared. I could see it in his eyes. I had — " Gabriel took another drink. "I had a very bad night after I paid him and he left."

The doctor leaned back in his chair, listening. "Keep going."

Gabriel took another sip of water, twisted the cap back on and set the bottle on an end table. He stood and removed his jacket, folding it carefully before draping it over the arm of the couch. He sat as he unbuttoned his left shirtsleeve and rolled up the cuff. He sighed. "I was upset and very, very drunk. I threw an empty bottle at the bathroom mirror, and next thing I knew I had done this with a shard of broken glass. Like I said — a bad night."

"Monster. Did you scar yourself in order to warn others like this young man?" Dr. Schultz drew a hand down over his mouth and rubbed at his chin. "Have you had anyone look at that? Glass splinters can be dangerous. There might be slivers in the wound that could cause infection."

"I'm fine." Gabriel rolled the sleeve down and buttoned the cuff. "I don't know why I did it, Norman. I was rip-roaring drunk. I vaguely recall crying and screaming into what was left of the mirror . . . something about a reminder." He shrugged, shaking

his head. "Maybe that's it. To remind *myself* what I am before I do something *really* stupid. Maybe I should have done it a long time ago."

"You're not a monster, Gabriel." Dr Schultz made a few notes before looking up to meet Gabriel's gaze. "Are you, in effect, saying you're giving up on attempting to satisfy what you think is going to make you happy? Considering practicing abstinence, perhaps? I feel that may be unwise."

"I don't know what to do!" Gabriel covered his face with his hands, leaning forward to prop his elbows on his knees. "I'm afraid if I don't find someone soon, a relationship with some permanence, I'm not going to be able control myself for much longer. But I'm also afraid of what will happen if I *do* find someone." Gabriel looked up. "What then? What happens a few years down the road when he doesn't look like a teenager anymore and that's still what I want? Honestly, Norman, that prospect scares me a hell of a lot more than not finding someone in the first place." He slumped back into the couch. "I want to shut this off, but I can't. I can't make it go away, and short of castration or a lobotomy, I don't know what the fuck to do."

"You have been living your life purely from the perspective of lust, Gabriel. These things you do never have anything to do with loving the person you're with. You've had a sexual obsession from the moment your parents told you what you wanted was forbidden." Dr. Schultz paused. "When you do find someone to call your own, you need to feel more than that, Gabriel. Otherwise, yes, you no doubt will grow bored and toss him aside. There has to be more than lust, sex, and obsession. You have to be interested in *his* thoughts, *his* desires, *his* dreams, or you might as well go on seeing these host boys. This young man you were with this trip – do you care about what he does when you aren't with him? Do you care about his past? His future?"

"His name is Kuri. And yes, I *do* care about him, and I could kick myself six ways to Sunday for scaring him off." Gabriel's eyes stung; he blinked hard to dissipate gathering tears. "We shared some moments that, although we were in the *midst* of sex, had nothing to *do* with sex. We made a connection, and I swear to God, I've never felt

anything like that before. On the other hand, how am I supposed to tell the difference? This could have all been in my head. More wishful thinking. More fantasy."

Dr. Schultz rubbed his temple with his index finger. "I'm assuming you'll continue to turn down pharmaceutical help, so in lieu of that I'm going to recommend you sit down and put your thoughts and feelings about this young man into a letter. On paper with a pen. Write as if you're going to mail it to him. Explain to him why you did what you did. Let him know what your feelings were, and how your feelings have changed since meeting him. It can be very therapeutic to work out your feelings on paper, even if the intended audience never receives the letter. I do not recommend returning to Japan to seek out this young man just yet. You need time. Writing the letter should help."

Gabriel nodded, checking his watch. "All right. I'll do that before our next session." He stood and took his jacket from the arm of the couch. "Thanks, Norman. I always feel better when I leave here than when I came in, so I guess that's a good thing."

"Yes, it is. Gabriel, you're not a monster. The young man may have left out of fear, but you made it possible for him to make that choice, and for him to act on it." Dr. Schultz rose from his chair and smiled. "Monsters don't typically do that."

"Maybe you're right. Have a good weekend, Norman. If you could have your lovely wife schedule me for Tuesday afternoon, that would be terrific."

"I certainly will." They returned to the outer office, and Dr. Schultz opened the door to the hall, stuck his head out, and then popped back inside and smiled. "All clear. Have a good weekend, Gabriel. If you need me, you have my cell."

Chapter Nine

Three weeks after his experience with Gabriel, Kuri had fallen back into his host club routine. True to his pact with Daichi, Kuri had declined all extended after-hour requests. At first it seemed hard, disappointing regular clients and turning down all

that money, but no more worrying about when and if the other would come home made the monetary sacrifice worth the price.

Kuri still thought about Gabriel. Not in any sort of pining, longing sense, but occasionally when he'd walk past the Dotonbori Hotel or when Mr. Hiroshi took him to Torafugu for *sushi*, Kuri found himself glancing up at the hotel or around the restaurant for that familiar, handsome face.

Early on Friday evening a fight had erupted outside, on the street below the front window. Even as the calendar announced summer drawing to a close, the heat had stuck around in Osaka. Windows were left open to catch the early evening breeze, but that meant letting in the sounds of the neighborhood. Kuri moaned in his light sleep and scrunched closer to Daichi. Along with Sora and Takumi, they had not gotten in until after five in the morning. Friday nights at Kingyo Club started later than on weekdays, so the four of them slept in. Kuri heard Takumi yell down from a window to those below, but the yelling did little good.

Fingers snaking down the crack of his ass told him Daichi was awake, too. "Stop messing around; we need to get up. We can't be late again, or Mr. Toshi will get rid of us all."

A trail of kisses, wet and light, started at the nape of Kuri's neck and traveled downward, the fingers exploring his ass becoming more insistent. Daichi's breath brushed warmth against Kuri's ear, voice whiskey-rough from sleep and booze and too many cigarettes the night before.

"I would face the firing squad for this ass," Daichi purred. "Mr. Toshi doesn't scare me."

Kuri lifted his ass in the air, his face half buried in the pillow. He felt himself being spread open and the pressure of a single finger working in dry. "Liar. You bow lower to Mr. Toshi than I do. Or does he earn respect other ways?"

Takumi entered the bedroom, scrubbing his shock of black, spiky hair dry with a towel. "The bathroom is free — hey!" He balled up the towel, took aim, and struck Daichi in the back of the head. "You could at least wait until Sora and I are gone!"

Sora, already dressed in the *de rigueur* black suit, white shirt, and colorful necktie – today's tie a bright cobalt blue – came up beside Takumi in the doorway, priming gel to spike his ash-blond hair.

"Speak for yourself," Sora said to Takumi, bumping shoulders with him. "I don't mind. Where else do you get to watch free porn of this quality?" He smiled as Daichi chucked the towel back to Takumi. "Carry on, Daichi. I bet you can get him off in less than five minutes so none of us will be late for work."

"Oh, you guys are a great help!" Kuri grinned and wiggled his ass.

Takumi laughed, the sound deep and resonant, almost sinister. "Just be glad we don't videotape you and sell it online."

Kuri would've retorted had Daichi not taken control of the situation with a sharp finger stroke against his prostate. All thoughts fled in a burst of white lightning, repeated a split second later. Reduced to moans, Kuri concentrated on getting off. He imagined what he and Daichi must look like through Takumi and Sora's eyes, and slipped his hand between himself and the bed to work his dick.

He heard Daichi say, "Five minutes, huh?" and Sora reply with a soft, "Uh huh."

Daichi chuckled. "Five thousand *yen* says I can make him pop his rocks in under two."

Withdrawing his finger, Daichi parted Kuri's ass cheeks wide and dragged his tongue across Kuri's hole.

"I can't believe you jerks are betting – *oh!*" Kuri's legs tensed. Nothing got him off faster than Daichi's talented tongue on his ass.

"Hey, that's not fair! We didn't agree to changing methods!" Takumi grumbled under his breath, and the soft rustle of paper told Kuri that Takumi was counting out his part of the bet.

Daichi licked at Kuri's hole, circling the rim and getting him wet before thrusting his tongue inside, worming and wiggling once there. The maddening sensation made Kuri strip his hand harder up and down his dick almost by reflex. Daichi moaning,

blowing hot, dirty words against Kuri's hole with humid breath, came close to setting Kuri off with time to spare.

"So fucking hot," Daichi said between licks and invasive thrusts of his tongue. "That tight, pretty little hole. Could eat you out all day long. Fuck Mr. Toshi, fuck work. Could stay here, drive you crazy with my tongue until you come so many times you can't walk."

Orgasm imminent, Kuri looked over his shoulder. He could barely see Daichi planted belly down on the bed, but he got an eyeful of Takumi with one hand inside Sora's pants and his tongue down Sora's throat. Kuri came so hard his screams were answered by shouts from the street below.

Daichi snuggled next to him as his orgasm subsided, and as Kuri's pulse stopped raging in his ears he heard Sora panting hard and whimpering, Takumi's ominously deep voice coaxing with, "Come for me hard, baby."

Sora's dick must have been leaking like a drippy faucet inside those neat black trousers. The clicking sound of pre-cum on Sora's dick was unmistakable as Takumi worked his hand faster.

"It's a shame we're all so damn repressed," Daichi whispered in Kuri's ear, following up with a quick kiss to his temple.

Kuri reached over and swatted Daichi on the head. "You take the bathroom first. I won't be able to walk for another few minutes. When I do, I'm going to need to piss like a bull, and if you get in my way . . ."

Daichi laughed and rolled out of bed. He walked to the doorway, blocked by Takumi jerking Sora off, and Daichi leaned close to Sora and whispered something in his ear.

"Oh, my fucking God." Sora moaned, knees buckling, cock spitting spurts of white all over the pleated front of Takumi's black slacks.

His egress cleared as Sora collapsed forward against Takumi, Daichi shot a grin in Kuri's direction and scurried out the door.

Chapter Ten

Kuri raced with his companions down the street like a pack of bounding wolf pups, dodging pedestrians and cars within an inch of disaster. Early Friday evening, and the air of Osaka swirled with the scent of food. Kuri, Daichi, Takumi, and Sora stopped at a food stall for fish cakes to fill their empty bellies before hurrying the rest of the way to Kingyo Club.

Mr. Toshi stood at the bar, lining up the evening's supply of champagne bottles when the boys arrived. He looked at his watched, one eyebrow raised. "Cutting it close."

After bowing in unison and muttering a chorus of apologies for being almost late, Daichi, Sora, and Takumi headed toward the employee room in the back of the club with Kuri bringing up the rear.

"Kuri!" Mr. Toshi called out. "Wait."

Kuri stopped and spun around. A top earner and reliable employee, Kuri rarely got singled out for a reprimand. He went back to the bar and made another respectful bow. "Yes, Mr. Toshi?"

"You had a letter delivered this morning by private courier." Mr. Toshi reached into his inside breast pocket and brought out a plain white envelope. He held the letter up but didn't hand it over. "The license plates on the car the courier drove were diplomatic tags from the American consulate." Mr. Toshi narrowed his eyes, and from experience Kuri recognized concern, not anger. "You're not in any sort of trouble, are you, Kuri? You're my top boy; I have very good lawyers."

"No, not that I know of. I haven't been with an American since — " Kuri throat muscled tightened. "Since Mr. Gabriel, the man who paid for three nights."

"Ah, I see." Mr. Toshi handed the letter to Kuri, his expression softening. "If he's bothering you, you come to me. I take care of my boys."

Kuri took the letter and bowed. "Yes, sir. I know. We're all grateful for your protection." Kuri looked back to see if Daichi had noticed he'd lagged behind, but found the hallway empty. "Can I use one of the back rooms for a few minutes?"

Mr. Toshi gestured toward the back of the club. "Room four is clear. Help yourself."

* * * * *

Kuri closed the door behind him and sat on the futon's oversized pink cushion. His fingers shook as he held the letter, trying to find the strength to open it. He'd only recently managed to put Gabriel out of his mind, and now this. Fish cakes twisting in his belly, he slipped his finger under the flap and tore open the envelope.

Dear Kuri,

I am writing to you now to apologize for my dreadful behavior. I'm afraid I didn't leave you with a very good impression of me, and for that I'm sorry. Although I never would have hurt you, I can understand why you were so scared. It's no accident I'm alone after all these years.

I explained to you why I was initially attracted to you, but in our brief time together you became more than that to me. Even after I told you my dirty little secret, you didn't treat me like a freak. You host boys are good actors, but I'm an even better one, skilled enough to live and work in civilized society despite the fact I am a monster. I can tell when people are acting, putting on a false front. You weren't pretending, and you'll never know how much that means to me.

Somehow I've managed to keep the creature inside me at bay, showing the world my genteel Dr. Jekyll while controlling my evil Mr. Hyde. I wish there was something more I could do to break this endless cycle of loneliness and forlorn puppy love for young men I can never have, but I can't. Drugs are not an option, though God knows my psychiatrist still offers them to me every visit. I know there are pills that will make this yearning go away, deaden

the lust I feel when I look at pretty young men like you and your friends. But I can't, because that would mean revealing to my employer that one of their key employees is nothing more than a non-practicing

I can't even write the word. For a few hours, when I was with you, I didn't feel like a monster. I felt like a normal man, and I want to thank you for that. I felt a connection with you that I've never felt before. I know the chance of my having you is far less than zero, but I needed you to know how I felt. Don't worry about me showing up on your doorstep, or anywhere else in Osaka for that matter. I can't risk seeing you there with someone else. I won't put myself through that torture and I won't put you through the constant worry that I could at any time be lurking around the next corner you turn. I promise you, Kuri, that's not the case.

You have a kind and gentle soul, Kuri, and you're so very beautiful. I hope you find someone you trust, someone you aren't afraid of, who will give you the wonderful, comfortable, happy life you so richly deserve. I will attempt no further contact, I swear, but if you ever need anything – anything at all – please don't hesitate to call me. 010-1-757-555-5874.

All my best,

Gabriel

Kuri read the letter over and over, his eyes moistening more with each pass. Though he knew he should feel relief at the closure, a deep sadness overwhelmed him instead. He traced the penned signature with a fingertip, feeling the bumps and ridges, imagining Gabriel's strong hands. Kuri didn't realize he was gnawing at his lower lip until his teeth slipped and pain returned him to reality. He put the letter into his inner breast pocket and left the private room to find his friends.

He bumped into Sora's lithe form when he rounded the corner into the main part of the club, nearly knocking him over.

Once he collected himself, Sora looked at Kuri with wide eyes. "What happened? Are you all right? You look upset."

Kuri drew his arm across his eyes to catch the collected tears and flashed Sora a desperate smile. Calling on his best acting skills, he nodded. "Yeah, fine. Just tired. Have you seen Daichi? I want to know what time his first client is tonight."

"His regular canceled," Sora said, "due to a family emergency, so Daichi's on the open menu tonight." Sora put a hand on Kuri's shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. "Are you *sure* you're all right?"

Kuri sighed and nodded, forcing another smile. "I got a letter today. From the American."

"Oh. Are you going to tell Daichi?"

"The letter says he isn't coming back. I don't know; would you tell? I guess it might set his mind more at ease." Kuri swept his hand back through his hair. He noticed in the mirror across the room some of the eyeliner he'd put on had smudged. "Shit!"

"Now, now." Sora snapped a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and proceeded to dab under Kuri's eyes. Apparently satisfied he'd cleared up the muss, Sora smiled. "Daichi loves you. Don't keep secrets from him, no matter how small."

Kuri nodded. "You're right. If he found out later it might hurt him. He deserves to know, even if it makes me uncomfortable for a few minutes. What would I do without you, Sora?" With his conscience clear, Kuri hugged the ever-compassionate Sora close. "I'll go find him. I have a client in thirty minutes, but it should give us enough time to talk."

Sora smiled approval and headed back to the employee room.

Kuri ventured into the club. The vast space buzzed with activity as the evening's first appointments and walk-in customers trickled in, comprised mostly of young women. Men looking for like companionship rarely showed before midnight and oftentimes much later, after the gay baths and dance clubs closed.

The infectious undercurrent of dance music thrummed the air, and champagne flowed freely. Kuri smiled, scanning the room, until he noticed something seriously amiss.

Daichi was nowhere in sight.

Confused, considering what Sora had just told him about Daichi being a free agent for the night, Kuri went in search of Mr. Toshi. He asked a few other host boys along the way if they'd seen Daichi, but unfortunately none had. Mr. Toshi, still behind the bar, cocked his head at Kuri's approach.

Kuri made a quick bow. "I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Toshi, but have you seen Daichi?"

"Walk-in client," Mr. Toshi said. "An American. He flipped through the menu and picked Daichi. Offered him eighteen million *yen* for two hours, with a five million bonus for me on top of my cut of Daichi's take." Mr. Toshi shrugged. "They left about ten minutes ago for the Dotonbori Hotel."

The envelope in Kuri's breast pocket seemed to burn against his skin with the familiarity of the conditions and the flash of money. "It wasn't Mr. Gabriel, was it?"

"No," Mr. Toshi said. "This man was much older, with very short dark hair, dark brown eyes, and very tan skin. He spoke English with an American accent, but he looked Middle Eastern."

Kuri wasn't sure if he felt relieved or not. If it had been Gabriel, he would have been angry, but he would've marched right down to the hotel and demanded to see Daichi. This sounded like a legit transaction, but Kuri's heart kept skipping beats. He checked his watch. Two hours would be around ten o'clock. They'd still have most of the night together and be able to walk home as a foursome. "All right, if you see him, can you have him find me?"

Mr. Toshi nodded, his attention torn away when four host boys converged on him simultaneously with drink orders.

Kuri checked his watch again.

* * * * *

Kuri knocked the back of his head against the streetlamp pole outside Kingyo Club in a constant rhythm. His eyes were glazed over with drunkenness, his stomach

twisted in knots. Most of the other host boys had already gone home for the night, as the thin, pink ribbon of color on the horizon heralded the new day. Sora and Takumi were coming out with Mr. Toshi, which meant no one else remained inside.

"You two go home," said Kuri to his housemates. "I'm going to wait here for Daichi."

Mr. Toshi locked the club and turned to Kuri. "Perhaps you should try the hotel."

Takumi staggered over to share the lamppost with Kuri.

Sora sighed and shook his head. He'd had an easy night of it, with an older lady who more or less just wanted to look at him and talk. As a result, Sora hadn't drunk nearly as much as usual and didn't seem the least bit intoxicated.

"Kuri," Sora said, "you and Takumi go home. Daichi is probably there already. I'll check the hotel, just in case."

Kuri grabbed onto Takumi when he started to fall and drew him closer, petting his soft, black hair. Takumi was notorious for being a puker, but Kuri's concern over Daichi's whereabouts overrode care about protecting his expensive suit. "Are you sure? I'm too much of a wreck and Takumi . . . I'll get him home and call your cell if Daichi is there."

Sora trotted off in the direction of the hotel.

"You call me when you find him," Mr. Toshi said, and then he headed down the street in the opposite direction toward his car.

Takumi slid an arm around Kuri's waist and hiccupped. "I'll walk as fast as I can."

Takumi staggered six blocks before needing his first stop to rid his gut of excess alcohol. Kuri held Takumi's hair back and rubbed his shoulders until he could walk again. They continued on to the apartment, but even before they opened the door, Kuri knew Daichi wasn't home. The lights were off, and all the windows were still closed, just as they'd been when they left for work the evening before.

Kuri's pulse raced. "Oh, Takumi . . . I have such a bad feeling about this."

As they waited inside for Sora, Kuri tried to call Daichi's cell phone for the hundredth time that night. And for the hundredth time, the call clicked directly to Daichi's voice mailbox.

When Sora arrived, breathless and rosy-cheeked from running, Kuri knew by the look on Sora's pretty face that he had bad news to share.

Sora shut the apartment door and leaned back on it. "The hotel manager said Daichi and the man he was with were there for only about thirty minutes. He gave me a good description of the man, and it didn't sound like anyone I've ever seen before. The manager told me that when they came through the lobby on their way out, the man was gripping Daichi by the arm, and Daichi didn't look happy." Sora let out a long, shuddery breath. "He said the strangest thing happened. As the man and Daichi crossed the lobby, Daichi dropped something into one of the large potted plants outside, between the front door and the big statues." Sora reached into the front left pocket of his trousers and pulled out what Kuri recognized instantly as Daichi's phone.

Shaking, Kuri got up from the bed he shared with Daichi and took the phone from Sora. "But why would he do that? Unless" Kuri opened the phone and checked for sent text messages. As he suspected, a single message had been typed and saved, bound for Kuri's phone but never sent. He read the *kanji* characters and Hindu-Arabic numerals aloud.

NISHI 500 47-83 HELP ME

Kuri felt his breath rush out and sat back on the bed as his knees gave way. He didn't understand the numbers, but *HELP ME* was clear enough. "He's been kidnapped. Oh God, what do we do? We have to call Mr. Toshi and let him know."

"Oh, no." Takumi slapped a hand to his mouth and bolted for the bathroom.

Sora sat next to Kuri on the bed. "We should call the police right away, and then Mr. Toshi. If this man took Daichi, every minute counts."

He took his phone from his jacket pocket and dialed for emergency assistance, leaning against Kuri's shoulder.

* * * * *

Kuri and Sora answered questions for the police until close to noon. Mr. Toshi joined them and gave a statement with further description of the man last seen with Daichi. The whole scene seemed like a circus, frantic and confusing, but the activity kept Kuri from thinking too hard about what might be happening to Daichi. He gave them Daichi's cell phone after writing down the text message on the back of Gabriel's letter.

Once the police left and Mr. Toshi departed, a suffocating silence fell over the apartment. Kuri curled up on his bed and cried tears he thought would never cease. He sensed Sora and Takumi's close presence, but his mind had turned inward and he barely noticed their soft conversation.

Sora came into Kuri's room and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Takumi and I were talking." Sora stroked Kuri's hair. "We both have a lot of money saved up, and I know some of the other guys would probably pitch in, too." He hesitated and sighed. "Takumi and I think you should hire a private detective. You saw what happened when" Sora's voice caught and his eyes welled up with tears. "When Aki went missing earlier this year. The police won't make much effort. We're too marginal in their eyes."

Eyes stinging, Kuri looked up and nodded. The surreal memories of the night Aki disappeared had been running through his mind all night. More than six months had passed and Aki still hadn't been found. Kuri's stomach knotted tighter. "Thank you, Sora. You're right. We're nothing but gutter trash to them."

Kuri lay down, exhaustion overtaking him, and he felt something crinkle under him. Sitting back up, he found his jacket underneath him, with Gabriel's letter. He picked up the battered paper and ran his fingers over Gabriel's name. He wanted to call him. He needed to hear from someone older, smarter, worldlier, that everything would be all right. He wanted someone to take care of him, to be stern with him and help him

focus to get through this. He needed money. Kuri had his excuse. "I'm going to call Gabriel."

Sora gasped. "Kuri! Are you sure? I thought the American scared you?"

Kuri held out the letter. "Read it. Tell me what you think. And be honest."

Long minutes passed, and when Sora reached the end he returned the paper to Kuri and nodded. "Call him. Takumi and I will watch your back."

* * * * *

Kuri stared at the numbers written on the paper. He'd entered them into the cell, deleted then, and then entered them again. With his finger hovering over the *SEND* button, he kept his thoughts on Daichi and getting him home safely. Finally he stabbed his finger down and listened to the long distance connect and resultant tones.

After several rings over a surprisingly clear connection, a familiar voice said, "This is Gabriel Hartley."

Kuri lost all power of speech. He drew his knees to his chest and frantically pulled himself together, grateful for Gabriel's command of the Japanese language. "I have your letter."

A pause ensued, seeming to last for minutes, before Gabriel finally said, "Kuri?"

Kuri answered with a sob of relief, and he almost dropped the phone from his hand shaking so badly. He swiped his arm across his eyes to clear his vision and sniffled. "Yes, it's me."

He bit his lip. *Now what?* He didn't feel right launching straight into asking for money. Thankfully, Gabriel took the problem out of his hands by speaking next.

"It's good to hear from you, although I must admit I'm surprised," Gabriel said. "Are you all right? You sound upset."

Kuri sucked in a stuttered breath. "I didn't know who else to call. I need help. I am scared to ask, but I know you have power. And —" He tugged nervously on a lock of hair. "I need . . . I . . . I need *you*."

Gabriel made a shushing noise. "It's okay, Kuri. Try to calm down and tell me what's the matter. I told you if you ever needed anything, I'd be here for you. I meant that."

Kuri nodded, forgetting Gabriel couldn't see him. "The other host boy you met in the restaurant. His name is Daichi. You remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

The answer sounded so tight Kuri almost hung up. He rolled over onto his belly and grabbed his pillow. He remembered the jealousy Gabriel exhibited when Daichi caught up to them at the restaurant, but Kuri had no choice but to proceed. "He was kidnapped. Taken by a man – a stranger. It happened last night. I know you have no reason to help me, Gabriel, but – "

Kuri heard a heavy sigh then Gabriel spoke. "I'll be on the first flight I can get out of here. In the meantime, I assume you've already contacted the local police?"

"Yes!" Kuri winced. "Yes. *Yes*, but they will only look for a few days and only locally. I have information I can give you to help." He flipped the letter over to read the text message. "The police say it might be a license plate number, but they didn't seem to be in a hurry to find out."

"I understand," Gabriel said. "Look, I've got to tie up a few loose ends here, and then I'll be on the first flight to Osaka I can catch. It'll take me a full day to get there, Kuri. Keep your phone charged and with you at all times. I'll do what I can via phone and with my computer during the flights. And Kuri? Don't go anywhere alone, you or your other friends. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Kuri felt tears sting his eyes anew as hope sprung into his heart. "I'll see you soon."

Chapter Eleven

Gabriel's hands shook as he ended the call with Kuri and dialed his travel agency. Cold sweat trickled down his spine. He could barely breathe much less speak,

and he had to repeat himself several times before the agent had enough information to make the arrangements.

He called his father to announce his departure out of town on business he couldn't discuss. His immediate superior in the linguistics division of the National Clandestine Services Department at the CIA received the opposite lie – a family emergency. The only person who got the truth was his shrink.

Dr. Schultz expressed concern, as Gabriel expected, but remained a steadfast believer in Gabriel's control over his inner demons. Gabriel found it simultaneously disheartening and a comfort that the person who should trust him least – the one who knew the truth about him – trusted him most.

* * * * *

Twenty-six hours and three plane changes later, Gabriel shut down his laptop computer and closed the lid. He'd called in some favors with friends at the agency – friends who had access to useful information. What he'd learned so far wasn't good news. He downed the rest of his Scotch-and-soda, put his laptop back in the case, and gave his empty glass to the flight attendant as the *FASTEN SEATBELTS* sign lit. The plane started its final approach into Kansai International Airport.

Chapter Twelve

An eternity seemed to pass since Kuri had made the desperate call to Gabriel. He'd felt as if the little red needle of his personal fuel tank had dipped so far below empty as to be permanently stuck. Sora made him eat, but Kuri had thrown everything up and refused to try again. All he wanted now was Daichi, and if he couldn't have him, he'd take Gabriel. Curled up on a red plastic airport terminal seat, he closed his eyes and laid his head against his knees pressed to his chest. The schedule board in the

terminal said Gabriel's plane had been somewhat delayed, and Kuri drifted in and out of sleep until the familiar voice woke him.

"Kuri, wake up."

Kuri felt a hand on his arm gently shake him. He struggled to open his tired eyes, squinting against the harsh intrusion of the terminal's bright fluorescent lights.

Gabriel came into focus. He had his dark blond hair combed neatly back, he wore a handsome dark gray suit, and his blue-eyed gaze didn't look nearly as scary as Kuri remembered.

Gabriel's mouth held the barest hint of a smile. "Hi there."

The rush of emotion robbed Kuri of control. He sprung off the chair and embraced Gabriel like an old friend who'd come home at last. His fingers dug into the soft cotton shirt. "You really came."

"Of course I did." Gabriel held him tightly, speaking in hushed tones against Kuri's ear. "I . . . I missed you, and I'm so sorry I scared you before. I'll try harder this time not to let that happen."

"I never should have walked out. I wasn't *that* scared. Nervous? Yes. Scared has been the last two days." Kuri took a deep breath and stepped back. He took in Gabriel's neat appearance and felt guilty about his own plain white shirt hanging out over loose jeans. Hardly the snappy host Gabriel had seen the first time, but Kuri tried not to dwell on superficial things. "There has been no word from Daichi. The police only say they are working on it."

Gabriel picked up his laptop case, took Kuri by the hand and started walking. "I have a car waiting outside. Let's grab my suitcases from the carousel. I'll tell you what I know once we're in the car back to—" He sighed. "I haven't gotten a room yet. I don't want to stay in that same hotel, and I'm sure you don't want to go inside either. I was hoping you could recommend another place."

Kuri nodded and hurried to keep up. "There are plenty of hotels in Osaka. Hilton? Westin? Ritz-Carlton? Hmm. Do you think Daichi is still in Osaka, Gabriel?"

"We'll talk once we're in the car." At the carousel, Gabriel waited in silence, watching as luggage moved on the conveyor, leaping forward when he spotted his. He hauled them off the belt, pulling the handles out so the luggage could be wheeled. Gabriel turned one over to Kuri. "Let's go."

Gabriel wasted no time, maneuvering through the crowded terminal with haste. Once outside, he held up a hand to halt Kuri and looked around. Kuri followed Gabriel's gaze. A row of black limousines idled at the curb, and three cars down a uniformed driver stood at attention, holding a sign that said *MR. G. HARTLEY*.

Kuri nodded toward the limousine driver. "Is that for you?"

"Yes."

Gabriel wheeled his luggage to the waiting car and set it by the trunk. Kuri did the same. The chauffeur stowed the suitcases in the trunk then tipped his cap to Gabriel and opened the rear door of the vehicle.

Gabriel kept his laptop bag with him and stepped into the car. He peeked out immediately, beckoning Kuri with waggling fingers and a smile. "Come on in. I won't bite, I promise."

"Are you sure?" The small bit of playfulness eased Kuri's tension as his host training took over in the face of a tough situation. He climbed into the car and settled on the leather seat facing Gabriel. To sit closer invited too much, too soon. Kuri knew he had to play this well to avoid upsetting Gabriel, but at the same time be aggressive enough to get what he needed.

The chauffeur slipped into the driver's seat. "Where can I take you tonight, sir?"

"I need long-term lodging," Gabriel said. "A hotel suite, at least two bedrooms. American style but Japanese owned. No American or European chains. I like to support local commerce when I travel abroad."

The driver nodded. "Very good, sir. Hotel Hankyu International is the ticket. I will call ahead and secure a suite. Might take money if they have bookings, though."

Gabriel sighed. "Money I have. Do whatever it takes."

"Yes, sir." The driver pulled away from the curb, steering wheel grasped in one hand and a cell phone in the other. Gabriel pressed a console button on the door; smoked privacy glass rose, separating the cockpit from the passenger compartment.

Kuri picked at his fingernails. "Do you think there's any chance of finding Daichi?"

"I called in some favors from people I work with." Gabriel fiddled with the strap of his laptop case, which occupied the seat next to him. "You can't tell anyone, Kuri, but I work for the CIA. The Central Intelligence Agency. You've heard of it?"

Kuri's eyes bugged and for a moment he considered jumping from the car. Everything he'd ever heard of the CIA sounded terrifying. "Yes. CIA like from the movies? You are America's watchdogs. Spies."

With a chuckle Gabriel said, "I'm not a spy, I'm a language officer — a translator. As you may have noticed, my Japanese isn't half bad. However" Gabriel shrugged and offered what Kuri took as a hopeful smile. "I do have some friends who *are* spies, and some others who have access to a lot of important information. People who owe me favors for keeping secrets for *them*. One of these people has access to international vehicle registries. The license plate number Daichi left for you on his cell phone is registered to a man in the Nishi ward. This man — Yoshida Gaku — has a history of involvement in human trafficking. Sexual slavery trade, involving boys and young men."

Kuri's stomach turned upside down worse than anything he'd ever experienced from a night of heavy drinking. "Sexual slavery? You think Daichi is in this sort of trouble?" With his fingers gripping the bottom edge of his shirt, Kuri tried to catch his breath. "Where? Where does this man take them?"

"According to another of my associates: Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong. Occasionally the Middle East. Yoshida Gaku rarely involves himself with the kidnappings personally, but acts as a facilitator. My friends are amazed he got sloppy enough to provide a client with a vehicle registered under his own name. A lucky break

for us." Gabriel took his laptop from the adjacent seat and set it on the floor near his feet. "Can you come here and sit with me, please?"

The request seemed simple, but Kuri quickly weighed the meaning. Searching inwardly, he knew he needed to demonstrate a measure of trust after Gabriel had come all this way by virtue of a single phone call. Kuri switched seats. "If they took him for sex, he is probably still alive?"

To Kuri's surprise, Gabriel kept his hands to himself, though he did shift somewhat sideways in his seat to face Kuri more directly. "That's the *good* news. Daichi has a certain reputation for being skilled at his trade. He's young and very, very pretty. People who deal in the sexual slave trade aren't likely to inflict damage on their merchandise. I would tell you the truth if I thought otherwise, but it's my opinion, and that of my colleagues, that Daichi is safe for the time being. Hopefully, he's as smart as he is skilled and pretty, and he'll go along with whatever his captors ask of him until help arrives."

"The good news . . . then what is the bad?" Because there was always bad when something else qualified as good. "Daichi is very smart. His name even means great wisdom." Kuri smiled, remembering his talk with Daichi that last night. If only he had known then what he knew now.

The chauffeur's voice crackled over a speaker. "Sir? Sorry to intrude, but we're pulling up to the hotel. I have acquired the Crown Suite for you. I trust you will be pleased."

Gabriel pressed the button to lower the privacy glass and smiled softly at Kuri. "No bad news, except you'll have to put up with me until we find your friend. I'll do my best to behave myself."

Chapter Thirteen

If Kuri considered the Dotonbori Hotel luxurious, then the Hankyu International Hotel ranked as a palace. European in appearance with a water garden theme, the

atmosphere exuded elegance, simple and clean. The accommodations Gabriel had secured were more like a well-furnished condominium than a hotel suite, with enough room for the two of them to live comfortably for as long as necessary.

Kuri sat on the puffy cushioned sofa and watched Gabriel settle in. "I didn't bring anything with me. I didn't realize we'd be staying in a hotel together."

Gabriel emptied his suit pockets onto a bureau near the living room's curtained, sliding glass doors. "I can have clothes and toiletries sent up for you by the concierge, but you don't have to stay. There are two bedrooms here, and the oath I swore to leave you alone still stands. I'm here to help you find your friend, Kuri, nothing more. No ulterior motives, I promise. The limo is waiting downstairs to take you back to your apartment if you wish to go. I can keep you updated by phone of any progress."

Kuri had again been given the option of freedom. Last time, he'd taken Gabriel up on the offer, which had perhaps been a mistake. Gabriel had proven his word meant something by coming back to Japan to help in Kuri's hour of need. "I don't want to sleep alone tonight. Sora and Takumi are working extra hours to make up for Daichi's and my absence. Mr. Toshi has been too good to us to leave him in the lurch."

"You're welcome to a room here." Gabriel sat down a few inches from Kuri. "I'd offer to hold you right now, but I don't want to make this any more complicated than necessary. I really *do* just want to help your find your friend."

"All right." Kuri tucked his knees up under him. "What can we do to get on Daichi's trail? Should we track down the car? But the police have probably tried to do that already, right? How long before your friends have more information?"

"Don't count on your police. My friends are the best at what they do, and the best thing *you* can do now is to get some sleep. You can't help your friend if you land in the hospital from exhaustion."

Kuri looked toward the bedroom doors. He began chewing his lower lip – an old habit Daichi often scolded. "Do you really still want to hold me? Because right now I think I could use that. If come morning everything is still good, I'll have Sora bring me clothes from home, and I'll stay with you until this is over."

"A test of my virtue? Fair enough." Gabriel chuckled, and as he rose from the couch he gave Kuri's knee a fond pat. He toed his shoes and socks off, removed his suit coat and tossed it onto the arm of the sofa. He began unbuckling his belt. "There's nothing else I can do until I'm contacted. I'll leave my cell phone on in case there's a break overnight. It could be hours before they find Yoshida Gaku's trail, but this is the first time they've had a lead this fresh. They're hopeful." Gabriel folded his belt and laid it on top of his coat. "You did the right thing by calling me."

Mesmerized by the quick dismissal of clothing, Kuri slipped his hand into his pocket and fingered the wrinkled, worn paper of Gabriel's confession letter. "Daichi is the most important thing in my life. You need to know that before we go any further."

Gabriel looked puzzled.

Kuri watched intently as realization dawned on Gabriel's handsome face.

Gabriel made a small, grunting noise. He dropped his chin to his chest, and his gaze fell to the carpet. "Habit. I'm sorry. I've been living alone for a very long time. I came here to help you help your friend, Kuri, but I have a selfish reason, too. I can't —" Gabriel shook his head, jaw clenching tight. "Jesus, I can't let this fucking *monster* control me anymore. I had to come here to discover if what I felt for you was something real or just more of the same: more illusion, more shit living only in my fucked-up head. I need to know if I can care for someone without sex being the primary motivation. Whether or not you return those feelings doesn't matter, but I need to know *I* can feel something deeper than lust."

Kuri rose from the sofa, feeling as if the air around him had suddenly developed tangible mass. He pulled the letter from his pocket. "This says you can. You aren't even *close* to the monster you think you are."

The silence in the room seemed thick and permeable, and long seconds passed before Gabriel spoke. "I wasn't supposed to send you the letter. My doctor . . . my psychiatrist told me to write it. He said committing my feelings to paper would be therapeutic. I mailed the letter on impulse." Gabriel's lips curved into a small, tentative smile. "I guess I did the right thing, after all."

The emotions of recent days caught up with Kuri. He rushed to Gabriel and flung his arms around him like a frightened, lost child. "I thought about you, long after the time we spent together. I felt guilty, leaving you there alone in the hotel. I still do."

Gabriel wrapped his arms around Kuri. "I'll be honest—I had a long, hard night after you left. Just me, my demons, and a mirror." He laughed softly against Kuri's ear. "I ended up with a few new battle scars, but I think I may have won the war."

Kuri nuzzled closer. "I don't believe in coincidence or random chance, Gabriel. Nothing happens without reason. We met because we were supposed to meet. You mailed the letter because I was supposed to read it. You're here because you were destined to come here. If none of those things had happened, Daichi would already be lost. There are no accidents." Kuri drew back and met Gabriel's eyes. "I don't need to wait until morning to begin trusting you. I'm staying here, and I'm sleeping in your bed. Daichi will understand."

* * * * *

The scent of the sheets didn't smell right.

When Kuri opened his eyes, he saw his immediate surroundings weren't those of home, no matter how familiar the arm around him felt. As his brain awoke and kicked into gear, he remembered the events of the previous evening with deep clarity and closed his eyes again. Like Gabriel, he still wore all his clothes. He felt clean. There wasn't a hand groping down his pants. Kuri smiled.

Gabriel passed with flying colors.

Twenty minutes later, Kuri woke again after a brief return to slumber, this time because his need to piss outweighed his ability to ignore. Memories of the first night with Gabriel returned. After slipping away from the bed, Kuri closed and locked the bathroom door. He focused on the images of lotus flowers decorating the walls of the black, pink, and white bathroom as he finished his business, his ears alert for the sound of a creaking bed. Nothing.

When Kuri returned to the bedroom, he crawled onto Gabriel and straddled his hips. "Are you awake?"

Sleepy blue eyes struggled open and finally peered up. Gabriel smiled. "You look like an angel. Am I dead?"

"Yes. We had wild, kinky, untamed sex all night and it killed you." Kuri turned to look at Gabriel's phone and computer on the table near the window. "No messages yet?"

"Patience is difficult," Gabriel said, his hands landing lightly on Kuri's hips, "but a virtue. It's a documented fact that the best way to ensure interruption is to order room service."

Or have sex. Kuri's mind went there before he could reel the thought back in. He could only be thankful the words hadn't spilled from his mouth, even though other parts of him screamed the message regardless. How strange. He'd not worked for Kingyo Club since Daichi had disappeared, of course. Now, he'd gone four straight days with no sex at all after years of excessive daily activity. "You said your doctor claims you're obsessed with sex, yes?"

