

Bitch Heiress X2 Samurai Butler

UNCENSORED

By

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CHAPTER 1

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned

Several days had passed and there was still no word from Haruka. Kusanagi tapped her foot impatiently on the floor of the study where she had the phone on the table before her as well as a bottle of *sake*. Kusanagi was *not* a very patient person...

She poured herself another cup of *sake* and drank it back in one gulp. "Ah! Stupid...useless Haruka...where could he be? Doesn't he have *some* news about Ranmaru yet? Argh!" Kusanagi pulled at her messy hair. "I can't take this waiting!" She poured herself another cup of *sake* and downed it. "Ah!" She slammed the cup down on the nearby table, a rosy hue coming to her cheeks. "Unless...Haruka *did* find Ranmaru's whereabouts and isn't telling me because of his own personal vendetta against Ranmaru or because of his stupid crush on me? Dammit! I'm going to *kill* that stupid *ninja*...I should just go and find him myself...hey, that's it! What am I doing waiting around here for? Hmm? When you want something done right - do it yourself!" Kusanagi declared standing up unsteadily. "*Hiccup. Hiccup.*" She picked up the bottle of *sake*, raised it to her lips, and began to chug it. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand when she had finished it off. "Now I'm ready!" Kusanagi picked up her *bokken* and headed out the door, walking slightly sideways and most definitely drunk.

Kusanagi left the mansion and went outside to her menagerie intent on getting Sora and Kaze to help her. "Sora! Kaze! Come!" Kusanagi called out and the unicorn and demon dog obediently came over to her at her call. "Guys, I need your help. Ranmaru's been taken and we're going to find him! *Yosha!*" Kusanagi punched the air enthusiastically.

Sora and Kaze both exchanged worried looks at the news, but also because Kusanagi was obviously drunk and swaying on her feet, a slight flush across her cheeks.

Kusanagi held up a pair of Ranmaru's boxers in order for Kaze to get his scent...

Scratch that - she was *very* very drunk. Sora realized worriedly.

"Here Kaze, get Ranmaru's scent...then let's go and find him!" Kusanagi slurred.

Kaze reluctantly sniffed the dirty boxers and once he had gotten Ranmaru's scent he barked. Kusanagi nodded. "*Yosh*. Good." She then mounted Sora unsteadily - the unicorn had to get down on all fours for the drunk Kusanagi to be able to mount him. Kusanagi held the reigns in one hand and her wooden sword in the other. "*Yosha!* Off...to battle!" She raised her sword high into the air and charged forward.

Sora sweat-dropped, *What battle?* Sigh. He shook his head at his Master.

Kaze barked encouragingly and took off into the night with Kusanagi and Sora following close behind. Kusanagi Kimamura, heir to the Kimamura estate, rode through the busy streets of Tokyo while in plain sight and on a unicorn - probably not the brightest of her ideas yet. She maneuvered Sora skillfully with the reigns, swerving through traffic and cars while following the excited Kaze. Yep, she was definitely drunk and would probably regret this reckless move tomorrow morning once she had sobered up.

But at the moment Kusanagi could care less since Kaze had actually managed to catch Ranmaru's scent! And before she realized it Kusanagi had reached a tall and impressive office building. She looked up, her vision somewhat blurry, to read the large letters that were on the top of the building: TSUBAKI INC. Why did that name sound so familiar? Kusanagi shrugged carelessly, she'd worry about that tomorrow.

She left Sora outside and Kaze continued to lead the way bursting through the front door of the building. Kusanagi made her way into the building following Kaze and was immediately stopped by two security guards, who tried to detain her-

"Whoa, hang on there little missy, where do you think

you're going at this time of night?"

"Is that a *bokken*?" The other security guard asked stupidly as Kusanagi pulled out her wooded sword and rested it across her shoulders, tapping her shoulder impatiently.

These bozos really had to get out of her way - now. Didn't they realize she was in a hurry? "Oh, but I have an appointment." Kusanagi declared with a cheery smile.

"You do? With who?" The first security guard questioned, used to dealing with overbearing weirdos during his job everyday. TSUBAKI INC was just that kind of place.

"With Death." Her innocent schoolgirl smile turned evil and she charged forward at them and took both of the guards out easily with her drunken swordplay in about 5.2 seconds flat. A few shots had been fired at her, but because of her unpredictable movements (since she was piss drunk) the guards had missed her. Whew.

Kusanagi let Kaze take the stair route and then Kaze finally stopped outside of one door in particular that led to the 29th floor. Kusanagi kicked the door open and dog and Master made their way down the hall. Up ahead she caught sight of two more security guards standing outside of a door, keeping watch. The only door on this entire floor, which meant that this apartment must take up the entire floor.

"Keh, more *yakuza* morons..." Kusanagi tsked as she made her way towards them, "Yo." She casually waved at them.

The two security guards that had been in deep conversation turned to look her way in surprise.

"Holy shit. How did she get in here?" The first guard swore.

"Hey, isn't she..." The guard looked over her outfit: trademark flying-saucer, military style hat upon her head, her piercings, the black leather, combat boots, and her wooden sword. "The Bitch? Uh oh..."

Kusanagi smirked. "Bingo. Uh oh is right. Kaze!" Kusanagi charged forward and disarmed the first guard with her sword and then with a harsh, slashing, upper cut blow of her sword she knocked the guard out.

Kaze leapt at the other security guard, growling, teeth bared and latched onto the man's wrist and onto the hand that was wielding the gun. He clamped his teeth down painfully, forcing the guard to drop the gun he held as blood gushed out from his wounds.

"Ow! Shit! Damned dog!" The security guard complained as he held his injured wrist.

Kusanagi turned to face this guard next and used her *bokken* to knock the security guard out with a quick forward jab to his solar plexus. "Good work Kaze."

"Woof!" Kaze was scratching at the door and whimpering now.

Kusanagi nodded, "Ranmaru is behind this door, boy? *Yosh.*" Kusanagi patted Kaze on his head, "Good boy. Thanks to you...I've found him. Ranmaru..." Kusanagi took a deep breath and steeled herself before she then used a roundhouse kick to smash the door in. She made her way inside-

And found herself in a luxurious suite but there was no sign of Ranmaru. However, she heard voices and made her way towards the sound, going over to stand in front of a bedroom door. Gulp. Kusanagi shook her head - now was *not* the time to hesitate.

Kusanagi kicked the door in and strode inside confidently, sword in hand-

And there illuminated by candlelight was Ranmaru along with someone else...

Kusanagi's face turned red in 3.5 seconds flat. She couldn't believe what she was actually seeing. The bedroom had been decorated with candles everywhere and it was their golden glow that illuminated the bed that was in the center of the room. A bed with red silk sheets and a tacky silk canopy.

And was that a *mirror* on the ceiling just above the bed? Kusanagi shook her head.

There lying on the bed was Ranmaru, who was currently being straddled by some woman...in what Kusanagi could only assume was a very *sexual* manner. Gulp.

The bed was positioned sideways so Kusanagi was able to see most of Ranmaru and could see how he had been stripped naked. His wrists had been handcuffed to the bedposts directly

above his head. And his legs had been tied to the bottom bedposts with what appeared to be strips of black leather. There was also a long chain attached to Ranmaru's Control Collar and which Kusanagi saw that the woman had held in her hand. Ranmaru also had strange leather bindings and straps wrapped around his body - strips of leather that seemed to be painfully constricting around his body in odd places. Kusanagi didn't even want to know why Ranmaru's face was flushed like that, with this strange pained expression on his face.

Luckily or unluckily, Kusanagi was unable to see Ranmaru's manhood because of the woman who was straddling him-

The woman, Kusanagi decided, was obviously some whore with a Dominatrix fetish. She was wearing a black *haori* shirt that was slightly open in front revealing a lot of the woman's ample cleavage. She had on a daringly short, leather skirt that was riding up her thighs as she wrapped her legs around Ranmaru's lower torso. She also had on a pair of black stiletto heels and was wearing fishnet stockings. There was a leather choker about her neck and as the candlelight hit the woman Kusanagi caught a glimpse of the tiny silver skull pendant that dangled from her choker, and which gleamed eerily in the candlelight. This woman was obviously one of the Shiro Tsubaki *yakuza*. *Dammit*. The woman had long, silky black hair that for the moment was blocking most of her face and expression from Kusanagi's view. Kusanagi felt a thrill of envy run through her at the sight of the woman's long, smooth hair. But then the candlelight seemed to illuminate something in the woman's hands-

Blades.

Long, razor sharp *flechettes*, or blades. At first Kusanagi almost cried out in a panic when the candle light glanced off the blade, thinking that the woman had been about to slit Ranmaru's throat, but the woman merely brought the blade down not on Ranmaru's exposed neck but down slowly upon Ranmaru's chest.

Kusanagi's voice left her and she found herself frozen to

the spot, and watching this woman's actions probably out of some kind of morbid fascination. Just what the hell was that woman doing? The woman pressed the blade to Ranmaru's chest beginning to press down on the blade, applying more pressure, and then she moved the blade downwards, cutting into Ranmaru's flesh very slightly, leaving a trail of red, of blood, in the wake of her blade as she continue to move the blade down Ranmaru's body and towards....

Ranmaru gasped at the pain and panted, chest heaving. Then when the woman leaned over him and began to lick up along the trail of blood she had caused, Kusanagi heard Ranmaru let out a strangled moan.

Of pleasure? That's about when Kusanagi snapped out of her stunned stupor. She gasped in shock at this revelation, and her eyes went wide. *Ranmaru...! Is enjoying this torture?*

Inner Kusanagi couldn't help but pipe up- *Ranmaru looks sexy all tied up like that doesn't he? Harmless...less intimidating...vulnerable. Like something you could handle. And he seemed to enjoy that just now didn't he? I wonder if he would enjoy it if you did something like that to him, Kusanagi? He seems to be the kind of man who doesn't mind lying below...and will let his woman have control. Isn't that something you've always secretly wanted, Kusanagi? A man who would bend to your will?*

Kusanagi's eyes widened to the size of saucers and she shook her head vigorously, willing the voice to go away, *Shut up! You know nothing about what I really want!*

But Inner Kusanagi continued relentlessly. *It's alright...there's nothing wrong with feeling that way. But...is it really okay for someone else to touch him like that? So...intimately? He's your slave isn't he? He belongs to you...*

Kusanagi froze at the word 'slave'. And for some reason the phrase 'sex slave' popped up in her head as she looked at Ranmaru's bound form. And then came anger...and rage. How dare that whore, whoever she was, use her Ranmaru for her own pleasure like he was some sort of sex slave! That Bitch! He wasn't...he was...her *Samurai* Butler, God dammit!

Kusanagi had had just about enough. "Ranmaru!"

Ranmaru turned his head slowly towards Kusanagi with

dull, dead golden eyes, which slowly began to change as they focused on Kusanagi. Ranmaru had had this far away look in his eyes, as if his mind had been far far away. But at the sound of Kusanagi's voice - she seemed to have managed to call him back somehow from wherever he was. A spark, a sudden fire was lit within those golden depths of Ranmaru's eyes at the sight of his true Mistress. "*Oujo-sama!*" Ranmaru began to struggle against his bonds.

And then the woman turned her head to look at Kusanagi, and it all seemed to happen to Kusanagi in creepy, slow motion-

Kusanagi saw the woman's face. She was beautiful with pale skin like porcelain, peridot colored eyes, pink pouty lips, and a beauty mark under her left eye. Her face held a youthful innocence about it but the expression that was on it...made Kusanagi shiver. But that wasn't what made Kusanagi gasp and take a sudden step back - the hatred that filled those peridot eyes as they stared back at her was overwhelming. And *familiar*. This woman...Kusanagi didn't know why she felt this way but...she felt as if she knew this woman somehow. Kusanagi shook her head, she was going insane - this was definitely the first time she'd seen someone who looked like her. Kusanagi pointed her wooden sword at the woman, emerald green eyes flashing, "Get off of Ranmaru, you whore. He's *my* slave, err, *Samurai* Butler!"

"Come to save your Spell-Collared yokai *sex* slave, have you? And all by yourself, little girl?" Kagura purred, amused. "That was quite the delayed reaction. Enjoy the show?"

Kusanagi's jaw dropped at the phrase 'sex slave' but she stubbornly shook her head. "No...he's not..." *She knew I was watching...and yet didn't stop...how sick.*

Kagura smiled evilly, "Oh yes he is. He's never told you? What he was before? In fact, he used to be *my* sex slave. I got bored with him though and sold him off on a whim, but I've regretted that ever since. You see, I've really been so lonely without him and I also decided I missed his screams. So I decided to take him back. Won't you give him back to me Kusanagi-chan? I'd be willing to pay any price you name."

Kusanagi clenched her fists at her sides, "Hell no!

Ranmaru is my slave. And I am his Master! Ranmaru belongs to me!” *I can’t believe I just said that out loud! What the hell is wrong with me? Argh! Oh my god. Don’t pass out!* “And I’m going to take him back with me, bitch.” She growled.

Kagura frowned darkly, “Hmm, that’s too bad, but I think not. Oh, Karas, darling-” She purred.

A cloaked and masked figure emerged from the shadows as if before he had been one with them. The man was one of the infamous H4 otherwise known as the ‘Heavenly Four’. They were a group of four mysterious characters that were Kagura’s personal bodyguards. She had named them after the Four Heavenly Kings. The man had a hooded black cloak and a skull mask on his face that resembled the skull of a large bird. As he approached Kusanagi she raised her wooden sword before her in a two-handed grip prepared to fight, however-

The H4 member slowly removed his mask with one hand to reveal his face-

And all the blood drained from Kusanagi’s face and she went pale as if she’d seen a ghost. “It’s YOU!” She gasped in fright.

Ranmaru craned his neck to observe the man better, and noted he had long, black hair, sharp, dark blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and slightly pointed ears. This man was a *yokai*...and Kusanagi seemed to know him gauging by her reaction to him.

Karas smiled as he continued to approach her and he summoned his *yokai* energy so that it began to crackle around him in an electric aura.

Kusanagi backed away in horror, “No! Stay away!” Her wooden sword fell to the ground from her limp fingers.

Ranmaru could see that Kusanagi was trembling in fear and his heart ached painfully in his chest. She had completely stopped moving and she remained wide-eyed as she watched Karas approach her. She had become frozen, paralyzed by her own fear, now its prisoner. “*Oujo-sama!*” Ranmaru yelled and struggled against his bonds more desperately than before, causing the metal handcuffs to cut into his wrists so that they bled. And the leather straps that were wrapped around his body were tightening in places that made Ranmaru want to curl up on the floor in the fetal position, but he grit his teeth against the pain and

continued to struggle to free himself. *Damn, why am I feeling so weak? What kind of drug has Kagura given me this time?* “Stay away from her, you bastard!”

Kaze suddenly moved into action. He jumped to land in front of Kusanagi blocking Karas’ path to her. He growled and barred his teeth at Karas, his claws digging into the floor before him as Kaze let them extend menacingly. But Karas just smirked and continued to approach Kusanagi unfazed, and so Kaze attacked him, teeth bared, jaw open and snapping.

“Out of my way, pup.” Karas drawled as he used the back of his hand to backhand Kaze as his jaws were almost upon his neck. The back of Karas’s hand connected with the side of Kaze’s face and jaw and with such force Kaze was sent flying back and into one of the bedroom walls with a sickening crack and yelp. When Kaze yelped in pain, it was that horrible sound a dog makes when it’s hurt or kicked very badly, that sound that makes one’s heart clench in one’s chest despite themselves. And this is what happened to Kusanagi as she heard Kaze’s yelp of pain.

“Kaze!” Ranmaru yelled and looked over at Kusanagi, who was still paralyzed, eyes wide and fearful. She appeared to be on the verge of some kind of nervous breakdown. Shit.

She was breaking to pieces right before his eyes and Ranmaru couldn’t do anything to stop it. He was powerless. *Kusanagi!*

“Kaze...” Kusanagi said weakly, tears springing to her eyes, as she seemed to snap out of her stupor just long enough to realize what had happened to her *yokai* dog.

Tears. Ranmaru couldn’t take much more of this kind of torture. The things Kagura did to him, he could handle, but this...seeing his beautiful, strong Mistress being reduced to tears before his very eyes he couldn’t take!

Karas turned his attention back towards Kusanagi and strolled towards her while carelessly raising a hand in a threatening gesture that was wrapped in a silver, sparkling and electric aura. He was prepared to bring this hand down upon Kusanagi-

When-
BOOM

A sudden smoke bomb exploded from within the room and Ranmaru watched as a figure dressed all in black went to Kusanagi's side. Ranmaru knew that scent – Haruka!

Haruka gripped Kusanagi's shoulders and shook her roughly, "Kusanagi! Snap out of it!" He successfully managed to snap her out of her daze when he slapped her across the face.

Kusanagi turned and blinked back at Haruka dazedly, "Haruka...I don't feel so good..." Kusanagi was beginning to look a little green.

Haruka swiftly picked her up into his arms and headed towards the bedroom window. "We're escaping."

Kusanagi seemed too stunned to speak until she burst out- "No! What about Ranmaru? We can't just leave him here!"

Haruka threw a bomb at the window so that it exploded, causing the window to shatter. He looked down at Kusanagi with an almost repentant look on his face. "I'm sorry." He said as he leapt up onto the window frame. "Kaze! Time to go boy!" Haruka called out to the demon dog that unsteadily struggled to his feet.

"Dammit! They're getting away! Don't let them escape! Karas! Hurry!" Kagura cried angrily, biting her thumbnail.

Karas bowed, "Yes, Mistress." He said turning and raising his hand to unleash an electric attack towards Haruka and Kusanagi.

Kusanagi screamed at the sight, and Haruka jumped - right out the window. Kaze followed close behind them and jumped out of the window as well.

"KUSANAGI!" Ranmaru yelled. "KAZE!"

Kusanagi and Haruka fell through the air and then Haruka pulled out what looked like a large black gun but with a four pronged, harpoon stuck to the end. Haruka aimed his grappling hook gun up at the roof and fired. The grappling hook shot out and went zooming up into the air, and then up and over the roof.

Kusanagi and Haruka continued to fall (until finally) Kusanagi frowned, "Haruka! You idiot! Are you sure this is going to work?"

Haruka frowned back, "I think so..." He didn't sound very confident however.

Kusanagi's eyes widened in disbelief. "You think! You think? Arghhh!" She began to spaz out and wave her hands frantically around, "I'm too young and beautiful to die, you idiot fruit cake! Some rescue this is! *Mou!*"

When the grappling hook finally took-
And caused them to halt in midair in a jarring manner.
Whew.

Kaze was also falling through the air but he used his claws to dig into the side of the office building and reduced his speed in this manner so that he was able to slowly reach the ground, lastly pushing off of the building, and then landing on the ground on all fours without injury.

Haruka then concentrated on slowly lowering he and Kusanagi safely to the ground below. They touched ground in the alleyway right next to the TSUBAKI INC building. Kusanagi immediately struggled to get out of Haruka's arms, "Let me go, you buffoon! I have to save him! I have to go back there!"

Haruka tried to restrain her, "Kusanagi-*chan!* You're talking crazy! That's the TSUBAKI INC building, you know. Did you even have any idea of what you were doing? The danger you were putting yourself in! It wasn't too long ago that the boss of TSUBAKI INC used me to try and kidnap you to bring you in either dead or alive remember!"

Kusanagi opened her mouth to retort, emerald green eyes flashing. "I-" But then her face had turned a bit green again. "I think I'm going to be sick..." Kusanagi moaned pathetically, her voice practically a whine.

Haruka's eyes widened and he tried to set her down in time, "What? Wait! Hold on a second, will you, don't-"

Too late.

"Blaarrghh!" Kusanagi ended up throwing up all over the front of Haruka's pristine *ninja* outfit. Ew. Before Kusanagi suddenly passed right out.

"Why me?" Haruka moaned down at the unconscious girl in his arms.

Karas was looking out the window and down below, his sharp, hawk like eyes focusing on the figures in the darkened alleyway, "They escaped." He declared in a monotone, drawling voice.

Kagura bit her lip, "Dammit..." She looked down at Ranmaru, "So your Mistress came to rescue you. I bet that makes you feel special?" Her voice was tinged with sarcasm.

Ranmaru wisely remained quiet. However, on the inside he was an emotional roller coaster. Kusanagi had come to rescue him and all on her own! She *had* to care about him at least a little to do something like that, right? And here he thought that she had abandoned him - that she didn't care if he had suddenly disappeared or been sold off. She...*cared*...enough to come face to face with HIM again too, the mysterious HIM that Kusanagi sometimes referred to when she spoke to Roze and didn't think Ranmaru was listening. The one responsible for her parents' and for Mamoru's deaths. The man now had a name and a face.

It had to have been Karas, one of the H4.

Kagura frowned, "Answer me, you pathetic slave." But when Ranmaru still failed to answer her, lost in his own thoughts as he was, Kagura grew angry. "*Embrace.*" She said in her silky voice. "That should teach you to ignore me..."

Ranmaru gasped in pain as the collar constricted around his neck and sent a nasty electric shock through his body-

"I know what you're thinking about. I know once again your mind is filled with nothing but HER. *Ooo~* I hate it. But I won't let you get away with it this time. I'll do whatever it takes until *I* am the only one you're thinking about." Kagura turned to Karas, "Karas leave us."

Karas bowed respectfully, "Yes Mistress." Karas silently left the room, slinking back into the shadows.

Once he had left them Kagura returned her attention to Ranmaru. "I'm going to make your night a living hell." She leaned over and put both her hands on either side of Ranmaru's head and pressed. "I'm going to push Kusanagi out of your mind...for good." She leaned over and kissed Ranmaru passionately, and when she pulled back blood was dripping down from Ranmaru's broken lips.

“I think you need to remember who your *real* Mistress is, Ranmaru Darling...although it’s hard to think that you could have forgotten our hundreds of years together...or forgotten about all of the ‘fun’ we’ve had together...” She trailed her hand down his chest...and made a beeline for his limp member.

She began to stroke it, up and down roughly, cajoling it to hardness.

Ranmaru struggled against his bonds again but it was really no use. He gasped as Kagura quickened her pace and unwanted heat pooled in his groin. He didn’t want this...but it was only natural for his body to respond to her touch.

After all, she knew his body better than he probably did.

“Yes,” she purred, “It seems your body has not forgotten my touch...”

Ranmaru didn’t respond. *This woman’s hands...can’t make me...can’t make me...*

Kagura seemed to sense Ranmaru was almost over the edge and so she suddenly squeezed Ranmaru’s dick painfully.

Ranmaru let out a grunt of pain, the pleasure suddenly gone.

Kagura waved her finger at him, “Ah, ah, ah, a slave can’t cum before his Mistress. Now, it’s my turn. It’s about time you pleased *me*, Ranmaru. But first...” Kagura took out her flechette blade again.

Ranmaru felt sick. He knew what was coming and yet he could do nothing to stop it.

Kagura postponed the inevitable, enjoying torturing Ranmaru some more. She drew red rivulets on Ranmaru’s body with her flechettes and licked at his wounds sensually. She then drew a circle around one of Ranmaru’s hardened nipples and suckled on him, until a low moan escaped his raw throat.

Dammit...He didn’t want this...

Kagura smiled and drew more red circles around his other nipple and began to lick and suck at it too until it also became hard. She teased and tweaked him thoroughly pleased with herself and knowing that she was driving Ranmaru mad with desire.

Even her mere touches and licks on his chest and nipples were becoming almost enough to send him over the edge to his completion.

But Kagura was a pro at their little game and so she always made sure Ranmaru got close to his completion but that he still didn't cum.

Bittersweet torture.

Kagura ran her hands up his legs sensually, and to his inner thighs...towards his hardness, which was now leaking pre-cum and just *begging* to be touched. She ghosted her hands over him still not touching him, and cruelly teased him some more. "Beg..." Kagura purred as she leaned over and pressed her ample chest against his. "I want you to beg..."

Ranmaru bit his lip. No...he wouldn't...he didn't want this...

"I said *beg!*" Kagura demanded beginning to get frustrated with him, "*Embrace.*"

Ranmaru was punished once more. And through the haze of pain Ranmaru unexpectedly felt pleasure, Kagura was stroking his dick to hardness once more as the electric shocks coursed through his body. The pleasure...and the pain...for hundreds of years Kagura had done this to him. Until, they had become one and the same...

Ranmaru's body and mind had become warped in his perceptions about sex...love...pleasure...pain. He believed that pain and hate were a natural part of 'love making'.

Oh God, he wanted this...the pain...the pleasure...he could feel himself falling, falling back into the darkness where Kagura controlled him – mind, body and soul. Where he completely belonged to her. Where there was no escape...

Kagura continued to tease and torture him, almost always bringing him to the edge but then withholding his release until finally - he broke. "I...want..." Ranmaru panted in a breathy desperate voice.

Kagura smiled both evilly and triumphantly, "Yes?"

Ranmaru gasped through the haze of pleasure and pain, tears of humiliation and shame coming to his sad golden eyes, "I want you...*please*..."

Kagura's eyes gleamed, and her expression turned

victorious. She had won. She straddled Ranmaru and raised herself up to position herself over Ranmaru's weeping cock. She then slowly lowered herself down upon him.

Ranmaru almost let out a sigh of relief. Finally. Tears were streaming down his cheeks in shame, humiliation, pure relief.

Kagura was still having fun torturing him and lowered herself onto him very, *very* slowly. Until he was finally completely sheathed in her heat, the wet, glorious core of her womanhood.

"*Kagura...*" He gasped, ashamed, his skin flushed. "Please...move..."

Kagura leaned over and kissed his lips sweetly before pulling back to smile at him, "*Yosh, yosh, good boy...*" She declared as she began to move on him.

He didn't want this...he didn't want this...but it felt so damned *good*. He was *so* close now...so close...

Kagura controlled their pace as she rocked hard against him, mercilessly, moving on top of him. She swung her hair back and he couldn't help but think that she looked beautiful above him. She looked like Nagi. Ranmaru's heart clenched in his chest. *God, what am I doing? Nagi...Kusanagi...*

Kagura quickened her pace as she was close to reaching her climax and then she let out a cry of pleasure as she finally reached her completion. Her inner walls closed down tightly, deliciously around Ranmaru's male member and he would have cum too if Kagura hadn't reached down and grasped his balls and squeezed. Ranmaru yelped and was unable to cum because of this. Kagura laughed as she collapsed onto Ranmaru, panting for breath, sated...

But poor Ranmaru still hadn't cum.

"*Mistress...please...*" Ranmaru begged pitifully.

Kagura moved up and smiled down at Ranmaru; she then moved her body off of his and his arousal. "You've been such a good boy I suppose you do deserve a reward..." Kagura declared as she slid down his body like a snake. She grasped his member in her hand and Ranmaru gulped, half in fear, half in anticipation.

Kagura then surprised him by taking Ranmaru completely into her mouth...and it was heaven. She was good and she knew it. She moved her mouth up and down his length in a tantalizing manner, taking his length deep into the back of her throat, and when she grazed her teeth against his member he was overwhelmed by the combination of pleasure and pain. He came fast, sparks in front of his eyes. "Kagura!" Ranmaru grunted as he released his seed into her mouth, his body trembling. Kagura smiled around his length and bit down hard on his member right in the middle of Ranmaru's climax.

Ranmaru cried out in a mixture of pleasure and pain, tears in his eyes.

Then when the roller coaster of pleasure and pain was finally over, all Ranmaru was left with was - emptiness.

Kusanagi...

Kagura licked her lips tasting both Ranmaru's blood and seed. "Mmm~ just like old times *neh* Ranmaru Darling? Don't you want to come back to my side? You could be my *Samurai* Butler instead of Kusanagi's. Ha! Naw, you'd be my obedient Spell-Collared *yokai* sex slave once more. I know you enjoyed our time together just now. I *know* you wanted that. You sure missed me a lot; there was so much of you that entered my mouth just now Ranmaru. How long has it been since you had your own release? Does your new Mistress Kusanagi not put out?" She teased devilishly.

Ranmaru looked up at Kagura and gave her a broken half-smirk, "Go to hell, bitch. Kusanagi's not like you. Kusanagi is the only woman who will ever be my *true* Mistress...the only woman who will ever truly be able to satisfy me. I'm sorry to say this but your performance was truly sub par." He spit at her.

His spit hit Kagura's cheek. Shocked she wiped her cheek with the back of her hand.

"*Kisama!* You!" She gripped Ranmaru's dick in her hand and squeezed it painfully. It was already black and blue from their previous activities. "How dare you! Even now she's still in your head! Even now! Argh! What if I were to rip this off hmm? Then you'd never be able to pleasure your precious, Kusanagi! What do you have to say to that?"

A chill of fear ran down Ranmaru's spine,

“No...*please*...I’ll do anything...”

“*Anything?*” Kagura’s angry expression mellowed a bit at the prospect, “That’s more like it, slave. But first I think I need to punish you for your earlier defiance.” Kagura lowered her hand to grip Ranmaru’s balls instead. “Did you know I’m able to direct the electric flow of the Control Collar with my power?” She was explaining to him conversationally as she squeezed her hand around his balls painfully while she intoned the word of subjugation. “*Embrace.*”

A ragged scream was torn from Ranmaru’s lips.

Ranmaru was taken back to the underground prison, bloody and broken. He was too weak to move so two guards carried him into the cell he shared with Ryoga and they dumped him onto the cell floor unceremoniously before leaving.

Ranmaru was looking pretty bad - more than bad. “Holy-!” Ryoga swore as he caught sight of Ranmaru’s form and went over to him. He knelt at his side. “What the hell did that bitch do to you? You’re a mess. You look like hell, buddy.”

Ranmaru weakly opened his eyes and half-smirked at Ryoga, “No shit.”

Ryoga saw how Ranmaru’s dirty white shirt was plastered to his body and there seemed to be splotches of blood on it. *Those wounds need to be treated right away or the poor guy could end up getting a nasty infection.* Ryoga thought as he moved next to Ranmaru and began to strip him roughly.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened in surprise. Did Ryoga...? Was Ryoga going to...! Ranmaru batted Ryoga’s hand away weakly. “No! Don’t touch me!” Ranmaru began to panic as he scrambled backwards across the cell floor away from Ryoga, a frantic, half-crazed, half -afraid expression in his eyes.

Ryoga looked at Ranmaru in shock. How could someone so incredibly powerful be acting like this...? Just what the hell did that bitch do to him to make him so...broken? Ryoga felt sick as he thought about it. Perhaps, he really didn’t want to know.

Ranmaru began muttering nonsensically to himself. “Not you too...Ryoga...”

Ryoga strode forward and grabbed Ranmaru by the front of his shirt. He then pulled him roughly up off the ground and then punched him hard across the face. "Idiot! I would never hurt you. Especially..." He lowered his voice. "Not like that. I have a wife and a kid after all. I have a family. And I just don't swing that way - not that there's anything wrong with that." Ryoga scratched his cheek in an awkward manner.

Ranmaru blinked at Ryoga in shock and realized how stupid his behavior had truly been. *God, why am I acting this way? This is so embarrassing.* He had just made a complete fool out of himself. Ranmaru blushed and hung his head, his hair shielding his tortured expression, "I'm sorry."

Ryoga frowned at him, "You have nothing to be sorry for."

Ranmaru's eyes widened as he suddenly remembered something. "The man's fiancé! And the mother and child...what happened to them?" *I'm nothing but a monster...a killing machine...did I kill them too?*

Ryoga sighed and then smiled weakly, "They've been spared - for now. I really don't know what Kagura plans to do with them. But whatever it is - it can't be good."

"I see." Ranmaru hung his head, his bangs shadowing his chaotic golden eyes. *They're safe. I didn't kill them.* He then looked up and pinned Ryoga with his golden stare. "Ryoga...I really am sorry about how strangely I was acting earlier. I know...you're not that kind of person. I was simply out of sorts because of what Kagura did to me. She-"

Ryoga put a hand on Ranmaru's shoulder, stopping him from continuing; he saw how much it hurt Ranmaru to talk about it after all and shook his head. "Don't worry about it, buddy. Are you...alright?"

Ranmaru felt like breaking down right then and there. There was just something about that question that made a person want to break down and cry when something was deeply troubling them and they had been trying their best to hide this fact. "No." Ranmaru told him quietly, holding back his tears, and simply buried his emotions deep within himself.

Ryoga came and sat behind Ranmaru, and then leaned back so that his back was pressed up against Ranmaru's own

back to give Ranmaru that slight comfort. “God, now *I’m* sorry. Of course, you’re not alright. But...you shouldn’t bury your emotions like that, Ranmaru. It’s not healthy. You should just let it all out. You’re not alone. We all understand what you’re going through here. And if you, um, you know, need a shoulder to lean on or something. I’m here for you buddy.”

Ranmaru thought about it and realized something, “I don’t know how, anymore.” *How to just let go of my emotions...*

Ryoga nodded sympathetically, “I see. Don’t worry about it, Ranmaru. We’ll get out of here...and then maybe I can help you. We have to keep up our hope though, if we manage to keep anything.”

“Hope?” Ranmaru mused aloud. “How can you have such a thing in a place like this? How do you keep your hope alive, Ryoga? Perhaps, you’re a stronger man than me.”

Ryoga grinned slightly to himself. “My family. I have someone to protect.”

“Someone to protect...” Ranmaru trailed off wistfully.

“I asked you this before but...don’t you have someone special? Someone to protect?”

Ranmaru’s eyes widened as he remembered how Kusanagi had come and tried to rescue him all on her own and despite HIM being there. “Yes, yes I do. My Lady Kusanagi.” Ranmaru nodded, a serious look in his eyes.

Ryoga’s expression turned warm, “I see. That’s good.”

Ranmaru suddenly remembered the robotic, *Samurai Butler* Remington’s words-

If you have someone to protect you are no longer just a killing machine, a tool. You are a Protector. A true Samurai Butler.

Ranmaru smiled and Ryoga looked back at him in surprise. “Ryoga, I’ve been a compete idiot. I let my past memories and scars consume me and I forgot something very important.”

Ryoga leaned in, curious, “Oh? And what’s that?”

Ranmaru had a steely glint in his golden eyes, “I’m a *Samurai Butler*.”

“A *Samurai* Butler huh?” Ryoga quirked his head at his strange friend.

Ranmaru nodded, “Yes, I cannot allow myself to break or to be broken because I am a Protector. I have someone I need to Protect. And not just Kusanagi...I want to protect you and your family and everyone here too. And...I will.” There was a fierce look in Ranmaru’s golden eyes, a flame had been ignited there – the flames of a one man war.

Ryoga’s voice was thick with emotion. “Ranmaru buddy...”

Ranmaru smirked, “That bitch is going down.”

Ryoga nodded, “Hell yea, let’s do it, Ranmaru!”

A cheer went up through the prison cells surprising Ryoga and Ranmaru both that everyone had been eavesdropping on their conversation. The *yokai* and slaves were all ready to follow Ranmaru in whatever course of action he chose. A half-smirk formed on Ranmaru’s lips; if he was good at anything it was war.

Watch out, Kagura. The thing a tyrant most fears are the people he or she has in his or her grip of tyranny.

The next day at the coliseum, Ranmaru, Ryoga, Kei and Eiji were escorted by the guards to the battle arena where all four were then pushed roughly out of the newly repaired gate, which had been raised.

There in the stands Ranmaru could see Kagura sitting and surrounded by her H4, who were standing. And there was that mysterious man again – the one with the long white hair, half-skull mask on his face, gray pinstriped, black suit, red shirt and black tie. That man whose scent was oddly familiar to Ranmaru and who made the hair stand up on the back of his neck in warning. Ranmaru still couldn’t place his scent since it was oddly obscured by the scent of blood and death. *That man...he can’t be...?* Ranmaru once again mused.

But Ranmaru had no more time to dwell on the man’s identity as Kagura stood up from her seat. “Ranmaru darling!” She called down to him and her voice boomed across the arena grounds, “Let’s make things more interesting for our guests. I propose a deal. A series of three challenges. And if you manage to pass all three challenges then the lives of all the hostages will

be spared and they will be freed. Do we have a deal?"

Ranmaru looked to the others who nodded in agreement, "YES." Ranmaru yelled back up at her.

Kagura clapped her hands together excitedly. "Oh, this is going to be such fun!" Kagura made a hand signal. "Release the first challenge!"

The metal gate at the other end of the arena was raised and four figures stepped out and onto the arena. These yakuza were *yokai*, who had been dressed in *samurai* battle armor and were obviously skilled fighters and warriors. Skilled fighters who were very good at what they did best - killing.

One of the men was a large and hulking *yokai* with skin that looked like dried mud and sand. Ranmaru realized that he was an earth golem *yokai*. A *yokai* that had complete control over the element of earth.

The *yokai* standing next to him was obviously a snake type. He looked like a man but had green scales covering his face and a long black tongue that darted out from his mouth from time to time to lick his lips. Ranmaru knew snake *yokai* were typically venomous so his strength was most likely poison. The snake *yokai* was spinning two deadly looking *sai* in his hands as well, which meant he was obviously a close range fighter.

Ranmaru's mind was working a mile per minute as he summed up their opponents. The third *yokai* was a very lanky man with large fangs that poked out of his lips; perhaps he was another wolf *yokai* Ranmaru mused wondering what his strengths and weaknesses were...

And the last *yokai* yakuza warrior looked particularly out of place. He was dressed in a slick gray suit, with a white shirt, and a black tie. He also had on a pair of black sunglasses. And in his hands he held a machine gun.

Uh oh.

Ranmaru nodded to himself having finished analyzing the opposition to the best of his ability and had already come up with a plan of attack i.e. battle strategy. He had been a War General once after all...

"Eiji I want you to take on the earth golem *yokai*. Hold

him off with your water attacks as long as you can.” Ranmaru directed in a gruff voice.

Eiji nodded, a steely look in his beady black eyes. “Right, General.” Eiji saluted Ranmaru. The normally cowardly *kappa* was looking somewhat confident in that moment. His faith in Ranmaru lending him strength.

Ranmaru blinked at that, ‘General’? Did they know about his past...? But that was impossible. He must merely have been joking. Ranmaru turned to Ryoga next, “I want you to face the snake *yokai*. Your sword should be able to fend off his *sai* attacks efficiently because your weapon has a longer range than his. Be careful because the *sai* are most likely poisoned by his own venom.”

Ryoga gave Ranmaru a half-salute and a lopsided grin, “Gotcha, General.”

Ranmaru turned to the little blonde boy, Kei next, “And as for you kid.” Ranmaru tapped his chin in thought.

Kei looked at Ranmaru with wide expectant eyes, while his tail popped out and was wagging behind him excitedly. “What! What do you want me to do? Huh? Huh?” He questioned Ranmaru in a hyper manner.

Ranmaru had a very serious expression on his face as he put a hand on Kei’s shoulder and looked him directly in the eyes, “I want you...to stay behind me.”

Kei face-faulted, and his expression fell comically off his face, “HUH? Aw man.” Kei whined, pouted, and kicked the dirt with his shoe, but did as he was told, after all he didn’t have ‘powers’ or ‘abilities’ like the others and so knew that he would only be dead weight in battle.

Ranmaru unsheathed his sword and pointed it towards the *yokai* with the machine gun and the guy with the large fangs. “These two guys are mine. Now - attack!”

“*Ossu!* General!” The group declared as they rushed off to face their respective opponents.

I just need them to hang on long enough for me to finish with these guys before I can go and save them from their own opponents. Ranmaru thought in his mind, already planning on taking out the *yokai* with the machine gun as quickly as possible so that he could then face the wolf *yokai* on his own next, without

Kei having to fight or endanger himself in any way. Then he planned on going to Ryoga and Eiji's rescue.

The *yakuza* raised his Sten gun at Ranmaru and began to pull down on the trigger - only to move the gun's aim at the last second so that it was directed at Kei instead. "Shit! Kei!" Ranmaru swore as the *yakuza* pressed all the way down on the trigger - there was little time to react and all Ranmaru could do was grab Kei and shield him with his back.

The Sten gun had pinpoint, lazer accuracy; a favorite toy of the *yakuza* families in Japan and it could fire five hundred rounds in one minute. Ranmaru could feel the bullets sinking into his back but he did not cry out from it.

2.5 seconds later...

"General!" Kei cried.

Ranmaru flung Kei from him and onto the ground. He turned to face the *yakuza* goon, sword raised before him. He then charged forward. Ranmaru moved his sword through the air back and forth, lightning fast, blocking as many bullets as he could, but a few of the bullets still managed to get past his defenses since there were just so many of them. Ranmaru could feel the bullets painfully imbedding themselves deeply into his arms and legs.

But the pain didn't stop Ranmaru and he simply kept on moving forward even though he was being shot full of holes.

The *yakuza* thug began to back away when he realized Ranmaru had no intention of backing down. "Bastard! What are you? You monster!" The *yakuza* man swore as Ranmaru appeared directly in front of him.

Kuroki Ryu chuckled in an amused manner. *The fucking idiot!*

Ranmaru moved his sword through the air and sliced through the Sten gun first. It fell out of the *yakuza* thug's hands in pieces. The thug then put up his hands before him in a surrendering gesture as he began to tremble. "No, wait, please don't kill me!"

Ranmaru didn't listen, however, and swiftly beheaded him.

Now, if only my regeneration would kick in nice and quick... Ranmaru thought to himself. But Kagura's drugs had done a number on his system and his natural healing abilities seemed to be working slower than usual.

But before Ranmaru could continue his line of thought he was suddenly being punched hard in the stomach and was flung backwards across the arena. Ow. That punch had come out of nowhere. In fact, Ranmaru hadn't even seen it coming. Ranmaru pushed himself up off the ground and shook himself off, like a dog. *What the-?* But then 'he' was back. Ranmaru was suddenly getting punched left and right by an invisible enemy. No - not invisible, he was just super fast. Ranmaru realized. Was this the wolf *yokai*? *Shit*. Ranmaru had lost a LOT of blood and so his *yokai* senses were not at their peak. *This asshole is running circles around me! How the hell am I supposed to defeat this guy?* Things seemed helpless until-

"General!" Kei cried out in concern as Ranmaru was getting mercilessly beaten up.

Meanwhile, Eiji was following Ranmaru's instructions to the letter and opened his mouth to release a spray of water towards the earth golem *yokai*. The earth golem *yokai* charged forward towards Eiji with loud, thundering steps but as the spray of water hit him dead on – the *yokai*'s body suddenly began to fall apart.

Eiji blinked and then smiled lopsidedly, looking quite pleased with himself, "*Yatta!* Eat that! Ha! I can't believe this is actually working. Am I the man or what?" Eiji declared excitedly as he continued his spray of water towards the earth golem. The golem kept falling to pieces and kept having to reform itself but with the constant stream of water attacking it the *yokai* was finding this rather difficult.

However-

The golem suddenly shot out an elongated and enlarged arm of mud and clay towards Eiji and wrapped its hand around Eiji's legs. The earth golem *yokai* pulled back hard, tripping the *kappa* up with a startled cry as he brought his arm back.

Eiji struggled in the golem's grasp and cried out in a panic as he was being dragged backwards across the arena floor

by the giant clay hand and towards the waiting earth golem *yokai*.

The earth *yokai* raised his other gigantic fist high into the air, enlarging it and prepared to bring it down upon Eiji in order to flatten him like a pancake-

Eiji looked behind him and his eyes widened like saucers.

Uh oh.

At the same time, Ryoga was facing off against the snake *yokai* and his deadly *sai*. The snake *yokai* charged forward, *sai* raised and poised to attack. Ryoga raised his own sword and managed to block the attack. The snake *yokai* seemed surprised by this but then smiled as he spun around and continued to attack Ryoga relentlessly, his movements were extremely fast. As blow after blow rained down upon him Ryoga had to use his sword to the best of his ability to block each attack. But this was taking everything Ryoga had, all of his animal instincts just to stay alive, and even then each deadly swipe of the *sai* was *almost* hitting its mark. It was a close call indeed.

Ryoga was walking on a thin line between life and death. That place that Ranmaru loved to be in the very heat of a battle and a place that Ryoga wished he could get out of as soon as possible. Then the snake *yokai* back-flipped a few times to put some distance between Ryoga and himself. He then flung one of his *sai* at Ryoga in a deadly killing move. Ryoga raised his sword and concentrated on blocking the attack, sweat beading on his brow. *Concentrate. Concentrate. You can do this. Ranmaru wouldn't have told you to fight this guy if he didn't think you could do it.* Ryoga moved his sword through the air and managed to block the attack. *Whew.* Ryoga let out a breath of relief.

However-

Ryoga didn't sense the second *sai* that had been hidden right behind the first *sai* in its shadow. *Oh shit.* Ryoga thought as the *sai* hit him dead center in his chest, just barely missing his heart. Ryoga pulled the *sai* out painfully, and tossed it aside before too much of the poison Ranmaru had warned him about could enter his bloodstream. Poisoned *sai*...double shit. Ryoga could already feel the poison spreading, burning its way through

his veins...

The snake demon laughed knowingly. "You won't last too long. This is the end for you!" The snake demon reached into his sleeves and pulled out two more deadly *sai* and spun them in his hands devilishly before he charged Ryoga once more.

Ryoga raised his sword, now on unsteady legs, panting for breath, his vision beginning to go fuzzy, *Ranmaru...*

Meanwhile, the wolf *yokai* was running in a circle around Ranmaru and with such incredible *yokai* speed that he was creating a kind of whirlwind, or vortex around Ranmaru so that all of the oxygen that was around Ranmaru was being sucked away. Without oxygen Ranmaru was also unable to summon his fox-fire...

Ranmaru realized this *yokai* obviously had elemental control over wind. This was going to be quite problematic. Ranmaru sunk to his knees, gasping for breath, beginning to feel dizzy since all of his oxygen had been cut off. He was suffocating. He needed to think of a way to get out of this, and fast. A plan, anything, what was wind's weakness again?

"General!" Kei cried and reached into his pocket and grabbed something. 'Something' that he threw at the legs of the wolf *yokai*. It didn't hit the *yokai* but instead hit the arena floor and it burst open at the *yokai*'s feet and then brightly colored marbles went flying everywhere, scattering across the ground.

The wolf *yokai* was immediately tripped up as one of his feet landed on one of the marbles and he went flying forward to land smack on his face.

BAM

Kei cringed. "Ooo. That *had* to have hurt."

The wolf *yokai* got up and angrily looked at all the marbles that now surrounded Ranmaru. Ranmaru could thankfully breath again and so stood up quickly, sword in hand. The wolf *yokai* seemed unfazed however by this turn of events and attacked Ranmaru head on - using a series of quick kicks and roundhouse kicks in Ranmaru's directions. This *yokai*'s fighting style was obviously a form of *Jujitsu* where one uses their legs and hips to prevent their opponent from behind able to get a strike in due to their long range of attack.

Ranmaru blocked these attacks with his sword and was surprised and slightly impressed that the *yokai* was able to fend off Kuroki Ryu with his legs alone! What was this *yokai*'s skin made out of, steel? This *yokai* was pretty tough, Ranmaru had to admit. He would not underestimate him. The wolf *yokai*'s attacks had become much faster and Ranmaru was hard put to block all of the deadly kicks, which had both great defensive and offensive power-

And then Ranmaru was kicked in his jaw, right underneath his chin as the *yokai*'s foot connected there, and Ranmaru was sent flying up into the air. But the wolf *yokai* didn't stop there and continued to kick Ranmaru again and again so that his body was propelled high and higher, upwards and into the air.

And Ranmaru wasn't fighting back anymore.

"General!" Kei called out in concern upon noticing this. "Wake up! Snap out of it!"

The wolf *yokai* leered as he sent a fierce and powerful kick to Ranmaru's stomach in midair, causing blood and bile to spew out of Ranmaru's mouth as he doubled over still in the air.

"It's about time I finished this. Say goodbye to your spine!" The wolf *yokai* declared as he leapt high up into the air himself and prepared to bring down the heel of his foot onto Ranmaru's back in a sort of axe kick as he fell through the air, using both gravity and his own *yokai* power to make this kick that much more powerful and deadly-

If the attack actually hit Ranmaru's spine - he would be done for.

But Ranmaru's eyes snapped open at the very last second, and he turned in midair to smirk up at the wolf *yokai* - now that he had him right where he wanted him. "Gotcha." Ranmaru declared as the wolf *yokai* flew towards him in the air. Or rather fell. Gravity was now controlling the wolf's movements. If Ranmaru knew anything - it was how to take a little pain to ultimately get what he wanted.

The wolf *yokai*'s eyes widened in surprise and fear, "Impossible..." He breathed as Ranmaru grabbed him and impaled him upon his sword in one swift and merciless motion.

“You fell right into my trap. Up here in the air you’re not so fast are you, *buddy*?” Ranmaru whispered sarcastically into the *yokai*’s ear, feeling strangely confident. “That was your fatal mistake.” This was a battle...and Ranmaru was on a battlefield with a clear enemy to fight. This was his element. Ranmaru suddenly felt right at home.

The wolf *yokai*’s eyes widened in realization, “You...you let your ass get kicked on purpose...you are one sick and twisted bastard.” Blood trickled down his chin as he laughed.