Gabriel nodded.

"I have sex with strangers every day. Sometimes several times a day." Kuri placed the palms of both hands on Gabriel's chest, spreading his fingers over the crisp dress shirt, and he spoke in a serious tone. "In the beginning I did it for money, but I've made enough to quit now. Enough that I could take my time to find a new job or even go back to school. But I don't want to. I *like* being a host. Maybe too much."

Gabriel snagged Kuri's wrists with his hands. "Don't tempt me. I'll take care of you anyway. You don't have anything to prove, and I'm not asking for payment."

Kuri couldn't respond. The sharp movement made the words catch in his throat. Gabriel's grip bordered on painful.

"I know, but it's been four days since I've slept with anyone." Kuri's shoulders drooped. He felt dirty telling this awkward secret, but maybe it would do Gabriel good to see his angel wasn't so clean and pure either. "I don't know regular life, I only know

the club. I know champagne and cigarettes and sex and morning-afters and excuses for breaking rules. I don't fit into the real world mold anymore. You're fighting so hard to be normal and you're winning, and maybe I don't want you to. I think I'm more broken than you are."

Grip easing, Gabriel rubbed the inside of Kuri's wrists with his thumbs. "Maybe that's why fate brought us together. You fix a broken part of me, I fix a broken part of you, and maybe we'll both come out on the other side of this a little closer to whole." He pulled Kuri close and wrapped him in a firm embrace. "Call your friend and see if he can bring you some clothes and whatever else you need from home. I'll send a car for him. I need to run a few errands by myself, and I don't want to leave you here alone. Ask if he can stay with you for a few hours."

Kuri understood. Partly disappointed that Gabriel offered no response to the sexual advance, Kuri nonetheless realized Gabriel's ability to resist such a blatant invitation constituted a gigantic step forward for the man. He nodded against Gabriel's shoulder, hugging him once more before disengaging. He left the bed immediately, not wanting to cause Gabriel more stress. "Can I use your phone?"

"Be my guest."

Kuri dialed the house phone at his apartment, hoping someone would be there to pick up.

Sora answered before the first ring finished. "*Moshi moshi*? Uh, hello?"

Relief filled Kuri. "It's me, Kuri. I know it's probably pointless to ask, but has there been any word about Daichi?"

"I would have called immediately," Sora said in a quiet tone. "Are you all right?"

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances." Kuri sighed and fingered the edge of the phone. "Gabriel's flight came in. We're staying at the Hankyu International Hotel." Kuri wandered out of the bedroom. "I'm not sure how long I'll be here, so I could use a few changes of clothing. I was wondering if you would pack some things for me and bring them over? Gabriel said he would send a car for you."

"Of course," Sora said. "I'll go pack a bag for you right now. It'll be good to see you, Kuri. I miss you."

"I miss you, too. If you aren't in a rush to get back for the club, we could get some breakfast when you get here. Gabriel has some errands and he'd rather I not be alone."

"That would be great!" The excitement in Sora's voice made Kuri smile, a brief spot of sunshine in an otherwise dark day. "Tell your Mr. Gabriel to have his driver beep for me. I'll see you soon!"

"I will. And Sora? Tell Takumi to be careful tonight if he goes to the club alone. I'm paranoid, I'm sure, but Gabriel has told me about this man who has Daichi—he's a monster."

Sora swallowed loud enough for Kuri to hear. "Okay, Kuri, I will. Bye now!"

"Bye, Sora." Kuri closed the cell just as Gabriel emerged from the bathroom. "He'll be ready by the time the car arrives."

"Good." Gabriel took the phone, and after verifying the address with Kuri, he placed a quick call to secure a limousine, making a point to ask for the same driver they'd had for their ride from the airport. He hung up and offered Kuri a small smile. "You boys take good care of each other. It's nice to see."

"We have to or none of us would survive. Most of us don't have families." Kuri flopped down on the soft leather sofa. Gabriel had already changed into a handsome suit—a darker gray than the one he'd arrived in, over the crispest white shirt Kuri had ever seen, topped off by a dark maroon necktie. Gabriel would command attention walking into any room, anywhere. The man exuded power and confidence, even if Kuri knew better. "You must have something important to do, to dress like that. Are you meeting with your informants?"

Gabriel shored up the knot of his tie. "I'll tell you all about it afterward." He took a seat behind the ornate writing desk where his laptop was open, pressed a few keys as he studied the screen, and then sat back, frowning. "The meeting location has changed. I probably won't be back until early evening." He flipped the lid of the laptop down and turned to face Kuri. "I don't want you or your friend leaving this suite. Feel free to order

room service, anything you want. Do you remember the concierge who greeted us when we checked in?"

Kuri nodded.

"Don't open the door for anyone but him. I'll make arrangements for him to make all deliveries personally. I'm not taking any chances with your safety."

"Okay, we'll stay put. Do you really think the man who took Daichi might come after me, too?" Kuri went to Gabriel and straightened his tie with care. "There. Perfect."

Gabriel brushed Kuri's cheek with the back of his hand. "I doubt it, but I'd rather assume the possibility exists than get lax and drop my guard. We don't know why Daichi was singled out, so that makes all of you vulnerable."

* * * * *

Kuri watched from the window as the limousine sent for Sora pulled up outside the hotel. Gabriel spoke with the driver for a few moments then escorted Sora into the hotel. A thread of excitement raced through Kuri. Being separated from his housemates had been much harder on him than he'd thought. He flung open the door to the hallway and waited for Gabriel and Sora to appear.

When they came into view, Gabriel was handing what appeared to be a business card to Sora.

Sora studied the card and nodded, and when he looked up and spotted Kuri, he grinned and came hurtling toward him. "Kuri!"

The impact was mutual as Kuri met Sora halfway, and Kuri launched into an excited accounting of all that had happened while he tugged him into the suite. He gave Sora a quick tour and only paused when he noticed Gabriel looking as if he needed to say something.

Gabriel glanced at his watch. "I won't be back until early evening, so you're on your own for the day. Remember what I said – don't, under any circumstances, open the door for anyone except the concierge. Order whatever you want from room service,

and there's some wonderful *sake* in the refrigerator. Help yourself." He quickly packed up his laptop and slung the strap of the case over his shoulder. "I gave Sora a card that has my cell phone number on it. There's also an emergency number for the American Consulate, if for some reason you can't reach me. Don't call that number unless you have an extreme emergency and you can't get through to me."

"We'll be fine." With Sora standing behind him, Kuri kept his emotions in check. He offered Gabriel a smile he hoped would convey more than mere words. "Thank you, Gabriel. And be careful yourself, okay? If they catch wind you're looking for them"

"I will." Gabriel returned Kuri's smile and took off.

Chapter Fourteen

Gabriel settled into the back of the limousine. He raised the privacy glass and took his cell phone from the inside pocket of his suit jacket with trembling fingers. After a few minutes the international connection completed, and to Gabriel's chagrin the ringing resulted in an immediate switch to Dr. Schultz's emergency service.

Shit. Gabriel jammed the phone back into his pocket, closed his eyes and leaned back on the leather headrest. Images flooded his mind. Falling asleep spooned behind Kuri, only to wake up a few hours later and find himself unable to get back to sleep. He'd lain awake for hours staring at Kuri, finally disengaging his embrace when an erection threatened. Gabriel shook the thought away, only for it to be replaced by the vision of Kuri perched on his thighs this morning, smiling down at him like an angel.

Gabriel chuckled, the sound mirthless to his ears. *Angel. Right. More like Satan incarnate come up from hell to tempt me into the pit.* Gabriel became hard, uncomfortably so. The privacy screen and the dark-tinted windows afforded enough privacy for him to succumb. He unbuckled his belt, opened his trousers, and slipped a hand inside his briefs to jerk off. His fantasy featured Kuri on all fours in the middle of the big, luxurious hotel bed. Kuri's gorgeous ass rocking back onto his dick. Kuri keening and moaning his name.

He came in his handkerchief, sweating and breathing hard, heart pounding. With guilt burning hot under his skin, he gazed up at the limo ceiling and whispered, "Please, God, give me strength."

Chapter Fifteen

"Does he seem different to you?" Sora closed the door after Gabriel's footfalls faded.

Leaning against the door, Kuri nodded. "He *has* changed. I think he's healing himself, but I don't know if being healed is ever going to make him happy." Kuri shoved off the door and led the way into the living room area. He noticed for the first time that the colors of the room were those of the sea: sandy whites, hues of blue, and soft sage green. Kuri sat and patted the cushion next to him. "We slept side by side last night and he didn't make a single advance. I told him about Daichi, that we're lovers, and he didn't get mad. He seemed more . . . I don't know. Sad. Resigned."

Sora removed his shoes, set them on the slatted wood mat next to the front door, and hurried over to Kuri. He settled into the sofa and leaned against Kuri's shoulder. "As long as he helps to find Daichi, that's the important thing. I wish you weren't having to go through this, but I guess in a strange way it's lucky you met the guy."

"Life *is* strange. I never thought I would see Gabriel again. I had hoped I wouldn't. Now I'm glad I gave him another chance." Kuri wrapped an arm around Sora and held him close. "How is Takumi? I'm surprised he didn't tag along."

"Takumi hasn't seen his sister in a long while, so when I told him I was coming here for the day, he decided to pay her a visit. He thought you might not be in the mood for so much company, so his sister came to pick him up. I asked a couple other guys if they wanted some extra hours, Mr. Toshi said it was okay. I told Takumi I'd call later to let him know when I'd be coming home." Sora sighed, resting his head on Kuri's shoulder. "Home. It doesn't feel like home with Daichi gone. I hope we find him soon. I'm so scared for him, and I don't like everyone being so worried and sad."

"I feel lost. Out of my element." Kuri ran light fingers down the length of Sora's arm. "I don't know how to react. This morning I woke up and wanted sex so bad, like a drug. I practically threw myself at Gabriel, until I came to my senses and realized how bad that would be for him."

Sora nodded. "I understand. After a while, sex becomes a need. Like breathing." He grinned. "I know. Mr. Gabriel said to help ourselves to his *sake*, right? We can drink, and I'll be your own personal host boy tonight. Just forget about everything for a couple hours and feel good."

"But Takumi –"

"Pfft, he won't mind." Sora waved a dismissive hand. "If he can deal with me sleeping with strangers for money, he can deal with me sleeping with someone we both love." Sora hopped off the sofa and grabbed Kuri by the hand, fairly dragging him toward the kitchen. "And I know for a fact Daichi wouldn't mind."

Sora wiggled his eyebrows like a lecherous old man.

Despite the severity of the situation, Kuri found himself laughing. "I adore all three of you so much! Sora, you and Takumi are so precious to me."

When they reached the full-sized refrigerator, Kuri discovered Gabriel had provided for them well. "It's almost noon. Have you eaten? There's a tray of *sushi* here, which looks freshly made."

"Yum." Sora leaned into the fridge and came out with the tray. He handed the *sushi* to Kuri and dove back in for a bottle of *sake*. "We'll eat, drink, and be merry. In that order, but eat fast so we can get to the merry part." He closed the fridge, removed the cap from the *sake*, and took a swig. "You know when me and Takumi were watching Daichi, um, rimming you, and then Daichi said something to me, and I came like a wildcat all over Takumi's pants? Do you know what Daichi said?"

Sora took another drink, handed the bottle to Kuri, and relieved Kuri of the *sushi* tray.

"No." Kuri drank several long swallows. "I never got the chance to ask him."

"Your boy has a bad, bad case of potty mouth." Sora strolled back into the living room and set the tray on the low coffee table. "He said, 'Takumi told me he wants to watch me and Kuri spit-roast you one day.'" He giggled, covering his mouth, brown eyes twinkling.

Kuri struggled to keep the slice of spicy tuna roll from flying out of his mouth or choking him, but he managed to hang on. He grabbed the bottle of *sake* for a chaser. When he could breathe and talk again, he looked at Sora and said with as straight a face as he could muster, "It's totally true. Takumi told me that just a month ago. Several times."

Kuri rolled his arm up over his head as Sora attacked, both of them ending up in a fit of laughter.

"I am *not* a luau pig!" Sora giggled, wresting the bottle away from Kuri while pushing him to the sofa. He took a long drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before giving the bottle back to Kuri. He plucked a piece of tuna roll from the tray and popped the morsel into his mouth.

"You don't look like a pig, but you eat like one!" After picking up another slice of tuna roll, Kuri held it out for Sora. "I know you want it, baby."

"*Oh*, I like it when you talk so sexy." Sora leaned in close and took a tiny, flicking lick of the outside of the roll.

Maybe it was partly the alcohol making the action look so fucking hot, but Kuri knew that wasn't the only reason. He'd had a physical interest in Sora since they first met on a chilly November night and shared a coat while trying to solicit clients for Kingyo Club. The way Sora had pressed in close under the coat and wiggled against him almost constantly had been adorable then, and Sora had never lost that innocent aura. Kuri never pursued Sora for more than a few drunken kisses and gropes, mostly for the entertainment of clients, but with the offer Sora had just made, Kuri's willpower started to unravel. He held the *sushi* still and locked gazes with Sora.

Sora stuck out his tongue and curled the roll into his mouth. He chewed slowly and swallowed, took the bottle and gulped a long drink, never shifting his eyes away. "Would you like to go to bed with me?"

Kuri took the bottle, finished the remnants of the *sake*, and dropped the empty bottle to the floor. Taking hold of Sora's hand, he pressed the palm to the crotch of his jeans. "Yes . . . yes, I would."

Fingers shaking with the prospect, Kuri unfastened Sora's belt.

The undressing proceeded quickly and in silence. Clothes strewn about the floor at his feet, Sora reached out first, placing his small hand on Kuri's chest, looking up at him. "You have such a beautiful body. When I first met you, I was so envious of your height." Sora chuckled. "I confessed to Takumi. He said you were well worth the climb."

"Oh, Sora. You have no idea how beautiful and sweet you are." The distance between them disappeared as Kuri moved forward into Sora's space. Resting one hand on Sora's hip, Kuri lowered his face to Sora's level and nuzzled his mouth against soft-as-satin lips.

Sora kissed him — a shy, tentative kiss, tender and sweet. "I really do love you," Sora said, sliding his arms around Kuri's waist. "I've never had friends I could count on before, like you and Takumi and Daichi. I am very lucky to have found all of you."

"Nothing is ever going to tear us apart. We'll find Daichi and everything will be just like before." Kuri forced himself to believe because anything else was too scary to contemplate. He kissed Sora again, unhurried, trying to show Sora the love he felt for all three of them. He coasted a slow hand down Sora's neck to his chest, his fingers plucking at Sora's nipple as if testing a small, ripe berry.

"Oh, Kuri" Sora trembled under Kuri's touch. He slid his hand down Kuri's belly, his slender fingers finding and petting Kuri's blossoming erection.

Maintaining sweet torture but switching nipples, Kuri pushed his hips forward to shove himself into Sora's grasp. He kissed Sora again, this time his fingers and thumb joining to fondle Sora's lips along with his eager tongue. Kuri lapped at the roof of Sora's mouth and then ended the kiss. He teased deeper with his thumb, watching

Sora's lips close around the base. "Fuck, so pretty. No wonder the girls and boys all love you."

Sora moaned softly. Kuri felt a few warm droplets hit his left thigh, and his own cock stiffened when he realized Sora's had started to drip.

Pulling away from Kuri's kisses and prodding fingers, Sora whispered, "You have me so hard it hurts. God, Kuri"

The sound of desperation in Sora's voice made Kuri's cock involuntarily flex. He grabbed himself, squeezed tight at the tip then stroked downward.

"Get on the sofa, face the back with your ass out." Kuri snatched the bag of clothing Sora had delivered and tore through the contents. "Please tell me you knew I needed more than clothes to get me through the week?"

Sora looked over his shoulder as he climbed into position on the sofa, both hands coming to rest on the high back cushions. "Outside zipper pocket."

"I knew you were a good boy." Kuri located the lube and condoms. A quick tearing of foil and Kuri rolled the condom over his dick. He popped the lube open, and drizzled a thin stream of slick over Sora's little pink hole. Fuck, even that part of Sora seemed innocent and cute. Kuri tossed the lube container to join the empty *sake* bottle on the floor.

He mounted up behind Sora, gave his ass a smack, and teased that cute, pink entrance.

"Oh God, Kuri." Sora arched his back, spreading his knees wider. "Want this so bad."

"Same here. I'm embarrassed to say how many times I've dreamed about you being behind the bar at the club, and me coming up behind you and fucking you against the wood. I jerk off sometimes when I hear you and Takumi fucking in the middle of the night at home."

With his body pressed tightly against Sora, Kuri licked the back of Sora's ear and gave a nice, firm push with his hips. Sora's body took him in, sending a surge of

pleasure rocketing through Kuri, and he snapped his hips forward sooner and harder than he intended.

Sora hissed, stiffened all over, and Kuri felt that tight little ass contract around his cock. Rocking back, Sora impaled himself fully on Kuri's rock-hard erection and moaned. Kuri let out a wail and bit down hard on Sora's shoulder, and Sora's smooth insides pulsed around his cock again.

"You like that, don't you?" Kuri said with a grunt. "Does Takumi whisper nasty things in your ear when he fucks you?"

"Oh fuck, yes!" Sora lowered his head and rested the side of his face on the back cushion of the sofa. "Oh God, I'm dripping all over the couch. Please, touch my cock!"

"Probably should have spread something underneath us." Kuri chuckled. He slipped one hand between the leather cushion and Sora's belly then moved downward. His fingers bumped the slick cap of Sora's cock, and he wrapped a loose-fisted grip around the sleek, stiff shaft. "Does he tell you what a naughty, bad boy you are? Fuck, you're tighter than I ever imagined!"

"Fuck, I'm going to shoot, oh *fuck*." Sora moaned, rocking back with sharp, quick thrusts, rabbit-fucking himself on Kuri's dick. "Fuck me hard, Kuri, fuck me hard . . ."

Kuri ran his fingers through Sora's short, spiky hair while he jerked Sora off with his other hand. Wet slapping and carnal moaning filled the air along with the heady scent of sex, and white light burst behind Kuri's eyes. His thighs twitched with aching tremors, and a hard knot coiled low in his belly as he unloaded into the condom. He pressed his face into soft, sweaty blond hair at the nape of Sora's neck. "Oh fuck, oh God, Sora!"

Moaning incoherently, Sora became still, and Kuri felt Sora's cock swell and pulse wildly in his hand, a warm spill of copious fluid coating his fingers. Sora collapsed against the cushions, gasping and sweating up a storm. "No wonder Daichi brags about you so much. God, Kuri."

"Stop, you're making me blush." Kuri soared through post-orgasmic bliss, idly petting along Sora's ribcage, feeling each bone. "You need to eat more. When was your last checkup?"

Sora collapsed onto his back, making a comic, sour face at the resultant squishing noise. "Last Tuesday. Doctor said the same thing. Come here, let me take that off you."

"He's right. Sora; you need to eat." Sighing, Kuri put his feet on the floor and rested his knees against the edge of the sofa. "I won't nag more than that, but I'm ordering us a big meal for dinner."

"All the drinking kills my appetite." Sora reached up and slipped the condom off Kuri's softening cock. He grinned. "Great sex, however, makes me very hungry. Do you think they have cheeseburgers? I really like cheeseburgers."

Chapter Sixteen

The drive to the port city of Kobe took a little over an hour, allowing Gabriel enough time to pull himself together. The chauffeur parked the limo under the canopy outside the French bistro, the flag of France and the building's blatantly continental décor incongruous to the surroundings. Gabriel remained seated until the driver opened the rear curbside door.

The chauffeur bowed and tipped his hat as Gabriel climbed out of the vehicle with laptop in tow.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Hartley, for requesting me personally."

Gabriel bowed in return. "There's a parking lot around back; please wait there. I shouldn't be long, and then we have another stop. You'll be paid for the whole day."

"Very good, sir," the driver said. He climbed back in the car but waited until Gabriel had taken a few steps toward the restaurant entrance before pulling away.

A uniformed doorman bowed and opened the ornate, gilded doors to Bistro de Marseille. Upon entering the lavishly decorated restaurant, Gabriel spotted his luncheon companion. He waved off the tuxedoed *maître d'* and strode purposefully

toward a clamshell booth in the far corner of the room. The dark-haired, handsome Arab man already seated there looked up at Gabriel and smirked.

"Well, they'll let anybody in here these days. And this used to be such a nice place." The man stood and offered his hand.

Gabriel gripped the proffered hand and shook it before taking a seat. "Thanks, Cyd. I owe you one."

"Nah, you don't owe me jack-shit," Cyd said. "My ass would've been kicked out of the Agency ten times over if you hadn't bailed me out." He chuckled. "My bookies thank you, too. They like dealing in cold, hard cash. How are you doing with *your* little vice?"

With a wincing sort of shrug, Gabriel said, "I have good days and bad, but it's under control. Mostly. Schultz helps a lot; he doesn't make me feel like a crime waiting to happen. Thanks again for the referral."

"No problem. We all have our crosses to bear."

"Yes, but some of our crosses are more socially acceptable than others."

Cyd gave a gentle smile and a wave of his hand. "You're far too hard on yourself, my friend."

Cyd Khalid, a first generation Arab-American, began life in Washington D.C., born of Jordanian parents in the diplomatic corps. Gabriel had known him for six years, and they'd bailed each other out of jams quite a few times. Gabriel's money had helped Cyd keep a gambling addiction at bay, and Cyd lent a compassionate ear when Gabriel needed more personal support than a psychiatrist could offer. A non-judgmental listener, Cyd had become Gabriel's closest friend – a confidante as close as Gabriel had ever allowed.

"You've been a lifesaver, Cyd," Gabriel said. "I hope you know how much your friendship means to me."

"If that's your way of trying to get into my pants, it ain't gonna work." Cyd grinned. "But I'll give you a nice, manly man-hug after you buy me lunch."

A waiter came to the table, offering menus, but Cyd shook his head. "No need. I'll have the burger special, and my sophisticated friend here will have the *Escargots Au Beurre D'ail*." Cyd raised an eyebrow and looked at Gabriel. "You still eat those nasty slugs, right?"

Chuckling, Gabriel nodded. The waiter rolled his eyes and asked, "May I recommend a lovely Loire Valley Chenin Blanc?"

"You may," Cyd said, "but we'll have beer. Two Sapporos." He cocked an eyebrow. "You need a glass, Fancy Pants? Or can you handle it straight from the can like the rest of us commoners?"

Gabriel laughed. "The can is fine."

"Very good, *monsieur*." The waiter turned on his heel and left in a bit of a huff.

Gabriel waited until the waiter was out of earshot before speaking. "Why the hell did you want to meet here? We could have gone to McDonald's if you wanted a burger."

"Are you kidding? This place has the best burgers in the hemisphere." Elbows on the table, Cyd leaned closer and whispered. "We've got this place under heavy surveillance for *Yakuza* activity, so I know it's not being bugged by somebody else. Kobe's current top crime boss is hooked on the *Coquille Saint Jacques Villageoise*."

"Great," Gabriel said. "Mafia downfall by scallops. What do you have for me?"

Cyd reached inside his jacket and pulled out a business-sized envelope, which he slid across the table. "These were taken three hours ago at Dubai International Airport."

Opening the envelope, Gabriel extracted a small stack of photographs. He scrutinized each of the four images with care.

Cyd drummed the fingers of one hand on the table. "That's Yoshida Gaku talking to Bahir Bahjat. Bahjat is an attaché to one Sheikh Akmal bin Hosaam. The sheikh is up to his earlobes in old oil money, but he's been building on his already sizable fortune over recent years by dealing in antiquities. He's apparently not as protective of ancient Persian artifacts as certain Middle Eastern nations would like — particularly Iran, Jordan, and Turkey. He'll sell to the highest bidder — private collectors only, of course.

Legitimate museums won't touch contraband artifacts. So, bin Hosaam has a bounty on his head, funded by most of his neighboring countries. He's Saudi by birth and citizenship, but he's been living in exile as an expatriate in Dubai for the past ten years. Two years ago, he bought one of those man-made islands in the Gulf off Dubai – the one called Easter Island – and built himself an authentic historical Persian castle."

Gabriel flipped one of the pictures around so Cyd could see, index finger poised above a third individual. A tall, slender woman stood between the two men. She wore the full, traditional black *burqa*, complete with mesh covering the eye area of the veil. "Who's this?"

Cyd rubbed the dark stubble on his chin. "We think that's Daichi."

"What?" Gabriel felt as if his jaw had hit the table.

Before Cyd could reply, the waiter returned with their beers and informed them lunch would be served momentarily.

"Fine, great." Cyd didn't look away from Gabriel. The waiter huffed again and scurried off.

Gabriel turned the photo around and took another look. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Cyd let out a long sigh. "Look at the full-length picture more closely."

Gabriel flipped to the wide-lens shot. "I don't see anything."

"Look at the bottom of the woman's robe."

Ah. Gabriel nodded.

"Uh huh," Cyd said. "You don't see too many orthodox Muslim women wearing Nikes under their *burqa*. We're pretty sure that's your boy in disguise." He shook his head, a strained look on his face. "We suspect Akmal bin Hosaam is collecting more than Persian antiquities these days."

Chapter Seventeen

Their backs braced against the bottom of the leather sofa, Kuri and Sora lounged on the floor with cheeseburgers in hand, flipping the big-screen television from channel to channel. They'd filled the afternoon with game shows and anime, filled their bellies with American junk food, and polished off two more bottles of *sake* between additional rounds of sex.

Kuri checked the digital clock on the television and frowned. "Gabriel's been gone a long time; it's already after seven. I hope he didn't run into trouble. How long do you think I should wait before trying to call him?"

Sora burped then giggled. "He said he would be back early evening. I don't think we should panic yet. Oh God, I don't think I can *move*. Now I need to go on a diet. Are you happy now that I let you fatten me up?"

Leaning over, Kuri poked Sora's belly. "Ooh. Hard like a rock! Now I know how to get you to eat. Sex and cheeseburgers! Sounds like an American pop song, hmm?" Kuri stretched for the remaining *sake* on the coffee table. "Want any more? There's only a swallow or two left."

"There's another bottle in the refrigerator. If Mr. Gabriel is much later, we may have to call room service for more liquor." Despite his distended belly, Sora took another big bite of burger. Mid-chew, a click and a beep sounded at the door, which promptly opened.

Gabriel entered, laptop bag slung over a slumped shoulder. He stopped in his tracks and surveyed the disarray. "Apparently, I missed the party."

"Gabriel!" Kuri jumped to his feet. "I was starting to get worried." He peered at Gabriel, looking him up and down with a critical eye. "You *look* okay. No gunshot wounds. No missing limbs. We can call off the search hounds, Sora."

Gabriel set his laptop on an empty spot on the coffee table. He brushed a few hamburger roll crumbs from the white leather and sank into the sofa cushions, letting out a long, tired sigh. "Any more *sake* left?"

Sora struggled to his feet and waddled off toward the kitchen. "One more bottle left. I'll fetch."

Kuri's eyes grew wide as Gabriel took a seat right in the spot where he and Sora had fooled around, intensely glad they'd taken time to clean away the mess. He sat beside Gabriel. "You look beat. Any news?"

Nodding, Gabriel fished the photographs from his jacket and handed them to Kuri. "We think that's Daichi in the *burqa*."

Afraid of what he might see, Kuri took the photos with shaking hands. He let out a relieved breath when at first glance there appeared to be no blood. He looked hard at the photo of the two men and the third unknown under the dark *burqa*. "Yes, that's Daichi, I'm sure of it. He always stands with a little lean to the left. I tease him about it. I tell him he stood out in the wind too long." Kuri turned his attention to the pair of men. One of them had dark, glittering eyes, a dark black beard, and loomed over Daichi with an aura of intimidation that rolled off the photo and made Kuri's skin crawl. "Demons. My Daichi is with demons."

"This man — " Gabriel pointed to the Japanese national. " — is Yoshida Gaku, whom we talked about earlier, and the Arab man in traditional garb is Bahir Bahjat. He's an attaché to an exiled Saudi sheikh named Akmal bin Hosaam. The sheikh is a collector of ancient Persian artifacts. A friend of mine from the agency suspects bin Hosaam is also collecting young Asian men for a . . . well, for a harem."

Kuri dropped the picture like a hot coal. "Harem? They still exist? I thought they were only in fairytales and *manga* by now." The idea of Daichi being kept in such a way twisted in Kuri's stomach like spoiled food, but a reassuring factor suddenly occurred to him. "A harem would mean he isn't alone, right?"

Gabriel shrugged. "We don't know for sure, but it's unlikely he's alone. The sheikh has built a replica of a Turkish royal palace on a private island in the Persian Gulf. We're hoping that's where Daichi is being held. It's going to be a challenge to ascertain whether or not Daichi and others are imprisoned, but once we have proof, the isolation should make the property easier to siege."

Sora returned with the new bottle of *sake* and three cups. Falling back into host mode, he knelt at the coffee table and poured the drinks with a flourish. He handed the first cup to Gabriel. "Thank you for your hospitality."

Gabriel gave a nod and offered Sora a small smile. "You're very welcome. And now I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask both of you for a tremendous favor."

Kuri drew his legs up under him and took the next cup of *sake* Sora offered. He stared at the reflection of lamplight on the surface of the liquid. "Anything. You've been so good to us, Gabriel. I feel ashamed to have nothing to offer you."

"Oh, but you do." Gabriel drank his *sake* in one long swallow and set the cup on the table.

Sora refilled Gabriel's without asking and looked worriedly at Kuri.

"My friend, whom I met for lunch today, is an operative for the CIA. A deep-cover spy. He has a plan to get inside the sheikh's compound to find out if Daichi and others are there. My friend says the best way to get to people like this is to offer them something they want badly. Badly enough that they might trip up, make a mistake, and let down their guard."

"You want Sora and I to pose as new toys for this sheikh?" Kuri had seen enough movies to know that's how things were done. Of course, in the movies, things always went mostly according to plan, and the heroes always made it out by the skin of their teeth. But this wasn't a movie, even if the idea of a modern-day harem seemed like farfetched fantasy to Kuri. A happy ending wasn't guaranteed.

Gabriel nodded. "I'll pose as a wealthy American businessman with similar interests, which I guess in a way isn't much of a stretch. We'll have to make the act convincing, make them believe I'm your master, that there's a real ownership relationship between us. I won't lie to you; this is dangerous, but frankly I don't see any other way that wouldn't pose more of a risk to Daichi. We can't simply rush in and storm the castle with guns a-blazing."

Gabriel polished off his second cup of *sake*, set the cup on the table, and put his hand on top of the cup. Sora set the bottle down.

"Let's get something straight," Kuri said, his voice and demeanor terse. Anger welled up inside him. "You aren't *anything* like him! You could've taken me. You could've forced me. You didn't do either one. You may have dark thoughts in your mind, Gabriel, but you're strong enough not to act on them. You care about me, I can tell, and I know how hard that must be for you. I saw you sweat when I tried to seduce you. I heard you get up in the middle of the night. But you know what's right and what's wrong, and you're able to rein yourself in." The outburst caught Kuri himself off guard. He pulled himself together and locked eyes with Gabriel. "We're doing this alone? No help from America? Your government, they don't know you're doing this, do they?"

Gabriel swallowed hard and color rose to his cheeks. He took a deep breath before he spoke. "The friend I saw today—his name is Cyd—knows. He knows everything about me. I trust him, and he'll back me up. But if I go to my government for official aid, I'll have to tell *them* everything about my involvement. I'd lose my job, and even though I don't need the money, I love my work. Also, my parents would find out, and then I'd be in a whole peck of shit. They would disown me in a heartbeat, and then I'd have nothing. Four generations of old Virginia tobacco money is a lot to give up." Gabriel shook his head and shrugged. "Even if I did come clean it could take weeks, even months before the agency would move on this, if they moved at all. Do you really think the American government—or your own, for that matter—is going to go out of its way to find what they consider a missing prostitute halfway around the world on foreign soil in a volatile zone? I have to try this on my own first, with Cyd's help. I *know* I can get us inside, and then we can let Cyd know the lay of the land and other details, and then *he* can organize a proper raid. Cyd's a gambler, but he wouldn't be sticking his neck out if he didn't think we had an above-average chance of success."

Kuri sat, his hands folded on his lap as he listened. He picked up the photo again and looked at the two men. He handed Sora the picture and pointed to the figure in the middle. Sora nodded.

This was Daichi's life at stake. Lover, best friend, family. Kuri would do whatever it took to see him safe and in his arms again.

"Gabriel," Kuri said, "does Sora really need to be involved?"

Sora put a gentle hand on Kuri's arm. "I want to help. Daichi is my friend, too. Takumi will understand. You would do the same if it were Takumi missing, wouldn't you?" Sora cocked his head, a pleading look on his face. "Wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would do the same if it were Takumi." Kuri realized the futility of demanding Sora stay behind. Truth be told, he didn't want to do this alone. "If I don't get Daichi back, my life is worth nothing. All right. We go, we get Daichi back, but if things go wrong I want you to promise you get Sora out."

Gabriel took Kuri's hand and gave a firm squeeze. "You have my word. Now, we have work to do."

Chapter Eighteen

Daichi stared at his image in the mirror as the *burqa*-clad woman behind him combed his hair. The night he arrived they'd dyed his hair back to his natural jet black and gave him a girlish bob. His hair now barely brushed his shoulders, and his bangs were blunt-cut straight across. He looked at least five years younger, which he now knew had been the point.

Finished combing his shiny hair, the woman stepped back, and in the mirror Daichi saw her reflection bow low to the man seated on a wicker stool in the corner. Unlike the woman, whose touch had so far been gentle, her voice soft and eyes kind, the man had been rough, cruel and detached from the start. Daichi had heard another palace worker call the man "Abdullah." He'd heard another prisoner – a delicate-looking Vietnamese boy of perhaps eighteen or nineteen years of age – call the man "dirty swine." Daichi had winced at the time, knowing the boy would be taken away and severely beaten. The incident had occurred weeks ago, and Abdullah didn't disappoint; Daichi hadn't seen the Vietnamese boy since and suspected he never would.

The wicker stool creaked as Abdullah stood. He barked something harsh in Arabic to the woman as he crossed the floor in Daichi's direction. The woman backed her way out of the marble cell, bowing low to Abdullah with each step, and closed the golden door behind her.

Abdullah spoke in slightly broken English, the only language they had in common. "This is a big, big day for you. Rahimah cleaned you up nice. His Highness will be pleased."

Daichi turned and glared hard at Abdullah. "His Highness can eat shit and die."

Pulling his right arm across his shoulder as if to backhand Daichi across the face, Abdullah growled, baring his teeth, but he didn't swing. "His Highness wishes you unmarked." He lowered his hand, a feral grin on his bearded face as he lecherously palmed his own cock through his white-and-gold palace robe. "I look forward to when he's finished with you. I don't mind so much, fucking to death a battered body. Fix your garment. The loose ends of the belt must be draped on the right; His Highness is left-handed."

Daichi took a deep breath and did as instructed. The braided gold belt slid easily around his waist over the silk fabric of the white, one-shouldered toga-like garment he wore. He made sure the two ends of the braid hung just so over his right hipbone as he'd been shown.

Abdullah opened the cell door. "Behave yourself and do as you have been taught, and you will live a happy and pampered life. Follow me, five paces behind at all times. No more, no less."

Straightening the hem of the mid-thigh-length toga, Daichi followed Abdullah, the marble floor biting cold on the soles of his bare feet with each step he took. People lining the lavish corridors on the way to the sheikh's private chambers stared. Daichi felt his cheeks flame feverishly hot; he lowered his head, keeping his eyes on the heels of Abdullah's sandals for the rest of the long, humiliating trip.

The chamber doors opened. On a riser of three steps made of marble and granite sat a throne, wide enough for two grown men to lounge. Carved from onyx and inlaid

with abalone shell and jade, the throne screamed power and opulence. On either side of the chair were two gold lions, their mouths open and snarling to all who came to stand before the sheikh. On the chair itself sat Sheikh Akmal bin Hosaam, smoking from an Arabic water pipe called a *shisha*, the scents of herbs and tobacco and something sweeter filling the room. At his feet lay two boys, both with the same inky-black hair Daichi possessed, one with hair to the waist, the other with a shoulder-length bob like Daichi's. The longhaired boy appeared to be Korean, the shorthaired boy Chinese, and both were either asleep or passed out. Daichi couldn't tell.

As Daichi and his keeper approached the dais, the sheikh removed the pipe's mouthpiece from between his lips and sat up straighter. Dark eyes seemed to undress Daichi as he neared.

"And what is this tasty morsel you have brought me, Abdullah?" The sheikh spoke English, albeit somewhat better than Abdullah, and certainly better than Daichi. As if the situation weren't stressful enough, Daichi clung to every word and attempted to translate in his head before the next was spoken.

Abdullah knelt and bowed his head to the floor at Sheikh Akmal's feet. Daichi stood staring straight ahead.

"He is called Daichi in Japan, his land of origin, Your Highness." Abdullah sneered at Daichi as he got to his feet. "As always, the court looks forward to learning his new name from Your Highness." He grasped Daichi behind the neck with strong, bony fingers, and Daichi found himself forced to the floor. Stars twinkled in his vision from pressure on the arteries.

"You will kneel in the presence of your lord and master," Abdullah roared. The fingers digging into Daichi's neck gripped harder. "His Royal Highness Sheikh Akmal bin Hosaam, Favored of the Prophet, and Beloved of Allah! Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!"

The tone of Sheikh Akmal's voice sounded indifferent and bored, but tinged with mild irritation. "Do you see what you have done, Little Japan? You've upset my Abdullah. He likes breaking pretty things like you, did you know?" Sheikh Akmal must

have dismissed Abdullah's hold, for suddenly Daichi was again able to breathe. "Come to me, Little Japan. Let me examine my purchase."

Daichi tried to speak. Nothing came out but a harsh, wheezy whisper. Gasping for breath, he climbed to his feet. He took a small step forward, but a hard shove between his shoulder blades stumbled him up the steps, landing him between the sleeping boys. At least, he hoped they were only sleeping; they could be dead for all he knew. Sprawled upon the stairs, Daichi looked up from under his new black bangs. He swallowed hard.

Sheikh Akmal looked every bit like the royalty he professed to be. Besides the white, veil-like *ghutra* headdress crowned with the corded, black *iqal* worn by most men in this place, Sheikh Akmal's body was draped in a rich blue *bisht* robe trimmed in embroidered bands of gold.

The sheikh leaned forward on the throne, caught Daichi's chin in one hand and jerked his head upward. "Skin the color of sand and soft as silk. Eyes with a dark fire in their depths. Long, good legs, strong and swift. Stand up. Turn around."

Once on his feet, Daichi pulled his chin up and held his shoulders back, stoic and proud. He'd slept with far worse for far less. The others had been for money – wasn't his life worth more than that? Someone would come for him. Kuri loved him and would never give up looking. Daichi grabbed onto that hopeful thought and held on tight.

Pretend this is just another paying customer with a role-playing fetish, Daichi thought. *Play the game and buy yourself time.*

Daichi turned.

Sheikh Akmal came up from behind and ran a hand along Daichi's flank. "Powerful. Much spring in your body. For this you will bear the name of Rasha, my young gazelle." Sheikh Akmal's laughter sounded dark and cruel as he grabbed Daichi by the arm and resumed his seat on the throne. "Rasha. Such a pretty little girl's name for you. I understand you were wearing makeup when you were pulled from your beloved country, and that you serviced men for money by choice. So come, Little Japan, and pleasure me."

Closing his eyes, Daichi chanted a mantra in his head to help him through this humiliation. *He's just a client at the club . . . he's just a client at the club.* Daichi opened his eyes demurely, a seductive smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. In a quiet, soft, seductive voice he said, "How may I serve you, Highness?"

Sheikh Akmal's dark eyes snapped up, locking with Abdullah's eyes in a hard, steady gaze, and then flicked toward the door in a silent order of dismissal. Abdullah departed, though Daichi suspected the man hadn't ventured far.

The sheikh relaxed back against the throne and pulled Daichi alongside him. "If you do as you are told, you will find life here not horrible. But Abdullah is always looking for a reason to break a headstrong child. He will not overstep my authority, but if I send you away with him, you will face his wrath alone." Sheikh Akmal pulled aside the layers of royal blue robes, grabbed Daichi's hand and pressed it against the semi-erect length of his cock. "You have the lips of a lotus flower. Put them to use, Rasha."

He's just a client at the club. Daichi wrapped his fingers around Sheikh Akmal's cock, applying pressure with his thumb just under the ridge of the circumcised head. He gave a few easy strokes and licked his lips.

"You are timid like a virgin girl!" Sheikh Akmal gripped Daichi's face with both hands, one thick thumb forcing between Daichi's lips to pop his mouth open. The other thumb followed, rubbing along Daichi's tongue and pinning it down while Sheikh Akmal lowered Daichi's mouth over the straining cock. "Close your lips. No teeth or you won't survive the night."

Sheikh Akmal kept one thumb in Daichi's mouth to guide the pace, forcing Daichi's mouth to stretch painfully. His eyes watered. The silent mantra ceased to work, and his stomach lurched as the horrid man fucked his mouth with rough thrusts. To end the nightmare quicker, he began to suck Sheikh Akmal's erection with gusto and more finesse, slowing down and finally working the thumb out of his mouth when he hit an obviously pleasurable zone.

"Good . . . good, Rasha." Sheikh Akmal grunted as he finally began to stiffen. Daichi realized now the likelihood the two spent boys on the floor had made the task so

difficult. The sheikh's age put him well past sexual prime, and there were only so many times a man that age could perform, royalty or not. Sheikh Akmal's enthusiasm increased with the hardness of his cock. He tugged Daichi's ass toward him and lifted up the hem of the modest toga.

Daichi almost forgot his manners when a thick finger teased him, his teeth threatening until the last second as he recalled the sheikh's sinister words. The finger rubbing his hole became more insistent, prodding for entrance. A shudder of revulsion ran through Daichi and he trembled, but didn't lose focus on his task. He began to blow Sheikh Akmal with a lascivious vengeance, rocking back to urge the meaty finger inside, to let the man feel how tight he was, to let him know how accommodating and pleasurable his body could be. He moaned around the fat cock in his mouth and tasted a salty burst.

Daichi found himself spun around so fast the room seemed to streak colors of peacock blue and crimson and bright yellow. He was pushed face forward over one well-padded arm of the throne. His flimsy gown flipped up over his back as Sheikh Akmal moved in behind. The noise of masturbation sounded obscenely loud to Daichi, but he felt a surge of gratitude when the wet slapping of lube application joined in. A sound smack connected with one cheek of his ass, and he jumped enough to give the sheikh room to wedge in between his spread legs.

"Pretty, quivering flesh. Are you frightened, Rasha?"

The slick heat of the head of Sheikh Akmal's cock pressed against Daichi's hole, and now Daichi knew what the man wanted to hear. Goose bumps pricked up all over Daichi's body.

"Yes," Daichi whispered. "P-please, please don't hurt me."

Lips kissed down his spine and a gentle hand wrapped around his soft cock, Daichi's reward for having guessed correctly.

"So tender. You will be my favorite." Sheikh Akmal pushed in with several slow, rocking thrusts and lay heavy against Daichi's back. "Squeeze me, Rasha. Make yourself tighter."

God, please let this end quickly. Daichi's eyes stung, his vision blurring, but he did his best to comply, contracting himself as tight as he could around the invading length. He relaxed and squeezed again, breaking into a sweat from the effort.

Sheikh Akmal moved, gripped Daichi's bony hips and rutted into him like a beast with only one purpose. A few well-aimed jerks, combined with Daichi's well-timed clamping, and Sheikh Akmal grunted like a wild boar and emptied his balls into his new toy. He continued fondling Daichi, who remained too soft to satisfy. With apparent disappointment, Sheikh Akmal shoved away from Daichi, smacked him on the ass hard, and pulled him over his lap face down.

"Enough," Sheikh Akmal said, settling into his throne, stroking Daichi's back like a beloved cat. "You'll learn to enjoy it. A day will come when I only have to look at you, and you will become hard for me."

Determined not to cry and show weakness in front of this monster, Daichi blinked hard and took a deep breath. He lay unmoving beneath the constant petting of the Sheikh's large hands.

"Forgive me." Daichi kept his voice soft and his words contrite. "The past few weeks have been difficult. I'll . . . I'll try to do better next time. I promise."

"There are many boys here for you to play with in your leisure time, to help relieve the pain of missing your home. As long as you please me and offer your obedience, you will be allowed to walk the palace halls. You will come to me the moment you are summoned. You will take your meals at my feet. You will occupy my bed each night unless I dismiss you." The fingers focused their rubbing on the small of Daichi's back. "These laws will not to be broken without the harshest consequence. Do you understand, my Rasha?"

What choice do I have? Daichi nodded. "Yes, Your Highness. I understand."

Chapter Nineteen

Three days later, after nineteen hours of travel, including a two-hour layover in Doha, the Qatar Airways plane screeched as wheels met runway.

A few minutes past ten in the morning, and the sun shone brightly in a cloudless blue sky. The modern, gleaming terminal of Dubai International Airport glinted like a huge diamond in the sun. Kuri would've considered the preparations exciting had it not been for such a scary purpose. Gabriel's friend, Cyd Khalid, had come to the hotel with a cart full of contraptions: cameras, printers, scanners, and other technology. Using the various machines and computers, Cyd created new identification papers for them all, including Cyd himself.

Retaining their real first names in order to simplify storytelling, Kuri and Sora traveled under the guise of cousins – whose parents were tragically killed while vacationing abroad – adopted by their wealthy American uncle.

The fabricated story and documentation convinced the authorities, the customs and security officials who grilled them first in Osaka, then in Doha, Qatar, and would again inside DBX.

The appearance of Kuri, Sora, and Gabriel in places where bin Hosaam's people would be watching would tell an entirely different story – the story meant to titillate and hopefully ensnare the sheikh's interest.

"Remember what I told you." Gabriel spoke quietly as the huge Airbus jetliner taxied slowly toward the terminal, Kuri leaning in from his wide first-class seat on one side of Gabriel to listen, Sora from the other. "Once we're away from the airport, keep your eyes cast down. Walk behind me. Don't speak to me unless I speak to you first. You can talk to each other as much as you like, but keep your voices down. If anyone approaches us, let me do the talking."

The plane came to a complete stop, and everyone stood and worked their way toward the door. Kuri had never been on a plane before, so he followed the more experienced Sora, picking up his small carry-on and shuffling toward the exit. He smiled at the young woman who had brought them their drinks during the flight and

felt relief to set foot on the solid ground of the terminal. The serious nature of the trip started to set in at the sight of such a foreign atmosphere.

Kuri sidled up to Gabriel. "Not that I'm planning on getting lost, but what should we do if we become separated?"

"I'm not planning on it either," Gabriel said with a gentle smile, "but good idea. Once we get outside, you'll see a huge hotel that's shaped something like a boat sail. That's the Burj Al Arab, one of the tallest buildings in Dubai and a well-known landmark. You can see the hotel from just about anywhere, but if not, any passerby should be able to give you directions. If we get separated, let's plan on meeting there."

The customs process went smoothly enough and without any eyebrows raised. A limousine waited for them at the curb, and after loading the luggage in the trunk, they climbed into the spacious passenger compartment.

Gabriel raised the privacy glass and relaxed back in his seat. "We'll be staying on a man-made island in The World complex. I've rented a private island with a villa — Java Island, which is located on the opposite side of the archipelago from bin Hosaam. He owns Easter Island, one of the largest and most isolated."

"I feel so lost already," Kuri said. "I've never been away from home. Everything here is so big and bright and new. I hate it." He reached for Sora's hand. Sora had been silent since leaving the plane, and Kuri could tell his friend was stressed. On the upside, Sora truly looked like a little angel with his eyes wide and staring, which might make them an easier sell to the sheikh. But Sora's discomfort made Kuri's heart ache. He rubbed Sora's fingers, comforting. "I won't let anyone touch you."

Sora took a deep breath. "Don't worry — I'm a lot tougher than I look. Whatever it takes to get Daichi back, I'm ready."

A solid determination shone from Sora's eyes, and Kuri knew he could count on his friend. Kuri turned to Gabriel. "I know things are bound to get rough and scary. I know you might have to say and do things you don't mean. I want you to know I understand, and I'm okay with that. Whatever it takes."

Gabriel offered no reply.

Chapter Twenty

Daily life consisted of rising before the sun, bathing, dressing, and hustling off to the palace mosque for pre-dawn prayer. The rest of the day unfolded with maddening slowness in Sheikh Akmal's nearly constant presence, with four more prayer interludes the only refuge from his gaze and touch.

Daichi had never studied Islamic culture. One of the other harem prisoners kindly coached him the first day, but by the third day following Daichi's official presentation to Sheikh Akmal's court, Daichi was on his own.

With his prayer rug neatly rolled and tucked under one arm, Daichi walked in the single-file line of captive young men down one of the palace's ornate marble halls. Like a labyrinth, the corridors turned and twisted, and just when Daichi thought he'd figured out the floor plan, he realized he still didn't know his way around.

Everything looked the same, and on such a grand scale even the hallways decorated with paintings and statues didn't allow him to get his bearings. He tried memorizing the routes they took back and forth from the boys' shared harem quarters to the mosque, to Sheikh Akmal's private apartments, to the decadent arena-like room with the beds and baths where Sheikh Akmal entertained other men with the charms and talents of his boys. The loyal servants who escorted the train of slave boys never seemed to take the same route twice.

Daichi clutched his rug tighter and sighed. He missed Osaka, he missed his friends, and most of all he missed Kuri. Each day passing made him less likely to be found, and more likely to be forgotten forever. In his sad, solemn reverie he accidentally kicked the heel of the boy in front of him.

The other boy spun around with a hiss, gnashing perfect white teeth, his long, blue-black hair whipping Daichi across the chest. Daichi knew he was in trouble. Zahirah—the Korean who'd been one of the young men asleep at Sheikh Akmal's feet

during Daichi's presentation – glared at him with dark, angry eyes. "Watch your step, *Little Japan!*"

Startled, Daichi came to an abrupt halt. Wide-eyed, he began to sweat, and his heart fluttered with quick, wild beats. He met Zahirah's irate stare for a brief moment then dropped his gaze to the inlaid-marble floor.

"I'm sorry," Daichi said in a quiet voice. "An unfortunate accident."

"Stupid new boy." Zahirah grabbed Daichi's chin and forced their eyes to meet. "You be more careful. His Highness loved me best before you came, and he'll love me best again when you're gone. Don't make me kill you too soon."

The man herding them from the mosque to the harem swept up in a flourish of white robes, brandishing a gold-tasseled whip. He scrutinized Daichi with a heavy gaze. "Do we have a problem?"

Daichi swallowed hard and his stomach flipped. He shook his head. "No, Master. No problem."

Daichi shifted his gaze to Zahirah, begging silence with his eyes.

Zahirah's brown eyes glimmered dangerously, dark and serpent-like. With one word, he could have Daichi beaten severely enough to be useless to Sheikh Akmal for several nights.

Zahirah licked his lips and turned his gaze slowly to the man in charge. "No, Master. An accident, I'm sure." The look he gave Daichi was cold enough to chill fire, and the line proceeded forward once more. "You *owe* me, Little Japan."

Their escort gave Zahirah a sharp nudge, and Daichi fell into step behind him. Silence became the rule for the remainder of the journey, enforced by the occasional crack of the whip. Once the trek ended and they arrived at the harem, Daichi stared as the huge, double doors adorned with gold and precious gems closed behind him. The locking bar on the outside made a loud clang that echoed for long seconds down the marble halls. The sound made Daichi wince no matter how many times he heard the door barred shut, an audible reminder a half-dozen or more times a day that his life no longer belonged to him.

Zahirah went straight to the dozen brass platters of food left out on the marble floor for the boys, while the rest of them hovered, waiting. Daichi learned immediately that the top boy ruled the harem as absolutely as Sheikh Akmal ruled the palace. Despite Sheikh Akmal declaring Daichi his new favorite, Zahirah had yet to back down from the position when out of the sheikh's sight. Daichi watched as Zahirah took the best fruit, the largest helping of lamb and rice, and then settled upon the most comfortable pile of pillows. Only then did the others move in to partake of the meal.

Daichi lagged behind. He didn't feel at all hungry, but he'd already experienced the wrath of an overseer when another boy tattled that he hadn't eaten. Weak boys tire too quickly, the overseer had said, and Sheikh Akmal would be displeased. Perform or perish. Daichi reached for a small apricot, unable to even think about tolerating something heavier, like meat. The spices used on the food here nauseated him – strong, foreign, pungent smells that did nothing to entice his palate. What he wouldn't give for a simple meal of plain rice and fresh, sweet fish.

He stole away with the apricot to a corner, settling onto an emerald green pillow far away from Zahirah. The other young men more or less ignored him, and Daichi had no complaint in that regard. Being ignored seemed preferable to the type of attention he received from Zahirah. Daichi took a timid bite of the fruit and tried hard to disappear.

Sheikh Akmal tended to spend his mornings conducting official business and rarely called for any of the boys before noon. This time, dubbed *leisure time*, lasted until the call to noon prayer. Unfortunately, Daichi's peace lasted no longer than Zahirah's wolfed-down meal.

Licking his fingers clean of grease from a juicy chunk of lamb, Zahirah crossed the room carrying his platter of bone and scraps. He set the platter down in front of Daichi on the floor and sat beside him, grinning.

Daichi took another nibble of the apricot and swallowed, grateful for the juice the fruit provided his dry mouth. "I'm trying to stay out of your way, Zahirah. I don't want any trouble."

"Leave him alone, Zahirah," came a small voice from several feet away. Amna, Daichi recognized – the young Chinese man who'd been the other pet sleeping at Sheikh Akmal's feet. "You were not always top boy!"

"Stay out of this, *Amna*!" Zahirah picked up one of the discarded bones with a bit of meat still clinging to it. He peeled away the shreds of uneaten lamb from the bone and held the morsel to Daichi's lips. "I'm making friends with you, Little Japan. All you have to do is submit. You're good at this, or so I'm told. Submit to me like you do for our sheikh."

Staring down his nose at the greasy piece of partially bitten meat, Daichi shook his head, trying to keep revulsion from showing on his face. "I don't want it."

"I didn't *ask* if you wanted it." Zahirah knelt in front of Daichi, trapping him in the corner, and pressed the cold, fatty morsel against Daichi's lips. "Take it, and I will accept your apology for your earlier clumsiness."

Daichi turned his head. "I stumbled and bumped into you. An *accident*, and I've already apologized. Why won't you just leave me alone?"

"This isn't about you being graceful as an ox, you fool, this is about you acknowledging me as your superior." Zahirah growled, grabbing Daichi's chin to push the meat past his lips. As soon as he managed to shove the morsel in, Zahirah covered Daichi's mouth with his own and forced the meat in deeper with his tongue.

Sputtering, Daichi had no choice but to swallow, and with the incendiary heat of anger burning through him he violently pushed Zahirah away. He clambered to his feet, sweaty palms sliding on the slippery marble wall and unable to find purchase, and promptly fell on his ass hard, hitting the floor square on his tailbone. Stars flickered in his field of vision.

Zahirah smiled. "You are more dangerous to yourself than I could ever be." He rolled to his hands and knees and stalked closer. The soft ends of Zahirah's long hair tickled Daichi's knees as he crawled between Daichi's sprawled legs. "You need to accept this, Little Japan. Life here can be glorious if only you will obey and accept your

fate." Smiling, Zahirah skimmed his fingers along Daichi's chest and stopped to pinch a nipple. "Do you understand?"

His back to the wall in more ways than one, Daichi summoned up every fiber of defiance he could muster. He dismissed the pain shooting through his nipple and fixed his gaze on Zahirah's dark eyes, thinking what a shame for such an outwardly beautiful man to harbor such ugliness inside. "Is your plan to rut me like a mangy dog showing dominance in the street? Then do it—I don't care."

Zahirah's pretty lips twisted in disgust. He released Daichi's nipple only to raise his arm and crack Daichi backhanded across the face.

Abdullah entered the room and rushed Zahirah, grabbing him by the hair and hauling him toward the door, shouting in Arabic.

Gut instinct took over and Daichi scrambled after them, falling at Abdullah's feet, clutching at the hem of the man's robes. "It was not Zahirah's fault! Please, Master, please don't punish him!"

Abdullah gave Daichi a kick that sent him tumbling across slick marble. He followed Daichi, Zahirah's hair still clutched in his hand.

From Zahirah's expression and the angle of his body, Abdullah's hold threatened to snap bone. Abdullah's voice thundered off the walls and floor, echoing in the vaulted ceiling. "It is forbidden for a harem boy to lay mark upon another."

On all fours, Daichi scrambled forward to kneel at Abdullah's sandals. Daichi stammered, buying time while he tried to think of a worse transgression to sway Abdullah. An idea leaped to mind.

"I refused to eat." Daichi took a deep, shuddering breath as he prepared to embellish the lie. "Zahirah tried to feed me so I wouldn't be beaten again for my disobedience, and I pushed him away, hard. He struck me out of instinct, nothing more." Daichi found Zahirah's angry eyes and locked his gaze on them. "And I deserved it."

Silence filled the room and Daichi wondered if the other twelve harem slaves had collectively stopped breathing.

The pause seemed endless.

Abdullah released Zahirah, flinging him into Daichi. "His Highness is entertaining a visitor this evening. The two of you will service the sheikh and his guest. Rest, now; you should be fresh for the setting of the sun."

Zahirah scurried to Abdullah's feet and kissed them.

Daichi remained on the floor.

Abdullah looked down from his imposing height, sneered at Daichi, and then shoved Zahirah away with the sole of his sandaled foot. He growled under his breath and departed in a swirl of cloth.

Wincing again as the locking bar reverberated on the outside of the door, Daichi drew himself to his feet. He reached a tentative hand down to Zahirah.

"I do not need your help!" Zahirah kept his left wrist tucked protectively against his belly as he struggled to his feet. "Why did you do that? You could have been rid of me, stupid boy."

The others formed a horseshoe around them. Daichi shooed them away with a slight jerk of his head, surprised when they complied without complaint. Perhaps bravery in the face of Abdullah's wrath had bought him some respect. Once the harem slaves moved deeper into the cavernous room, Daichi took a step closer to Zahirah.

"Where I come from," Daichi said, keeping his tone soft and non-threatening, "we watch each other's backs, even if we're rivals, and even if we don't particularly like each other. I didn't want to see you beaten or worse on my account. No one deserves that."

Zahirah, his awareness of the shift in power apparent, peered out at the other slaves from under thick, dark lashes. Finally, he looked Daichi in the eyes. "You're top boy now – look how they listen to you."

"Nobody is top boy here, Zahirah. We're all prisoners, just trying to survive. Will you come sit with me? Please?"

Fingers twisting nervously in his hair, Zahirah joined Daichi on the pillows in the corner. The rest of the harem paired off in twos and threes around the room. Zahirah sat cross-legged beside Daichi.

"Is your wrist all right?" Daichi reached out to check, but thought better of touching Zahirah unsolicited. He drew his hand back. "It looked like he was hurting you."

Zahirah pulled his left wrist in tighter to his body in a protective manner. "It hurts. Not all that bad, but enough to make tonight more difficult. His Highness's guests have been rough on occasion."

Daichi looked around. He spotted a bowl with ice near the food and smiled. Some sort of runny-looking dip in little cups sat nestled in the ice.

"Don't move," Daichi said. "I'll be right back."

He bounded over to the bowl, took a cloth napkin embroidered with Sheikh Akmal's fancy monogram, and fashioned a makeshift icepack. He returned to kneel in front of Zahirah and offered the bag. "This should help."

Zahirah accepted, placing the bag on his injured wrist.

Daichi scooted closer. "Have you been to one of these . . . parties before? I'm not sure what to expect, and —" He looked down at his knees then back to Zahirah's face. "I'm sorry you were dragged into this. I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"It would have been us tonight anyway." Zahirah sighed. "The wrist is my fault. I shouldn't have hit you. What you said before, about looking out for one another? It used to be like that in the harem, too. But new boys come and go so fast lately; it's easier for me to assume power than to get to know them."

"Why do they come and go so quickly?" Part of Daichi didn't want to know, but he figured the more he knew about this place and its inner workings, the better.

"Many reasons. His Highness grows tired of them or uses them until they break. Sometimes palace workers take a liking to a boy, and if the boy is not a favorite of the sheikh, he is sold or traded. A few have tried to escape; *they* were never seen again."

Daichi's sense of animosity toward Zahirah fell away, but he had reason to believe the feeling wasn't mutual. About to introduce himself by his real name, Daichi froze. He felt cold, and the small piece of fruit he'd eaten soured in his belly with the forced-down piece of meat. Zahirah had sneered and called him "Little Japan." No one

but Sheikh Akmal called him by that nickname. Zahirah had been in the throne room that first night, supposedly asleep on the steps.

"You weren't asleep when they presented me to the sheikh, were you?"

Caught by surprise, Zahirah's eyes reflected fear but then softened. He shifted the icepack on his wrist. "Sometimes it is best to play at sleeping. I wanted to see the new boy. Had I been awake, he would have dismissed me." Zahirah's mouth turned up in a haughty smile. "You didn't fight him. The new boys always fight him. Sometimes the new ones get broken beyond repair their first night."

Daichi looked around. Bellies full and with hours still left until noon prayer, most of the other slaves sought solace in each other in the only way permitted in the harem. Soft moans and quiet grunts, the gentle slapping of skin, and sounds of wet sucking echoed off marble and gold. Sex among the harem wasn't merely permitted; Sheikh Akmal encouraged the practice. Frequent sex created the urge for more sex — like a drug, as Daichi well knew.

Daichi dropped his hands into his lap and looked down as he fidgeted with his nails. "My name is Daichi. I'm from Osaka, Japan, and I'm a host boy. You're Korean, right? So you know what host clubs are." He blew a breath out through his nose. "I make a lot of extra money fucking some of my clients. This isn't so different, and I figure if I cooperate I'll live longer. Maybe even long enough for someone to find me and get me out."

"Host club . . . makes sense. Good acting job." Zahirah placed the wet napkin aside, most of the ice cubes having melted away. "You have someone who would come looking for you? How would they find you? How would they get in? This place is a fortress. I am twenty-two years old next month. Do you know how long I have been here? Six years. No one comes here for me or for any other boy in six years, Little Japan."

The words impacted Daichi like a hard kick in the gut, knocking the wind out of him as surely as any physical blow. He couldn't breathe, and for long moments he stared at Zahirah, hoping for a retraction. None came. Daichi licked his parched lips.

"Six years? No, that can't be!" Suddenly claustrophobic, panic set in. Daichi's heart pounded hard against his ribs. He looked around, feeling like a caged animal, but there was nowhere to run. His eyes brimmed with tears. "How do you stand it?"

"Life here is good for the obedient. We are fed, clothed, and fawned over. There are much worse places, much worse fates."

Daichi hung his head under the weight of his heavy thoughts. A tear splashed the back of his hand and trickled off before another fell. "I have someone who loves me. I miss . . . God, I miss him so much."

Zahirah paused, seeming to choose his words carefully. "Sometimes it is best to forget by rebuilding."

Each blink brought another tear spilling down Daichi's face. He hated himself for showing such weakness, but he couldn't stop. He lifted a hand to Zahirah's beautiful face and brushed a long lock of black hair behind his ear. "I don't want to forget."

Zahirah gently fended off the touches and lay down upon the pillows. "Then hold on tightly to your love. Maybe you'll be the lucky one." Zahirah chuckled. "Lucky number thirteen. Get some sleep while you can today, Little Japan. We'll have none tonight."

Chapter Twenty-One

Daichi awoke with a start, the noise of the doors swinging wide pulling him out of a dream about Kuri. He found himself jerked to his feet. Another of the nameless, bearded guards in white robes yanked him toward the bejeweled doors. He glanced over his shoulder to see Zahirah receiving the same treatment. All day's calls to prayer had been completed, and Daichi could see stars in the dark sky through the hallway skylight. The time had come.

Before they reached the end of the corridor, the guard shoved him through the doorway into the grooming room. Three robed-and-veiled women undressed him and nudged him into a low tub. One of the women poured a large pitcher of steaming water

over his head. Daichi stifled a scream, knowing better than to protest or offer complaint. He watched through wet bangs as Zahirah stumbled in moments later.

Zahirah's flimsy white toga fell to the floor as one of the other women shoved him into the tub. His waist-length hair received special treatment. Thin strands of golden rope were woven with his beautiful hair into a long, elegant braid. The women anointed both of them with oils smelling of strong spices. Both were dressed in harem-style pants, sheer and feminine, the legs slit up the outside, the waistbands decorated with gold thread and tiny pearls. Zahirah wore sheer sapphire blue, Daichi ruby red.

Glistening from the oil and chained together by ornate golden handcuffs, the pair was herded back into the corridor. They crossed over a stone bridge connecting one section of the palace to another, and then went down a flight of stairs. The palace seemed to continually expand and shift, the corridors an ever changing maze. Daichi spared a glance in Zahirah's direction and saw eyes empty and unfocused.

They arrived at their destination, a smaller, more intimate room than the grand throne room. Marble walls lined with tapestries surrounded the floor covered in expensive pillows. Sheikh Akmal sat at the back of the room, sharing his *shisha* pipe with another bearded man. The stranger looked younger and leaner than Sheikh Akmal, clothed in a long coat of subtle, myriad colors shimmering like a dragonfly's wings. Daichi would have thought the man handsome if not for the lustful way his dark eyes passed over him and Zahirah.

Sheikh Akmal, donned in his most formal robes of blue and gold, beckoned them closer.

Chained to Zahirah, Daichi had no choice but to move forward. Zahirah proceeded like an automaton but a graceful one, each foot placed just so, toes pointed outward as he walked. Were the situation not so vulgar, Daichi would have thought the procession beautiful. They came to a stop within easy arm's reach of Sheikh Akmal and his guest.

The two men were talking as Zahirah and Daichi approached. From the few words he caught, Daichi suspected the discussion revolved around show dogs or

horses. As he and Zahirah stood by the sheikh, Daichi noticed a stack of photographs on a low table between them. His stomach churned. They were photos of more young Asian men, most of them dressed much as Zahirah and he were now. Sheikh Akmal and his guest weren't discussing animals – they were engaged in slave trade.

Without thinking, Daichi slid a hand into Zahirah's, gripping his fingers. He wasn't sure what to do. Although he'd asked Zahirah earlier what went on when Sheikh Akmal entertained, Zahirah had never responded. Perhaps the answer had been too terrible to speak. Daichi trembled.

Sheikh Akmal continued conversing in his native tongue to his companion as if Daichi and Zahirah weren't there, although the guest made no effort to conceal interest.

Zahirah leaned close to Daichi and whispered. "This one has visited before. He is Sheikh Imran, and he and His Highness are very close. I think they were in the military together; I've seen pictures of them both in similar uniforms."

Sheikh Akmal looked at Zahirah and made a small hand gesture in Daichi's direction. Zahirah turned to face Daichi and tightened the grip on his hand.

"Kiss me," Zahirah said.

For a moment, Daichi doubted his hearing. He looked at Zahirah with a puzzled expression.

Zahirah pulled Daichi eyelash-close and nudged their hips together. "He likes to watch," Zahirah whispered while nuzzling against Daichi's cheek. "If we please him enough, we may escape this evening with nothing worse than pleasing each other. Now, kiss me!"

A whimper of protest never made it past Daichi's lips as Zahirah pressed their mouths together. Zahirah kissed him as if they were long-time lovers, hard and deep, and with passion. Daichi didn't resist, rationalizing in a rapid series of thoughts that Zahirah could be correct. If the visiting sheikh's kink involved voyeurism, perhaps putting on a show would be the best course of action. To borrow Zahirah's words from earlier, Daichi considered, there were certainly worse fates.

Inwardly, Daichi tried to blot out the world, or at least the two evil men lounging a few feet away, leering. Keeping his fingers laced with Zahirah's, Daichi raised his other hand and cupped Zahirah's soft cheek. He returned the kiss in earnest.

Zahirah seemed to appreciate the effort. His kissing became softer, slower, and with his thumb he rubbed the back of Daichi's hand. Eyelids heavy, Zahirah licked Daichi's lips as the kiss ended and they parted. "Not so bad, Little Japan. Warm and sweet like oasis waters."

With his free hand, Zahirah touched Daichi on the thigh, moving both their bound hands inward toward softer flesh.

Despite the fear flooding him, despite the humiliation of being forced to sexually satisfy Sheikh Akmal one way or another, despite feeling as if he were somehow cheating on Kuri, Daichi couldn't control the way his body reacted to Zahirah. As if being visually stunning weren't enough, Zahirah had an aura about him exuding confidence. Self-control. Power despite their captive situation, coupled with a paradoxical softness. Daichi's heart pounded, his pulse raced, and he felt his cock begin to harden. Zahirah's hand, clutched in his own, came precariously close to his growing erection. "Zahirah"

"I know; I'm sorry," Zahirah whispered. He pushed his mouth to Daichi's, milked a kiss so dangerous, Daichi could almost forget they weren't alone. The back of Zahirah's knuckles brushed against Daichi's swiftly gathering erection, teasing just enough to stroke out a moan. "Top or bottom? I don't care, but I need to know. Sheikh Akmal will become angry if we're awkward or messy."

"Bottom." Daichi spoke without hesitation. He didn't feel terribly aggressive or dominant at the moment. Not here. Not with Zahirah. Beyond that, letting Zahirah fuck him instead of the reverse somehow felt less like cheating, since he usually ended up on top when he and Kuri fucked. Daichi blinked and shook his head, trying to chase away random thoughts of infidelity. The concept had never presented itself in his mind during intimacy with host club clients, so why here? His earlier sense of claustrophobic panic returned, intensified.

Daichi quickly shunted the guilt away. Enough thinking. He looked Zahirah in those big brown eyes and flexed his cock, fully erect now, under Zahirah's hand.

"Would you like to fuck me?" Daichi said the words in a low, seductive tone, loud enough for the perverted sheikhs to hear.

The approach seemed to please Zahirah, who made no more hesitation to cup the hardness concealed only by thin, gauzy silk. "I wanted you the moment you were brought into His Highness's presence. I was so hard while I lay on the floor at his feet, listening to him fuck you."

Daichi flicked a glance toward Sheikh Akmal and the guest, his gaze lingering only a split second. Both of the older men held their rapt attention on Daichi and Zahirah, discreetly fondling themselves through their opulent, colorful robes. Daichi lifted his gaze to Zahirah. "Did you like what you heard?"

"I wanted it to last longer," Zahirah said, his eyes glittering darkly. Were the words spoken for dramatic support of the moment, or were they a viper's truth? "You swallowed cries that were meant to ring clear."

Zahirah started to kneel before Daichi, but the sharp sound of Sheikh Akmal slapping his own thigh interrupted.

"He will not allow me to pleasure you like this." Zahirah bowed his head and stood.

A small moan escaped Daichi's lips and he felt the internal squeezing sensation heralding pre-cum leaking from his cock. His knees felt about to buckle. "W-what does he want?"

Zahirah lowered his eyes.

Sheikh Akmal pulled something from a pocket and flicked a finger to beckon Daichi closer.

Oh God, what now? Daichi's temples throbbed with confusion, the rapid changes in direction plucking at his nerves. His hands trembled, and he felt a small muscle near his right eye begin to twitch. He exhaled with a shudder, taking a few timid steps closer to Sheikh Akmal until the chain connecting his wrist to Zahirah's pulled taut.

Daichi dropped his gaze to the jewel-colored pillows at his feet. "Your Highness?"

Sheikh Akmal slipped two fingers under the waistband of Daichi's harem pants and tugged downward until the red material pooled at Daichi's ankles. From a pocket in his robes, Sheikh Akmal produced a ring of silver attached to a leather strap. "You please me greatly, Rasha. You have learned much in short days with an easy temperament. You are the cooling moon to the hot fire of sun that is my Zahirah."

Sheikh Akmal slipped the silver ring around Daichi's semi-hard cock. The leather strap fastened behind Daichi's balls, and a connecting strap separated and pressed them close to his body. Zahirah returned to Daichi's side, pulling him down to the pillows in front of the sheikhs.

Nude except for the wispy pants trapping his ankles, Daichi's internal sense of vulnerability ratcheted up. His cock ached, swelling to full hardness involuntarily due to the cock ring and strap, and the pressure on his balls neared unbearable. He looked Zahirah in the eyes as he fought back stinging tears in his own. Daichi opened his mouth to speak but all coherent thought eluded him, his bottom lip helplessly quivering.

Zahirah stole away the pain of Daichi needing to act. He took the lead, spreading Daichi's thighs to settle between them while his mouth robbed Daichi's chance for words with a commanding kiss. Zahirah moaned, much louder than seemed necessary, and he grasped Daichi's cock with a rough grip. He palmed the tip of Daichi's erection, rubbing until Daichi began to mutter soft groans.

The sheikhs remained silent, though Daichi caught repetitive motion out of the corner of his eye. He allowed himself to sink back in the soft pillows, looking down the length of his body with narrowed eyes, closing off his peripheral vision to focus only on Zahirah. His cock stiffened to the point of exquisite discomfort under Zahirah's expert handling.

Hunkered down between Daichi's spread knees, Zahirah drew both his thumbs along the inner crease at the top of Daichi's thighs, avoiding the tender, trapped balls.

When he reached the cheeks of Daichi's ass, Zahirah spread them apart. Daichi could only imagine the sight from the look in Zahirah's lust filled eyes.

"Hairless." Zahirah made a pleased, throaty noise. "Perfect. They cleaned you up nice. I will work hard to make sure we stay at the top together."

Zahirah flicked his tongue against Daichi's hole.

Daichi tensed all over, drew in a sharp breath between clenched teeth and gripped the pillows beneath him. So damn wrong but felt so good. Daichi's eyes stung at the thought of how he'd ever manage to purge the guilt. But this meant survival – he had no doubt Sheikh Akmal would resort to on-the-spot execution should the entertainment displease – so Daichi shoved worries and unpleasant thoughts aside and permitted himself to live in the moment. He tugged on the chain affixed to his wrist and drew Zahirah's hand close enough to touch, caressing slender fingers with his own.

"It's all right, Zahirah," Daichi said in a soft, sensual tone just loud enough for the sheikhs to hear, letting his eyes tell Zahirah alone his words spoke truth. "Do as you wish with me. Tonight, I'm yours."

Zahirah's fingers closed around Daichi's in an understanding grip. The warmth of Zahirah's tongue returned, this time lingering at the rim of Daichi's hole, swirling in ever-tightening circles until Zahirah stabbed inside. He felt a trail of wet heat trickle downward – Zahirah's spit, and quite probably the only lubrication in the offing tonight.

Zahirah looked up, his black hair clinging to his sweaty brow. "Roll over, Little Japan. Put your tail in the air for me."

Daichi released Zahirah's hand and rolled over, maneuvering onto all fours by keeping his chained arms crossed over his body. The only way to accomplish the feat required resting his weight on his forearms, the upturning of his ass an unavoidable result. He craned his neck to peer over his shoulder at Zahirah, away from the sheikhs. Catching Zahirah's gaze with his own, Daichi nodded.

Zahirah's body felt warm against the back of Daichi's thighs, the wet, loose sound of Zahirah jerking off a thankful noise. The harder Zahirah became, the easier the

penetration, and the closer Zahirah would be to getting off. Daichi hoped their voyeurs would be happy with a single round.

The sheikhs had begun a low conversation between themselves in their own tongue, and though Daichi didn't understand the words, he knew the hushed manner, the labored breath. He heard his name spoken by Sheikh Imran, and a dark, answering chuckle from Sheikh Akmal. A moment later, the back of Sheikh Imran's knuckles caressed the side of Daichi's face.

"Such fear in your eyes, pretty Rasha," Sheikh Imran purred. "I wager you will be keeping this one, Akmal."

"So far, he has pleased me." Sheikh Akmal made a sweeping gesture toward Daichi. "Try him, if you desire."

Sheikh Imran's fingers paused in their caress, and Daichi felt Zahirah's pressure ease.

Frozen, Daichi watched as the grounding force to which he clung deserted him; Zahirah turned his head and looked away. Contact broken, Daichi now understood the empty, unfocused look he'd seen earlier in Zahirah's eyes.

There existed no defense against this horror, no escape. Only psychological retreat.

Summoning every atom of courage he could drag up from the hollow pit of his stomach, Daichi turned to face the visiting sheikh. Hoping his own eyes looked as empty and vacant as his heart and soul felt, Daichi said to the man, "How may I serve you, sir?"

Daichi's answer arrived in the form of a large hand surfing down the length of his back, ending with a questing finger at his tailbone. Sheikh Imran's robe felt soft against Daichi's shoulder as the man pressed close, but did nothing to conceal the hard excitement lurking under the cloth. From the sounds of wet slurping behind him, Daichi realized Sheikh Imran was kissing Zahirah as a finger invaded Daichi's well-prepared hole.

Like an abused child or a man dying on battlefield, Daichi mentally removed himself from the situation. His physical body remained, of course, pliant and accepting of first the finger then something longer, thicker, but his mind roamed elsewhere, watching a slideshow of snapshots of his life with Kuri. Laughter, crying, mundane things like grocery shopping, dusting furniture, fucking like wild animals and making sweet, quiet love. Daichi had collected enough fond memories of his lover to last a lifetime, if that cruelty became his fate.

Forehead pressed into a soft, blood red pillow, Daichi only resumed awareness as warm droplets of wetness spattered the small of his back.

The last of the grunting died away and weight rested over Daichi's ass, glued by the cooling release. The pressure remained, even as Sheikh Imran rejoined Sheikh Akmal in a flutter of quick words and lewd glances at the boys. The weight over Daichi's back then had to be —

"I hope I didn't hurt you." Zahirah's whispering breath against Daichi's ear came as sweet relief. "I had to make our performance good." He rolled off and curled himself beside Daichi against the pillows, gave the chain connecting them a tug, and pulled Daichi against his sweaty chest. "They will eat now, so we have a little break."

Overwhelmed, Daichi folded himself into the smallest parcel possible as Zahirah pulled him close, Zahirah's perspiration providing a strange sort of familiar comfort as the scent assaulted Daichi's nose. He scooted into Zahirah's arms until he could speak without fear of being overheard. "It was you all along."

Zahirah nodded. "The chain kept us close, and he couldn't get between us. I took his touches and kisses for you." He kissed the top of Daichi's head, his voice now holding none of the venom of before. "So delicate, Little Japan."

For the first time in God only knew how long, Daichi smiled. "At home, *I'm* the tough guy, believe it or not." He nuzzled against Zahirah's chest. "They'll come for me, I know they will. And when they do, I'll make sure you're safe, too."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cyd Khalid looked like a modern, expatriate Arab, clean-shaven and made of money, as he climbed out of the cherry-red speedboat onto the dock near the manmade isthmus connecting the mainland to the Palm Jumeirah. Once Cyd came up the ladder and stood on the dock, Gabriel shook his hand. Kuri and Sora chattered nonstop about ten yards behind Gabriel, marveling at the sights. The sail-shaped, thousand-foot-tall Burj Al Arab Hotel loomed nearby. While waiting for Cyd to arrive, Gabriel had taken Kuri and Sora inside the hotel to show them the exact spot to meet should they become separated.

"You clean up well," Gabriel said, looking past Cyd to admire the boat. "Nice ride."

Cyd laughed. "Hey, I'm a method operative, what can I say? If the company's gonna give me the budget to play jet-setter, who am I not to spend it? Besides, I figure at some point we're gonna need to make a quick getaway, and this puppy has the acceleration of a Porsche."

"What the hell is it?" With a low profile and what appeared to be a small cabin, the craft didn't look like any speedboat Gabriel had ever seen before.

"It's a refurbished Coast Guard Interceptor." Cyd beamed. "Full throttle, she'll take the wrinkles out of an old woman's face."

Gabriel nodded. "Glad to see our tax dollars hard at work." He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Kuri and Sora remained occupied. Their backs were to him, Kuri pointing at something inland in the distance, both boys still jabbering away. Gabriel turned back to Cyd. "Anything for me yet?"

"Oh, fuck yeah." Cyd reached into his stylish windbreaker and pulled out an envelope. "There are two clubs that hit my radar while you were in the air. Both have sketchy paper trails as far as money goes. The owners of record . . . well, let's just say neither one had the means to open such opulent establishments on the basis of their personal wealth or credit records. I've decided on my likely suspect, but I'm interested in your take. All the information for both places is in there."