Ranmaru nodded in assent and he watched as the wolf’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. Instead of letting the wolf *yokai* simply hit the ground, Ranmaru carried him through the air and set him down on the ground as he landed. It had been a good fight after all. The *yokai* had been an exceptional warrior, and so Ranmaru respected him as a warrior. He would respect him in death even if he had been the enemy.

Kei ran up to Ranmaru. “That was freakin awesome, dude! *Unreal*! Incredible! Fan-”

Ranmaru looked slightly amused, *Dude*? What had happened to the respectful title of General?

Kei caught Ranmaru’s look and appeared abashed, placing a hand behind his head. “Oh, right, sorry about that, General, sir. I guess I got a little carried away. Won’t happen again sir!” He saluted Ranmaru.

“At ease, little soldier.” Ranmaru ruffled the boy’s hair wondering what had come over him as he did so, “I couldn’t have won that fight without you. You were the one who was...” Ranmaru tried to find the right word. He wasn’t very used to giving people compliments. “Incredible back there.”

Kei beamed at Ranmaru’s unexpected praise. The boy wondered why Ranmaru was acting so...*human* all of a sudden.

“Now, let’s see how the others are faring shall we?” Ranmaru turned his attention to Ryoga and Eiji and not a moment too soon.

Eiji was about to get his skull smashed in.

“Eiji!” Ranmaru yelled as he rushed forward, using his *yokai* speed to get to him in time. He summoned his *yokai* power to empower his sword and sliced through the gigantic arm made of mud and clay. The arm fell to the ground where it turned into a

pile of crumbled dirt and sand. "Eiji, use your water attack one more time!"

Eiji struggled to his wobbly legs and nodded, looking fearful but determined, "Righto General." He opened his mouth and unleashed a water attack at the earth golem *yokai* once more.

The golem had been charging towards Ranmaru but sensed Ranmaru summoning his immense power and skidded to a halt. Uh oh...the golem took a step back. Too late to run though. Ranmaru gathered his fox-fire and swung his sword forward unleashing a fiery blast towards the *yokai*, "FOX-FIRE BLAST!" Ranmaru cried and watched in satisfaction as the attack hit the golem and blew it to oblivion. The combination between Eiji's water and Ranmaru's fire attack had been too much for the *yokai*.

Now to see how Ryoga is doing. Ranmaru turned to see that Ryoga was still managing to hold his own against the snake *yokai* but looked a little worse for wear - he was panting for breath, and there was a slight sheen of sweat covering his pale face. *Shit. Has he been poisoned?* "Ryoga!" Ranmaru called out as he rushed to his friend's aid. *Friend...?* Ranmaru was startled by his own thoughts.

The snake *yokai* became distracted as he noticed Ranmaru's approach and the murderous gleam in his golden eyes. That moment of distraction was all Ryoga needed. *Jack pot. Today must be my lucky day.* He saw an opening and took it, slipping past the snake *yokai*'s defenses Ryoga stabbed the snake *yokai* directly in the stomach. The snake *yokai* turned to face Ryoga with a look of disbelief on his face. "You?"

Ryoga smirked, "Yea, *me*. You forget about me or something - your opponent? Well, sucks to be you then. That was definitely stupid, my friend. Very stupid." Ryoga shook his head at the snake *yokai* as he removed his sword and let out a sigh of relief glad that was over and that he was actually still alive. *Damn, it's a miracle! I have the devil's luck today.*

The snake *yokai* sunk to his knees. "*Uso...no way...a pathetic dog demon like you killed the likes of me...*" He said before falling over, green, acidic acid gushing out of his stomach wound and causing the ground around him to burn and smoke.

Ryoga dropped his sword and he too fell to his knees in shock. “I did it. I really did it. I actually defeated him...” Ryoga began to laugh, a tad hysterically.

“Ryoga!” Ranmaru ran over to him. “You alright?”

Ryoga looked up and saw that Ranmaru had reached his hand out to him to help him up; he smiled weakly, tiredly, and took Ranmaru’s hand, letting the other *yokai* assist him. “Yea, but I think I’ve been poisoned.”

“*Kuso.*” Ranmaru swore. “How long do you think you have?”

“It’s not too serious...a few hours maybe.” Ryoga informed him.

Ranmaru frowned. “Then we’ll just have to finish the next challenges quickly.” Ranmaru turned to face the others, “Right guys?”

Kei and Eiji nodded and saluted Ranmaru, “Hell yea, General!”

“The first challenge has been cleared!” An emcee shouted across the battle coliseum. And his announcement was surprisingly greeted with a combination of cheers, boos, and jeers.

Kagura bit down on her thumbnail irate, “*Keh...*that wasn’t supposed to happen.”

One of the cloaked and hooded figures of the H4 and who was wearing a dragon skull mask that had horns curving out of it, spoke up from Kagura’s side. “What do you have in mind for the next challenge, milady?”

Kagura frowned. There was no next challenge. “I had thought they’d all be killed.”

“I see.” The *yokai* murmured, “Then allow me to face them. I should be more than sufficient for your challenge. I’ve watched your ex-slave and am curious about him. I wish to face him.”

“*Ooo~* Ryuugen, are you perhaps jealous of Ranmaru?” The man in the gray pinstripe suit teased.

The *yokai* man seemed to be caught off-guard by this, “No boss! I...I just know he’s strong.”

Kagura appeared both surprised and amused, “You do? I

doubt he'll be a real match for you though, my dear Ryuugen. And those losers he's with don't stand a chance in hell against you; it's a joke really. They'll be dead weight for Ranmaru - that's certain. *Hmm~* this could be interesting. Alright then, I'll okay it. You can go and fight him to your heart's content, Ryuugen. Just be careful."

The H4 member nodded and removed his mask and cloak to reveal that he was an incredibly handsome man with spiked up, ice blue hair and pale green eyes. Ryuugen had on a long white and blue *kimono*, which was open enough to reveal that he was wearing a black, high-necked, sleeveless top underneath along with a pair of black leather pants and combat boots. "However," Ryuugen turned to look at Kagura deeply in her peridot-colored eyes and bowed low before her, "I have a request, milady."

Kagura arched an eyebrow at him, "Oh? A request? What is it?" She leaned forward, intrigued. He had never before asked anything of her, only been completely loyal to her.

"I want to face him - them - fairly. So do not use the Control Collar against Ranmaru. I wish to fight him at his true strength."

One of the other male H4 members sneered, "Good luck with that then because you're going to need it, Ryuugen. It would be better if you didn't underestimate that guy."

Ryuugen glanced over at the cloaked man and gave him a narrow glance. "I don't need luck."

Kagura smiled visibly amused by all this, "Very well then, and you may rise Ryuugen. I shall not interfere in your fight. You have my word. However...do not fail me. Or else." Kagura narrowed her eyes at Ryuugen.

Ryuugen rose and gave Kagura a cocky grin. "I shall not fail you, milady."

Ryuugen hopped down from the stands and landed in the dead center of the arena, a crater forming under his feet from the force of his impact, and dust flying into the air in a swirling cloud that had been caused by his release of *yokai* energy.

The emcee's eyes were wide but he quickly pulled himself together and yelled - "Alright then! The second challenge

is sure to be something else folks since one of Kagura's Heavenly Four will be facing off with the slaves! Our very own top fighter that I'm sure all of you know - Ryuugen!"

A gasp went through the crowd of spectators, many if not all had heard of the powerful member of Kagura's H4, Ryuugen - one of her elite bodyguards. He had killed over a hundred men to earn his place at Kagura's side...

Ranmaru looked Ryuugen over, sizing up his opponent with an outwardly bored look on his face. On the inside however Ranmaru was surprised by the intense battle aura this man emitted. This was going to be a tough fight. The guy was certainly no pushover. He was in a whole different league altogether when compared to a small fry like the wolf demon he had just faced.

Ranmaru had only ever come across one other of the infamous H4 - and that was the lightning demon Karas. And that man was also extremely powerful. That meant there were only three more unknown enemies Ranmaru realized as he looked back up into the stands. The two other members of the H4...and that strange man in the pinstriped suit.

Ranmaru had already figured out he must be the *yakuza* boss of the Shiro Tsubaki Clan, and he was also a well-known business tycoon, president of TSUBAKI INC, but then why did he wear a mask? What was *he* hiding? And who was he hiding his true identity from? Ranmaru suspected he was...someone, but couldn't be too sure. Only time would tell if Ranmaru's suspicions were correct.

Ranmaru eyed his opponent taking in his spiked-up, icy blue hair, narrow and fierce pale green eyes, and his Chinese-style outfit. The shirt he was wearing was black, high-necked and sleeveless. It was also very tight fitting and showed off the demon man's muscles. The *yokai* had paired the shirt with a matching pair of black *hakama* pants and a white, green, and blue sash belt. There were white sleeves on his forearms that had been tied with zigzagging blue and green laces. And there was a pair



of zori sandals on his feet. Ranmaru noted that his opponent wore no sword and very little armor.

He's probably a close range fighter, skilled in some form of martial arts. Perhaps, he also has an Elemental control. The bastard's powerful. I'll give him that. Ranmaru could not only See but he could also sense the aura of murderous intent as it was flaring all around Ryuugen - invisible to those with low spirit energy signatures like Eiji, Kei or Ryoga. He was thankful that the others couldn't See Ryuugen's true strength in this way anyways since they would have probably run away screaming for their mothers. His battle aura was just *that* intense.

He was dangerous, very dangerous. He should not be underestimated. This yokai could very well be as old as Ranmaru himself - therefore hundreds of years old. And if that was the case he too would have regeneration abilities...this would be one hell of a long battle. *But what could his possible weakness be?* Ranmaru wished he had more to go on.

That's when Kuroki Ryu chose that opportunity to speak up. *Hmm~ Ryuugen huh? Long time no see...this is just perfect! Perfect!* Kuroki Ryu began to laugh in an insane manner.

Ranmaru blinked. *Perfect? What do you mean?*

I know that bastard. Follower of the Goddess Izanami back in the day, five hundred years ago give or take a century. He's the very same asshole that took my head!

Ranmaru's eyes widened. *He's the one who killed you and caused you to bind your soul to a sword in hopes of one day being able to exact your revenge...against him?*

Yes, Kuroki Ryu purred, *That's right. I've been waiting for this moment for a very, very long time. Ranmaru it looks like we'll have to go all out against this guy - and that means working together on this one, Master. He defeated me the last time we fought - this bastard is no pansy. But he's also an arrogant, overconfident, son of a bitch and we happen to have a card up our sleeve. He's an ice type yokai and you're a kitsune. Fire is his weakness and so we have the edge. It seems like this time fate has dealt us the winning hand...*

An ice type? You're right, that is lucky. But I wouldn't go celebrating our victory just yet. He's strong. Ranmaru thought but nodded. *Yes, this time I think we will have to work together,*

bastard sword.

If you really care about your little friends you had better tell them to back off. He's coming. Kuroki Ryu warned helpfully with a sneer, not because he cared about Ranmaru's pathetic acquaintances but because he knew Ranmaru might decide to do something stupid like jump in front of the blast that was meant for one of those morons and take the hit instead of them. *Idiot.*

This was all the warning Kuroki Ryu gave Ranmaru. *Shit.* "Get behind me!" Ranmaru declared as he stepped in front of Kei, Eiji, and Ryoga, unsheathing his sword and pointing it at Ryuugen. The three immediately obeyed Ranmaru and all stood behind him.

Ryuugen approached while at the same time he summoned his *yokai* energy so that it flared to life in an aura around him, a blue-tinged aura of icy flames. He held out his hand and in seconds a sword made entirely of ice had been formed and then he charged at Ranmaru, sword raised.

Ranmaru followed suit and summoned his own *yokai* energy so that it too swirled around Ranmaru in deep red flames. He empowered Kuroki Ryu and the sword was also enveloped in flames. Ranmaru then ran forward to meet Ryuugen and-

The two combatants clashed - their swords striking each other and sending sparks and spirals of red and blue energy into the air. Their auras clashed against each other in red and blue waves. The effect of the two powerful, ancient demons clashing with each other caused a shock wave of energy to shoot out and engulf the entire battle arena. This energy almost blasted Ryoga and the others right off their feet, but Ryoga acted quickly and dug his sword into the arena ground telling the others to hold onto him, which they quickly did.

"Whoa. Holy-" Kei was saying when Ryoga covered his mouth with his hand.

"Kids your age shouldn't swear." Ryoga's attention then turned to the fight at hand.

"Shit." Eiji finished for the kid and Ryoga shot the *kappa* a glare. "What?" The *kappa* tried to look innocent. "He's right."

Ranmaru raised and slashed his sword through the air

unleashing a fiery blast upon Ryuugen. Ryuugen slashed his sword through the air and countered Ranmaru's attack with an icy attack of his own. The attacks clashed in midair, each canceling each other out. They were so far evenly matched.

But then as Ranmaru swung his sword to attack again Kuroki Ryu seized control of Ranmaru, "I'll be needing this, thank you." Kuroki Ryu declared as he began to draw Ranmaru's *yokai* energy and fox-fire into himself so that the sword flared brilliantly with red light. This time as the sword unleashed another attack upon Ryuugen it was mostly fox-fire. Kuroki Ryu drained Ranmaru of all possible *yokai* energy, and continued to feed the attack as it flew through the air-

This attack headed towards Ryuugen, who brought up his ice sword to block the fiery attack. Ryuugen caused his aura to flare around him for added protection as well.

The attack hit and Ryuugen successfully blocked, a confident smirk on his face. *All too easy*. However, his feet were skidding across the arena floor as the force of Ranmaru's attack managed to push him back-

What the? And then Ryuugen's sword shattered and he was flung backwards - flying through the air, head over heels, tumbling across the ground until he finally came to a halt. Lying face down on the dirt of the arena floor, the powerful warrior remained unmoving.

A surprised silence filled the arena - everyone was in complete shock.

Ryuugen however began to push himself up off the arena floor, and glared at Ranmaru. He wasn't one to be going down that easily after all. No, he still had his own tricks up his sleeves. He wiped the blood that was trickling down the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "Not bad..." Ryuugen stood steadily once more. "Not bad at all." His eyes narrowed at the sword in Ranmaru's hands and his eyes widened as he recognized that spirit energy signature, *that aura!* "Kuroki Ryu. So we meet again. But he won't be able to save you from me, Ranmaru! How about we take a little trip down memory lane, Kuroki Ryu, and I'll jog your memory on how I kicked your ass."

Ryuugen's aura began to flare madly around him as he began to transform into his 'true' *yokai* form. His face widened

and horns shot out of his head. His fingers lengthened into claws and a tail emerged from behind him. Then as his size increased and his muscled bulged his *kimono* and shirt burst from his chest in shreds of material, and in seconds a man who was more like a dragon was standing before them. But Ryuugen's transformation did not stop there and instead of only having only one head...several long hydra-like heads began to emerge from his neck. *Creepy*. Ranmaru shivered. His body now appeared translucent and made of ice. He also had diamond-like scales that glimmered in the underground lights of the coliseum.

"Mother-" Kei was saying when Ryoga beat him to it.

"Fucker." Ryoga exclaimed seeing Ryuugen's impressive *yokai* form.

Kei's eyebrow twitched, "I was going to say 'Mother of God' but yea that works too."

"We're so dead." Eiji nodded his head.

However, Ranmaru appeared to be unfazed and bravely charged the ice-hydra, dragon man head on. He leapt up into the air and brought his sword down hard upon the dragon's scales. But the scales were too hard - like diamonds - impenetrable.

Ryuugen laughed and batted Ranmaru aside, like a fly. Ranmaru went flying backwards and skidded across the arena floor.

"General!" Ryoga cried as he saw that Ranmaru continued to lay where he had fallen, unmoving.

"General?" Ryuugen questioned aloud curiously and his eyes widened as he suddenly remembered something. *Of course! Ranmaru!* He had wondered where he had heard that name before...*War General Ranmaru...the Celestial Fox that had worked under the Goddess Inari during the Holy Wars. But then who had mysteriously disappeared for nearly five hundred years. Ranmaru is dangerous...I had better kill him now that I have the chance!* Ryuugen quickly strode over to where the fallen Ranmaru lay, and formed a sword of ice in one of his hands, prepared to bring it down upon him.

"Dammit." Ryoga swore, "I can't just stand here and do nothing! Not when Ranmaru's in trouble and needs help! Not

when he's been risking his life to protect us!" Ryoga raised his sword and charged Ryuugen, "*Hooryah!* You stay away from him! I won't let you hurt him! He's my friend!" Ryoga declared as he leapt up into the air and brought his sword down upon Ryuugen's head. The sword hit dead on but Ryuugen seemed completely unaffected and merely chuckled as he backhanded Ryoga and sent him flying next.

Ryoga coughed blood as he was sent backwards from the force of the blow.

"Ryoga!" Kei cried out in alarm and turned to glare at Ryuugen, "You...you big bully! Why don't you pick on someone your own size! You jerk!" Kei cried as he charged Ryuugen next.

Eiji watched this happen fearfully, "No! Kei don't! You little fool! Aw...dammit!" Eiji realized Kei wasn't listening to him and that he had no choice but to act. He rushed at Kei and grabbed him in order to stop him just as he was almost upon Ryuugen. Eiji gulped as he looked up into Ryuugen's icy green eyes that were now narrowed upon him. *Uh oh...this is so not good.* Ryuugen raised his clawed hand and brought it down upon Eiji who turned to shield Kei from the blow. Ryuugen's claws sliced deeply into Eiji's back and he was also blasted forwards, with the kid still in his arms.

Blood splattered through the air and Eiji landed on top of Kei. "Eiji no!" Kei cried out.

"Kei...run..." Eiji said weakly before passing out cold.

"Eiji...Eiji!" Kei tried to shake the man awake as Ryuugen was approaching them.

Ryuugen then turned his sights on Kei, who was frozen in his fear, "Looks like you're next kid." He gave the kid a chilling smile.

Kei trembled in fear. He couldn't do this - there was just no way. He was going to die. He was no match for Ryuugen. Kei's legs gave out from under him and he sunk to his knees in defeat as he awaited his death.

However-

One of Ryuugen's heads was suddenly sliced off and Ryuugen's other heads howled in rage and pain. But then another and another head was sliced off and fell to the ground of the arena with a thud.

The orange and black blur that had executed this feat landed in front of Kei and he saw that it was none other than Ranmaru.

“General!” Kei cried out happily, “Yes!”

“Stay behind me, kid,” Ranmaru gruffly commanded.

Kei hurriedly nodded as he ran to stand behind Ranmaru.

Ranmaru was about to attack again, however - Ryuugen’s heads had begun to grow back! Ryuugen cackled madly at Ranmaru’s stunned expression. “You weren’t expecting that one were you? Well, I’m just full of surprises, just like you are, *general*.” Ryuugen said sarcastically as he nodded in the direction of his fallen heads.

The heads had begun to bubble and steam where they had been severed at the neck...the blood forming bubbles as if it were boiling and then the head began to transform. And in seconds legs and arms were sprouting out from the neck of the head and then a tail to go along with it! Three creatures that were about the size and shape of a dog, covered in scales like a dragon, but that also had a long, sinuous body like a salamander - now stood before them. “I’ll let my little pets finish off your friends while I take care of you.” Ryuugen declared.

Ranmaru tried to run towards his friends and the beasts, but Ryuugen stood in his path and attacked him so that Ranmaru had no choice but to fight back and engage him in battle. But no matter what he did his sword seemed to be unable to pierce through the hydra *yokai*’s scales.

Ranmaru heard a cry of pain and turned around expecting to see one of those ‘creatures’ disemboweling one of his friends. Instead, he saw to his great relief and surprise that Eiji, Ryoga, and Kei were all running for their lives. *Hey, they can be pretty fast when they want to.* Ranmaru smirked at this development. They had just bought him some more time.

Eiji turned and fired something disgusting looking out of his mouth and towards the beasts. A slippery, green, gooey looking substance. That when the beasts ran over it they immediately began to slip and slide. *Way to go Eiji!*

His friends were doing pretty good without him but it was

only a matter of time before they would need his help. He had to do something. He had to figure out a way to defeat Ryuugen. Ranmaru wracked his brain for an idea.

Ranmaru continued to attack and forcibly swung his sword at Ryuugen, but Ryuugen merely opened his large jaws and suddenly bit down upon Kuroki Ryu with his diamond-hard teeth. Ryuugen's other heads followed suit and they all swooped down to sink their teeth into Kuroki Ryu.

Ranmaru tried to pull his sword back but to no avail. And Ryuugen was beginning to gather his *yokai* power around himself and his heads ominously.

Kuroki Ryu shrieked in pain and Ranmaru looked down in a mixture of shock, surprise, and disbelief to see that his sword was actually cracking-

Uso. No, fucking way. Ranmaru's eyes were wide.

And then his sword, his constant companion, Kuroki Ryu suddenly cracked in two.

Kuroki Ryu let out a howling shriek and then fell eerily silent.

"Kuroki Ryu!" Ranmaru cried out and back-flipped to put some distance between himself and Ryuugen now that he was weaponless. *Shit. How the hell am I supposed to finish off the dragon hydra now?* Ryuugen ran forward and before Ranmaru could properly react he was being punched hard across the face.

This situation left Ranmaru with very little alternatives...He only wondered if Kagura would interfere? It was a shot, a gamble - a risk that Ranmaru was willing to take and so he transformed into his true *yokai* form - that of a nine-tailed fox. He would risk it all for his new friends he decided. He had to protect them; he knew that Kusanagi would be proud at least. A red aura formed around him as he transformed, his nine tails slashing behind him viciously and then he attacked and leapt at Ryuugen.

And the two *yokai* clashed once again. Ranmaru opened his mouth and unleashed a gigantic fireball at Ryuugen, who blocked using his own icy aura once again for protection. Ranmaru leapt at Ryuugen and sunk his teeth into the hard scales at Ryuugen's neck but it was just no use. There was still no way to get past Ryuugen's diamond hard scales...

Ranmaru leapt backwards to put some space between him and Ryuugen and began to summon all of his remaining power for one last final attack.

Ryuugen laughed sensing Ranmaru's desperation and as he watched Ranmaru's pitiful effort for a last stand. "You fool! You'll never be able to defeat me no matter what you do!"

Ranmaru opened his mouth and unleashed a large fiery blast - but he didn't stop there and using his own attack as cover rushed forward towards Ryuugen. Ranmaru transformed back into his human form and picked something up off the ground as he continued forward.

Ranmaru then leapt up high into the air, still invisible to Ryuugen because of the fire blast attack. And Ryuugen was still laughing.

"Yo." Ranmaru simply greeted him.

Ryuugen looked up to see Ranmaru in surprise, "Wha-?" He was opening his mouth to speak.

Ranmaru smirked. *Checkmate.* He held the broken half of Kuroki Ryu in his hand and as he fell down through the air he plunged this part of the sword into Ryuugen's now open mouth, "Fire Blast Attack!" Ranmaru declared as he summoned his power and Kuroki Ryu's one last time and let it flow through the sword. *Come on Kuroki Ryu, let's end this together! You're too much of a bastard to give up now!*

Ranmaru? Revenge! I will finally have my revenge! Finally! The broken sword cried as it poured the last of its power into the attack as well.

The attack entered Ryuugen's body and the dragon hydra's eyes widened in horror and surprise as he was being blown up from the inside. Blood was streaming down Ranmaru's hand from where the broken sword blade was cutting into his delicate palm but Ranmaru paid it no mind.

BOOM

Ranmaru leapt backwards out of the way as pieces of the ice hydra dragon went flying through the air.

He then turned his attention to Ryoga and the others who were still being pursued by the icy dog-like creatures.

Ranmaru used his *yokai* speed and still holding his broken sword in hand he moved forward to swiftly take care of the creatures in a matter of seconds.

“General, oh thank God! I thought I was done for!” Eiji declared, wiping the sweat from his brow. “I really didn’t want to die a virgin...oh God did I just say that out loud?” Eiji flushed.

“General!” Kei declared happily as he glomped a bewildered Ranmaru, who patted the boy’s back awkwardly.

Ryoga smirked as he watched the exchange. He was determined to somehow help Ranmaru later on about his repressed emotions...Ryoga frowned at the thought, he owed so much to this *yokai* man before him. How could he ever fully repay him?

“And there you have it folks! The second challenge has been cleared!” The emcee waved his hands enthusiastically through the air.

A mixed cheer once again rose up through the battle coliseum, some positive and some negative.

“Ryuugen...” Kagura put a hand to her chest, shocked and sunk back down in her chair with a stunned look on her face, “My dear Ryuugen...my powerful Ryuugen...it’s impossible...Ranmaru killed him...”

Ranmaru looked up at Kagura, a fierce glow shining in his golden eyes, “The next challenge, milady?” He gave Kagura a flashy bow.

Kagura narrowed her eyes at him, and chewed on her lower lip angrily. At this rate Ranmaru would clear all the challenges and she’d be forced to release the hostages. Damn. Unless...?

An evil smile spread across her red lips. Ranmaru had to pay for killing her dear Ryuugen after all. And he would pay dearly. Kagura stood up and addressed Ranmaru. “Alright, Ranmaru. You win. Now for your third and final challenge. Kill your friends. Kill them and the hostages will be set free!” Kagura’s voice echoed through the coliseum.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened in horror. No...no...he couldn’t. Ranmaru shook his head. “No! I won’t do it! Kagura...*please*...why not simply kill *me* instead if you crave blood so much! Only let the hostages go!” Ranmaru pleaded.

“Ranmaru!” Ryoga began to object, not liking the idea of Ranmaru giving himself up for their sakes either.

Kagura frowned down at him and stomped her foot childishly, “*Yadda! No~!* That’s no fun at all! Since when were you even this...heroic Ranmaru! Ugh, you disgust me! This isn’t like you at all Ranmaru! I *know* you and you’re nothing but a murderer.”

“Don’t listen to her Ranmaru...” Ryoga began not liking where this was going.

“An emotionless killing machine! A tool to kill! You’re nothing but a monster Ranmaru! Stop trying to pretend you’re something that you’re not! Allow me to prove it to you! *Embrace.*” Kagura reached out her power to control Ranmaru’s mind using the power of the Control Collar to aid in her task.

Ranmaru grasped his head in pain as Kagura attacked his mind.

“Ranmaru! Fight it! Fight her!” Ryoga gripped Ranmaru’s shoulders and tried to look him in the eyes. “You’re *not* a monster! You’re not some killing machine! Don’t forget what you told me before - you’re a *Samurai* Butler! You have someone to protect!”

“Kusa...nagi...” Ranmaru moaned as he gripped his head painfully again, digging his nails into his scalp and drawing blood.

Ranmaru suddenly stopped struggling and relieved Ryoga let go of Ranmaru to take a step back. But when Ranmaru raised his head he revealed two blood-red eyes and an evil leer on his face. He had been taken over.

“Oh shit.” Ryoga declared as he raised his sword defensively. “You two get behind me - he’s not himself. Kagura is controlling his mind.”

“Ranmaru...” Kei murmured sadly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you guys. Even if it costs me my life.” Ryoga declared as he rushed forward to attack Ranmaru with a battle cry. “Ahhh!” Ryoga raised his sword and brought it down upon Ranmaru-

Who caught it in his bare hands. Ranmaru destroyed the

blade of Ryoga's sword with a single burst of his *yokai* power. Ranmaru then reached out his hand and wrapped it around Ryoga's neck and squeezed.

Ryoga grasped at Ranmaru's hands frantically, "Ranmaru...fight it...fight her...I know you can..."

CRACK

Ranmaru tossed Ryoga's limp body aside carelessly.

"No!" Kei cried out in horror, "Ryoga!"

Ranmaru turned his sights on Kei and Eiji next.

"Oh shit. Run!" Eiji grabbed Kei's hand and ran with him as Ranmaru growled and rushed after them from behind. Ranmaru was almost upon them when-

"Ranmaru! No!" A loud voice echoed through the entire coliseum, "Stop Ranmaru, you stupid *baka Samurai* Butler! That's an order!"

Ranmaru paused in his advance upon Kei and Eiji, "Kusa...nagi...?"

Kagura stood up from her chair once more in shock and annoyance, "No! Ranmaru! Don't listen to her! Listen to me! I am your Master! I have always been your Master! Obey me and kill them!" She bellowed.

Ranmaru cried out and grasped his head as Kagura tried to regain control over his mind.

"Ranmaru!" Kusanagi called out to him again, her voice tinged with anger.

But...*that voice...I know that voice. Oujo-sama!* Ranmaru blinked and realized he had regained control of his body once more. "*Oujo-sama!*"

From out of one of the gates to the battle arena came Kusanagi followed close behind by Haruka, Katsumi, Shinichi and several of his robotic *Samurai* Butlers!

"*Oujo-sama!*" Ranmaru called out again as he spotted her. There was a tinge of overwhelming happiness in his voice that was usually so monotone.

Kusanagi followed the sound of his voice and their eyes met, emerald green clashing with golden yellow. "Ranmaru!" She smiled brightly. "Did you miss me? I'm here to save your pathetic ass!"

Ranmaru blushed in response not really knowing how to

respond to that.

Kagura glared down at them, “Now what the hell is *she* doing here? How did she even find this place! Dammit! She’s ruined everything! Everything! Why does she always have to steal everything away from *me*! *Why?*” Her voice cracked.

Kusanagi looked up and recognized the dominatrix *miko* lady from before, “You! Oh I have something special for you, you ugly whore! This is payback for putting your dirty paws all over my Ranmaru!” Kusanagi reached into the back pocket of her camo pants and pulled out a grenade. “Batter’s up!” Kusanagi took out the pin and tossed the grenade up into the air and used her *bokken* sword to hit the grenade up and into the stands directly towards Kagura-

“Oh shit. That’s a grenade.” One of the H4 noted. The H4...now the H3 sprung into action. One of the cloaked and hooded figures picked up Kagura and the others all dispersed effortlessly. The other spectators in the stands however were not so lucky.

BOOM

Kagura was spazing out, “That bitch brought grenades? Argh! How the hell did she get her hands on those things anyways? Guards! Guards! Get them!” Kagura cried from her place in the arms of one of her minions as they flew through the air.

Kusanagi was already directing the *samurai* robots with an imperious wave of her hand, “Free the prisoners!” Kusanagi got out another grenade and tossed it in the direction of the gate, which led to the prison cells.

BOOM

The gate was blasted to pieces and the *samurai* robots all rushed inside to break out all the prisoners.

Kusanagi threw another grenade up into the stands for good measure and began to cause a riot. The spectators screamed and began to make a mad rush for the exits. *About time*, Kusanagi thought.

Meanwhile, the guards had poured out and onto the arena grounds and Kusanagi and the others were now facing off with

them.

“You think you can win against me that easily? Bitch! You’d need an army to go up against the H4 and the Shiro Tsubaki *yakuza*! *Baka!*” Kagura declared haughtily.

“Um, milady, I think she brought an army.” Karas murmured to her as he continued to carry her.

Kusanagi smirked back up at Kagura in a cocky manner, “Who says I don’t have an army? SP!”

Mysterious figures dressed all in black began to attack the remaining *yakuza* guards, and this time Kusanagi’s SP had been armed with Sten guns per her request to her Grandfather. Good stuff. The Mamoru clones began to make quick work of the Shiro Tsubaki *yakuza* using their new toys.

“No! Impossible!” Kagura cried as she watched the sudden blood bath happening below. “Then how about I send HIM after you!”

Kusanagi frowned thoughtfully, “Oh, you can try but really time’s running out you know if you want to get out of here alive.”

“What?” Kagura snapped as she narrowed her eyes at Kusanagi suspiciously.

Kusanagi pulled out a detonator, “Time’s up.” She pressed down on the detonator’s red button and the entire ground shook from the force of an explosion that sounded somewhere within the office building above them. The ceiling of the coliseum began to crack in places, and parts of the stands were already beginning to give way. “I’d say we have about five minutes before the entire ceiling caves in.” Kusanagi declared.

“You didn’t? You bitch! What are you crazy? You’ll be buried alive too!” Kagura spat, “I oughta kill that bitch! Karas put me down this instant!” Kagura ordered.

“My lady we must retreat for now. It’s much too dangerous to remain here with that...crazy girl.” Karas declared in a low voice.

Kagura bit her lip, “Keh, I guess we have no choice. This isn’t over you bitch! I will kill you and take Ranmaru back and your little demon dog too!” Kagura declared before the H4, err, H3 and the mysterious leader of the Shiro Tsubaki Clan disappeared.

“Well done, my dear.” The *yakuza* boss saluted her. “But the war game has just begun. So let’s have some fun shall we? Till we meet again.”

Kusanagi watched him go curiously. That white-haired man had been the leader of the Shiro Tsubaki *yakuza* clan after all. The man who had wanted her dead for some reason. The one who had sent HIM after her and her family, and Mamoru. *Just who are you? And if you’re a villain why do you have such a good sense of style? That is one snazzy suit.* Kusanagi shook her head. *Hmm, maybe he’s gay, only gay guys have such good fashion sense. Although wouldn’t it make more sense if he was interested in Ranmaru and not me then? Hmm...? Speaking of which, where is Ranmaru?*

Kusanagi looked around the chaos for Ranmaru. *Ranmaru?* Where was he? She then caught sight of him kneeling next to a body; his head was bowed, his bangs covering the expression in his eyes. She rushed over to his side, sensing that something was amiss. “Ranmaru...?” She reached her hand out towards him tentatively.

“I killed him...I’m nothing but a monster...a killing machine...” Ranmaru declared brokenly. “He was my friend...I’d never really had one of those before and I killed him.”

Kusanagi looked down at the fallen form of the *inu yokai* on the ground and reached out her senses before looking at his shadow...

She knelt down besides Ranmaru and surprised him by embracing him suddenly. “Ranmaru...you are NOT a monster...or a killing machine. I know you better than anyone, perhaps better than yourself.” She stroked his head as he buried his face in her chest. The tears in his eyes however would still not fall. Kusanagi smiled reassuringly. “You didn’t kill him Ranmaru. I don’t see...the Grim Reaper’s Shadow.”

Ranmaru pulled back and looked at Kusanagi in shock. “What? I didn’t...?”

Ryoga suddenly coughed and stirred, “Ugh...anyone get the license plate number of that truck?”

“Ryoga!” Ranmaru breathed out in shock.

“You see. Told ya.” Kusanagi nudged Ranmaru in the side with her elbow and looked at him fondly. And Ranmaru looked back at her. He had never before seen her with such an open expression on her face, that smile, that fondness - it was all directed towards him.

Kusanagi...how could I live without her...this woman with the beautiful smile and emerald green eyes. I love her. I love this woman that has saved me from myself. I know that as long as she's my Mistress I won't become a monster. How could I have not realized this sooner? I love her more than life itself..

Kusanagi blinked confusedly at Ranmaru noticing his odd change in expression and how he was beginning to stare at her. “Uh...is there something on my face?” She began, feeling self-conscious.

Ranmaru blushed and looked away, “It’s nothing.”

“Hey, the General is *blushing*.” Kei sounded amused.

“She must be the infamous Kusanagi.” Ryoga looked her over curiously wondering what kind of girl had captured Ranmaru’s heart. “The babe you’ve sworn to protect huh? Although...” Ryoga looked around at the chaos that had become the battle coliseum. “I’d say she does a bang up job of protecting you too.”

Ranmaru sighed as he looked at the chaos shaking his head. “Overkill.” He frowned.

Kusanagi frowned back at him, brows furrowing in annoyance, “Overkill? Why you ungrateful, stoic idiot! Here I come risking my life to save your ungrateful hide when-”

“Um, Kusanagi we really have to get out of here. Like now. The ceiling is about to cave in.” Haruka had popped up from nowhere.

“What about the prisoners and the hostages?” Kusanagi turned serious and began asking Haruka about their status.

“Shinichi and Katsumi have already freed them and are taking them to safety. All that’s left is for use to get to safety.” Haruka informed her.

Kusanagi blinked. “Oh right, what the hell are we waiting for again?”

“For you two to kiss maybe?” Ryoga suggested teasingly.

“K-kiss?” Kusanagi began to spaz out and wave her hands

frantically before her. “Why do you think we’d do that? I don’t even like this moron!”

A large chunk of cement dropped down and nearly landed on Kusanagi’s head. *Epp!* She squeaked out in surprise.

That’s heaven’s way of saying you should stop telling lies. Inner Kusanagi teased in a singsong voice.

Shut up you! Kusanagi shot back, blushing furiously.

Ranmaru made sure to pick up both pieces of his broken sword Kuroki Ryu before he then picked up Kusanagi and swept her up into his arms. “Yes, it is certainly time to go, *Oujo-sama*.”

“*Oi!* Ranmaru put me down this instant! Ranmaru *no baka!*” Kusanagi yelled and punched and complained and flailed while they took off running towards the exit.

“The General sure has odd taste.” Eiji declared thoughtfully as he pushed his glasses up his nose.

Kei just nodded in agreement.

Ryoga shrugged. “To each their own I suppose. Though they say opposites attract. *Hmm~* I kind of think they look good together though - in a weird, slightly creepy kind of way. The stoic and the spaz huh?” Ryoga mused aloud before he was suddenly feeling dizzy. “What the...?” Ryoga began as he fell forward.

Ah yes, the poison.

“Ryoga!” Ranmaru cried.

“What’s wrong with him?” Kusanagi asked, her expression changing quickly from anger to concern.

“He’s been poisoned.” Ranmaru informed her.

“Don’t worry, he can receive medical treatment once we get outside I brought Dr. Tanaka with me.”

Eiji hoisted Ryoga’s limp body up and put Ryoga’s arm around his own shoulders. “This man needs to lose some weight.”

“Here I’ll help you!” Kei declared as he came over and went to Ryoga’s other side.

“Right, let’s go peeps!” Kusanagi directed them and they all made a very hasty exit and not a moment too soon-

KABOOM

CHAPTER 2

Don't trust girls with striped stockings

Kusanagi was taking a long, hot shower and thoroughly enjoying soaping herself up with her luxuriant strawberry and vanilla scented bodywash. When unexpectedly the image of Ranmaru, tied up to the bed with leather straps and at that evil Dominatrix's mercy, popped up into her mind. The image from that night seemed to have been burned into her mind for some reason.

Mmm~ yum. He did look rather delicious didn't he? Kusanagi's inner voice piped up. *I don't think you ever really noticed before but Ranmaru is a very handsome man...*

This was true. Kusanagi had never really noticed Ranmaru like *that* before. He had always just been this pain in the ass, stoic idiot, thorn in her side, but now...

When had that changed? When had she come to care for him? When had she become...attracted to him? *Gulp...*

Kusanagi pictured Ranmaru in her mind once more but this time she pictured herself straddling Ranmaru instead of that evil, Skull Head whore. She could just imagine what it would feel like to have herself pressed up against Ranmaru's body like that, so intimately...

Is it getting hot in here? Kusanagi felt flushed for some reason as she ran her loofa down along her skin...over her breasts...her hardening nipples...and down...down...lower to...

Kusanagi looked down at where her loofa was headed in bewilderment. She had been just about to pleasure herself with

the image of a 'bondage' Ranmaru burned into her mind!

What the hell was wrong with her? Was she losing her mind! How could she find the image of poor Ranmaru tied up and at the mercy of some Dominatrix woman arousing? Tied up against his will...suffering...being taken advantage of...

God, she was sick, messed up in the head. To find *that* arousing. What the hell was wrong with her? Kusanagi began to hit her head on the shower wall repeatedly.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! God, I'm so stupid! And messed up! Argh! Why am I so weird? Kusanagi continued to slam her head against the cold tiles of the shower wall.

Then there came a sudden knock at her bathroom door. "*Oujo-sama?* Are you alright? I smell blood."

Kusanagi's heart stopped in her chest. *Ranmaru!* She covered herself up unnecessarily. It wasn't like he had x-ray vision...right? *Blood?* Kusanagi put a hand to her forehead and brought her hand back down to look at it. There was blood on her fingertips. Kusanagi frowned. Maybe she *had* gone a little overboard. "I...I'm fine. I just slipped in the shower." Kusanagi called out.

"Do you need any assistance?"

Kusanagi flushed, "I most definitely do NOT! Hmph! Go make me some breakfast or something, you *baka!* I'm almost done!"

"*Hai, Oujo-sama.*" Came Ranmaru's obedient sounding voice.

Ranmaru left and Kusanagi let out a sigh of relief. She supposed in the end - nothing had really changed between them.

Ranmaru was still a Spell-Collared *yokai* who probably didn't really care about her at all. Except, he *had* told Orihime that he had wanted her as his Master. But then he said it was because he owed the Kimamura family a debt. *Sigh.* Kusanagi didn't really know what to think.

She really should be trying to find a way to free Ranmaru right? She was sure old *miko* Akane would have the answer. She really should go and find out ASAP...but exams were coming up, so Kusanagi would be *very* busy. *Yea, right. There's just no*

helping it for now.

Who are you kidding? You don't want to free Ranmaru. You don't want to let him go. Kusanagi's inner voice spoke up. *Admit it.*

Did you ever stop to think that was merely because maybe I don't want to die just yet, hmm?

Are you really so certain that he'll kill you? No, that's not really why you're avoiding what needs to be done...you just don't want to be alone again.

Oh shut up.

Kusanagi got out of the shower and dressed for school in her sailor uniform. She didn't even bother looking in the mirror to try and fix her wild hair. It was useless anyways, her hair never obeyed her. She was making her way towards the dining room when she saw that Ranmaru's bedroom door was slightly ajar-

Out of curiosity Kusanagi couldn't help but peek inside.

Ranmaru had a serious and almost sad expression on his face as he looked down at the two broken pieces of his sword Kuroki Ryu in his hands. The sword had been cracked in its very middle and Ranmaru held the two pieces, one in each hand.

Kusanagi gasped when she caught sight of Ranmaru's sword. She hadn't been aware of the fact that during his time in the Death Match Coliseum he had somehow managed to break his treasured sword...

Kusanagi's gasp alerted Ranmaru to her presence, so that he turned around to face her. He hadn't noticed her presence since he had been so deeply lost in thought.

Kusanagi strolled up to him, "So your sword broke huh?" She frowned. "Why didn't you tell me? I know how much that sword meant to you. I know a *samurai's* sword is like his soul. At least, that's what Mamoru used to say..."

Ranmaru blinked at his *Oujo-sama* wondering why she was angry now.

"Give it to me." Kusanagi reached out her hands to take Ranmaru's sword and he reluctantly obeyed her. "Don't worry Ranmaru, Grandfather should be able to reforge your sword. It will be just as good as new, hopefully. And the spirit that has been tied to the sword may or may not return..."

Ranmaru blinked back at Kusanagi in shock. Kuroki Ryu

might be able to be reforged? And- “How did you know about the spirit?”

Kusanagi shrugged. “I dunno...just a gut feeling, you know.”

Ranmaru narrowed his eyes at her. *A gut feeling huh?* Ranmaru was more sure than ever now that Kusanagi had latent *miko* powers. And her Sight...there was something wrong with it since she could only See Death. Had her true powers been sealed? Had her Sight been cursed? And if so by whom and why?

Ranmaru nodded. He couldn’t even begin to express the gratitude he felt for Kusanagi’s help. “Thank you.” Was all he managed in a soft voice.

Kusanagi smiled back, apparently it was enough. “You’re welcome, Ranmaru.”

It was just another ordinary school day at *Yokai Academy*. At lunch, Kusanagi was sitting under her favorite cherry blossom tree along with Katsumi, Ranmaru and Shinichi.

“Hey, where are Orihime and Haruka?” Kusanagi couldn’t believe she was actually asking but somehow Orihime and Haruka had become a part of their ragtag group.

“Oh, like, didn’t you know?” Katsumi began. “I guess you wouldn’t know since you decided to play hooky for the last couple of days because of the whole Ranmaru fiasco. Anyways, Shinichi and I don’t really hang out with the two of them unless you’re around so they started getting friendly with Maka and Koga instead of hanging out with us.” Katsumi informed her as she was flipping through the latest issue of *GothLoli* nonchalantly while looking at the photos, a few of which featured Orihime and Haruka while they modeled the latest fashion trends.

“Who?” Kusanagi questioned.

Katsumi looked up from her magazine then, eyes wide, “You don’t know who Maka and Koga are? Well, they’re like super popular. And over the last few days since you and Ranmaru haven’t been around their popularity at school has like grown overnight! But it looks like Orihime and Haruka don’t mind sharing the limelight much - see. Look over there, they’re all

having lunch together.”

“Huh?” Kusanagi turned to look in the direction Katsumi had pointed.

And sure enough sitting under a tree that wasn’t too far from them were Orihime and Haruka, who were seated with two other students that Kusanagi had never really noticed before. Which was extremely odd since these two students really stood out-

The girl, Maka, had dark violet colored hair that had been tied up in curled pigtails on each side of her head with large, lacy, black and white bows. She had clear, ruby-red eyes and slightly pointed ears. A dead give away that she was a *yokai* of some kind. She was wearing a black choker around her neck and had on these black and white stripped stockings along with matching armbands that also had black and white stripes. A couple of buttons on the front of her school uniform had been undone in the front to reveal a bit of her ample cleavage. She also had on a pair of patent leather, Mary Jane shoes and was currently sucking on a red lollipop in an overly sensual manner that had all the nearby schoolboys drooling.

The whole thing was obviously some kind of elaborate, attention getting act, Kusanagi realized. Though Haruka seemed to be eating up her innocent, sexy doll act - hook, line, and sinker. His eyes were all heart-shaped as he watched her, chin in hand. Kusanagi’s eye twitched. In fact, he seemed to be completely enamored by her. *How disgusting. And whatever happened to your undying love for me? Hmm? Grrr~ Ah!* Kusanagi caught herself in her thoughts, *Ack! Why should I even care who that idiot likes or even dates? Hmph! Haruka no baka.* Kusanagi frowned darkly.

Kusanagi then turned her attention to Koga. He also stood out from the crowd and Kusanagi once again wondered why she had never noticed him at school before - though she did tend to be rather ‘indifferent’ with her fellow classmates and so shrugged it off.

Koga had a spiked-up, buzz cut of black hair, and a striking widow’s peak. He had fuzzy, dramatically arched eyebrows that were narrowed together and which gave him a mean expression. His eyes like Maka’s were also a gleaming

blood-red color. His ears were also slightly pointed and when he smiled his incisors stuck out slightly. Yep, definitely another *yokai*. He was also very tall and muscular, at least as tall as Ranmaru maybe more so. The more she looked at him the deeper her frown became. *He's supposed to be a high school student? How long has he been fifteen/sixteen like four hundred years years? Hmph!* Kusanagi shook her head as she thought this to herself.

Koga seemed to feel Kusanagi's eyes on him and looked up and stared directly back at her. Gulp. Those eyes...they felt like they could see right through her. It was an unsettling feeling - like being naked. Kusanagi shivered, swallowed heavily, and looked away.

When she looked back Koga had returned his attention to Orihime. Kusanagi hummed thoughtfully. Orihime was talking to Koga in a very animated manner - *very* animated. In fact, Kusanagi narrowed her eyes at the girl, Orihime seemed to be completely captivated by Koga. Hmm. Kusanagi looked over at Ranmaru to see how he was taking all of this. After all, Orihime's confessions of love to Ranmaru were a daily occurrence. But - Kusanagi's eye twitched in annoyance - he seemed as emotionless as ever! His face was completely blank. *Who the hell knows what he's thinking...damned poker-faced idiot.*

Then Kusanagi felt a sudden chill and looked back up and over at the group of four. And there just behind Orihime and Haruka was the Grim Reaper's shadow.

"You have got to be shitting me." Kusanagi moaned and stood up. She then began to bang her head against the trunk of the cherry blossom tree. She couldn't take much more of this. Couldn't she ever get a moment of peace? But now Kusanagi would have to go up against Death again. Although this time she already had her suspects: Maka and Koga. *Just what are they really up to? People don't just befriend people out of nowhere. They became Orihime and Haruka's friends for a reason. They want something from them, but what?* Kusanagi intended to find out.

"Kusanagi!" Katsumi called out in concern.

“*Oujo-sama!*” Ranmaru echoed.

Her two friends had called out to her worriedly. Shinichi however was calmly munching on his usual bag of potato chips, “She must be bummed that Haruka dumped her for someone cuter.”

Ranmaru gave Shinichi a calculating stare and looked over to where Haruka was currently eating lunch with a girl with purple hair. Shinichi sometimes showed surprising insight. Could what he had just said be true? Ranmaru’s heart clenched. *Oujo-sama...*

Kusanagi listened to the *Mission Impossible* theme song on her iPod as she followed and spied on Maka and Haruka, as well as Orihime and Koga, throughout the rest of the day. The Grim Reaper’s shadow that was behind Haruka was larger than Orihime’s, however, which meant he had far less time left to live, and so when the group suddenly split up with Haruka and Maka heading to the roof Kusanagi decided to follow them instead.

Kusanagi snuck her way up to the roof and quietly exited out the door to the roof so that Haruka wouldn’t hear her.

Kusanagi’s eyes widened at the sight before her-

Maka had roughly pushed Haruka up against the chain fence that was along the edge of the roof and had begun to kiss him passionately.