"Fast work." Gabriel opened the envelope. "Am I still out of the picture?"

"So far, the company just thinks I have amazing instincts." Cyd chuckled. "If we manage to keep your involvement secret, I'm liable to get a promotion out of this."

Gabriel laughed. "Make sure you remember the little people after you get kicked upstairs."

"Nah, won't let 'em do that. Why would I want to sit behind a desk when I can wrap my ass in fiberglass and go seventy-plus on the water? I've still got a few good years left in the field."

Gabriel sighed, folded the pages and stuffed them back into the envelope. "Of the two, I'd bet the ranch it's the one called Topkapi Palace Club."

Cyd smiled. "How come?"

"Well," Gabriel said with a shrug, "first off, the other club has a minimum age requirement of twenty-one. We know this guy likes them young, and while the legal drinking age in Dubai is twenty-one, Topkapi Palace Club's minimum age for admission is eighteen. They do the wristband routine just like eighteen-and-over clubs in the States."

"Keep going."

"If you insist. I didn't know there was going to be a quiz." Gabriel chuckled. "Okay, the owner of the other club is Italian, which doesn't mean anything. Topkapi Palace Club's owner of record is Ahn Hae Joon. A Korean, so there's our Asian connection. Icing on the cake is the name of the place – Topkapi was the imperial palace of the Ottoman sultans in Turkey, famous for it's enormous harem." Gabriel snorted a short laugh. "Almost like the prick is showing off."

"But only to the astute." Cyd gave Gabriel a slap on the shoulder. "Good job, my friend. I still think you should reconsider fieldwork. You're still young enough to go through the academy, you know."

"I don't think so. I get into enough trouble sitting inside an office eight hours a day. Cutting me loose would be asking for trouble."

Cyd glanced over his shoulder at Kuri and Sora. "You gonna get through this, Gabriel? I mean, none of my business, but that's some awfully pretty temptation you're carting around with you. I could probably get an agent to stand in. Plenty of guys owe me favors, too."

Gabriel shook his head. "No, I'll be all right. I won't have to lie about . . . well, you know. I think the sincerity I bring to the table will make a difference in the end."

"You may be right," Cyd said, "but watch yourself. You've heard stories about undercover agents getting sucked into the world they've entered. Drugs, money, power. You going behind those palace walls is gonna be like a recovering alcoholic cut loose in a liquor store. Be careful."

Gabriel nodded. Cyd slapped him on the shoulder again and climbed down the ladder into the boat.

"Call me when you have some news," Cyd yelled above the roar of the engine. "And good luck!"

Gabriel waved as the snazzy red boat sped away. Once the craft became a speck on the horizon, Gabriel took a deep breath and walked back along the dock to Kuri and Sora. As he approached, the boys turned in unison. They were dressed nearly the same, having donned their familiar host club attire. The nightclubs of Dubai frowned on local garb, most of them outright refusing entrance to those wearing traditional Arab clothing. The appeal of Dubai lay in its opulence and modern look, and more European or Americanized styles were favored. And as Gabriel pointed out, the host club ensembles with their flirting-with-rebellion casual look were just as enticing here in Dubai as in Japan. Neither Kuri nor Sora wore neckties, and Gabriel had instructed them to leave a few buttons undone to show off their pale, smooth chests. Kuri had preened like a peacock in the mirror for close to an hour, fixing his hair and fussing with Sora's.

Kuri spoke up first. "Do we have a plan?"

"Yes." Gabriel displayed the enveloped. "My friend Cyd is on the ball. We're going to a place called Topkapi Palace Club. The first floor is a restaurant – The Sultan's

Den. We'll take a table, and then we're to order a specific dish not appearing on the menu. 'Young Pheasant Under Glass' is the password required to gain entrance to the club, which takes up the rest of the building. The club flies under the radar as a rave-type club for patrons eighteen and older. The law in Dubai prohibits nightclubs to admit anyone under the age of twenty-five, so this private club setup is how the owner skirts the law."

Gabriel stepped between Kuri and Sora, and putting a hand on the back of each boy's neck, started walking them toward the marina parking lot and the waiting limousine. "The club itself is apparently designed after the famous harem in Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Large pillows the size of king-sized beds where people lounge, instead of tables and chairs. It's my understanding that once you pass scrutiny and are allowed in, the doors are locked and pretty much anything goes. For all intents and purposes, this is more or less a private party." Gabriel paused at the car. "If we're to have any hope of gaining access to the sheikh's palace, we'll need to be convincing here. I . . . I want to apologize in advance for my behavior. This isn't going to be easy, for any of us."

Kuri and Sora exchanged glances. Sora slipped into the waiting car, but Kuri took a moment to face Gabriel. "I know what you're doing for us, how much it goes against everything you're trying so hard to change. Nothing will ever be enough to repay you for this." He started to get into the car but stopped, adding, "If you need to be physically rough with us for any reason, let me bear the brunt. Sora is here as a friend, for support only. This is *my* mess, not his."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Opulent turned out to be an understatement.

The outside walls of Topkapi Palace Club were tiled in intricate patterns of blue and white, bordered by rich tones of red and gold. Pillars of blue marble supported an intricate overhang, and granite steps gleamed under decorative lights. Kuri couldn't

focus on any one detail for more than a moment before some other amazing feature stole his attention. He could tell Sora was experiencing the same disoriented feeling, despite the two of them having grown up in the crowded, flashing neon streets of downtown Osaka.

Inside the bright and colorful restaurant, a hostess led the party of three to a private, pillowed nook. The scent of lamb and sharp, exotic spices filled Kuri's nose. Kuri settled into a spot allowing him a view of the front door and most of the massive room. A waiter decked out in period Persian garb, complete with gold slippers with upturned toes, greeted them with a gracious smile. The waiter handed Gabriel a menu printed on a sheet of genuine papyrus, the words handwritten both in Arabic and English.

Gabriel acknowledged the waiter with a small smile. "Could we have a few minutes, please?"

The waiter returned the smile, bowed, and backed away.

Gabriel handed the menu to Kuri. "Order whatever you like. We're probably in for a night of heavy drinking, so you may as well fortify yourselves. I already know what I have to order."

Sora peered at the English side of the menu, and after a few moments wrinkled his nose. "Everything *sounds* good, but I don't like these strange smells. I guess I'll just have a plain steak." He pointed to a particular line of writing on the menu. "I think that's what this says."

Gabriel leaned past Kuri for a closer look then nodded. "*Filet mignon*. Yes, that won't have any exotic spices, just good old salt and pepper. And butter. Lots of butter."

Smiling, Sora said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Gabriel raised an eyebrow at Kuri. "And you?"

Kuri perused the menu. Like Sora, he had trouble understanding what most of the dishes were by the names alone. Trying to read the ingredients proved only marginally helpful. He finally settled on something sounding reasonably safe. "Lamb kabob. It has vegetables I recognize." Kuri placed the menu on the table as he reached

for a silver pitcher of water. "Don't worry about us and alcohol. Sora and I are used to drinking huge quantities of champagne back home."

The waiter returned as if on cue. "Sir? Are you ready to order?"

"This young man," Gabriel said, gesturing toward Kuri, "will have the lamb kabob with vegetables. My other companion will have the *filet mignon*, medium rare."

"Very good," the waiter said. "And for you, sir?"

"I'll have the Young Pheasant Under Glass." Gabriel seemed composed enough, but Kuri knew otherwise.

The waiter remained expressionless, but slid his gaze from Gabriel to look at Kuri, and then Sora.

The waiter's smile returned, but as a knowing smirk rather than the guest-greeting smile he'd previously assumed. "An excellent choice, sir. I'll inform the chef right away."

The waiter hurried off.

Gabriel sank back against a plush pillow and let out a sharp breath. "Let's hope that gets us in."

Heart pounding like a hummingbird's wings, Kuri waited with his companions. Minutes seemed to stretch on, the three of them trying to make small talk to pass the time. Kuri kept his eye on the doorway into which the waiter had disappeared. "I wonder what's going on back home. Kingyo Club seems like another world, in another lifetime."

Sora moved closer to Kuri. "Do you miss it? I mean, if circumstances were different and we weren't here for such a bad reason, would you miss that life?"

"Yeah, I do. Wouldn't you?" Kuri saw something in Sora's eyes he'd never noticed before. A deep, penetrating sadness lurked there. "I mean, we had some stability in our life, at least. We were well paid, well cared for."

"Well paid, yes. Well cared for?" Sora shook his head. "No, I don't think so. We're all slowly killing ourselves with lack of sleep, eating poorly or barely eating at all, not to mention the insane drinking. I'm not trained for anything else, and I had little choice at

the time I came to Kingyo. But if I *did* have a choice, I wouldn't choose to live this way." Sora sighed and leaned against Kuri's shoulder. "Takumi and Daichi and you are the best things that have ever happened to me, and for that I'm grateful. The rest? No, I wouldn't miss it at all."

"I guess, when you put it that way" Kuri fingered his fork, his mind rocketing through the last weeks before Daichi had been taken. Nights filled with boozing and empty sex, days filled with restless sleep and hangovers. "I don't see a way out of that life, assuming we make it back to Japan. We need the money. No one else is going to hire us solely on the basis of our good looks."

"I wouldn't be so sure — " Gabriel began, but the waiter returned to the table with quick steps.

"The chef has suggested that an esteemed visitor such as yourself would like to enjoy your meal in our special VIP area?"

Kuri felt Gabriel's knee knock against his under the table.

Success.

Gabriel paused only a moment before replying. "My companions and I would be delighted."

"Excellent." The waiter gestured grandly to a brocade curtain covering a doorway on the far side of the room. "If you would please follow me."

The waiter turned on his heel and started across the restaurant.

Gabriel stood, leaning over to whisper as Kuri and Sora rose from the pillows. "Remember — stay behind me, eyes cast down. No speaking to anyone unless I give you permission. Let's go."

Kuri wouldn't have been able to speak had his life depended on it. Terror of a new kind filled and tightened his chest and throat, making it nearly impossible to breathe. His fingers shook as he took Sora's hand. He wanted to bolt. Only his love for Daichi kept him in step behind Gabriel. As they walked through the curtain, they were met with a grand staircase leading up to the second floor. At the top of the stairs stood

two men dressed in black suits, wearing wireless earpieces. The men remained motionless and staring straight ahead as the three walked by.

A set of ornately carved double doors lay ahead. The waiter pulled an electronic card from his pocket, waved the card in front of a mosaic plaque, and as if by magic the doors opened inward. Strains of traditional, sensual, Arabic music hit Kuri's ears along with an undercurrent of murmured conversation.

The waiter gestured them inside with a grand sweep of his arms and a broad smile. "Enjoy your evening, sir."

"Thank you." Gabriel crossed over the threshold, Kuri and Sora on his heels. The doors closed behind them.

Wide-eyed, Kuri looked around, feeling as if he'd suddenly been transported back in time. He'd seen pictures of the real Topkapi Palace in school. From what he could recall, the Imperial Hall of the harem had been duplicated here down to the smallest detail. The domed roof seemed to rise endlessly, an enormous crystal chandelier hanging from the center. Gold, real gold, glittered on the walls and ceiling, and even in the mood lighting of the central chandelier, Kuri recognized the quality of artistry as nothing short of masterful. At the center of the room, against the far wall, sat a cluster of off-white, low couches, many of which were occupied. To the left, a small fountain bubbled and splashed, the edge lined with velvet cushions. To the right, a large bath steamed, with modest privacy given to several men using the bath by an intricate gilded grill encircling the pool.

On large, bed-sized pillows, men of all ages reclined, some eating and drinking, others engaged in conversations, still others engaged in more intimate pursuits.

The sight of young men on display – many of them with far more displayed than Kuri expected – reminded Kuri of the task at hand. He concentrated on remaining the requisite number of steps behind Gabriel, because his first instinct was to press himself as close as he could. He glanced at Sora. Sora kept his eyes on Gabriel's back and nowhere else.

A few sets of eyes turned toward them as they made their way deeper into the room, following until Gabriel selected a section of pillowed floor in plain view of everything going on around them. Extremely showy, Kuri reflected, Gabriel making an obvious statement to all those within eyeshot. *Look what I have. Don't you want it?* Kuri knelt down beside Gabriel on his left. Sora knelt at Gabriel's right.

Showtime.

Kuri felt Gabriel's hand grasp the back of his neck, the touch a gentle, soothing massage.

"It may seem arrogant and prideful of me," Gabriel said, a little louder than necessary, "but I must say, my boys are among the most beautiful here tonight."

Kuri's cheeks went hot as embers, as every set of eyes that hadn't been on them before trained on them now. Eyes burning with an unsettling darkness, piercing and dangerous. To keep from losing his nerve, Kuri tried to focus on putting on a good show. He removed his dark suit coat, and handed the neatly folded garment to Gabriel, accompanied with a slight bow of his head.

Sora did likewise. Gabriel took the coats and placed them in an empty space behind them on the pillow.

A young Asian man, dressed in nothing but a pair of sheer black harem pants, both nipples and his navel pierced and adorned with black onyx gemstones, walked toward them from midway across the cavernous room.

"It appears we're about to have company," Gabriel said in a stage whisper. "Eyes down. Don't speak to him, and don't take your gaze off the floor, no matter what."

Kuri did as he was told. He watched as the young man's bare feet came into view.

The young man knelt before Gabriel, returning to Kuri's visual field. A glancing assessment told Kuri the man was also Japanese, very pretty, with straight black hair falling halfway down his back. Perhaps only eighteen or nineteen years of age, he would've have made a star host boy at Kingyo Club without a doubt.

"Begging your pardon, sir." The young man spoke in a soft, sweet voice, using perfect English. "My name is Johara. My master" — he turned and nodded toward the far side of the room, to a bearded Arab man wearing traditional white garb — "Abdullah bin Rafiq, has taken notice of you and your beautiful companions. He is a man of some importance, and he has asked me to graciously request your presence at his table this evening, as his honored guest."

Risking a peek, Kuri looked toward the indicated area and took in the imposing figure watching them. His heart tightened, and a knot formed in his stomach. He had no idea how far any of this would go, and this situation suddenly seemed much worse than anything he'd ever experienced at the host club.

In a cool, casual tone, Gabriel gave his answer. "Tell your master I would be delighted. My name is Gabriel Hartley."

With his gaze returned to the floor, Kuri heard Johara say, "Thank you, sir," and then saw him stand and walk away.

Gabriel handed Kuri and Sora their coats. "I think this might be the contact we were hoping for," Gabriel whispered to Kuri. "Keep your fingers crossed."

"I wish I felt as good about this as I think I should." Kuri put on his coat. He waited for Sora, and then followed Gabriel to make the trek across the room to Abdullah bin Rafiq's area. Kuri suddenly wished he'd been able to drink. He realized, not for the first time, that the ease of Kingyo Club work was due to being half blitzed by the time the first client arrived. He pulled himself back into character.

Abdullah waved his arm to an empty place at his side, and Kuri waited for Gabriel to sit.

"Mr. Hartley, is it?" Abdullah glanced at Kuri and Sora as they both settled in to kneel close to Gabriel's feet.

"Gabriel, please." Gabriel bowed his head in a polite and gracious manner.

"And your companions?" Abdullah smiled, and Kuri felt a chill run through him. The man possessed a serpentine quality, as if he should be slithering down from the branch of a gnarled tree to offer Gabriel an apple.

Gabriel smiled. "My pride and joy. This dark-haired beauty is Kuri, and my adorable little blond pet is Sora."

"Lovely, most lovely." Abdullah ran his gaze blatantly over Kuri and Sora. "Though it is a shame how covered you keep them. Would they not be more pleasing to the eye dressed in the fashion of my beautiful Johara?"

Gabriel cast a quick glance at Johara, who stood beside Abdullah with his hands clasped behind his back. "American sensibilities are quite puritanical, I agree. But when in Rome, as they say"

Abdullah clapped his hands twice. Johara moved in a flash to come before him, bending down on one knee. "Your wish, my master?"

"If my guest gives his consent, would you take his companions to my private room and find them something more alluring to wear?" Abdullah looked at Gabriel with a questioning expression.

"You're far too generous to this humble stranger." Gabriel dipped his head in a courteous bow. "By all means."

* * * * *

Once out of the main room, Kuri released the tense breath he'd been holding. The walk to Abdullah's private room provided as much a chance for display as walking in had been. Amazing to Kuri, how greedy these men could be, to have several boys at their side and still have eyes for more.

The private areas in the back of the club proved every bit as lavish as the central area. Off the hall were shallow nooks under arched doorways, each with cushioned benches or more pillows, and some larger rooms with private heated baths. A few of the rooms were occupied. Kuri stole a glance into one, but tore his gaze away just as quickly.

Too late; he'd make eye contact with a very young man riding impaled on one bearded local's lap while another man made use of his throat.

When he was sure they were out of earshot, Kuri spoke up. "Johara? Your name doesn't sound Japanese."

"My name is not Japanese." Johara escorted Kuri and Sora inside a larger room, where several women, completely covered in black robes and veils, stood at the ready. As soon as the three entered, the women bowed, keeping their heads low.

Johara turned to face Kuri and Sora. "Although Abdullah is my master of the day, I am owned by the great Sheikh of Easter Island, Akmal bin Hosaam. When I was chosen for his harem, he bestowed upon me a female Arabic name, as is his custom." Johara smiled, an expression of genuine pride on his face and in his dark brown eyes. "Johara means *jewel*."

Kuri exchanged glances with Sora and saw the same look of twisted comprehension on his friend's face he imagined graced his own. "Female names? What kind of pervert is this sheikh?"

The women gasped. Johara clapped his hands twice, and like a small swarm of bees the women were on Kuri and Sora, divesting them of their clothes, grooming their hair with combs smelling of sandalwood.

Johara stood by watching, and Kuri noticed the tightness in the boy's previously relaxed jaw.

"I must ask you to mind your tongue when speaking of His Highness, Sheikh Akmal," Johara said in a curt tone. "He is a very important man in Dubai, and it would serve you well not to be regarded as his enemy."

It took every effort Kuri could muster not to shove the hands of the women away. He inhaled deeply to quell his anger. "I'm sorry, Johara. Of course, I would be upset if someone spoke of our master in such a manner. How long have you been with Sheikh Akmal?"

Johara's demeanor relaxed. "I came into the great sheikh's service only recently."

Sora, red-faced with embarrassment, no doubt from being suddenly and unexpectedly nude in front of the women, stayed close to Kuri. As he stepped into a

pair of sheer harem pants identical to Johara's except for the color, Sora's being emerald green rather than black, he whispered to Kuri, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Daichi. This Sheikh Akmal sounded exactly the sort who would put Daichi in a burqa like in the photograph. Kuri held Sora's hand as the women pulled a pair of amethyst harem pants over Kuri's hips, the material so lightweight he hardly felt like he was wearing anything at all. His cock formed a shadow under the deep color, but remained visible. He swallowed, hoping his voice would cooperate and not come out too shaky. "Sheikh Akmal loans his property out to other men? He must have many others to keep him happy to be so generous."

Johara came close to Kuri and held out a hand. One of the women put a kohl pencil in Johara's palm then backed away. "Tilt your head back," Johara said to Kuri. "I want to accentuate the beautiful shape of your eyes."

Kuri didn't resist, and Johara began applying the kohl liner to Kuri's eyelids.

"As of this moment, we number thirteen," Johara said, "but His Highness has received a revelation instructing him to significantly increase our numbers as soon as possible."

"Significantly? Thirteen is such a large number already. Our master has only four." Kuri lied, hoping to make Gabriel sound even more credible. Certainly Daichi was among those thirteen, and if what Johara said proved true, convincing this sheikh to take in Sora and him should be a breeze.

Finished with Kuri's eye makeup, Johara moved on to Sora. Sora wrinkled his nose in mild protest, but with a sharp glance from Johara he relented and looked toward the ceiling.

"Sheikh Akmal is a great prophet, chosen by Allah." Johara continued working on Sora's eyes, smudging the corners with the tip of his index finger. "Allah has instructed His Highness to restore his people to the greatness of ages gone by. For Sheikh Akmal to remain pure, he mustn't have intimate contact with women. But although he is a great prophet, Sheikh Akmal is also a strong and virile man with

desires and urges. The harem keeps him untainted, and Allah has commanded him to grow his harem to elevate him to a higher level."

Johara handed the kohl pencil to one of the women and stepped back, smiling as he admired his handiwork. "Master Abdullah will be most pleased, as will your own master, I presume."

Johara waved a hand. The women scattered and left the room.

Something about Johara's words seized Kuri's heart. He decided to take a chance and go fishing for more information. "No offense to your master, but I really only care to impress Master Gabriel. Why should I care about your master? I would think you'd be jealous if he showed interest in Sora and me." Kuri looked around for his clothing. "Will we get our things back?"

"Yes, of course, unless—" Johara paused, a secretive-looking smile on his face that set the small hairs on the back of Kuri's neck on end. "We should rejoin our masters now. Please, follow me."

* * * * *

Gabriel somehow managed to keep from choking on the potent Syrian wine. His heart thudded against his ribs as he listened to Abdullah relay the story of Sheikh Akmal's supposed "prophet" status. The alleged dictate from Allah, and the apparent necessary growth of Sheikh Akmal's harem of young Asian men, had Gabriel's mind spinning. He made a mental note to thank Cyd later for having hit this nail so squarely on the head. He took another sip of wine, hoping to calm his jangled nerves.

"How did you come into possession of such lovely boys?" Abdullah had passed on the wine—as Gabriel presumed he would, due to Islamic law—instead partaking of smoke from a *shisha* pipe that smelled distinctly of hashish.

As Gabriel had explained to Cyd, his real-life background, his true obsession, provided a better cover story than even the CIA could concoct. He told Abdullah the

truth, starting at the beginning, of his high school crush and subsequent fetish-like obsession with recapturing that unrequited lust.

"In the end," Gabriel said with a shrug as he brought his story to a close, "it was quite easy to coerce them into traveling with me. They're well paid, every need is satisfied, and they no longer have to whore themselves out to undesirables in order to earn their keep."

Abdullah smiled, seeming more pleasant and content with each draw on the *shisha*. "Ah, look," he said, pointing across the room.

Gabriel looked in the indicated direction.

Johara, flanked by Kuri and Sora, stood in the arch of a doorway.

God, give me strength, Gabriel thought.

Rising quickly, Abdullah clapped his hands and a young Arab man scurried over, gathering Gabriel's wine and Abdullah's pipe.

"To my private chamber," Abdullah instructed the servant. He then turned to Gabriel, smiling broadly. "Come, my friend. We shall enjoy the rest of your visit away from prying eyes."

* * * * *

Kuri felt Sora's hand wiggle into his own as they were led from one section of the building to another, and then up another flight of stairs. He tried to remember the way they came in case they should need to make a hasty exit, but by the fourth turn he felt utterly lost.

Abdullah's private chamber resembled a miniature palace. Cold marble shocked the soles of Kuri's feet as they entered the main room through a golden door. A large-screen television hung on one wall, surrounded by low couches and pillow seats. As if guests had been expected, a brass table in the center of the room held a feast of breads and dips, fresh fruit, and more wine.

Kuri whispered to Sora in Japanese. "I never knew people lived like this. I feel like I'm on a movie set. Like this can't possibly be real."

Nodding, Sora huddled close to Kuri as Johara ushered them to the front of the palatial room.

"I'll try to say and do all the right things," Sora whispered, replying also in their native tongue. "We're so close; I just know we'll get him back as long as we —"

"Come, come!" Abdullah called out in a jovial tone as he settled into a low couch of rich burgundy-and-gold brocade. He beckoned Kuri, Sora, and Johara closer with animated waves of his hands. "Come closer, come closer, all you pretty things!" Abdullah tugged on Gabriel's shirtsleeve. "Sit, sit, my friend!"

Gabriel shot Kuri a passing glance and a subtle nod of his head, which Kuri read as "*don't worry, we'll be all right.*"

Johara moved forward to stand at Abdullah's feet.

Kuri wasn't sure if he was expected to sit with Gabriel or with Abdullah, so rather than risk offending the latter, he joined Johara instead. Heart racing, he forced himself to keep his eyes down and his breathing even. He let go of Sora's hand, the hardest thing of all.

After another suck on the brass *shisha* pipe, Abdullah blew out a pungent stream of smoke and settled into the plump couch cushions. "Gabriel, my honored guest, may I examine your boys more closely?"

Gabriel looked at Kuri, catching and locking his gaze.

Kuri blinked once. Time to get to work. He pulled himself out of the line-up and took a step toward Abdullah, sensing Sora do the same at his side.

A tall man, Abdullah appeared to be made of muscle. His narrow chin sported a perfectly trimmed, jet-black beard, which he tugged and pulled as he ran the sharp eye of a vulture over Kuri and Sora. The man exuded danger absolute, and the mood rolled off of him, thick as petroleum.

Gabriel took his wine glass and raised it to Abdullah, offering a smile. "As you wish."

"Johara," Abdullah said, and paused to take another drag from the *shisha*. "Our young guests look beautiful, but there is one" – Abdullah chuckled, the sound hollow and sinister despite the jocular attitude – "*embellishment* conspicuously lacking in their appearance. If you would, please."

"Do you have a preference, Master?" Johara bowed his head.

"Hmm" Abdullah chewed on the brass mouthpiece of the pipe as he contemplated. He looked at Gabriel with a feral grin. "Let it be your choice, Gabriel. Which of your young men would you like to see under the ministrations of my Johara's supremely talented mouth?"

"Kuri." Gabriel blurted the name without hesitation, obviously having taken to heart Kuri's plea for Sora to remain as uninvolved as possible. "Let it be Kuri."

Mouth gone dry, Kuri gave Sora a little flick of his gaze. Sora eased back until he stood beside Gabriel.

Kuri turned to face Johara and felt his face warm. Willowy and fair, Johara had somehow managed to embrace his feminine name, and save for the very masculine sex between his legs, would shame any woman with his beauty. Once again, Kuri felt as if this world he'd been thrust into existed only as a bad dream, and that attitude supplied him with courage. He moved close to Johara and whispered to him in Japanese. "Does you master allow us to speak?"

"When all needs and wants are fulfilled, there exists no need for words," Johara said in English, soft as silk, sliding a hand behind Kuri's neck and kissing him tenderly on the cheek. "Relax and enjoy yourself, and take pride in knowing you give your master pleasure by submitting."

Johara placed a hand on Kuri's chest and skimmed downward, fingers plucking at the waistband of the sheer amethyst pants. His lyrical voice and soothing touch helped Kuri to imagine himself back home with a new host boy, and not thousands of miles away with lives on the line. The elastic snapped against Kuri's belly as Johara played, and the first rush of excitement filled Kuri's dick. He made the mistake of

rolling his head back and caught sight of Abdullah watching. Their gazes locked and Kuri froze, unable to look away from those intense, hypnotic eyes.

"It's all right, Kuri." Gabriel's calm voice pulled Kuri out of the deep, dark void of Abdullah's gripping gaze. "I'm right here. Sora, come sit with me."

Sora looked like a frightened deer, his brown eyes wide as he passed by Kuri, his slender fingers feeling cold as they brushed quickly over Kuri's arm. Kuri watched as Sora settled cross-legged on the floor between Gabriel's legs.

Gabriel placed a hand on Sora's shoulder, his fingers moving in a slow caress.

Gentle fingers on Kuri's chin urged his attention back to Johara.

Johara smiled and hooked his fingers under the waistband of Kuri's pants, dipping lower. "Do you find me attractive?"

"Yes." Such a struggle, for Kuri to utter even a single word. Fear, apprehension, and lust mixed in equal parts through Kuri as he watched Johara uncover him.

Johara slid the harem pants over Kuri's hips and lowered them to the floor. Kneeling, he ran his hands up Kuri's thighs and looked up, dragging his tongue slowly across his lips.

"Do it," came Abdullah's gruff voice. "Get him hard."

Rising onto his knees, Johara licked the very tip of Kuri's cock, teasing.

Kuri's focus shattered, forcing him back into acknowledging Abdullah looked on. He wondered if the interruption had occurred on purpose. Abdullah seemed the sort to delight in making his playthings jumpy. Frantic to regain lost footing, Kuri dropped his hand into Johara's soft hair and traced the back of Johara's ear with one nervous finger.

Nuzzling against Kuri's groin, Johara moaned, and then ran his tongue along the length of Kuri's forming erection. "Mmm, you taste so good. I can bring you off quickly, if that will be easier for you."

Kuri wasn't sure anything Johara could do would hasten his climax, no matter how good those pretty lips felt. He was still too sober, the place too evil, the

circumstances too out of control. Kuri heard a soft whimper and turned to see Sora burrowing his face in Gabriel's chest.

"Indulge yourself, my friend!" Abdullah said in a cheerful, festive tone. He gestured toward Sora, dropping his hand to his lap, obviously fondling himself through a slit in the front of the robe. "Do not be shy; we are here to enjoy these beauties brought to us by Allah!"

Gabriel made a valiant effort at smiling, but Kuri noticed the twitch at one corner of Gabriel's mouth. Kuri hoped Abdullah hadn't noticed.

Abdullah stared at Gabriel with a hard look in his eyes. His smile looked doubly dangerous, his hand moving beneath his robe with a steady rhythm. "I *insist*."

So, Abdullah liked to watch. Kuri knew he had to draw attention from Gabriel and Sora until the two of them worked out their dance steps, so he tightened his fingers in Johara's hair and growled. "No. You say you like it – are you trying to get out of this quickly? You want to please your master, don't you?"

Kuri ignored the motion at the corner of his eye, knowing he needed to perform for Abdullah harder than ever right now if he hoped to rescue Daichi. Sora would be all right; Gabriel had promised.

"I was thinking only of your comfort, Kuri," Johara said, pausing to take a lick of Kuri's balls. "I can be slow. Torment you with my tongue until you beg me to let you come." With one hand Johara gripped Kuri's dick and started jerking him off with long, slow strokes, using Kuri's foreskin to stimulate the swelling head.

Just keep your eyes on Johara. Nothing else. Kuri kept his field of vision as narrow as possible as he gave his hips the slightest swing forward. In a quick whisper he said, "Does he know Japanese?"

A sound to Kuri's right strangled him. Sora. *Be good to him, Gabriel.*

Johara rose from the floor in seeming slow motion, licking and nibbling Kuri's belly, his chest, nipples, and finally kissing his neck accompanied by soft, passionate moans.

"He doesn't know Japanese," Johara whispered against Kuri's ear, sucking on his lobe for an instant. "It will anger him if he thinks we are trying to shield something from him. I do not wish to be whipped later. Please, let me pleasure you."

Before Kuri could respond, Johara took Kuri's mouth in a hard, deep kiss, his hand dropping to reclaim Kuri's cock. As Johara released him and lowered himself again to the floor, Kuri's gaze strayed to the couch.

Abdullah had his large cock fully exposed, working himself over with a rough hand, his eyes roving from Kuri and Johara to Gabriel and Sora.

On his knees on the floor at Gabriel's feet, Sora's head bobbed between Gabriel's thighs, while Gabriel's fingers twisted through Sora's spiky blond locks. Gabriel's eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling on rapid breaths.

Johara's warm, wet mouth envelope the head of Kuri's cock, sucking hard. Kuri's eyes swam, his nightmares coming to life. He had Johara's flavor on his tongue still, fresh and bitter at the same time, the taste of anise.

"Harder," Kuri gasped in English, deciding to heed Johara's warnings. He imagined Daichi there, sucking him off, and that Sora was with his beloved Takumi. The illusion made things much easier. Before long, Kuri's pulse quickened, and he pulled Johara's face down hard on his cock.

With a loud, utterly carnal moan, Johara started blowing Kuri in earnest, taking Kuri's cock, rock hard now, deep into his throat. Long, slender fingers petted Kuri's balls as if to coax them to empty. Pausing for a breath, gasping, Johara looked up, his chin wet with saliva and Kuri's leaking juices.

"Come on my face." Johara slid a surreptitious glance toward Abdullah. He lowered his voice and whispered to Kuri, "He enjoys that, and this will all end quickly for you."

The world suddenly seemed to move in slow motion, as if Kuri were under the influence of some sort of psychedelic drug. A long, deep moan caught his attention.

Kuri turned toward the sound in time to see Gabriel, hands grappling in Sora's pretty hair, tossing his head back in obvious ecstasy, shoulders stiff and trembling, a sheen of sweat on his brow and upper lip.

His mind already twisted into carnal knots, Kuri couldn't help himself. As Gabriel apparently shot his load down Sora's throat, Kuri felt his own seed boil. He gripped his cock, fist working furiously to the same rhythm he heard coming from the couch. Lips in a tight circle of erotic pain, Kuri felt his leg muscles tremble.

A thick, creamy jet of cum splattered Johara's cheek. Another hit Johara's chin then ran down his long, pretty neck. Johara dipped the fingers of one hand in the mess and lifted them to his mouth, using tiny kitten licks to clean himself off.

Abdullah's coarse voice burst through Kuri's addled, unfocused mind. "Johara!"

Scrambling as if his life depended on it, Johara fell to his knees between Abdullah's legs, barely in time to become a receptacle as Abdullah's orgasm hit. Kuri watched blankly as Johara took Abdullah's fat cock in his mouth, his shoulders moving, repeated swallows audible.

The tableau before him seemed surreal, worse than any real nightmare.

Johara, licking Abdullah's cock clean and moaning in the process.

Sora, kneeling at Gabriel's feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Gabriel on his back, swaddled in jewel-colored pillows, breathing hard and sweating like the pig he was.

Kuri tugged up his harem pants, not caring what smeared on them. Seeing Abdullah still busy with Johara, he went back to Gabriel's side and offered a hand down to Sora. His mind in a rage, he knew his eyes shone full of dark fire. "I'm glad he pleased you, *Master*."

Once on his feet, Sora flung himself into Kuri's arms, burying his face in Kuri's neck. "Everything is all right," Sora whispered.

Gabriel stood, eyes averted from Kuri, and he made a show of tugging up the zipper of his trousers. He turned toward Abdullah and dipped his head in a polite bow.

"Your hospitality is overwhelming. Unfortunately, I have business to attend, so we must take our leave."

Reaching into the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket, Gabriel extracted a card, which he set on the pillow he'd previously occupied. "If my boys have pleased you, please contact me at your leisure. I'm still looking for the one who will satisfy my" — he paused, as if searching for the perfect word — "*craving*. Good day to you, Abdullah bin Rafiq."

In a euphoric haze, undoubtedly from the combination of hashish and sexual stimulation, Abdullah garbled a farewell and dismissed Gabriel with a wave. With a hand on each boy's elbow, Gabriel hurried Kuri and Sora into an adjacent hallway. No one lurked nearby, and without warning, Sora hurled himself at Gabriel, arms about Gabriel's neck and skinny legs around his waist, laughing uncontrollably.

"That was *amazing*!" Sora squealed.

Kuri stood dumbfounded. He felt his anger melt away, but still questioned Sora. "Are you *really* okay?"

Sora detached himself from Gabriel, and with Gabriel sagging back in silence against a mosaic-tiled wall, Sora grabbed Kuri's hands in his, grinning. "You know, those giant pillows are awfully useful for hiding things you don't want others to see." He looked at Gabriel then back to Kuri. "Like simulated blowjobs."

Kuri's gaze shifted sharply to Gabriel. "Are you serious? That was all *faked*?" Kuri felt his entire body deflate. He grabbed Sora and hugged him tight. "That looked so real! Gabriel, I—" Kuri stopped as voices echoed down the hall. He pulled Sora with him as he dropped down in front of Gabriel on his knees.

"I'm sorry, Master," Kuri said loud enough for the strangers to hear as they walked by. "I should have known. Please, forgive me?"

Letting out a long, hard sigh, Gabriel dropped a hand to Kuri's head and ruffled his hair. "Do you remember where you changed? No way I'm walking out of here with the Disney Princesses."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Daichi gave himself the final few tugs necessary to get off, and he came on the beveled mirror on the floor at Sheikh Akmal's feet as commanded. He watched, mesmerized, as his reflection became more speckled with each spurt, momentarily blocking out Johara fucking him hard from behind. The taste of Sheikh Akmal's spunk still fresh on his tongue, Daichi looked up, waiting for an approving sign to indicate a job well done. Sheikh Akmal's cock visibly withered against a hairy thigh long bereft of youthful muscle tone, but the man seemed content, and Daichi received his reward in the form of a nod and a smile. There would be no flogging tonight.

With a relieved sigh, Daichi turned his attention to the boy behind him. In the month during which Daichi had been imprisoned in the palace, he'd had only brief, casual contact with Johara. Abdullah blatantly favored Johara over all the other harem slaves, and as a result Johara spent little time confined with the rest. Well known within the harem was the fact Johara slept each night with Abdullah, and often took his meals with him as well. Abdullah had personally adorned Johara with the black onyx navel and nipple piercings. Sheikh Akmal, on the other hand, preferred his boys unmarked and pristine, but as Daichi had learned, Johara had been an exception. Johara had been a gift of sorts to repay Abdullah for steadfast loyalty, although not given over entirely. Johara remained the property of Sheikh Akmal, more or less on continual loan.

Daichi felt Johara's sweat-soaked body press against his back, Johara rutting into him with stabbing thrusts, grunting and moaning with abandon in his ear.

"Going to come so deep inside of you," Johara said, his voice thick and hoarse with lust. "I'm going to fill you up, Rasha, then hold you open and let His Highness watch me drip out of you."

Just as Daichi dropped his head submissively to wait for Johara's brutal finish, the weight of Johara fell away.

Daichi looked over his shoulder in surprise to find Johara sprawled flat on his ass, looking up at Sheikh Akmal in shock.

"Little cur," Sheikh Akmal growled. "You may be the shining star for my servant Abdullah, but for me it is Rasha who is now favored. Rasha has finished. Move away."

Akmal curled his finger to beckon Johara closer, and Daichi knew Johara had no choice but to obey.

Johara, his cock engorged and swaying between his legs, crawled on all fours past Daichi and stopped at Sheikh Akmal's feet. "Your Highness."

Sheikh Akmal coiled his fingers into Johara's hair and pulled him up into a kneeling position. His thick fingers plucked at the black onyx jewelry hooked through Johara's nipples, teasing and twisting until Johara wailed. Daichi couldn't tell if Johara cried out in pain or pleasure, but no matter . . . footsteps coming from the long corridor outside the throne room distracted Sheikh Akmal from his task.

The doors opened, and Daichi knew without looking the intruder had to be Abdullah. No one else in the palace had freer access, or would dare interrupt Sheikh Akmal, other than Abdullah.

On all fours, still staring down at the dirtied mirror, Daichi heard Abdullah's voice, hardened and gruff from spending too much time enjoying the *shisha*. He didn't dare move until instructed; he'd had hard lessons regarding palace life in his short stay.

"Your Highness, your latest acquisition has arrived. He has been cleaned up and brought straight to you, as per your orders." Abdullah laughed. "We seem to be inundated with bleach-blonds of late. This one fussed so much the household women refused to dye him. He bit old Umayma on the wrist until she bled."

The young man – a slender, early-twenties Korean with sandy-blond spikes not unlike Sora's – stumbled into the throne room via a hard push between his shoulder blades.

The young man's eyes were wide with fear and blue as the desert sky, features that seemed to catch Sheikh Akmal's attention immediately, and not favorably. "Blue eyes? Blond hair? Abdullah, has the fountain run so dry?" Leaning forward, Akmal cupped the boy's face in his hand and examined him closer. "He *will* have his hair dyed after I break him in. No excuses."

Abdullah bowed low, his palms pressed together with his fingers forming a steeple under his chin. "As you wish, my sheikh. If I may be so bold, the boy possesses talents that should more than make up for the cursed blue infidel eyes."

Johara backed up until he stood even with Daichi.

"We must lie down now, on the top step," Johara whispered, "while His Highness examines the new boy. Just as the boys slept during your presentation."

Sheikh Akmal made a short humming noise. "What have you learned about the American and his two boys?"

Daichi joined Johara on the step near the foot of the throne. The new boy perched on Sheikh Akmal's lap, from the sound of things receiving his first touches. Daichi squinted through his eyelashes to peek.

"Get your hands off—"

The sound of a slap rang through the otherwise silent room.