Kusanagi’s jaw dropped. She then watched as Maka began to hastily undo Haruka’s shirt and slip her hands inside to run them over his bare chest. *What a slut! Maybe...I should go.* Kusanagi thought as things began to get a bit more heated. Kusanagi began backing up, intent on sneaking away before she was noticed by either of them until, however she noticed something odd-

There was this strange ‘aura’ around Maka, and Kusanagi could suddenly see that Haruka had a similar ‘aura’ around himself as well. And as Maka continued to kiss him it appeared as though this aura was being sucked into her body through her mouth. Maka pulled back and Kusanagi could see tendrils of the aura of Haruka’s energy still being pulled directly into her mouth quite clearly now. Maka licked her lips and went back in for dessert.

Kusanagi didn't know what type of *yokai* Maka was but whatever she was stealing from Haruka couldn't be good. She had to put a stop to this at once.

Kusanagi cleared her throat and stalked forward, "Ahem."

Maka turned around to give Kusanagi a haughty look while Haruka looked back at her with a wide-eyed stare, "Kusanagi...I can explain..." He began guiltily.

Kusanagi stomped forward and grabbed Maka by one of her pigtails. "Get away from him, you slut!"

"Ow! Hey!" Maka cried out indignantly as Kusanagi pulled her roughly away from Haruka.

"That boy is mine." Kusanagi stepped forward, grabbed Haruka by his chin, leaned forward and suddenly kissed him roughly.

It didn't take Haruka long to eagerly respond to her kiss.

2.5 seconds to be exact.

Maka smiled devilishly as she watched the 'act' and looked over to the door to the roof that happened to be open. There standing in the doorway was Ranmaru, brows furrowed in confusion. A flash of hurt crossed his face before it was gone replaced by his usual emotionless mask. Ranmaru turned and left without saying a word. Maka's smile broadened into a 'cat who ate the canary' smile.

Kusanagi pulled back from Haruka and glared at Maka, "Get the picture? So lay off okay?"

Maka put out her hands in a surrendering gesture. "No need to act so bitchy Kusanagi. I get it, alright? You want Haruka. I guess that means Ranmaru is up for grabs then right?"

Kusanagi's jaw dropped, "Wait, what?" Had she just fallen into some kind of trap? Shit.

Maka giggled and skipped away, "I had better go and give you two lovebirds some privacy! Make sure to remember to use a condom guys! *Ja-ne!*" Maka slammed the door to the roof behind her loudly.

"I have some strawberry flavored ones." Haruka offered, piping up.

Kusanagi immediately punched him hard across the face,

“Pervert!”

Haruka sunk to the ground on his ass and rubbed his bruised cheek, “Ow! Kusanagi-*chan*!” Haruka moaned pitifully. “What did I do wrong? Just a moment ago you were all over me. In fact, you couldn’t keep your hands off me.” He pouted, feeling putout.

Kusanagi sighed and ran a hand back through her messy black hair. She couldn’t very well tell Haruka the truth now could she. That she could see the Grim Reaper’s shadow behind him and that she suspected Maka of foul play. And not to mention, that she had seen Maka stealing ‘something’ from him. Naw. “Uh that? That was a temporary lapse of sanity. Don’t worry though I’m better now so that will never ever happen again. Ever.” Kusanagi glared at him to make her point, hands on her hips.

Haruka continued to pout, tears in his eyes, his lower lip trembling, “*Whaa~* why does Kusanagi always have to be so mean to me? Oh why? When I love her so!”

“Love?” Kusanagi’s eyes narrowed dangerously at Haruka, “This coming from a guy who had his tongue down Maka’s throat just a few seconds ago!”

Haruka blinked, a strange confused look coming to his face, and he put a hand behind his head in a bashful gesture. “Yea, about that - it’s weird...I don’t know what came over me but...when Maka looked into my eyes I just...lost myself and couldn’t resist her. I *know* that sounds pretty bad. But you have to believe me, Kusanagi-*chan*! The only one I love is you, my princess!” He declared assuredly, standing up, and launching himself at Kusanagi in order to glomp her, arms flung wide.

Kusanagi let her fist connect with his nose this time.

BAM

Kusanagi sighed heavily and shook her head at the unconscious and twitching body of Haruka that was now on the ground. Her expression then turned thoughtful as she started to leave. *Her eyes huh? Hypnosis maybe? If that’s the case then...maybe Ranmaru is in danger!*

Kusanagi rushed through the school hallways in search of Ranmaru frantically, but there was no sign of him. *Shit. That’s strange...where could he be?* “Dang, I’m thirsty...” Kusanagi said to herself as she panted for breath.

Kusanagi made her way over to the school vending machines. She purchased an iced coffee and waited for the paper cup to fill up. Such an advanced coffee vending machine as the one that was in Akai Bara Academy was just one of the perks the students got to enjoy at the exclusive and private Academy. She then sensed a presence behind her - it was Maka. Kusanagi picked up her coffee cup calmly before turning to face the she-demon.

"Maka...just the person I wanted to see." Kusanagi declared. "I need to speak with you."

Maka raised an eyebrow at Kusanagi and appeared amused, "Oh? Sure thing Kusanagi, what is it?"

Kusanagi slammed a hand behind Maka's head against the wall that was directly behind Maka, and glared into Maka's ruby-red eyes. Kusanagi brought her face so close to Maka's that their noses were almost touching. "I know what you're up to. I know what you are...so stay away from Haruka or else."

"Ooo~ scary. You must care about Haruka a lot. Then...how about you give me Ranmaru instead?" Maka challenged, not backing down.

Kusanagi's eyes narrowed into thin slits. This again? This was beginning to get old. "What?" She snapped.

"You heard me." Maka twirled a strand of her purple hair around her index finger childishly. "You can't have both of them you know, *slut*." Maka's expression had oddly turned serious as she met Kusanagi's eyes directly, challenging her.

"I'm not like you." Kusanagi scoffed, waving a hand dismissively through the air.

Maka just laughed, "Oh really? Are you so sure of that? That you would never take advantage of a man and use him for your own sexual pleasure?"

Kusanagi turned red and began to spaz out, "W-what? What are you talking about!"

"About Ranmaru of course. I know all about how he used to be a sex slave. Don't tell me you haven't been taking advantage of his skills in that department yet?" Maka raised an eyebrow at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi's eyes widened and color was rising to her cheeks in embarrassment at where this conversation was going but also in anger and surprise. How did Maka know about Ranmaru's past? "Wait, how do you-?"

"*Hmm~* You can't tell me you haven't been dying of curiosity about it. Ranmaru's dark past. You are his Master now...and he's a Spell-Collared *yokai* sex slave. You know you could make him do *anything* you asked...aren't you the least bit curious about 'it' and what 'it' is like? You could even order him to forget about how you used him, and he'd never even have to know about what you did to him. *Ooo~* sweet temptation." Maka teased and began licking her lollipop in a sensual manner.

Kusanagi's jaw dropped, "I already said I'm not like you! I wouldn't...do that to him. I wouldn't take advantage of him like that. It's wrong." Kusanagi clenched her fists at her sides.

"*Hmm~*" Maka leaned her face forward so that it was inches away from Kusanagi's own face and she then sniffed the air between them, "But that doesn't mean you don't want to...experiment, right? You can't lie to me, Kusanagi. I'm a lust demon after all. I can *smell* your lust when you're around him. You want him, you *desire* him, don't you? And it's driving you mad. Just admit it."

Kusanagi blushed and stuttered, "W-w-what? You're crazy! This is crazy." She began to wave her hands frantically in the air before her.

Maka laughed and leaned away from Kusanagi, "You'll see...in the end you're just like me. Perhaps, even worse. Who knows what dark desires lie inside *your* heart after all." Maka reached out to put a hand to Kusanagi's chest before pulling it back. "Oh hey, what's that over there?" Maka pointed behind Kusanagi, who turned to see what it was.

Kusanagi saw that there was nothing there and turned to frown back at Maka, who innocently smiled back. *Just what's she up to?*

"Have a *very* nice day, Kusanagi. *Ja-ne!*" Maka cackled mischievously as she skipped away.

"What the hell is her problem?" Kusanagi shook her head before she took a sip of her coffee, "What a weirdo." But as Kusanagi watched her go she couldn't help the knot of dread that

had formed in her stomach at Maka's ominous words. That *yokai* whore was definitely up to something.

Meanwhile, Ranmaru headed towards the entrance of Akai Bara Academy since he had agreed to meet Ryoga at the front gate to catch a quick chat. Ryoga was already there waiting for Ranmaru before he arrived and Ryoga raised his hand in greeting.

"Yo!" Ryoga called out as he walked over to Ranmaru. Ranmaru merely nodded in greeting. "So, how are things going? Everything back to normal?" Ranmaru nodded. "And how about between you and Kusanagi?"

Ranmaru opened his mouth to speak but then closed it. How could he even begin to express his current inner torment and confusion. He had finally figured out that he was in love with Kusanagi only to catch her kissing someone else. Haruka. And he had always suspected that Kusanagi actually *liked* Haruka despite how badly she treated him. "Not good." Ranmaru admitted with a heavy sigh.

Ryoga raised an eyebrow, "Oh? Well, come on tell me all about it. I'm not psychic you know. Come on, just let it ALL out." Ryoga teasingly poked Ranmaru in the arm.

"I saw her kissing someone." Ranmaru admitted.

Ryoga's eyes widened and his expression fell. He laid a sympathetic hand on Ranmaru's shoulder, "Whoa, I wasn't expecting that one. That is hard to figure out. Dang. Tough luck, buddy. So, she told you that she's picked him then?"

Ranmaru shook his head.

Ryoga furrowed his brows, "But wait, what? You have told her how you feel about her right? So that you can find out how she feels about you in turn, right?"

Ranmaru again shook his head.

"You mean you haven't even told her how you feel? And now some guy is moving in on your territory? This sucks! You *have* to tell her how you feel ASAP. Right away, before it's too late!" Ryoga shook Ranmaru by his shoulders roughly.

Ranmaru's head was snapping back and forth but he still

looked pretty emotionless, and seemed wary about the whole idea of confessing to Kusanagi. “What if she doesn’t feel the same way?”

Ryoga waved his hand dismissively through the air. “You *have* to tell her. Be a man Ranmaru.”

“I...wouldn’t know what to say.” Ranmaru looked away embarrassed by his confession, a slight tinge of pink coming to his cheeks. When it came to women Ranmaru was still clueless. Even after having lived four hundred years and more.

Ryoga just sighed and ruffled up his messy brown hair in exasperation, “Just-just tell her what’s in your heart.”

Ranmaru shook his head. “I don’t know how to do that.” *Any more.*

“Argh!” Ryoga pulled at his hair. “What are you a robot? There’s *got* to be a way that you can get your feelings across to her somehow...” Ryoga tapped his chin in thought. A light bulb seemed to form over his head and light up. “I got it! Actions! Obviously, you suck with words so...you just need to rely on your actions to get the message across to her about how you feel.”

“Through my actions...show her how I feel?” Ranmaru quirked his head at Ryoga, considering it. That didn’t sound so hard.

Ryoga nodded enthusiastically, “Yes, it’s perfect!” Ryoga slapped Ranmaru’s back enthusiastically. “You can do this, dude!”

“But *what* should I do?” Ranmaru deadpanned.

Ryoga nearly face-faulted and began to shake Ranmaru roughly by his shoulders again. “What are you in grade school or something?” Ryoga looked around to see if anyone was around or listening in on their conversation before he leaned forward to speak to Ranmaru in a low voice. “Kiss her. Hug her. Make a move! Something, anything. Be a *man*!”

Ranmaru blushed. “Oh.” That was surprisingly simple.

Ryoga chuckled at Ranmaru’s reaction. “Don’t sweat the small stuff. If she doesn’t like something she’ll just order you to stop. Well, I’ve seen the girl firsthand, she’ll probably make it *quite* clear if she doesn’t like something you do. Like hit you over the head or something. So you have no worries there.”

Ranmaru raised an eyebrow at this comment.

Ryoga continued. "But it's a risk you have to be willing to take. I know you can do it." Ryoga gave Ranmaru a thumbs up.

Ranmaru half-smirked. "Thank you, Ryoga. I shall try my best." He hesitantly gave Ryoga a thumbs up back.

Ryoga grinned in response at Ranmaru's unusual show of emotion. *Now we're talking. He almost seems human. I guess that's the power of love ka?* "Anytime, buddy. Now go get her!"

Ranmaru went off in search of Kusanagi but as he was making his way down the hallway Maka stepped into his path from the shadows. *Why didn't I sense her?*

"Yo." Maka greeted nonchalant and put her red lollipop into her mouth, sucking on it in a teasing manner.

Ranmaru raised an eyebrow at her odd behavior. *Girls certainly are strange creatures.* "Have you seen Lady Kusanagi by chance?"

"No...but who cares about her anyways? She's off with Haruka somewhere no doubt. And besides you have *me* here to keep you company. I'm much more fun and interesting than Kusanagi." Maka licked the top of the lollipop in a suggestive manner. "We could have some *real* fun."

Ranmaru's eyes narrowed at her at the mention of Haruka and then Maka was suddenly stepping closer to him and drawing circles on his chest with her index finger in a playful manner. *What a weird girl.* She was suddenly pressing her ample chest against his own and Ranmaru decided enough was enough. He was just about to open his mouth and tell Maka to leave him alone when he looked into her eyes...

Those ruby red eyes...he could easily lose himself in their endless depths. They were so... "Beautiful." Ranmaru breathed out unthinkingly.

Maka smirked. *Bingo.* "Thanks, handsome. You're sweet. Now, be a good boy and follow me, Spot." Maka commanded and with that she turned around to walk down the hall.

Ranmaru followed after her in a daze.

"Ranmaru!" Kusanagi called out as she ran through the

school halls while trying to find her *Samurai* Butler, “Grr. Where could that idiot be?” Kusanagi chewed on her thumbnail in irritation.

Kusanagi was running by the gym storage building when she suddenly heard the sound of voices coming from within-

“Oh Ranmaru...yes! Oh yes!” That was Maka’s voice! Kusanagi’s eye twitched. *Ranmaru...that idiot!* Kusanagi kicked the door open and strode inside. “Ranmaru *no baka!*” She yelled loudly and looked around the storage closet suspiciously. *Hmm. Where’d they go?* But it appeared to be...empty. *Strange. I was sure I heard them in here...maybe my overactive imagination is going wild again.*

Kusanagi was about to go when she noticed someone lying down in the middle of the floor on one of the sport mats fast asleep. *What kind of moron would fall asleep in a storage unit anyways? Weirdo.* Kusanagi walked closer to the sleeping figure and was surprised to see that it was none other than Ranmaru.

Ranmaru! Kusanagi immediately went to his side, worried that something may have happened to him. But he appeared to be unharmed and was just peacefully asleep. *Whew.* Kusanagi looked down at Ranmaru’s tranquil sleeping face and smiled to herself, a true, genuine smile. He just looked so...innocent and...handsome.

“Ow!” Kusanagi realized that she had sat down on something hard and reached behind her to grab whatever it was. She pulled her hand back and saw that it was a pair of handcuffs. *Gulp. Handcuffs? What the hell are these doing in the gym storage room!* Although...Kusanagi *had* heard ‘rumors’ that the storage unit was a popular place for students to ‘hook up’. So maybe some kinky couple had left the handcuffs behind by accident? *Yea, right, that must be it.* Kusanagi blushed at the thought.

Kusanagi looked down at Ranmaru’s sleeping face again and then her eyes ran down to his chest. She noticed that several of the buttons of his butler’s uniform had been undone, revealing a large expanse of his golden tan chest. *Gulp.* Had Ranmaru been hot? And this was the reason why those buttons were undone? Kusanagi wondered.

Her attention turned back to Ranmaru’s lips...Was it

getting hot in there, or was it just her? She felt...odd for some reason. Funny. Restless.

There were butterflies fluttering in her stomach and for some reason she suddenly remembered what Ranmaru had looked like handcuffed to that bed...

Aren't you even curious about 'it'? Maka's voice rang in her mind. You could order him, you know...to do whatever you wanted...don't you want to experiment? You could order him to forget...and then he'd never even have to know what you did...

Gulp. Kusanagi's fists clenched around the handcuffs. She didn't *dare* right? But she *was* curious...about Ranmaru...and men in general. And about what 'it' felt like. What did 'it' even look like? All she would have to do was order Ranmaru to stay still...and she could do whatever she wanted to him...even if it was just to touch him...Yea, just touch him...nothing more. There was no harm in that right? Naw.

Before Kusanagi even realized what the hell she was doing she had straddled Ranmaru and put his arms over his head. She then used the handcuffs to secure his wrists together. It was as though she were possessed.

Some sort of *need* had overtaken her. Her primal instincts had been set loose and consumed her. Somehow her most hidden, most subconscious desires had been released and now Kusanagi just couldn't seem to be able to stop herself from what she was doing.

Kusanagi hesitated but then leaned over and pressed her lips hungrily against Ranmaru's.

Ranmaru's eyes shot open and then widened in complete shock and surprise to see Kusanagi on top of him *and* kissing him. Was this a dream? He wondered. It had to be, and if it was a dream Ranmaru never wanted to wake up!

Ranmaru began to return her kiss eagerly and he could feel Kusanagi's tongue running along his lower lip, asking for entrance. Had she always been this bold? Ranmaru quickly obliged her and opened his mouth so that Kusanagi could deepen their kiss, which she did passionately. How had Ranmaru fallen into such luck? Ranmaru was on cloud nine. *I wish this moment*

could last forever...

Kusanagi was right up there with him. *I can't believe I'm doing this! I can't believe I'm doing this! I can't believe I'm actually kissing Ranmaru!* Kusanagi frantically thought in her head.

After several minutes she finally had to pull back for some air.

Ranmaru opened his mouth to speak, "*Oujo-sama?*" He questioned in a breathy voice, his chest heaving. He stared into her eyes searchingly.

But Kusanagi hurriedly put a finger to his lips. "*Shh~* Be quiet and don't move. That's an order." Kusanagi finished with a sly smile.

Ranmaru blinked up at Kusanagi in surprise. Don't speak? But then how was he supposed to finally tell Kusanagi how he felt about her? How was he supposed to tell her how happy he was that she had kissed him out of her own free will and not out of necessity (like when she had had to save his life)?

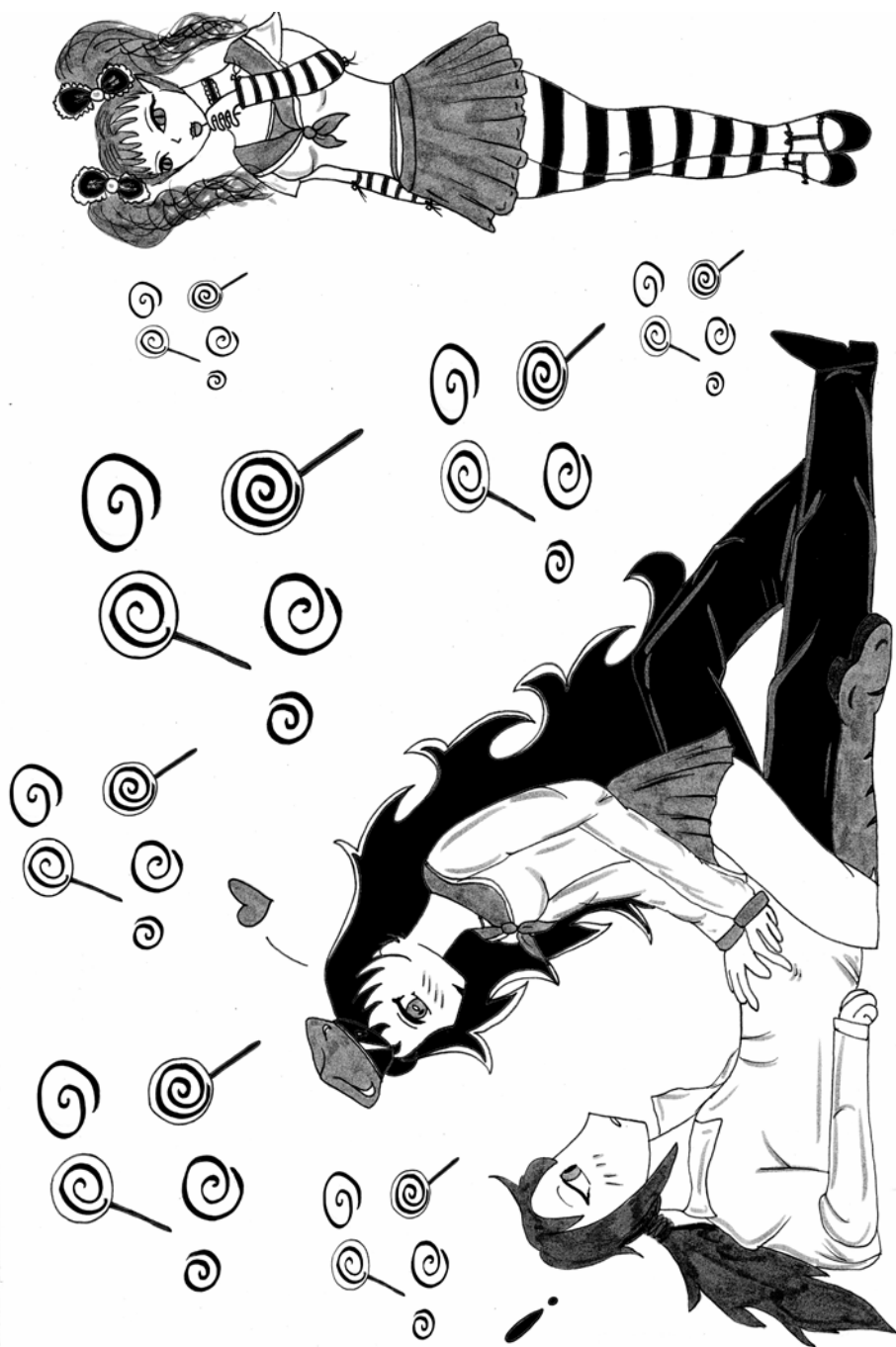
He suddenly had so much to say to her. How? Why? The words were there, just on the tip of his tongue - *I love you*. But now ironically he was unable to speak.

Don't move? But then how was he supposed to worship her body with touches, caresses and kisses? Run his hands through her beautiful wild hair...cup her soft cheek with his hand?

Ranmaru nodded however and Kusanagi let out a sigh of relief. This was going to be easier than she thought. Now she could do anything she wanted...

A cat's paw smile formed on Kusanagi's face as she began to slip Ranmaru out of his butler uniform's white, button down shirt...until he was completely shirtless, though the shirt remained bunched up around his handcuffed wrists. She hesitated before she then began to tentatively run her hands over his chest, delighting in the strange sensation of touching a man, and thoroughly enjoying the unexpected chance to touch Ranmaru like this. *So this is what a man feels like. So this is what Ranmaru's chest feels like.*

She reached out and experimentally pinched at one of his nipples and watched fascinated as it began to harden at her mere



touch. She felt quite pleased with herself when Ranmaru let out a strangled moan of pleasure. He was becoming putty in her hands and it was giving her this odd sense of power. This kind of power was intoxicating, Kusanagi found she wanted more. Getting to touch Ranmaru sinfully like this was like getting to drink a bottle of *sake* Roze had hidden from her. She knew it was forbidden, but that made it even more tempting and delicious until she was becoming drunk on the new sensations and on the power she felt over Ranmaru.

Ranmaru's nipples were becoming hard at his Mistress' touch...but that wasn't the only thing that Ranmaru embarrassingly enough found was getting hard. He wondered beginning to panic if Kusanagi would notice this and get scared off...She was by no means as bold as she was acting now. Ranmaru wondered when Kusanagi would begin to realize what she was doing and spaz out. But he decided he would just savor the moment until then.

Kusanagi wondered what Ranmaru would do if she kissed them? Kusanagi leaned over and suddenly licked one of Ranmaru's nipples. Ranmaru sucked in his breath at the sensation. Kusanagi watched his reactions curiously and smiled to herself knowingly since Ranmaru had obviously liked that a lot. This gave her more confidence and so she leaned over and took one of Ranmaru's nipples into her mouth and began to suck and nip on it gently. *Ah, so this is what he tastes like...*

Ranmaru hissed as he tried to stay still beneath Kusanagi's body. He wanted so badly to thrust his hips upwards and bring his own arousal closer to her womanly heat but he knew this would most certainly scare her and so was using all of his willpower to remain motionless beneath her. It was delicious torture. Ranmaru's breathing was becoming irregular at her ministrations until he was gasping for breath.

Kusanagi was so nervous at this point, however, that she couldn't look Ranmaru in the eye. *Oh God! What could he be thinking? He really must think I've flipped my lid or something! But it will all be okay when I make him forget this right? Will I really order him to forget...?*

And because she didn't look up to see Ranmaru's face she missed how his golden eyes were sparkling with a combination of

want, desire and love as he watched her pleasure him. What could he have possibly done to deserve this? He wasn't worthy of his Mistress' attentions. Emotions that he could no longer seem to hide were finally shining through his cool mask of indifference despite himself. A smug smile was also forming on his lips since it was becoming obvious to him that Kusanagi actually wanted him. Ranmaru was so happy at this revelation that he wanted to shout for joy. *Yes! I'm so the man. Maybe Ryoga was right and I can do this!* Kusanagi also unluckily missed seeing this smile as well.

A sudden thought occurred to Ranmaru as he considered her sudden change in behavior. Did this perhaps mean that Kusanagi felt the same way he did? Did she care for him as he did for her? He had to know the truth. He had to tell her how he felt. But the order she had given him had been a direct order, to disobey her would mean...

Kusanagi's hand slid down Ranmaru's chest...over his chiseled abs...and lower still. To stop hesitantly at the waistband of his pants. Did she dare? Curiosity got the better of her. What did 'it' even feel like? She wondered and licked her lips.

And before Ranmaru could stop her Kusanagi had slipped her small hand down Ranmaru's pants and wrapped her hand around his arousal. *Oh my God! Oh my God!* Gulp. She was actually touching 'it'. *Oh, aren't I supposed to do something?* Kusanagi began to experimentally move her hand tentatively up and down Ranmaru's length and could feel as it began to grow and swell beneath her touch. *It's HUGE!* Kusanagi thought to herself blushing furiously. Was *that* really supposed to be able to fit *in there*. Epp! She squeaked at the thought.

Kusanagi was driving Ranmaru crazy. In a good way. It was obvious now that Kusanagi might actually end up taking things to the next level, but before that he *needed* to speak to her. Ranmaru frowned. He didn't want to make love to Kusanagi until he had told her how he felt and found out if she felt the same way. He needed to know the reason behind her sudden change of heart. He needed to know *why*?

Also Ranmaru couldn't let her go on like this without him

being able to do anything. It was torture...sweet torture but torture just the same. Ranmaru wanted to kiss her, touch her and hold her so badly. And yet right now because of her order he was powerless to do anything. He couldn't take much more of this. And so Ranmaru decided to resist-

Kusanagi's inner voice was piping up just then: *Kusanagi! Just what the hell do you think you're doing? You're taking advantage of Ranmaru!*

Through the haze that was Kusanagi's mind she managed to hear that annoying little voice, *I'm...what?*

You're going to rape Ranmaru if you allow things to continue as they are!

Rape? Kusanagi blinked down at Ranmaru in shock. What the hell was she doing? *Oh my God! What am I doing? What's come over me! Oh my God! Oh my God! GAH!* Kusanagi's mind began to go into meltdown mode as she began to regain her senses all at once.

Then Kusanagi looked down at Ranmaru and noticed the slightly pained expression on his face and her eyes went right to his Control Collar - which was glowing. Which meant that Ranmaru was trying to resist her control and being punished for it! Kusanagi's eyes widened in realization. *Oh shit.*

Ranmaru slipped his arms around Kusanagi and spoke, "Kusa...nagi..." His voice came out strangled and breathy. *Shit!* Ranmaru swore in his mind out of frustration. He had thought he could resist her control with a bit more finesse. But resisting the Control Collar was turning out to be a lot more difficult than he had anticipated. He could barely speak as a result. But there was so much he needed to say to her! He just had to tell her how much he loved her. So Ranmaru struggled to open his mouth to speak again.

Tears filled Kusanagi's eyes as she watched Ranmaru struggling beneath her and trying to speak and being punished for it. *What have I done?* What had she been about to do! "Ranmaru...I'm so..." *Sorry.*

At that moment, Maka slipped out from the shadows while giggling insanely, "I knew it! I knew you were just like me. Worse, in fact. I must say I'm impressed Kusanagi, who would have thought you'd have it in you? To take advantage of

Ranmaru like that - order him to stay still and quiet while you had your way with him! You're an even bigger *bitch* than I am. At least Haruka...could have said no." Maka gave Kusanagi a challenging stare, daring Kusanagi to deny it.

Kusanagi shook her head in shock, "No, I...didn't mean..."

Maka smiled evilly, "Of course, you didn't."

Kusanagi hastily scrambled to get up and off of Ranmaru. "I release my hold over you." She said quickly and turned to look away from Ranmaru, unable to meet his eyes since she was so ashamed.

"I wonder if Ranmaru will run away from you now? God, you were such a total bitch to him just now. Do you think you could have picked a crueller thing to do to him? *I don't think so~.*" Maka mocked in a singsong voice. "You knew Ranmaru was a sex slave...that he probably carried deep, emotional scars because of that, especially where sex was concerned. And yet you forced yourself on him anyways. You probably caused old scars to bleed once more...disturbing memories to resurface in his mind. The poor thing, he was probably scared to death with you on top of him and controlling him like that. Tsk tsk tsk." Maka clucked her tongue.

Maka's words were like knives mercilessly thrown at Kusanagi's heart. More tears began to fill Kusanagi's eyes since she knew every word that Maka had said was completely and horrifically true. She was a total slut bitch...doing that to Ranmaru...had been a completely heartless thing for her to do - even by her standards. Would he ever forgive her? She hung her head. Not a chance. She wouldn't forgive herself either, that's for sure.

Maka laughed evilly, triumphantly as she watched Kusanagi's shoulders begin to shake.

Ranmaru narrowed his golden eyes dangerously at Maka. "You're wrong." He said in a loud and firm voice.

Maka's head snapped in his direction, "*What?*" She snapped.

"Kusanagi is not a bitch. Kusanagi has always been very

kind to me-” Ranmaru began to explain.

“Kind?” Maka scoffed, “Ha! That’s a joke! I’ve seen how she treats you! How can you even say that? She punches you and kicks you all the time, and calls you an idiot and a moron and-” Maka would have continued on her rant but Ranmaru cut her off.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. Kusanagi is an incredibly powerful woman. If she really wanted to she could have easily broken all the bones in my face with one of those punches of hers but - she didn’t. She held back. Those punches of hers usually don’t have any *real* power behind them. In fact, they barely hurt.”

Kusanagi’s eyes widened as she listened to Ranmaru’s words, listened to him defending *her*. Even after everything she’d done to him. *He’s...defending me...*

Maka’s jaw dropped, “But-but...she was just about to rape you!”

Ranmaru frowned, “It’s only called ‘rape’ if it’s nonconsensual. But I wanted...to be with her.”

Kusanagi turned to look at Ranmaru in utter shock. He...*wanted* her? Even after the cruel thing she had just done to him? It was just too much. She didn’t deserve his kindness...

Maka looked down at Ranmaru in disbelief and bit her lower lip in frustration. Things were definitely NOT going according to plan. How could she turn this around? Dammit! She was supposed to split the two of them up not...bring them together! She looked at the way Ranmaru and Kusanagi were now looking at each other too. As if they were just seeing each other for the first time. *Uh oh...this is so not good. At this rate they’ll fall in love with each other. I have to do something to stop this!*

The lust potion she had given Kusanagi was supposed to have been powerful enough to bring out Kusanagi’s darkest sexual desire and - that’s it! A cat’s paw smile formed on Maka’s face, “Oh, really Ranmaru. That’s just too bad then isn’t it? You may have wanted or desired Kusanagi, but I can assure you that she didn’t really want you. It’s all my fault actually...” Maka trailed off sounding repentant.

Kusanagi’s emerald green eyes flashed angrily and she narrowed her gaze at Maka. “*Kisama!* You...what did you do to me?”

Maka looked at her fingernails, which had been painted in alternating white and black, a bored, careless expression on her face. "Oh, just slipped a lust potion in your iced coffee earlier."

Kusanagi's hair seemed to spark, "You...WHAT? I knew it! I knew there was something incredibly wrong with me! I'd never normally act that way towards Ranmaru - that's for sure! You bitch! How dare you!" Kusanagi clenched her fists angrily at her sides.

Kusanagi's words were unknowingly daggers to Ranmaru's heart.

Maka looked over at Ranmaru however and did *not* miss the hurt expression that had flashed across his face and which was quickly masked by indifference. *Gotcha.*

So...Kusanagi hadn't actually desired him. Ranmaru realized. Her strange behavior had all been the effects of a lust potion? Ranmaru's shoulders sagged and he could feel his heart break. He should have known...Kusanagi didn't feel the same way. She didn't love him.

"That's *disgusting!*" Kusanagi shrieked beginning to spaz and pull at her hair. "What's the cure? You must have a potion that's the cure right? I have to stop feeling this way! It's awful!" *A potion that makes me want to tie up Ranmaru and hurt him! It's unforgivable!*

Disgusting... Ranmaru hung his head, letting his bangs shield his pained golden eyes.

Maka smiled triumphantly, "Sure, here you go." Maka reached into her cleavage and pulled out a small purple vial, which she then tossed at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi caught the vial easily, which held the antidote potion. She glared at Maka heatedly, "And you gave one to Ranmaru too right?" *Poor guy, forced to feel all hot and bothered for me against his will...*

Maka blinked, "You're so funny Kusanagi. Do you really think a well-trained sex slave needs any help getting turned on when a girl touches him? Any woman's touch would turn *him* on." Maka cackled evilly. "That's all he meant when he said he wanted you as badly as you wanted him, *duh*. What? Did you

think it meant something else?” Maka looked sideways at Ranmaru, who was no longer paying attention to what Maka was saying since he was so lost in his own torturous thoughts. Lucky! This made it appear as though Ranmaru was not denying Maka’s words. Maka smirked happily and skipped away. The damage had been done. Her job was done here, so she decided to leave Ranmaru and Kusanagi alone. They could only make things worse on their own from here. *Perfect~ oh I’m bad.*

Kusanagi chugged the potion and turned to face Ranmaru with a sigh. It was just as she thought - the tingly butterflies in her stomach had not gone away. But at least the dark ideas of tying Ranmaru down and hurting him had vanished. Phew. Ranmaru was the real victim here she realized. She had almost taken advantage of the sex slave with a dark past after all. *Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! How could I be so stupid?* She had probably traumatized him or given him psychological damage or something. *Shit.* Kusanagi shook her head and put her face in her hands, completely ashamed with herself. She had hurt Ranmaru. Her attraction to him would only ultimately hurt him in the end...

She had to apologize. And make sure Ranmaru knew she *wasn’t* attracted to him so that he wouldn’t be afraid of her, and that she wouldn’t try pulling something sick like this again. She had to regain his trust somehow.

“Ranmaru, I’m so sorry...” Kusanagi turned to face him and looked down at her shoes as she fidgeted. “That I did that to you. I...wasn’t myself. Don’t worry, it will *never* happen again.” She reassured him.

Ranmaru’s heart was breaking into tiny little pieces. His hope of Kusanagi loving him in return shattered. Her words more daggers to his heart. It was the potion. She didn’t desire him as he desired her. She didn’t love him as he loved her. This was...unrequited love. “There’s nothing to apologize for *Oujo-sama...*” Ranmaru’s voice was stiff and strained. *I’m the one’s who’s sorry...sorry for loving you. For almost taking advantage of you while you were under the influence of a lust potion. I should have known something was wrong with you and tried to help you. I should have protected you from yourself and...from me. Instead, I almost let you do something you would have regretted. I’m a total asshole.*

My own selfish desires...almost hurt the one I love. They both thought at the exact same moment as they looked at each other.

CHAPTER 3

If you play with fire you're likely to get burned

Kusanagi was pissed and that was putting it lightly. How dare that bitch Maka drug Ranmaru. How dare she manipulate her and make her take advantage of Ranmaru as well. And then there was the fact that Maka was a *yokai* with unusual powers - powers that were potentially dangerous to Ranmaru and Haruka.

She needed to confront and perhaps defeat Maka if she was really the one who was going to instigate Haruka's death - but how?

Kusanagi needed to know more about her enemy and her *yokai* power. What was it exactly that she was stealing from the boys? It looked like some kind of life force energy but Kusanagi couldn't be sure.

Although there was someone who would know - old *miko* Akane. She would have the answers Kusanagi was searching for concerning Maka - if she were truly dangerous, and how to defeat her.

Very early the next morning, Kusanagi took Sora out of her menagerie and headed to Kyoto. When she arrived at the Inari Shrine old *miko* Akane was already expecting her.

"This way, child." She led Kusanagi into the main inner sanctum of the shrine. "Have a seat." Kusanagi did as she was told and took a seat at the low table, folding her legs beneath her.

Akane went over to a dusty bookshelf filled with sacred scrolls and ancient tomes. She pulled out one very large and

ancient looking book. Akane blew on it and dust filled the air. She walked back over to Kusanagi and set the book down on the table before them as she too knelt at the table.

Kusanagi wiped her hand across the dirty front to reveal the golden embossed letters that were on the brown leather cover of the book and which read:

YOKAI ENCLYCLOPEDIA

“Now tell me what it is you’re searching for, my dear.”

Akane prodded lightly.

Kusanagi began to explain about her encounters with Maka, first with Haruka and then with Ranmaru and how the she-demon had seemed to be stealing ‘something’ from the boys through the seemingly innocent means of a *kiss*.

Akane nodded, “*Qi* perhaps,” She began to flip through the gigantic book until she came to the page she was looking for. “Ah, here we are the *Rokuro Kubi*, otherwise known as the Japanese succubus. A vampiric *yokai* that feeds on *qi*, the vitality that courses through a male’s body. Through a kiss they are able to suck out this aura of physical and mental desire in a man and consume it. The *Rokuro Kubi* also has the ability to hypnotize their prey in order to lead them to a secluded area where they can suck out their *qi* undisturbed. If too much of a man’s *qi* is stolen the effect can prove *fatal*.”

Fatal. Kusanagi frowned. So Haruka and Ranmaru really were in danger. And if the *Rokuro Kubi* was really out to kill them then Kusanagi had to stop her.

Akane continued to read. “The *Rokuro Kubi* also has the ability to stretch their limbs though they are most commonly known for the ability to stretch their necks like a snake.”

Kusanagi blinked. “Stretch their necks? That’s an odd sort of ability.” She shrugged. She doubted such an odd talent would actually be of any use in a real fight.

Kusanagi bowed low before Akane, “Lady Akane, I need to know if there’s a way that *I* can defeat her. I know I do not possess any *miko* or exorcizing powers like you do. But if you could perhaps gave me another talisman like the last time - then I could use it against her in order to weaken her long enough for

me to take her out.”

“Hmm,” Akane tapped her chin thoughtfully, “A mere talisman would do nothing against a *yokai* as powerful as the *Rokuro Kubi*. But..I may have an idea...a way that even you will be able to defeat her.” Akane stood up and retrieved a piece of parchment, ink stone, ink block, and a brush. On the long strip of paper she painted an *o-fuda* (prayer talisman) by drawing the script in *kanji* for an ancient spell or sutra, which read in *kanji* letters:

Evil Be gone! Rokuro Kubi Maka!

Akane then stood up and went to the back wall of the shrine’s inner sanctum where a holy bow and arrow were hanging on display. She took these two items down and came back over to the table with them. She set the bow down and picked up the *o-fuda* to then wrap it around the arrow’s shaft. She then handed the bow and arrow to Kusanagi. “That arrow is now a Sacred Arrow - it has been empowered with my own holy energy. It should have power sufficient enough to destroy the *Rokuro Kubi*. But I warn you - she can only be destroyed if you manage to pierce her heart and so you cannot afford to miss. You get only one chance at this Kusanagi, and one alone.”

Kusanagi nodded, the sacred arrow now in her hand. She clenched her hand around it, a fierce look in her eyes.

Watch out Maka, Kusanagi The Bitch is coming for you. You’re so going down! I won’t let you hurt my friends any longer. I’ll take care of you myself. I will defeat Death...because that’s what I do as a Death Prophetess.

Kusanagi rode Sora back to the Kimamura Estate, arriving there quickly. She wanted to get back before Ranmaru realized she was missing since she knew the overprotective idiot would become suspicious and stubbornly demand to know where she had gone and why. And Kusanagi knew Ranmaru didn’t trust old *miko* Akane either...and so didn’t want Ranmaru scolding her for going to see her. He had actually tried to warn Kusanagi about the harmless old lady once, Kusanagi shook her head - the paranoid moron.

Kusanagi grimaced, she was all sweaty from her hard ride back to the estate, and she probably still had old *miko* Akane’s scent on her as well. So the most logical thing to do was to take a

bath ASAP. That way Ranmaru wouldn't smell the scent of the *miko* on her and she could also refresh herself since she felt all icky and sweaty. Yuck!

Ranmaru really wasn't paying attention that morning - when he wished he had been. He had been in a sort of daze worrying about his newly discovered feelings for Kusanagi and how she obviously did not care about him in return. This is how he ended up walking into Kusanagi's bathroom and catching Kusanagi in the middle of her bath! Ranmaru froze as he caught sight of her in the bathtub - she was soaping up one of her long legs and her cleavage was visible just above the sudsy water in a very tantalizing manner. Kusanagi was humming to herself absentmindedly (her humming was completely out of tune) but then she sensed Ranmaru's presence.

Kusanagi turned and blinked at Ranmaru and he simply stared back.

5...4...3...2...1

Meltdown.

Kusanagi turned bright red and screamed. "Iyyyyeeee! *Hentai!* Pervert! Get out!" Kusanagi grabbed a bar of soap and threw it at Ranmaru. It hit him right in the forehead. But Kusanagi didn't stop there and began to pelt him with several objects that she had close by the tub - shampoo bottles, a bottle of conditioner, a loofa (Ranmaru wondered if he could get away with keeping that one since it had Kusanagi's scent on it, strawberry and vanilla *Mmm~*), and a scrub brush - that last one had hurt.

Ranmaru made a hasty exit, face burning and muttered a quick. "Forgive me, *Oujo-sama*."

Ranmaru ran down the hall as fast as his legs would take him, the image of Kusanagi in the bathtub bathing still burned into his mind. He quickly made it to his room and rushed inside, panting for breath, his heart racing a mile per minute. Ranmaru put his hands on either side of his head; he couldn't get the visual image of a naked and beautiful Kusanagi out of his mind. Gulp.

And...he found that he was aroused. Uh oh. But...to have

desire for a woman who didn't desire you in return was twisted...wrong. Ranmaru felt guilty, ashamed, pathetic. And so...he sat on the edge of his bed wondering what to do about his little problem. He decided he shouldn't have desire for his Mistress. It was wrong. He had to protect her from himself. Teach himself that desiring her was wrong...but how? Ranmaru raised his fist-

And brought it down upon his own arousal.

He would *make* it go down.

Ranmaru whimpered as his fist connected with his crotch but he didn't succumb to the pain. He raised his fist again.

Kusanagi sat back in the tub panting for breath, face red, bristling with anger. *Ranmaru...that jerk!* How dare he walk in on her while she was taking a bath! *That oblivious idiot!* Kusanagi sighed as the anger began to leave her as she remembered his shocked face when she had started throwing stuff at him. That last brush must have really hurt...Kusanagi felt a twinge of guilt go through her. She hadn't really meant to hurt him. Perhaps, she should go find him and apologize. Yea, that was it.

Why do you continue to be dishonest with yourself, with your feelings? Kusanagi's inner voice chided, *Did you really mind him seeing you naked? Or was it something else? Are you just going to keep running away?*

I'm not running...but you're right, he didn't deserve to be treated like that. Like a stranger. Especially, after how I treated him yesterday. I'll go and find him and apologize to him. Yosh! Kusanagi reluctantly got up and stepped out of her nice warm bath. She wrapped a white robe around herself and slipped her feet into some bath slippers. She didn't want to waste anymore time, if she hesitated she knew she would change her mind from going to find him and end up never apologizing to him. After all, apologizing did not come easy to someone like Kusanagi The Bitch.

Kusanagi hurriedly made her way down the expansive hallway of her mansion and towards Ranmaru's room. She saw that the door was slightly open and so peaked inside-

Her eyes widened in shock when she saw Ranmaru ball up his fist to then bring it down hard upon his crotch. What the

hell was he doing? Kusanagi burst into the room and rushed to his side, grabbing his wrist to stop him from hitting himself again. "Stop!" She turned to face him, emerald green eyes flashing, a flush to her cheeks over the odd situation. "What are you doing?"

Ranmaru was completely mortified that Kusanagi had actually caught him hitting himself. He flushed and said the first thing that came to mind - the truth. "I'm making 'it' go down."

'It'? He couldn't possibly mean...? Oh my god, he did mean *that*. Kusanagi's jaw dropped, "Why?"

Ranmaru hesitated, "Because...it's wrong to..." *Desire you when you don't desire me. It's wrong to love you when you don't love me. I'm supposed to be your protector and now the mere sight of you naked arouses me. No - I have to protect you from myself. I've become a danger to you. A pervert. But your safety is more important to me than my love for you. If I have to toss...or bury my feelings of love for you in order to protect you to the best of my ability - then so be it.*

Kusanagi was waiting for the rest of his answer in confusion. *Ranmaru thinks it's wrong to be aroused? Why the hell is that?* A light bulb seemed to form over Kusanagi's head as she remembered Ranmaru's dark past as a sex slave. That had to be it. Ranmaru must have been 'taught' or 'conditioned' to believe it was wrong to be aroused, or even to pleasure himself. How horrible! Kusanagi felt like killing someone but she just didn't know who exactly. Kusanagi raised her hand as Ranmaru tried to speak. "Don't worry, you don't have to say more. I understand. But...it's not 'wrong'. It's..." *I can't believe I'm saying this!* "Only natural. You're a man. And men have these sorts of reactions to...things." Kusanagi coughed unable to say 'to seeing a girl naked in a bathtub'. "And it's also natural and acceptable for you to, uh...cough...take care of your little problem."

Ranmaru was balling up his fist again. "Take care of it?" He seemed ready to punch his crotch again.

"No you idiot!" Kusanagi grabbed his hand again. "I meant...naturally...oh come on, don't make me say it out loud

Ranmaru...” Kusanagi looked away embarrassed.

Ranmaru quirked his head at her, “Naturally?” Did she mean sex?

Kusanagi turned to glare at Ranmaru, “Yes you fool! Naturally. Haven’t you ever...” Kusanagi looked around as if someone might be listening and leaned in close to whisper to Ranmaru in a low voice, “Ahem, jacked off? And I can’t believe you made me just say that!”

Ranmaru blinked and then turned red as her words began to sink in. Oh.

Kusanagi sighed, “You’re completely hopeless...” Had he really never jacked off before? Perhaps, he’d never been allowed to pleasure himself before? That wasn’t too far-fetched. Kusanagi didn’t really know much about being a sex slave though. Kusanagi sighed. *I can’t believe I’m doing this! But...he just looks so sad, pathetic and lost. And he needs my help. And I owe him one for yesterday.* Kusanagi took a deep breath and steeled herself for what she was about to do. Kusanagi grabbed his hand and rested it on the bulge that was in his pants. “Here...let me show you. Gently...” She began to move Ranmaru’s hand over his hardness, up and down.

Ranmaru sucked in a breath. Just what did his *Oujo-sama* think she was doing! Was she trying to seduce him again? Or was this really a naive attempt to help him? Did his Mistress really think he was that clueless?

Kusanagi looked deeply into Ranmaru’s eyes, “Understand?” She totally *did* think he was clueless! “I order you to finish this by yourself, ‘naturally’, alone and um, not to hurt yourself or cause yourself pain. *Neh?*”

Ranmaru blinked. His *Oujo-sama* really was just trying to help him. He was such an idiot! Tears burned in his eyes as he nodded, “*Hai, Oujo-sama*, I understand. Thank you.”

I can think of a better way to help Ranmaru with his little problem... a voice teased in Kusanagi’s mind. Kusanagi stubbornly ignored it.

Kusanagi stood to leave, a strained smile on her face. “Good. Ranmaru I...” Kusanagi bit her lip, hesitating to tell him ‘I want you’ and decided against it. What was she crazy? She shook her head. “No, never mind.” Kusanagi declared before she

left the bedroom.

Ranmaru sighed and looked down at his hardness. Well, he better get to work then, now that he had 'permission'. Ranmaru slipped his hand down his pants and followed Kusanagi's order dutifully. "*Oujo-sama...*" He groaned as he pleased himself, moving his hand slowly up and down his length as it began to swell. Ranmaru began to quicken his pace as he was nearing his completion. "*Oujo-sama!*" He cried out once he was spent, coming into his hand, with the image of Kusanagi bathing in the forefront of his mind.

Dirty. Shame. Guilt. Pathetic.