"Perhaps this one requires more intensive training." Abdullah reached out to extract the young man from Sheikh Akmal's grasp. "I apologize, my sheikh, for allowing my personal taste to cloud my judgment on your behalf."

The boy climbed off Sheikh Akmal's lap and scampered to Abdullah, who sent him on his way.

Abdullah knelt at Sheikh Akmal's feet. "I believe His Highness will pardon my oversight with the news I bring of the American."

"Rasha," Sheikh Akmal barked in a commanding tone, "come to me."

As Daichi hurried to his feet, Akmal addressed Abdullah. "If the news pleases me, you may have that blue-eyed demon you brought to me."

The hours, days, and weeks had worn hard on Daichi. Although in his dreams he remembered and pined for his former life, for his Kuri, days filled with training and drugs and punishment and sex had mostly dulled and desensitized him. Moving robotically on automatic, Daichi settled onto Sheikh Akmal's lap, making sure to wiggle his ass against the man's crotch as he'd been taught.

"You will be pleased to know the American has checked out." Abdullah remained on his knees. "His credentials are faultless. He works as a linguist at the Central Intelligence Agency, specializing in Japanese language and culture. The man has few friends. His wealthy family has all but ostracized him due to his homosexuality. He has a paper trail as long as the Euphrates recording his visits to Japan for the purpose of sexual congress with young men meeting specific criteria. He holds no position of significant importance, but he has access to those who can easily shield his actions. There exists documentation showing he has made use of his connections on occasion. He could prove useful as an ally."

Abdullah scooted closer on bended knee. "My sheikh, the American owns a boy who would please you greatly, I am certain. And, I must admit, one also that is more to my taste. In my humble opinion, this American is open to the prospect of trade; he seeks a very specific type." He shot a quick glance at Daichi. "Two for one is a good deal in any market, is it not?"

"Interesting. With so much information, we can hold him over hot coals if need be." Akmal shifted Daichi into a face-down position and stroked him like a pet cat, fingers lingering at his ass, sometimes slipping along the ring of loosened muscles and underneath to fondle Daichi's flaccid cock. "What does he consider his type?"

"That which you hold in your hands, mighty sheikh," Abdullah said. "A beautiful, young Japanese boy, very feminine in appearance, a quick learner and complacent."

Daichi felt himself prodded and penetrated, Sheikh Akmal obviously determined to have his evening unspoiled.

"Leave me, Abdullah." Sheikh Akmal's command, barely above a growling whisper against Daichi's ear, nonetheless held the power of a god. Abdullah seemed to know he'd overstayed his welcome; he bowed and began backing away. "Take your plaything with you. Make arrangements to have the American come to my audience at the end of the month. I will meet with him then and not a moment before."

"As you command, my sheikh." The parting words echoed against the marble tiles as Johara followed Abdullah, and Abdullah closed the doors behind them.

* * * * *

Daichi had been taken to Sheikh Akmal's private chambers many times, but each new visit proved as frightening as the first. He never knew the sheikh's true mood until the doors closed. Some nights, slow and sensual lovemaking constituted the agenda. Other nights included sexual activities extreme enough to rattle even the most experienced after-hours host boy. As Daichi learned, Sheikh Akmal had fondness for creative bondage, trussing his boys up with any combination of rope, chains, and leather harnesses. But mostly, Sheikh Akmal had a penchant for invasive toys.

Daichi's feet traveled from the cold marble of the hall onto the soft warmth of Persian rugs lining the floors of Sheikh Akmal's massive sleeping chambers. A chained tiger cub growled at Daichi from the far side of the room, startling several parrots that raucously squawked their annoyance. At the center of the room stood an enormous canopied bed, the canopy and ornately carved posts draped in rich blue and gold silks. Restraint bolts adorned all four bedposts, adding a sinister air to the ancient luxury.

"Go and cleanse yourself for me, Rasha." Akmal went to the tiger cub and fed the beast a strip of meat from a nearby table laden with food and drink. "Use the ginger and lavender oils this evening."

"As you wish, Your Highness." Daichi backed away, head bowed low, until he reached the marble corridor outside the sheikh's bedchambers. Unlike other areas of the palace, Sheikh Akmal's private apartments remained devoid of servants. Unless the sheikh himself called upon them for a purpose, the servants—including Abdullah—respected Sheikh Akmal's seclusion. Two armed guards on constant duty outside the main apartment door provided enforcement of Sheikh Akmal's privacy.

Daichi entered the bathroom reserved for Sheikh Akmal's harem boys. With haste, he showered and used the provided equipment and soaps to cleanse inside and

out. He shaved all over using generous amounts of shaving gel to assure not a hint of stubble remained anywhere. After drying, Daichi found the vials of ginger and lavender oils, touching the perfect combination of the scent on all his pulse points as dictated by the sheikh. He dotted the oils behind his earlobes, at the divot at the base of his throat, the inside of his ankles and wrists, the spots beneath both hipbones at the juncture of torso and thighs, a small drop rubbed into both temples. He reached for a bottle of scent-free lubrication, but drew back his hand. Last night Sheikh Akmal had wanted him greased up and well stretched, so without specific instruction to guide his preparations, Daichi took a gamble His Highness might want him dry and tight this time.

With a final look in the full-length gilded mirror, Daichi smiled at his reflection, pleased, hoping His Highness would be as well. He padded back down the lengthy corridor, stopped inside the door of the bedchamber and lowered his gaze to the priceless rug beneath his feet.

The sheikh, bare to the waist and shoeless, went about lighting various brass lanterns and candles scattered throughout the room. He must have sensed Daichi's silent presence; without turning to face Daichi, he spoke. "Abdullah would praise Allah should this American take you from my side. He dislikes the fact I have never let him have a turn with you. Come. Kneel at the foot of my bed."

Keeping his eyes cast down, Daichi crossed the floor, grateful for the warm rugs under his feet. He knelt, facing the foot of the bed, and laced his fingers together behind his back at the base of his spine.

"Abdullah is correct on one point, however. Your obedience will make you valuable in trade. Lazy Americans hate anything requiring work. Even in sex they prefer legs that open for them without effort." He finished lighting a candle then came to stand directly behind Daichi, his fingers petting Daichi's hair.

As the sheikh's touch moved lower, Daichi felt the lightweight trickle of metal on his collarbone. He looked down to see a thick gold chain, which then disappeared from his view to tighten around his neck.

"What do you think of the prospect, Rasha? I grant permission for to speak freely."

Daichi swallowed, the choker tightening against his Adam's apple. "Have I displeased you in some way, Your Highness?"

Strong fingers slipped under Daichi's chin and lifted, forcing him to meet Sheikh Akmal's steady gaze. "Such a question leads me to believe you would not want to be given away, and I see worry in your eyes. You have come to enjoy your life here, at last. No, Rasha, you've done nothing to displease me." Akmal drew back and nodded toward the bed. "Bend over the mattress. This American who may find you of interest holds a position in his government that could prove of value to me. I intend to offer him others first, but if he will only want you, I may have to make the allowance."

After rising to his feet, Daichi bent forward over the bed, the satin comforter slippery and cool on his chest. He turned his head to one side, arms at his sides, standing on tiptoe due to the height of the magnificent bed. "If I may ask, who *is* this man that His Highness would trade me away, and for what am I to be traded?"

The rustle of clothing from behind told Daichi that Sheikh Akmal was preparing himself.

"I have not yet met him," Sheikh Akmal said, "but I am told he has two beauties of his own he may be willing to offer in trade."

A firm hand rested on the small of Daichi's back, pinning him like a butterfly, as another hand spread his ass cheeks. Something thick and wet pressed against Daichi's hole. Sheikh Akmal grunted and growled, forcing himself through the tightness with the surprising aid of lubrication. Perhaps tonight would not be so horrible; Sheikh Akmal seemed to be in a generous mood.

Daichi pushed back against the invading cock, as he knew Sheikh Akmal expected. As soon as hairy balls touched Daichi's ass, Daichi clenched his inner muscles and relaxed again, repeating the movements to create a pulsating sensation. In the course of concentrating on Sheikh Akmal's pleasure, Daichi's mind cleared enough for a thought to creep into his head.

An American. An American with two boys, and given Sheik Akmal's well-known personal preference, the two boys were doubtlessly Japanese.

Daichi's heart pounded, and he chose his next words with great care. "These boys belonging to the American must be very special for you to consider giving me away."

"Abdullah believes so." Sheikh Akmal gasped, his lips pressed against Daichi's ear. "Most likely, Abdullah was taken with their oddities. He prefers the Asian boys who lighten their hair, and Abdullah's cock hardened when he spoke of the one boy's chestnut hair and bright green eyes. Cry out for me, Rasha. It excites me when you cry."

Sheikh Akmal started a steady fucking, his thighs and balls slapping against Daichi's ass.

Chestnut hair. Bright green eyes. Oh God . . .

Daichi cried out, a pathetic, sorrowful whimper, but not in answer to Sheikh Akmal's demand. Grasping at a fragile thread of hope, even as he bucked back against Sheikh Akmal's forceful thrusts, Daichi said in a small voice, "Chestnut hair? Both boys have chestnut hair?" For good measure, Daichi moaned and whimpered again, louder this time, as if he were in great discomfort, knowing how the act would intensify Sheikh Akmal's pleasure and hoping *that* would further loosen the man's tongue.

"Oh yes, little Rasha!" Sheikh Akmal humped against Daichi like a wild rabbit, and Daichi felt rough lips and the scratchy beard pressing kisses to his shoulders and back. A sharp slap to Daichi's hip demanded he lift, and Sheikh Akmal slipped a hand under and began to fondle Daichi's semi-erection into fullness. From the labor of breath against Daichi's ear, no response would be forthcoming until the sheikh was spent.

Diverting his thoughts for the moment, Daichi alternately rocked back onto Sheikh Akmal's cock and thrust his own into the man's fist. He focused on pure sensation, knowing the spill of his own release over those strong, thick fingers would expedite the sheikh's orgasm. He squeezed his inner muscles around Sheikh Akmal's fat erection to stimulate his own prostate.

"Oh, Highness . . ." Daichi moaned. The first tremors of climax tightened his balls, and he felt the telltale pressure grip the base of his cock. "I'm so close, so close."

Daichi grunted with each stroke along his cock, with each pummeling thrust into his ass. "Fuck, I'm so close"

Akmal slowed the motion, making Daichi work doubly hard for his culminating release. Daichi felt teeth tug at his earlobe, heard the Sheikh moaning coarse words into his ear.

"Good boy, Rasha. Shower my hand with your gift, and I will anoint you with my own blessing."

With a loud moan, Daichi cut loose, his cock jerking in Sheikh Akmal's hand, cum splashing his belly. His ass contracted with each ensuing spurt. Sheikh Akmal rewarded him with a lustful groan and a sharp snap of hips, heralding the thick spill of heat inside him.

"Good . . . good, Little Japan. You are still my favorite." Akmal labored against Daichi's sweaty back, his big hands squeezing and spanking Daichi's quivering ass. He toyed at the slit of Daichi's cock with his thumbnail, eliciting more pained cries before finally drawing back. He went immediately to fetch his *shisha* pipe. "On the bed. I want to hold you before we continue."

The pungent smell of hashish wafted to Daichi's nose. Breathing hard, Daichi climbed onto the bed, keeping his sphincter clenched tight in order to prevent Sheikh Akmal's cum from leaking out to soil the satin quilt. His thighs quivered from the effort, but he didn't dare displease the sheikh for fear of not receiving an answer to his earlier question.

Sheikh Akmal placed the hashish paraphernalia on the bed and joined Daichi there, at once acknowledging Daichi's discomfort with a surprising, understanding smile. He gave Daichi's rump a playful slap. "Go . . . release, but return to me quick as a breeze."

The likelihood Sheikh Akmal had indulged in the pipe during his post-coital bliss appeared evident upon Daichi's speedy return. The man lay sprawled, his eyes glazed and heavy, and he had a Cheshire cat smile plastered on his face. He waggled lackadaisical fingers of one hand in summons. "Come."

"Most gracious, Your Highness." Daichi climbed onto the bed. Remembering an old adage about flies, vinegar, and honey, he knelt beside Sheikh Akmal and flashed a coquettish smile. "You were wonderful."

Sheikh Akmal sighed, contented, and gave Daichi the *shisha* mouthpiece.

Daichi obeyed the wordless command. Although the drug flowed freely behind the palace walls, Daichi had not yet grown accustomed. He choked and coughed on the first long draw, but managed to get the next two drags to stay in his lungs. With no tolerance yet built up, the drug affected his brain with rapid ease. Warmth settled over him like a heavy blanket, a hazy sense of well-being and euphoria clouding his mind. He handed the *shisha* back to Sheikh Akmal.

Sheikh Akmal sighed again, a deeply satisfied sound. After sharing the pipe back and forth several more times, he set the *shisha* on the bedside table and pulled Daichi close with one arm. He traveled his other hand over Daichi's body, soothing him into a trancelike state. Through the haze of the drug, Daichi didn't react when Sheikh Akmal stopped petting and took a long, mahogany box from the table.

"If it pleases Your Highness," Daichi said, his words sounding slurred to his own ears, "could you tell me more about these two new boys?" Thoroughly relaxed, Daichi shifted onto his side to face Sheikh Akmal and watched him with vague interest. The drug's other side effect swept through Daichi's belly, and he lowered a hand to his crotch and started fondling his cock and balls. "Are the boys very pretty?"

Though the sight was one Sheikh Akmal usually enjoyed, he was quick to shoo Daichi's hand away.

"I need you soft." Sheikh Akmal moved Daichi's hand, and Daichi wrapped his fingers around Sheikh Akmal's semi-flaccid shaft. "I have only seen pictures of the young men. One is small and childlike, very sweet and innocent in appearance. He currently has that cheap blond hair to which your former culture has become attached. He has big eyes for a Japanese. I understand he is wary and easily frightened. Abdullah fancies him, of course."

Sheikh Akmal opened the box and displayed two long, silver rods, each curved at one end.

Daichi's heart rate increased so fast he feared he might faint, his temples throbbing as blood rushed to his brain. He knew in his heart, after the smattering of information, that the boys described must be Kuri and Sora. The American must be Gabriel. Even with the deepening drug funk permeating his mind, he easily came to the conclusion Gabriel was the one person Kuri knew with the money and resources to plan a rescue.

God, he hoped Kuri hadn't sold his soul to one devil in exchange for finding another. But if —

Thinking became painful, and the great amount of hashish he'd smoked had fully landed. Higher than a kite, Daichi forced himself back into the moment and focused on Sheikh Akmal. The curved metal rods registered more clearly this time. "What are those, Your Highness?"

Sheikh Akmal began to inspect Daichi's soft cock. He spread and rubbed the little slit several times. "The other boy, Johara tasted," he said, ignoring Daichi's question. "Johara said he was quite beautiful, with an inner fire matching the reddish highlights in his hair." Sheikh Akmal picked up a small tube of lubrication and spread a dollop over the tip of Daichi's penis, working the lube gently into the small slit. "How are you feeling?"

Daichi let out a soft moan, his legs involuntarily spreading wider as Sheikh Akmal played with his cock. His heavy eyelids closed halfway, and somewhere in his drug-infused mind an image of Johara blowing Kuri formed. Daichi felt a band of warmth coalesce deep in the pit of his belly and spread downward. He moaned again when he felt a rush of blood surge into his cock. "That feels so good, Your Highness. I feel good."

"I can see that." Sheikh Akmal drew his hand back and let Daichi's erection subside. "Your body's response is beautiful when you are under hashish. Perhaps I should share my pipe with you more often."

After Daichi was again calm and flaccid, Akmal took Daichi's cock in one hand and chose the larger of the two metal rods from the velvet-trimmed box.

Finally putting the pieces together, Daichi gasped, eyes wide. He'd seen cock-stuffing in porn videos but had never experienced the practice first hand. Daichi swallowed hard. "Your Highness? H-h-have you done this before?"

"Ah, you recognize them? Urethral sounds. Yes, yes I have. Zahirah enjoys them very much. Relax and lie back."

Sheikh Akmal used gentle movements to part Daichi's slit with the tip of the metal sound. The first few centimeters dropped in with the pull of gravity alone. He seemed to hold the rod back after that, guiding at his own pace.

Daichi whimpered, every muscle in his body tensing. The intense stinging and buzzing nerves inside his dick sent conflicting messages to his brain. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck. Baffling, how something hurting so bad could feel so good at the same time. In that instant, Daichi knew he couldn't keep his cock from getting hard if his fucking life depended on it. "Y-Your Highness . . . oh *God!*"

Daichi slammed his head back into the pillow.

"Mmm," Sheikh Akmal moaned. "Yes, yes . . . let the sensation overtake you."

Even though Daichi had his head thrown back and his eyes closed tight, he could feel Akmal was now moving the little rod in and out with a slow, constant motion. He could hear Sheikh Akmal's other hand was occupied with jerking off.

Nerve endings buzzed, and unbelievably Daichi felt every place the metal rod touched him inside. Cold, wet, hard, the thing glided on a thin layer of lube and felt *fucking incredible*. His cock stiffened around the sound, building pressure from the inside out that broke his skin into a sweat. Pleasure shivered through him, his cock became impossibly hard, and the slight, burning sting lingering around his slit felt much better than it should have. Skin flushing, he swallowed back a groan as a knot of dirty desire coiled hard and low in his gut. He opened his eyes, saw the glint of gleaming metal slide out of his cock and back in again. He flexed his cock, and the

pleasure grew intense enough to drag a nasty, carnal moan from the pit of his knotted-up belly.

Panting, Daichi licked his lips so he could speak, staring at Sheikh Akmal's hand fisting that dark, fat cock of his, shiny wetness slicking the swollen head.

"More, more. . . ." Another deep moan spilled from Daichi's lips. "More, oh fuck, *harder*."

Rising to his knees, Akmal shifted to move his cock closer. "Finish me, beautiful Rasha. Finish me and I will let you feel more."

At that moment, with fireworks shooting off in the pleasure centers of his brain from his cock stuffed full of metal, Daichi would have jumped off the palace's highest turret had Sheikh Akmal asked him to. He grasped the sheikh's dick, the thick flesh so hard, so hot in his hand. Lifting his head from the pillow, he wrapped his lips around the fat, bulbous knob and ran his tongue over the circumcision scar, moaning.

Sheikh Akmal fed his cock to Daichi, painting Daichi's lips with the clear fluids bubbling up.

As mutual moans filled the cavernous room, Akmal grabbed a shock of Daichi's hair and forced his mouth open to accommodate more cock. "Your throat is very relaxed. Good boy."

The metal rod bobbed in and out of Daichi's cock on its own, his cock looking more than ready to blow.

No threat in the world could have staved off his release at that point. Compliant to a fault, Daichi took Sheikh Akmal's cock as deep into his throat as he could, swallowing around the warm thickness. Several strong pulses of his dick expelled the metal rod and sent it to the mattress. Orgasm racked his body, warm spatters of cum striking high on his chest, his unrestrained moans muffled by the cock stuffed in his mouth.

Sheikh Akmal withdrew, grabbed Daichi's chin with one hand, and began beating off at a reckless pace against Daichi's face. With a thunderous groan, he shot off into Daichi's open mouth, milking his fat length until the last dribble drained him dry.

He fell back against the pillows, appearing finally spent. As his chest rose and fell, Sheikh Akmal ran his fingers over Daichi's bony hips. "Those boys the American brings will have to be solid gold for me to give you up."

Swallowing the last of the bitterness on his tongue, Daichi snuggled beside Sheikh Akmal. "Then I will have to try even harder to please you, Your Highness."

Chapter Twenty-Five

A warm sea breeze swept the floor-length, sheer white curtains over the tile of the bedroom and ruffled Sora's hair as Kuri sat beside him deep in thought. For weeks they had stayed in this rented house on The World island of Java, and ever since their meeting with Abdullah at the Topkapi Palace Club, Sora's sleep had been fitful. Most nights he didn't sleep at all. By midmorning, he was so exhausted he'd finally drift off, but not without Kuri at his side.

The passage of time had been maddeningly slow. Kuri hated the looks they received everywhere they went, and his stomach wasn't handling the local cuisine well. Things had been strange with Gabriel, who was always pleasant but distinctly guarded. Having been close enough to Sora to fake a blowjob had obviously rattled Gabriel, and the circumference of his personal space had doubled. Sora and Kuri shared one bedroom and Gabriel took the other for himself.

Satisfied Sora rested in a deep, comfortable sleep, Kuri left his side, closed the French doors, and went to the living room to find Gabriel. He found him standing outside on the deck, leaning on the wooden railing and staring out at the Persian Gulf. Kuri slid the screen door open.

Gabriel turned to look, offering the guarded half-smile he'd been using for weeks, ever since that night at Topkapi Palace Club. Genuine enough and not really forced, but certainly not an expression resembling happy. In this idyllic paradise, sadness seemed out of place, though Gabriel's solemn mood did serve as a reminder they weren't there on holiday.

"Sora sleeping, finally?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes." Kuri crossed the deck to stand beside Gabriel and leaned over the rail. The silence hung between them like a guillotine about to fall. The long days of subtle pressure had built to a point where Kuri couldn't handle the strain any longer. He turned to face Gabriel. "Why do you keep away from me now? Now, when you could do anything you want, when I would *let* you do anything you want, you choose to hide inside a tight shell."

"Because that would be taking advantage of you *and* breaking a promise to myself. I'm trying hard not to let either one of us down." Gabriel chuckled, his gaze sweeping quickly over Kuri's body. "You're not making my effort any easier."

Kuri looked down. Barefoot and nude to the waist, he wore only a pair of light pants made of a thin cotton weave. His cheeks warmed. His skimpy attire left nothing to the imagination. Gabriel, on the other hand, had armored himself in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Kuri signed.

"I guess maybe I should go put something else on, but you should take something *off*. It's a million degrees too hot today for long sleeves!"

"I'm fine." Gabriel tugged at his left shirtsleeve and pulling the cuff down to his wrist. He gave Kuri another half-smile. "And you're fine, too. You have a beautiful body, and I love looking at you. I'd love to do a lot more than look, but it wouldn't be right." Gabriel reached out and tucked a lock of windblown hair behind Kuri's ear. "You're with Daichi, and even though I know you fool around with Sora, it's not the same thing. I don't want to dig myself in any deeper with you than I already have, Kuri. It's going to be hard enough to say goodbye as it is."

The idea of saying goodbye hadn't occurred to Kuri. Everything had been so risky from the start, he didn't want to think about an end they might never see. Now that Gabriel's feelings and the concept of them parting had been put out in the open, Kuri's heart began to ache. "Maybe you could move to Japan? You could be part of our family, Gabriel. We all live openly with one another."

Gabriel moved away from the railing and took a seat on a wide lounge chair facing the beach. He scooted over and patted the empty space next to him. "How do you manage living like that without any jealousy?"

"Because we're all friends. Because we all love each other, and we take care of each other." Kuri tumbled into the chair beside Gabriel and started tickling him.

Gabriel laughed and wriggled around. "What the hell are you doing? I'm horribly ticklish! Stop! Stop!" He twisted suddenly, his torso turning sharply toward Kuri. The left sleeve of his shirt rode halfway up his forearm; Gabriel didn't seem to notice, but Kuri certainly did. All tickling stopped and Kuri looked in horror at the scar forming a word on Gabriel's arm. Kuri looked up, shocked.

"Oh God." Gabriel yanked down the sleeve and sprang up out of the chair. He looked down at the deck and raked the fingers of one hand back through his sun-streaked blond hair. "Jesus, you weren't supposed to see that. I'm sorry."

Kuri bit on his lower lip until he tasted blood. "Gabriel? When did you do that?"

"Kuri, I—" Gabriel looked as if he were struggling to find the right words. Or perhaps the right excuse. Finally, defeated, he dropped back down to the chair. "I did it in Osaka, the night I told you to leave."

"The mirror. You said something about battle scars and a mirror." Kuri remembered that night as clear as if it had been the night before. He remembered his hesitation, then taking the money and leaving. He recalled wondering later that night what had become of Gabriel. "I never should have left you. All this might have been so different."

Kuri rolled against Gabriel. Before Gabriel could react, Kuri grabbed the front of his shirt and kissed him full on the mouth.

Gabriel initially froze, but Kuri's kiss only became more insistent. Relenting, Gabriel kissed him back, his hands dropping to Kuri's hips above the waistband of the skimpy pants. "Kuri, please —"

"Shut up," Kuri mumbled against Gabriel's lips as he crawled over him, one leg to either side of Gabriel's thighs. "You're so damn tense, there's no way the sheikh is

ever going to believe you're getting unbelievable sex from two hot boys. Call it a hazard of the job. Now, kiss me."

No freezing up. No more hesitation. Gabriel kissed him hard, hands fumbling with the drawstring on Kuri's pants.

"Fucking Christ," Gabriel said, his voice catching. "Who's the excuse for, Kuri? Me or you?"

"Hey, I never said I was an angel!" Kuri shoved Gabriel's hands away, knelt on the lounge chair, and pulled the flimsy pants down over his hips.

Gabriel's soft hand closed around Kuri's dick, and he drew in a sharp breath. "Doesn't take much to get you hard, does it?"

"I'm very young, Gabriel." Kuri playfully rolled his eyes and reached for the snap to Gabriel's jeans. He grinned. "Like you should talk. How often have you had to go in the bathroom and jerk off in silence in the last few weeks?"

Gabriel smiled, the first real smile since his return. He jacked Kuri a little harder, and unzipped his own jeans with his other hand. "I didn't have to be silent. You and you're little blond friend make an awful lot of noise."

Kuri blushed. "You were listening? You were jerking off to us? Oh, now that is bad!" He felt relieved to break the unbearable tension, even if meant trouble down the road. They'd figure it out. Life had a way of fixing things if one exercised patience. He caught one edge of Gabriel's jeans and pulled.

Gabriel lifted his ass off the lounge chair and after letting go of Kuri's dick, he yanked his jeans down to his knees, using his feet to kick them off the rest of the way. He slid a hand around the back of Kuri's neck with a slight amount of downward pressure and took his own dick in his other hand. "I'm going to regret this later."

Kuri smirked before placing a deceptively chaste kiss on the tip of Gabriel's cock. "You'll feel *great* later. And you'll sleep instead of pacing your room."

Kuri gave a little kitten lick to the soft underside of Gabriel's cock, moaned and wrapped his lips tight around the head.

"Fuck . . . so, what you're saying," Gabriel said, obviously giving up and giving in, legs splaying wide to either side of the lounge chair, giving Kuri more room to maneuver, "is that you're doing this for my own good?"

Gabriel moaned, his cock disappearing inch by inch into Kuri's mouth. His fingers dug into Kuri's neck, gripping tighter.

Kuri wasn't about to take his mouth off Gabriel to answer. Instead, he moaned around the hard flesh and nodded. He slipped his hand between Gabriel's spread legs and tickled the rim of his hole. Briefly, Kuri hoped Sora had actually been asleep when he left the room, so he concentrated to keep all screams of passion to a minimum. A small spurt of bitter salt told him Gabriel's body was responding, if not his mind, and Kuri found himself yanked off task. Gabriel hissed at the accidental scrape of teeth.

Breathing hard and grabbing his cock at the base in an obvious attempt to keep from coming, Gabriel shoved Kuri off. "Get up. Go bend over the railing."

A dark fire burned in Gabriel's eyes as his gaze locked on Kuri, and Kuri shivered. He scrambled back, grabbed the railing of the deck and bent over. Hair rose on the back of his neck as he listened for footsteps from behind. "When was the last time you were with someone?"

Gabriel leaned against Kuri's back, his hands coming to rest on the railing from under Kuri's arms, effectively caging him in. The voice in Kuri's ear rasped with a quiet sort of danger, familiar and exciting.

"No once since that night with you in Osaka." Gabriel's cock, warm and stiff, nestled in the crack of Kuri's ass and flexed. Wet heat trickled down Kuri's skin. Gabriel kissed Kuri's ear, nibbling at the lobe. "I was doing real good at behaving myself, until you came back into my life again to tempt me, Jezebel."

Kuri sucked in his breath. His entire body tingled, and every word Gabriel spoke made him harder. "Maybe because what you feel for me is genuine."

"Fuck," Gabriel growled against Kuri's neck. "This wasn't supposed to happen."

Kuri's feet were suddenly kicked apart; Gabriel's hands moved off the railing. A sweaty palm pressed between Kuri's shoulder blades and pushed his chest to the

smooth, flat top of the two-by-four wooden railing. He heard Gabriel spit several times just before something wet and slick slathered against his hole. With Gabriel breathing hard behind him, Kuri felt pressure as Gabriel pushed up and in.

Kuri dug his short nails into the wood of the railing and held on as Gabriel struggled for entry. Opening himself as much as he could, Kuri felt the hot stiffness break through and sink into him with Gabriel grunting like a wild boar at his back.

A thrill went through Kuri to know he could elicit such a response. "Why not? You stayed away from other boys and waited until you could have me. Sounds to me like you were more in control than you thought."

Gabriel slid his hand up Kuri's back to the shoulder, and Kuri pushed down even as Gabriel thrust up. Moaning and cursing, Gabriel established a steady rhythm as he fucked Kuri against the rail.

"Just shut up and let me fuck you," Gabriel said, his other hand sliding around Kuri's hip. "Jerk yourself off. God, you feel so good wrapped around my dick."

Breath burning hot and ragged in his lungs, Kuri complied. It wouldn't take much to bring him off with Gabriel already hammering away, dripping words in his ears that could make Kuri come on their own, so he took his secondary stimulation slow. The subtle burn from Gabriel's cock moving in and out felt delicious. Kuri closed his eyes and rode the feeling, like a bird on an updraft. He'd known he was in trouble that first morning in the bathroom of the Dotonbori Hotel. Gabriel made him hot, and that was that. "So good. Fuck, do everything you've wanted since you first saw me."

Kuri felt Gabriel's forehead press between his shoulder blades. A subtle shift in angle of Gabriel's hips brought Kuri up onto his toes.

"This has," Gabriel said between thrusts and gasping breaths, "gotten complicated. Fuck, Kuri, come for me. I'm so fucking close."

Kuri clamped himself down hard on Gabriel and cried out when the next thrust came hard enough to nearly knock him flat. He reached behind and grabbed a fistful of Gabriel's hair. "Anything worthwhile . . . oh God, Gabriel!"

His train of thought destroyed, Kuri let the tidal wave break over him. He shot cum all over his hand and the flood of emotional release wiped out all else. The next thing he knew the deck seemed to rise up to meet his knees, Gabriel still behind him. An odd sense of peace washed over him, brought on by the balmy Gulf breeze dancing over his sweating skin, Gabriel unmoving save for the warm, pulsing sensation deep in Kuri's ass. Small, quick kisses peppered a trail up Kuri's back. The sound of the screen door sliding wrenched Kuri from his sublime post-orgasmic reverie. He looked across the deck but saw nothing.

Gabriel exhaled hard against the back of his neck, sweat droplets dotting Kuri's skin and making him shiver in the breeze.

"I'd better make sure my will is in order." Gabriel planted a firm kiss on the back of Kuri's head. "I think you're trying to kill me."

Kuri stared at the closed deck door. "We both might want to start looking for a casket. I think Sora was just out here." Kuri gently pushed Gabriel back and grabbed his pants. "Shit."

Gabriel sat on the lounge chair, snatching up his jeans and shirt. He started dressing as Kuri stepped into the skimpy pants.

"Do you want me to — " The chime on Gabriel's phone sounded and he fished the device out of the pocket of his jeans. He looked at the phone then back to Kuri. "It's Cyd; I have to take this. Go see if Sora's okay, and I'll see you back inside."

Gabriel pressed a button and put the phone to his hear. "Hang on a second, Cyd." He pressed another button, no doubt muting the phone. He gave Kuri a smile and not a halfway one this time. "I think I missed you."

Kuri blushed. The sex had been incredible, but more existed between them. Now that they had broken down the wall, their connection shone as clearly as the desert sun. "Me too."

Heart racing, Kuri made his way through room by room until he found Sora, fully dressed in khaki shorts and a tank top, sitting on the edge of their bed.

Sora looked up, cheeks aflame. "Sorry. I, um, I didn't know you were out there. I mean, I knew you were out there, but I didn't realize you were, uh, well, you know."

Kuri rushed to Sora and threw his arms around him. "Oh God, Sora. Don't you apologize when I should! I didn't mean for you to see. It just happened."

Kuri pulled back and looked Sora in the eyes, fully expecting him to lash out. But no outburst came, not even a raised voice, only a tight hug and a deep sigh against Kuri's shoulder.

"What does this mean, Kuri? I'm sorry, but when I stepped out onto the deck, you didn't even notice, and I couldn't look away." Sora sighed again, his small voice sounding shaky. "That didn't look like a casual fuck to me."

"I don't know." Kuri felt less confident in what he'd just done, now that he had to face one of his closest friends. "It started out as one, but it certainly didn't end that way. Fuck, Sora . . . I don't know why I did it. Daichi is somewhere out there, in danger and waiting for me, and I'm still tripping over my dick for Gabriel. He does something to me, Sora. He looks at me and I get weak. And I know I'm doing the same thing to him."

Sora rubbed Kuri's back then pulled away. "Do you still love Daichi?"

"Yes, of course!" Kuri jumped ahead and answered the question he knew Sora would pose next: *Why?* "It sounds awful, but I think maybe I'm afraid I might never see Daichi again. I've heard Gabriel talk to his friend Cyd. I've read some of the reports lying around when Gabriel wasn't looking. The boys with this sheikh don't stay there long. He uses them and tosses them away. I'm terrified to think of Daichi, because we could walk into that palace right now and find he isn't even there anymore. Then what?"

Delicate fingers on his cheek turned his face until he looked at Sora again.

"Do you have real feelings for Gabriel?" Sora cocked his head. "Or does he just make you feel safe and protected? He's a powerful, wealthy man, and despite his inner weakness he comes across as very, very strong. I felt that protectiveness from him as well, while we were at the palace. It's . . . he's magnetic. But if that's *all* it is, Kuri, it's not

fair to anyone that you play around with his feelings like that. It's not fair to you, it's not fair to Daichi – whether or not we find him – and it's certainly not fair to Gabriel."

Kuri sat on the bed and digested Sora's words, reviewed his actions and the feelings that had brought them about. He felt a shameful twist in his gut. He *did* care for Gabriel. But the sex had been driven by the fear of not having heard anything about Daichi in so long, amplified by the lust he'd felt for Gabriel from the start and the need to be wanted by the man.

"Shit." Kuri lay back on the bed. "I made Gabriel break his oath. And I broke mine to myself not to give up on Daichi. Shit."

A knock on wood interrupted, and when Kuri leaned up on his elbows, Gabriel stood in the doorway. "I'm sorry to intrude. I just got off the phone with Cyd."

Kuri had no idea how much Gabriel had heard, if anything, but just the sight of him made Kuri's shame rise. "What did he say?"

Gabriel, arms folded across his chest, leaned against the door jamb. "Good news and bad news. The good news is we were convincing. Posing as my personal assistant, Cyd received an invitation for us to have an audience with His Highness, Sheikh Akmal bin Hosaam, at his palace on Easter Island. Our collective acting skills paid off, and my credentials checked out to their satisfaction. We're in."

"Okay." Kuri sat on the edge of the bed. "And the bad news?"

"The bad news is we've had some really crappy luck in the timing department. Sheikh Akmal and company took their good old time delving into my personal history, which has landed us in the midst of Ramadan – the Islamic holy month of fasting. Good religious boy that he is, the sheikh won't receive any non-Islamic visitors until Ramadan is over. Our appointment isn't for another nine days."

"Damn," Sora said. He grabbed Kuri's hand and gave a squeeze, and then slid off the bed, looking nervously from Gabriel to Kuri several times. "Well, maybe I'll go take a walk on the beach for a while. You probably have a lot to talk about."

Before Kuri could protest, Sora skirted past Gabriel and slipped out of the room.

Kuri hung his head, his hands clasped between spread knees. He lifted his gaze to see Gabriel staring at him. "Nine more days. Together." Kuri swallowed. "How are you feeling?"

Jaw tight, mouth drawn into a stoic line, Gabriel stepped fully into the room. He closed and leaned back against the door. "How do you *think* I feel? Forty-five minutes ago, spending time with me didn't seem such a bad idea to you. Now, you make it sound like a prison sentence. Care to clue me in on the swift change of heart?"

Kuri closed his eyes and wished his emotions weren't in such chaos. "It's not a change of heart. I still want to be with you. That's the problem. I don't have a fucking clue how all these pieces are going to fit together. I still love Daichi, Gabriel. I feel like I gave up on him back there, when I swore I never would."

Gabriel sat on the bed next to Kuri and stared down at the floor. "I know you love him, Kuri. You wouldn't be here if you didn't. Hell, *I* wouldn't be here if you didn't. But given what just happened outside, I think we need to have a talk about where we're headed — *we* meaning you and me, regardless of the outcome of why we're here." Gabriel lifted his gaze from the floor and looked Kuri dead in the eyes. "Unless I really *have* completely lost my mind, I think we both know this has become more than physical."

Kuri's eyes started to burn and his vision fogged. This was up to him. He needed to listen to his heart and listen to Gabriel. "You make me feel something I've never felt before. No matter how reckless our actions, I feel safe with you. I don't know why, but I do."

"Until I met you, I accepted my obsession for what it was — nothing more than a fetish for a certain type, borne of a bad experience in my formative years." Gabriel shook his head, slid a hand across the mattress, and laced his fingers with Kuri's. "You were — *are* — different. I feel things for you I've never felt for any of the others. I don't think exclusively about sex where you're concerned, believe it or not. I want you to be safe and well taken care of. I want you to be loved and happy, whether or not that involves me. You make me feel like I'm not such a bad person after all. So, however this

all pans out, I'd like us to work really, really hard at still being friends, even if that's all we'll ever be."

Kuri couldn't hold himself back. He threw his arms around Gabriel and clung with all his might. "I promise, no matter how things end, I will never let you walk away from me. I need you. People in Japan say host boys never really grew up, that they live in a fake world, living fake lives. I never felt like that was true until now. This life is real and that frightens me, but somehow you make the real world a little less scary." Kuri tightened his grip on Gabriel's fingers. "None of that probably makes any sense to you."

Gabriel lay back on the bed and pulled Kuri down on top of him, petting Kuri's hair out of his face. "Maybe we need to stop trying to analyze things so much."

Kuri lowered his head to rest over Gabriel's heart. "I can't imagine going back to the host club after this. For all it's worth, and despite the shit we're in now, I'm really glad you came into my life."

A warm, sighing breath caressed Kuri's face, and Gabriel's deep voice reverberated through the broad chest into Kuri's ear.

"I'm not going anywhere anytime soon," Gabriel said. "First priority is to get your boy back. Then we'll worry about the rest."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nine days had seemed like ninety, but the appointed day finally arrived. Kuri looked down at the whitecaps of the waves rushing away from the buffeting wind coming off the helicopter rotors. The chopper approached at a low altitude. He could see the perfect, white sand beach encircling the edge of Easter Island and the tall spires of Sheikh Akmal bin Hosaam's palace.

"It has to be as big as Osaka!" Kuri yelled to Sora over the roar of the chopper.

Sora gave a sharp nod, having not been terribly thrilled with the idea of flying in a helicopter in the first place.

As they flew over the palace and circled, Kuri took in the extreme opulence of the island. Within the palace walls were enormous gardens, including a topiary garden complete with a massive labyrinth, a stable with rolling pastures filled with horses, and what appeared to be a small zoo. Kuri saw a tiger pacing in a cage.

He knew exactly how the beast felt.

The helicopter landed with a bit of a thud, and Kuri thought Sora's grip might snap off his fingers if they had to endure much more. Thankfully, a moment later, a man in a red-and-white checkered headdress, which Kuri had learned was called a *shumagg*, opened the side door and offered a hand to Sora.

Sora, looking quite grateful, followed the man's pointing motions and stepped back and away from the spinning rotors. Kuri's turn came next, and finally Gabriel, and once all were clear of the small helipad, the chopper rose into the bright blue Dubai sky.

The man smiled, gesturing toward an archway leading into a splendid garden. "If you would kindly follow me," he said, and immediately began walking toward the archway with long, purposefully strides.

Gabriel leaned over and whispered to Kuri. "Remember what we discussed. We want the sheikh to want to take you, so be on your best submissive behavior at all times."