He looked down at his hand that was covered in his seed. He had just pleased himself to the image of a naked Kusanagi in his mind. He really did deserve to be punished. Ranmaru hung his head, his bangs shielding his tormented golden eyes. "*Oujo-sama...forgive me...I'm dirty...I'm a pervert...I don't deserve your pity or kindness. Or even to be your Samurai Butler...I'm not worthy to be by your side.*"

Somewhere deep in Mount Fuji, Kimamura-san knelt on the floor of a gigantic cavern which was inside of a cave and that had been naturally carved out of the stone of the mountain. This was a holy place. And the perfect place to do what he was about to do.

In his hands Kimamura-san held the two pieces of Ranmaru's broken sword, Kuroki Ryu. He planned on reforging the sword magically but first he needed to see if the sword's spirit was still tied to the sword or had already moved on. He formed a hand seal and opened his Sight.

Once his eyes could See he was able to see that the spirit of the dragon demon Kuroki Ryu was still indeed tied to the sword. Kimamura-san shook his head, what a stubborn evil spirit indeed. Or was it that the spirit still had some kind of unfinished business that it felt it still needed to take care of? *How very interesting.* The spirit was indeed powerful but Kimamura could sense its instability of mind. It was an impressive spirit regardless, a black-scaled dragon with fiery red eyes. There was a

somewhat crazed and desperate look in those eyes though. It was clinging to the sword, like a lifeline, stubbornly refusing to pass on...

“Hmm, so the spirit is still attached. That is one very powerful or perhaps stubborn spirit. It appears I will be able to reforge the Muramasa sword to its original state after all.” Kimamura-san grinned.

Kuroki Ryu laughed gleefully, *Yes!* He hissed, *I owe you one, old man!*

“Those eyes of yours...” Kimamura-san looked directly into its eyes unflinchingly, “They hunger for blood and destruction. I can’t help but wonder if you are the right sword for Ranmaru now...now that he is no longer a Destroyer or a Conqueror on the path of Ultimate Conquest and Power - but a Protector, a *Samurai* Butler.”

Kuroki Ryu chuckled, clearly amused. “The *right* sword? You’re funny old man. A sword is the soul of the *samurai*. Or rather the missing half of a *samurai*’s soul. Right sword? Right sword, you say? That’s a riot! *Me* the right sword for Ranmaru?” He laughed hysterically at his own inside joke.

Kimamura-san narrowed his eyes questioningly at Kuroki Ryu, “Hmm, you seem to know something don’t you? Spill.”

“Slim chance, old man. But I will tell you this - right now Ranmaru needs power and that I can give him...until the time when he needs something...more.” Kuroki Ryu hissed.

Kimamura-san nodded and pushed his rectangular sunglasses up his nose, “Hmm, alright then.” He pushed the sleeves of his white suit up. “Let’s get you back to being in one piece, shall we?” Kimamura-san took out an enchanted hammer, which he began to empower with his spirit energy so that it was enveloped in a blue light.

“You’re quite the interesting monk.” Kuroki Ryu smirked.

Kimamura-san grinned, “So I’ve been told.”

That day at school, Kusanagi found that Ranmaru was avoiding her for some reason. Kusanagi sighed heavily. It was probably because of the bath incident and then when she had gone to his room...Kusanagi’s cheeks flamed red. She put her

face in her hands, feeling completely mortified as she remembered how she had *helped* Ranmaru figure out how to solve his *little problem*. She still couldn't believe she had actually done that! She looked around the school courtyard and saw that there was still no sign of Ranmaru. And it was lunchtime. Her stomach grumbled. She was hungry dammit! Where was that useless *Samurai* Butler of hers when she needed him anyways! She wanted good food, his food. She pouted.

Kusanagi stomped off angrily to the cafeteria and filled her tray high with sub par food. Well, anything was sub par when compared to Ranmaru's delicious and out of this world *bento* box lunches. Kusanagi sighed wistfully as she thought of them. *Oh where for art thou Ranmaru's bento box!* She walked towards the cafeteria tables while trying to spot a place to sit. She hated the cafeteria - it made her feel claustrophobic for some reason. All eyes seemed to become focused on her. Kusanagi paused when she noticed that her fellow students were staring at her again - condemning her, judging her.

Kusanagi's breath began to become a bit irregular. *Get a hold of yourself Kusanagi - it's just lunch dammit!* She looked around and then blinked. *Huh?* She rubbed at her eyes. Was she seeing things? Because it looked like there were suddenly several Makas in the cafeteria:

Girls, who had put up their hair in pigtails, had on black chokers, striped stockings, and patent leather Mary Jane shoes. And not to mention they were all sucking on lollipops while trying to look 'sexy'. Kusanagi's jaw dropped. They were acting like a bunch of middle graders. Kusanagi shook her head at them, silly girls. Though the boys seemed to be eating it up and were in deep male conversation about this new trend and how great it was. What was the world coming to?

Kusanagi tried to stay out of the petty politics of her high school Akai Bara Academy but it was hard to ignore the fact that there seemed to be a new candidate for Bitch Queen of the school, over Orihime.

Or rather...make that two. A commotion had begun as soon as 'they' entered the cafeteria. Orihime AND Maka. Two

beautiful, popular, high school Bitches. Yep, they were the new Bitch Queens of the school alright and whatever they did or said was the new 'cool', the new 'in'. Was 'cool' even the right word anymore? Kusanagi didn't even want to think about it. Sigh. She saw that even Orihime had her golden locks done up into two long pigtails on either side of her head. Eye twitch.

What was the world coming to indeed? But there had to be a way to show everyone Maka's true colors - a way to warn the guys to stay away from her before it was too late, right? Kusanagi didn't even want to check and see how many male students now had the Grim Reaper's shadow behind them...

She watched as Koga joined the two girls at their cafeteria table and how Orihime began to fawn all over Suspicious Character #2. How pathetic. Disgusting. Kusanagi turned to leave the cafeteria dumping her uneaten tray of food in the trash. It wasn't fit for human consumption and she had lost her appetite anyways.

A pair of ruby colored eyes watched Kusanagi's retreat intently.

Kusanagi stalked down the hall wondering how her life could possibly get any more fucked up-

"Yo." Came a casual greeting.

Kusanagi turned to see Koga walking towards her. *Gah, what the hell could he want?* Kusanagi turned around to face him, hands on her hips, a frown on her otherwise pretty face, and raised an eyebrow at him. "Yes?"

Koga stepped in front of her and smirked. "Why did you leave lunch? I was saving you a seat, beautiful." He gave her a confident smile that Kusanagi was sure would make any other girl swoon. Luckily, she wasn't 'any other girl'.

Kusanagi's frown deepened. There were so many things wrong with that sentence Kusanagi didn't even know where to begin! Her mouth gapped open. "What about Orihime?" She found herself blurting out. Was there no such thing as a faithful man anymore?

Koga's smile broadened and he stepped closer to Kusanagi. "I could care less about her...she's a dime a dozen. But you on the other hand are unique and very interesting." Koga began to lean even closer to her. He towered over her because of

his height but that didn't mean that Kusanagi was intimidated by him - quite the contrary. When Kusanagi was fenced in - she was the type to push back.

Alarm bells began to go off in Kusanagi's mind, was Koga trying to hit on her? *Great, just great. I think Suspicious Character #2 is trying to hit on me. Wonder if I should just punch him or headbutt him or something and get this over with.*

And Kusanagi was about to do just that when-

Ranmaru suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He slammed his hand on the wall directly next to Kusanagi's head while his body was in front of Kusanagi and blocking Koga's path to her. Then Ranmaru turned his head while simply narrowing his golden eyes at Koga menacingly - and didn't say a word. If his look was anything to go by, Kusanagi supposed he didn't really have to.

The message was quite clear to Koga. Koga put his hands up in a surrendering gesture. "Ooo~ scary. Don't worry I get the picture, Ranmaru. She's your girl huh? Well, I'll catch you guys later. Bye, beautiful." Koga blew Kusanagi a kiss before strutting off.

Kusanagi waved her hand frantically back and forth in the air in front of her face as if to bat the kiss away.

Orihime, who had been watching the entire exchange jealously from the shadows, took off after Koga intent on making a move of her own. She wasn't about to lose a guy to Kusanagi! Love was a battlefield and she intended to win the war even if she had just lost this battle. She stalked down the hall, the Grim Reaper's shadow trailing behind her while the smile on the Grim Reaper's face widened eerily...

Was Death laughing?

Ranmaru's eyes narrowed at Koga as he turned to leave - there was something oddly familiar about that guy. But when Ranmaru tried to sense or feel Koga's spirit energy signature it was as if the signature was blocked or shielded somehow, perhaps by some kind of enchantment. But only a very powerful *miko* witch would have been able to cast such an enchantment. How odd. That guy was definitely hiding something...but what?

Ranmaru was off in his own little world and so didn't notice how uncomfortable Kusanagi was becoming with Ranmaru in his current position, hovering over her, or how embarrassed she was either. She began to turn red and then spaced out.

"Move already, would ya, geez! People are staring!" Kusanagi burst out frantically.

Ranmaru suddenly turned his attention back to Kusanagi and wished he hadn't. There was something different about her today. Something even more alluring than usual that was driving Ranmaru crazy. Ranmaru couldn't quite put his finger on it but-

Ranmaru leaned over and began to sniff the air around Kusanagi.

Sniff, sniff, sniff.

Kusanagi fidgeted and blushed at what he was doing. "Just what are you doing? *Baka.*"

Ranmaru's eyes widened when he suddenly caught the scent of what was so different about Kusanagi today.

Gulp.

No wonder he had the insane urge to just pounce on Kusanagi and kiss her senseless - it was her ovulation period. In other words, Kusanagi was in heat. No wonder Kusanagi had appeared just that much more delectable to Ranmaru today. A sweet, sinful morsel that Ranmaru just wanted to devour. Something akin to a deep-fried Twinkie. Something so bad for you, but at the same time *so* good. *Drool~ Gah!* Just what was he thinking? Bad Ranmaru bad!

Kusanagi didn't think she could *get* any redder. Was he *smelling* her? And was that drool on his chin!

Ranmaru suddenly pulled back, an odd strained expression on his face. Dude, the man looked constipated. Before Ranmaru took off running as if - as if -!

Kusanagi's temple throbbed in irritation, "Ranmaru *no baka!*" She yelled after him, shaking her fist in the air angrily before her. Kusanagi then looked around the hallway to see if anyone was watching her before she risked it and raised her arm to smell her underarm. Hmm, she didn't smell bad. *That idiot!*

Kusanagi shook her head and stalked off down the hallway while in a pissy mood. She turned around a corner to

come across a rather odd sight-

“Please, I have to speak to you, alone.” Orihime had her hands on Koga’s chest and was looking up at him beseechingly.

Koga shrugged, nonchalant, “Sure thing, babe.” He responded to her in a careless manner and motioned over towards one of the currently empty classrooms.

They entered the classroom and Kusanagi heard the sound of it being locked from the inside. Kusanagi immediately had a bad feeling about all this and went over to the door and pressed her ear up against it in order to eavesdrop on Orihime and Koga.

“Chose me instead!” Orihime blurted out, a tinge of desperation to her voice. “I can tell that Kusanagi doesn’t like you. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s in love with her *Samurai* Butler, Ranmaru. But I...I love you! Can’t I replace Kusanagi? I’ll do *anything*!” She added suggestively.

She heard heavy footfalls and then Koga’s throaty voice, “*Shh~* you’re much cuter when you’re not talking...”

Kusanagi had a pretty good idea of what was going on at this point but...her gut feelings told her NOT to just let this go. She took out one of her credit cards and used it to unlock the door to the classroom before rushing inside.

Koga had Orihime in his arms and appeared to be kissing her neck but...Orihime had become limp in his grasp and was that blood trickling down from the side of Orihime’s neck!

“Orihime!” Kusanagi called out in concern as she ran over and punched Koga in the side of his face so that he was forced back, staggering away from Orihime.

Kusanagi could see the blood on Koga’s incisors as he licked his lips, a sinful smile on his face. A vampire? Oh shit...

Kusanagi grabbed Orihime’s wrist and dragged the dazed girl hurriedly from the classroom. Kusanagi continued to run down the hall, still holding onto Orihime’s wrist, before after turning a few corners Kusanagi finally felt it was safe enough to stop and catch their breath. It didn’t look like Koga had chosen to pursue them. Whew. The bastard. After a few moments, however, Orihime seemed to return to her senses and yanked her wrist out of Kusanagi’s grip.

Orihime's golden eyes flashed with heated anger. "Just what are you doing?"

Kusanagi glared right back, sparks in her green eyes. "Saving your ass, duh!"

Orihime's mouth gapped open and then she shut it. "That's just stupid. I think you're jealous. You just want Koga for yourself don't you!"

"What?" Kusanagi spat back, outraged.

"Or you're just envious of me and Koga and so you want to sabotage my relationship with him since things aren't going smoothly between you and Ranmaru. Don't think I haven't noticed how he's been avoiding you like the plague lately. *Hmm~* I wonder why. What did you do to him Kusanagi? Did you finally go too far?" Orihime prodded maliciously.

Kusanagi's mouth opened and closed multiple times in shock, before she burst out - "Koga is some kind of vampire! He bit you dammit! I mean, just look at your neck if you don't believe me!"

Orihime quickly raised her hand to cover the bite mark and looked away, a somewhat guilty expression forming on her face. A blush was coming to her cheeks as she remembered the feeling of Koga's fangs sinking into her flesh. It was a feeling she had never felt before - pure carnal pleasure. "I...already know." Orihime admitted. "But he said he won't take enough blood to kill me. And it's...pleasurable."

Kusanagi face-faulted, and blinked back at Orihime in shock. She couldn't believe what she had just heard. Orihime knew and yet she still...Kusanagi grabbed Orihime's wrist to yank her hand away so that she could have a better look at the bite mark. She had to be sure. The mark was red and irritated, and black and blue in some places. That was not a 'fresh' wound, which could only mean Koga had been feeding on Orihime's blood for some time now. Kusanagi looked behind Orihime and at the laughing Grim Reaper's shadow - it wouldn't be long now before he came to claim her life. Kusanagi gave Orihime an outraged look. "You're playing with fire, Orihime. And let me tell you, you're going to get burned."

Orihime yanked her hand back from Kusanagi and shoved Kusanagi back roughly with both hands, "Get away from me!"

What the hell do you know about me anyways? How could you possibly understand! He accepts me...he said he loves me. I...don't want to be alone again! So stop trying to sabotage us. I'm *happy*!" Orihime yelled, tears of frustration in her eyes.

Kusanagi looked stunned and raised a hand towards Orihime wanting to comfort the girl somehow, "Orihime I-"

"Sabotage?" Came Haruka's surprised sounding voice as he turned the corner and spotted the two girls. He looked at Kusanagi and a strange, dark look formed on his face. "I see. She did that to me too. She sabotaged my relationship with Maka." Haruka confided to Orihime in a sad tone.

Orihime's eyes widened in surprise, she appeared scandalized and gave Kusanagi a disgusted look. "You really can't stand it if anyone else is *happy* can you? Maybe...maybe everyone's right about you after all. That you bring nothing but pain and misfortune to all those around you - and that you do this on purpose. You really are cursed."

Orihime's words cut deep and Kusanagi staggered backwards in shock.

"I was happy with Maka, Kusanagi." Haruka shook his head, a far off look in his eyes. "I sort of knew I'd never really be good enough for you but...a least for a little while I was finally happy, being *loved* instead of doing all the loving. You don't want me so why did you have to ruin that chance for me to finally have my own happiness, *why*?" His voice cracked on the last word.

"I'll tell you why, Haruka." Orihime came to stand next to him. "She's nothing but a sadistic bitch, who finds pleasure in another's pain. I'm right about that too aren't I Kusanagi?"

"I- no!" Kusanagi shook her head, brows furrowed, "You don't understand! I was only trying to-!" But before Kusanagi could say more Katsumi and Shinichi were running up to the group. They were panting, out of breath, and they seemed panicked. Kusanagi was instantly on guard.

"Guys, what's wrong?" Kusanagi demanded.

"It's Ranmaru he-" Shinichi looked at Orihime and Haruka and seemed to hesitate to say more. But this was enough

for Kusanagi anyways and a timely excuse to escape Orihime and Haruka's verbal abuse. She didn't really think she could handle much more of their interrogation.

"Right, take me to him." Kusanagi nodded.

"This way!" Katsumi declared as she sped off down the hall.

"Hey, guys, wait up!" Shinichi called after the two girls, huffing and puffing as he tried to keep up with the extremely fast girls. Shinichi was forced to stop and catch his breath as he rested his hands on his knees. "I really got to cut back on that *takoyaki* (deep fried dumplings that look like donut holes)..."

"Kusanagi!" Orihime called after her, "Running away just makes you look that much more guilty! I know that you know what I said is true!" Orihime's condemning voice followed Kusanagi down the hall. Kusanagi tried to block it out, shaking her head.

"So what's going on?" Kusanagi questioned as the trio ran out of the main school building.

"Probably nothing too serious but...like we saw Maka taking Ranmaru to the gym storage unit and he seemed...funny." Katsumi explained in her usual ditzzy manner.

"Funny? Funny how?" Kusanagi questioned worriedly, remembering what had happened the last time in the storage building.

"Don't think we're crazy but - he looked like he had been hypnotized or something." Shinichi explained.

Kusanagi swore. "Shit. I don't think you're crazy. I should have told you guys earlier but Maka is actually a *Rokuro Kubi*, or Japanese lust demon."

Shinichi and Katsumi both gasped. "Ranmaru's life could be in danger...dammit. I wonder how long this has been going on? If anything's happened to Ranmaru-" Kusanagi was saying menacingly.

"That bitch is going to pay!" Katsumi nodded in agreement, finishing her statement for her, a fierce look in her sky blue eyes.

Kusanagi, Katsumi, and Shinichi all reached the gym storage building and Kusanagi tried the door. The two doors of the building had been chained shut; Kusanagi could hear the

chains rattling from the other side. *Shit*. “Stand back.” Kusanagi waved her hand at Shinichi and Katsumi who quickly complied and took a couple of steps back. Kusanagi then took a deep breath and concentrated, and gathered her center; she then sent a powerful kick at the door. The sound of the metal chains breaking and snapping was heard from the other side of the door as the doors were blasted open by Kusanagi’s powerful kick-

Kusanagi, Katsumi and Shinichi all rushed inside. There they saw a seemingly unconscious Ranmaru on the floor while Maka was on top of him, straddling him, and kissing him passionately, almost desperately.

Kusanagi saw it again. The same strange phenomena from before. A strange aura had surrounded both Maka and Ranmaru as she kissed him and she was pulling this aura of Ranmaru’s (Kusanagi now knew what this was thanks to old *miko* Akane, it was Ranmaru’s *qi* or his mental and physical desire made manifest) into her mouth. Ranmaru was looking deathly pale and even though Kusanagi didn’t want to she looked next to Ranmaru to see if the Grim Reaper’s shadow was there.

And sure enough there it was. The shadow was enormous, and had a large, twisted grin on its face. The Grim Reaper was laughing at her...sure that he had won.

“Ranmaru! Get away from him you bitch!” Kusanagi yelled.

Maka turned her head slowly to look at Kusanagi, a bored expression on her face as she licked her lips. Then she smiled, “How did you find me?” Maka looked over at Katsumi and Shinichi. “Oh I see. I’m actually surprised you didn’t realize what was going on sooner Kusanagi. *They* seem to overestimate you. I’ve been stealing poor Ranmaru’s *qi* for days now. Today - was going to be his last.”

Kusanagi clenched her fists at her sides, “Bitch...” She growled and then ran at Maka. “I SAID GET THE HELL OFF!” She flung a punch at Maka’s head.

And missed.

Maka’s neck had stretched and allowed Maka’s head to move in such a way that she was able to dodge Kusanagi’s

punch.

“Ew! Like that is totally gross!” Katsumi complained.

“Shh!” Shinichi chided her, “Quiet or she’ll hear you! It’s probably not a good idea to insult a *Rokuro Kubi* you know.”

Kusanagi was feeling the same way however. *Ew*. Maka’s neck stretched back down to normal and Maka then leapt off of Ranmaru and turned to face Kusanagi. She cracked her neck from side to side, an amused expression on her face. “So, you wish to fight me for him? How amusing. You really must care about him to face me like this, knowing you could never win against me, pathetic human that you are, and since I hear all your powers have been sealed away.”

Kusanagi frowned, “That’s really none of your business! And tell me what you mean by that! What powers?” Kusanagi demanded as she ran forward, fist raised. Again, Kusanagi punched through the air towards Maka only to have the *Rokuro Kubi* dodge her attack in that same bizarre manner of hers - by stretching her neck and dodging the attack, her movements resembling that of a snake. “Tell me!” Kusanagi insisted. “Argh! Stay still and let me hit you already!” Kusanagi complained as she tried to land a punch on Maka.

Maka just laughed in a tinkling manner. “I think not! And that...is a secret! Ask my boss if you want to know so badly!”

“Boss?” Kusanagi executed a roundhouse kick, this time aimed at Maka’s torso but then surprisingly Maka’s torso just bent out of the way in an abnormal manner. Maka’s body appeared as though it were made of rubber now. “Shit. You have got to be kidding me.”

“Now, it’s my turn.” Maka declared, getting into a fighting stance and moving on the offensive. She ran towards Kusanagi, her own fist raised, prepared to land a hit on Kusanagi-

Who leapt backwards out of the way, a confident smirk on her face since Maka’s attacks were straight forward, easy to read and avoid.

However-

Maka caused her arm to extend in length, shooting forward and her fist went flying unexpectedly into the side of Kusanagi’s face.

“Kusanagi!” Katsumi called out.

Kusanagi was sent flying backwards into the wall. She quickly pushed herself up off the ground though. She licked the blood that had been trickling down from the corner of her mouth, a fierce look in her emerald green eyes. "Not bad. But I won't go down so easily!" Kusanagi rushed at Maka again.

Maka gave Kusanagi a thoughtful look. "I'll keep that in mind. Guess I shouldn't hold back then." Maka sent both of her limbs forward, stretching her hands outwards to grasp at Kusanagi who jumped and leapt and rolled out of the way of these attacks as Maka sent her limbs after her. Kusanagi then rushed forward, past Maka's stretched out arms, trying to get past her defenses and land a punch. She had managed to do so, but Maka's head ended up dodging her attack at the last second. "Aw, so close!" Came Maka's mocking voice. "Care to try again?"

"Dammit." Kusanagi did a couple of back flips to put some distance between Maka and herself as soon as possible. Maka spun and performed a sidekick at Kusanagi in response. "Oh, you're not getting away!"

Kusanagi had thought she had dodged it when Maka stretched her leg out even more and managed to kick Kusanagi hard in the stomach.

Kusanagi gasped in pain as she doubled over - having had the wind knocked out of her. Ow. She wrapped her arms around her torso as she coughed. "*Ow~*" Kusanagi declared, tears in her eyes.

"That's what you get for coming here and expecting to be able to face me, one of the H4, all on your own, stupid bitch! Now to finish you off! *Oyabun* will be so pleased with me!" She smiled and raised her extended and stretched out leg high into the air prepared to bring it down upon Kusanagi's head. "Now die!"

"She's NOT alone! Meow!" Katsumi declared as she ran at Maka's leg while on all fours and then leapt up into the air. She extended her claws, which became long and razor sharp. She then came down upon Maka's leg and sunk her teeth and claws into Maka's leg.

Maka cried out in pain, "Argh! Get off of me, you stupid

cat girl!”

Maka swung her leg into the wall instead of onto Kusanagi with Katsumi still stubbornly attached.

Katsumi was slammed into the wall, but still didn't let go. “I said LET GO!” Maka cried as she slammed her leg along with Katsumi into the wall again and again. Katsumi flinched with each impact but she still stubbornly refused to let go and also did not cry out.

“Katsumi...no...” Kusanagi weakly managed.

“Katsumi!” Shinichi cried, “Dammit!” He pulled out a remote control device and pressed a red button on it, “Remington come!”

The sound of booming steps was heard from outside and Remington bent over and made his way inside of the gym storage room.

Shinichi turned to give a haughty look to Maka. “Let Katsumi go or else be prepared to face my wrath!” Maka raised an eyebrow at the kid in the top hat wondering what the hell he intended to do when Shinichi waved a hand forward and declared: “Go get ‘er Remington!” A trickle of sweat formed on Maka's brow in response.

But then Maka smiled a cat's paw smile. “Here catch!” She swung her leg at Remington and Katsumi went flying off and towards Remington.

“Catch her!” Shinichi ordered.

“Yes, Master.” Remington opened his arms and easily caught Katsumi and skidded backwards across the floor from the force of the impact. Remington gently set down the bruised, battered, bloody, and limp form of Katsumi onto the floor before turning and facing Maka.

“Remington! Attack!” Shinichi directed.

“Yes, Master.” Remington took his hulking *samurai katana* down from behind his back and charged Maka with it.

Maka didn't appear too concerned, however as Remington charged her and she easily dodged out of the way. Remington swung his sword and Maka simply bent and stretched out of the way like some kind of rubbery rag doll.

Remington continued to pursue her but Maka was just too fast and agile when compared to the huge hulking form of

Remington. Remington swung his sword at Maka and she stretched out her arm and had it wrap around Remington's sword like a snake. She then pulled back and managed to disarm Remington.

But Remington didn't give up there and charged Maka even though he was now weaponless.

"When will you people ever learn to give up? It's futile to fight against me! I'm one of the invincible H4!" Maka declared snottily

"H4?" Kusanagi scoffed, "I think you mean H3. And why are they invincible again?"

Maka glared at Kusanagi but then turned her attention back to Remington. She spun her body around like a top, her limbs wrapping around her body and twisting like taffy and then she let her fists fly forward and towards Remington. They hit him again and again, repeatedly on his chest, and with the added force of having been twisted beforehand. Her fists bounced back like rubber and continued to hit Remington relentlessly with at least twenty punches per second. Until finally Remington was being pushed back-

Remington's chest armor was beginning to crack.

"Remington! No! Fall back!" Shinichi ordered, seeing what was happening.

"*Hmm~* how about I return your robot toy to you, little boy! Hooryah!" Maka declared as she let out a battle cry and punched Remington back so that he went flying in Shinichi's direction. "Go have some nice playtime or something!"

"Uh oh." Shinichi gulped. "This is going to hurt."

But Remington turned himself in midair and opened his arms to hug Shinichi instead of letting himself ram into the boy. As they were flung back in this manner Remington was also able to use his body to shield and protect Shinichi's body from the coming impact. Remington landed with a hard thud on the floor with Shinichi safe in his arms. Whew.

Kusanagi forced herself to stand. This was crazy! Maka could even hold her own against a giant killer robot! How the hell was she supposed to defeat her? Normal means just wouldn't

work. *Normal...that's it!* Kusanagi suddenly remembered the sacred arrow that old lady Akane had given her and which was still in her locker. "Shinichi! Go and get 'it'! It's in my locker! You'll know what it is when you see it!" Kusanagi flung her ID card at Shinichi, which he would be able to use to unlock her locker.

Shinichi grabbed the card and nodded, "Right!" He took off running, huffing and puffing. "Dang, I think I've lost five pounds today on the 'Kusanagi is your friend diet'."

Kusanagi turned her attention back to Maka and knew she just had to keep the *Rokuro Kubi* busy until Shinichi would arrive with the bow and arrow - she just had to last until then.

"Looks like it's just you and me again." Kusanagi smirked and cracked her knuckles menacingly.

"Seems that way." Maka cracked her neck from side to side. "Let's do this." She shot her limbs out at Kusanagi who skillfully dodged the attacks.

Kusanagi punched at Maka's arm but the *Rokuro Kubi* seemed unfazed as her fist connected with Maka's flesh and simply bounced back. *Dang, what's her skin made out of? Rubber?*

Maka sent her fist out at Kusanagi and she once again leapt out of the way.

However-

Maka caused her arm to continue to stretch and managed to grab hold of Kusanagi's ankle tripping her up. She then began to wrap and coil both of her arms around Kusanagi's legs as she reeled her prey back and towards herself across the floor of the storage room.

"I have you now, Kusanagi." Maka declared as she used her arms to lift Kusanagi up off the floor and then began to coil her arms around her like a python before beginning to constrict her limbs around Kusanagi. "I'm going to break all the bones in your body!"

Kusanagi struggled in Maka's grasp but it was just no use. And Maka's arms had begun to tighten painfully around her. Kusanagi gasped as she could feel her ribs beginning to crack.

But then-

"Kusanagi!" Katsumi leapt at Maka again, apparently the

cat girl had recovered, and she sunk her teeth and claws into Maka's arms once more, having gotten a second wind.

"Ah! Not you again, you little pest! Let go!" Maka cried out in outrage, "Dammit!" Maka swore as she was forced to unwind her arms from around Kusanagi and instead swing her arms so that Katsumi and Kusanagi were both sent flying.

Kusanagi and Katsumi landed together in a heap on the storage room floor.

Kusanagi turned to smirk at Katsumi, "Wow, thanks Katsumi I owe you one."

Katsumi looked back at Kusanagi a bit starry-eyed, "Like really? Do I make a good sidekick then? Huh Kusanagi?"

Kusanagi scratched her cheek, "Well, uh, I dunno about that but...you do make a hell of a good friend."

"Friend?" Katsumi's eyes welled up with tears as she grabbed Kusanagi's hands and stared into her friend's eyes emotionally. "You just called me your friend! Am I really?"

"Uh...sure..." Kusanagi agreed awkwardly, blushing. She really wasn't used to this being nice bullshit. It was a lot of work.

Katsumi smiled. "You know, Kusanagi, you've really changed. And I think it's all because of Ranmaru."

"I-I have?" Kusanagi frowned, "That idiot? I doubt it."

Maka stomped her foot, "Stop ignoring me you two! And stop having some sappy friendship moment. It's making me sick. Blah! I'm going to have fun sending you both to hell! Isn't that nice of me? At least that way you two won't be alone!" Maka approached them, a menacing aura forming around her.

"Kusanagi! I have it!" Came Shinichi's voice. Kusanagi and Katsumi both turned to see Shinichi with a bow and arrow in his hands.

"A sacred arrow..." Katsumi eyed the arrow with the *o-fuda* that had been wrapped around its shaft and stood up. "I'll keep Maka busy so you can go and get that bow and arrow!" Katsumi declared as she rushed at Maka.

"Katsumi no! Wait!" Kusanagi called after her. "Shit." Kusanagi ran at Shinichi instead, since she really didn't have much of a choice. She couldn't let Katsumi's decision be in vain.

Maka stretched her arm out at Katsumi and Katsumi leapt up into the air and latched onto her arm again with her teeth and claws. Maka cried out in pain and slammed her arm down on the floor, “You stupid cat girl! Die!” She raised her arm to slam Katsumi down upon the floor again when-

“Hey Maka!” It was Kusanagi’s voice. Maka turned towards the storage room’s door to where Kusanagi was standing with a bow and arrow in her hands. Kusanagi knocked the arrow to the bow and pulled back on the string and arrow as she aimed for Maka’s heart.

“What the?” Maka breathed when she noticed the aura of blue-tinged spirit energy that was suddenly flaring up around Kusanagi and the sacred arrow. “But she’s not a *miko*...her powers have been sealed. So how is that even possible? I never sensed...impossible...!”

“EAT THIS!” Kusanagi declared as she loosed the arrow at Maka.

The sacred arrow went flying through the air, bathed in a pure blue light and struck Maka’s heart.

Maka cried out, a look of disbelief on her face before she was exorcized and burst into dots of lights.

Maka had been defeated.

Kusanagi sunk to her knees suddenly feeling totally exhausted for some reason. Whew. That had taken a whole lot out of her.

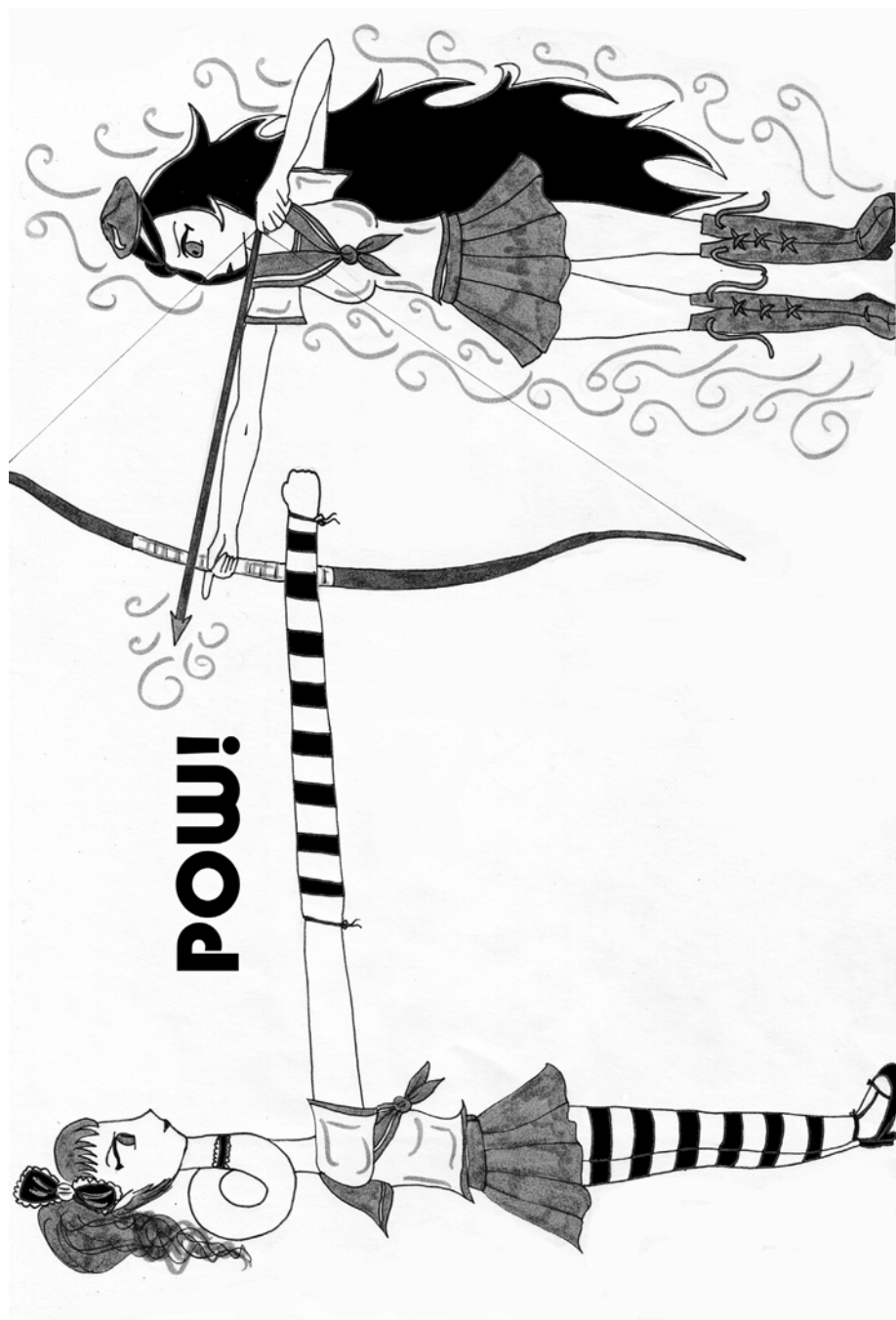
Ranmaru suddenly regained consciousness and sat up. He looked around curiously and then caught sight of the beaten up figures of Katsumi, Shinichi, Remington and of course Kusanagi.

At first, since there was no one else there Ranmaru feared the worse and that *he* must have gone berserk and attacked them all somehow, “What happened?”

Shinichi immediately began to explain, “Dude it was awesome. It totally sucks that you missed it. Kusanagi kicked some serious ass and Katsumi did too!” Shinichi recounted excitedly.

“It’s all about the Girl Power!” Katsumi declared, “High five Kusanagi!” Katsumi put up her hand for Kusanagi to hit.

Kusanagi hesitated before shrugging. “Aw what the hell.” She gave Katsumi five and smirked. “Girl Power indeed.”



“And then Kusanagi went all Sailor Moon on Maka’s ass and exorcized her in the name of Justice and the Moon - all to save Tuxedo Butler!” Shinichi was still rambling on.

Ranmaru blinked, “Tuxedo Butler?”

“He means you,” Katsumi nudged Ranmaru in his side with her elbow, “Kusanagi *saved* you.” She finished in a singsong voice. “Kusanagi *likes* you.”

“Kusanagi saved me?” Ranmaru blinked, a warmth flooding his chest.

“Of course she did!” Shinichi was nodding to himself. “After all she lo-”

BONK BONK

Kusanagi bonked both Katsumi and Shinichi over their heads. “You guys talk too much.” But she looked up and smiled at Ranmaru anyways, relieved that he was alive and safe.

Ranmaru gave her a small smile back and wondered what he had missed...since...he looked around the gym storage room and saw that it looked like it was about to cave in. It must have been something else.

BOOM

Opps. The ceiling had caved in. Ow. That had to hurt.

“Like totally.” Katsumi agreed with the narrator.

Once Ranmaru and Remington helped get everyone out of the collapsed gym storage unit Kusanagi managed to sneak away from the rest so that she could be alone. She looked around just to make sure she was truly alone before she reached into her pocket and pulled out a small notepad. She then flipped it open to the first page. It read:

HIT LIST:

1. Leader of the Shiro Tsubaki Clan and CEO of TSUBAKI INC.
2. The lightning tengu yokai, member of the H4.
3. The miko witch
4. Maka, the Rokuro Kubi, Succubus, member of the H4.
5. Koga, Vampire, member of the H4.

She crossed out Maka’s name, a pleased smirk on her face. Target #4 had been successfully eliminated.

Kusanagi’s Note to the Reader: Now kids don’t make a Hit

List at home! The government will get pissed and throw your ass in jail! Cough.

Now her next target was Koga. If she didn't do something about him soon...he could turn out to be a real problem. Orihime was already in serious danger.

But he was a vampire. What could Kusanagi possibly expect to be able to do against someone like him? How was she supposed to defeat him? Wait, wasn't he already dead? Hmm?

Kusanagi made her way to the Akai Bara Academy school library intent on researching 'vampires'. Akai Bara Academy's school library had an extensive collection of works about *yokai* since *yokai* had come to live side by side with humans and their human neighbors naturally wanted to learn more about them. *There just has to be a way to defeat him...*

As it turned out the school library had a wealth of information on vampires and their weakness: garlic, silver crosses, holy water, a stake to the heart. Kusanagi smirked. This was almost going to be too easy. Now, if only she could figure out a way to get Koga alone with her so that she could finish him off - hmm...Kusanagi tapped her chin in thought.

Kusanagi needed a plan of attack. She looked around suddenly wondering where Ranmaru had run off to. Usually, he was always by her side like this annoying shadow or stalker or something but now...he was avoiding her again. Sigh. *Where's that damned Samurai Butler when I really need him? Hmph!* It wasn't like she really needed his help anyways. She could do this all on her own, just like how she had managed to take care of the *Rokuro Kubi*.

*I can do this! I just don't know how yet...*Kusanagi was musing to herself while walking down the hall when she heard the sound of giggling coming from one of the music practice rooms. It sounded like a group of girls actually.

Immediately suspicious (music wasn't fun, at least not when one actually had to try to sing or play an instrument in Kusanagi's opinion) Kusanagi kicked the door to the music room open where the sound of the giggling girls had come from-

The sight before her made her blood run cold. Koga was seated on the floor with several girls around him, who were all fawning over him...girls who all had bite marks on their necks or wrists. They all seemed to be under some sort of hypnotic trance too. They just looked so... 'enamored' by Koga it made Kusanagi sick. And Kusanagi also couldn't help but notice that all the girls had the Grim Reaper's shadow behind them. Shit! This had to stop!

Koga was licking on one of the girl's wrists when he looked up to see Kusanagi watching him and smiled charmingly. "Want to join in, my dear? We could all have a lot of fun together." Koga drawled as he licked his lips. That's when Kusanagi noticed that some of the girls had their blouses slightly undone. So blood sucking wasn't the only thing going on here. Apparently, there was also some kinky play. Kusanagi realized as she flushed. *The pervert!*

"No thank you! Hmph!" Kusanagi declared as she slammed the door and stalked off in a huff. *That total hentai...pervert...disgusting blood-sucker! There has to be a way to get that playboy alone so I can kill him! He has to have a weakness...bingo.* Kusanagi thought to herself. *That's it! I'll just have to seduce him! Then when he's least expecting it I'll put a stake in that pervert's heart! Hell yea! Booyah! It's the perfect plan. I'm such a genius.*

*Now to get the needed equipment...*Kusanagi made her preparations over the following days for Mission Impossible, err, Mission: Assassinate Target Vampire Koga! What? Kusanagi had to name her mission *something*. It hadn't been very hard for her to get her hands on garlic, a silver cross, holy water and a stake. Money could buy anything really. And Kusanagi had a *lot* of money.

Ranmaru had been avoiding her like the plague again, she shrugged. But a frown formed on her lips anyways...she really could use his help in this, that useless *baka*. *No!* Kusanagi shook her head. She refused to go to him and ask him for his help. She could handle this on her own, she had already decided. Though she did need help with one thing-

And she spotted just the girl who could help her. "Katsumi!" Kusanagi waved and called out to the girl as she was walking

down the hall.

Katsumi turned around and quirked her head at Kusanagi in surprise not being used to being called out to by the other girl. “Hey, girlfriend sup?”

Kusanagi ran up to her, “I need your help with something. Something only you can help me with.”

Katsumi immediately became starry-eyed, “You do? With what? With what?” She began questioning repeatedly in her hyper manner.

How much sugar is this girl on? Kusanagi sighed and ran a hand through her messed up hair. She already had a plan and the school dance that was coming up, and that was going to be held at Nikko Hotel, was going to be the perfect opportunity. “The dance on Saturday...I need your help with...well...”

Luckily Katsumi was way ahead of her and saved Kusanagi the trouble of having to explain. Katsumi clapped her hands together excitedly. “Ooo~ you just leave everything to me! I’ll make you so gorgeous Ranmaru won’t be able to take his eyes off of you!” Katsumi placed a hand on Kusanagi’s shoulder and gave Kusanagi an excited thumbs up.

Kusanagi gaped. “Ranmaru?” *Wait, this is perfect! Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Kusanagi!* “Oh, yea, right.” There was no sense in worrying Katsumi by telling her of her assassination plan. She didn’t need anyone’s help. She could do this on her own just like she had always handled shit like this in the past. Facing Death by herself. This was her battle, her forte, no one else’s. This was the way it was supposed to be. Right...she could do this...

The day of the big dance had arrived. Katsumi had come over to the Kimamura Estate armed with the ‘weapons’ needed to combat Kusanagi’s hair and along with a dress she had brought for Kusanagi to borrow. She had managed to make Kusanagi look quite spectacular. If Katsumi didn’t say so herself. Katsumi beamed as she looked Kusanagi over up and down and nodded. “Mhmm, perfect. Ranmaru will propose!”

“Oh shut up.” Kusanagi had said harshly, but had been

smiling anyways.

Katsumi herself was wearing a short, black and pink *kimono* dress, which was sleeveless. There was a black *obi* sash belt tied about her waist and the *obi* was tied in the back in such a way that it resembled a butterfly. The ends of the *obi* reached the floor in a dramatic fashion. Since the *kimono* dress was a low v-neck Katsumi was practically busting out of it. Kusanagi's eye twitched at the sight but for something Katsumi had chosen to wear it wasn't half bad she decided...

There was no sign of Ranmaru and Katsumi informed Kusanagi that Shinichi and Ranmaru had decided to get ready for the dance together and that the boys would meet Kusanagi and Katsumi there at Nikko Hotel and act as their dates for that evening.

Kusanagi looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror. Everything was going according to plan. Outwardly, she looked gorgeous (a delectable little morsel that Koga was going to definitely find hard to resist) - but little did Koga know she was Death on heels. She was wearing a long, high-necked, sleeveless, Chinese-style, emerald green dress that had golden chrysanthemums sown into the thick silk material. Hidden beneath the dress she was wearing a silver crucifix. She also had a bottle of holy water and a clove of garlic concealed in her bra.

Katsumi had managed to tame her wild hair into an elaborate up do, and had also managed to *convince* (more like she blackmailed Kusanagi into complying with her wishes by saying she'd tell Ranmaru that Kusanagi was deeply in love with him) Kusanagi to take out her usual piercings - her favorite nose ring, eyebrow bar, ear cuff, and normal earrings. Kusanagi had sighed heavily and pouted at that.

Kusanagi lifted up her dress to reveal a leather holster of some kind that was strapped around her mid thigh and where she had slipped in the silver stake she had purchased online. Ah, the wonders of the internet. She lowered her dress and looked back at her reflection and smirked. He would never know what hit him. She was ready to go Buffy on his ass now.

Mission: Assassinate Target Vampire Koga was a go!

Kusanagi had a stretch limo take her and Katsumi to the front of Nikko Hotel. The limo of course drew the attention of

Kusanagi's fellow classmates but she ignored them and walked inside with confidence in her every step. For a split second she almost felt like Cinderella, since mouths were gaping open upon seeing Kusanagi appear so ladylike for once. She shook her head; she wasn't there to have fun or dance with Ranmaru. She had only one thing on her mind and that was 'assassinate Koga'.

"Hey guys!" Katsumi called out enthusiastically across the dance hall to who Kusanagi could only assume had to be Ranmaru and Shinichi. Sigh.

She'd have to think of a way to get away from the over-protective Ranmaru somehow-

Kusanagi turned to see where Katsumi was looking and her jaw dropped. Ranmaru was dressed in an all-white tuxedo, which consisted of a white jacket, a pair of matching pants, a black shirt and a white tie. He had paired this outfit off with a pair of shiny black and white shoes. *Whoa~* He was drool-a-licious.

Inner Kusanagi was already all heart-eyed. *Damn, that boy looks fine tonight~ I could just eat him up! Mmhmm.*

Yea, Kusanagi agreed before she caught herself. Uh, I mean no way! And shut up will you! I really need to concentrate and find Koga... Kusanagi shook her head vigorously. Now was NOT the time to be having such thoughts but...perhaps one dance couldn't hurt...

Yes! Compromise! Her inner voice agreed enthusiastically.

Just to shut you up okay? Then we have to concentrate on our mission.

Mmhmm.

Shinichi and Ranmaru made their way through the crowd, who all ogled Ranmaru openly. Even Shinichi was looking quite sharp in his own specially tailored (it had to be taken out a little in the stomach area) black tuxedo, which consisted of a black jacket, matching pants, white shirt, shiny black leather shoes, and a black bowtie. He was also wearing his signature monocle perched on his nose. There was a snazzy top hat perched on his head and he was swinging his silver-topped cane in his right hand.

"Yo Katsumi, Kusanagi." Shinichi ran up to them and looked

them over. “Dang girls, you two ladies are lookin *fine*~ Isn’t that right Ranmaru?” Shinichi elbowed Ranmaru in his side to get him to speak up.

Ranmaru’s golden eyes were fixated on Kusanagi intently as he looked her over. Was it just her imagination or were Ranmaru’s eyes devouring her? It made her slightly uncomfortable and she shifted on her feet restlessly. And who the hell knew what he was thinking? Damn him and that stoic poker face of his! He was as expressionless as usual, well, except for his eyes...

When Shinichi jabbed him in the side he seemed to snap out of his stunned stupor. He shook his head and half-smirked at Kusanagi, “You look...”

“Babe-a-licious.” Shinichi offered quickly in Ranmaru’s ear.

Ranmaru had been about to say ‘beautiful’ but what came out instead was, “Babe-a-licious.”

Kusanagi blinked and raised an eyebrow at Ranmaru, “I look...what?” She shot Shinichi an amused glance. The troublemaker, but she couldn’t blame him. Sometimes Ranmaru was so much fun to tease. But Shinichi was *their* troublemaker so she wouldn’t have it any other way.

Ranmaru blushed slightly and corrected himself, “What I meant to say was, you look beautiful, *Oujo-sama*.”

It was Kusanagi’s turn to blush, “Thank you.”

Ranmaru reached his hand out to her, half-bowing. “Would you care to dance, milady?”

Kusanagi hesitated before putting her hand in his. “Sure I-”

However-

Orihime suddenly shoved past Kusanagi and took Ranmaru’s hand instead, “Oh so sorry Kusanagi-*chan*, but Ranmaru promised *me* a dance!” Orihime smirked evilly as she dragged Ranmaru off to the dance floor. She looked behind her and gave Kusanagi a look as if to say, ‘Gotcha’. Orihime was wearing a liquid gold, slinky evening gown and her hair had been left down so that it cascaded down past her waist in golden waves.

Why that...bitch! Kusanagi frowned inwardly as she watched Orihime go in a flurry of black and white lace. She was wearing another of her favorite *Gothic Lolita* styled dresses. Kusanagi saw right through Orihime’s ‘nice act’. She was trying to get

back at Kusanagi for ‘stealing Koga’ away from her or some such bullshit. Sigh. High school drama was so...frickin retarded. Kusanagi was about to stomp after her and Ranmaru when she realized something - *chance!*

This was almost too perfect with Ranmaru (and Orihime) out of the way there was nothing stopping Kusanagi from seeking out Koga and setting her plan into motion - *yes!*

Kusanagi turned to Katsumi and Shinichi, “I’m going to go and get some punch. Why don’t you two dance in the meantime?”

Shinichi watched Orihime and Ranmaru dancing together and frowned...well, it was more like Orihime dancing in front of Ranmaru while he just stood there stiff as a board, but still! That wasn’t how it was supposed to go. Ranmaru and Kusanagi were supposed to be dancing together in a romantic fashion. “But Kusanagi-” Shinichi began only to be stopped by an excited Katsumi.

“Yay! Dancing! That like totally sounds fun! Come on Shinichi! Let’s go like totally boogie our asses off till we drop.” Katsumi grabbed Shinichi’s wrist and dragged him off to the dance floor.

“Why me...?” Shinichi moaned since he was trapped in Katsumi’s clutches.

“Now’s my chance.” Kusanagi turned and scanned the dance floor. There! She caught sight of Koga surrounded by a group of girls. She headed to the dance floor towards Koga only to be intercepted by Haruka who stood in her path.

“Haruka?” Kusanagi blinked, “Get out of my way Haruka. I’m busy.” She gave him a stern look while ignoring how good he looked in his tux along with a snazzy red tie.

“No.” Haruka said with an oddly serious expression on his face. What was with the fruitcake getting serious on her all of a sudden, lately? “You’re going to dance with me.”

“Like hell I am!” Kusanagi complained as Haruka caught her off guard and grabbing her hard by the wrist unceremoniously dragged her to the dance floor.

“You were going to dance with Koga weren’t you? *Why?*”

Haruka narrowed his eyes at her as he spun her in his arms, “Are you really trying to steal Koga away from Orihime? Or is it something else? You’re not the only one around here who is good at using masks to hide one’s true intentions.”

“That’s really none of your business.” Kusanagi shot back as Haruka roughly pulled her up against his chest.

“I beg to differ,” He looked deeply into her eyes, searchingly, “Aren’t we...friends? I don’t want to believe you’d really do that to Orihime. Just what are you up to Kusanagi? What’s the *real* reason you’re doing this? Why do you always feel you need to do things alone?”

Oh shit! I can’t let Haruka know the truth. “You already know the real reason. I’m a selfish bitch. And I’ve decided I want a little eye-candy like Koga on my arm tonight. Is that so hard to believe? You must know how superficial I am and Koga is better looking than Ranmaru - so yea I’ve chosen him. There, now you know the truth. Deal with it! And leave me the hell alone Haruka.” Kusanagi struggled to get out of his grasp and managed to free herself before shoving him backwards. This gave her enough time to escape Haruka and quickly speed off into the dancing crowd.

Haruka tried to go after her but the opening that Kusanagi had made as she went through the crowd seemed to close after her and he lost sight of her. *Dammit.* Haruka watched Kusanagi leave him behind, a hurt and disappointed look on his face. Everyone really just thought he was an idiot. But he noticed things dammit! “Kusanagi...” Haruka looked down and then he noticed something - a note pad. Kusanagi must have dropped it in her struggle to free herself from Haruka. *Strange.* Haruka picked it up and slipped it into his pocket. He’d give it back to Kusanagi later.

Kusanagi made her way towards Koga through the crowd with purposeful steps. He was currently dancing with some girl. But that wasn’t going to be much of an obstacle for Kusanagi The Bitch. Kusanagi simply shoved the girl away, and the poor girl went flying. “My turn,” Kusanagi said simply as she easily took the girl’s place in Koga’s arms.

The girl let out an indignant, “Hey!” She was ignored.

“Kusanagi.” Koga’s red eyes lit up in surprise as he began to

maneuver her across the dance floor, “To what do I owe the honor? Why the sudden change of heart?”

Kusanagi let him spin her around before smiling at him coquettishly. Yea, gross. “Maybe it’s because you look so damned handsome in that tuxedo of yours tonight, hmm?”

Koga chuckled, “If I had known that’s all it would have taken I would have worn a tux sooner.”

They danced to the beat of the music (Gackt’s *Vanilla* was playing - yes! hell yea!) and moved closer and closer until they were freak dancing with each other, pressing their bodies up against each other, moving to the beat of the music and to their inner desires. Kusanagi turned around and pressed her back against Koga’s chest, she could feel his arousal pressing into her lower back. Ew. But she had to stick to the plan. She turned around and faced him with a playful smirk on her face as she pressed her chest up against his and wrapped her arms around his neck. It was now or never. Kusanagi leaned forward to capture his lips.

However, Koga paused and pulled back, brows furrowed and a confused expression on his face. “I thought you hated me.”

“There’s a very fine line between love...” Kusanagi whispered in his ear, letting her hot breath waft over it, and then she nibbled on his ear lobe teasingly before then biting down hard. Koga gasped in a mixture of pleasure and pain. “And hate.” She pulled back and licked the blood from her lips. “Two can play at that game, Koga.”

Koga looked back at Kusanagi in surprise and didn’t move away when she leaned forward to capture his lips with her own again. He responded eagerly to her kiss as they began to kiss each other quite passionately and then Kusanagi boldly deepened their kiss, plunging her tongue into his mouth. Koga moaned in pleasure and wrapped his arms more tightly around her. Their kissing was quickly becoming more heated, fervent, desperate - Kusanagi had him right where she wanted him.

Koga ran his hands over Kusanagi’s body, along her hips, over her ass, and back up to ghost over her breasts. *The pervert!* Kusanagi could feel the anger building up inside of her, waiting

to unleash itself. She wanted to punch Koga right then so badly that it was very hard for her not to act on her feelings. *I should kill him right here and now! How dare he touch me like that? Okay, Kusanagi, chill - think of the mission. You can't just kill him out in the open like this, there are just too many witnesses. Right. Yosha.* Kusanagi pulled away and smiled teasingly. *Yuck! He tasted like BBQ! Be strong Kusanagi, be strong!*

Kusanagi began to walk away leaving Koga dumbfounded. He looked around for her dazedly and saw Kusanagi up ahead quirking her finger teasingly at him, beckoning him to follow her. A smug smile formed on Koga's lips, the little vixen couldn't get enough of him, hmm? He had this effect on all the girls, but he hadn't thought his usual charm had been working on Kusanagi - until now. This was going to be good. Koga quickly followed after her.

Kusanagi left the dancehall with Koga following close behind. Kusanagi walked up to the front reception desk and asked for her room key. She had reserved a room earlier that night for this very purpose. In fact, several of the students had also reserved rooms to make use of later in the evening. Kusanagi shook her head. Kusanagi led the way and Koga followed close behind her until they made their way into the elevator. Once they were alone they began to fervently kiss each other once more. Kusanagi distractedly pressed the appropriate floor number for her room and continued to kiss Koga back mechanically.

Finally - the elevator door opened and Kusanagi was leading Koga to her room. The room Kusanagi had purchased was of course a suite. Kusanagi had to manage opening the door while Koga's lips had still been plastered to her face. Ugh.

They made their way inside the room and Koga began to take control, guiding Kusanagi over to a nearby couch. He pushed her down on top of it and began to get on top of her. They continued to kiss and then Koga leaned over to kiss the side of her neck. Kusanagi stilled and held her breath but Koga didn't stop there and began peppering her skin with kisses, going down from her neck to her collarbone. At the same time he was running his hand up her dress and sliding her dress upwards to reveal that she had on a pair of knee high, combat boots. Opps.

Kusanagi gave him an innocent look, but Koga just looked at



her and smirked amused. “*Kinky.*” He declared before continuing his ministrations and kissing downwards towards Kusanagi’s cleavage. That’s when he caught sight of the silver chain she was wearing.

“Hmm, what’s this? A love locket perhaps?” Koga teased as he began to pull out the necklace from her cleavage.

“Wait don’t-!” Kusanagi began. Too late.

Koga pulled out the silver cross and fingered it curiously and raised an eyebrow at Kusanagi, “Hmm, I wouldn’t have pegged you as one of those religious catholic girls. Is *this* going to be a problem?”

Kusanagi’s eyes widened in shock. “You can touch that? But you aren’t supposed to be able to do that.” She blurted despite herself. Double opps.

Koga blinked back down at her confusedly, “Huh? Why not?”

Kusanagi’s eye twitched, was she missing something? “It’s supposed to burn your flesh!” She deadpanned.

“My flesh?” Blink. Koga looked amused before a knowing expression crossed his face next. “Oh, I see. I get it now...you think I’m some sort of vampire. Well, hate to break it to you, babe, but I’m not.”

Kusanagi’s eyes widened like saucers, “You’re not? *Nani?* What! But I thought...those girls back at school...you were sucking their blood weren’t you?”

“I’m a vampiric bat *yokai* - silver crosses won’t work against me. It’s not the same as being a vampire. A real *miko* would have known the difference. But I guess it’s not like you’re a *miko* anyways...” Koga said thoughtfully.

Kusanagi’s blood ran cold. “*Uso! No way!*” *Shit! I’m so screwed! What do I do now? If silver crosses won’t work then there’s no reason to assume a stake to the heart will work either but I can’t just give up! I have to try - something.* In one fluid motion, Kusanagi reached down and grabbed her silver stake from out of her holster strap and aimed it at Koga’s heart. “AH!” She let out a cry as she slammed the stake forward.

The stake impacted against Koga’s chest and shattered. Pieces of silver went flying into the air in sharp shards - Kusanagi’s eyes widened in shock. She looked down at her now bladeless, completely useless, silver dagger in despair. “*Uso!*

What's your skin *made* of?" Kusanagi made a mental note to leave very bad feedback for the online seller she had purchased the dagger from.

Koga had a bored expression on his face. "A silver stake? That won't work. Well, it might have if you had put some spirit energy behind that attack. So...all this time tonight you were just trying to get close to me in order to seduce me so that you'd be able to have a chance to assassinate me, huh? You've got balls - for a girl. But you know that's a real blow to my male pride. And here I thought you liked me. That hurts Kusanagi." Koga looked mock hurt.

Oh shit! I can't believe he survived that! Kusanagi began to inwardly freak out and reached into her cleavage to pull out her garlic clove. She then threw the garlic clove at Koga and it hit him right between the eyes.

Blink. Koga began to chuckle. "I already told ya, it won't work, babe."

But Kusanagi wasn't really listening, "How about this then!" She took out her vial of holy water and splashed it across his face.

Now dripping wet, Koga's amused expression was shifting to anger as he was beginning to get pissed off. He frowned down darkly at Kusanagi. "I already told you, it won't work. Now, trying to kill me wasn't a very nice thing to do Kusanagi." He wagged his finger at her. "How are you going to make it up to me, hmm?"

Epp! Kusanagi inwardly squeaked. *This is so not good!*

"How about I control your mind and make you do all kinds of *naughty* things to me, hmm? Sounds like fun huh, babe?" Koga suggested with a mischievous glint in his red eyes.

Kusanagi's own eyes widened. "You can do that? You wouldn't dare..."

Koga chuckled. "How else did you think I was able to brainwash that model friend of yours? What's her name?" Koga looked pensive, "Ah yes Ori-something. She'd be a total babe if it wasn't for that horn sticking out of the center of her head."

"Orihime." Kusanagi supplied, with a frown. What a total

jerk.

“Right, Orihime,” Koga nodded, “Along with all those other girls.”

“So that’s how you manipulated them. You bastard.” Kusanagi growled.

“Now...look into my eyes...” Koga said as he stared down at her.

“I’d rather not.” Kusanagi tried to look away but Koga grasped Kusanagi’s chin and turned her face to look at him.

“Too bad. You’re all mine now that your little dog isn’t here to protect you.”

Kusanagi blinked back at Koga confusedly wondering who he meant and then realized he meant Ranmaru. “You mean Ranmaru? He’s a fox by the way.” Kusanagi glared back defiantly. “And he’ll come for me, he will. And he will so kick your ass if you hurt me.” Kusanagi spat. Though on the inside she wasn’t so sure if Ranmaru would actually come for her. She’d been a real bitch to him lately after all.

“We shall see.” Koga didn’t appear to be all too concerned with her threat and continued to stare deeply into her eyes. She felt paralyzed, trapped within his hypnotic stare. She could feel herself losing consciousness. *Oh dammit. Ranmaru...where are you?* Kusanagi closed her eyes and when she reopened them her eyes were no longer bright and sparkling, but dull and lifeless. She was now an obedient little doll.

Koga smirked down at his handy work. Gotcha. “There, now I have you completely under my control. Your mind is mine now. Now...touch me Kusanagi.” Koga ordered.

Kusanagi dazedly reached up her hand to cup his face but then stopped. She blinked and her eyes seemed to clear and focus on Koga. “Who are you?”

Koga blinked back down at her in confusion, “Huh? What?”

Kusanagi’s eyes narrowed at Koga, “I know you...you’re General Kogarashi. Ranmaru’s old rival. You can’t hide who you really are with that pathetic spell some half-assed *miko* must have slapped onto you.”

Only a very powerful or capable *miko* should have been able to see past Kogarashi’s spell of concealment, which Kagura had placed on him herself. His eyes narrowed at her. “I should have

compete control over your mind right now so how is it that you're still talking? Wait, it can't be - a second mind? Just who are you?"

"I am *miko* Nagi. Kusanagi is my reincarnation." She informed him.

"Shit." Koga blinked down at Nagi in shock. Kusanagi was Nagi! So that's why Kenmaru was after this girl!

"You know, I would leave Kusanagi alone if I were you. Ranmaru is never too far away when Kusanagi is concerned. Do you really want to get your ass kicked again?"

"Ass kicked?" Koga growled, "I never thought I'd hear Lady Nagi speak so...uncouthly. The times certainly have changed."

"And I never thought I would see the day when a gentleman would take advantage of a lady. Times really have changed. *Samurai* apparently no longer have honor. Do they Kogarashi? And I like to watch MTV while Kusanagi is sleeping so I've picked up a few bad language habits."

"I'm only following orders." Kogarashi shot back and shook his head. "Besides, let Ranmaru come. See if I care. Let him come and try to save her. I wonder if he'll make it in time or if I will have her broken already? Anyways, I've been itching for a rematch for the last four hundred years. Ranmaru will regret that he left me alive that day. What he did to my pride by letting me live was unforgivable. A compete insult. He was...laughing at my pathetic state. I'm sure of it. He was looking down on me - and that's something I won't forgive! But I'll show him who has the last laugh."

"But why harm Kusanagi? This isn't like you." Nagi questioned, her brows furrowed.

"I was ordered to break her...by Kenmaru. Surely, you remember *him*. And he has a way of always getting what he wants in the end. He can be a very...*persuasive* bastard." Koga shivered, remembering Kenmaru's threat of burning his internal organs from the inside out if he failed to comply with his order.

"Kenmaru? That bastard!" Nagi bit her lip. "Why can't he ever leave me in peace?"

Koga shrugged, "Hell if I know. And as much as I've enjoyed

our little trip down memory lane it's time for you to go back to sleep, *miko* Nagi."

"Wait, Kogarashi, please don't do this! I know you don't want to-" Nagi was saying.

Koga formed a hand seal and tried to ignore what Nagi was saying. "*Release*." Koga released his hold upon Kusanagi's mind.

Kusanagi groaned, opened her eyes, and blinked.

"Welcome back, babe." Koga smirked down at her with a malicious gleam in his eyes. Inwardly he was frowning however but he shook his head as he leaned forward. He had to do what he had to do. Orders were orders after all. And he wasn't foolish enough to go against Kagura or Kenmaru especially combined.

Meanwhile, back at the dancehall, Haruka was sitting dejectedly at one of the tables that surrounded the dance floor while sipping on some spiked punch. It was his 6th glass. He sighed heavily and in an overly dramatic manner. He hoped someone would notice and come and ask him what was bothering him. He was absentmindedly flipping Kusanagi's notepad open and closed as he waited. "Oh woe is me..."

Katsumi, who had needed a punch break, came over to sit beside him absentmindedly and did not notice his depressed state in the slightest. "Yo Haruka! Hey, what's that?" Katsumi pointed to the notepad in his hand.

"Oh...this? It's Kusanagi's." He sighed in a depressed manner. "I don't know what it is. She just dropped it."

Katsumi's blue eyes sparkled mischievously. "Maybe it's a diary."

"A diary?" Haruka looked down at the notepad. "Nah, I doubt it..."

Haruka and Katsumi immediately both flipped open the notepad to the first page intent on reading its forbidden contents, and together they read:

HIT LIST:

1. Leader of the Shiro Tsubaki Clan and CEO of TSUBAKI INC
2. The lightning *tengu yokai*, member of the H4.
3. The *miko* witch
4. ~~Maka, the *Rokuro Kubi*, Succubus, member of the H4.~~

5. Koga, Vampire, member of the H4.

The fourth line had been crossed out neatly.

Haruka blinked, “A hit list? Maka, *Rokuro Kubi*, Succubus? Huh?”

Katsumi looked over his shoulder and nodded. “Oh, didn’t you know? Maka turned out to be a powerful *Rokuro Kubi*. She was also a member of the H4, you know, the Shiro Tsubaki *yakuza*. Anyways, she was stealing the *qi* of the boys at school and putting their lives in danger. Kusanagi told me Maka was doing that to you too. And that your life was also in danger and everything. But then Kusanagi swooped in and BANG! WHOOSH! CRASH! KABOOM!” Katsumi waved her hands through the air and did sound effects. “Exorcized her and Kusanagi was like totally awesome, you know. And yea, that’s how she saved you!”

Haruka’s mind was spinning, half because what Katsumi said was always hard to understand and half because of the part that she had said that he did get. “She saved me?” Haruka had this sinking feeling in his stomach. “And Koga? Is he really a vampire?”

Katsumi looked down at the hit list and tapped a finger to her chin, “*Hmm~* I dunno, I’m not really sure - but if Kusanagi says so then I’m sure it’s true. Kusanagi is really smart.” Katsumi nodded vigorously.

Orihime plopped down in one of the chairs across from Katsumi and Haruka, fanning herself, “*Whew~* I’m so hot! Ranmaru darling, go and get me some punch would you? Thanks, you’re a real doll. Mwaha!” Orihime blew him a kiss as he obediently walked off.

Katsumi immediately blurted out, “Orihime, is Koga really a vampire?” Katsumi figured if anyone would know it was probably someone really *close* to Koga.

Orihime instantly went on guard and narrowed her eyes suspiciously at them, “Hey, what is this? An intervention? I don’t have to answer that...I love him despite what he is.” Orihime stubbornly crossed her arms over her chest. “*Hmph!*”

Haruka looked appalled, “Oh my god, you *know* he’s a

vampire and yet you still..."

Katsumi reached out and grabbed at the golden scarf Orihime happened to be wearing around her neck and yanked it off, "It's *not* scarf season - I would think GothLoli's top model would know that." Katsumi declared.

"Hey!" Orihime immediately tried to cover her bite mark. Too late. Haruka and Katsumi both gasped when they saw it.

"What are you an idiot?" Haruka burst out at Orihime angrily, "You actually *let* him suck your blood!"

Orihime glared back at Haruka defiantly, "Hmph, I don't care. I love him. He accepts me for who and what I am."

Katsumi quirked her head at Orihime, "A stuck up bitch?"

Orihime turned and glared at Katsumi, "No you airhead, cat girl! I meant as a unicorn *yokai*."

"She must be hypnotized or something." Haruka nodded his head knowingly.

Katsumi nodded along with him in agreement. "Yep."

Orihime glared heatedly at them both.

Ranmaru returned to their table with Orihime's punch. He looked down over Katsumi and Haruka's shoulder curiously to see what they were all looking at and saw the hit list. His eyes landed on 'Koga, the Vampire'. "Guys, where's Kusanagi?"

"She went off looking for Koga," Haruka said dejectedly and then when he looked back down at the hit list his eyes widened. "Holy crap! She wouldn't."

Ranmaru had already taken off running. He went to the front desk and demanded to know which room Kusanagi had reserved earlier.

"I'm really sorry, sir." The receptionist began petulantly without looking up as she continued painting her fingernails red, "But I'm not allowed to give out that kind of information about our guests."

Ranmaru reached out his hand and grasped the tiny bottle of nail polish before shattering it in the palm of his hand.

The girl's eyes widened in fright as she was forced to look up at Ranmaru and meet his angry golden glare. "Alright already geez. I don't get paid enough for this shit." The girl's hands flew across the keys of her computer as she accessed the needed information. "Alright I have it, she's in suite #903 which is on the

9th floor. Happy now?"

Ranmaru nodded and was about to take off, however-

"Hey, wait, is your name Ranmaru?" The receptionist asked suddenly.

Ranmaru turned around and nodded.

"Then I have something for you." The girl appeared amused, "This old geezer stopped by and said that you'd be needing it."

"Welcome back, babe."

Kusanagi's eyes widened fearfully. "Get the hell off of me!" Kusanagi tried to shove Koga off of her using her legs.

"Oh, now don't be like that, beautiful. We can do this the hard way or the easy way. If you chose the easy way, perhaps the two of us can both have some fun. What do you say? You didn't seem to mind my touches so much earlier this evening. How much of that was really an act, hmm?" He reached down and stroked her cheek.

"I happen to be a great actress." Kusanagi shot back and batted his hand away, "And I said don't touch me!" Kusanagi brought her head forward in a powerful and painful headbutt that sent Koga sprawling off of her and onto the floor. Chance!

Kusanagi quickly slid off the couch and bolted for the door.

But Koga was behind her in seconds, breathing into her ear, "You can't get away from me that easily, babe." Koga grabbed Kusanagi and simply flung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Hey! Let me go!" She beat her fists against his back. But to no effect - what was this guy's skin made of? Rock?

"You do have some spunk, but resistance is futile. I'm a five hundred-year-old demon male and you're just a powerless, pathetic human wench. No matter how much you struggle you are simply no match for me."

He carried her off to the bedroom and dropped her unceremoniously onto the bed. He then straddled her and pinned her arms above her head to lean down to kiss her.

"Let go of me! Don't you dare touch me!" Kusanagi shrieked.

Koga breathed over her face, “You’ve already lost. Just give in already.”

Kusanagi’s eyes widened as her expression turned to fear. This was really happening. Shit! “Ran-” Kusanagi began to scream but Koga covered her mouth quickly. “Ah ah ah.” He tsked waving his finger back and forth at her. “I can’t have you calling out for your *Samurai* Butler just yet. I say we have some fun together first. But I wonder what Kenmaru still sees in you after four hundred years? There are other fish in the sea after all. But he’s still completely obsessed with you. Go figure...” Koga ran a strand of Kusanagi’s hair through his fingers; it was a lot softer than it looked. “Though I suppose he doesn’t have bad taste. You are rather beautiful in an otherworldly sort of way. Perhaps, this won’t be so bad...maybe I’ll betray Kenmaru and take you as my mate instead.” Koga ran his hand up Kusanagi’s leg, “I can be very gentle if you’d let me.”

Kusanagi cried out behind his hand, tears springing to her eyes, *Ranmaru!* How had she been such an idiot?

BOOM

The door was blasted open by a fireball and Ranmaru rushed inside. He took one look at Kusanagi - with tears in her eyes and Koga straddling her before he saw red and attacked, sword flashing through the air as Ranmaru unsheathed his newly forged Kuroki Ryu!

Koga was forced to leap backwards as Ranmaru brought the sword down on part of the bed, which crashed to the floor as it was sliced in half.

Ranmaru didn’t stop there and charged Koga, sword raised, leaping off the bed. Koga drew his own sword, which had been concealed underneath his unusually long tuxedo jacket. And just in the nick of time too-

Koga brought his sword up to block Ranmaru’s attack that would have sliced him in two. “So the knight in shining armor has arrived to save the damsel in distress. Little late, hero. But I suppose it’s better late than never.”

Their swords clashed, Ranmaru’s golden eyes narrowing fiercely at his prey. Koga raised his hand and made a hand seal. “Release!”

The spell that had been hiding Kogarashi’s energy signature

was released.

Ranmaru's eyes widened in surprise, "Kogarashi?"

"In the flesh. Long time no see, Ranmaru. You ready for that rematch? AH!" Koga pressed his sword forward.

They moved into the adjacent room, swinging their swords carelessly at each other, chairs and lamps getting sliced to pieces in the process. Koga increased the power behind his attacks and Ranmaru was put on the defensive. "What's the matter Ranmaru? It isn't like you to hold back in the middle of a fight!" Koga jeered.

Ranmaru looked sideways at the bedroom. He was worried to use too much power around Kusanagi fearing that she could end up getting hurt because of him. He didn't want to kill her accidentally.

A surprised look crossed Koga's face. "Oh I get it. You're worried about the wench! Well, you should be more worried about me!" He increased his speed and attack power and Ranmaru was forced back. "Pathetic! Were you always so weak, General? This is what having someone to protect makes you - WEAK!"

Their swords continued to clash.

"Oh I see how it is now - you love her don't you? It all makes sense. But...she won't ever love you in return!" He waved his sword and released an energy blast attack at Ranmaru.

Ranmaru summoned his power and cut through the attack easily.

"No...she'd never love the *current* you. What's wrong with you anyways?" Kogarashi seemed angry. "You used to smile while you fought. You used to *enjoy* fighting! You used to be a true swordsmaster. But now...I suppose those rumors were true. You were captured and made some evil *miko*'s sex-slave. She broke you huh? That's pathetic to have a *woman* break you like that. You're nothing but a broken toy now. A fiery woman like Kusanagi who's so full of life and energy and passion could never fall for a broken, pathetic shadow of a man like you!"

Kogarashi's words cut deep. And voiced Ranmaru's inner doubts. Why *would* Kusanagi love a man like him? He was

unworthy of her love.

Briefly, Ranmaru was lost in his own inner torment – and it was this mere moment of distraction that was all Koga needed.

“And now you’ve let your guard down?” Koga sneered, “Absolutely pathetic!” Koga swerved past Ranmaru’s defenses and disarmed him.

Kuroki Ryu went spinning off into the air and landed on the floor, imbedding itself there, standing hilt up.

And then Koga rushed forward and impaled Ranmaru through the stomach with his sword, but Koga didn’t stop there and summoned his *yokai* energy to burst out through his sword.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened in shock and pain as he coughed up blood.

Koga removed his sword from Ranmaru’s stomach. And Ranmaru collapsed to the floor in a heap.

Koga walked over to his fallen form and glared down at him. “Pathetic...you’re weak. Your past self would cry if he could see you now. This is all you amount to? This is the rematch I was waiting four hundred years for!” Koga moaned and angrily kicked Ranmaru in the stomach. He then slammed his shoe into Ranmaru’s wound again and again. Ranmaru grunted in pain. Koga spit on him. “You’re nothing but garbage. Trash. Completely useless, worthless.” Koga shook his head and then shrugged. “Well, I still have an order to carry out. Kenmaru wanted me to break your fiery Kusanagi and then kill her.” Kogarashi shook his head while looking at the pathetic, broken form of Ranmaru. “I guess true love doesn’t conquer all...” Koga declared as he left Ranmaru on the floor and headed back to the bedroom-

Kogarashi attacked Kusanagi viciously ripping the front of her dress open and revealing her strapless bra. He was taking out his frustrations on how his rematch with Ranmaru had turned out on her. That wasn’t how it was supposed to go! Their rematch...was supposed to have been brilliant, historical, legendary. Instead it was just...pathetic. *Dammit!* Why else had he been living these past four hundred years other than to fight with Ranmaru again?

Kusanagi cried out and tried to cover herself up. “No! Stop! Please don’t do this! Ran-” Kogarashi backhanded her across the

face. “He won’t save you...he’s nothing but a broken toy now...” He lifted Kusanagi up by her hairdo.

Kusanagi glared back at him, “You’re wrong. Ranmaru is more of a man than you could ever hope to be.” Kusanagi spit at Kogarashi-

Meanwhile, Ranmaru was in extreme pain...why was he so...low on energy? The succubus! She must have been draining his *yokai* energy for days without him realizing it...shit! How the hell was he supposed to save Kusanagi now...he couldn’t even get his own useless body to move dammit!

He reached out his hand and touched Kuroki Ryu...

You need power? I’ll give you power but in exchange you have to give me blood...Kogarashi’s blood...

Ranmaru, from a place that seemed very far away, heard the sound of fabric ripping, and then the smell of Kusanagi’s blood was suddenly in the air. He heard Kusanagi’s muffled cry and then her words:

You’re wrong. Ranmaru is more of a man than you could ever hope to be.

Oujo-sama... Ranmaru struggled to move. *You have a deal...Kuroki Ryu.* Ranmaru grasped his hand around the hilt of his sword.

Whee~ this is going to be so much fun! The sword cackled insanely. *Watch out Kogarashi because here we come!*

Use my energy. As much as you need and help move my body...it’s completely useless right now. Ranmaru directed Kuroki Ryu.

Let’s do this thing, you pathetic bastard!

Kuroki Ryu began to draw Ranmaru’s energy into itself and helped Ranmaru to stand, puppeting Ranmaru’s body, which by itself was now too weak to move. Pushing Ranmaru’s wounded body far beyond its limits. Then Ranmaru charged into the bedroom just as Kogarashi was about to backhand Kusanagi again for spitting on him.

Ranmaru sliced his sword through the air and sliced through Kogarashi’s arm without mercy. Mercy after all wasn’t part of the deal. Blood spurted into the air as Kogarashi’s arm was

severed from his shoulder.

Ranmaru spun and brought his sword down upon Kogarashi again intent on cutting him in half this time. But Kogarashi had recovered from his surprise and had his sword up just in the nick of time to block this next attack.

Kogarashi's eyes were wide. "You! You shouldn't even be able to move with a wound like that! How-"

Ranmaru smirked, "You were wrong about something, Kogarashi. Having someone to protect doesn't make one weaker - it makes one stronger! Because I can't give up. I can't afford to. And I won't give up until I have defeated you! You're right about something though - I'm not the same man you fought four hundred years ago. I have changed. But right now I am Kusanagi's *Samurai* Butler and so in order to protect her I will defeat you! Whatever the cost!"

Ranmaru summoned his *yokai* energy and it flared to life around him. "Hooryah!" He let loose a battle cry as he attacked and pushed his sword forward and Kogarashi was forced to block. Ranmaru then unleashed a large blast of energy towards Koga-

"What are you crazy? You'll kill her too!" Koga yelled out.

Ranmaru smirked. "Oh no, I won't. HA!"

Kogarashi was flung back into the window that shattered with the force of the blast and as he fell out the window the blast exited out the window as well so that most of the fiery energy went outside of the building rather than staying inside of the bedroom.

Ranmaru leapt up into the air and out the window after Kogarashi.

"Ranmaru!" Kusanagi called out in concern. "Don't die you idiot!"

Ranmaru aimed his sword at Kogarashi's heart and as he fell down through the air towards the other demon he stabbed him through. Before Kogarashi even had a chance to summon his wings.

"Ahhh!" Ranmaru yelled as they plummeted through the air, and summoned his energy to flow through Kogarashi's wound in order to finish him off.

Kogarashi coughed up blood.

The two combatants crashed into the ground below, creating a gigantic crater from the force of the impact of the two powerful battling demons. Ranmaru used Kogarashi's body to cushion his own fall.

Ranmaru removed his laughing and giddy sword, Kuroki Ryu, and looked down at Kogarashi's broken, bloody and beaten form.

A sad expression crossed Ranmaru's face, "I didn't want to have to kill you but this is what *you* wanted isn't it - *why?*"

"Because...you stomped on my pride all those years ago by letting me live. You looked down on me. You took pity on me and-" Kogarashi began to cough.

Ranmaru shook his head, "That isn't why I spared you. It was because I truly admired and respected you as a *samurai*, a warrior, an equal. I respected your power and strength. I honestly enjoyed my fight with you and...if we hadn't been enemies then I believe perhaps we could have been friends."

"Friends!" Kogarashi laughed brokenly, blood streaming down his chin, "Man, you really have changed. The old you wouldn't have even known what a friend was. All you thought about was swords and power."

"You're right - and my life was empty. I was searching for an answer...to why I was fighting. And I thought that you'd be able to give me my answer. But before, there was no real answer because I was only fighting for a hollow reason called Power. But now I can finally answer that same question myself. Why am I fighting? It's to protect the woman I love. What is true power? The power to protect those you care about nothing more. This is what I've learned. This is what Kusanagi has taught me."

"For love huh?" Kogarashi shook his head disbelieving, "I never thought a guy like you would ever fall in love. You really have changed. But...a leopard can't change his spots Ranmaru...remember that...no matter how much you love her...it doesn't change the fact that you are what you are...who you were...General...Protect her from Kenmaru if you love her so much. Love *ka*? Maybe that's a cause worth fighting for after all...I wish...I had had more time...four hundred years wasted...my

friend..." Kogarashi panted, speaking brokenly as he struggled to speak.

Ranmaru shook his head, "Not wasted, my friend. You were a brilliant warrior."

"Promise me something..." Koga gasped and looked into Ranmaru's eyes beseechingly. "Remember me."

"I shall." Ranmaru nodded.

Kogarashi smiled back before his eyes rolled back into his head and he lay unmoving.

"Kusanagi..." Ranmaru headed back towards the door to the hotel, however, all the strength and power in his body suddenly left him and he collapsed to his knees.

Shit, Kuroki Ryu, what gives you bastard sword? Ranmaru complained, *I have to go and see if Kusanagi is alright.*

Kuroki Ryu chuckled. *That wasn't a part of the deal. I helped you kill Kogarashi...we're even. I could care less about you having some sappy romantic moment with your woman!*

Shit. Kusanagi... Ranmaru tried to get his body to move but with his current wounds it was simply impossible. *Move...move...move!*

Luckily, Kusanagi came to him.

"Ranmaru!" Kusanagi yelled as she ran out from the hotel building. She was wearing what looked like a tuxedo jacket that was buttoned up in front and turned to see Haruka running along next to her, which meant he must have lent her his jacket. At least the fruitcake was good for something. Though his scent on hers marred Kusanagi's otherwise perfectly wonderful scent.

Kusanagi... he was so glad that she was safe. She had even sounded worried about him. He could die happy. Ranmaru thought as he let himself simply pass out.

CHAPTER 4

A good friend is more valuable than gold

Her parents and Mamoru were alive! There! She could see them across the grassy field that lay stretched out before her. They were all seated on a red and white checkered blanket on the grass and were laughing at something. Were they all having a picnic together? Kusanagi wondered. When they caught sight of Kusanagi however they stood and beckoned her to them. Tears welled up in Kusanagi's eyes - they were alive! Mom...Dad...Mamoru...

They opened their arms and called out to her and Kusanagi slowly walked forward. Why were her feet moving so slowly? She wanted to run to them, launch herself into their arms, their waiting embrace.

She couldn't hear or understand what they were saying exactly but it was clear they wanted her to join them - to go away with them.

"Mom...Dad...Mamoru..." Kusanagi breathed, tears in her eyes as she finally stood in front of them, "Thank god, you're alive."

But then as they reached out towards her, their arms outstretched, about to take her into their embrace - the expressions on their shadowed faces seemed to change and their smiles became strange, twisted and leering. Their eyes seemed hollow all of a sudden, empty, like black voids, and their skin had taken on a blue hue. Dead...zombies...?

But Kusanagi had already closed her eyes - willing to succumb to their embrace.

Their smiles broadened eerily as Kusanagi stepped forward and was about to join them-

However-

Just as Kusanagi would have fallen into their embrace, a figure cloaked in shadow and wielding a katana materialized in front of her and attacked Kusanagi's parents and her beloved Mamoru.

"No!" Kusanagi screamed. 'Not again...how can I bear to watch the people I love, stolen from me again?' "No please!" She cried out to the shadowy figure that mercilessly cut them down.

The figure turned to face her and there was something oddly familiar about him. Was it HIM? Was this merely a memory? Was she imagining the sadness she saw in this man's eyes? But she knew one thing for certain - "I hate you!" Kusanagi screamed at the figure, tears running down her face. Her words were filled with venom.

And then she woke up.

Kusanagi woke up with a start, a scream dying on her lips. It had all been a dream? No, a nightmare. Or perhaps a vision? But her parents and Mamoru were already dead and so it had to be nothing more than a real nightmare...right? She hadn't had one of those prophetic dreams of hers for a while now. But this could only bode ill...

Kusanagi put her face in her hands and could feel the wetness on her cheeks.

"*Oujo-sama?*" Came Ranmaru's worried sounding voice from the other side of her bedroom door. *Ranmaru.* Kusanagi frowned since it was odd that Ranmaru was staying outside of her bedroom. Usually if she were having a nightmare he would just barge into her room and get into her personal bubble to see if she was alright. But to stay outside of her room...Ranmaru had been acting very strange lately. Almost as if he were avoiding her for some reason. But why? Was he afraid of her? Distrustful perhaps? Kusanagi couldn't help but wonder.

"Are you alright?" He questioned in that monotone voice

of his.

Kusanagi sighed, “Y-yes.” She managed to stammer out. She wanted to tell Ranmaru to come in and hold her. *Gah!* Where had that crazy thought come from? No - she couldn’t. She wasn’t like Maka...or that evil *miko*...She wouldn’t use Ranmaru for her own selfish needs.

Ranmaru, however, sat down with his legs crossed just outside of her bedroom door in a very uncomfortable position and one that would surely leave him with a crick in his neck the following day. He waited until he heard the sound of Kusanagi’s breathing slow, which meant that she had fallen back to sleep before he rested the back of his head against the door and allowed himself to sleep as well.

Kusanagi awoke and got ready for school. As she was trying to open her bedroom door she found that something was blocking it. She pushed against whatever it was and found that Ranmaru was asleep outside her bedroom door. She stared down at him in surprise. *Naze? Why?* Why would he go out of his way to look out for her like that? *Why?* She just didn’t understand. Why did her heart clench in her chest as she looked down at him. *Why?*

It was another ordinary school day at Akai Bara Academy. That was until Katsumi came over to join Kusanagi, Ranmaru, Shinichi and his *Samurai* Butler, Remington, in the school courtyard for lunch.

“Hey guys!” Katsumi enthusiastically greeted them as she skipped up to them, her ample breasts bouncing indecently - as usual. However, when Kusanagi looked up to watch her approach this wasn’t the only thing that bothered her this time. Her eyes widened when she took in the sight of Katsumi’s school uniform.

Katsumi’s uniform was cut up, torn in places, and covered in splotches of dirt and mud. Katsumi looked like someone had just tried to push her off a cliff and succeeded!

But Katsumi was acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary and came over to sit down with them. “So what’s up? It’s like a beautiful day, isn’t it?” She innocently asked.

Kusanagi's eye twitched, before she began to spaz out, "What do you mean 'What's up? *Ii otenki des neh?*' What the hell happened to you? I mean, just look at your uniform – what happened?"

Katsumi blushed in embarrassment, "Oh, I thought no one would notice..." She began bashfully.

"Not notice? How could anyone NOT notice! You look like someone pushed you down a cliff or something. Now—" Kusanagi began to crack her knuckles, "You *will* tell me who did this to you because I'm going to send their asses to kingdom come."

Katsumi turned even redder at this suggestion. "No one did anything to me Kusanagi. It was...an accident." She tried to explain abashed, and her cat ears were pressed down on the sides of her head, making her look extremely pathetic.

"An accident?" She narrowed her eyes at Katsumi and raised an eyebrow, "And you really expect me to *believe* that?"

Shinichi popped a rice ball into his mouth, "Well, she *is* clumsy..." He said between bites.

Katsumi opened her mouth to explain, "I—" But then her stomach let out a loud rumble.

Rumble, rumble

Katsumi became even redder. Now it was Ranmaru's turn to raise an eyebrow at the cat girl. She was acting extremely strange today - even for her. And...Ranmaru sniffed the air in her direction. She smelled like...mud for some reason. Wet mud to be exact, the kind found directly by a river.

Katsumi's eyes drifted to the huge, elaborate *bento* that Ranmaru had prepared for Kusanagi. Her lunch had *everything* even *Inari-zushi* (a pouch of fried *tofu* filled with rice), circular cut up pieces of omelet, and delectable looking shrimp in a spicy sauce.

Katsumi began to drool.

Shinichi held out a rice ball to Katsumi, "Here, you hungry?"

Katsumi looked at the rice ball as if it were manna from heaven. She reached out her hand for the rice ball only to realize everyone's eyes were upon her. She quickly stood up. "I'm not hungry."

Rumble~

Kusanagi narrowed her eyes at Katsumi. "Oh yes you are. Your stomach just rumbled *again*. It sounds like an angry volcano so there's no use trying to hide it, *baka* Katsumi. Don't tell me you're on one of those stupid starvation diets all the other girls are on? You are NOT fat. Isn't that right Ranmaru?" Kusanagi shot Ranmaru a death glare.

Cough. "You are very skinny Katsumi-san." Ranmaru obediently agreed.

Kusanagi nodded her approval and turned her attention back to Katsumi, "Now, you're going to sit down and have some of my *bento* with me. I'm going to make sure you eat a healthy lunch. Ranmaru always makes me too much food anyways, and *I'm* beginning to get chubby."

Katsumi hesitated before stubbornly shaking her head. "Ranmaru made that *bento* especially for *you*. You're the only one meant to eat it. He made it with love for you."

Kusanagi's jaw dropped, *Huh?*

Katsumi smiled knowingly and then skipped away before Kusanagi could hit her over the head for that comment. "Besides, a vegan now. And I gotta go so...*ja-ne!*"

"Hey Katsumi! Wait!" Kusanagi glared after the cat girl. She was definitely hiding something. Kusanagi frowned as she watched her friend, err, odd acquaintance go. Kusanagi focused her eyes and sight behind Katsumi to see if there were any signs of the Grim Reaper's shadow. Kusanagi let out a sigh of relief. There were none. So, Katsumi wasn't in any mortal peril at least, but something was definitely wrong. The cat girl's smile was brighter and bigger than usual. It was fake. A happy mask had been set over her face. And if anyone could spot a mask it was the Queen of Masks herself - Kusanagi.

Kusanagi's brows drew together in a sharp crease. Ranmaru suddenly leaned over and put his index finger between Kusanagi's furrowed brows right where they were creasing. "Stop furrowing your brows, it's so uncute." Ranmaru chided her.

Kusanagi frowned back at him and batted his hand away,

“Stop that!” She turned her face away, to hide her pink-tinged cheeks.

Ranmaru shook his head at her, “You’re worrying about something all on your own again aren’t you *Oujo-sama*? But you’re not alone. You have me at your disposal after all.”

Kusanagi’s expression seemed to brighten at Ranmaru’s words and her green eyes sparkled as she got an idea. “That’s it! Ranmaru I want you to follow Katsumi for me and find out what’s wrong with her. That’s an order.”

Ranmaru nodded and half-bowed, “*Hai*, as you wish, *Oujo-sama*. However, you didn’t need to *order* that. I too am worried about Miss Katsumi.”

Kusanagi blinked. “You are?”

“Miss Katsumi is *Oujo-sama*’s best friend, is she not?” Ranmaru gave her a knowing look.

“Best friend? Ranmaru *no baka*.” Kusanagi scolded him softly.

Ranmaru did as he was ordered and after school he followed Katsumi home...or at least he thought he was going to follow the cat girl home. Instead, she took off to *Akihabara* - a popular shopping area in Tokyo lined with shops that catered to *otaku*, fans of Japanese animation. There were shops that sold things like *anime* DVDs, Dating SIM games, *anime* figurines, and cosplay outfits. Cosplay outfits are costumes based on *anime* or *manga* characters that people dress up in, in order to role play their favorite characters. Ranmaru and Katsumi entered a cosplay, maid cafe called *Hello Master!*

Ranmaru entered the cafe and sat down as inconspicuously as possible while hiding his face behind the menu of the café. He then watched as Katsumi returned from the back of the establishment dressed in a full maid, waitressing outfit. Ranmaru’s brows rose as he took in what she was wearing. The maid outfit they had given her must have been custom made since it fit Katsumi perfectly and showed off her curvy figure. The dress was a pale pink with lots of lace around the edges of the neckline, sleeves, and the bottom of the skirt. The dress was also very low cut revealing a lot of Katsumi’s ample cleavage. She was also wearing a frilly white apron on top of the dress

along with a pair of black, patent leather shoes. On top of her head sat a small maid cap with frilly lace to complete the overall look. Ranmaru briefly wondered what Roze would look like in a maid's outfit like *this* one, but then shook his head vigorously. Where had *that* thought come from?

Apparently, Katsumi had a part time job there but that still didn't explain her odd behavior earlier that day or the state of her school uniform.

Katsumi waitressing at *Hello Master!* had been painful to watch. Katsumi was an extremely cute, kind, and helpful girl but she was also hopelessly clumsy. She accidentally took the wrong orders from time to time, got yelled at, she tripped and dropped people's orders (sometimes right on top of them) and got yelled at, got her butt groped by male patrons and slapped them for it out of reflex, and then got yelled at.

It had certainly irked Ranmaru when Katsumi's boss had complained that Katsumi simply had to 'put up with it' or else she wasn't going to get paid. Ranmaru had wanted to go to Katsumi's rescue as soon as he caught sight of the boys' perverted advances towards Katsumi. But Ranmaru had somehow managed to restrain himself from doing so and from ripping the boys to shreds. Although when he looked down at his hands he realized in surprise that he had unconsciously ripped his menu to shreds instead. Opps. Bemused he wondered when he had gotten so protective of the pink-haired cat girl and shook his head. He really had changed.

After a couple more similar incidents Katsumi was banned from the cafe area and sent to the kitchen to wash dishes for the rest of her shift as punishment. And with Ranmaru's good hearing he was able to hear poor Katsumi breaking several of the dishes she had been asked to wash and how her boss was yelling at her about how each plate was going to be docked from her pay. Her also heard her exclamations of 'Ow!' when she had cut herself while trying to pick up the pieces of the broken plates. He almost stood up to go and help her, but once again restrained himself. After all Kusanagi had ordered him to only observe Katsumi. Not to get involved.

A few hours later Katsumi was allowed to leave since her shift had ended. Tired, worn out, and now sporting Band-Aids on her fingers, Katsumi had left the cafe wearing her ratty uniform once more. Her cat ears were dropping down on either side of her head dejectedly. That had not gone well. Katsumi continued walking down the darkened sidewalk and Ranmaru followed close behind her keeping to the shadows.

He figured since it was so late that surely she must be on her way home now. But he was once again mistaken when he found Katsumi stop outside of an all-night Hostess Club called *Paradise*. Ranmaru followed her inside and discovered that Katsumi had yet another part time job. This one was actually worse than the last job had been. Katsumi was dressed in a slinky, low cut, red dress and forced to serve drunken business men bottles of Dom Perignon while putting up with their groping touches.

Ranmaru, who had been watching, accidentally caused the champagne glass he had been holding to shatter. The hostess girl that had been attending him cried out in surprise and immediately began to apologize to Ranmaru profusely, and helped to clean up the mess as if it had been her fault. Opps. Ranmaru really didn't know his own strength anymore.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I'll get you a new glass right away, sir!" She began to pick up the broken glass shards.

Ranmaru reached out to stop the girl from cleaning it up by grabbing her wrist, "Another bottle." Ranmaru said simply.

The hostess girl looked up at Ranmaru into his shining, golden eyes, and blushed, "What...?" Wow...*this guy is incredibly handsome!*

"Another bottle of Dom Perignon." Ranmaru clarified. "Make it two."

"Oh *hai!* Right away sir! Thank you, sir." The hostess girl immediately got up off the floor and went to place the order, a smile plastered to her face, and a skip in her step. *Lucky!*

Ranmaru merely nodded at the girl as she rushed off to get him a new glass and two bottles of Dom Perignon. Ranmaru sighed, it really didn't matter how many bottles of Dom Perignon he ordered since Kusanagi had given him her Gold Card and so he practically had unlimited money to spend. Though Kusanagi

had made it quite clear it would be added to his debt. He was beginning to feel sorry for the girls that worked there and for the crap they had to put up with since they obviously worked on commission.

The place seriously needed a bouncer or some kind of security - to Ranmaru *Paradise* appeared to be letting in any scum off the streets as long as they had some money. And these perverted scumbags were really giving the girls a hard time and were getting away with it too. Ranmaru shook his head and wondered if Kusanagi would allow him to get a part-time job? That way he could work off some of the debt that he owed the Kimamura family while looking out for Katsumi in this strange place at the same time.

Ranmaru's hostess girl came back a few moments later with the new champagne glass and two bottles of Dom Perignon, which she excitedly set down in front of him. "Can I get you anything else sir?"

"Another glass." Ranmaru offered, in his dull monotone voice.

"Oh!" The girl's eyes glittered, "Thank you sir!" She grabbed another glass and began to help Ranmaru go through the two bottles of Dom Perignon while she went on and on about herself. She must have told Ranmaru her entire life story in about the span of three minutes. Then there was a crash and Ranmaru turned to see that Katsumi had just dropped a tray filled with champagne glasses and one bottle of Dom Perignon.

"Oh, she's at it again~" The hostess girl slurred as she too caught sight of Katsumi sprawled out on the floor, "I don't know why she gets so many requests. I mean, sure she's very pretty but...she's a total airhead klutz. I heard she took this job because of family troubles. But whatever it is she desperately needs the money for something. She makes a lot because she's very popular but she ends up losing everything she makes because of all the payroll deductions for breakage. Poor thing, I almost feel sorry for her."

Family trouble? Ranmaru looked away when Katsumi turned to look in their direction. He wondered what kind of

‘family trouble’ Katsumi could possibly be in. And if there was anything he might be able to do to help.