Character already firmly in place, Kuri lowered his gaze. He and Sora walked silently behind Gabriel and took in as much of the palace as they could once inside. Much of the building looked like the Topkapi Palace Club, further proof that the sheikh himself owned the decadent establishment. Kuri was admiring a full wall of tapestries when he suddenly stumbled. Standing before them was the man they'd met at the club.

"Welcome, welcome, my friend!" Abdullah smiled broadly, bowing first and then offering his right hand to Gabriel in the Western manner. Unlike the man who'd helped them debark from the chopper, Abdullah wore imperial finery. Despite the arid heat, Abdullah's voluminous robes were fashioned from expensive brocades of gold and emerald and ruby. His headdress, a far cry from simple checkered cotton, flowed in sapphire waves down his back, blue as the surrounding Persian Gulf.

Gabriel shook Abdullah's hand and smiled. "Cozy little retreat you have here."

Kuri had to bite the inside of his cheek to quell a smile. Gabriel had slipped easily into character, playing the genteel southern plantation owner to the hilt.

"Come, come!" Abdullah waved them forward. "His Highness is prepared to greet you immediately, so we mustn't keep him waiting."

Gabriel caught Kuri's eye and nodded almost imperceptibly, clearly telegraphing the thought that had already entered Kuri's mind.

Game on.

With the holiday of Ramadan over, the palace halls buzzed with activity, crowded with outsiders denied access to within the walls for the month. Delivery men, maintenance workers, and guests like Gabriel hustled about, adding to the confusion of winding corridors. The commotion died away when Abdullah led them down one final passage.

Lions of gold seemed to stare them down as they entered a warped version of utopia. A crowd of well-heeled visitors filled the huge room. The sheikh sat on a wide, couch-like throne in the center of the room; a sea of blue-black hair surrounded him. Kuri couldn't be sure, but he figured there were at least a dozen young Asian men gathered around Sheikh Akmal, all of them with their eyes glued on the new visitors.

Kuri moved closer to Sora as he looked from one beautiful face to another. With them all crowded together, he couldn't tell if Daichi sat among them.

"Welcome, Mr. Hartley." Sheikh Akmal's thunderous voice broke Kuri's concentrated search. The sheikh didn't rise from his throne to greet Gabriel, but beckoned him closer. "Come. Abdullah will bring a seat for you."

Abdullah returned within seconds, bearing a large blue pillow made of velvet, the corners adorned with golden tassels. He placed the pillow to Sheikh Akmal's left and backed away, bowing. A quick hand gesture invited Gabriel to sit, and Gabriel complied.

"Your reputation for generous hospitality precedes you, Your Highness," Gabriel said, and even Kuri couldn't detect the faintest waver of duplicity in his voice. "May I introduce my young charges?"

With no pillow offered to them, Kuri and Sora stood where Gabriel had left them in front of the throne. Kuri kept his gaze lowered, but he could feel eyes on him. He'd never experienced a sensation of such complete, utter exposure. Gabriel had decided to adopt the wardrobe protocol set at the club by Abdullah and had ordered two sets of harem pants made for Kuri and Sora, identical to the ones they'd worn before, right down to the color and sheerness of material.

"Such rare jewels you bring me, Mr. Hartley. Abdullah, bring them closer." Akmal leaned to his left and spoke to Gabriel, "You have an excellent eye. How old are they?"

Kuri kept his eyes on Gabriel as Abdullah urged him closer with rough fingers digging into the back of his neck. Sora stumbled forward next to him.

Gabriel glanced at Kuri then looked at Sheikh Akmal with a grin. "In the current international climate, Your Highness, isn't the more important question how old do they *look*? I have a keen eye for genetics, but I have no desire to wallow in a foreign prison until my dick is no longer useful."

Sheikh Akmal laughed and turned his attention to the boys. First he took Sora by the wrist and pulled him forward. Kuri's fists balled up so tight he started losing sensation in his fingertips. Sheikh Akmal ran his fingers through Sora's short blond spikes and then down over Sora's ass. To keep himself from screaming, Kuri resumed his search of the harem for Daichi. Much closer now, he could clearly see every boy's face. Even though Daichi's hair would no longer be blond, Kuri knew he would recognize his lover.

Only Daichi wasn't there.

Heart breaking in two, Kuri barely noticed when Sheikh Akmal grabbed his wrist. He retreated from despair as Sheikh Akmal palmed his soft cock through the sheer pants. "Don't touch me like that."

"This one could use more training," Sheikh Akmal said with a deep laugh.

Sora now sat on the throne to Sheikh Akmal's left. Kuri tensed.

Gabriel chuckled. "He's a spitfire to be sure, but well worth the trouble, Your Highness. He makes up for his recalcitrant mouth with an extremely talented tongue. And this one" Gabriel gestured at Sora, who shook like a leaf. "He *is* full-blooded Japanese. The tacky blond will grow out. Although" —Gabriel looked out over the harem — "I'm sure you have a skilled colorist on staff. So many of them have adopted Western fashion habits lately."

"Yes, I blame America for that. No offense to you, but your country forces change where there has been none for centuries." As he spoke, Sheikh Akmal caught Kuri's chin and he looked him in the eyes. "Green as emeralds," he said with some distaste. "He will surely be Abdullah's new favorite." Then he did the same with Sora and smiled. "Brown as an Altai Saker falcon's flight feathers. Beautiful."

"Both are beautiful in their own right," Gabriel hastened to comment, all the while maintaining his pleasant smile. He leaned closer to Sheikh Akmal as if to speak in confidence, but his words were not out of Kuri's easy earshot. "I saw the way Abdullah fawned over Kuri at Topkapi Palace Club. He's quite fond of half-breeds, obviously. And happy servants serve all the better, do they not, great sheikh? As for Sora, I'm certain he will serve you well."

Sheikh Akmal appeared to ponder Gabriel's words. "What do you think of him, Abdullah?"

Kuri felt suddenly sick. He'd been terrified of Abdullah at the club, and even more so here in the absolute privacy of the palace.

Abdullah nodded. "I saw him perform previously, Your Highness, and perform well." Johara, the boy from Topkapi Palace Club, came crawling out from the group of slave boys and stopped beside Abdullah's feet, the man petting the top of Johara's head as one might stroke a pet. "I might be willing to sweeten the pot myself to trade with your esteemed guest, Your Highness."

Johara didn't flinch.

Sheikh Akmal waved a dismissive hand at the offer. "I should let you see what you'll be trading for, Mr. Hartley. Abdullah, bring Rasha in."

As Abdullah left the room, Akmal turned his attention to Sora and pinched one little nipple as Kuri remained standing in his place, unable to imagine how this nightmare could possibly get any worse.

Gabriel, from his position on the raised dais, had a better vantage point of the enormous room than Kuri. Kuri watched Gabriel's face as the two-story-high double doors opened and the crowd parted.

Gabriel's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. When he seemed to collect himself, Gabriel looked in Kuri's direction and nodded, but the expression on his face looked pained, horrified, with an underpinning of apology.

Translation: Daichi was here, but something was terribly wrong, and very unanticipated.

Kuri held his breath.

To a fanfare of trumpets heralding a royal entrance, Kuri turned around. As the music played, a litter carried on poles supported by four slaves on each side came into view.

On a red velvet bed canopied in gold, Daichi — adorned, bejeweled, dressed and made up to look more female consort than male slave — lay on his side, one leg drawn up to accentuate a rounded hip.

So stunned by the surreal vision of his lover and the surprising easy expression on Daichi's face, Kuri had to be pulled aside as the litter-bearers approached. Desperate, Kuri tried to make eye contact with Daichi, but the make-up around Daichi's eyes wasn't the only thing smoky. Mouth slack and eyes glazed over, Daichi appeared only half aware of where he was.

Sheikh Akmal gestured toward Daichi with a grand sweep of his hand. "The crowning jewel of my growing kingdom, Mr. Hartley. This is my beautiful and devoted Rasha."

The litter-bearers lowered their cargo to the floor with slow, precise movements, taking obvious care not to unsettle their passenger. After pulling the gilded poles away from the bed-like sedan chair upon which Daichi reclined, the litter-bears left the room.

Wide-eyed, Gabriel said, "Your Highness, I'm . . . I'm speechless. His beauty is unprecedented."

Kuri felt a tug on his right elbow and looked down. Johara had crawled the few steps away from Abdullah that separated them and knelt beside Kuri.

"Kneel," Johara mouthed to Kuri.

Anger nipped Kuri hard, but he knew he had to play this out no matter how difficult. If he hesitated too long, the sheikh might lose interest in accepting Sora and himself into the harem.

"My apologies." Kuri dropped to his knees and bowed his head.

Sheikh Akmal spoke with unrestrained pride. "You will find my Rasha eager and willing to provide you with any pleasures you could possibly require. I have schooled him myself in the sexual arts. He has been my constant bed partner for the last month, and has been granted freer access to the palace than most of my slaves. I trust his loyalty deeply."

Kuri risked a glance at Daichi, but Daichi's attention appeared riveted on Gabriel.

Daichi was rubbing himself hard through the thick material of a richly made kimono. Unlike the rest of the slaves, Daichi's apparel covered him from neck to ankles, a reproduction of an ancient kimono, re-worked to include Arabic themes into the embroidered designs. His ankles were ringed in gold, his fingernails painted. A small cluster of jewels adorned his forehead, and he wore precious gems in his earlobes.

Johara leaned closer and whispered to Kuri in Japanese. "Your expression tells me you know our lovely Rasha. If so, it would be in your best interest to keep that information to yourself."

"He's beautiful, Your Highness." Gabriel's jovial voice grabbed Kuri's attention. "Everything I've ever dreamed. I mean no disrespect, but I'm surprised you wish to part with such a treasure."

"For some men, the having is what is important. A pretty thing that will do all you ask and offer himself at a single gesture." Sheikh Akmal ran his fingers over Sora, who tensed and pulled away. Sheikh Akmal smiled. "For me, I find the most joy in the capture and creation of such a companion. Yes, little beauty," he crooned to Sora. "Pull away. It will be my pleasure to tame you."

Kuri's head pounded. He watched in horror as Sheikh Akmal pulled Sora's legs apart and palmed his soft sex. "When I am through with this one, he will become hard the instant I walk in the room."

Mind reeling as if caught in the grip of some frightening horror novel, Kuri watched Sora's terrified expression as Sheikh Akmal fondled him. The more Sora squirmed, the better the horrible man seemed to like it.

"And the other one?" Gabriel pointed toward Kuri. "If it's the challenge you enjoy, I believe you'll find Kuri compatible with your desires. I'd be quite interested to see if you can break him."

"He does not exaggerate," Johara whispered to Kuri. "If you seek to get closer to His Highness, put up a struggle. He likes his prey to fight back."

"Why are you helping me?" Kuri noticed Sheikh Akmal shoot him a glare.

"I see." Sheikh Akmal hadn't ceased the movement of his hand between Sora's thighs. "Your Kuri is not pure Japanese, but he will provide some entertainment until I give him to Abdullah."

Johara grabbed Kuri's arm, hard, and whispers turned to seething hisses. "A spy knows kin when he sees them. Now, if you do not want your little blond friend to be publicly ravaged, I suggest you offer up yourself as a substitute. We will talk later if things go well."

As if in agreement, Sora yelped and Kuri rose to his feet. He let his building anger loose, grabbed a small pillow, and threw it at Sheikh Akmal's chest. The room fell silent.

Sheikh Akmal turned toward Kuri with calculated, reptilian slowness. His mouth drew a thin line across his face, his dark eyes went wide and staring. Abdullah

grabbed Kuri by the scruff of the neck and shoved him to the floor, face down into the colorful tile at Sheikh Akmal's feet.

The sheikh smiled and removed his hand from Sora. "Let him go, Abdullah."

"But, Your Highness!" Abdullah sounded incredulous, and the grip on the back of Kuri's neck measurably tightened. "Let me take this infidel back to the harem to teach him a lesson! How dare he shame you in front of your court!"

"Release him! I know you, Abdullah. You'll soil him beyond further use so you might possess him without conflict." Sheikh Akmal's voice sounded more forceful in tone than before, and Kuri felt the pressure on his neck lessen.

Gabriel spoke up. "My sincerest apologies, Your Highness. Perhaps we should cut our visit short —"

"On the contrary," Sheikh Akmal said, the sound of Sora being eased off the throne following. "This is *exactly* the fire I have been looking for. Rasha is a beautiful creature, but he submitted almost too quickly. I am in the mood for a greater challenge."

Abdullah released Kuri, giving him a shove with a sandaled foot before backing away. A moment later, Johara was at his shoulder, helping him off the floor with gentle hands.

Sora threw himself against Kuri's chest, clinging.

Daichi rose from the sedan chair and stepped forward, standing on Kuri's other side.

Gabriel looked at the four young men then at Sheikh Akmal. "Have you made your decision?"

Akmal ran his eyes over the four boys, his chin resting on an upturned hand. He seemed to be deep in thought. After what seemed like minutes, he broke the hanging silence. "One night, Mr. Hartley. I demand one night with your boys, and in return I offer one night to you with Rasha. If we are both pleased, we will commence with the trade. Is this an acceptable arrangement?"

They'd come here for this, but the knowledge didn't do a thing to ease the sick knot coiling in Kuri's gut. Gabriel's gaze flicked toward him. Kuri answered with the smallest of nods and a single slow blink.

"Very well, Your Highness," Gabriel told Sheikh Akmal. "I agree."

"Excellent." Sheikh Akmal clapped his hands, and as his *shisha* pipe was brought and placed between himself and Gabriel, he called for Kuri to be brought forward. To Daichi, Sheikh Akmal nodded, and immediately the boy went to Gabriel's side and knelt beside him. "I've had a meal prepared for us in celebration, after which Abdullah will show you to your room for the evening. But first, I would like to know more about what you do back in the United States."

As Kuri swallowed a taste of bile, Sora pulled away from him. Kuri walked up to the throne and glared at the sheikh.

"Such fire under those beautiful, long lashes. You are just waiting for the right moment to strike. More pillows, perhaps?" Sheikh Akmal stood for the first time in their presence and Kuri took a step back.

The man loomed much taller than Kuri had expected. He thought for sure he would be cuffed for his insolence, but instead Sheikh Akmal took his chin and forced his face upward to meet his eyes.

"Warisha. I shall call you Warisha. Lightning, she who strikes first." Sheikh Akmal laughed, grabbed Kuri by the wrist, and pulled him down to the pillows beside Gabriel, where Akmal also took a seat. Sheikh Akmal clapped his hands three times. The doors opened as if in response, and immediately all other attendants and visitors in the room disappeared into the corridor. The boys of the harem, with the exception of Daichi, lined up single file on cue and followed Abdullah out.

The exit commotion settled and the great doors closed once again. Gabriel addressed Sheikh Akmal. "In answer to your query, and as Abdullah no doubt mentioned, I work for the Central Intelligence Agency of the U.S. government."

"I am aware," Sheikh Akmal said. "Which I will admit has a great deal to do with why you are now in my presence. I believe that beyond our current transaction, we may

be of great use to one another." He took a pull from his pipe and passed the mouthpiece to Gabriel. "I can assure you, I have no terrorist motivation. I could not care less about my brethren's activities. Their gripe with the United States is not my own; I have no use for their *jihad*, their so-called holy war. But I am not entirely disinterested in what goes on around the world. Knowledge is a powerful weapon."

Kuri listened as he knelt, his hand inching over to Sora's.

Across from them, Daichi had moved behind Gabriel and was massaging his shoulders.

The expression on Daichi's face, a detached sort of serene calm, the hint of a Mona Lisa sort of smile gracing his lips, concerned Kuri greatly. As he watched Gabriel take the *shisha* pipe and take a deep inhalation of smoke, the thought occurred Daichi might be drugged in addition to whatever brainwashing techniques had been inflicted.

Appearing to enjoy the massage, Gabriel tilted his head from one side to the other on occasion to grant Daichi's hands better access to his neck. During once such movement, Daichi leaned down and whispered something into Gabriel's ear.

Gabriel blushed. "Perhaps as we get to know each other better, Your Highness, an exchange of knowledge can be arranged. For now, I look forward to breaking bread with you, and acquainting myself with your Rasha."

Kuri hoped his breaking Gabriel's fast of sex wasn't about to backfire.

Sheikh Akmal smiled, seeming to understand exactly what Gabriel meant. Another series of claps and immediately the doors to the room opened. Four boys entered, each carrying a large platter of food, which they placed on low, wooden platforms beside the sheikh.

"Venison is to your liking, I trust?" Sheikh Akmal took a large knife to cut the meat and served a piece to Gabriel.

"Absolutely," Gabriel said, taking the meat and dipping it into a small dish filled with dark sauce. He popped the morsel into his mouth and made a pleased little noise. He nodded. "My compliments to your chef."

Sora huddled closer to Kuri, fingers lacing tighter. He looked about to speak but only sighed.

The food smelled wonderful and despite himself, Kuri stared at the platter and started salivating. After Gabriel and Sheikh Akmal had been eating for several minutes and it became obvious the boys were not getting plates, Kuri heard his stomach growl. He lowered his head as the sheikh laughed.

"You keep your boys well fed," Sheikh Akmal said to Gabriel. "Their bellies know when it is time for food. Of course, here they will learn only the best behaved slaves are invited to eat."

The sheikh glared at Kuri, and Kuri met the gaze directly.

Gabriel must have noticed. He smiled at Sheikh Akmal, making light of the obvious tension. "You *did* say you welcomed a challenge, Your Highness."

Sheikh Akmal cut off a small chunk of meat. "I did indeed," he said, and held the meat out to Kuri.

Kuri reached for the meat, only to have his hand viciously slapped. Startled, he fell back. Sheikh Akmal stared at him, but the meat had not been removed. It didn't take a rocket scientist to understand what the sheikh required. Swallowing his pride, Kuri inched closer and again reached for the meat, but this time with his mouth.

Another slap came after Kuri tried to dislodge the meat from Sheikh Akmal's fingers. The flat of Sheikh Akmal's hand stung sharp and brought tears to Kuri's eyes. He sat back, confused.

"I know you will figure this out, Warisha." Sheikh Akmal offered the meat again.

Before Kuri could mount another attempt, Sora pushed by him and wrapped his lips around Sheikh Akmal's fingers, sucking the meat, lapping at the man's fingers until the venison disappeared. Sora sat back on his heels, big brown doe eyes on Sheikh Akmal. Gabriel wasn't the only one running interference.

"Will I receive a new name too, sir? I mean, Your Highness?" Sora asked, his voice soft and sweet.

Sheikh Akmal's breathing became notably heavier, and he devoured Sora with his eyes. "Slender as an oasis reed. Willing, beautiful lips, I will name you Haifa." He turned back to Gabriel. "I desire these two. I will pay whatever price you name should you decide against taking Rasha."

Daichi scowled as if offended and responded by nuzzling Gabriel's neck.

Gabriel grabbed the slim arms draped over his shoulders. He looked back at Daichi and smiled before addressing Sheikh Akmal. "It would appear your Rasha is eager to prove his worth."

"I can have the food served in your room," Sheikh Akmal said. "Take Rasha and go now. Abdullah will escort you to your quarters. And please, enjoy yourself." As Abdullah appeared, seemingly from nowhere, Akmal motioned him over. "Please bring Haifa to the baths. I want him cleaned and his hair dyed. He will sleep with the harem tonight."

The smile on Abdullah's face looked nothing short of feral as he grasped Sora by the upper arm. "As you wish, Your Highness. It will be my pleasure to make sure Haifa is properly indoctrinated." He nodded to Gabriel. "If you and Rasha would follow me, I will show you to your quarters."

Sora looked over his shoulder as Abdullah dragged him away, his face white as a sheet.

Gabriel managed to catch Kuri's gaze as he rose to follow Abdullah. "Be careful," he mouthed, and then with Daichi following dutifully behind, Gabriel left the room.

The closing of the enormous doors echoed through the cavernous room.

Drawing the colorful robes around his body, Sheikh Akmal rose and came closer to Kuri, walking a slow circle around him, scrutinizing. "You do not adhere to my usual taste. You will have to work much harder than the others to win my favor."

Kuri resumed his kneeling position. Though still hungry, the idea of food seemed far less appealing now. Sheikh Akmal's footsteps matched the sound of the blood pounding in Kuri's head. "Yes, sir."

"You will address me as *Your Highness*." Sheikh Akmal went back to his food, settling into the pillows. He plucked up a morsel of venison. "Come, Warisha. Eat. I do not wish for your protesting belly to interfere with your concentration on my evening's pleasure. Sit beside me."

Without hesitation, Kuri went to the sheikh. He copied Sora's tactic of eating, nibbling the meat from Sheikh Akmal's fingers with plenty of tongue caressing. The thought of Daichi having spent the past two months living this life with these people disgusted him. He started to understand the vacant look in Daichi's eyes and prayed it was reversible. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Sheikh Akmal chuckled, a resonant, ominous sound, and he spread some grease from the meat lingering on his fingertip onto Kuri's mouth like lipstick. "Perhaps you are not such a hopeless case after all."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gabriel was led upstairs and down a length of corridor opening up to the outside, across an oriental garden before returning to the cool interior. As they crossed the garden, Gabriel saw several colorful koi in a large pond. How strange, to see such familiar things surrounded by desert foliage and not the gentle sway of cherry trees.

The same hues and royal accoutrements adorned the room assigned to Gabriel for the night. Priceless Persian rugs scattered the mosaic tile floor, and giant marble pillars appeared to hold up a ceiling peppered with golden 'stars' providing illumination.

Abdullah tugged Sora to a halt. "If you need anything, there is a house phone on the desk by the window. Your refreshments will be delivered shortly."

Gabriel looked Abdullah in the eyes with a hard, steady gaze.

"Go easy on him, my friend." Gabriel gave a nod toward Sora. "He's quite sensitive and fragile, and, as of this moment, still my possession. I wouldn't want my trade with Sheikh Akmal to be jeopardized due to my property being mishandled."

Abdullah looked like Gabriel had struck him, his lip quivering, a retort obviously swallowed. "Yes, *my friend*. He will be treated as if made of fine crystal. After Sora is cleansed and his hair colored, he will be introduced to the rest of the harem. If I were you, I would worry more about your other boy."

Slimy bastard, Gabriel thought. *I'll have to talk to Cyd about serving a little special comeuppance for your sorry ass.*

To Abdullah, Gabriel simply smiled and said, "Thank you. That will be all."

Without another word, Abdullah departed. Daichi slipped his hand into Gabriel's and give a tug. "Forget him, Master. Let me help make up your mind about taking me away with you."

Taken aback by the brazen approach, Gabriel came to a grinding halt. "Slow down, there. I think we need to have a little talk before we —"

A heavy knock at the door interrupted.

Puzzled, Gabriel went to answer, amazed at how difficult the door was to open. Apparently the structure didn't simply look authentic, the construction values were, too. He made a mental note to relay the information to Cyd, so the infantry didn't storm in armed with peashooters where rocket-propelled grenades were required.

Johara stood outside the door, pushing an elaborate bronze cart. More food, much wine.

"His Highness sends you greetings." Johara wheeled the cart inside. He pulled back a burgundy drape, revealing a well-stocked liquor supply on a shelf underneath the cart. He knelt beside it and pulled out a single bottle. He wagged his fingers for Gabriel to join him on the floor. "His Highness has generously shared with you some rare items from his private reserves. Here, let me show you."

Gabriel squatted down. Johara moved so close Gabriel could smell pineapple on his breath.

"I must speak quickly, so listen well," Johara whispered. "You are being watched, and expected to take full advantage of your examination time alone with Rasha, if you follow my meaning. The trade will be called off if you back down or are caught

speaking to Rasha as if you know him. I *know* you know him, but he may not remember you. He's been heavily drugged on and off the past few weeks." Johara glanced around for an instant, a wary look on his face. He put the bottle back and selected another and showed the label to Gabriel. "I will take care of Sora in the harem. Kuri, I cannot help unless Sheikh Akmal summons me. If you request my presence in the morning, I will be able to explain more fully." Johara returned the bottle to the tray under the cart and smiled. "I am on your side."

Gabriel stood, smiling pleasantly as he examined the dishes on top of the cart. "His Highness is generous. Please thank him for me."

Johara rose to his feet and bowed. "Enjoy your evening, honored guest."

Johara backed his way to the door, eyes flicking up to the stars on the ceiling. Gabriel nodded. Johara slipped out the door.

"Well," Gabriel said, hands going to his hips. "Perhaps you could make me a drink, Rasha? I might be a little better company if I loosen up a bit first."

Daichi seemed to glide to the cart, his bare feet silent on the rugs. He picked up a crystal goblet. "Does Master have a preference?"

"What do *you* like?" Gabriel kicked off his shoes, toed off his socks, and pushed them aside, slipping into character, which came too damn easy. He took a deep breath and tried to slow his racing pulse. "I wouldn't want any taste on my lips you don't like."

The words seemed to startle Daichi; he looked directly into Gabriel's eyes for the first time. Cheeks turning pink, he reached for a long-necked bottle and filled the goblet. "It's a guava and passion fruit cordial, the closest thing to plum wine His Highness stocks. I . . . hope you like it."

Daichi bowed his head as he handed the glass to Gabriel.

"Thank you." Gabriel took a small sip. "Very nice. You can fix one for yourself, if you like." After drinking the rest of the thick, sweet liquor, Gabriel set the glass down on the cart. "I'll have another."

Moving toward the bed, Gabriel removed his jacket, shirt, and tie, hanging them neatly over the back of a chair. "How long have you lived here, Rasha?"

Glasses clinked, liquor poured, and then Daichi returned to Gabriel's side with one glass held out, the other retained for himself. "Two months, Master. I think."

Gabriel took the glass and sat on the edge of the bed. "Do you like living in the palace?"

Daichi remained standing and sipped the drink before answering. "I suppose so. I'm fed and clothed. I'm his Highness's favorite, so I am allowed outside and given special treatment. I share his bed and his *shisha*. He is even teaching me how to ride his prized horses. Life could be worse."

Perhaps only his imagination, but Gabriel detected a note of sorrow in Daichi's words. Keeping in mind they were under observation, Gabriel proceeded with care. "Do you miss your life prior to coming here?"

Daichi looked up, his eyes smoky and unfocused. "I don't know. Everything is a blur."

Reality struck Gabriel hard and a piercing pain stabbed his heart. He looked down at the word etched in flesh on his left arm. No. If he were truly a monster, he wouldn't give a damn about the abject hopelessness reflected in Daichi's eyes. He took a deep breath to steady the rage welling up inside. Polishing off the drink, he held the empty glass out to Daichi. "Finish your drink and set the glasses on the cart. Then, I want you to do something for me."

Daichi did exactly as Gabriel asked and returned to him with haste. "Yes, Master?"

Gabriel promised himself to apologize to Daichi later, to one day make this up to him, and to Kuri as well. "Your *kimono* is quite beautiful, but I'm not here to purchase clothing. Take it off."

Daichi hesitated only a moment. "Would you like to untie the *obi*, Master? Or shall I remove everything for you? Some men prefer to unwrap *kimono* themselves."

"I prefer to watch you undress for me."

Bowing, Daichi proceeded to demonstrate undressing as an art. The *obi*, once untied, was carefully unwound and folded, after which the colorful outer layer of the

kimono was slipped, one arm at a time, from Daichi's body. The *hiyoku*, the lightweight undergarment, Daichi removed with the same slow, practiced moves. He folded each piece and placed them aside before he returned to Gabriel and knelt, bowing low with his forehead pressed to the floor.

As if he'd witnessed a beautiful, erotic dance, Gabriel found himself mesmerized and more than a little aroused. He wiped a light sheen of sweat from his upper lip and tried to regain control of his senses, knowing full well he'd have to let go eventually to make this charade look convincing.

"Come lie down next to me," Gabriel said. "I want to touch you."

Daichi crawled to the bed on hands and knees, the ruby-colored harem pants previously hidden by the *kimono* making a quiet swish along the rug as he moved. Hands on the edge of the bed, Daichi crawled up and reclined beside Gabriel with wide, swimming eyes and a soft, relaxed mouth. "Do you love the boys you brought with you?"

Hoping the cameras in the ceiling lights were the only ones present, Gabriel feigned a lazy stretch to facilitate rolling onto his stomach. He propped up on his elbows, bringing his face close to Daichi's. Unsure if the cameras also recorded audio, he kept his voice quiet and low, as lovers would. "I care about both of them, very much."

"I believe you." Daichi took Gabriel's hand and ran his tongue along Gabriel's fingers. His black hair fell over his face and Daichi whispered between the licks. "If His Highness desires more time to make his decision, please take Kuri and Sora out of here. Do not leave them with him."

Gabriel let out a shallow breath. "Do you remember who I am?"

"Vaguely. But I saw how Kuri kept looking to you, so he must trust you."

"I think he does now," Gabriel said, "but it's taken a lot to get us to this point." Gabriel smiled. "The last time I saw you, you had bleached hair and you were very, very pissed off. I had purchased Kuri's time for several days, and I behaved badly. Whether you remember or not, I'm apologizing."

Something clicked, a glint of recognition cutting through the haze in Daichi's eyes. "Yes, I think I remember. But you need to do something more than talk to me now, or they will suspect something is wrong."

"I know." Gabriel turned onto his side next to Daichi, dragging the tips of his fingers along the waistband of the harem pants. "Will you be all right? I promise not to be rough."

Daichi smiled and pressed his hips forward. "Nothing you can do to me will be any worse than what I've endured here so far."

Gabriel brushed strands of silken black hair from Daichi's eyes, caressed the soft skin of Daichi's cheek with the back of his fingers. "Then I'll do my best to try to make it nice." He leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on Daichi's mouth. "I can already see one of the reasons Kuri loves you so much. It takes a very strong man to live through something like this and still be able to smile."

"Thinking of Kuri kept me alive." Daichi stretched out, arms over his head, completely open to Gabriel. He nodded toward Gabriel's scarred arm. "You seem too kind to proclaim yourself a monster."

Gabriel marched a trailed of soft kisses down the center of Daichi's chest and belly, stopping when he reached the harem pants. He slid off the bed, turned to face Daichi, and began unbuckling his belt. After tossing the belt to the floor, he skimmed down his trousers and briefs, and crawled onto the bed to straddle Daichi's thighs. He palmed Daichi's cock and balls through the sheer material.

"I've gone through some changes lately, for the better." Gabriel remembered to keep his face tilted downward from the overhead cameras and his volume low. "I owe Kuri a debt of gratitude."

Daichi arched up into the touch with such conviction, Gabriel couldn't be sure if the boy was that sensitive or simply an amazing actor.

Lying on his back, Daichi's ability to speak freely was hampered because of the cameras, but his open position declared his body belonged to Gabriel for the time being.

Keeping his eyes locked on Daichi's, Gabriel pulled the harem pants down below Daichi's ass, exposing him fully. He ran a fingertip along the length of Daichi's cock from base to tip.

"You really are beautiful," Gabriel said. "I almost wish this were happening under more pleasant circumstances."

Daichi turned his head to one side, breaking eye contact. "Like at the host club? A sad little secret? This will be more intimate, and I might actually remember you in the morning. If you were my client back in Japan, I would be moving on to the next one two hours from now and you'd be forgotten." Daichi's breathing became labored. "Kuri remembered you. That means far more than you realize."

A sad little secret.

Four small, insignificant words put in just the right order to sum up Gabriel's insignificant little life. If there had been a rock nearby, he'd have slinked off on his yellow belly to crawl under it.

He leaned down over Daichi, caging him between elbows and knees. "That's not what I meant," he said, rocking slowly back and forth as if he were fucking. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. Pretend that I'm getting you off, and then we can sleep."

Daichi's expression hardened. "I appreciate your sense of honor, but if there are no stains on this bed come morning, we could both lose our heads. Don't think that they don't do that here. I've seen people dragged off."

"Fuck . . ." Gabriel swore under his breath, knowing Daichi's words to be true. Balancing his torso on one elbow, he grabbed his own cock in a tight fist and began to roughly stroke. "Smile at me," he said to Daichi as he jerked himself off. "Lick your lips. Talk dirty to me so the camera can see. I'll soil the bed if they need evidence, but I refuse to soil you in the process."

"So noble." Daichi reached up, cupped Gabriel's face and kissed him. A slow, deep kiss. Daichi's tongue worked in firm strokes against Gabriel's. One long leg joined in the seduction, hooking over Gabriel's hip. Daichi arched and his cock came in contact with the back of Gabriel's hand and left the skin damp.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place, Daichi's eyes once again revealing more than words. The bedclothes weren't the only place Sheikh Akmal would look for evidence of sex. Gabriel broke the kiss. He ceased masturbating, and grabbed Daichi's slender wrists, pinning them to the mattress high over Daichi's head.

"I know you can't really want this," Gabriel whispered, "so I think I understand. I hope you'll be able to forgive me."

Shifting Daichi's wrists into the grip of one hand, Gabriel used his other hand to line himself up, hoping Daichi had been prepared for penetration earlier as a matter of course. To Gabriel's relief, Daichi's hole felt warm and slick on the head of his cock. He teased the rim with circular movements.

"He'll check; he's done it before." Daichi gasped, his legs spreading wide for Gabriel. High cheekbones blushing red, Daichi whimpered as Gabriel made the first push, the small sound the only protest. "Nothing to forgive. You're a good man. Kuri has good instincts whether he knows it or not."

Gabriel eased himself in, doing his level best to make his entry as comfortable as possible. Once fully inserted, he leaned over Daichi on both forearms, cradling Daichi's head with gentle hands, his fingers caressing soft, shiny hair. He touched his lips to Daichi's chin in a tender kiss.

"We're going to get you out of here." Gabriel canted his hips, sliding deeper inside Daichi with a long, smooth stroke. "How many total in the harem? Was that all of them—*fuck*."

Despite the gravity of the situation, sensation remained sensation, and damn if Daichi didn't feel tight and hot and *so fucking good*. Gabriel let out a quiet moan, a shiver racing down his spine. He collected himself and finished his question. "Was that the entire harem in the audience hall?"

Daichi broke into a sweat. His eyes fought hard for focus—whether from the drugs or his mind fleeing to take refuge, Gabriel couldn't be sure. "Yes. There are thirteen, including me."

Some *good* news, finally. Gabriel had harbored the fear there might be many more young men being held, perhaps even hundreds. Fewer than twenty seemed a small enough number for Cyd and his team to manage a safe extraction.

"Daichi." The plaintive look on Daichi's face when his real name was spoken wasn't lost on Gabriel. "I need to trust you with some information. Have they drugged you to the point where you can't keep a secret from them?"

To cover the continuing conversation, Gabriel gave a solid upward thrust while plundering Daichi's mouth with a hard, deep kiss. He backed away after leaving another, more tender kiss on Daichi's delicate chin by way of apology.

Daichi's breath pushed out in a sordid moan into Gabriel's mouth. "I . . . I'm not sure. He keeps me somewhat sedated, but if I'm to be yours he might not waste the effort. I haven't been drugged to that point in several days."

After a few more steady thrusts, changing his angle to offer Daichi at least a modicum of pleasure, Gabriel entered him slowly, deeply, and then held perfectly still. He nuzzled his face against Daichi neck as if kissing him. "Johara isn't working with me, but he's here for a similar purpose. In the morning, when you're taken back to the harem while Sheikh Akmal and I formalize the exchange, I need you to get a message to him. I may not have the chance myself, and I may not be able to speak to Kuri and Sora again, either. Do you think you'll be able to do that for me?"

"Oh, oh yes!" Daichi moaned, his fingers digging into Gabriel's shoulders, fingernails leaving little crescent grooves in Gabriel's flesh. Daichi pressed his forehead to Gabriel's and whispered. "What's the message?"

"Tell him — " With muscles in his upper arms trembling from the strain of supporting himself in one position for so long, coupled with impending orgasm, Gabriel moaned, sweat slicking his body. "Fuck," he said, panting. "God, tell him to find some way to meet me at ten p.m. at Topkapi Palace Club the day after tomorrow. Christ. Daichi, I'm sorry. I'm coming — "

Daichi smashed his mouth into Gabriel's, drinking a kiss from him intimate enough for old lovers. Gabriel felt Daichi clenching for him, pulsing tight walls around

Gabriel's dick. A moment later, Daichi showed appreciation with his own thick heat splattering against Gabriel's belly. Tears glistened in Daichi's eyes when the shuddering ended.

Waiting until his breathing slowed enough that he could control the volume of his voice, Gabriel clutched Daichi in a tight embrace. He forced his rattled mind to focus on where he was and why. "Will you . . . will you be able to remember the message?"

"Ten p.m., Topkapi Palace Club, day after tomorrow." Daichi smiled then kissed Gabriel again. "Thank you. I know damn well you could've left me here and taken Kuri for yourself." He moved his fingers down Gabriel's shoulder and caressed the scars on Gabriel's forearm. "You're saving thirteen innocent men from a *real* monster. Promise me something, Gabriel. If we get out of here alive, you add the word 'slayer' to that."

Gabriel couldn't remember the last time words had touched him so deeply. His vision blurred. He nodded once and smiled. "I promise." He gave Daichi a soft kiss on the cheek. "Let's get cleaned up and get some sleep."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kuri stumbled out of sheer exhaustion and looked up at Abdullah in terror as they marched down the long, silent corridor.

Abdullah looked sharply down at him, but rather than crack Kuri's already sensitive skin, he smiled.

Kuri got the distinct impression there were gruesome, obscene images playing behind those dark eyes. He knew Abdullah had been just outside the door of the sheikh's quarters and likely heard every cry. When the initial inspection and training ended, Abdullah appeared at the first call. After several more hours alone with Sheikh Akmal, Kuri fully understood the reason behind Daichi's hollow expression. Kuri had put up a strong fight for the first hour, but learned quickly enough Sheikh Akmal was going to have his way.

"Where are we going now?" Kuri hoped to break Abdullah's current train of thought.

"To your new home, Warisha." Abdullah gave a sharp push between Kuri's shoulder blades. "The royal harem. Your little companion is already there, waiting. He looks much better now, with his natural hair color restored." Abdullah's sinister chuckle resounded off the marble walls, his smile gleaming lethal and deadly as a desert serpent. "His attitude is also much improved, as you will see. Such a tasty little morsel."

Kuri didn't realize he'd stopped walking until it was too late. He looked Abdullah straight in the eyes. Gabriel would be disappointed, but Kuri's raw anger boiled over. "What did you do to him, you fucking monster?"

Abdullah met Kuri's stare, the slight curl of his lips still evident as he twirled the tip of his long beard with his fingers. "Nothing he has not done for pay in the past." He nodded toward the huge, elaborate double doors ahead of them at the end of the long corridor. "Now, move, before I fabricate an acceptable reason to flay the flesh off you with my whip. You will be of no comfort to your friend if you are cowering in a corner sucking your thumb."

Throat tight, Kuri peeled his gaze off Abdullah and went to the doors, entering after the guard currently on duty opened them. This room looked different from the first room he'd seen upon arrival, but the ambience felt the same. Most of the harem slaves inside slept, but Kuri saw a few shadows of motion, and he heard soft moans and the slapping of skin on skin. The door closed behind him. Kuri scanned the room for Sora.

"I settled him toward the back of the room." Johara's soft, whispering voice came accompanied by a gentle, guiding hand on Kuri's elbow. "The guards are sometimes permitted to indulge as a bonus for loyal service, and they mostly take whichever boy is closest to the door."

Kuri stared at Johara. "Thank you. Is he — ?" Kuri couldn't get the words out. He knew in his heart none of them would ever be the same after this horrible, inconceivable experience.

Johara moved them through the room, careful to walk them around young men sleeping on mats, others engaged in quiet sex. "I'm sorry," Johara said, leaning in to whisper, "but I could not intervene without exposing my cover. I am far more valuable to you alive than dead, but I *am* sorry. Fortunately, Master Abdullah loves to watch, and I was able to steer him in that direction. Most of what Sora was forced to do was done with me, much as I did for *you* at Topkapi Palace Club. When we are freed from this place, I will beg your forgiveness."

Kuri kept his voice low. "Who are you?" He then spotted Sora close by, curled up in a tight ball and possibly sleeping. Kuri paused. "You owe me no apology. You've helped us in the best way you can, and I'm grateful." He approached Sora with tentative steps. "Sora?"

Sora stirred and sat up, holding a hand out to Kuri. "Come sleep with me, please. I'm so tired."