Well, if coming here and buying bottles of Dom Perignon might help...he knew of someone he could *convince* (i.e. beat up until they agreed) to spend their money there on Katsumi - the fruitcake model, Haruka. He would be the perfect sap, err, friend to convince to help another friend in need. And he did have all that money from his *lucrative* modeling career just lying around in his bank account and not doing anything important. Ranmaru nodded to himself knowingly.

Elsewhere...Haruka was in the middle of a photo shoot when he suddenly sneezed.

“Achoo!” Haruka rubbed his nose with his index finger. “*Hmm~* I bet some cute girl is talking about me!” Haruka grinned to himself and the photographer resumed taking pictures as Haruka made another pose before the camera.

The picture was becoming clear to Ranmaru as the night progressed and as he continued to follow Katsumi to her several part time jobs. The girl obviously needed money and very badly. But *why*? And why hadn’t she just asked Kusanagi for the money if she needed so much of it?

At least, at the hostess club Katsumi’s clumsiness had mostly been overlooked since everyone was too drunk to notice or really care. And since it had also been the kind of establishment where spilling drinks on your customers was considered sort of...kinky. As long as one was prepared to lick it off. Sigh. Poor Katsumi.

Katsumi bowed and said goodnight to the others at the hostess club before leaving for the night. Ranmaru looked down at the watch Kusanagi had gifted him as a present. It was one of those watches with a leather band and then the metal watchband and watch face sat on top. It was nearly 11:00 pm at night; surely, Katsumi would be going home, right? Ranmaru thought as he followed her down the dark street.

But he ended up following Katsumi to an on-road construction site. There Katsumi suited up in an orange jumpsuit, and was given a glowing stick of some kind to direct traffic with and into the proper lane bypassing the construction area. Ranmaru’s eyes widened, *Construction*? Well, it was one of the

higher paying jobs that a young person could do - even Katsumi. He figured he didn't have too much to worry about here at least since how could Katsumi screw up waving a stick around?

Ranmaru continued to watch over Katsumi from the shadows until he decided he had observed her enough for the night and that he should probably get back to Kusanagi and make his report. Knowing Kusanagi she was probably beginning to get worried since Ranmaru had been gone for so long.

Ranmaru made his way back to the Kimamura estate ready to make his report to Kusanagi. Kusanagi had been waiting for him impatiently in the study when Ranmaru entered and bowed before her. He then began to tell Kusanagi all about Katsumi's many part time jobs, the rumor about her having family troubles, and her apparent need for money.

"Well, obviously she needs money and a LOT of it. But the real question here is *why*." Kusanagi tapped her chin in thought. "Keep following her Ranmaru...and then we'll pay a little visit to Katsumi's house."

"*Hai, Oujo-sama.*" Ranmaru nodded.

"Oh and Ranmaru?" Kusanagi asked nonchalant.

"Yes?" Ranmaru looked up at her, golden eyes clashing with green.

"What size do you think Katsumi is?"

Ranmaru blinked. "She's a 5/6 and a D cup." Ranmaru reported accurately.

Kusanagi's eye twitched, "I don't even want to know how you even know that, pervert. But at least your weirdness can come in handy for something."

"*Hai...*" Ranmaru inwardly moaned, Kusanagi thought he was a pervert, once again.

The next day, Kusanagi called out to stop Katsumi in the school hallway at Akai Bara Academy. "Hey, Katsumi, wait up!"

Katsumi turned and blinked at Kusanagi in surprise, "Kusanagi-chan?"

Kusanagi handed Katsumi a paper bag, "Here."

Katsumi blinked down at the bag that Kusanagi had just shoved into her arms in confusion, “What’s this?”

“It’s a spare uniform of mine. It was a little too big for me in...certain places. I was going to throw it away but...I thought of you. So until you *remember* to get your own uniform dry cleaned you can just use my spare one okay?”

Katsumi’s blue eyes filled with tears and she took both of Kusanagi’s hands in her own, “Thank you so much! You really do care Kusanagi! I knew we were friends! Like totally!”

Kusanagi frowned and pulled her hands away, “Yea, yea, don’t get the wrong idea, Katsumi. I *don’t* care. We’re *not* friends and *that* is just a loan. A *loan*. Got it?” She narrowed her emerald green eyes at Katsumi dangerously.

But Katsumi was barely affected by Kusanagi’s death glare since she was already on cloud nine after all, and was way too happy to hear Kusanagi’s harsh words, or even care since Kusanagi had given *her* a spare uniform. “I knew we were friends!” She continued to gush.

“*Oi!* Are you even listening to me? *Moshi Mosh!* Hello, hello! Have you even heard a word of what I just said? Gah.” Sigh. Kusanagi slapped a hand to her forehead.

Even though the Kimamura family had their own private detective, finding Katsumi’s home address proved to be harder than Kusanagi had anticipated. As it turned out Katsumi’s home address was unlisted and when the private detective had attempted to follow Katsumi to her house he had somehow lost track of her. *How odd.*

Kusanagi turned to Ranmaru, “You have no choice but to follow her home tonight after her construction job, Ranmaru.”

Ranmaru bowed, “As you wish, *Oujo-sama.*”

Kusanagi smirked, “Good boy.”

Ranmaru followed Katsumi to all of her odd jobs again until finally she was at her last job for the evening - her construction job. He watched as she worked her butt off directing traffic, and Ranmaru shivered since the seasons were changing and it was becoming colder now. *Brrr.* Ranmaru *hated* the cold...it dredged up bad memories of when he was a Spell-

Collared *yokai* slave for Yoshimaru. Of how he had been kept out in the kennels with the guard dogs, treated like an animal, and how he had nearly been starved to death. He had been so cold...and alone. The cold had seeped through his bones and to his very soul. Alone...so close to death and yet no one would care if he died. He remembered thinking this to himself: *Ah, so I'm to die alone...*

Ranmaru shook his head. *No!* Things were different now. He wasn't alone anymore. He had Kusanagi and Roze and Mister Kimamura and Shinichi and Remington and Katsumi. He now had friends...*nakama*...comrades. And he had love...he loved Kusanagi dearly. And her safety and happiness were Ranmaru's TOP priority. He knew that deep down Kusanagi was very worried about her friend Katsumi but just couldn't show it. Kusanagi was afraid...afraid to care about anyone again, to let anyone in, to get hurt again. And so she had created a mask and tried to push everyone away, but the stubborn Katsumi had stayed by Kusanagi's side anyways, just stayed there...

Perhaps, like himself Katsumi had seen the truth, seen past Kusanagi's mask. Ranmaru also couldn't forget that Katsumi had been there when Kusanagi and the others had come to rescue him from the Death Match Coliseum. She too had been there to save him - even though she was powerless. He owed her one. And Ranmaru took debts very seriously because he considered himself an honorable man, a *samurai*, who followed *bushido*, the way of the warrior. What was a man without honor after all but a beast? A beast that fought only because of his instincts was not a true warrior at all. Ranmaru knew this and that's why he had been searching for the reason to why he was fighting all that time. He was sure he wasn't a beast...that he had a reason, a purpose. He had found a new reason to fight in protecting Kusanagi, but in his dreams he was still haunted by the question that had plagued him in his past. What had been the reason behind his constant fighting five hundred years ago...?

He turned his attention back to Katsumi, a slightly warm expression on his face as he kept an eye on her protectively. She was his love's best friend and she was his friend as well.

Someone who understood him and his love for Kusanagi.

Katsumi wiped the sweat from her brow, and smiled cheerily since her shift was almost over.

However-

As Katsumi took a step forward she suddenly swayed on her feet and collapsed.

Ranmaru almost couldn't believe what he was seeing. Katsumi seemed to fall forward almost in slow motion to Ranmaru. "Katsumi!" The happy, perky, clumsy cat girl was now...?

Katsumi's boss and several of the other construction workers on site all rushed to Katsumi's aid. They were all equally worried for the state of their perky employee.

"Quick! Someone call an ambulance." The boss directed.

Ranmaru was at Katsumi's side in seconds and picked her limp body up into his arms. "No need. I shall take her to the nearest hospital." Ranmaru declared.

Her boss seemed to hesitate since this young man had just appeared out of nowhere after all. "But it's more than an hour away."

"I'll get her there in ten minutes." Ranmaru declared as he leapt up into the air. He ran off at his top *yokai* speed, appearing as a blur to those construction workers who watched him leave.

The boss shook his head and whistled through his teeth. "Damn boy, I don't doubt it." He tipped his hard hat at the disappearing form of Ranmaru, "You get her there and fast, boy."

Ranmaru quickly made his way to Tokyo Hospital. It had been easy for him to locate the hospital since it was a place filled with the stench of blood and death. He stopped to adjust his hold on Katsumi so that she was now on his back piggyback style before taking off running once more since he was able to run much faster in this manner. Ranmaru could feel Katsumi's forehead pressing to the side of his face - she was burning up! She had a very high fever, which was probably why she collapsed, Ranmaru realized.

In less than ten minutes Ranmaru had arrived at the front hospital doors. He ran inside and immediately carried Katsumi to the front desk.

"This young lady needs medical attention immediately."

Ranmaru stated.

The girl at the front desk frowned back at him, “I’m really sorry, sir, but you’ll have to fill out these forms first.” She handed the forms that were on a clipboard over to him.

“Forms?” Ranmaru looked the forms over; he didn’t have time for this. He set the papers on fire in his hands and the receptionist gasped in shock. He narrowed his golden eyes fiercely at the woman. “This girl’s life is hanging on by a thread. We don’t have time for forms. You get her medical attention *now*.” His voice brooked no argument.

The receptionist gulped at the murderous gleam in Ranmaru’s eyes. What was with this guy? Was he some sort of angry terrorist or something! Geesh! She was too young and beautiful to die! And they needed to give her a raise dammit! “Uh...I’m really sorry about that sir. We’ll get a doctor right away.” The girl immediately picked up the phone and paged the emergency room.

The receptionist hung up the phone and seconds later doctors arrived on the scene along with a medical bed on wheels to take Katsumi away to the emergency room. Ranmaru gently set Katsumi on the bed and Katsumi’s eyes slowly opened to blink up at Ranmaru in surprise.

“Ranmaru...?” Her voice was weak, “I knew you were following me...please don’t tell Kusanagi about this. I don’t want her to worry.” Katsumi finished before passing out again.

They began to wheel Katsumi away and Ranmaru tried to follow her but was stopped by the head doctor. “I’m sorry, son, but you’re not allowed in. You could end up getting in the way and causing this girl to get hurt if there’s something serious going on with her. Please just wait here. We’ll let you know when you can see her.”

...cause this girl to get hurt...

Ranmaru hung his head and nodded. The doctor seemed to sense his distress though and put a hand on Ranmaru’s shoulder. “Don’t worry son, you brought her here so quickly that I’m sure she’s going to be just fine.” And with that the doctor left Ranmaru alone with his thoughts.

Ranmaru sat in the lobby wondering if Katsumi would be alright. It had been so unnerving to see the usually perky girl, who was always so full of life and energy, just collapse like that. It had also been unreal seeing Katsumi so subdued too when she had spoken to him. Ranmaru really was useless when it came to things like this. Powerless. It was times like this that reminded Ranmaru of how truly powerless he was and that there were so many forces in the universe greater than himself. That in the grand scheme of things he was just a tiny speck of existence in the infinite. What if something happened to Katsumi? What would happen to Kusanagi if he had failed to protect Kusanagi's best friend? *Kusanagi...* He put his face in his hands. *What should I do...?*

A few moments later the doctor came out of the emergency room to speak with Ranmaru, a slightly confused look on his face. Ranmaru stood up, waiting for the axe to fall.

"She's alright...she merely has a mild case of anemia." The doctor began to explain.

Ranmaru gave him a blank look.

"She has iron deficiency anemia, which has caused her to have low blood pressure, that's why she fainted. She also appears to be malnourished, which has caused the iron deficiency in her system. Basically she's just been pushing herself too hard and hasn't been eating properly. With enough rest and once she begins to eat properly and gets off of this insane diet she's probably on she'll be as good as new. The fever was just a result of her working out in the cold and pushing herself too much with her currently low immune system." The doctor finished.

Ranmaru blinked. Katsumi had just been pushing herself and not eating properly? So she fainted? A person was able to faint because of something like low blood pressure? That...was it. Ranmaru almost felt like laughing for some reason.

The doctor shook his head, a bemused expression on his face, "With the way you were acting...I thought the girl had had a heart attack or something. I see this all the time though with young girls her age. They all go on those silly starvation diets." The doctor gave Ranmaru a stern look and a smile. "Make sure she eats and rests properly now. It's your responsibility. She needs someone to watch over her. She's already called her

family. They're on their way here now. She's lucky to have a boyfriend like you though."

Ranmaru nodded and then blinked. "Oh I'm not..." Ranmaru shrugged and then paused to bow low to the doctor. "Thank you." He was too relieved by the news to really care that the doctor had misunderstood his and Katsumi's relationship.

The doctor chuckled and waved Ranmaru's thanks aside, "Really, young man, no thanks necessary. You're acting as if I just performed open-heart surgery on the girl or something. It was just *low blood pressure*." He turned to walk away, "Young people are so overdramatic these days. They think the world is ending when any little thing happens." He muttered to himself and shook his head as he walked down the hall. Ranmaru heard every word.

Ranmaru let out a sigh of relief and collapsed onto a nearby chair. *She's okay. Oh shit! I have to call Kusanagi ASAP!*

Kusanagi had her limo driver rush her to the hospital in record time. She stormed the hospital, acting as if she owned the place, and with the way people ran to get out of her way, it made Ranmaru think that perhaps she did. She looked around and finally caught sight of Ranmaru seated silently in one of the chairs in the lobby.

Kusanagi stalked over to him, "Ranmaru! What's this all about? You said Katsumi collapsed? Where is she?"

Ranmaru nodded, "The doctor said it was due to her low blood pressure. This way *Oujo-sama*." Ranmaru began to lead the way but Kusanagi pounced on him and began to give Ranmaru a noogie.

"Ranmaru *no baka!* You had me worried sick over nothing! Low blood pressure, my ass! Hmph!"

A disgruntled nurse passed by them, "No fighting in the hospital you two. Crazy teens..." She muttered as she stalked off. "They make me feel old with their S and M play in the middle of a hospital..."

Kusanagi reluctantly let go of Ranmaru and he led the way to Katsumi's hospital room. They could hear voices coming

from within-

This didn't deter Kusanagi however and she burst her way inside to see a man dressed in a ragged suit with stubble on his chin and looking as though he'd probably seen better days. Standing next to him was a young boy, who looked like a street urchin. Yep, this kid's name was probably Oliver.

The first thing Kusanagi thought was - *Who let these two homeless people inside of the hospital? Mou!*

The boy's clothes were ripped and torn in places and covered in splotches of mud. Kusanagi tapped her chin, *Kind of think of it, the man's business suit is also covered in mud. Just where are these people living - under a bridge or something? Mou.* But judging by the way they were bawling their eyes out however at Katsumi's current condition, and also the cat ears that were on their heads it became apparent that these two were obviously Katsumi's father and little brother.

Katsumi was currently talking animatedly with her father and little brother while assuring them that she was alright. However-

"Yes, I understand all that honey, but why did you go to a *hospital* after you fainted? We can't possibly afford the bill! You silly girl. What are we going to do?" The man wailed.

"We won't have any money left for Mama's medicine!" The boy moaned and his eyes began to well up with tears.

"We can't afford for you to stay here overnight!" Her father rung his hands together worriedly, "You have no choice. You'll have to sneak out later tonight." There was a slightly crazed look in the man's eyes.

"Father!" Katsumi looked appalled by the idea. "You like want me to bail on the hospital bill?"

"Ahem." Kusanagi cleared her throat. Katsumi looked up to see Kusanagi and Ranmaru standing in the doorway and her eyes widened like saucers. "I can handle the hospital bill, Mister Kurosaki."

Katsumi's father and brother turned to look at Kusanagi in shock and their eyes widened comically as they took in her overall appearance-

The signature dark green, flying-saucer, military hat that was on her head, her wild black hair, her piercings, her black

combat boots, along with the black tank top she was wearing that had been paired with a pair of baggy, camo pants.

"It's the Kimamura heiress!" Katsumi's little brother declared.

"Kusanagi?" Mister Kurosaki's eyes narrowed at Kusanagi calculatingly, "Ah, so you're Kusanagi-*chan*." Katsumi's father seemed to do a 180 with his personality and became very composed. He walked over and offered Kusanagi his hand in greeting. "Allow me to introduce myself, I am Katsumi's father, Kurosaki-*san*. It is truly an honor to finally meet you, Lady Kusanagi. I want to thank you for taking care of my daughter..." He bowed and put his hand on his son's head to make him bow as well.

Kusanagi raised an eyebrow at this action.

Katsumi's brother looked up at her with his large blue eyes sparkling with admiration, "Lady Kusanagi...hey, Katsumi, why don't you just ask her for the mone-" Katsumi's brother began excitedly.

Katsumi, however, suddenly leapt out of the hospital bed while still in her medical dress and then clamped a hand down over her little brother's mouth. She looked up and gave Kusanagi a bashful look before laughing nervously. "Don't mind Shiro, my crazy little brother here has been dying to buy some stupid, overpriced video game lately. I think it was called Yokai World. Anyways, my family cannot afford to buy such frivolous things. He's asking just about anyone for the money for it, the spoiled brat."

"I think you mean we can't afford *anything*." Katsumi's father corrected her.

"Dad!" Katsumi objected and began to turn red in the face, completely mortified by her father and brother's behavior.

Kusanagi appeared unfazed, "Ranmaru, put Katsumi back into bed. And make sure she doesn't try to escape the hospital or do something foolish. It appears she has her energy back at least." She yawned broadly. "Man, I'm tired, I don't have the energy to deal with this crazy shit right now. Ranmaru, I'm going to head back to the mansion without you. It's almost morning

after all.” Kusanagi turned to leave. “Oh and Ranmaru make sure Katsumi eats properly-” She was saying.

“But I’m hungry too!” Shiro complained as he managed to pry Katsumi’s hand away from his face.

“Brother!” Katsumi gasped.

“The kid too.” Kusanagi said in a bored voice as she shook her head and left. There was no use asking Katsumi what was wrong right then, not with her father and little brother there at least. But Kusanagi didn’t intend to give up. She was going to find out the truth. She was really good at digging into other people’s business after all.

Ranmaru performed a diligent job of caring for Katsumi over the next couple of days while she rested and recuperated at the hospital. He had even gone so far as to feed a blushing Katsumi her food by spoon-feeding her. Ranmaru was going to make sure he did the job that Kusanagi had assigned him to the best of his abilities, and would make absolutely sure that Katsumi was back to one hundred percent health before he let her leave the hospital. Although perhaps he had gone a little too far when he had offered to give Katsumi a sponge bath. Ranmaru’s head was still sore from where Katsumi had tossed that bedside lamp at him. *Ow. Girls*, he shook his head, would he ever be able to understand them? *Naw*.

When Katsumi was finally given a clean bill of health and allowed to leave the hospital Ranmaru was more than ready to return to his *Oujo-sama*’s side. How he missed her! He knew without a doubt that she was probably having a hard time back at the mansion without him too-

And judging from the state that he found the kitchen in he had been right. Somehow Kusanagi had managed to destroy and blow up the kitchen *again*. Ranmaru shook his head. He had to wonder how she had managed to do that in the first place. He supposed it was a gift. Shrug.

Ranmaru quickly took over the tea Kusanagi had been trying to prepare, and together they sat down at the dinning room table to discuss the ‘Katsumi Situation’.

“We’re going to follow her back to her home - tonight.” Kusanagi nodded to herself, her expression adamant. She took a sip of her mint green tea with honey and smiled appreciatively.

Ranmaru always made the best tea.

Ranmaru nodded obediently, “*Hai, Oujo-sama.*”

Kusanagi sighed heavily since she couldn’t help the bad feeling she had about all this.

Kusanagi and Ranmaru had dressed all in black in these goofy, *ninja* outfits that Ranmaru had gotten from god knows where (Haruka) and declared that they were absolutely necessary in order to ‘blend into the shadows of the night’. Sigh. After Katsumi had finished her shift at the construction site Ranmaru and Kusanagi, who was riding on Ranmaru’s back piggyback style, followed Katsumi to wherever her home might be.

Katsumi entered a very dangerous, rundown, slum area only to continue through it and towards the nearby Sumida River. There was a large bridge there that had been pretty much abandoned and left in disrepair since it was cracked in the very middle of the bridge.

A small shantytown had sprung up underneath the bridge, a series of small cardboard houses the homeless and destitute had constructed for themselves. Kusanagi wondered briefly if the fuzz knew about this place, perhaps if they did they would clean it out.

And this is where Katsumi entered, with Kusanagi and Ranmaru continuing to follow close behind her. Kusanagi’s eyes widening in disbelief. “A shanty town...” *This is where Katsumi is currently living? Uso! Well that does explain the mud on her school uniform...*

Katsumi made her way through the cardboard houses to one small house in particular. Kurosaki-san and Shiro were seated outside, huddled next to a small, pathetic looking fire. The ‘house’ was really nothing more than a large refrigerator box that had a square opening cut out of it and that currently had a flap of cloth covering this opening.

“*Tadaimas!* I’m home!” Katsumi greeted them enthusiastically, a huge smile plastered to her face.

“Welcome home, sis.” Shiro greeted her with a toothy smile that revealed he was missing a few teeth, probably baby

teeth. Kusanagi also couldn't help but notice that the boy's teeth were chattering from the cold.

"Welcome back," Kurosaki-san greeted her with a nod, "Did you remember to bring your latest pay checks?"

Katsumi was about to open her mouth to reply when the cloth flap was moved aside from the small opening in their refrigerator box house and a frail looking woman with kind eyes and a pair of cat ears on her head, poked her head out, a weak smile on her face, "Welcome home...Katsumi..." The woman immediately began to cough into her hand.

"Mom!" Katsumi rushed to her side and knelt down just outside of the cardboard house, "Like don't push yourself, Mom. You should be resting..."

"Yes, I know but I was so worried about you. Your father told me about how you collapsed and were in the hospital. I'm so sorry I was unable to come and see you..." Katsumi's mother had the same bright blue eyes as her daughter and had long magenta colored hair that was pulled back into a long braid.

Katsumi's eyes were sparkling with unshed tears, "Mom that's ridiculous. How could you come? Have you had your medicine today?"

"I ran out a few days ago."

Katsumi's brow furrowed and a confused expression came over her face, "A few days ago? But I gave Dad the money from my paycheck last week to buy you some more medicine. *Dad!*" Katsumi turned her flashing blue eyes on her useless, deadbeat father. Her tone was accusatory and she did not seem surprised by this turn of events.

Kurosaki-san looked incredibly guilty and became shifty-eyed as he responded to his daughter, "Well, you see...I lost it."

"You lost it! *How?*" Katsumi burst out angrily. It was the first time either Kusanagi or Ranmaru had seen Katsumi actually look angry about something. Both of them felt like they had just fallen into the Twilight Zone.

Kurosaki-san cracked and broke down. "I'm so sorry Kat-chan! I lost it all at the *pachinko* parlor! I just thought that I could double the money somehow, and then buy your mother her medicine *and* all of us a nice dinner – with *meat*." He wailed and began to cry, sloppy tears streaming down his grimy face. He

looked pretty pathetic; a dribble of snot came out of his nose and as he sniffed, it went back up into his nose. "I'm so sorry." He bowed repeatedly before Katsumi on the ground.

Pathetic. Hopeless. Broken. A burned out light bulb. Her father had once been a successful businessman but had lost his way. He had become addicted to gambling and had eventually squandered the family's entire fortune away. Katsumi's angry expression softened upon seeing her father this way. "Dad..." Katsumi shook her head. "Forget about it. I bought some more of mom's medicine while I was at the hospital anyways with my latest paycheck. Now sit up and wipe your nose Dad. You look pathetic! Mom..." Katsumi turned to her mother. "You need to take your medicine now, alright?"

"Alright Katsumi-*chan*." Mrs. Kurosaki nodded and allowed her daughter to help her to sit up so that she could take her medicine. Shiro ran off and fetched a glass of water from the river and returned to hurriedly hand it to his mother. Mrs. Kurosaki put the pill her daughter handed her into her mouth and used the water her son had brought her to drink it down.

"Dad, I'm hungry." Shiro began to complain only moments later.

Kurosaki-*san* shook his head, a regretful look on his face, "I'm sorry son. You really do have a pathetic man for a father. This is all my fault since I gambled away all our money. So there isn't anything for dinner tonight."

Katsumi took out her ratty backpack that Kusanagi saw had been sewn and patched up in places. "Don't worry. I brought these rice balls back from the cafe where I work. They were going to throw them out since they're expired, but they look just fine to me." Katsumi pulled out a small package, which contained three rice balls.

"Yay! Sis you're the greatest!" Shiro declared, punching his fists in the air happily.

"Our Kat-*chan* truly is the most wonderful daughter in the world isn't she, dear?" Kurosaki-*san* murmured as he took a bite out of his rice ball.

"She most certainly is. Katsumi aren't you going to eat

something honey?" Mrs. Kurosaki questioned pensively as she took a small, delicate bite from her own rice ball.

Katsumi shook her head and Kusanagi watched as she lied with a smile plastered to her face, "I already ate. I'm *stuffed*." She placed a hand on her stomach and groaned for full effect.

Mrs. Kurosaki nodded contentedly, "Oh I see...well your father told me all about how your friend Kusanagi-*chan* paid for the hospital bill. That was very nice of her. We must thank her properly one of these days."

Katsumi frowned, "I intend to pay her back."

"Keh, what would be the point? She has *millions* to spare anyways, doesn't she?" Kurosaki-*san* couldn't help but scoff.

"Dad! Shut up! *Hssss...*" Katsumi hissed at her father and her hair seemed to stand on end.

Ranmaru and Kusanagi had been watching the entire scene and Kusanagi could feel the tears welling up in her eyes and even Ranmaru could feel his own eyes burning.

"I had no idea...Katsumi was suffering like this. She always smiled at school like nothing was wrong. How would anyone have known that something like this was happening? That anything was wrong. She should have told me...Katsumi...why?" *Why didn't she tell me? Is it because she doesn't really consider us friends? Is it because I'm always so mean to her? She must know that I don't really mind her tagging along behind me all the time right? She said so herself...that she can see through me. Katsumi...* Kusanagi bit her lip. She had made up her mind. "Ranmaru, go and buy the proper ingredients for a cookout, bring a grill, and any other needed equipment in order to have a spectacular cookout here! Oh and I want *kushiyaki* (skewers of meat and vegetables) and *yakitori* (barbeque chicken skewers)!"

Ranmaru bowed, a twinkle in his eye, "*Hai, Oujo-sama*, as you wish."

Ranmaru rushed off to the nearest convenience store and was back in mere minutes along with everything Kusanagi had requested. With him he had all the needed ingredients for both the *kushiyaki* and *yakitori*, the grill, charcoal, and lighter fluid. Kusanagi nodded in approval. "*Yosh*. Let's go!" Kusanagi

entered the shantytown like she owned the place, and hungry eyes followed her. A few of the degenerates even seemed to recognize her for who she was a.k.a Kusanagi The Bitch. Their eyes turned into dollar signs as they watched her pass. Kusanagi could feel their auras of malevolent intent and would have been afraid or perhaps worried, but she had Ranmaru at her side after all.

Kusanagi walked up to Katsumi and her family, “Yo Katsumi, what’s up?” Kusanagi greeted her nonchalant, as if she always went strolling through shantytowns.

Katsumi turned to stare at Kusanagi in horror, “Kusanagi-chan! What are you doing here?” Katsumi looked around quickly, “It’s too dangerous for you-”

Kusanagi raised a bag of groceries. “Why we’re here to have a cookout with your family of course!”

Katsumi’s expression turned to one of stunned disbelief. “A cookout...?”

“Yay! Your friend Kusanagi is awesome, sis!” Shiro exclaimed happily.

Kusanagi immediately began to direct the event, “Ranmaru, set the grill up and hurry up and get cooking! Just wait until you get to taste my butler’s cooking skills first hand - he’s a culinary genius!”

“*Hai, Oujo-sama.*” Ranmaru beamed at Kusanagi’s unexpected praise and tried to hide the blush that was on his face as he began to set up the grill. In moments Ranmaru had the grill lit, the coals were glowing nicely (a little fox-fire helped) and he was cooking delicious smelling skewers. Katsumi’s family was munching down on a few appetizers of *korokke* (croquette, breaded and deep fried vegetables) that Ranmaru had made seemingly out of thin air. It wasn’t long before Ranmaru began handing out skewers, which Katsumi’s family all began to munch on happily. Katsumi however was remaining oddly silent throughout the whole impromptu cookout party and was not her usual bubbly self.

Kusanagi, who was already on her fifth skewer, noticed that Katsumi still hadn’t touched her first. “Hey, what’s wrong,

girlfriend? You haven't touched your *yakitori*? Don't tell me my Ranmaru burned it!"

Katsumi blinked, and turned her attention back to Kusanagi, she had appeared to be lost in thought. "Huh? What? No, I just...don't have much of an appetite. That's all...I...if you'll excuse me." Katsumi stood up and suddenly walked off.

Shiro stood up, followed by Kurosaki-san, "We'll go get her." Her younger brother declared.

Katsumi was standing by the Sumida River, looking out at its murky surface and wondering what the river would look like if it hadn't been polluted with trash. Kurosaki-san came to stand next to Katsumi and spoke in his low voice, "Your friend Kusanagi-chan is a really nice girl isn't she? It's a shame about that reputation of hers though."

"Sis, I don't get it." Shiro began, brows furrowed, "If you're such good friends then why don't you ask Kusanagi-san for some money? Dad keeps on going on about how she has *millions*, so much money in fact that she doesn't even know what to do with it."

Katsumi shot her father a stern look before turning her attention back to her brother and shaking her head vigorously, "Shiro *no*. I won't ever ask Kusanagi for money. Kusanagi is my friend. You don't understand what's she's been through because of that *money* you both want so much. She's suffered so much already. How could I be like *them*? And betray her trust?"

"Keh, what's the point of being her friend if you don't get anything worthwhile out of it? That was the entire plan remember? You make friends with Kimamura Kusanagi and get *everything* you can out of her!" Kurosaki-san frowned at his pink-haired daughter, failing miserably at trying to look intimidating.

Katsumi looked shocked. "I know that's how it was in the beginning. But that was before I actually got to know Kusanagi. We had only agreed on the plan to begin with because of Kusanagi's awful reputation. That she was a juvenile delinquent, an accused murderer, suspected killer, and on the streets of the Tokyo underworld she was known as The Bitch. But...once I got to know her I realized none of this was true. My cat instinct told me so. It was all a mask, an act. Kusanagi is a good person and

my friend. My best friend. And I won't betray her by asking her for money!"

At that exact moment, Kusanagi chose to reveal herself to the three. She had been hiding behind one of the nearby cardboard houses and eavesdropping the entire time. "Why not?" Kusanagi began casually, "Why not just go ahead and ask me for the money, Katsumi? I won't mind. You should have just asked me. I don't even want *that* money."

Katsumi looked horrified.

Kurosaki-san and Shiro were looking pleased. "You see, Kat-chan, Kusanagi-chan said so herself. She'll be happy to help."

"How much do you think she can give us?" Shiro put in.

Kusanagi shrugged, "As much as you all need. I could care less. I'll buy you all a new house, car or whatever, if you want me to. I owe Katsumi and besides, what's the point of being friends with someone like me if you don't get anything worthwhile out of it, right Katsumi?"

"I...I...." Tears filled Katsumi's blue eyes and her lower lip began to tremble. But then her sadness shifted to anger. No - she would not cry! "I can't believe you think I would do that Kusanagi! I'm...I'm not like the *yakuza* who are always after you...or your greedy relatives that are always trying to off you or kidnap you because of your inheritance! I mean, sure I started out with the intent of befriending you with the purpose of getting money out of you but...then I got to know you. And I really just wanted to become your friend. Someone you could lean on when you needed. Someone you could trust. But, obviously you *don't* trust me if you think I would accept your money, your pity, or your charity!

You don't know me at all! And you obviously don't consider us friends if you would do something like this. You really must think I'm the lowest of the low. I suppose I always knew deep down that I just wasn't good enough to be friends with you...who's a part of elite society...but I had hoped you'd be able to see past-" She waved her hand at the shanty town. "All this, and see *me* for who I truly am. *Your friend*. I...I hate you

Kusanagi! I hate you! From this moment on we are *not* friends, you...bitch!" Katsumi ran off with tears flying past Kusanagi through the air and shimmering in the moonlight.

Kusanagi stood in shock, stunned before she shook her head and called after her. "Katsumi wait! Wait, you *baka*! That's not what I meant I-aw damn!" Kusanagi put her face in her hands. *I only meant that what's the point in being friends with a bitch like me...I mean, what could Katsumi really be getting out of this friendship? Tagging along with me all the time and being beaten up? The pleasure of my company? Ha! Not when I completely treat her like shit! I just don't get it...could she really just want to stay close to me for the sake of being my friend? Have I truly misjudged her? Damn, I suppose in the end I really know nothing about Katsumi or who she really is. Katsumi, I owe her for putting up with me. Don't worry, I'll make things right, somehow. I'm sorry I ever doubted your friendship.*

Ranmaru was just about to rush off after Katsumi but Kusanagi stopped him, placing a hand on his shoulder as he ran past, "And where do you think you're going, Mister? You still have a cookout to host and I need to have a little business chat with Kurosaki-san here."

"Business?" Kurosaki-san's ears perked up.

Kusanagi grinned evilly and Kurosaki-san gulped nervously in response upon seeing her expression, "Oh yes, I have a proposition, Mr. Kurosaki and I think we will find it mutually beneficial."

Katsumi ran and ran until her legs finally gave out from under her and she simply collapsed on the cold, frostbitten ground. She had absolutely no idea where she was and she didn't really care as she sobbed into the ground.

"Chilly night isn't it?" Came a drawling and amused sounding voice.

Katsumi sniffled and looked up to see a striking *yokai* man. He was beautiful but there was also something *off* about him. He had long silver-blue hair that was brushed back from his forehead, pinkish red eyes and extremely pale skin, skin that was so white it was like snow. Katsumi realized he was an albino. He was wearing a male *kimono* in the *kinagashi* style (an informal

way of wearing a *kimono* where neither a *haori* or *hakama* is worn underneath). The *kimono* was red and had the pattern of white camellias on it. The *kimono* was open halfway revealing a large expanse of the man's pale chest in an overtly sensual manner.

He was wearing *zori* or wooden sandals on his feet and there was a *katana* strapped to his waist that was giving off a very powerful aura. Katsumi sniffed the air and was able to recognize the scent of a fox *yokai*. The man before her though had his own intense aura, which had nothing to do with his sword. He was probably almost as powerful as Ranmaru, Katsumi thought to herself. He was smiling down at her unconcernedly. And a chill of fear went down Katsumi's spine; this man was incredibly dangerous despite his almost effeminate, pretty boy good looks. *Bishonen ka? Pretty boy huh?*

The fox *yokai* man was twirling a sprig of a white camellia in his hand. He then sniffed the flower. "Camellias are such beautiful flowers aren't they? Sadly, they have no scent. Which do you prefer camellias or roses?"

Katsumi blinked. *Camellias or roses?* If she'd have to chose... "Roses." Katsumi replied.

The fox man chuckled in response. "How did I know you were going to say that? Inari once said that Ranmaru was like a rose and that I was like a camellia. Where Ranmaru was fragrant, blood-red, and had deadly thorns I was the white camellia – scentless, beautiful but not as deadly. Have you ever watched the way a camellia's blossom falls from the tree, my dear?"

Katsumi shook her head.

The fox man tsked, "Ah, then you've really missed something. It's so tragic. It looks a lot like this." The man raised his index finger and Katsumi watched as the man caused his fingernail to lengthen into a deadly claw. He then used this claw to sever the flower blossom from the sprig he had been holding and Katsumi watched as the blossom fell down through the air and hit the ground so that its petals burst outwards. It had indeed looked tragic.

This man...is crazy. Katsumi looked around quickly



wondering where she was. She realized in horror that she had somehow ended up in an old cemetery. And ironically in front of her lay two very specific gravestones, which read:

*Here lies
Mr. and Mrs. Kimamura
May their souls find peace
Here lies
Mamoru
He was loved*

Katsumi's eyes widened, these were the graves of Kusanagi's parents and of her former *Samurai* Butler. She watched the fox man place upon the graves another sprig of camellias that he had made appear out of thin air, and wondered how they could possibly be real since it was almost winter.

"Just who are you?" Katsumi breathed.

The fox man's smile broadened in a creepy manner, while the moon overhead was laughing at Katsumi, "Your worst nightmare." The *yokai* man moved quickly and hit Katsumi over the back of her head, knocking her out cold with one blow. "My dear." The fox man took out what appeared to be a golden collar. "You will be of great use to me, *nekomata*. You should have said you liked camellias and not roses."

Kusanagi nodded, "So it's settled then." She smirked. Katsumi would be pleased. She was such a genius. Speaking of Katsumi, where was the cat girl anyhow? Kusanagi looked around noticing that she still hadn't returned. "Hey, where's Katsumi? She should have been back by now...it's freezing out here. Ranmaru come, we're going to go and look for Katsumi." Kusanagi declared.

Ranmaru bowed, "*Hai, Oujo-sama.*"

Ranmaru and Kusanagi started off through the shantytown, and a cold wind was blowing so strongly it was almost as if it was trying to push them back. Ranmaru shivered, not from the cold, but from past memories. Kusanagi seemed to sense his unease.

"Are you alright?" Kusanagi questioned.

Ranmaru nodded and looked at Kusanagi. She was only wearing a tank top and a pair of camo pants and she had goose bumps all up and down her arms. She was shivering slightly but trying to hide this fact. He shook his head, his *Oujo-sama* was freezing and he hadn't even noticed! *Stupid! How stupid and useless can I be?* He was truly unworthy to be her butler...Ranmaru took off his butler's jacket and slipped it over Kusanagi's shoulders before she could protest - which he knew she would do.

"Ranmaru? What are you-?" But Ranmaru had already started off ahead of her. *Wily bastard.* Kusanagi shrugged and decided to let it go. "We have to find her soon Ranmaru. It's getting really late and this place is dangerous."

"Dangerous for *you*, you mean." Came a voice.

From out of the shadows of the shantytown came several shrouded figures dressed in hooded jackets. Their hoods had been pulled down low so that their faces were left in shadow, and their teeth were gleaming white in the moonlight in their evil smirks, smiles and leers. They carried chains, wooden sticks and long metal poles in their hands. They were the homeless...thieves...degenerates...the destitute people from the Tokyo underworld who had recognized Kusanagi as the #1 kidnapping target of the city. *Shit.* Sometimes Kusanagi wished she wasn't so infamous.

Kusanagi got into a fighting stance, prepared to fight, however, Ranmaru stepped in front of her and acted quickly-well, quickly would have been an understatement. In literally a few seconds flat he had knocked out the group of at least twenty men in all.

Whoa. Sometimes Kusanagi forgot just how powerful Ranmaru actually was...Kusanagi could feel a trickle of sweat form on her brow at this.

"This way, *Oujo-sama*. I can smell her." Ranmaru informed Kusanagi as he started off.

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place? Hey wait up! *Mou!* Geesh!" Kusanagi complained as she took off after him.

They crossed the partially collapsed bridge, jumping over the gap in the very center of the bridge and making it to the other

side. They continued on their way until they came to the elaborate iron gates of a cemetery. It read in twisted, iron lettering on the front gate: Tsubaki Cemetery. Kusanagi stopped dead in her tracks as she eyed the cemetery's name looking as though she had just seen a ghost.

"Katsumi's...really in there?" Kusanagi all but squeaked.

Ranmaru gave her a strange look but nodded stoically, "*Hai*, is there something the matter, *Oujo-sama*?"

Kusanagi seemed to snap out of her stupor and shook her head, "No-no of course not. Come on." Kusanagi raised her booted foot and kicked at the front gate that had been chained together. The chain broke allowing the rusty gates to swing open, creaking eerily.

Kusanagi and Ranmaru made their way into the cemetery. Ranmaru looked around curiously, realizing what this place actually was. It was filled with the stench of death and decay...and there was another scent, a familiar scent that Ranmaru couldn't quite place but which caused his hackles to rise. The scent had been masked somehow, Ranmaru realized, perhaps spiritually. But to what end? He wondered.

It can't be...?

Kusanagi and Ranmaru continued their way deeper into the cemetery until-

"*Kusanagi~*" Came an eerie moaning voice.

From behind a skeletal tree in the cemetery two figures stepped out. One was a man and the other a woman with long dark hair.

"Kusanagi." They called out to her again as they approached her, swaying slightly on their feet. Were they drunk? Their hair was long and shadowed their faces and expression as they kept their faces lowered. But then they suddenly raised their faces to look Kusanagi directly in the eyes, and Ranmaru saw that their skin appeared unhealthy, almost blue-tinged, and that their eyes were dark, sunken, hollow. Their expressions were also shifting from being blank to instead smiling these creepy, leering smiles at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi froze on the spot as she caught sight of the two

people in front of her and Ranmaru. She seemed to recognize them and see them for who they truly were despite their currently decrepit appearances. *Oh my god!* Kusanagi's eyes widened. Kusanagi did not see the monsters that Ranmaru saw but instead merely saw her parents. This was because Kusanagi was looking upon them with the eyes of her heart.

The two figures opened their arms wide, reaching out to Kusanagi, "Kusanagi...come to us..." They moaned.

"Mom?" Kusanagi turned to the other figure, "Dad?"

Ranmaru looked at the two figures before him in shock. They were Kusanagi's parents? But then - he took a whiff of the air that held their scent and immediately the overpowering, horrible stench of rot, death, and decay hit his sensitive nose. It was so powerful that it brought him to his knees gagging and covering his nose. Kusanagi's parents...were not alive. *No, it's not possible, unless...?*

"But...you're dead?" Kusanagi shook her head, speaking her words as a question. Not wanting to believe, yet unable not to hope. And at the same time afraid.

They nodded in unison. "Come to us, Kusanagi." The called. "Come here, daughter. You can come away with us now. We've been waiting for you...for such a long, long time. The time has come for us to be together again, Kusanagi-chan."

"Come away with you? What do you mean?" Kusanagi unconsciously took a step forward. This was what she had always wished. That her parents would somehow return to her. That somehow they could be together. Was this a dream? If so, Kusanagi didn't want to wake up...

"First you must become like us..." Kusanagi's mother crooned as she reached out to stroke Kusanagi's head.

"Yes, become like us, dear..." Her father echoed, "Then we can be together...for all eternity..." He reached out his arms.

And Kusanagi took another step forward, closer to their waiting embrace. "I don't understand. Mom...Dad...what?"

But Ranmaru did. These two figures before Kusanagi weren't really her true parents at all – these were simply their revived, soulless corpses. They were zombies. And he had a pretty good inkling about how this had been accomplished as well - Katsumi. He had known all along that Katsumi was a

nekomata yokai, albeit not a very powerful one. For that reason, he had assumed that she posed no threat. But it was common knowledge that *nekomata* had the ability to raise and control the dead. *Why Katsumi why?*

The crescent moon overhead was cackling as it shed its yellow glow down upon the phantasmagoric scene...

The light from the moonbeams suddenly reflected off of the daggers that Kusanagi's zombie parents had been holding inconspicuously in their hands. In that moment the daggers gleamed and shinned menacingly in the moonlight. And in that same moment Ranmaru knew that he would have to make a choice. A choice to protect Kusanagi and to perhaps then become hated by her. By the one he loved. But if that meant Kusanagi would be safe so be it.

The zombie mother and father raised their daggers high into the air, prepared to bring them down upon their beloved daughter Kusanagi in order to make her one of them, a zombie, an undead being, because in order to accomplish this task Kusanagi would have to die.

Kusanagi saw their daggers descending towards her, but she didn't flinch, nor did she move. Perhaps, this really was the only way she and her parents could be reunited...Kusanagi mused. And Kusanagi was willing to do anything to make her wish a reality. And if Death was the only way, then so be it.

Ranmaru unsheathed Kuroki Ryu and acted quickly, summoning his power. He leapt in front of Kusanagi just as she was about to be embraced by her mother and father and stepped between them. He then swung his sword that was swiftly enveloped in wild, red flames and in a horizontal slash cut through both of Kusanagi's parents - cutting them neatly in half in seconds.

Half of their bodies fell forward and even as the flames of the fox-fire began to purify and consume them Mr. and Mrs. Kimamura crawled their way towards Kusanagi while moaning pitifully and crying out - "Kusanagi...why..come with us...Kusanagi...!"

Kusanagi's eyes widened in horror as she watched her

parents getting cut down before her eyes for a second time-

Ranmaru scanned the area for any sign of Katsumi and spotted her not too far away, tears streaming down her face and a glowing Control Collar around her neck. Ranmaru rushed at her and neatly sliced through the Control Collar using his sword Kuroki Ryu. The spell that had been upon the collar had been a weak one and so Ranmaru had managed to break the collar for this very reason. The collar shattered and Katsumi fell to the ground unconscious.

Ranmaru returned to Kusanagi's side, "*Oujo-sama*, are you alright?"

Kusanagi however looked to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but then her eyes suddenly cleared and she turned to glare at Ranmaru with her eyes full of hate. "How could you...how could you do that...you killed them! You stole my parents away from me! I...I wanted to go with them. How dare you act on your own - without orders! You pathetic, worthless, useless *slave*! I hate you! I HATE YOU! Leave my sight immediately. I can't even stand the sight of you right now. Go!" Kusanagi screeched.

Kusanagi's words were like daggers to Ranmaru's heart. Though he had expected this. He had made his choice and so he accepted his fate. "I understand, *Oujo-sama*." Ranmaru bowed once before obediently leaving.

Katsumi, who had regained consciousness, had observed the entire conversation, "Oh...poor Ranmaru..."

Kusanagi sunk to her knees as soon as Ranmaru was gone and began to cry into her hands. "Mom...Dad...why did you leave me again?"

Katsumi pushed herself up off the ground and made her way to Kusanagi's side, "Kusanagi!"

Kusanagi looked up, somewhat dazed and distraught, "Katsumi?"

Katsumi flung her arms around Kusanagi and hugged the other girl, "Kusanagi! I'm so sorry! It's like all my fault!"

Kusanagi's brows furrowed, "Katsumi, what on earth are you talking about?"

"I did it...I raised your parents from the dead. I'm a *nekomata*. Well, *he* made me do it but I still did it and-"

“Wait, someone made you do this, Katsumi? Who?” Kusanagi cut in.

“A handsome fox demon, a total *bishonen*, with long white hair and pink eyes. An albino. Before I passed out he called himself Kenmaru.” Katsumi informed her.

“Kenmaru?” *Why does that name sound so...familiar.* Kusanagi shivered.

“So you see, those weren’t really your parents Kusanagi-chan. They were only reanimated, soulless, corpses that I, or rather Kenmaru through me, was controlling. He made them say those things - I can assure you that your real parents would never say something like that. Your parents would never have wanted you to kill yourself...in order for you to be with them!” Katsumi put both her hands on Kusanagi’s shoulders and shook her slightly.

“How do you *really* know that?” Kusanagi looked away, unable to meet her friend’s eyes.

Katsumi was about to open her mouth to say more when the sound of a branch breaking was heard. Kusanagi and Katsumi looked up to see that a group of people from the shantytown had chosen to follow Kusanagi and Ranmaru to the cemetery. They were apparently intent on not giving up their prey that easily. Kusanagi noticed that they had the same weapons as before: chains, long wooden sticks, and metal poles. They were out for blood that night - her blood. *Is this a trend tonight?*

Katsumi stood up while at the same time she picked up a long wooden stick that had been on the ground nearby. She then turned to face the angry mob with a fierce gleam in her pretty blue eyes, “What the hell do you all want?”

“Get out of our way, Katsumi. The Bitch is ours.” One of the men said in a gruff voice.

Katsumi held up the long wooden stick in a two-handed grip before her, “Then-then you’ll have to go through me first!” Katsumi declared with a fierce look in her eyes, though her ears were flopped down on the sides of her head and she was trembling slightly. Even so, she still stood in front of Kusanagi ready to defend her.

“Katsumi...” Kusanagi’s eyes widened in awe.

The mob of people looked surprised by Katsumi’s actions as well, “Why do you defend her, Katsumi? You’re one of us. And she...is not. She could save us. All we would have to do is ransom her and all of our problems would be solved. Or is it that you want her money for yourself?”

“No!” Katsumi cried, tears forming in her large blue eyes, “That’s not it! I don’t want her money! Kusanagi is my best friend!”

“Friend...?” One of the thugs scoffed and this time it was a woman, “How can you even think that?”

Katsumi looked hesitant, unsure.

But this time Kusanagi spoke up, “She’s right. We are friends. Though I regret to say that I’ve been a pretty lousy friend to Katsumi here. I may have a ton of money but that doesn’t make me worthy of Katsumi’s friendship. Katsumi is worth a whole lot more than me. I’m a dime a dozen. But Katsumi, she’s...amazing. A person’s true worth is not measured by money.” Kusanagi admitted with a smile.

Katsumi’s eyes widened in shock, and she couldn’t help the tiny grin that formed on her face. But she still stood firm while waiting for the others to act.

They began to mutter among themselves: “She looks so...pathetic...” “She’s just too cute!” “I feel bad...it’s like we’re bullying her.” “She *is* one of us...” “And they say they’re friends...” “We can’t hurt Katsumi...and she wants to protect The Bitch so I guess we have no choice.”

One of the men, who had acted as their leader, started forward, “We’ll let you off the hook this time around Kusanagi. But next time when you don’t have your cat with you, you won’t be getting away so easily. Thank your friend Katsumi and don’t forget - this night you survive only because of her. Next time you may not be so lucky since Katsumi might not be around for you to stand behind.”

Kusanagi stood up then. “If Katsumi stands up for me, then she knows that she does not stand alone. We stand together.”

“Kusanagi...” Katsumi grinned back at her and then turned to glare at the men again, this time with a bit more confidence.

The man sighed and ran a hand through his messy brown hair, “I see...good to know. Men, move out. We’re outta here. Till the next time, Bitch.”

Kusanagi mock saluted him, “I’ll be waiting, you bastard.” Kusanagi let out a sigh as she watched the man and his group of thugs go. She was glad that that at least was over with. She really did owe Katsumi one; she had really come through for her that night and protected her. Whereas Ranmaru had...She shook her head as she looked down at her parent’s gravestones. “Damn that Ranmaru...damn him...he took them away from me. I *hate* him.”

A look of sadness crossed Katsumi’s features, “Why do you say things like that? When I know you don’t really mean it. I know you don’t *really* hate him. So why do you lie to him...to yourself? Why do you push people away with false words and false actions? Why do you use masks? *Why?*” Katsumi searched Kusanagi’s emerald green eyes for an answer. “Do you even know why Ranmaru killed them? Because he made a choice. He chose to kill them even if it meant that you would end up hating him. And do you want to know why? You may be too blind to see it or to admit to it, but Ranmaru cares about you. He didn’t want you to be hurt or to die. He didn’t want to lose you. Because...Ranmaru loves you.”

Kusanagi’s eyes widened, “But...he can’t...not really...the collar...”

“Means nothing. I know the truth. I’ve known all along...he loves you, Kusanagi. I’m sure of it. And you hurt him just now with your careless words. You hurt someone who loves you so much. How will you treat him now, Kusanagi? Now that you know the truth. Now it’s your turn to be brave and to make a choice. And sometimes the easy choice is not the right one.”

“Ranmaru...” *Ranmaru...loves me? Ranmaru, oh god, I’m so sorry.* “I...have to find him!”

Katsumi smiled, “Good, now we’re talking, girlfriend. It’s about time. And I hope that when we do find him you’ll act honest for once.”

Kusanagi nodded hesitantly, “I’ll try.”

“Like totally.” Katsumi gave her a thumbs up.

CHAPTER 5

Beware the power of words

...I hate you! You pathetic, worthless, useless slave...

Kusanagi's harsh words rang through Ranmaru's mind as he made his way 'home'. Home. The Kimamura estate. Would Kusanagi allow him to remain there after what he had done? His hands were stained with the blood of countless innocents and now even with the blood of her dead parents and cloned former butler. He was *unworthy* of Kusanagi. He wasn't worthy of being her *Samurai* Butler either.

...useless...worthless...pathetic....slave...

Cold. So cold. Ranmaru felt cold all the way down to his very soul as he made his way back to the estate. The cold, merciless wind was biting at his jacket-less form, cutting through him. He shivered.

As soon as he got back to the estate Ranmaru decided to head over to the menagerie in order to feed and care for Kusanagi's various 'pets'. Kaze pressed his head under Ranmaru's hand sensing his sadness and tried to comfort him. Ranmaru absentmindedly stroked Kaze's head and sighed. What would become of him he wondered? Would Kusanagi sell him? Whose 'pet' would he be next? He was just setting down a giant dog bowl before Kaze filled with kibble and that could have easily fed ten normal sized dogs, when the back hairs on his neck prickled in warning. His animal instincts screamed to Ranmaru - danger!

Kusanagi had told him what to do if such a situation arose

- to press the big red button. So Ranmaru ran over to the control console and pressed the large red button that was on it and that read 'Emergency Only'. This button would activate the menagerie's 'lockdown' mode.

A siren began to blare loudly and a synthesized voice sounded, echoing throughout the menagerie- *Lockdown mode commencing...lockdown mode commencing...*

Large metal panels began to come down and cover all of the doors and windows of the menagerie until finally only the large front doors of the menagerie were left. This doorway was also about to go into lock down mode and a giant metal gate was about to descend when someone casually stepped through the entrance. Ranmaru knew that the gate would come crashing down any moment and so acted quickly leaping at the mysterious figure and pushing him out of the menagerie just as the metal gate came crashing down behind them.

Ranmaru had his sword to the man's throat in seconds. He looked down to see a man, who was in his late twenties who had short, spiky, golden blonde hair, and bi-colored eyes. One eye was brown...while the other eye was an icy blue – Ranmaru's attention focused on this eye in particular and noticed its slanted pupil. That eye...was no human eye. Ranmaru also noted the scar that ran directly over this eye, a wound, which resembled a claw scratch or perhaps a knife attack gone wrong.

The man was wearing a white, male, tank top with thick straps, and Ranmaru could see the dog tags that were around the man's neck on a chain, which made Ranmaru think that perhaps this man had once been in the military. He had a few silver piercings on his chin and on his eyebrow. He was also wearing a pair of camouflage pants in tan colors, a pair of heavy military boots and a long, white lab coat, which had been left unbuttoned. The man was larger and more muscular than Ranmaru but he wasn't intimidated by the man's hulking size.

The man was smiling up at Ranmaru with an unconcerned expression on his face and Ranmaru could see one of the man's incisors peaking out of his mouth as he smiled. He seemed to look Ranmaru over closely and came to some kind of conclusion. "Hmm, you're a *yokai* aren't you? I can tell that you're different from normal humans. Interesting. I'd like to learn more about you

– perhaps by cutting you open. Nadya!” The man shouted the name like a command in his gruff voice.

“Yes Doctor,” Came a woman’s purring voice and the hair on the back of Ranmaru’s neck prickled in warning.

Following his instincts Ranmaru leapt off of the doctor and just in time as gunshots were fired his way. He spun to see a striking woman who was dressed all in black – with a pointed witch hat on her head, a long cape, a matching tube-top, short shorts, and a pair of thigh-high boots that had shiny, silver buckles running up the sides. The boots also had sharp four-inch heels and pointed toes.

A witch? Ranmaru blinked. *Do witches really exist...?* Ranmaru’s eyes darted to the strange creature that was perched on the woman’s shoulder – a black cat that had bat-like wings. Now, Ranmaru was sure that a creature like *that one* most definitely shouldn’t exist but he was seeing it right there before his very eyes. Not only that but Ranmaru did a double take when he noticed that the cat seemed to be smoking a cigar, now he must be seeing things...

The woman’s black painted mouth quirked into a smile and Ranmaru’s attention finally focused on the woman’s face and her liquid, coal-black eyes. She had glossy, shoulder length, blonde hair that was playfully flipped out at the ends. The woman may have been very strange, and otherworldly looking but Ranmaru had to admit that she was beautiful. Ranmaru also caught sight of a black leather collar around her neck, which had a gleaming silver buckle. Ranmaru shivered wondering why someone would wear a collar as a fashion statement.

The woman was wielding a broom and she had the non-bristle end of it pointed at Ranmaru. She pulled back on the handle of her broom and it made the sound of a shotgun loading, before she fired off another shot Ranmaru’s way. Ranmaru dodged the shot realizing that was no ordinary broom, but a disguised shotgun.

And behind this otherworldly looking woman several masked and armed SP (special police), who were all wearing



matching white wolf masks on their faces, suddenly began to reveal themselves. These men raised their guns at Ranmaru and simultaneously fired at him. Ranmaru leapt into action as the shots were fired and dodged out of the way. Ranmaru then charged forward and began disarming and taking down the SP left and right.

“Nadya! Use water against the fox demon!” The doctor directed her in his scratchy, German-accented voice.

“Yes, Doctor.” Nadya waved her hand at a nearby water hose that had been lying on the lawn that Ranmaru had watered earlier that day. She narrowed her eyes at the hose, which flashed with a golden light. By using some sort of telekinesis ability Nadya caused the hose to turn on. With a wave of her hand she then raised the hose up into the air and pointed the hose’s nozzle in Ranmaru’s direction.

Ranmaru was hit with a direct spray of water and he could feel himself immediately weaken slightly due to the combination of the cold air that surrounded him and now the icy water. *This is so not good.*

But Ranmaru gathered his remaining strength and charged the doctor again anyways. He had to protect the menagerie after all. For Kusanagi.

But the doctor only smiled casually as Ranmaru approached him, unfazed, and just as Ranmaru was almost upon him the doctor suddenly pulled out what appeared to be some sort of taser device. The doctor then lunged forward with this device and aimed it at Ranmaru. Ranmaru scoffed since such a weak electric attack couldn’t possibly have any effect on *him* but-

When the device hit Ranmaru it immediately sent an electric shock through his body that was at least one hundred times more powerful than he had expected. Obviously, that had been no ordinary taser. The scientist must have altered it somehow. The electric shocks, combined with Ranmaru’s weakness to water and the cold, were just too much for Ranmaru to handle, and his body ended up transforming into his smaller fox form. Ranmaru opened his mouth in pain and he could feel himself blacking out. *Kusanagi...*

Nadya licked her lips as she watched Ranmaru get hit with the powerful electric attack. "You sure showed him, Doctor. No one can stand up to the Doctor now can they? Isn't that right Leon?" Nadya crooned as she scratched the top of her cat's head.

Her bat-winged cat took out his cigar to respond in a low voice that Ranmaru was sure he must have been imagining. "Indeed."

The doctor smirked triumphantly, "Nadya, take the fox *yokai* and put him in the containment chamber."

"Yes, doctor." Nadya saluted him and did as she was told, lifting up Ranmaru and slinging him over her shoulder and showing that she had an unusual amount of strength for a girl her size.

The doctor turned towards the menagerie, "And now to get some more specimens for my collection as well as take back the ones The Bitch stole from us." The doctor chuckled darkly, "It won't take me long to hack this pathetic security system she's created. No one can match my brainpower. I am the almighty Dr. Wolfram after all." A cocky smirk formed on his face as he cracked his knuckles and approached the security system.

Kusanagi looked off into the distance suddenly, and shook her head, "Did you just say my name?" She turned back to Katsumi.

"Huh? No..." Katsumi gave her friend an odd look, quirking her head at her.

Kusanagi shrugged it off, "Never mind then." Kusanagi returned her attention back to Mr. Kurosaki, "Well, Mr. Kurosaki, I think it's about time you started your new job. Pack up, and let's go!"

Kurosaki-san saluted Kusanagi, "*Hai*, right away, Lady Kusanagi."

Katsumi looked at her family with a bewildered expression on her face as her family began packing up to leave and she shot Kusanagi a confused look, "What's going on?"

"I hired your father to be my new chauffeur. You and your family will live at the Kimamura estate where your mother can receive proper medical treatment. Once your mother is better your father can continue working for me or I can help him find a

suitable job. Your mother told me all about how your father had gotten addicted to gambling, but it seems as though he wants to turn over a new leaf. Also, I don't think you should keep working all your mother's part time jobs. She told me all about that too. You could also work for me or just pick one of the jobs you're doing now and just stick with that one." Kusanagi explained.

Katsumi was moved beyond words. "Kusanagi...it's too much..."

Kusanagi waved it off, "I'm shorthanded back at the mansion anyways. I've pretty much fired *everyone* except for Roze and Ranmaru. It might be nice having other...humans, err, people around."

Katsumi wiped a tear from her eye, smiled and then nodded, "Right! We'll all do our best, Kusanagi-*chan*!"

Kusanagi felt a trickle of sweat form on her brow at Katsumi's words, "I'm not letting you do any of the cleaning though. *You'd* break everything if I let you get your iron claws on it! Maybe you can help out in the garden or something. Yea, that might work. And if your brother likes animals perhaps he can help Ranmaru in the menagerie."

"Menagerie?" Katsumi questioned.

Kusanagi smiled, a fond, wistful smile as she thought of all her beloved pets, "You'll see."

Kurosaki-*san* pulled the limo up by the shantytown and Katsumi began to help her brother load their small amount of luggage into the car. The Kurosaki family didn't have much so moving was an easy matter. After that Kusanagi and the rest piled into the limo and Kurosaki-*san* sped off after saying 'Hold on tight!'. Katsumi appeared embarrassed but Kusanagi wasn't one to like to waste time either, so her current limo driver was getting on her good side if anything with his reckless speeding. They made it to the Kimamura estate in record time. She knew that Ranmaru would be there, waiting for her. She really had to apologize to him. And tell him...how she really felt for once. No masks.

But when they arrived at the estate the first thing they

noticed was that it looked like a battle had just taken place at the menagerie and on the front grounds. The menagerie was still in lock down mode by the looks of it but the front door was open, and the lawn in the front of the Kimamura mansion was scorched and still burning in places. “Ranmaru! My animals!” Kusanagi jumped out of the limo and rushed towards the menagerie. That’s when she caught sight of a figure lying on the ground, “Roze!”

Roze was lying facedown on the grass, a pool of blood surrounding her, and with two .45 handguns held limply in each of her hands. Roze had obviously fought to protect Kusanagi’s animals but had been defeated.

“Roze!” Kusanagi rushed to her maid’s side and knelt by her, before turning her over and onto her back.

Roze opened her eyes and looked up at Kusanagi, her glasses were askew on her face. “Kusanagi...I’m sorry. *He* took them...Ranmaru, Kaze, Sora...”

Kusanagi’s blood ran cold. “Who took them Roze?”

“Dr. Wolfram.” Roze coughed.

Kusanagi’s eyes widened in recognition, “Dr. Wolfram? Shit! What about the other animals?”

“They tried to fight to protect Sora and Kaze...some of the animals were injured but none of them were taken.” Roze hesitated before continuing, “Dr. Wolfram seemed particularly interested in Ranmaru. When I arrived on the scene Ranmaru had already been defeated and Dr. Wolfram took him away.”

Kusanagi’s eyes widened, “Shit. Double shit!” Kusanagi punched the ground next to her angrily.

Katsumi ran up to Kusanagi, “Kusanagi, what’s going on? Who did this? Where is Ranmaru? And who is this Dr. Wolfram?”

“He has the name of a villain, that’s for sure.” Shiro nodded to himself knowingly. “I bet he’s some kind of mad scientist.”

Kusanagi frowned, “He’s an old enemy of mine. Back for revenge. The bastard. I’ll make him pay for this. And I will get Ranmaru back!”

Katsumi wrung her hands together, “But do you like even have any idea where Ranmaru was taken?”

Kusanagi nodded, “To Dr. Wolfram’s evil lair - in

Germany.”

“Germany!” Katsumi exclaimed.

“As soon as Roze’s wounds have been seen to, Roze and I will go after Dr. Wolfram. Katsumi, I need you and your family to stay here and take care of my animals and to keep an eye on the mansion for me while we’re gone.” Kusanagi explained to the cat girl, a fierce gleam in her eyes.

“But, I want to come with you!” Katsumi interjected.

Kusanagi shook her head, “Thank you, but no. You’ll only get in my way. This is something I need to do on my own. Dr. Wolfram is my arch-nemesis. This is *my* fight.”

Katsumi pouted and then frowned. She didn’t like this one bit. Ranmaru was her friend too. To her, Ranmaru was...Katsumi bit her lower lip before she nodded. “Fine, but I don’t like this! Kusanagi...you have to bring them back safely.”

Kusanagi’s emerald green eyes gleamed, “Don’t worry, you can count on it. Dr. Wolfram, you are so going down, you bastard! The Bitch is coming to get you. I’ll show you no mercy! You made a big mistake when you chose not only to target my animals but my butler as well.”

Kusanagi and Roze prepared to go and rescue Ranmaru, Sora, and Kaze before taking Kusanagi’s private jet to Germany. During the flight, Roze was cleaning the different parts of one of her .45s before reassembling it so that it would be in perfect working order. This time around she would not be underestimating her opponents. She pointed her gun in the air and aimed it at an imaginary enemy.

Kusanagi knew because of her information network that Dr. Wolfram’s evil lair was located somewhere in Germany in the Harz Mountains and close to the town of Blankenburg. She had never really wanted to directly confront her arch-nemesis like this before, but now he had left her with no choice. She had to save Ranmaru before it was too late. *Ranmaru...I’m coming.*

Kusanagi and Roze arrived in Blankenburg and went to a small rustic establishment called Edelweiss Inn to check in. Roze took care of arranging a room for them while Kusanagi headed to

the lounge since she felt like she needed a drink. Kusanagi figured it was probably alright for her to be wandering around in the open since she was in disguise. Or at least Kusanagi felt she was in disguise since she had on a pair of dark sunglasses and had tamed her hair up into a high ponytail. She had also taken out all her usual piercings. The outfit she was wearing was a black, skintight, high-necked shirt, with matching leather pants, combat boots, and a silver fur-lined, green jacket that reached the floor. (Don't worry the fur was fake and animal friendly!) She was also wearing a thick silver utility belt around her waist, but to the naked eye no one would be able to tell that it was filled with grenades.

Before entering the lounge Kusanagi caught sight of a Wanted Poster on the wall, and which read:

WANTED
K The Bitch
 REWARD
 \$2,000,000 USD

On the Wanted Poster was a picture of a girl with wild black hair, a green military hat on her head, lots of piercings, and shinning, emerald green eyes. Yep, it was none other than Kusanagi herself. Kusanagi smirked, there was no way anyone was going to recognize her with the way she currently looked though. She was such a genius. Kusanagi confidently strode into the lounge and took a seat at one of the tables to listen to the guitar player that was currently performing. She had to admit the guy was pretty good and so she turned her full attention towards him.

The guitar player had on a pair of *Ray-Ban* Wayfarer sunglasses even though he was inside, his dark hair was slicked back, and he had a goatee. The guitarist had this *cool* expression on his face as he strummed his guitar and sang: *Where the Streets Have No Name* by *U2*.

But Kusanagi's eyes widened when she recognized his voice. It was none other than the infamous, International Detective, Gunnar Martin!

In fact, she was surprised she hadn't recognized him sooner. There was no one else she knew with those signature thick eyebrows, and not to mention he was still in his detective

threads, though as she narrowed her eyes at him she saw that he was looking a little worse for wear and somewhat disheveled. His red tie was slightly undone, his long, black trench coat and matching pants were wrinkled.

Gunnar Martin: Smoker of fine cigars, cognac and scotch drinker, Detective, Super Spy, Level 5 weapons training, weapon of choice: .44 Magnum, 31 years old, Single.

Gunnar must have thought that by slicking back his hair and wearing a pair of sunglasses that Kusanagi wouldn't recognize him but she had right away. *Idiot, that's not a disguise. That's a fashion statement. Shit! What the hell is he doing out here anyways?* The bar maid set down Kusanagi's drink around the time that Kusanagi decided it was definitely time to go. She stood up hurriedly but this caused her to jostle her table causing her drink to fall and shatter. Gunnar's attention was immediately drawn in her direction.

And his eyes widened as he too recognized Kusanagi easily despite her so-called 'disguise'. "YOU!" Gunnar stood up, dropping his guitar.

"Oh shit!" Kusanagi swore and hightailed it out of there, running past the bar maid, and flying out the door. She fled past a confused and worried Roze, who was still in the front lobby.

"Kusanagi? What's-" Roze was saying as Gunnar ran past her.

"Hold it right there, dammit!" Gunnar was chasing after her, and Roze's eyes widened when she too recognized the infamous Detective Gunnar Martin as well.

Oh shit. Roze fell back and hid in the shadows. The last thing they needed was for Gunner to recognize *her* as well. Though she was almost positive he wouldn't recognize her in her current maid's outfit. Her hair was also short now and she wore those big round glasses of hers to hide her sharp eyes for a reason.

Kusanagi rushed out of the inn and down the cobble stone street in the rustic town with Gunnar hot on her heels. Gunnar took out his .44 Magnum and fired at her. "Stop!"

Kusanagi rushed forward and dodged the shots using her

battle instinct. “Like hell!” She declared. “Who the hell would stop when someone’s trying to kill them?”

Kusanagi rushed down an alleyway and discovered that it was a dead end. *Shit*. She turned around to face Gunnar as he rounded the corner and realized that he had managed to corner her. She pulled out her *bokken* sword that she had concealed behind her back and under her long jacket, and held the sword in a two-handed grip before her. Gunnar raised his gun at her in retaliation.

“Gunnar Martin.” Kusanagi greeted with a heated glare.

“K The Bitch.” Gunnar nodded in return.

They then charged each other, Kusanagi’s sword raised high. Gunnar fired and shattered Kusanagi’s *bokken* with one shot. But Kusanagi didn’t stop there and moved swiftly forward, past Gunnar’s defenses when he hesitated to shoot her at point blank range. She used this split second of hesitation to her advantage and punched him hard, delivering a harsh uppercut that sent Gunnar flying backwards-

Gunnar quickly pushed himself up off the ground, but Kusanagi was ready for him and delivered a spinning roundhouse kick towards Gunnar, which kicked Gunnar’s Magnum out of his hand.

Gunnar rubbed his jaw. “Dang, your crazy strength never ceases to amaze me, lassie.”

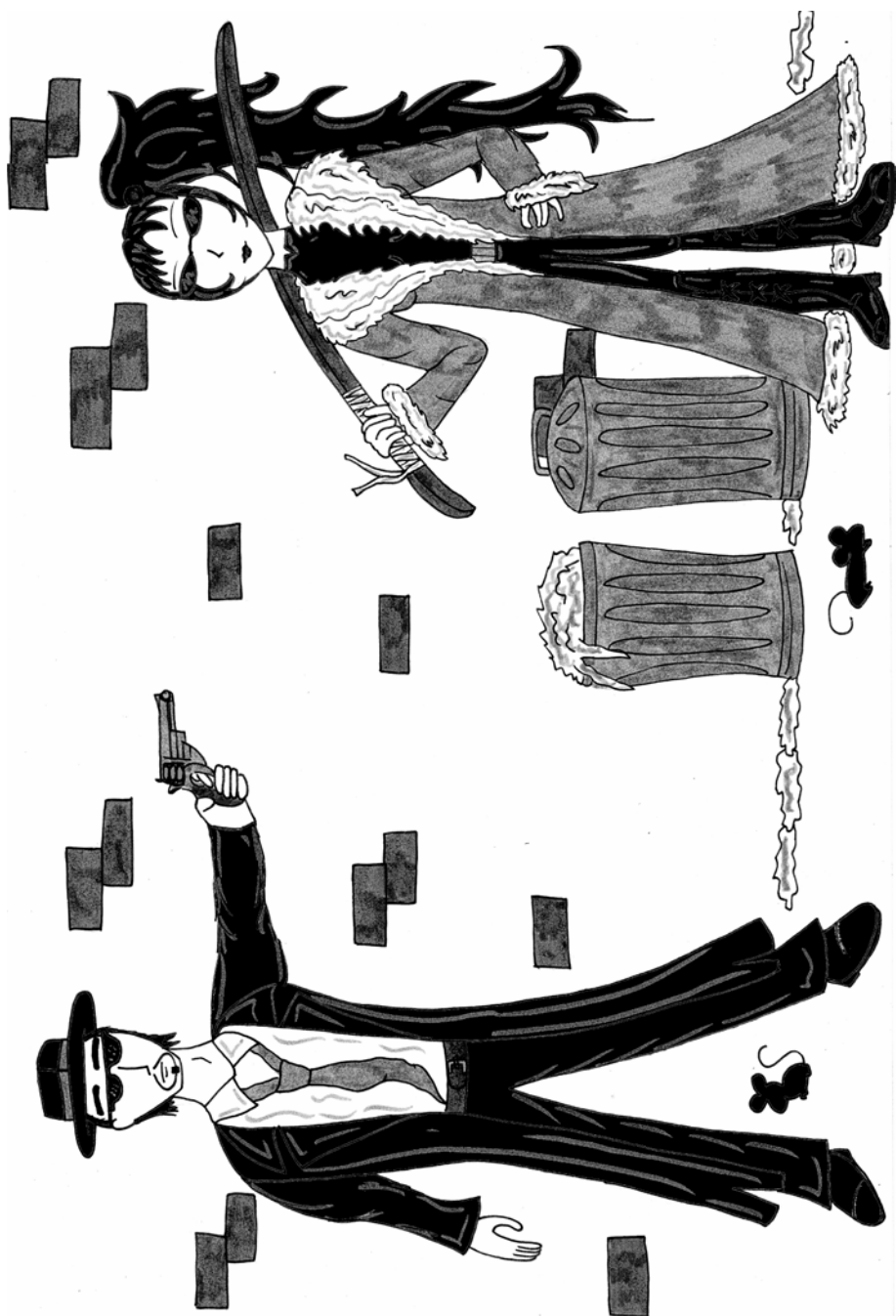
“I’m flattered.” Kusanagi smirked and got into a fighting stance, “Not.” Kusanagi crooked her finger at him as if to say ‘come and get it’.

Gunnar got into a fighting stance as well and smiled grimly, “I prefer to fight fair anyways.”

“Is that why you’re still using rubber bullets, *baka*.” Kusanagi shook her head at him as she held up one of the bullets she had managed to catch between her thumb and index finger and squished it slightly.

Gunnar didn’t answer as he attacked Kusanagi, but she was too fast for him and sent a sidekick to Gunnar’s stomach, which sent him flying into the nearby trashcans with the wind knocked out of him. Ow.

“And that’s called taking out the trash.” Kusanagi declared wiping her hands off together.



Gunnar pushed himself up off the ground, “Don’t count me out just yet!” He charged Kusanagi and they attacked each other, fists flying, delivering kicks and punches, blocks and blows. Though they were pretty evenly matched Kusanagi began to tire.

That’s how they ended up collapsing on top of each other with Gunnar landing on top of Kusanagi – both were panting for breath since each of them had just been too stubborn to stop fighting.

“So, what are you doing in Germany, K? Steal any dangerous dragons lately?” Gunnar questioned casually from above her.

“Dragons?” Kusanagi blinked up at him, “Bullshit. I’m just here to get back my butler.”

“Butler?” It was Gunnar’s turn to blink.

“Dr. Wolfram has him.” Kusanagi informed him casually.

“That quack? He’s here in Germany?” Gunnar raised an eyebrow at this intel.

“Yes, according to my information network Dr. Wolfram’s latest evil lair is here in the Harz Mountains. *He’s* probably the one who stole your dragon.” Kusanagi glared up at Gunnar pointedly.

Gunnar’s eyes narrowed down at Kusanagi, “Why should I believe you?”

“You don’t have to do shit. I intend to get my butler, Sora and Kaze back all on my own!” Kusanagi sneered. “I don’t need your help, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Gunnar scratched his cheek thoughtfully, “But Dr. Wolfram only ever steals animals so why would he kidnap your butler? Or did he do that for revenge?”

“My butler is a fox *yokai* so maybe that’s the reason.”

“A *yokai*? Huh?”

Kusanagi sighed, “*Yokai* are spiritual beings in Japan that have both a human and an animal form. Ranmaru, my butler, happens to have a fox form as well as a human form. This must be why Dr. Wolfram is interested in him.”

Gunnar stroked his goatee thoughtfully, “I see, so you flew all the way to Germany to save your butler. That just doesn’t

seem like you K. Unless..." Gunnar smacked a fist into his open palm, "I know...you're in love with him aren't you?"

Kusanagi blushed and began to sputter and spaz, "In love? *Nani!* You're crazy! There's absolutely no way I'd be in love with that stoic, emotionless idiot!" She waved her arms frantically in the air before her.

Gunnar's brows rose and his expression turned amused, "I think thou dost protesteth too much, milady. I've never seen you so worked up over anything other than an animal you were trying to *steal*."

Kusanagi glared back at him and growled. "Oh shut up. And-" Kusanagi threw her hands up into the air in exasperation, "For the 100th time I wasn't *stealing* them! I was *rescuing* them! *Mou!* Geez! You still just don't get it? And you're what how old now...40?"

"31." Gunnar coughed and ignored that last barb while still not looking convinced as he shook his head, "*Sure...*but a lot of those animals you 'rescued' were already under government protection just like that unicorn you recently stole."

"Keh, government protection is crap. Dr. Wolfram had his sights on that unicorn so I had to get to him before Dr. Wolfram did." Kusanagi crossed her arms over her chest, her expression both stubborn and adamant.

Gunnar looked thoughtful before shrugging helplessly, "I don't know what to believe."

Kusanagi gathered her strength to roughly shove him off of her and managed to stand, "You don't have to believe anything. Just stay out of my way. Things are probably going to get a bit...messy. So it would be better if you just stayed out of this, for your own good. *Ja-ne*, Gunnar Martin." Kusanagi declared as she stomped off. Gunnar reached out to pick up his gun but Kusanagi was way ahead of him. "Don't even bother, you're out of bullets." She declared as she opened the palm of her hand and several rubber bullets fell to the ground as she walked away.

"Damn," Gunnar whistled through his teeth. That little lassie was always one step ahead of him. "This butler that you

flew all the way to Europe for in order to rescue...I'm curious to meet him. He must be one hell of a guy."

Kusanagi paused, "You have no idea." She said simply before leaving the alleyway.

Gunnar smirked to himself before pulling out a small handheld tracking device. There was a small screen with a blinking dot on it that was currently on the move, "Gotcha, K The Bitch. You won't escape Detective Gunnar Martin that easily."

When Ranmaru awoke it was to find himself in a cold, dank cell. His entire body ached. He moved to huddle in the far corner of the cell and wrapped his arms around himself. He began to shiver since it was cold, so very cold...and he was all alone...the bad memories were beginning to creep up on him once again but then-

There was suddenly something very wet and warm on his face. *Huh?* Ranmaru opened his eyes and focused on Kaze, the *yokai* dog. Kaze was licking Ranmaru's face and whimpering since he was obviously worried about Ranmaru, which was nice and all. But-

Yuck! Ranmaru shoved Kaze back. *Doggie drool.* Dog slobber was now all over him. "Ugh...Kaze...bad doggie." He scolded half-heartedly.

Kaze seemed happy that Ranmaru was awake now, however, and his tail was wagging behind him speedily in an over-excited manner. There was also this goofy grin on his face, and his tongue was hanging out of his mouth, "Woof woof!"

Ranmaru sighed and shook his head. *Dogs.* Kaze pressed his head under Ranmaru's hand and Ranmaru absentmindedly scratched it while secretly enjoying the warmth that was seeping through Kaze's head and to Ranmaru's cold fingers. And also he felt warmer all of a sudden just by being near Kaze. Maybe it was because of all that fur that Kaze was producing heat or something. Ranmaru mused thoughtfully. Ranmaru looked around the cell, *Just where the hell are we?*

A chill went down Ranmaru's spine as he looked up and saw that they were basically in a prison – one that was eerily similar to the one he had been in back at the Death Match Coliseum. There were rows of cells on either side of the dark

narrow corridor. But in the cells were not other *yokai* people or humans as Ranmaru had been expecting, but rather animals. *Special* animals.

Ranmaru caught sight of Sora in the cell directly across from his own and he immediately stood up. He was going to get them the hell out of there! He couldn't fail Kusanagi like this. Ranmaru stood up on shaky limbs and made his way over towards the front bars of his cell. Kaze panicked and grabbed onto the sleeve of Ranmaru's shirt with his teeth and yanked backwards while trying to stop Ranmaru from moving forward any further-

Ranmaru shook Kaze off, "Let go, boy." Ranmaru said as he roughly shook the poor dog off. "We're getting out of here." Ranmaru reached forward to grasp the bars of his cell and immediately regretted it.

A powerful, mind-numbing, painful, electric shock instantly coursed through Ranmaru's body - with such force that Ranmaru was sent flying backwards to where he hit the back cell wall with a sickening crack as the back of his head met with the cement wall. Ow.

Dazed, Ranmaru slid down the cold, cement wall, regretting his reckless actions. So, escape wasn't going to be so easy...And Ranmaru realized as he reached down to his belt for his sword that Kuroki Ryu wasn't there. *My sword! That mad doctor bastard has Kuroki Ryu! Dammit! That bastard is going to pay!*

Kaze whimpered and hesitantly came back over to Ranmaru. He then began to lick Ranmaru *all* over obviously trying to *heal* his wounds. Ranmaru was too weak to resist Kaze's 'treatment' and just moaned despairingly. How did he manage to get himself into these kinds of messes anyways?

That's what you get for being foolish. Came a voice in Ranmaru's head. Ranmaru looked up and saw Sora looking directly at him with those deep blue eyes of his that held both intelligence and wisdom.

Sora... Ranmaru spoke back to the horse in his mind in surprise. He hadn't known that Sora was able to communicate

telepathically.

All the cells are rigged with a powerful electro shock mechanism that delivers over 1000 volts when it senses any kind of escape attempt being made. It's amazing you're still even conscious.

Yes, well, it would take a hell of a lot more than that to keep me down. Where are we?

We're in the heart of Dr. Wolfram's lair close to his laboratory.

Who the hell is Dr. Wolfram?

Kusanagi's arch-nemesis...at least in Europe. He steals endangered or magical creatures to do genetic experiments on them. For what purpose, we are unsure. He's completely mad though so maybe there isn't really a reason. Kusanagi saved me when Dr. Wolfram was about to capture me. Kusanagi's always 'saving' animals from Dr. Wolfram's clutches...and they're always going head to head. Unfortunately, this has given her a bad reputation in Europe and so she's a Most Wanted thief here known as K The Bitch. There's even a bounty on her head. There's also this annoying detective that's always going around Europe chasing after her...he can be a real pain.

Ah, that's why she has the menagerie then. Ranmaru nodded to himself, a few things were finally beginning to make sense.

He probably plans to experiment on us as well...

What kind of experiment?

Well, just by looking at his other victims, I believe his intentions become quite obvious, Ranmaru...

Ranmaru did so and instantly regretted it as his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. There in the other cages weren't just rare, unusual, or magical creatures. But animals that shouldn't even exist. Abominations. Hybrids. Chimeras. Grotesque mixtures of animals combined into one hideous and dangerous creature. All of the worst or most dangerous qualities of both creatures had been brought out to their fullest in their final Chimera form. He saw a Pegasus with bat-like wings, a tiger with long, saber tooth like teeth and huge feathery wings, and a dangerous looking dog that resembled a Doberman pincher that had been combined with a snake since it had two live snakes for

tails.

They've become Chimeras. This is not good.

The lights in the corridor were suddenly turned on overhead. Flickering light bulbs that probably needed to be changed cast a pale dull yellow glow about the prison. And then the sound of approaching footsteps could be heard as a group of people approached.

Nadya along with a group of Dr. Wolfram's SP entered the prison and began to make her way down the center path. Her high-heeled boots *click clacking* on the cold cement floor as she and her group of SP made their way to Ranmaru's cell. She stopped just outside of his cell and Ranmaru instantly recognized the woman's scent from their previous encounter. *She's that witch...Nadya.* When Ranmaru sniffed the air in the SPs' direction, however, he was surprised when he found that the men's scent seemed to be the same as a monkey. *Now that's strange...*

Nadya placed her hands on her hips and smiled at Ranmaru, her red-painted lips quirking upwards. Behind her the SP shadowed her protectively. "Get the fox man and the dog – Dr. Wolfram needs them right away." Nadya directed the SP.

"Yes, Mam!" The SP stepped forward to deactivate the electro shock mechanism before opening the barred cell door. Kaze immediately leapt into action, barking, snarling, and snapping his open jaws at the SP as he was almost upon them-

However, the SP pulled out long metal rods that were sparking at the ends ominously. They then jabbed their electric shock prods forward so that they hit Kaze, who yelped in pain as a nasty electric shock was immediately sent into his body. Kaze collapsed to the ground, smoking.

"Kaze!" Ranmaru struggled to stand. *Shit.*

Kaze hit the ground with a pained whimper and the SP hurriedly muzzled, collared, and chained Kaze before they began to carry him off.

"Bastards, let him go." Ranmaru struggled to walk forward and the SP were immediately upon him next.

They simultaneously shocked Ranmaru with their electric

prods and once he too had collapsed they began to drag him off as well.

Ranmaru! Sora shouted in his mind. *Don't do anything rash. Just hang in there. Kusanagi will come for us!*

Ranmaru and Kaze were taken to Dr. Wolfram's main laboratory. There were several strange devices and what appeared to be inventions in the lab as well as several impressive super computers. But what immediately caught Ranmaru's eye was the massive dragon that was currently being held in what appeared to be a gigantic glass globe. This globe was attached to several wires and there was a metal pole that ran from the top of the globe to another similar looking globe, which was empty.

Dr. Wolfram turned to face them with a pleased expression on his face, and in his hand he held a scalpel, which he was moving between his fingers playfully, "Ah, so our guinea pigs, err, guests have arrived." He drawled. "Excellent. Nadya, prepare for the first experiment. The dog is to go inside of the DNA containment chamber first."

"Yes, Doctor. SP place the dog into the DNA chamber!" Nadya directed them with a wave of her hand.

Dr. Wolfram turned his attention to the captured Ranmaru, "Put this guy in the special chair I have for *guests*." He grinned maliciously.

The SP dragged a half-struggling Ranmaru over to a metal chair where metal bands were clamped over his wrists and ankles to keep him from moving. And if the voltage regulator device next to the chair was anything to go by if Ranmaru decided to try and escape he would most likely be rewarded with a nasty and perhaps deadly electric shock.

But when Ranmaru watched the SP moving an unconscious Kaze into the DNA chamber he couldn't help but struggle. *Dammit!* As if he could just sit by and do nothing when Kusanagi's favorite pet was in danger!

Dr. Wolfram stalked over to Ranmaru and glared down at him curiously. "You're a very interesting guy. You're pretty brave or maybe you're just incredibly foolish. You must know resistance is futile. What are you a masochist? Well, why else would you resist me when you know what will happen to you when you do." Dr. Wolfram calmly walked over to the voltage

regulator and turned the knob on the device slowly and immediately painful shocks of electricity were being sent through Ranmaru's body. "Some would say I'm a sadistic bastard...I'd disagree. I just like watching people in pain."

Nadya licked her lips as she watched the doctor torture Ranmaru, "*Ohh~* he's so lucky. Doctor, save me some pain too please." She pouted.

But despite how much pain Ranmaru was in he didn't cry out or scream. Instead he merely bit down on his lower lip causing it to bleed. Dr. Wolfram raised an eyebrow at this intriguing behavior and turned the knob back to zero. "You seem used to pain or to have a high threshold for it. I'm impressed. Other men would have crumbled to pieces but not you..." Dr. Wolfram reached out his hand and grasped Ranmaru's chin, turning Ranmaru's face this way and that, a calculating expression on his face. "You're a bit of an enigma. I'm not really sure what to make of you, Ranmaru. You...confuse me. This is because I *hate* humans. When I was a baby my parents abandoned me in the forest...but the wolves there took pity on me and raised me as one of their own. My wolf mother and father are my *true* parents. I consider myself to be a wolf even though I am trapped inside this miserable human body." Wolfram spit off to one side.

"But animals are different from humans. There is a darkness that lies in all men's hearts. Humans are ever ready to display their malignity. But, that's not so with animals. Animals are driven by their *instincts* not their own greed or ambition. Sometimes an animal's instincts do tell them to kill but it is only for two reasons: to kill to *protect* i.e. the pack or its offspring, or to kill for *food*. Also, an animal's instincts tell a mother wolf to look after and care for its cub. And the male wolf will protect her. But humans are different. A human mother can simply abandon her own baby out of cruel selfishness...and a human father can abandon his own wife and offspring for his own selfish reasons as well. It's *disgusting*." Dr. Wolfram frowned and a dark expression crossed his face.

He turned his attention back to Ranmaru. "Humans, make

me sick. Humans are like a plague upon the earth, a disease. And I'm the cure this world needs." Dr. Wolfram put out his hands in a dramatic gesture. "I plan to create an army of powerful chimeras to take over the world. We will kill all the humans! And take back the earth for *us* animals!"

Ranmaru blinked. *This guy is a complete egomaniac.* "But why are you telling *me* this?" Ranmaru questioned, in his low monotone voice.

"Because," Dr. Wolfram leaned his face closer to Ranmaru's until their noses were mere centimeters apart, "Every great world leader needs a *nakama*, a comrade. I didn't think I'd ever find someone who would be worthy enough to be my second in command, a true brother in arms. Someone to share the world I create with. Someone who would be able to understand and appreciate my greatness. But I'm beginning to believe that that someone could very well be you Ranmaru. I think that you could understand me.

Since you're a *yokai*...a being that is both human and animal. But neither just one nor the other. You're just like me. We belong in neither world Ranmaru. Not the human world or the animal world – we live on the line between them, in limbo. Just like how I am a wolf trapped in this disgusting human body. And we're all alone...so I know you will be able to understand what I'm trying to do. Especially since you're a Spell-Collared *yokai*. It was a human who enslaved you right? You must feel the same hatred towards humans that I do. Join me, Ranmaru, and together we will take over the world!" Dr. Wolfram offered.

A hatred towards humans? Ranmaru had never particularly thought that way about it before. Sure, Kagura, was a human and a *miko* witch and she had enslaved and broken him...and what must the other Spell-Collared *yokai* think or feel about *their* human Masters? Humans had enslaved them and their freedom had been stolen from them. Surely, *they* hated humanity...

But - Kusanagi's face popped up in Ranmaru's mind. He couldn't possibly *hate* her. He loved Kusanagi *and* she was a human. And there were others who Ranmaru found he could also never hate, humans who had somehow become his friends: Roze, Mister Kimamura, Shinichi, and Haruka...

Humans. *Yokai*. Animals. Was one group really better than the other? Did one group deserve to rule the Earth? But...Ranmaru shook his head. There were both good and bad in each group. There were good humans and bad humans. There were good *yokai* and bad *yokai*. So how could one condemn an entire group for the actions of a few? Ranmaru frowned. He couldn't.

Ranmaru looked up to meet Dr. Wolfram's bi-colored, "No, I do not hate humanity. It was a human *miko* who did this to me, yes...but it was another human who saved me. Not all humans are evil. There are both good and bad. I will not condemn them all, not when I have found one human whom I love. And I am not alone. I have...friends now. But...you are alone. You're the one who's lonely, Dr. Wolfram, not I. And you're wrong about me, we are not alike, you and I. I will never join you because that would mean betraying the one I love."

Dr. Wolfram's pale skin began to turn red from his anger as his face flushed, "Insolent bastard!" Dr. Wolfram backhanded Ranmaru swiftly across the face, his frown deepening, "Maybe you're more *human* than I thought. That really sucks. You would have made a worthy comrade, Ranmaru." Dr. Wolfram shook his head and then turned his attention back to the captured dragon and Kaze. "Begin the experiment!"

"No!" Ranmaru objected.

"Begin the experiment...begin the experiment..." The SP began to chant in a monotone voice as they obeyed Dr. Wolfram's command and began preparing for the experiment by pulling down on levers and pressing buttons on the nearby super computer.

The first DNA chamber began to glow with a neon green light and then Kaze's containment chamber began to glow with the same green light as well.

"DNA combination commencing, Doctor." Nadya informed him. "If I screw this up you have to promise to punish me, Doctor." Nadya joked teasingly.

He pointedly ignored Nadya's joke.

"Excellent." Dr. Wolfram grinned and one of his incisor's

peaked out of his mouth as he observed the process.

A green light began to envelope Kaze and then he suddenly woke up and began to howl in pain. Then black scales began to erupt all over Kaze's body. His tail lengthened and became more snake-like as it was covered in scales, three spikes shot out of the end, and small spikes were emerging all along its length. Two large, curved horns sprouted out of either side of Kaze's head and his claws began to lengthen and turn black.

Ranmaru watched the process of Kaze's transformation in horror. "No...Kaze..."

Dr. Wolfram began to chuckle darkly, "He will make the perfect addition to my army now that he is the perfect killing machine. I really am a genius." His bi-colored eyes gleamed with malice.

"Bastard," Ranmaru growled, "You're worse than any human I know. How could you do something like that to the animals you claim to love so much?"

"The ends justify the means, Ranmaru. Besides, I am providing these animals with the power and the means to stand up to their human oppressors." Dr. Wolfram stated adamantly and clenched one of his fists.

Ranmaru shook his head and gave Dr. Wolfram a pitying look. "You're nothing but a madman."

"Did you just call me...mad?" Dr. Wolfram's blue eye flashed angrily.

"That was a mistake." Nadya declared in a singsong voice as she scratched the head of her winged cat affectionately.

Dr. Wolfram stomped over to Ranmaru and grasped his chin painfully in his calloused hand, "I was going to wait until you had recovered but...you've made me change my mind. Nadya! Prepare the DNA mapping chamber for this guy, immediately!"

Nadya sashayed over to the super computer console and began typing away rapidly, "Yes, Doctor." A separate spherical containment chamber began to thrum with power as it was turned on and activated.

Dr. Wolfram smiled at Ranmaru sadistically, "This is going to hurt like hell. I will be mapping out your entire DNA sequence in order to discover your secret - how to become both

man and beast.” Dr. Wolfram revealed to Ranmaru and then made a hand motion towards the SP who immediately went over to Ranmaru and unclamped the metal bands around Ranmaru’s wrists and ankles. Ranmaru was still too weak to resist as the SP then began to drag Ranmaru over towards the containment chamber.

Ranmaru struggled against their grasp as they opened the door to the chamber, but it was futile. They threw him inside of the chamber and closed the hatch behind him. Ranmaru’s eyes drifted over to the mysterious witch Nadya, “Tell me something Doctor, if you hate humans so much why do you have that one working for you?”

Dr. Wolfram looked over towards Nadya. “Ah, you mean Nadya? She’s a special case. Several years ago...I was passing through the remote village of Madhya Pradesh in Russia that was rumored to have a cat possessing magical powers. The local townspeople were a narrow-minded, superstitious group of people and when I arrived there I stumbled upon a surprising sight. Nadya had been tied up to a giant wooden stake in the very center of their town square. A pile of wood had been placed around her and just as I was arriving they were beginning to set the pyre on fire.

They were about to burn Nadya alive for being a witch. Nadya loves cats and in the village they were drowning cats under the suspicion that they were a witch’s familiar. This was something that Nadya couldn’t stand for but by trying to stand up for the cats she drew attention to herself and her own familiar. It turned out that Nadya was a real witch and with a real familiar. So as soon as that was discovered they sentenced her to death. Well, suffice it to say humanity’s ugliness that day disgusted me, and I decided to kill all of the townspeople and free Nadya. It was all on a whim really. When I told her why I did it she said she understood and that she wanted to help me.” Wolfram shrugged carelessly. “She’s been working for me ever since. You see, a witch is not fully human either. She too was at a crossroads, living between two worlds. Together we have decided normal humans are unfit to rule this planet and that together we will let

the animals reclaim this land.”

Ranmaru eyed the witch curiously. She was caught between two worlds? Was he also this way? As a *yokai*...who loved a human?

Dr. Wolfram made another hand motion in Nadya's direction, “Begin DNA Mapping Procedure!”

“Yes, Doctor,” Nadya nodded obediently and pressed a button on the computer console.

DNA mapping? How painful can that really be? Ranmaru thought dazedly as the machine began to activate. Ranmaru was enveloped in a red tinged light as the DNA mapping procedure began. And then Ranmaru felt pain coursing through every fiber of his body. This was a pain unlike any Ranmaru had ever felt before. It was a pain that went down to his very soul. It was so intense and all encompassing that even Ranmaru couldn't hold back the scream he was wrenched from his lips.

Dr. Wolfram smirked triumphantly, “I knew this stubborn bastard would have a nice scream.”

“He does have a beautiful scream doesn't he, Leon?” Nadya agreed as she patted her cat's head and spoke to it. “He's so lucky to have captured the doctor's interest. If only I could...” She trailed off sadly.

“Don't worry Nadya, one day you will.” Leon began to purr loudly while digging his claws into Nadya's shoulder hard enough to draw blood – though Nadya didn't seem to mind.

Kusanagi and Roze were both riding snow sled quads over the snow as they headed through a densely forested area and up a snowy mountain trail that led towards Dr. Wolfram's evil lair. Kusanagi was armed with her spare *bokken* (Gunnar Martin had broken her first) and had her hand grenades at the ready in her utility belt. Roze had her twin .45 handguns hidden in the apron pockets of her maid's outfit.

Detective Gunnar Martin had been tracking the girls but was now in a real pickle. *Shit*. He'd reached the small town of *Bad Harzburg* on the outskirts of Harz Mountain realizing he had no way to continue pursuing the girls up the snowy slope. As he walked through the town dispiritedly, however, he caught sight of a man with a dog team and sled. *Perfect*. Gunnar quickly

purchased the dogs and sled (that had emptied his wallet) and prepared to go off in pursuit of K The Bitch.