"I'll be right over there should you need me." Johara gestured toward a mat in a nearby corner. "We'll most likely be left undisturbed until morning, so try to get some sleep."

"All right," Kuri said with wan smile. "Thank you, Johara."

The rest of the room seemed to have settled down with the arrival of the final occupant for the night. Kuri lay down behind Sora and wrapped an arm around his narrow waist. "I'm sorry. I never should have let you come here."

Sora nestled back against Kuri. "It's all right," he whispered. "Maybe we'll be able to help Daichi better when this is over, since we've suffered some of the same." Sora craned his neck and looked over his shoulder. "Do you remember my friend Aki, from Kingyo?"

"The one who went missing months ago? Yes, of course!" Kuri felt his heart skip a beat. "Is he here, too?"

"No," Sora said with a sad shake of his head, "but Johara is Aki's younger brother. That's why he's helping us; Johara let himself be sold into slavery because he heard a rumor describing a boy who sounded a lot like Aki." Sora hugged Kuri's arm in

a snug embrace. "I feel so bad for him, Kuri. Maybe we should ask if Gabriel can help Johara once we're all safe and away from here."

Kuri looked toward the huddled shadow of Johara. "And I was so suspicious of him. Poor thing; we'll do whatever we can, Sora. I promise." Kuri wasn't sure what could be done. The facts they'd uncovered so far led him to believe Aki had been one of the many boys Sheikh Akmal trained then sold or traded away. He could be anywhere in the world by now. Pushing the horrible idea from his mind, Kuri nestled his face into the crook of Sora's neck. "Get some sleep, okay?"

"Okay." Sora yawned. "Try to have good dreams, Kuri."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Gabriel stood at the window of his palatial guest quarters overlooking the Persian Gulf, the blue waters peppered with tiny, man-made islands in every direction. If not for the horror underscoring this trip, he might've entertained the notion of acquiring property here for himself. Perhaps, if they were successful, he'd buy this very island for spite and burn the godforsaken palace down to the artificial ground, leaving the barren plot as a memorial for those he'd arrived too late to save.

He checked his watch. Only a few minutes had passed since breakfast had been cleaned up and Daichi taken away, but time seemed to drag in this frightful place.

A booming knock shattered his reverie.

"Come in." Gabriel turned away from the window as Abdullah entered the room.

"If you would follow me, Mr. Hartley," Abdullah said with a facetious bow. "His Highness awaits you in his office. I believe he has come to a decision."

* * * * *

Gabriel entered Sheikh Akmal's office, the large door closing immediately behind him.

The new surroundings gave the unsettling impression the doorway had been a portal through time. Gabriel had walked out of a world rich in antiquities and ancient traditions, into another world of modern technology. Windows completely enclosed Sheikh Akmal's office with a 360-degree view. Gabriel assumed they were at the top of one of the highest minarets he'd spotted from the helicopter. Sheikh Akmal sat behind a jet-black desk accented with brushed steel, studying a large, flat-screen computer monitor. A bank of monitors lined one wall flashing views of the palace's interior, while other monitors displayed stock tickers and news programs from around the world. The appointments of the luxurious office would've made even the highest paid CEOs back home supremely envious.

Akmal looked up from his task and smiled. "Breakfast was satisfactory?"

Gabriel nodded. "It was indeed. Has Your Highness reached a decision? I can see you are a very busy man, and I don't wish to take up any more of your valuable time."

Akmal relaxed back into his high-backed leather chair. "Sit."

The commanding tone of Sheikh Akmal's voice rattled Gabriel to the core. Fearful something had gone wrong with the deal – or worse, that he'd been found out to be a fraud – set Gabriel on edge. With the sort of control usually reserved for maintaining his "straight" façade in front of his parents, Gabriel settled his jangled nerves with a quick swallow and a deep, silent breath. He took a seat in the elegant wing-style chair facing Sheikh Akmal's desk.

Only once Gabriel stilled in the chair did Sheikh Akmal continue. "Americans. You are all in such a rush. It is quite rude, don't you realize? I offer you food, drink, and my best slave, and you want to deal with me standing up?" Akmal clasped his hands on the desk and ran a contemplative gaze over Gabriel. "Your offer is acceptable. The boys are currently becoming familiar with the rest of my harem. If you are content with Rasha, they will remain here with me. What is *your* decision?"

"My sincerest apologies," Gabriel said with the most contrite demeanor he could muster, despite wanting to exhale a loud sigh of relief instead. "I'm in agreement. You've trained Rasha well. I only hope my boys will someday please you just as much."

"Good! I am content." Akmal reached into a desk drawer and pulled out what appeared to be a written contract. "Read this. The details cover both our needs equally for a smooth transaction. When we're through with this formality, we can go collect Rasha and you may grant your boys a final farewell."

Signed. Sealed. Delivered.

Chapter Thirty

Breakfast was served after the morning call to prayer, which had raked Kuri's nerves. Not only because prayer seemed to be all they did besides eat and get fucked, but because of the inherent hypocrisy. Who would want to worship a god who allowed for the devout to inflict such atrocities on another human being?

He and Sora stuck close to Johara and avoided the boys in the harem who seemed to resent them. Johara filled them in on the hierarchy in place and seemed to buffer them from the worst of the initial strife.

When the food arrived, Johara once again proved beneficial beyond his weight in gold. He moved in first and took his choice, enough to assure Kuri and Sora would also have satisfied bellies.

Kuri nibbled on fruited bread and listened as Johara ran down the rules of their new situation. He was about to ask Johara why all the slaves didn't band to fight back, but the door to the harem swung open.

Abdullah, dressed in colorful ceremonial finery, swept into the room in a swirl of bright fabric, a long, ivory-handled buggy whip in his hand. He flicked the whip, and the resulting crack silenced the harem.

"His Royal Highness, Sheikh Akmal bin Hosaam," Abdullah said in a strong, booming voice.

A fanfare of trumpets followed the announcement, and with his hands on his hips, Sheikh Akmal sauntered into the room with a gracious smile. Gabriel entered

behind the sheikh, and behind Gabriel followed Daichi, the latter dressed only in sheer red harem pants.

A pin could've been heard dropping on a rug. Kuri tried to get Gabriel's attention with slow steps forward, but a guard who entered after Daichi seized him by one arm. Glancing back at Sora, Kuri saw the same fate befall him. *Have we been found out?* Panic coursed through Kuri's veins in a rush of hot adrenaline, and he struggled against the guard's grip.

"He is a blaze of fire even now," Sheikh Akmal said to Gabriel, his dark eyes shining with satisfaction as the guards brought Kuri and Sora forward. He turned to address the rest of the harem. "Allah has blessed me with the gift of Warisha and Haifa. In return, I transfer ownership of Rasha to my new friend Gabriel."

"No!" A wail rang out from the back of the room.

Kuri turned, shocked.

A slave he'd come to know in his brief hours as Zahirah broke through the surprised guards and threw himself at Daichi. "Anyone but Rasha, please!"

Daichi wrapped his arms around Zahirah, pulled him close, and whispered something in his ear. Zahirah nodded. Daichi smiled, and leaned in to kiss Zahirah on the mouth.

The exchange left Kuri with his mouth agape. As a host club boy, Kuri knew how to fake a kiss, how to make everyone watching think your heart belonged to the woman or man receiving the gesture. He knew Daichi. He knew the difference between Daichi's heartfelt kisses and the ones meant to pry more money from a client.

This kiss hadn't been artificial, and neither were the tears spilling as Abdullah grabbed Zahirah by his waist-long hair and hauled him off Daichi. Abdullah shoved Zahirah to the ground in a sobbing, woeful mess.

"Abdullah, take Rasha to the helipad while Gabriel bids his farewells." Sheikh Akmal shook Gabriel's hand. "A true pleasure, Gabriel. I hope you will visit us again. Remember me when you come across suitable Asian treasures in your wanderings, yes?"

Gabriel offered Sheikh Akmal a wide smile and released the friendly grip. "I'll bear that in mind, Your Highness. Thank you again for your unparalleled hospitality." He turned to Daichi. "Rasha, would you care to say goodbye to anyone?"

Daichi looked toward the back of the room. "May I say farewell to Johara?"

Sheikh Akmal nodded.

Breezing past Kuri in a blur, Johara met Daichi halfway across the floor. A chaste hug, a whispered exchange, accompanied by smiles and tears. Abdullah cracked his whip and they parted. Daichi returned to Gabriel's side, and Abdullah escorted them out.

The sheikh began a slow meander through the harem.

Johara moved behind Kuri, and Kuri felt warm breath near his ear.

"Daichi needs me to be at Topkapi Palace Club two evenings hence at ten o'clock. I may need your help." Kuri felt a gentle kiss on the side of his neck behind his ear. "My kiss is from Daichi. He said to tell you that he loves you very, very much."

"Anything you need, just ask." Kuri's throat constricted and his eyes blurred and stung. He watched the doorway until he could no longer see his beloved Daichi or Gabriel. The doors closing felt like an angry fist squeezing his heart. Sora appeared at his side, hiding from Sheikh Akmal as the man took up residence on a low chair in the center of the room.

Several boys rushed to Sheikh Akmal with enthusiasm. Kuri sighed, relieved that the man, for the moment, had enough lapdogs and seemed content.

Chapter Thirty-One

As the helicopter circled for a landing on the helipad next to the house, Gabriel saw the cherry-red speedboat hitched at the beachside dock on his rented island and smiled. At least *something* turned out to be dependable amid the madness.

They debarked without incident and the chopper left. Not seeing any sign of Cyd Khalid near the boat or on the beach, Gabriel took Daichi by the hand and tugged him toward the deck.

"The boat belongs to a friend of mine who works for the CIA," Gabriel said as they climbed the wooden stairs. "He's going to lead the team that enters the palace."

Once inside the house, Gabriel heard the shower running in the guest bathroom. Cyd had obviously made himself at home. After guiding Daichi through the living room, Gabriel settled him onto the couch and proceeded to draw all the window blinds.

He looked at Daichi with as much of a smile as he could summon and sat next to him, brushing a wayward lock of hair out of his face. "We're alone here, just the three of us. You're safe now, and in less than forty-eight hours, we'll have Kuri and Sora back, too."

"I should tell you, His Highness is not above suicide if he suspects he's about to lose everything. I learned very quickly how differently he and his people look at life." Daichi stared at his hands, folded between his spread legs. "He's not above killing every boy there, and then joining them by his own hand. When your people move, they need to make sure it's a sudden, killing strike."

Gabriel nodded. "Anything you can tell us will be helpful." The shower stopped running, the sounds of off-key singing drifting down the hall. Gabriel chuckled. "Cyd is a much better agent than he is a singer. He'll do his best to make sure everyone is okay. While we're waiting, can I get you anything? Something to drink? Or eat? I don't remember you being quite this skinny back in Osaka."

"Can I have something alcoholic?" A light seemed to spark in Daichi's eyes, mirth and hope rebounding. "And a piece of paper and a pencil. I can draw the layout of the palace. It took me a long while to get my bearings, but I know it by heart now."

"You bet." Gabriel patted Daichi on the leg, got up and headed toward the bar. "What's your poison? I have pretty much everything here you can think of."

"Cept a decent American beer," Cyd grumbled.

Gabriel looked back. Cyd – wearing a pair of white cotton slacks and an insanely loud tropical-print shirt – stood in the doorway leading from the hall.

"How about some cheap champagne?" Daichi smiled. "I went through serious withdrawal."

"Cyd," Gabriel said, nodding toward the couch, "this is Daichi."

Cyd went to Daichi and extended his hand. "Nice to see you safe and sound, young man. I'm pleased to meet you."

Daichi shook Cyd's hand. "Thank you. Thank you for helping me."

"Nah, don't mention it," Cyd said with a dismissive wave. "It'll be my pleasure to bring these bastards in or cap a couple holes in 'em if we can't."

"I wouldn't mind seeing that scumbag Abdullah meet an unfortunate end." Gabriel popped the cork on a champagne bottle. He grabbed two crystal champagne flutes and the bottle, returned to the couch, and in moments Daichi had a drink in his hand.

"Daichi," Cyd said, "did I hear you say you could draw a layout of the joint?"

Daichi's face glowed with pleasure as he accepted the glass and sipped. "Yes. I was walked back and forth to most rooms in the palace often enough for me to visualize the routes. We traveled to many different sections in the palace on the way to prayer."

"Prayer." Gabriel's mouth pinched up in disgust. "What a sick son of a bitch."

Cyd snorted. "Kinda puts the whole 'monster' thing in a little clearer perspective, wouldn't you say, pal?"

"Lay off. Go make yourself useful and find some paper and a pencil. Set up on the dining room table; we'll be there shortly."

After offering a grin and a mock salute, Cyd disappeared down the hall.

Gabriel turned to Daichi. "After we finish with Cyd, I'll show you to your room. I'm sure you'll want to shower and get that place off you; I know I do. Then we can relax while Cyd meets with his people. I'll make us some dinner, and we can talk if you like. It might help."

Daichi rose and moved to the dining room table. "Anything to help keep my thoughts off Kuri and Sora and how scared they must be right now. What about Takumi? Is he here, too?"

"No," Gabriel said. "Takumi stayed behind. We needed one other along with Kuri to sweeten the pot for the sheikh. Sora volunteered, and Kuri thought it best for Takumi to remain in Osaka and at work. It seemed wise not to relieve your boss of all his best employees for when" —Gabriel paused as clear realization hit him that nothing was carved in stone at this point regarding how things would work out— "*in case* any of you decide to return to work there. No need to burn a bridge unnecessarily, and Mr. Toshi seemed satisfied with Takumi holding down the fort. Sora has spoken with Takumi several times, and he's doing fine. Tired and missing you all, but fine."

"Mr. Toshi. Working at Kingyo seems like a lifetime ago. I don't think I can ever go back to that. I see now what I was doing to myself. How others were viewing us." Daichi looked up as Cyd came back into the room with a pad of paper and some pencils. Daichi began to sketch out the palace as best he remembered from his months of captivity. As the drawing took shape, he recalled more and more, adding small details until satisfied. He handed the pad of paper to Cyd. "Here. I circled all the hallways I know are kept guarded. This entrance to the menageries, I've never seen guarded. I guess they figure the noises from disturbed animals would be enough."

Cyd smiled. "Nothing a few high-powered tranquilizer guns can't take care of."

Gabriel nodded, resting a hand between Daichi's shoulder blades as he leaned over the rough blueprint. "We could see the zoo area from the chopper when we flew in. Do you know who's in charge of feeding the animals?"

"I know him by sight, but not by name. He's one of the kitchen helpers." Daichi leaned back into Gabriel's gentle touch. "The boys in the harem will know who I mean."

"Hmm." Cyd swung a leg over a chair and sat, tapping his chin with the eraser end of the pencil. "Do you think this man could be bought? And is there any way you can think of that Johara might be able to gain access to him?" Cyd looked at Daichi and shrugged. "Just a thought."

"Johara has more access than most because of Abdullah. It's possible if anyone could gain access, he might." Daichi paused. "If Johara asks Abdullah to see the animals, Abdullah will grant his request, he is *that* wrapped around Johara's little finger. Perhaps if we were able to get some form of sleeping pills to him, Johara could toss them into the animals' water buckets?"

Gabriel planted a playful kiss on the top of Daichi's head. "Does Kuri know how smart you are? Because if he doesn't, he's in big trouble."

Daichi flashed a joyous smile. He turned back to the drawing and began placing small x-marks in various places. "The palace is under camera surveillance, as you know. Here. Here. Here, and also in the harem room." Daichi placed more marks in the harem room than in any other. He looked at Gabriel. "His Highness likes to watch."

Bastard. "Do you have what you need?" Gabriel cocked an eyebrow at Cyd.

Cyd nodded and gathered up Daichi's map. "Call me as soon as you leave Topkapi Palace Club tomorrow night. Unless something drastically changes, we're looking at two o'clock raid the following morning."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kuri glared at the boy named Zahirah from across the room. In the hours following Daichi's departure, Kuri had been kept too busy to approach the pretty, longhaired boy to ask him what exactly was going on between him and Daichi. Now, with dinner served, Kuri watched as Zahirah ate with a small band of harem boys, all of them crowding and touching Zahirah as if he were some sort of prince among slaves. Only once did Zahirah look up and meet Kuri's gaze.

"Look at him." Kuri groused to Sora as they picked at their dinner. "He knows who I am. I can tell!"

Sora elbowed Kuri in the ribs. "Don't be so damn judgmental. Would you have rather seen Daichi hated and treated badly? You should be *glad* someone here thought

enough of him to act concerned. Look . . . he's looking at you again. You should go talk to him, Kuri." Sora cupped Kuri's chin in his hand. "And be civil."

Kuri pouted with a huff. "I know you're right, but he and Daichi kissed like old lovers. I felt something twisted inside me, Sora." Looking over toward Zahirah, Kuri realized Sora was right. Zahirah appeared nervous. "Okay, okay! I'll be nice."

As Kuri approached, the boys surrounding Zahirah took notice and a few scampered away. Kuri ignored them and stood close to Zahirah, looking down. "Can anyone join this party?"

Zahirah waved a hand and the rest of the boys surrounding him scattered. He patted an emerald-colored pillow next to him. "Sit."

Kuri didn't budge. "Is that an offer or a command?"

"Take it however you wish." Zahirah again patted the green pillow at his side. "Be it known, however, that I rarely ask twice."

"You're pretty full of yourself. How did Daichi—I mean Rasha—put up with your arrogant ass?" Kuri sat, convincing himself he should heed Sora's advice and keep things civil, at least until he uncovered the facts.

A warm, slender hand slid against Kuri's neck, a sharp gouge of fingertips staking claim as they twisted in the hair at his nape. "You should be thanking me."

Kuri shoved Zahirah's hand away. He hadn't expected a forward act of possession or such an aggressive retort. Rubbing his neck, Kuri answered and kept his voice as calm as possible. "Thanking you? For what? For shoving your tongue down his throat? What kind of game are you playing?"

"Would you have preferred him to be the sole consort of the sheikh?" Zahirah ran his fingertips across the fabric of the pillow. "I watched his back. I gave him the best food. I accepted punishment for him more than once. I'm quite willing to share, since he has vocally expressed his longing for you."

"Daichi is out of this madness, and in a few days—" Kuri snapped his mouth closed. He had no idea how much he could trust Zahirah, and after this display he

wasn't sure Zahirah could be trusted at all. "You're never going to see Daichi again. Gabriel has him now."

Zahirah laughed a short, snorting burst. "He'll no more forget me than he forgot you. I am *not* your enemy, pretty one." He reached out to pet the underside of Kuri's chin with his fingertips. "With what surely awaits you, it might be in your best interest to be nice to me. I am sure you know by now how much His Highness likes to watch."

"You're sick." Kuri glared, but he'd seen for himself before Gabriel had even left the island. Sheikh Akmal had done as much supervising of sex as he'd partaken.

As if on cue, the giant doors to the harem opened and Sheikh Akmal entered for his nightly inspection. On reflex, Kuri shot his gaze toward Sora, who had already started melting into the shadows of the room. Sheikh Akmal circled around the perimeter, touching and speaking to each of his precious Asian dolls.

Zahirah knelt and scooted closer to Kuri. Warm breath, scented with the drug-laced jasmine tea they'd been served earlier, brushed against Kuri's ear. "He told me how much he loves you."

"You'd better not mean the sheikh," Kuri muttered. His eyes never left Sheikh Akmal, who drew down his pants and called over two of his pets to service him orally.

Again, Zahirah's breath ghosted warm against the skin of Kuri's neck. "Of *course* not. Now, I recommend you hold me fondly or your ass will be His Highness's, not mine."

Sheikh Akmal pulled away from his appetizers and surveyed the room for his next course. Suddenly, Kuri understood how Daichi fell into companionship with someone like Zahirah. Rather than risk being thrown over the nearest pillow by the ravenous sheikh, Kuri turned toward Zahirah and found lips immediately pressed against his own. Soft, commanding, and Kuri found himself lowered to the cushions. Zahirah crawled on top.

"Don't worry," Zahirah whispered as he caged Kuri against a softly woven rug. Gentle lips pressed a tender kiss to Kuri's mouth. "I know what he likes."

Sheikh Akmal crushed a pile of pillows against the wall behind him, settling back into the velvet. He wasted no time in shoving down his thin cotton pants to expose himself, straining cock thick and throbbing in his hand. Kuri fought off a shudder of pure revulsion as dark, lustful eyes roamed over him.

Thankfully, Zahirah knew what he was doing. Despite their rocky introduction, Kuri found himself able to indulge in the passionate kissing with relative ease. Zahirah had a hand between Kuri's legs, assisting Kuri to attain the state Sheikh Akmal no doubt desired to see. "You're too good at this."

"I am the best." Zahirah stroked Kuri's cock in a gentle but determined manner. Warm lips and a wet tongue nuzzled Kuri's ear. "I can make you feel very, very good, if you let yourself go."

Kuri's body arched involuntarily, and he ground up against Zahirah. "Do you know what real love is?"

"No," Zahirah said, "but I know you do. Don't ever forget your great fortune."

The sheikh, still fondling his erection, moved closer to Kuri and Zahirah.

"There's still time for you to experience love." Kuri cupped Zahirah's face in his hands and kissed him, in the effectual, convincing way he'd learned to kiss at the host club. Sheikh Akmal moved closer and rested a hand on Kuri's hip, skimming downward until a meaty finger tickled a trail to his tender hole.

"Love is a dangerous emotion," Sheikh Akmal said in a surprisingly soft voice. "Love blinds a man to the world. Blinds him to his own true path."

Kuri knew he should keep his mouth shut and let things happen in due course, but he couldn't let the subject go. "Love can bring two people through impossible odds. Love makes a *new* path for those willing to follow their heart and do the right thing."

Silence blanketed the room like a heavy fog, the only sound remaining the quiet labor of Zahirah's breathing against his ear.

A moment later, Sheikh Akmal pushed Zahirah away from Kuri and swiftly took his place.

"Perhaps I should make a new path right *now* for my mouthy new pet." Sheikh Akmal growled, his lips closing over Kuri's throat and sucking with tongue and teeth. He pushed hard between Kuri's thighs, blunt pressure as he pressed himself against the thin silk of the wispy harem pants.

Kuri yelped and broke into a cold sweat. He looked frantically for Zahirah, if only to take his hand as something to ground himself with.

Zahirah moved toward him, a serene smile on his face as he lowered amethyst silk down over Kuri's hips.

Apparently pleased, Sheikh Akmal backed away and stood, one hand gripping and squeezing his jutting erection. "Still so many things to learn, Warisha. Listen to Zahirah, and you could save yourself much trouble." Sheikh Akmal smiled at Zahirah, his hand moving quicker in self-stimulation. "Break him in, my beautiful tiger. Do not block the cameras."

Without another word to them and without a glance toward another boy, Sheikh Akmal tucked himself in and left the room with purposeful strides. The doors closed again, leaving the harem untended.

Zahirah nuzzled his face into Kuri's neck and inhaled. "I would know you even if I were blindfolded. When Rasha first arrived, he wore your scent all over like perfume."

"We live together." Kuri tried to relax into the inevitable but found the process difficult despite Zahirah's obvious charms. "I've died a little each day since he disappeared."

Slender arms wrapped around Kuri's back and Zahirah moved to look him in the eyes. The expression on Zahirah's face seemed softer and somehow melancholy. "You have no idea how I envy you. All of you." Zahirah glanced toward the location of the cameras. "His Highness will be back in his apartments by now. I would probably leave you be were this not expected. I *am* sorry."

A ring of harem boys gathered around them at a respectable distance, no doubt for fear of blocking the cameras, but close enough to demonstrate obvious interest in witnessing Kuri's plight. Kuri wished he had more time to talk with Zahirah. That he

hadn't wasted his few moments with arrogance and pride. He could see the pain behind those haunting brown eyes, the despair and loneliness as cold and sharp as a sliver of ice.

He resigned himself to his current fate. "I believe you. I'll play along, but not like this. I only let people I care about take me face to face, if I have a choice. I ask that you allow me that choice."

With a sad nod, Zahirah lowered his gaze to the floor. "I understand. I will attempt to make this not so unpleasant. His Highness prefers to see roughness when his new acquisitions are broken in, but I will accept punishment for us both for non-compliance. I owe you that courtesy, at the very least." Zahirah sighed. "Move into whatever position you like."

Perhaps because the situation demanded certain things, or perhaps Kuri thought "rough" would somehow make the sex much less like making love. Or perhaps because he simply didn't want to feel indebted for any favors, Kuri met Zahirah's eyes. "Make it rough, then. Let him get his fill and make a mess on himself watching. It will be his *last* time."

Kuri pushed Zahirah back and turned onto his belly. Zahirah crawled between his legs, parting him wide at the thighs. Delicate hands on his hips showed surprising strength, no doubt borne of anger, and Kuri found himself jolted onto his hands and knees.

"Lubrication, or would you rather I spit-fuck you?" Zahirah's voice sounded raspy, as if he were hissing through clenched teeth.

"You're the crown prince of the harem," Kuri said, purposely fanning Zahirah's fire. "Do what feels best for you."

Kuri reached under himself to give his soft cock a few rough tugs.

The distinctive sound of spitting provided Kuri with a decisive answer, followed by Zahirah's warm, wet fingertips rubbing against his hole. With no further preparation, the head of Zahirah's cock pushed at the tight ring of muscle, a sharp surge of hips sinking Zahirah deep.

Kuri clawed the rug, his back arching and his head thrown back. He forced himself to turn his thoughts to Daichi. "I love you," he whispered to the air as he felt Zahirah draw out for another thrust. Looking up, Kuri saw the blinking red lights of the cameras, lens moving in and out like Zahirah, catching every motion.

Rhythm established, Zahirah pressed the palm of one hand to the small of Kuri's back. The sound of slapping flesh from each violent thrust bounced off the human wall circling close. The other harem boys had moved in to watch, leaving an opening like a doorway in the direction of the cameras. Some of the boys palmed themselves through the sheer, colorful pants, while others had lowered their waistbands to openly masturbate.

"So tight," Zahirah said, first rubbing his hands along Kuri's back and then leaning over him. "So fucking pretty. Look at them, watching you." Zahirah moaned, and Kuri felt the hard cock in his ass flex several times in quick succession. "If I were feeling less charitable, I would command them all to come on you. His Highness would be most pleased."

"Then *do* it." Kuri slammed back hard into Zahirah's next forward thrust. "I need the sheikh to be extremely happy for the next — *ah, fuck!*"

He knew he couldn't risk saying more now, so Kuri bit his tongue and refocused.

Every other boy, including Sora, watched with wide-eyed interest. Unlike the others, Sora looked on with a concerned rather than lustful expression, and without his hands in his pants. Kuri sent Sora a surreptitious wink to let him know he was okay.

Sora nodded, his eyes going vacant, and Kuri knew Sora was attempting to block this out.

"Fuck," Zahirah said, leaning back, pulling out in one swift motion. "Come closer, all of you."

The first warm spatter hit Kuri on the ass, Zahirah moaning and panting behind him as he shot the rest of his load all over Kuri's back.

Johara emerged from the crowd and approached Kuri from the front, stopping shy of Kuri's face and squatting enough to present his stiff cock at a comfortable level.

The look Johara gave Kuri made a clear statement he acted solely for the benefit of Sheikh Akmal. Better a friend than foe.

"Do it." Zahirah rubbed his spunk into Kuri's skin with a gentle, massaging motion. "Suck him off until he comes."

Kuri's face burned hotter than a mid-summer sidewalk in Osaka, and he wasn't sure if the heat derived from humiliation or the fact his cock felt as hard as a railroad spike in his hand. Regardless, he obeyed. He slapped his tongue against Johara's dick and mouthed the flesh with an honest suck. He pulled away and growled to the surrounding crowd, "Give me more."

As the boys came closer, forgetting and blocking the cameras, Kuri whispered to them between sucks on Johara's cock. "We're all getting out of here. Don't say a word, and don't think loyalty to the sheikh will buy you anything but death."

Surprised whispers joined the sound of slapping flesh and moans, and Zahirah appeared, a shocked expression on his face, in front of Kuri.

Johara grabbed Zahirah's wrist and hissed a warning through a feral grin. "We will speak of this later." Johara turned to address the rest of the harem, concealing his words with the cover of a coy hand and whispered words. "Continue as you were. I will explain everything tonight after lights-out."

Zahirah wrapped his fingers around the base of Johara's cock and fed the tip into Kuri's mouth, stroking. Johara moaned, his eyes closing as he concentrated, and within moments he started to come. Zahirah's aim with Johara's cock was true, spattering Kuri's face until Johara fell spent.

Zahirah raised an eyebrow at Johara. "You knew of this?"

"Zahirah, I beg of you! End this, and we will talk tonight!" Johara knelt and cupped Kuri's cheek in his hand, wiped a ribbon of cum away from Kuri's mouth, and smiled. "Your bravery and self-sacrifice will be remembered."

Kuri leaned forward and kissed Johara, using the action to mask his words. "I couldn't have managed without you. We won't forget about your brother."

With Johara and Zahirah at his shoulders like the golden lions at the gate, each remaining harem boy approached Kuri in turn. Some ejaculated on Kuri's face the moment they moved close enough; a few others required Kuri's oral simulation to push them over the edge. All the while, Zahirah rubbed Kuri's back and Johara caressed his hair.

Maybe they weren't so different from his family of host boys back in Japan, after all. Radically different circumstances had brought the two groups of young men together, but in the end they watched out for each other.

Only Sora waived the chance to mark Kuri. With Johara and Zahirah's support, Kuri managed not lose his nerve through one shot to the face after another. Several times he came close to panic when he could barely breathe, but a quick wipe of his face had him ready for more.

As the last boy approached, grunting and jerking off, Zahirah leaned down and whispered in Kuri's ear. "When you get out of here, you tell your Little Japan that he's a lucky, lucky man."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Entering Topkapi Palace Club with Abdullah proved considerably easier than with Gabriel as escort. No fancy meal needed to be ordered; the owner knew Abdullah on sight. They were immediately allowed through the massive double doors and into the club, which was every bit as well attended as the first night. Kuri felt his stomach lurch at the sight, the memory of his first meeting with Abdullah still vivid. He suspected Abdullah had clear memories of his own, and the thought set Kuri's fragile nerves on edge.

The déjà vu didn't end there. Brought to the same table as on that memorable night, Abdullah immediately requested a *shisha* for himself and wine for his expected American guest. Kuri must have looked close to ill as a hand suddenly rested on his elbow.

Johara's caring eyes spoke volumes. *This is almost over.*

Kuri found a smile and plastered the expression onto his face. He swallowed his nerves and turned his thoughts inward to focus on his reunion with Daichi.

Abdullah leaned back into a pile of pillows, chewing on the mouthpiece of the *shisha* between puffs. The sickening-sweet scent of hashish wafted through the air on billowy clouds of exhaled smoke. Abdullah smiled at Kuri. "How are you adapting to harem life? You seem docile enough already. You also appear to be quite attached to my Johara. This is good."

Kuri remembered Sheikh Akmal had grumbled disinterest in him the first day because of his green eyes. *Half-breed*, the sheikh had spat in distaste.

Abdullah had watched Kuri closely from that moment on, obviously with the intent Kuri would belong to eventually belong to him.

"Yes, Master Abdullah," Kuri said. "Johara has helped me to learn my place, and he's taught me what is expected. I'm grateful to have such a good teacher."

Partly for show, partly in truth, Kuri took hold of Johara's hand and gave a light squeeze.

After another deep, slow drag on the pipe, Abdullah blew out a huge billow of smoke and smiled. "Wise of you to display an affinity for my Johara. If you continue to make good choices, perhaps one day you too will enjoy my favor. Johara can attest to the benefits of my mentorship. Is that not true, my beautiful Johara?"

Johara went to Abdullah and knelt before him, taking Abdullah's hand in his to kiss the gnarled knuckles. "Indeed, Master. I enjoy privileges of which the others only dream."

"My beautiful Johara." Abdullah cupped Johara's chin. "Would you be pleased if I were to ask His Highness for permission to have Warisha join us permanently? His Highness has told me how he favors the tiny, timid one who was bartered along with Warisha. So young looking, that one, which I knew would catch His Highness's eye. With his disdain for impure bloodlines, I am certain I can effect a permanent arrangement."

Johara nodded and kissed the back of Abdullah's hand again, and then nuzzled his cheek against the spot his lips had touched. "You are far too gracious to your most humble servant, Master. How may I show appreciation for such a grand gesture?"

Abdullah caressed Johara's cheek with his fingers and traced Johara's lips with the pad of his thumb. "I will end up with blisters on my cock from pleasuring myself while watching you pleasure each other. Return to him, my beautiful Johara. Kiss him, and tell him how badly you want him. Touch him. Show me my pursuit of an arrangement with His Highness will prove worth my effort."

Johara rose to his feet, bowed low, and returned to Kuri's side, compliant without fault to Abdullah's command.

With Johara's soft lips brushing against his chin, Kuri alone could see Johara's mischievous wink.

"I want you, Warisha," Johara said. "I want to enjoy you in Master Abdullah's bed."

Kuri saw Abdullah watching intently and butterflies flitted wildly in his stomach. He knew none of this mattered. In a few more hours they would all be free or dead. In either case the nightmare would end.

"I would do anything to strengthen our bond and remain together," Kuri told Johara, sincerity behind every word. He took Johara's face between his hands and drove their mouths together in a deep kiss.

Johara returned the kiss, intimate with tongue, and full of meaning behind the motion. He came up for air with pink blushing his fair cheeks, his words whispered so Abdullah couldn't hear. "I am but a simple man on a mission of mercy. I had no intention to develop attachments along the way, but I didn't expect such" — Johara pressed a tender kiss to Kuri's lips then offered a soft smile — "such beautiful complications." He ran the palm of one hand down Kuri's bare chest, and loud enough to be overheard, he said, "Do me the honor of allowing me to make love to you tonight when we return home?"

Kuri felt his eyes sting and forced himself to still. He knew such emotion no doubt came from extreme exhaustion and stress, but he also knew his feelings contained more than a kernel of truth. "Giving myself to you tonight would ease my insecurities." He looked from Johara to Abdullah. "If it would please His Highness?"

"It pleases *me*," Abdullah said, "and right now, that is all that matters. Ah!" Abdullah's face brightened, his gaze shooting past Kuri. "Our guests have arrived!"

Kuri turned, his eyes settling on the sharp, gray designer suit. Gabriel wore a white dress shirt and a jewel-toned paisley tie to compliment the well-to-do American businessman look. Many gazes followed as Gabriel and Daichi walked past. Gabriel had wisely dressed Daichi in traditional host club attire. The sight rimmed Kuri's eyesight in tears. He wanted to rush to him, chatter at him about everything they'd missed and smother him in kisses, but Kuri knew the real reunion had to wait.

Abdullah struggled to his feet, already quite toasted from the constant puffing on the hashish. He stumbled clumsily on the pile of pillows and managed to get entangled in his own robes before finally righting himself to wave at Gabriel. "Come, come, my friend!" Abdullah's gestures became increasingly animated the closer Gabriel and Daichi approached. "Look, I have already ordered fine Arabic coffee and a platter of honey cakes. And wine for you!"

Gabriel came to a halt, offering his hand. "A pleasure to see you again, Abdullah. Very gracious of you to oblige my wish to visit Topkapi Palace Club one more time before I fly back to the States."

"Consider it an act of continued faith, friend." Abdullah resumed his seat between Kuri and Johara. "Sheikh Akmal has repeatedly expressed his interest in establishing an ongoing trade with you. He's very happy with what he's seen, and it seems that our last contact in Japan had to — shall we say — *retire*."

"How unfortunate for His Highness." As Gabriel settled into the indicated pile of pillows, he took a glass of wine and sipped. "I'll be sure to keep in touch with you after I return home. No doubt in my travels I'll come into contact with properties he might

deem worthy." Gabriel raised his glass. "To His Highness, Sheikh Akmal, and to your good health as well, Abdullah."

"Master, if I may interrupt," Daichi said as Abdullah acknowledged Gabriel's toast with a smile and gracious nod. "Perhaps I should honor Master Abdullah one last time by changing into more suitable garb?"

Daichi flicked his gaze to Kuri then back to the floor.

Abdullah took his time finishing his sip of coffee, perhaps mulling over the suggestion, perhaps showing suggestions made by slaves were not to be jumped upon. As he set the cup on the low table, he finally nodded. "Entirely up to you, Gabriel. Johara and Kuri can take your boy to the changing room, and we can further discuss your connections in Japan. I would be very interested in hearing details."

"Very well." Gabriel waved a dismissive hand at Daichi. Daichi looked up, and Gabriel nodded once.

"Thank you, Master." Daichi stood and gave Abdullah a respectful bow, and then looked at Kuri.

Johara took Daichi by the hand and Kuri in his other, leading them down the same corridor they'd traversed during Kuri's first visit. The moment they were out of sight of the main section of the club, Kuri threw himself at Daichi, knocking him against the wall. He kissed him hard then backed away, smiling. "You are a sight for sore eyes! It's so good to see you in something other than harem pants!"

Daichi pulled Kuri to him and held on so hard, so tightly, Kuri thought his ribs might break.

"Just hold me for a minute," Daichi whispered against Kuri's ear. "I've missed you so. Thank you. Thank you so much."

Kuri cradled Daichi against him, running the tips of his fingers through Daichi's newly black hair. Daichi shook against him in a way Kuri had never felt, and Kuri held him tighter, kissing him on the temple.

"This is over for you, Daichi," Kuri said. "Gabriel will take you out of here soon, and then tomorrow we'll be together again, forever."

Releasing Kuri, Daichi took Kuri's hands in his. Tears flowed down his face, and the horror behind his eyes ran so deep Kuri feared he'd never find the bottom to pull him out.

"They made me do unspeakable things, Kuri." Daichi lowered his eyes. "I didn't have any choice. If not for Zahirah, I don't think I would've survived. Please forgive me." His shoulders shook uncontrollably, emotions cutting loose. "I love you so much."

The depth of Daichi's anguish broke Kuri's heart. Though he had experienced a few very uncomfortable moments at the hands of Sheikh Akmal and Abdullah, Kuri had the constant knowledge they were there to get the other boys out. He never had to experience the despair of thinking this would be his final fate the way Daichi had. "There's nothing to forgive. I've seen what this place is like. You've done nothing wrong. Oh, Daichi, if I could've done anything to get word to you, to let you know we were coming, I would have."

Johara sidled up to Kuri and leaned close. "There will be time for this later. Daichi, what word do you bring from Gabriel?"

Sniffing loudly, Daichi brushed tears from his face with the back of one hand, his other hand digging into the inside pocket of his suit coat. He pulled out a small plastic bag fastened with a twist-tie and handed the bag to Johara. "These are tranquilizers, very strong. You must get these into the water given to the animals. The authorities will be entering the palace through the zoo. The drug works quickly and lasts many hours. Make sure you put them into the animals' water supplies by midnight tonight. The siege will begin at two a.m."

Already aflutter with nerves, Kuri's heart nearly stopped when a serving boy turned a corner and walked past. Kuri made show of unbuttoning Daichi's shirt. They all flashed smiles, and in a moment they were again alone. Kuri kept a closer watch for more disturbances. "Should Sora and I do anything other than prepare the rest of the boys for tonight?"

Daichi continued in a hushed voice. "Kuri, have the boys remain in the harem once lights-out is announced and the door locked. Keep them calm and quiet, business

as usual. Some of them may be frightened of what will become of them once they're free. Captivity has become security – a roof over their heads and regular meals in their bellies – for many of these boys. Assure them they'll be taken care of once they leave." Daichi offered a smile. "Your friend Mr. Gabriel has turned out to be a very kind and generous man."

Kuri returned the smile. "I know he is." He took a steeling breath and nodded. "Between me and Johara, we'll make sure no one puts up any resistance to the authorities when they come."

"Hurry," Johara said, knitting his brow. "This is taking too much time. Abdullah will start to wonder what is taking so long."

They ducked into an empty room, and as Daichi disrobed and slipped into the silky pants he peered up at Johara. "Make sure you get to the animals by midnight. Entice Abdullah into a moonlit walk." He smiled at Johara and adjusted the waistband of the harem pants lower on his hips as if by habit. "There is more than enough of the drug to put all the animals safely to sleep *and* to fell a grown man."

"That's not a bad idea. If Abdullah is out of the way, that's one less person to raise alarm or threaten the harem." Kuri felt more confident by the moment that all would turn out well. "I'll help you persuade him. He might even take us *both* out there, since he's shown so much interest in me suddenly." Kuri's eyes drifted down low to Daichi's barely hidden goods; how commonplace now for them to be dressed so. How quickly people adapted. "You know, we're all going to have culture shock going back to our old lives."

"Johara! Warisha!" The thundering voice of Abdullah rang off the marble walls.

"We must go." Daichi peeked out of the room and took a nervous glance up and down the corridor. He gave Kuri one more smile. "Good luck tonight, and be careful."

Chapter Thirty-Four

The rest of the evening proceeded smoothly. Gabriel and Daichi finished their meal with Abdullah and departed, and Kuri knew he'd never forget the sorrowful, frightened look on Daichi's face as they left. Abdullah seemed determined to hang around Topkapi Palace Club, and Kuri started worrying they wouldn't return to Sheikh Akmal's in time to tranquilize the zoo animals.

Luckily, the moonlit walk idea worked like a charm.

On the ride home, Johara and Kuri managed to convince Abdullah to take them on a tour of the exotic zoo, Kuri explaining he'd only seen the place from the air.

Kuri and Johara were returned to the harem while Abdullah went to his quarters to change into less formal attire. Enough time elapsed to reveal the plan, and for Kuri and Sora to convince the boys their freedom didn't mean trading one bad place for another, or worse, the streets.

Sora snuggled in a pile of velvet pillows, Zahirah behind him. A frightened-looking boy lay spooned protectively in front of Sora. Kuri didn't know the boy's name, only that the poor thing looked scared to death and Sora looked utterly precious playing mother hen.

"We'll be fine," Sora said in a soft, quiet tone. "Be careful, Kuri. I'll make sure everyone is awake before two, so there's no panic if we're burst in on suddenly."

"Try to keep everyone away from the doors and low to the ground, just in case someone comes in and bullets fly." Kuri placed a loving kiss to Sora's brow. "We have no idea how Sheikh Akmal will react. With any luck, the bastard will be caught asleep."

Two loud claps of Abdullah's hands summoned Kuri and Johara. Kuri nodded a farewell to Sora and slipped a hand into Johara's. The two of them followed Abdullah down the long hall and out into the courtyard.

"Such wonderful things Sheikh Akmal has gathered," Abdullah said, fairly gushing. "Creatures from all over the world, here in this one small place." Abdullah took both the boys by the hand, keeping Kuri to his right and Johara on his left. "Be grateful your cages are slightly more hospitable, my pets."

They paused at a natural-habitat exhibit displaying a rare Sumatran Tiger. The big male cat paced along the grassy edge of a deep, wide moat designed to give the illusion of no barrier at all.

"He's so beautiful," Johara said, his tone verging on reverent. "Such a shame to keep such an exquisite creature captive." He looked up at Abdullah. "But I suppose it is easier to increase the numbers of a rare species when they are kept under your watchful eye."

Kuri had to smile at the ease with which Johara put Abdullah under his spell.

Abdullah rewarded Johara's observations with a hand traveling up his back in slow, circular motions. "To keep the world pure is Sheikh Akmal's task. I rather enjoy the myriad surprises the new world doles out. I find the shock of blue or green eyes under dark hair quite stunning, myself."

"You don't believe in His Highness's vision?" Kuri, curious, dared to dig a little deeper. Some small bit of knowledge might prove useful later regarding the whereabouts of other lost boys like Aki, Johara's brother.

"His vision is bullshit." Abdullah shrugged and moved them on to the next animal, a Red Panda. "We have been friends since we were boys, so I tolerate his insanity. Patronizing his fantasy has given me an easy life and graced me with my beautiful Johara. And now you as well, my fiery Warisha."

"If you will excuse me for a moment, Master, nature calls." Johara nodded toward a small copse of imported bamboo stalks and eucalyptus tree on the other side of the cobbled path. "Afterward, perhaps we can find a pleasant spot and —"

Johara wet his lips with a slow, sensual drag of his tongue then walked away, batting his eyes coquettishly over his shoulder at Abdullah before slipping behind the thick brush.

Even in the darkness, Kuri saw Abdullah's eyes narrow and watched him take a step forward. Panicking, Kuri threw himself into action, placing himself in front of Abdullah with a sultry look. He barred the way with soft hands to Abdullah's chest and

a flutter of eyelashes. "Johara is correct; we should enjoy the night. This air makes my blood warm."

"When Johara returns," Abdullah said. Frowning, he started moving forward again.

Kuri took a chance. "You had eyes for Gabriel, didn't you?"

Abdullah stopped as if he'd been slapped across the face. "Your tongue will be mine for your insolence!" Abdullah growled and took a step toward Kuri. "How dare you speak to me in such a way!"

Kuri crept backward a step, the skin on the back of his neck prickling hot. "But it's true. You took a liking to him. I saw how you looked at him at dinner. You *like* his blond hair and his blue eyes, and probably his money!"

Abdullah reached out and grabbed Kuri by the hair, jerking him forward painfully. He held Kuri close, his breath smelling of hashish and forbidden liquor. "You will keep silent about your observations, do you understand? I *should* rip out your tongue, but I'd rather leave it intact tending my cock."

"Master," came Johara's sultry voice out of the darkness. "Anger on such a beautiful night?"

Abdullah turned toward Johara's voice, enabling Kuri to see past him. Johara stood on the path nude, the black onyx jewels in his nipples and navel glinting in the faint starlight. His sheer black pants were draped around his shoulders like a stole, his cock full and hard as he languidly stroked himself.

Johara smiled. "Surely, there are better ways to expend your energy than barking at an ill-trained slave. Your secrets are safe and my devotion to you absolute, Master. I will train Warisha, so he may devote himself to you in the same manner."

Kuri watched as Abdullah forgot all else, mesmerized by the thrall of sensual Johara. Abdullah's breath grew heavy, and Kuri knew the man had likely become rock hard. He moved behind Abdullah and ran his hands along Abdullah's broad back.

Johara came to Abdullah and pulled him into a long, wet kiss. Kuri saw Abdullah move one hand to Johara's cock and begin stroking.

Abdullah turned to Kuri. "You are forgiven, *this* time." He pulled Kuri against his body and sampled his mouth with a hard, lewd kiss. Kuri fought himself to not stiffen and pull away.

Without warning, the force of Abdullah's body hurtling forward slammed Kuri's back against the cobblestone wall bordering the walkway near the tiger habitat. Johara's harem pants were wrapped around Abdullah's neck. Abdullah's eyes bugged out, his face reddened, and he pawed and clutched at his throat.

The gauzy material proved an efficient ligature, and the element of surprise an effective weapon. Kuri heard Johara grunt; Abdullah gasped and sagged lifeless, pinning Kuri to the wall. Kuri stood, stunned, as Abdullah's body slid down and collapsed on the ground before him.

No matter how well he and Johara had gone over the plan, seeing Abdullah's thick tongue hanging out of his mouth, his head at an off angle, proved more gruesome than Kuri expected.

Kuri's pulse raced. "We need to get him off the path in case someone else comes out here. Do you have the tranquilizers?"

"Behind the trees, over there." Johara retrieved his pants from Abdullah's neck and slipped them back on. "Get his legs."

Johara hefted the top end of Abdullah with a hold under the man's armpits.

Kuri grabbed Abdullah's ankles and struggled to lift, but together he and Johara managed to move the dead weight into the cover of trees. They waited in the bushes, listening for any signs to indicate they'd been discovered.

Nothing.

"Okay," Kuri said. "Give me half the pills. I'll do the far end; you take this side."

Johara rooted through a pile of leaves and came up with the small plastic bag Daichi had given him earlier. He removed the twist-tie, and after carefully tearing off a piece of the bag, he dumped out half of the tiny tablets into the torn plastic. He handed the portion of pills to Kuri.

"Try not to touch them with bare skin," Johara whispered. "Daichi said they are very strong. I don't want to take a chance that the drug might be absorbed into our systems. Now, if you go to the far end of the lane and take a right, you can enter the zookeeper's access building that runs behind the exhibits. The water buckets can be reached without going into the enclosures — you'll see where the sliding access panels are located in the wall. Throw a piece of meat into the water to entice them to drink. The meat is stored in a large refrigerator located near the main door. Move quickly. Most of the animals are nocturnal and will be waking soon, if they aren't awake already. Go!"

Kuri followed Johara's instructions to the letter. None of the animals offered any resistance to drinking the water, and they didn't seem to care this wasn't their usual feeding time. Kuri finished the last of the animals, a rare Malaysian Sun Bear, and rejoined Johara on the path.

"Now what?" Kuri wiped his sweating brow with the back of his hand. "If we get caught in the hallway without an escort on the way back to the harem, we're screwed."

Below them, the Sumatran Tiger staggered and fell.

Johara exhaled. "I'll be allowed to pass. As Abdullah said, my being considered *his* was not without certain privilege. The guards won't blink an eye at me coming in late. If they question your presence, let me do the talking. The guards are easily bought with promises of sex, and they'll not risk jeopardizing a potential two-for-the-price-of-one." He took Kuri by the hand. "Try to look as if you have just had the most incredible sex of your life. That should be enough explanation for them."

Kuri grabbed Johara by the waist. He took his thumb and smeared the kohl that rimmed Johara's eyes down his cheek, and then kissed him hard enough to plump up their lips. Kuri didn't find difficulty getting both their breathing labored and raspy, their blood flowing southward.

"That should make things look more authentic," Kuri said, his voice thick and strained.

Johara smiled, and he mussed Kuri's hair with both hands. "Perhaps, when this is all behind us, we can play under better circumstances. I like you, Kuri, and I hope we can be friends."

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure that happens." Kuri hooked an arm around Johara's waist and walked back inside, putting on the appearance he'd had too much to drink.

A sly wink and a knowing roll of eyes from Johara gave sufficient explanation to each encountered guard.

Silence greeted them when they opened the harem door, but Kuri saw many sets of eyes trained on them in the darkness. He walked with Johara toward where they'd left Sora and joined him.

"Everything is set," Kuri whispered.

Sora sat up and scooted next to Kuri on the floor, leaning his head on Kuri's shoulder as he always did when fretful. "Never thought I'd be so glad to see morning come."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Fortune favors the foolish, Gabriel thought as he looked up at the night sky. Only an hour before, the moon had shone high and bright like a beacon reflecting off the water, illuminating everything in sight. A thick layer of clouds had rolled in shortly before the clock struck midnight and the winds stilled. They couldn't have prayed nor paid for better cover. Cyd Khalid's sleek red speedboat cut through the water with barely a sound—a team of eight United Arab Emirates naval officers rowed in practiced silence in the large scull rowboat towing the Interceptor. As Cyd had explained, arrival at Sheikh Akmal's palace would be done in slow, deliberate silence under human steam to avoid detection, while their departure would take place in frantic, noisy haste under 650-horsepower. Another crew towed an identical boat about forty yards to port.

Gabriel could hear the soft splash of oars dipping into the water in a rhythmic pattern behind him.

Daichi, dressed in head-to-toe black like the rest of the rescue team, sat next to Gabriel on the bench seat rimming the perimeter rail of Cyd's speedboat, one leg jiggling nervously up and down. Gabriel reached over and stilled Daichi's knee with a gentle hand.

"It'll be over before you know it." Gabriel offered a soft smile he hoped would set Daichi more at ease. He would've preferred Daichi remain back at the rented house on Java Island, but Daichi had insisted. Daichi told Gabriel there was little point in him being excluded and safe when everything he lived for remained in Sheikh Akmal's palace. Should something go wrong, Daichi had posed, what would be the point in him living? In the end, Gabriel couldn't disagree.

Gabriel looked across the boat to where Cyd Khalid sat next to a man who'd been introduced as Faris of the Dubai Police Force upon boarding. Both of the men seemed so relaxed, while Gabriel felt every muscle he possessed drawn tight and bunched with tension.

"Little more exciting than your usual desk-jockeying, isn't it, pal?" Cyd flashed a smile. "Don't worry, Gabriel. My man Faris here knows what he's doing, and these UAE Navy guys are top-notch. Relax; we have everything under control."

Faris looked up at the mention of his name, his finger poised over the button of a small handheld radio. A fairly young man with a neatly trimmed moustache and beard, dressed all in black like the rest of them, he appeared almost invisible in the darkness. "The UAE will be most grateful once this man is brought to justice, Mr. Hartley. We have suspected his activities for some time, but somehow he always managed to clean house before our inspectors arrived. Without hard evidence against a man, it is difficult to convince our government to act. The photos and testimony you and your friend have provided were exactly what we needed." Faris looked over toward Daichi while he was talking, but away again when the boy's own eyes did not look up. "I assure you our

Emir, Sheikh Mohammed, would like to ferret out each and every one of these scourges. They make our beautiful emirate, otherwise a jewel, seem tarnished."

Daichi's leg started bouncing again. Gabriel slid an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close, and Daichi buried his face against Gabriel's chest.

Cyd's dark eyes narrowed. "You gonna be okay out here alone once we make landfall? If we had a bigger contingency of men, I'd say we could leave one behind to man your boat, but — "

"Yes," Gabriel said. "I know. We'll be fine. You do whatever you have to do to get those boys out."

The remaining twenty minutes of the slow trip passed in silence. Gabriel sensed the change in Cyd and Faris's demeanor the moment the crafts slowed their lurching progress. The men crewing the rowboats climbed out to guide the speedboats closer to shore, mooring them to shoreline palm trees in order to avoid the lighted and camera-surveilled docks. Once the boats were secured, the soldiers returned to Cyd's speedboat, catching rifles and ammo packs and other weaponry as Cyd chucked the items off the stern of the craft.

Daichi looked up, took a shaky breath, and caught Faris's gaze. "Thank you. Thank you for helping my friends."

"I should be begging your forgiveness," said Faris with a courteous nod. "It is a horrible thing to be plucked from your home and taken somewhere unfamiliar. To then be treated poorly, beaten . . . raped. I cannot imagine your grief. I am sorry someone from my land would do such a thing."

A soft call came from the direction of the island. Faris raised his hand and gave a signal. He turned to Daichi and reached to his belt, loosening a pistol. He handed the pistol to Daichi and said, "Just in case."

As Faris walked away, Daichi stared wide-eyed at the gun in his trembling hands. He closed his eyes. "Please, please let this end well. I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me."

After the distribution of weapons, Cyd returned to Gabriel and extended a gloved hand. "Wish us luck. Be ready to get this boat the hell out of here once we bring out the boys. Half will go on this one, half on the other. Once you've got seven on board, take off."

Gabriel gave Cyd's hand a tight squeeze. "Good luck. I'll be ready."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Despite his noble words about everyone getting some rest before the big breakout, Kuri didn't sleep a wink. He could tell from the constant shifting of bodies in the room that no one else did either. Sora wiggled against him like a worm, and a few times Kuri thought for sure he heard sobbing somewhere in the room. No matter that most were in there early twenties; they'd all been through so much, enough to reduce them to scared children. Kuri whispered in the darkness. "Sora, are you awake?"

Behind him Zahirah let out a trembling sigh. "We're *all* awake."

Kuri felt weight press against his back as Zahirah snuggled against him. "I wish this night would be over," Zahirah said. "I hate this waiting."

"They should be coming soon, shouldn't they?" Sora sighed, nestling closer to Kuri. "I'll be glad to get back to civilization where rooms have normal things like windows and clocks."

Johara, sitting cross-legged on the other side of Sora, chuckled softly. "And we can wear real clothes again instead of silky pajamas all the time."

"And eat real food. I would kill for a big bowl of —" Kuri cut off mid-sentence, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. He listened again as the rest of the boys fell silent, but he heard nothing. Absolutely nothing. Even the constant sound of nocturnal insects had stopped. "They're here." Kuri pushed himself up from the tangled pile of arms and legs. "Everyone get to the far end of the room. Keep low, and be ready to run the second those doors open."

Sora clung to Kuri like glue, and once Johara had gotten the last of the others settled in the corner, Johara crouched next to Kuri. A hand on Kuri's shoulder blade told him Zahirah remained at his back.

The sound of gunfire erupted, staccato bursts echoing through the cavernous marble halls outside the harem door.

Johara stood and faced the group, holding his hands up in front of him. "Stay still and quiet! The good soldiers come to rescue us know where we are, and they will protect us! If we flee, who knows what we will run into! Please, please stay still!"

Dropping to crouch next to Kuri, Johara leaned against him, trembling. "I hope I never, ever have to be this scared again," he whispered.

Kuri slipped a hand into Johara's. "Remember Aki. You have to be strong and get out of here so you can find your brother."

Additional gunfire caused the group to draw even tighter together. Angry shouts, most of the Arabic words incomprehensible, accompanied rhythmic pounding on the harem doors. The wood shook, and a loud crack like thunder blasted through the room. Kuri stood as the door began to give way, his eyes hunting for a familiar face.

"Kuri" Sora whimpered, his fingernails digging into Kuri's arm.

The door burst open under the stress of a four-man battering ram, splinters of brightly painted hardwood showering down on the room. A small cadre of men donned in black rushed in, rifles and handguns drawn. The men turned their backs on the harem and aimed their firearms back into the great hall.

One of the men ran over to Kuri, and Kuri breathed a hard sigh of relief. Gabriel's CIA friend, Cyd, grinned at him, looking like he was having the time of his life.

"Everyone, go straight down the main hall!" Cyd shouted commands over the sound of rapid gunfire coming from every direction, all at once. "Turn left after the baths, and you'll see a window open. Climb out and haul ass down to the beach as fast as you can. Do *not* stop—do *not* look back. Run like hell and get on the red boats." Cyd

stepped aside, gesturing at the door with the muzzle of his rifle. "Now, go! *Move, move, move!*"

For a paralyzing moment, Kuri and the rest of the boys stood rooted in place by fear. No matter how prepared Kuri had thought himself, the actual event—hearing the crossfire, smelling the gunpowder—overwhelmed him.

Zahirah broke out of the fearful reverie first. Strong, alpha Zahirah, shifted his fear into something else. A fire blazed behind Zahirah's brown eyes. He turned away and started aggressively herding the boys out into the hall. Johara fell into step, and between the three of them they got the whole group moving.

Smoke and dust rose up around them, choking Kuri as he ran. As they turned the corner after the baths and raced toward the window, a familiar voice rose in fury and every boy stopped. Sheikh Akmal, hands behind his back and escorted by two burly, black-clad men, cursed and struggled for freedom. Even under arrest, Sheikh Akmal held such power over his boys that none of them dared move.

A strong hand touched Kuri's arm. "You need to go now. My name is Faris, and I am UAE Police. Please, your friend Gabriel is waiting on the boat for you."

Kuri snapped out of his trance. "Gabriel is here?"

"Yes! Yes! Down at the beach!" Faris gestured toward the window and the train of boys moved again, climbing outside even as Faris's men hauled Sheikh Akmal away.

As Kuri ran toward the beach, he saw Gabriel behind the wheel of the boat on the left. He grabbed Sora by the hand and took off in that direction. The engine of both boats roared to life like angry, mythical beasts in the night.

Daichi reached over the side of the boat with both hands as Kuri approached. As Daichi hauled Kuri up onto the boat, the sound of gunfire and shouting melted away. Long months of separation blew apart as soon as Kuri's feet hit the deck of the boat. He pulled Daichi to him in a crushing hug and kissed him, blocking out the chaos all around. Kuri vaguely heard Gabriel perform a head count and then shout a command for everyone to sit down and hold on.

Hands grabbed at both he and Daichi, pulling them down to the cushioned bench. Both boats turned from the beach and roared off across the Persian Gulf. Between the noise of the engines and the concentration required to hang on as they sped across choppy water, conversation had to wait until they slowed on approach to Gabriel's rented island.

As the boat cut through the black water like a surgeon's blade, Kuri clung to his long-lost Daichi, his eyes riveted on him. He harbored a desperate, unreasonable fear that if he blinked Daichi would disappear and be lost forever. As the salty water kissed his face with spray, Kuri wondered if any of them would ever be able to live normal lives after this experience.

His somber thoughts ended as Gabriel expertly sidled the right side of the boat against the dock and cut the engine. He tossed the end of the mooring line to Kuri and smiled. "Welcome home."

* * * * *

Although exhausted and despite Gabriel ordering them directly inside, Kuri and Daichi stayed to help the rest of the boys off the rescue boats. As they walked into the house after completing the task, Kuri caught sight of Sora talking on a cell phone, chattering away in Japanese and crying at the same time. Takumi. The knowledge lit a joyous fire in Kuri's heart, and he held on even tighter to Daichi.

Cyd – accompanied by several local law enforcement officers – arrived shortly thereafter. Between the cacophony of the houseful of boys talking and crying, and Gabriel talking animatedly to Cyd and the policemen, the noise and activity became too much for Daichi. He tugged on Kuri's hand and pulled him down the hallway at a brisk pace, until he flung open the door to Gabriel's bedroom.

Daichi closed the door, leaned back, and let out a long, harsh sigh. "Do you remember how I used to say I couldn't stand clingy people?"

Kuri nodded.

With glassy eyes and his bottom lip trembling, Daichi said, "Prepare for me to be very clingy for a while."

"Oh, Daichi!" Kuri's eyes burned with tears as he threw both arms around the trembling body of his lover. Running his hands up and down Daichi's back, Kuri covered him in soft, calming kisses. "You cling as much as you need. I'm not going anywhere."

Daichi held on to Kuri with ferocity. "I've been doing a lot of thinking the past few days, and I've come to a decision. You may not like it, but I can't help how I feel."

Kuri searched Daichi's eyes. "Whatever it is, I'll understand."

"I can't go back to Kingyo Club." Daichi took a deep breath and shook his head. "I can't return to that lifestyle, Kuri. I never want anyone to touch me again like that unless they love me and I love them." Tears flowed freely down Daichi's beautiful face. "I just can't do it anymore."

Had Kuri not come to the same conclusion himself several hours earlier, Daichi's sincerity and heartbreaking pain would've made the decision for him. The months inside the palace had broken something inside Daichi – something Kuri wasn't sure would ever fully heal.

Kuri had only witnessed the extreme lifestyle for a few days and the experience had been the most horrifying he'd ever known. For people like Daichi, and even more so for people like Zahirah who'd been inside those ugly walls for years, the trauma could be nothing less than soul crippling.

"We're both finished with the host clubs," Kuri said. "You and I will find some other way to get by. Sora and Takumi, too."

Daichi exhaled, and his shoulders sagged as if the weight of the world had been lifted. He pressed his forehead to Kuri's and gave a weak but sincere smile. "I love you very, very much."

A knock came to the door and Daichi jumped.

"Kuri? Daichi?" Gabriel said.

"We're okay. We needed a few minutes away from the noise." Kuri opened the door, allowing Daichi to remain hidden to pull himself together. "Do you need some help? It almost sounds like things are settling down."

Gabriel nodded. "Cyd and the police have taken most of the young men to the hospital for an evaluation. Then they'll be transported to their respective consulates downtown to be repatriated and sent back to their homelands. I've contacted my lawyer to have a foundation set up to pay any expenses. They'll all be well taken care of." Gabriel turned his head for a moment and looked down the hall toward the living room, and then returned his attention to Kuri. "Two of them have refused to leave until they speak with you and Daichi in private. Shall I send them in?"

Kuri knew the two would be Johara and Zahirah. In the short time he'd known them, both had made lasting impressions on Kuri, and he felt sure he and Daichi had on them. "Tell them to wait, and we'll be out in a minute. Thank you, Gabriel."

Gabriel walked away but hesitated and turned back to look at Kuri. "We need to talk, too, at some point."

Kuri nodded. Gabriel continued on his way.

Daichi looked pale and worn out. "This may get complicated."

As predicted, Johara and Zahirah awaited them in the living room. Johara paced, his arms crossed tightly around his waist as if he couldn't get warm, his steps taking him back and forth like the caged tiger they had drugged.

Zahirah—the exact opposite. He sat in chair in the corner, a vacant look on his face, still as a statue. He didn't look up as Kuri and Daichi entered the room.

Kuri felt his chest tighten. "Are you two all right? If you need to see a doctor, we could talk afterward."

Zahirah's gaze flicked up. He looked so tired and scared. "Gabriel said we could stay."

Daichi moved close behind Kuri, clinging as promised.

The pacing tiger stopped and regarded Kuri. "Zahirah cannot return to his homeland," Johara said.

A mixture of anger and hopelessness churned behind Zahirah's brown eyes. "I am from *North* Korea. My family was killed trying to defect, and I was sold into slavery. I can't go back there. I am too old and too . . . too *used* by slave trade standards. No longer marketable to a new master. I'd be killed as soon as I crossed the border." Zahirah averted his eyes. "I have nowhere to go."

Daichi rested his chin on Kuri's shoulder.

Kuri reached over his shoulder and patted Daichi. "Daichi and I have decided we don't want to go back to our old lives either. So . . . why don't you come back to Japan with us? We can all find odd jobs and chip in until we get on our feet. Johara, you're more than welcome, too. With the four of us, plus Sora and Takumi, we should be able to still afford a decent place."

"Mind if I interrupt?" All eyes turned toward the doorway, to Gabriel, who stuffed his cell phone into the pocket of his black jeans. "I think after everything that's happened, we all have stake in the way this pans out. Maybe we all better take a seat and talk this out."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

A large calico goldfish came to the top of the tank as Kuri dropped food pellets in. Two more joined the first in a flurry of gold, white, and black scales. Kuri stood back from the tank to watch the feeding frenzy. The thought struck him that today marked six months since Gabriel had first seen him in this restaurant, standing by this very tank.

How things had changed.

Looking out over Torafugu Restaurant, he caught sight of Daichi cleaning one of the back tables and smiled. The last of the official customers had donned their overcoats and headed out into the soft, slushy snow. The small *sushi* restaurant's business boomed, and he and Daichi had fallen into the switch from host boys to waiters with

relative ease. Some of their old clients from Kingyo Club came into the restaurant from time to time and left them host-club-sized tips.

Mr. Narita Sakamoto, who was in the back preparing his last meal for the evening, called out for Kuri to begin locking up. Mr. Sakamoto's wife had been grateful for the opportunity to retire when the boys came on as hired hands.

Kuri looked toward the door and smiled as Gabriel and Johara — who had resumed using his real name of Jiro — walked into the restaurant.

Zahirah flipped the *CLOSED* sign to face out and locked the door. He jerked his head toward Gabriel and Jiro, and then called over to Kuri, a mischievous grin on his face. "Soon as we get these slowpoke, straggler *tourists* out of here, we can go home. I'll come in early Tuesday before opening to mop and wax the floor."

Gabriel smiled. "Is he always this mouthy?"

"This is nothing," Kuri said with a snort. "You should've have seen him the first week." He ducked a playful swat from the offended party. "When did you get into town, Gabriel? Hi, Jiro! It's so good to see you!"

"We just got back from Singapore," Gabriel said, pulling a bright red, knitted muffler from underneath the collar of his camel hair coat. Mrs. Sakamoto had taken to knitting in the free time her retirement provided. Everyone in her immediate circle now owned a neck scarf they'd better be wearing when visiting the restaurant, in case she happened by.

Jiro, his hands buried in the deep pockets of a heavy parka, shook his head and shrugged. "Nothing yet, but we're not giving up." He butted his head against Gabriel's shoulder, a small smile curving his lips. "He won't let me. You should've warned me what a bossy bastard he is, Kuri."

"Oh, don't tell me you haven't got him wrapped around your finger yet. Even *I* was learning my way there, and I had a hell of a lot less personal time with him!" Kuri grinned and motioned toward the back of the restaurant. "I set up a table for us already. Zahirah, tell Mr. Sakamoto our friends are all here now. I know he has some blowfish

ready to go under the knife for Gabriel." Kuri took Daichi's hand and laced their fingers together, turning his attention back to Jiro. "Has there been any news of Aki at all?"

"Unfortunately, no." Gabriel hung his coat on the rack near the table and held out a hand to take Johara's parka, which he hung up as well. "Cyd has been throwing as much time as he can into the case. I have a feeling we'll get a break soon. If nothing else, I've learned there's no point in giving up as long as the tiniest shred of hope remains."

Johara . . . *Jiro* smiled at Gabriel in such a way, Kuri suspected Gabriel and Jiro had ended up much more than friends with a common goal.

"Show them," Jiro said to Gabriel with an emphatic nod.

Gabriel seemed reluctant, and narrowed his eyes. "Jiro"

Johara glared right back. "Show them. You owe it to Daichi. You *promised* him."

Gabriel sighed and rolled up his left sleeve, exposing the raised white scars clearly spelling *MONSTER* on the back of his forearm.

Jiro cocked his head, one eyebrow lifting. "Gabriel"

Gabriel let out a slow breath and turned his arm over to show the topside of his forearm. A tattoo, inked in a deliberate, steady hand clearly said:

— *SLAYER*

Kuri felt Daichi's breath catch, a soft sound of happy surprise at the sight. Both of them nearly bowled Gabriel over with affection the way a litter of puppies would their mother. Kuri lived for these nights, these all-too-brief, far-too-infrequent evenings when they gathered together to share food and stories, working past their pain. They'd agreed upon their return to Japan that no matter what, they would meet at Torafugu once a month. So far, no one had missed a gathering.

"Where the hell are Sora and Takumi?" Zahirah looked up at the clock on the wall and scowled, his brow knit in typical fashion.

Of all the boys, Zahirah had faired the worst. Gabriel made sure he was employed at the restaurant, but they had to give him after-hour tasks — cleaning floors, emptying the trash — due to his horrible moments of unprovoked anger. He had good

days and bad, but mostly bad. Zahirah refused to change his name from the Arabic female name given him by the sheikh.

Kuri worried for him terribly, and he and Daichi did their best to shelter him during the worst moments, even if that meant letting Zahirah hide out in his room with the door closed.

Kuri checked his watch. "They'll be here soon. Takumi has to work tonight, but not until after midnight. Sora said they were going to stock the bar for the new kid and then come over."

A smoosh-nosed face plastered cartoonishly against the glass of the front door caught Kuri's attention. Sora — ever the clown — and Takumi behind him.

"I'm going to make you clean that window!" Kuri laughed as Sora waggled his face back and forth and added his tongue to the mischief.

Takumi yanked Sora away and tugged him into the restaurant.

"You two!" Kuri gave them both a hug. "Gabriel and Jiro are already here. Come on in!"

Laughter, giggles, tight hugs, and friendly elbow punches into ribs ensued. A family reunion. The merry-making went on throughout dinner and would've continued longer, but Takumi and Sora had to leave for work. Sora had decided to stay at the host club despite his experiences because Takumi was still a part of the scene, though Sora managed to talk Takumi into saving most of the money they made. After a year, they planned on joining Daichi and Kuri in host boy retirement. Sora no longer took clients; he tended bar and helped Mr. Toshi with the early morning clean up. No one questioned the change.

With two of their group departed, the rest started making their plans for meeting again the following month.

"Out of here." Mr. Sakamoto set a big take-home box on the shelf over the fish display case. He waggled both hands toward the door, an affectionate grin on his face. "You people make me crazy! Go, go, go!"

Kuri rushed forward to take the box, bowing repeatedly and laughing the entire time. "Yes, yes, we're going, Mr. Sakamoto! We're going!"

Once outside, they headed toward the boys' apartment, pausing at the end of the block where Gabriel's car was parked. After goodbye hugs and promises to keep in touch, Jiro climbed into the passenger seat.

Gabriel opened the driver's side door and rested his elbow on top of the window, looking out at Kuri. He smiled. "Funny how things worked out, isn't it? Everyone is safe and well, and even Zahirah is on the mend. I've never been happier, Kuri, and I owe it all to you. My life would still be on that same, sad path had I not met you. I'm glad we can be friends."

"And I would be at Kingyo, drunk already, sweet-talking some woman or man I might never see again, instead of going home to sleep in the arms of the man I love." Kuri pulled Daichi closer to him. "There's a saying here in Japan: 'When the time is right, even the lowly rat can become the mighty tiger.' You are the tiger now, Gabriel. I'm proud of you."

Gabriel turned briefly, and Kuri saw Jiro tugging at Gabriel's sleeve.

"Boss says it's time to go," Gabriel said with a smile. "We'll call if we hear anything about Aki. See you soon."

He gave Kuri a quick peck on the cheek, climbed into the car, and drove off slowly in the snow. Kuri watched until he couldn't distinguish Gabriel's taillights from any other, then hooked an arm around Daichi and headed for home.

* * * * *

Kuri threw the leftovers in the refrigerator of the little apartment. Gabriel had offered to pay for new living arrangements for the boys, but Kuri and the others had politely refused the offer. They needed each other more than ever now, and they needed to make their own way. Adding Zahirah to the quad had taken some adjusting,

but with the hours of the host club and the hours at the restaurant almost opposite, the small space was rarely ever completely full.

Yawning, Kuri followed the sounds of Daichi getting ready for bed and caught him brushing his teeth. He rested his chin on Daichi's shoulder and smiled. "I had fun. It was good to see them again."

Daichi nodded, rinsed, and put his toothbrush back in the holder before turning. He put his hands on Kuri's hips and leaned back against the sink. "It *was* nice. I didn't know Gabriel and Johara—I mean Jiro—had become so close."

"Didn't surprise me at all," Kuri said with a sly grin, his fingers playing with the drawstring of Daichi's flannel sleep pants. "They were both in desperate need of someone needing them. What *does* surprise me is how I'm fairly sure Jiro is the one holding the leash!"

"Speaking of desperate." Daichi urged Kuri backward, stepping him through the bathroom door and down the short hall to their bedroom.

Barely audible, heavy metal music came from the door of the bedroom Zahirah shared on a split shift with Takumi and Sora. Zahirah had the music blasting through earphones again. Many nights, Daichi and Kuri would knock on the door and cajole Zahirah into coming out of the room to socialize, maybe even to mess around a little if everyone was in the mood. As Daichi nudged him backward and beyond the other bedroom, Kuri realized tonight wouldn't be to be one of those nights.

"I think Gabriel is right about eating *fugu* and wanting sex!" Kuri flipped off the hallway light as they reached the bedroom, plunging them into darkness save for a stream of moonlight coming in the window. "Sunday night. We can sleep in tomorrow."

"Which means I can keep you up as late as I want and wear you out."

Kuri found himself pushed onto his back on the bed, Daichi climbing up to straddle his thighs. "*Fugu* is a powerful aphrodisiac. Why don't you check just how much?"

"With the ever-reliable *fugu* thermometer?" Kuri slid a hand into Daichi's pajamas and around his hard cock. "Mmm, feels like the most powerful stuff on the market to me. Better than those pills on television."

Daichi closed a hand around Kuri's hand wrapped around his cock and gave a shake. "I've got your natural male enhancement right here — it's called 'Kuri's Pretty Mouth on My Dick.'" Daichi scooted up Kuri's body and parked his ass on Kuri's chest, leaning forward to facilitate. "Go ahead. Show me how it works."

"Is that your way of loving telling me I talk too much?" Kuri gave Daichi's ass a smack, opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue. A reward came in the form of the familiar taste of Daichi followed by a loud moan from him. Kuri ran his hands up Daichi's slender chest and mapped every inch of Daichi's body with his fingers.

Daichi moaned, and as Kuri's eyes adjusted to the scant moonlight streaming through the window, he saw the look of bliss on Daichi's face and melted.

"Glad I don't have to share this with strangers anymore." Daichi ran the fingertips of one hand along the curve of Kuri's working jaw and gave a sinful smile. "There are broken hearts littering the streets of Osaka now that famous host boy Kuri is off the market. Mmm, you suck me so good."

Kuri sucked harder in answer.

Daichi fell forward, his hands pressed to the bed on either side of Kuri's head, his hips rolling as he fed his cock to Kuri. "You have room in your belly for dessert? Fuck, gonna come, Kuri."

Doing his best to beg with his eyes, Kuri slipped his hand over Daichi's hip and caressed the tips of his fingers lightly across Daichi's drawn-up balls. He gave a gentle squeeze, then tickled his middle finger to Daichi's hole and pushed in.

"Devil!" Daichi's hips lurched forward.

Kuri barely tasted the first spurt with Daichi so far back in his throat. He made sure Daichi was utterly spent before rolling him off and crawling alongside. "I can tell you drank daiquiris tonight. You taste much sweeter than after champagne."

Breathing hard and sweating, Daichi grinned. "Can also tell it was only *one* drink since it didn't take me an hour to get off. Your blowjobs give me hair-trigger orgasms when I'm sober. Make me feel like I'm sixteen again." Daichi threaded his fingers in Kuri's hair and pulled him in for a long kiss. "Love you so much."

"I went halfway around the world to get you back." Kuri danced his fingertips along Daichi's sexy collarbone. He could hear Daichi's heart still racing, and the sound quickened his own. "I love you, too."

Daichi kicked his sleep pants the rest of the way off, turned onto his stomach, and raised up on his elbows. The moonlight seemed to know just the right spot to land on, and Daichi flexed the nicely rounded muscles of his firm ass. He licked his lips and smiled. "Want to go for a ride, little boy?"

Kuri laughed with a joy he never thought he'd feel again to see Daichi in such a playful spirit. He leaned forward and took a bite of Daichi's pale ass cheek before settling in behind. "It's such a shame you've become so withdrawn and shy, Daichi! I think you picked up more bad habits over there!"

"No, I just realized how good I had it *here*." Daichi arched his back, legs spreading, and he peered over his shoulder at Kuri with a smoky, smoldering look in his dark brown eyes. "Do it, Kuri. Fuck me hard, make me yours."

Kuri hurriedly slathered on some lube and lined up. He put weight behind his push, and he sucked in his breath as Daichi opened up and took him in. Teeth clenched, he kept pushing and felt sweat prick the nape of his neck. He drew back just enough to regain leverage and made another attempt, grunting as he bottomed out. "Talk to me, Daichi."

Despite Daichi's steady recovery, Kuri kept constant awareness of the trauma and turmoil his lover had been through. He didn't go easy on Daichi, but he wasn't reckless either.

Daichi's fingers clutched at the bedclothes and he rocked back against Kuri. "I'm all right. Just need you really bad tonight, that's all. Need to feel you as close as you can

get. I need" – Daichi's voice caught in his throat – "I need you to hold me tight and tell me you love me, and that you won't ever let me go."

"Never." Kuri slowed his pace to a nice, sweet fuck, and he peppered the back of Daichi's neck with tender kisses. "I love you, Daichi. I'll love you forever."

Kuri felt Daichi shudder underneath him, his hips popping against the inward thrust. Slow, deep, moving in subtle ways, bumping special, hidden places deep inside discovered slowly and known only to them. Sex. Love. No difference existed between the two, not now, not for them. Lovers in every sense of the word.

Daichi tightened his inner muscles, beckoning Kuri's conclusion. "God, I love you so much," Daichi said again.

The connection of their hearts as much as anything physical set Kuri off. He clung to Daichi, sharing that most intimate, heartbeat of a moment deep inside. They collapsed into a heap and Kuri sighed.

"You've heard the saying," Daichi said, his fingers lazily trailing along Kuri's ribcage as if he were subconsciously counting them, "the one that goes 'that which does not kill us makes us stronger?'"

"Yes, I have." Kuri heard the emotion thick in Daichi's voice and his own throat tightened.

"I believe it's true. If . . . if what happened hadn't happened, I would've never had the guts to leave Kingyo. I wouldn't know the power I feel to say yes or no as I choose." Daichi curled tighter against Kuri, brushing a damp cheek against Kuri's chest. "I wouldn't know what it means to have the love of one good man. Those horrible months didn't break me, Kuri. I didn't let them, so in the end it made me stronger."

Kuri ran his fingers through Daichi's beautiful black hair. "We learned there's a scary world outside our little Japan, a world eager to swallow us whole." He wriggled closer to Daichi's warmth and faced him, eyelash close. "But as long as we're together, as long as we have our friends and one another, we'll be okay."

~ The End ~

About the Authors

Reno MacLeod and partner Jaye Valentine live on the south coast of Massachusetts with their menagerie of cats, freshwater fish, and dust mice. They enjoy writing and watching movies together, and both are shamefully fond of competitive reality shows. Reno also designs and creates book cover art and logos, while Jaye is incapable of drawing stick people. For more information on their writing, please visit Reno and Jaye at <http://macleodvalentine.com>.

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