“Just like old times, but this time you won’t get away, K The Bitch. MUSH!” Gunner declared as he snapped the reigns and got the dog team underway. The team of dogs ran through the town and pulled Gunnar along with his sled behind them. “I’ll find out what you’re really up to this time. I didn’t believe a word of what you said last night. No thief would risk her life to save someone. She must be up to something. And I intend to find out what it is!” The dogs began to ascend the steep snowy slope at an extremely fast pace.

Kusanagi and Roze had just managed to reach Dr. Wolfram’s evil lair. They could see it just ahead of them – it was a creepy looking fortress that was all metal and cement and nestled right up against Harz Mountain. The fortress was extremely tall and had sharp metal spires. There also appeared to be gargoyles perched above the arched windows of the fortress. Part of the fortress seemed to have been remodeled recently and so was a stark white cement. The overall effect of the fortress was that it was a patchwork of old and new. Rusty metal and broken glass windows were side by side with new white cement walls and sparkling glass panes.

As they approached the strange looking building, guard dogs began to reveal themselves from the shadows, and Kusanagi and Roze could see that they were pacing back and forth menacingly in front of the doorway to the evil looking fortress, daring anyone to try and pass them.

Kusanagi paused but then shrugged. She didn’t have time for this bullshit. She revved her quad forward and rode straight for the fortress.

“Kusanagi! *Mou!*” Roze complained as she took off after her.

Kusanagi and Roze drove forward and as they approached the dogs rushed at them in attack. The closer Kusanagi and Roze got to the dogs they were now able to see them for what they truly were, and that these were certainly no ordinary guard dogs. *Holy shit.* Kusanagi swore in her mind and her eyes widened

when she saw that these dogs appeared to be creatures that were a combination between a dog and a snake. *Chimeras*?

They were at least three times as large as a normal dog, about the size of a tiger. Their necks were long, stretched and covered in green scales. They had two tails that were live snakes, and had glowing, yellow eyes with slanted pupils. Their tongues were long and green, and were flicking out of their mouths as they tasted the air for the scent of their prey. Their claws were at least five inches long and looked razor sharp. Sharp fangs were also peaking out of their mouths as they growled to reveal rows of razor sharp teeth, and green-tinged drool was dripping down from their teeth and onto the snowy ground where it appeared to melt the snow.

Kusanagi reached behind her and whipped out her *bokken* to point it at the dogs as they approached her, and she continued to ride forward, undeterred. "They must be some of Dr. Wolfram's mind controlled animals. Poor things. Roze don't kill them - use rubber bullets!" Kusanagi ordered her.

"*Hai, Kusanagi-sama!*" Roze called back and then muttered to herself. "Easier said than done since they're trying to *kill* us." Roze sighed and loaded her two handguns with two clips, which contained rubber bullets. She raised both of her guns and then began to fire at the dogs simultaneously as they leapt at her through the air. Roze hit one right between the eyes and it fell down howling out in pain and rolled across the snow. She quickly shot another directly in its chest and it was blasted backwards.

One dog ran and leapt up into the air at Kusanagi, jaws snapping, and she moved her *bokken* swiftly through the air in a sideways slash. This blow collided with the side of the beast and sent it flying.

Gunnar Martin arrived at the scene with his dog team and sled. "Holy shit." He declared as he watched Kusanagi and Roze charge the fortress. "So much for subtlety. And talk about overkill." Gunnar scratched his hand back and forth over his hair in an exasperated manner. "Haven't those girls ever heard of 'the element of surprise'? Sneaking into an enemy stronghold *undetected* maybe? What kind of thief does Kusanagi think she is? Thieves are supposed to be good at blending into the shadows and breaking into places completely undetected. Not running in,

guns blazing, and making a *ton* of noise alerting the enemy to their presence. Women!”

Kusanagi and Roze made quick work of the guard dogs using their killer combination of rubber bullets and *bokken* attacks.

And is that...her maid? Gunnar shook his head and was forced to take out his .44 Magnum, which he also loaded with rubber bullets, in order to fend off the vicious guard dogs that had sighted him as he tried to hurry and follow after Kusanagi and Roze. Gunnar managed to get past the guard dogs but instead of going for the front door like Kusanagi and Roze had he decided to do, Gunnar instead decided to sneak in through a window.

Kusanagi took out a grenade, removed the pin, and threw it at the front door.

KABOOM

Roze and Kusanagi revved their quads and pressed on the gas as they approached the entrance and flew through while still on their quads. Immediately alarms began to sound all around them and as their quads finally skidded to a halt red lights in the hallway had begun to flash on either side of them. Kusanagi and Roze were forced to dismount from their quads and continue on foot.

As they raced down the hallway it wasn't long before SP, who were all dressed in black and wearing white wolf masks, appeared and stood in their way. But Kusanagi and Roze acted quickly and began to take them out. Kusanagi used her signature *bokken* attacks to knock the SP out using quick blows to the back of their heads, just behind their knees to bring them kneeling to the ground, and also devilish forward jabs to their solar plexus.

Still using rubber bullets, Roze raised and aimed her twin guns to fire consecutive shots at the SP, who were blasted backwards to where they fell to the floor with a hard thud and remained unmoving.

Kusanagi and Roze both shared a look. Girl Power. They made an invincible team when they wanted to.

Meanwhile, Gunnar was crawling through a cramped ventilation shaft and making his way painstakingly towards what

his own 'information network' had told him would be the direction of Dr. Wolfram's lab. He had his own gun in hand, just in case, but due to his current position he was sure he wouldn't be using it anytime soon.

Kusanagi and Roze finally made it to the large metal door that led to Dr. Wolfram's laboratory. Kusanagi wasted no time in taking out another grenade and carelessly tossing it towards the door of the lab. She owed Dr. Wolfram for blowing up her menagerie after all. The door and part of the wall was obliterated.

Kusanagi and Roze rushed inside through the smoke and debris.

The sound of clapping rang through the air as Kusanagi stalked inside and she turned to see none other than Dr. Wolfram. "Good job, Kusanagi." He drawled.

"Doctor Wolfram," Kusanagi glared at him, and pointed her *bokken* sword in his direction. Immediately, the sound of several guns being drawn and pointed her way was heard as the SP, who were in the lab and there to guard Dr. Wolfram, reacted to Kusanagi's move.

Roze retaliated by taking out her two .45s at the same time and kept her sights aimed on the SPs.

"I'm here to retrieve my butler and my pets." Kusanagi declared.

Meanwhile, in the ventilation shaft Gunnar had managed to reach the lab and was currently peering through a grate at the ongoing scene in the lab below. *Shit!* He saw Kusanagi pointing her *bokken* at Dr. Wolfram and saw that her maid Roze had two guns raised and was covering Kusanagi. *What in the hell are those two girls thinking? They're going to get themselves killed!* He had to do something...but what? Gunnar then noticed the giant dragon that was being held captive inside of the large containment chamber. *Ah! There you are!*

"Butler?" Dr. Wolfram raised an eyebrow at Kusanagi and then his expression turned knowing. "Ah, you must mean him." Dr. Wolfram jerked his thumb towards the spherical containment chamber where Ranmaru was currently lying unconscious and looking like shit. "The brave fox man. He's an interesting guy. I'll give you that. Definitely one of a kind." Dr. Wolfram praised, a twinkle in his blue eye.

Kusanagi turned to look in the direction that Dr. Wolfram had motioned to and caught sight of Ranmaru and the state he was in. Ranmaru was still bathed in a pulsing red light. “Ranmaru! You bastard!” Kusanagi turned to look back at Dr. Wolfram, her green eyes flashing angrily, “What did you do to him? *Kora!*”

Dr. Wolfram picked something out of his ear and flicked it off into the air in an obstinate gesture, “Nothing really, just painfully extracted and mapped out his entire DNA sequence. It looks like the pain was too much for him though and he passed out. I only have a little bit more of his DNA code left to map, but at this rate he might not make it...” Dr. Wolfram shrugged and put his hands out in a helpless gesture while shaking his head. “That sucks, he would have been fun to experiment on.”

“Let him go,” Kusanagi got into a fighting stance with her sword, “Or else.”

“You’re in no position to make threats, Kusanagi. I don’t think you quite realize the situation you’re in-” Dr. Wolfram was saying as he took out a scalpel and began to inspect the blade carelessly before running his tongue along the deadly blade. “I haven’t cut something open in so long. Perhaps I’ll start with you...”

However-

Gunnar had snuck out of the ventilation shaft and had made his way undetected through the lab while taking advantage of Kusanagi’s distraction in order to get to the containment chamber, which held the enormous dragon. Gunnar then quickly took out his PDA and attached it to the control console that was near the chamber and began to hack the ‘command key’ that was needed in order to unlock its door.

“Got it!” Gunnar declared as he typed in the needed key and the hatch was opened.

The dragon immediately flew up and out of the containment chamber as soon as it was freed. The dragon was an impressive, but deadly looking creature with bronze-colored scales, large bat-like wings that were ripped and torn in places, and that had spikes running all along the creature’s spine and tail.

The dragon also had fierce looking red eyes, which it had now narrowed at Dr. Wolfram. It's teeth were as long as Kusanagi's arm and as it let out an angry roar in Dr. Wolfram's direction, the dragon's saliva sprayed through the air.

Dr. Wolfram turned and eyed the dragon in shock. "What the hell? SP! Contain the dragon! Move your asses!"

The SP leapt into action, turning their full attention to the dragon instead of Kusanagi. They attacked the dragon with their electric prods and others were firing tranquilizer bullets at the dragon using special guns that had apparently been modified and improved by Dr. Wolfram himself if their high-tech appearance was anything to go by. The dragon was becoming increasingly enraged and began to puff up its chest ominously before opening its mouth and releasing a vicious stream of fire at the SP, who cried out as they were engulfed in the flames-

Gunnar knew his 'diversion' wouldn't last long, however, since some of the SP had already managed to hit their marks with their tranquilizer guns, which meant it wouldn't be long now before the tranquilizer darts began to take effect and the dragon would become subdued.

While Dr. Wolfram was preoccupied with the dragon that was now on a rampage through his lab, Kusanagi immediately took this opportunity to speed past Dr. Wolfram and towards Ranmaru's containment chamber. "Ranmaru!" She raised her *bokken* and slashed it through the air at the containment chamber itself and using her unusual strength she was able to shatter the glass creating an opening where she could pull Ranmaru out.

Kusanagi grabbed Ranmaru, pulled him out of the containment chamber, and set him down on the ground. "Ranmaru! Ranmaru! Wake up! Snap out of it, *baka*! If you don't wake up now I'm feeding you dog kibble for a week!" Kusanagi declared as she slapped him hard across the face, tears in her eyes.

Ranmaru slowly opened his eyes, which widened considerably once he caught sight of Kusanagi, "Kusanagi...*Oujo-sama*..." He said in a low, weak voice. *Am I dreaming? And why do I have a bad feeling...something to do with dog kibble?* Shiver.

Kusanagi beamed and smiled down at Ranmaru with

relief...and - as Gunnar watched he was sure of it but shocked nonetheless - love. Tears were shining in her emerald green eyes but they were now tears of happiness. Gunnar Martin had never before seen such a soft expression on K The Bitch's face before - it was just so open and genuinely happy. *She's never smiled like that before.* Even when Gunnar and Kusanagi had oftentimes exchanged witty banter and jokes as they frequently crossed paths and fought with each other. The Bitch Gunnar knew always frowned and had her eyebrows closely furrowed together. But right then, in that moment, Kusanagi looked very different...beautiful even. *Whoa.* Gunnar had never really realized that before. *She really must be in love with him to make an expression like that.*

"Can you stand?" Kusanagi asked Ranmaru.

"Yes." Ranmaru replied as he let Kusanagi help him up.

Roze had headed towards Dr. Wolfram intent on killing him now that he had his guard down.

However-

Just as Roze was aiming one of her .45s at him Nadya stood in her path and with a wave of her hand Nadya sent a burst of telekinetic power at her, which sent Roze flying back with a surprised cry.

Roze quickly pushed herself up to her feet and began to duel with the witch. The witch sent telekinetic blasts Roze's way but this time Roze used her unusual agility to dodge, leap, cartwheel, and back flip out of the way of the attacks - while at the same time returning a few shots of her own. Only this time Roze let the two clips that had been filled with rubber bullets drop to the floor and reloaded her twin guns with clips of real bullets.

Dr. Wolfram noticed Kusanagi taking Ranmaru towards the exit, "NO! You bitch! I won't let you have him! Ranmaru is mine!"

Kusanagi frowned and turned to glare back at the deranged doctor, "Gee, Wolfram, I didn't know you swing that way. There's no way I'm letting a deviant like you anywhere near my Ranmaru now!" She pointed her *bokken* at him. "Pervert!"

“W-what?” Dr. Wolfram sputtered, his face turning red. “It’s not like that! I only find Ranmaru interesting as a potential comrade or specimen!”

“*Mmhmm~*” Kusanagi didn’t sound at all convinced, “Well, Ranmaru is a bit of a pretty boy isn’t he? A regular *bishonen*. *Teehee~*” Kusanagi sighed and shook her head. “Gee, Ranmaru, you better be careful. You’re popular with both the girls and the *boys*. Well, I suppose I can consider myself lucky that I’m safe from your creepy advances Wolfram.”

“*Teehee?*” Gunnar shivered and then shook his head. “That was just creepy, K. Don’t do that.”

“Enough of this bullshit!” Dr. Wolfram frowned and turned narrowing his eyes at the containment chamber, which still held Kaze. Dr. Wolfram’s eyes met with Kaze’s dark eyes and Dr. Wolfram instantly seized control of Kaze’s mind. Kaze’s eyes turned from coal black to blood-red. Dr. Wolfram then pulled out a handheld control device and pressed a button on it, which opened the hatch of Kaze’s containment chamber.

Kaze leapt out and stalked towards Dr. Wolfram obediently. “Get the fox man and bring him to me.” Dr. Wolfram spoke his command in a low voice and Kaze went running towards Kusanagi and Ranmaru.

Kusanagi’s eyes flickered in Kaze’s direction and her eyes widened in surprise as she took in his new appearance. Her eyes then narrowed at him when she saw that his eyes were glowing red. “Kaze!” Kusanagi started forward but then realized there was something wrong with him. There was no recognition in his eyes and he was growling at her, preparing to attack. *Shit*. He was being mind controlled by Dr. Wolfram. *That bastard!* Kusanagi raised her sword but then faltered. She couldn’t fight Kaze...She just couldn’t...

Kaze took Kusanagi’s moment of hesitation to attack and leapt up into the air at her, his jaws snapping, drool flying through the air.

Gunnar Martin leapt into action - he stood in front of Kusanagi and Ranmaru so that Kaze slammed into him instead and knocked him to the ground.

“Gunnar!” Kusanagi cried out in surprise.

Gunnar wrestled with the giant dog that was now gnawing

on his gun while Gunnar sent a punch to the side of its face. “Go on! Get out of here!”

Kusanagi blinked at him in shock. “Why? Why are you helping us!”

“I guess, I’m a hopeless romantic at heart!” Gunnar declared.

Kusanagi shook her head, with a bemused expression on her face, wondering what that was all about. She turned to find her maid. “Roze! Let’s go!” Kusanagi called out.

“I’m a little busy right now - go!” Roze declared as she fired a few more shots in Nadya’s direction. “I’ll...catch up!” Roze was forced to dodge another of Nadya’s telekinetic attacks.

Kusanagi eyes widened as she watched the fierce confrontation. “But Roze!”

“We should go.” Ranmaru informed her in his dull voice.

“But I can’t just leave them.” Kusanagi persisted.

“We’ll come back for them. I just need to regain my strength.”

Kusanagi looked back into Ranmaru’s serious golden eyes and nodded, “Alright, if you say so.”

Kusanagi and Ranmaru managed to make their escape. Dr. Wolfram became enraged and ran after them, but the dragon suddenly stood in his path.

“*Nooo!*” Dr. Wolfram moaned dramatically as Kusanagi and Ranmaru made it to the hallway and beyond. “Damn you Kusanagi! You’ve screwed up my plans again!” Dr. Wolfram turned to his super computer to check out the current readouts and to see how much of Ranmaru’s DNA sequence he had managed to map. Wolfram frowned it was at ninety five percent.

Kusanagi hurriedly mounted on one of the snow sled quads that her and Roze had left in the hallway and Ranmaru got up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Kusanagi blushed at Ranmaru’s closeness but there was no time for that now! She revved the quad, pressed on the gas, and they sped down the hall. They went flying out what used to be the front door, and then she and Ranmaru went whizzing down the

mountain and through the forest as they made their escape.

The sun had just set and twilight had descended, the sound of wolves howling at the full moon shining overhead was heard in the distance. Kusanagi's hand went instinctively to her waist for her *bokken* sword and she realized that in the commotion to escape she had dropped it. *Shit*. She was weaponless and Ranmaru was in no condition to fight.

Uh oh. Well, Kusanagi shrugged, maybe the wolves won't even notice us and we'll make it out of the forest safely.

AWWHOOO~

A wolf's call sounded from just behind them and Kusanagi looked over her shoulder to see that wolves were already pursuing them. She could spot their gleaming red eyes in the darkness. She wondered if they were ordinary wolves or something more...? All around them more and more pairs of gleaming red eyes became visible through the trees and surrounding foliage. They were surrounded.

The wolves began to give chase and Kusanagi increased their speed but the wolves were much faster than normal wolves and easily managed to catch up to them. One leapt up at Kusanagi and Ranmaru moved to shield her with his body, but they were both knocked off of the quad as a result.

The wolves attacked the quad and viciously went right for the gas line before then leaping away. The quad exploded and was engulfed in a mass of flames.

"Aw man! My quad! Shit!" Kusanagi moaned despairingly.

The wolves circled around them and Ranmaru stood in front of Kusanagi protectively. *Ranmaru...*

One of the wolves leapt at Ranmaru and knocked him down to the snowy ground and latched onto his arm fiercely sinking its teeth into his flesh. Ranmaru punched the wolf across its jaw and with an angry growl it leapt away. Ranmaru staggered to his feet, blood pouring down his now useless arm that was just hanging limply at his side since his tendons had been cut.

Another wolf leapt at Ranmaru and sunk its teeth into the back of Ranmaru's leg aiming for the tendons there as well in order to sever them. Ranmaru spun and used his other leg to kick the wolf aside, but now he was without the use of his right leg.

The wolves were much smarter than normal wolves Kusanagi realized with a start, and they had calculatingly aimed for Ranmaru's tendons. With Ranmaru now suffering from being unable to use both his right arm and right leg Kusanagi knew they were in serious trouble. *We're in some deep shit here. No other choice but to-* Kusanagi grabbed his wrist, "Run!"

Kusanagi pulled Ranmaru blindly through the forest with the wolves hot on their heels. Then they emerged out onto a strange open clearing - the full moon was visible overhead and was casting an almost blinding light upon the clearing that was covered in a white blanket of sparkling snow. Was it Kusanagi's imagination or was the moon laughing at her? *Dammit!* They'd be sitting ducks now - there was no coverage anywhere. Though Kusanagi continued to pull the struggling and limping Ranmaru along behind her as they proceeded to make their way forward. They had to at least try and make it to the other side, Kusanagi decided. Where she saw that there were thicker trees and foliage that would provide them with cover and with places to hide.

Kusanagi looked back to see how far behind the wolves were when she noticed something odd. Her brows furrowed when she realized that the wolves had in fact stopped pursuing them and had all gathered at the very edge of the white clearing that Ranmaru and Kusanagi were currently making their way across. *Now that's funny.* Kusanagi stopped dead in her tracks. She suddenly had a very bad feeling about this. "Hey, Ranmaru, they're not chasing us anymore. They're just standing there and watching us. See?"

The wolves were pacing back and forth restlessly in front of the clearing that Kusanagi and Ranmaru had run into and seemed unable to continue forward. Kusanagi frowned thoughtfully. "Why aren't they chasing us? It almost looks like they're afraid of something. Uh oh, I have a really bad feeling about this Ranmaru-"

Crack

An ominous cracking sound echoed through the forest clearing and a couple of crows took flight from some of the trees that were nearby. Kusanagi looked down. The cracks had started

around their feet and began to extend outwards. *Ice!* Kusanagi realized in horror. Ranmaru and Kusanagi had stumbled out onto a frozen lake. *Oh shit!*

“Run!” Kusanagi declared as she watched the ice begin to crack under their feet. The two began to run and stumble their way forward across the ice-

However-

The ice beneath Ranmaru’s feet suddenly cracked and gave way. Ranmaru fell into the lake and would have instantly been pulled under and swept away by the current if it hadn’t been for Kusanagi’s firm hold on Ranmaru’s wrist.

She did not let go but instead let herself get slammed down into the ice as she landed on her chest, and had the wind knocked out of her as Ranmaru sank under the icy surface. “Ranmaru!” Kusanagi pulled Ranmaru up fiercely and his head quickly popped up from out of the lake. Ranmaru gasped for breath. “Hang on! AHH!” Kusanagi gathered her strength and pulled Ranmaru up and out of the icy water and back onto the solid ice.

The two were both panting for breath.

“You saved me.” Ranmaru sounded surprised.

Kusanagi shot him an irritated look as if to say ‘it can happen’. “We’re not out of the woods just yet though, come on.” Kusanagi stood up and stretched her hand out to Ranmaru who took it. Hand in hand, they continued their way across the icy lake until they finally made it safely to the other side.

Kusanagi glanced sideways at Ranmaru and could see that his entire body was shivering violently. *Shit.* At this rate unless they found a place where Ranmaru could get warm he’d end up getting hypothermia. Ice, water, and the cold were all a fox demon’s weaknesses. Ranmaru was in deep trouble. *Though now that I think of it, when isn’t he in trouble? Sigh.*

Kusanagi stripped off her long, green leather jacket and wrapped it around Ranmaru’s lean form - he seemed smaller to her somehow in that moment and it sent a pang through her heart. “Come on, we have to find shelter.” Kusanagi declared as she grabbed Ranmaru’s wrist and started forward again.

Ranmaru dazedly let Kusanagi pull him along. He was so cold and in so much pain...was he really even still alive? Or was

this hell? But the feel of Kusanagi's warm hand around his wrist seemed to be the only thing that gave Ranmaru the will to keep moving. He used all his concentration to merely put one foot in front of the other and continue moving forward. *Kusanagi...she came to rescue me...*

A light snow had begun to fall, and the forest seemed eerily quiet around them. Just when Kusanagi was about to give up hope she caught sight of a cave. *Yes! Lucky!*

Ranmaru stumbled and Kusanagi caught him and put his arm around her shoulders. "Just hang in there, Ranmaru, we're almost there..." She led him inside of the cave.

The cave went back pretty far and Kusanagi went back as far as they could possibly go before setting Ranmaru down on the cold stone floor of the cave. Ranmaru was turning blue and his body was shivering violently. He desperately needed a fire.

"Wait here." Kusanagi told him before leaving the cave. She quickly gathered the needed firewood before rushing back into the cave. She set up the pile of wood and shook Ranmaru roughly awake. "*Oi!* Don't fall asleep! Light this wood with your fox-fire! Hurry!"

Ranmaru stirred and looked at Kusanagi dully, dazedly, and Kusanagi slapped him hard across the face, tears in her eyes. She couldn't help it, she was so afraid at seeing him like this, so afraid of losing him...She didn't know how else to react.

Ranmaru's eyes widened as he caught sight of the fear that was hidden in her emerald green depths. Why was she afraid? What was she saying? Her voice sounded like it was coming from so far away. But she had been saying something about a fire hadn't she? Ranmaru blinked down and looked at the pile of wood that had been set before him. Ah, Kusanagi must have wanted him to light it. But did he even have the strength left to do it?

"You can do it, Ranmaru." Kusanagi assured him, patting his arm.

Yosh! Ranmaru reached out his trembling hand towards the wood and concentrated his *yokai* power. A small fireball shot out of the palm of his hand and hit the pile of small sticks, which

instantly caught on fire.

Kusanagi grinned. "Alright! You did it Ranmaru!" Kusanagi turned to him but saw that Ranmaru was already falling back into unconsciousness. *Shit!* His body was going into shock. She had to get those wet clothes off of him immediately.

Kusanagi grabbed Ranmaru and began to take off his wet clothes. Kusanagi blushed and paused at his boxers, but decided it was too dangerous to leave them on. (She didn't want him losing anything important now did she?) So she merely closed her eyes before slipping them off as well. Then with her eyes still closed she wrapped her green jacket around his waist like a skirt. *There! Yosha!*

She looked down at Ranmaru and frowned since he still looked pretty bad. But what else was there that she could do to help him get warm? Then it hit her...this was just like in those movies or sappy romance novels where the hero and heroine had to share their body warmth because they had gotten trapped up in the snowy mountains of Canada while they had been on a skiing trip. The couple would cuddle and then they would ultimately make lo-

Kusanagi's face turned bright red and steam came out of her ears as she internally combusted! *No way! That is so not happening! For one thing this isn't even a nice log cabin but a dank, freezing cave.* She couldn't share her body warmth with Ranmaru - that was just insane, crazy! *No frickin way!* Kusanagi began to inwardly spaz out at the very idea of stripping down and embracing Ranmaru while being half-naked. *There's just no way!* She continued to blush.

Kusanagi nodded to herself in relief, yes her mind was made up. There was just...no...way...Kusanagi looked down at Ranmaru's pathetic, shivering form. He had his arms wrapped around his limbs while he was curled up in the fetal position and Kusanagi could hear him whimpering from the cold, pain, or perhaps...memories. Kusanagi didn't know nor did she really want to know which. This wasn't some romantic moment...this was a nightmare. Ranmaru was dying right before her very eyes...

Her heart ached to see him so broken, frail and weak looking. Her handsome, strong, powerful, stubborn, stoic, idiotic, *Samurai* Butler - Ranmaru. She smiled fondly at the thought as

she reached out to stroke his hair.

A steely look formed in Kusanagi's eyes, she had made up her mind, for the second time. She began to strip off her clothes until she was in nothing but her bra and panties. She then laid down next to Ranmaru and pulled him into her embrace, "Don't get any ideas...I'm just doing this to save your ass, alright? You know, share body heat and all that jazz." Kusanagi gripped as she ran her hands up and down Ranmaru's back in an effort to get his circulation going and while also trying to warm him up.

"Ranmaru? You shouldn't sleep..." Kusanagi chided.

Ranmaru nestled up closer to Kusanagi, and buried his face in her chest-

"Don't worry...*Oujo-sama*..." Ranmaru began, teeth chattering, "I...understand but...please just let me stay like this...when I'm like this I feel...like I'm dreaming." Ranmaru murmured into her chest.

Kusanagi's ears turned pink and she was glad Ranmaru didn't see. "*Baka*..." she said affectionately as she began to stroke his hair.

You love him don't you? Gunnar's words echoed in her mind.

Lo-love? Kusanagi tightened her hold around Ranmaru unconsciously. Did she love Ranmaru? *Naw...Impossible...*

Ranmaru seemed to be losing consciousness again, "Don't fall asleep Ranmaru *no baka!*"

"But...it's so cold...and it hurts so much...and...I'm all alone..." Ranmaru murmured, his voice laced with pain.

Kusanagi blinked. "Alone? But you're not alone Ranmaru. I'm right here with you. It's me Kusanagi." She comforted him in a warm voice, letting one of her masks drop.

"Kusanagi...?"

"That's right. Stay with me Ranmaru. Don't leave me alone. *Please.*"

Oujo-sama...I won't ever leave you...I promise..."

"Good, that way, together, we won't have to be alone anymore." Kusanagi smiled and then her eyelids slowly began to

droop. She was just so tired. She decided she would just rest her eyes, for just a moment...

CHAPTER 6

Dragons are misunderstood creatures

Roze's guns were blasted out of her hands by a blast of Nadya's telekinetic power and then Roze found herself being blown backwards into the wall with a crack. She slid down the wall where she remained unmoving. Gunnar was easily overpowered by Kaze and just as Kaze would have ripped Gunnar's throat out Dr. Wolfram called out.

"Enough, Kaze."

Kaze stopped moving, his teeth mere centimeters from Gunnar's throat.

"SP! Take these two to the holding chambers immediately!" Dr. Wolfram directed his SP, who moved forward to grab Gunnar and Roze before taking them to the prison area. They were then both thrown unceremoniously into a cell together.

Roze let out a cry of pain as the SP simply tossed her roughly inside the cell. She grasped at her ankle realizing she had twisted it, tears in her eyes.

"Are you alright, lass?" Gunnar said with his heavy Scottish accent, after they had also tossed him roughly inside of the cell. He managed to scramble to his feet quickly and rush to Roze's side.

Roze turned away from Gunnar in surprise at his concern. Perhaps, chivalry wasn't dead after all. "I-I'm just fine..."

Gunnar ripped off part of his shirt before leaning forward

to wrap the piece of cloth around Roze's ankle. "This should help." He explained.

Roze turned back to face him quizzically. Did he truly not recognize her? About five years ago Roze had been a Most Wanted, International, Super Thief in Europe who had been known as: Bloody Rose.

FLASHBACK

Ten years ago, detective Gunnar Martin had been assigned to the case of the notorious Bloody Rose and had pursued the lady thief all across Europe relentlessly.

Bloody Rose usually targeted rare jewels, or priceless artifacts, but then one day she caught wind of something a hundred times more valuable - a legendary bird. A phoenix that apparently had golden feathers.

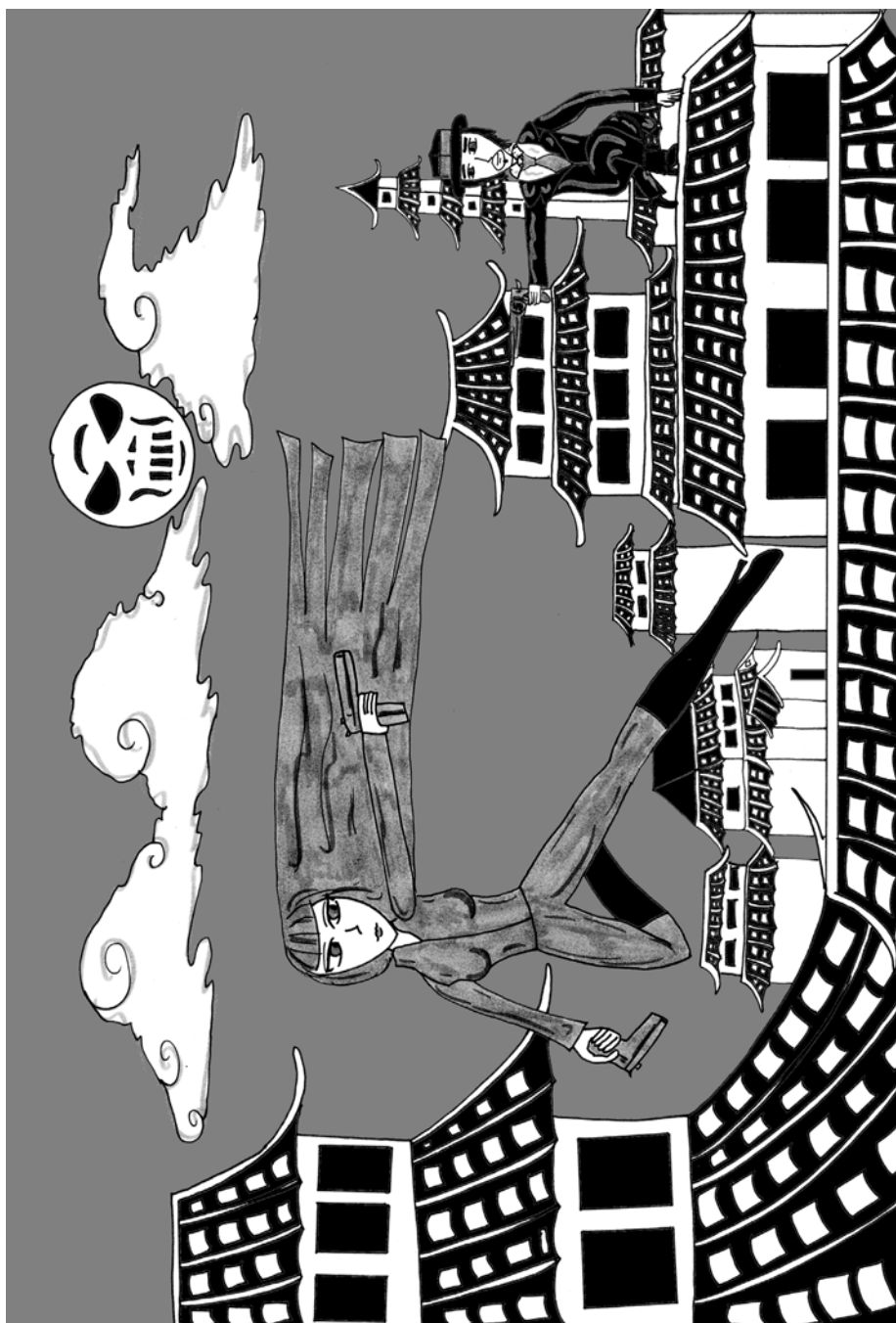
Bloody Rose's interest had been piqued and so she had decided to see if the legendary bird truly existed for herself. And if she found that it did exist she planned on stealing it of course. Roze traveled all the way to Venice, Italy in order to steal the phoenix, and managed to infiltrate the building where the bird was being held, getting past the high level security and finally arriving at the main chamber where the bird was located.

There in the very center of the chamber and trapped in a large steel cage, which was sitting on a raised and obviously boobly trapped pedestal was the bird. Just as she was approaching the cage, however, she realized she wasn't alone. Apparently, she wasn't the only one trying to steal the bird that night. Dr. Wolfram and Nadya were there also. Roze ended up fighting against them, but Nadya blasted Roze back unexpectedly with a burst of her telekinetic power and Roze went flying through a nearby window!

Roze managed to grasp the windowsill with one of her hands at the very last second as she was falling through the air, shards of broken glass were cutting deeply into the palm of her hand as she tried to hang on for dear life, but she knew she couldn't hold on for much longer-

Shit! Was this how the International, Super Thief, Bloody Rose would meet her end? *I'm getting too old for this crap...*

But it was at that moment that Kusanagi had appeared out of nowhere and grasped Roze's hand just as she was about to



plummet to her death. Kusanagi then pulled Roze back up and into the chamber while displaying an unusual amount of strength for a girl her age. Kusanagi had saved Roze's life.

Kusanagi looked Roze over, eyeing the thief interestedly from head to toe, and taking in her tight fitting, one piece, red leather, jumpsuit, which zipped up in front, and striking, long, blood-red hair. Kusanagi nodded to herself knowingly, "Bloody Rose huh?"

Roze blinked back in surprise but nodded. Kusanagi stuck her hand out for Roze to shake.

"Kimamura Kusanagi." Kusanagi declared as she shook Roze's hand vigorously. "Now, I do believe I just saved your life so that means you owe me one." Kusanagi gave her a cheeky grin.

Roze felt a trickle of sweat form on her brow in response; just who did this girl think she was? But Roze realized that the girl was right. She did indeed owe this strange girl one. "What do you want?"

"I'm here to save that phoenix from Dr. Wolframs's evil clutches! He performs experiments on rare or magical creatures, you see. Anyway, I think if we join forces we'll have a chance against them. I've fought that witch Nadya before so if you can distract the doctor for me I think we can do this!"

Roze found herself nodding in agreement. "Well, alright." *It's not like I have much of a choice anyways. Let's just hope we don't get our asses kicked.*

But Kusanagi turned out to be a lot tougher than she looked. She was somehow managing to keep the witch Nadya on her toes by dodging all of Nadya's invisible telekinetic attacks effortlessly - probably by using innate battle instincts to sense the attacks. *Just who is this girl?* Roze mused to herself in wonder. And then Kusanagi managed to get Nadya to accidentally shatter another window, which as the shards were raining down onto Nadya, gave Kusanagi the perfect opportunity to rush over, break the birdcage open with one bash of her wooden...stick? No, Roze realized, shaking her head, Kusanagi was holding some kind of wooden sword.

Roze had been having her own duel against Dr. Wolfram in the meantime. Roze was an ace shot and she fired countless

rounds at Dr. Wolfram relentlessly using her twin .45 handguns. However, she hadn't expected his reflexes to be as good as they were and the way he moved - Roze shook her head. Those movements...weren't human. Wolfram also seemed to possess a sixth sense when it came to battle, but when Wolfram had actually gotten down on all fours to rush and attack her it made Roze think: *There's definitely something up with this guy.*

Roze didn't have any more time to muse on this strange anomaly, however, since Kusanagi, phoenix in hand, was suddenly calling out to Roze to follow her. Roze turned and her eyes widened when she saw that Kusanagi had already gotten a hold of the phoenix. *Dang!* The girl was good, whoever she was. Roze had to give her that. Overall, Kusanagi was a lot stronger and more ingenious than Roze could have ever anticipated. *The girl would make a good partner...*

Roze decided that this was a sign that her run as a notorious, international, Super Thief had finally come to its end. She owed her life to Kusanagi and right then and there decided to take Kusanagi under her wing and make Kusanagi her protégé. Roze would teach her everything she knew including all the things she had learned over her years as a thief. At least, that's how it had started out. Roze taught Kusanagi everything she knew about how to be the perfect thief - stealth, weapons training, sniper skills, martial arts. And Kusanagi had been a fast learner.

As it so happened, Roze discovered that Kusanagi had not been entirely unschooled in the martial arts department and was in the *kendo* club of her high school back in Japan. This had made her training go a lot faster. Kusanagi had excelled in everything Roze taught her surprisingly well - well, except for the stealth part. And somewhere along the way when Roze realized Kusanagi didn't need her as a *sensei* anymore since 'the student had already surpassed the master', Kusanagi had somehow convinced Roze to stay with her and be her maid.

Or rather become her bodyguard whose front was that of a maid. Kusanagi had not only saved Roze's life but had also given her a second chance at life to do something better, decent. And so

Roze had accepted though it was less for her sake and more for the opportunity to remain close enough to Kusanagi in order to protect her.

This was also why Roze knew the girl who existed behind the mask.

Roze had been by Kusanagi's side before Kusanagi's prophetic dreams had started, and before her parents were murdered, so she knew the *real* Kusanagi.

The Kusanagi, who was a kind-hearted girl, who had gone around the world protecting animals from Dr. Wolfram and Nadya. The Kusanagi, who had been in love with her *Samurai* Butler, Mamoru, and who had acted like a normal teenage girl anytime she was around him: blushing, stuttering, and making a complete fool of herself. The Kusanagi, who had loved and cared deeply for her parents and was noticeably happy while in their presence. And the Kusanagi, who was a social butterfly, and who had always surrounded herself with lots of friends.

This was the *real* Kusanagi.

END OF FLASHBACK

After Roze had moved to Japan to become Kusanagi's bodyguard and maid - that was the last she had seen of Gunnar Martin. 'Bloody Rose' had simply vanished into thin air and K The Bitch had taken her place - making her grand debut as an international Super Thief, who stole endangered, rare or magical creatures. Gunnar had to forget all about Bloody Rose and had been reassigned to the K The Bitch case instead.

Bloody Rose and Gunnar Martin had been enemies, sure. But Roze had never actually felt hate or contempt towards the stubborn detective, who had tried to catch her numerous times. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Somehow Gunnar had earned her respect. Gunnar was an honorable man and there had been times during a few sticky situations where Roze had gotten in over her head and Gunnar had actually saved her. Though she didn't know or understand why. She had always wanted to ask him though. Perhaps now was her chance...

Roze flinched in pain as Gunnar finished tying the makeshift bandage tightly around her ankle.

"Sorry." He apologized good-naturedly and smiled openly at her.

But then Gunnar's smile suddenly faltered as he looked Roze over, "You know, there's something oddly familiar about you. I can't quite put my finger on it but...do I know you?" Gunnar chuckled to himself. "Though I think I would remember a gun-toting maid."

Roze immediately became evasive, "I don't know what you're talking about Gunn, we've never met before."

Gunnar raised an eyebrow at her and he smirked, as a sudden thought seemed to come to mind. "Take off your glasses."

Roze spun around in surprise, "What? I can't...!" She knew that this would reveal her eyes – eyes that were the eyes of a killer and a thief. Roze hated her eyes.

"Oh come on, just do it." Gunnar teased, "I bet you have beautiful eyes." Gunnar sighed when Roze continued to shake her head adamantly and held onto her glasses in a vice grip. "Oh well, I guess there's no helping it." Gunnar put his hands out in a helpless gesture before him and pretended to have given up. Roze sighed a breath of relief and let go of her glasses. But that's when Gunnar suddenly reached out and plucked Roze's glasses right off her face before she could react.

Shit. Roze blushed as he narrowed his eyes at her.

Gunnar's expression softened, "I was right. You have beautiful eyes."

Roze blinked back at him in shock...he didn't recognize her?

"I thought it was you, Bloody Rose." Gunnar reached his hand out to touch her now short hair. "You cut your hair...you should have kept it long, lass. And what happened to that tight, red leather number you used to wear? Now, not having that on any more should be considered a crime."

Roze whacked his shoulder good-naturedly, "*Mou!* Did you really know it was me?"

Gunnar nodded, "The twin .45s kind of gave you away. I've never seen anyone as skilled with two guns or as agile as you are. Your movements and the way you fight - it's kind of hard to forget. Even dressed up in that maid's uniform I was able to recognize you pretty easily for who you really are." Gunnar

scratched his cheek somewhat bashfully. "So...you became K The Bitch's Maid huh? How the hell did that happen?"

Roze smiled, "She saved my life and gave me a new one."

"I see..." Gunnar nodded and stroked his goatee thoughtfully, "Maybe she's not such a total bitch after all. Though I already suspected as much and even more so after today. She came all the way to Germany to save that butler of hers after all. I think she's really in love with him. But I don't think even she realizes that yet. She'll probably be coming back for you too, Bloody Rose."

"It's just Roze now."

Gunnar nodded, "Right, Roze." His expression then turned serious. "Why do you hide your eyes behind those glasses of yours, Roze?"

Roze turned away, "My eyes...they're the eyes of a killer..."

Gunnar grasped her chin and turned her face back to look back at him and stared deeply into her dark brown eyes, "You're wrong. They're the eyes of someone with spirit. You're a fighter. There's nothing wrong with that. I think your eyes are beautiful, Bloody Rose."

Roze smiled teasingly, "Oh? And did you always think this? Even when we were enemies, Detective?"

"Yes." Gunnar replied not missing a beat.

Roze gasped, "But then...why didn't you tell me?"

Gunnar shrugged, "There was never the right time. But...we're not enemies now are we?"

Roze shook her head. "No. I don't think we were ever really enemies, Gunnar. There's...something I've always wanted to ask you though."

"Go right ahead, lass."

"Those times that you...saved me. I don't understand. During those times you should have taken advantage of the fact that I was completely defenseless, apprehended and turned me in. But you didn't. Instead you let me go. It doesn't make any sense – why?" She gave him a quizzical look.

Gunnar chuckled to himself and put his hands behind his head in a careless gesture, "Ah, well, I had hoped by now my true intentions would have become obvious to you, lass. Apparently

not.”

“True intentions?” Roze questioned curiously.

“Yes, my *intentions...*” Gunnar smirked as he boldly grasped her chin and began to lean forward-

However-

An SP guard passed by and whistled encouragingly at them. “*Hyyy~*”

Gunnar and Roze quickly sprang apart from each other, blushing, and both were feeling extremely embarrassed.

“Aw, don’t stop now on my account.” The SP pouted, “And just when it was getting good too.”

Roze’s eye twitched in annoyance, “This bozo is so lucky I don’t have my guns.” *As soon as I get out of this cell he is so dead.*

Gunnar chuckled, “You shouldn’t joke about things like that, lassie, it doesn’t become you.”

“Ah shut up.” Roze frowned back at him, but then her expression softened. *Gunnar...does he...?*

FLASHBACK

“Ranmaru! Ranmaru! Ranmaru!” Nagi called out happily as she ran through the forest. Ranmaru had arranged to rendezvous with Nagi at their special meeting place where a large, ancient, cherry blossom tree stood in a clearing in the forest. The cherry blossom tree had a silvery colored, gnarled trunk and branches that were big enough to sit in. The blossoms were in full bloom in vivid hues of pink, purple and white. Ranmaru and Nagi would oftentimes go there together and have a picnic - just the two of them. That day Nagi had prepared Ranmaru a special boxed lunch, which contained his favorite food - fried *tofu*. This was in celebration of the two of them finally getting to see each other again after so long.

If Ranmaru had seen her running like that he probably would have scolded her because of her health. But Nagi was just too excited to finally get to see Ranmaru again that she couldn’t help but be in a hurry to go see him. Their love was a forbidden love, one that had to be kept a secret.

Nagi understood why their love was forbidden better than anyone. Ranmaru was the Celestial War General of the Goddess Inari after all and she was a human and a *miko* or priestess. Not only was he part *kami*, god, he was also part *yokai* and *yokai* and *miko* were absolutely forbidden to fall in love with each other. For centuries the two had been enemies...

Nagi had read in the scrolls she kept at the shrine that their union could disrupt the entire balance of the universe. *Yokai* held evil within them while *miko* were pure good incarnate. To have these two opposites come together was taboo. Because their union would create a child...who was a Rule Breaker. At least, this is what the legends and scrolls had revealed to Nagi.

But Nagi didn't care about any of that. All she cared about was seeing Ranmaru again. *I want to see him! I want to hold him in my arms! Oh Ranmaru!* Nagi could just sit and stare at Ranmaru's face for hours. To her his face was perfection - his thin, kissable lips, his arched brows, his beautiful golden eyes with soft, dark lashes, and his soft, copper-colored hair-

Nagi had reached their meeting place and caught sight of Ranmaru up ahead of her. He was standing with his back to her under the cheery blossom tree while a mass of petals flew through the air, and swirled around him in a circle like a whirlwind, "Ran-" She was calling out to him when her words died on her tongue. *That man* wasn't her Ranmaru.

'Ranmaru' turned around to greet her, a cool smile on his face, "Nagi my love."

Nagi dropped her *bento* box and took a step back. The contents of the lunch she had so painstakingly prepared for Ranmaru spilled over the grassy ground. "You're not Ranmaru. Who are you?"

'Ranmaru' frowned. "I should have expected as much from a *miko* as gifted with the Sight and as powerful as you are. You saw right through me didn't you, Nagi?" 'Ranmaru's' image shimmered and shifted like a mirage until the mirror image of the man she loved was no longer standing before her, but instead it was none other than Kenmaru, Ranmaru's best friend...and fellow Celestial War General.

Nagi's eyes widened, "Kenmaru? What are you doing here? Where's Ranmaru?"

Kenmaru's lips quirked. "Women, they always have to know the *why* of things don't they? I'm here to take you away with me, Nagi. Now come-" He held out his hand to her.

Nagi shook her head, her long, silky, black hair swishing back and forth, "No...where's Ranmaru?"

Kenmaru's expression turned angry, "Enough about him! Ranmaru! Ranmaru! Ranmaru! God! It's *all* I ever hear about! Well, I'm sick of it! I'm sick of living in his shadow. I'm sick of him stealing things that belong to me - like your love." Kenmaru complained in a whiney voice.

"Love?" Nagi appeared confused.

"Yes, that's right. I love you. And I want you to come away with me, so that we can be together. There's so much I want, no, need to tell you Nagi. I'm sure that I can make you understand and accept my feelings..." Kenmaru gave her a hopeful look.

Nagi's expression turned sad and she gave Kenmaru a pitying look, "But I don't love you. I love Ranmaru. You can't force someone to love you, Kenmaru. I can't be what you want me to be, please try and understand."

"You don't have to do anything. We're the *same* Nagi. We're kindred spirits. I can make you understand somehow I just need to be alone with you-" Kenmaru rushed forward and hit Nagi over the back of her neck knocking her out cold. As she fell forward he easily caught her in his waiting arms. "You'll see...I'll make you understand how much I love you." Kenmaru turned to go but then caught sight of the *tofu* that had fallen onto the ground. Kenmaru reached over and picked up a piece of *tofu* before popping it into his mouth. His eyes widened. "*Umai*...delicious. Is this the flavor of love?"

Kenmaru quickly took Nagi back to a castle that he had recently conquered and brought her up to the royal bedchamber. There he tossed her indelicately on the bed with the intention of marking her as his life-mate once and for all. Once she was marked she would become his whether she liked it or not. Then he would claim her and show her who the better man was.

Nagi regained consciousness and glared up at Kenmaru,

who was hovering over her as he straddled her. He had been running his fingers through her hair lovingly while she had been asleep. "He'll come for me, he will. And then you will be in a great deal of trouble." Nagi declared fearlessly.

Kenmaru merely smiled unconcernedly and leaned forward, ready to kiss her supple lips, "Let him come..."

At that exact moment Ranmaru burst through the door to the bedchamber and caught sight of Kenmaru on top of Nagi. He instantly saw red and attacked Kenmaru and with such force that the two of them went flying out of the castle window, which shattered.

"Ranmaru!" Nagi cried after them as she saw both men fall out of the window. She hopped off the bed and ran over to the windowsill, grasping the edge, and peering down below to watch their ensuing battle. *Ranmaru!*

Nagi ran out from the bedchamber, and made her way hurriedly down the hallway - she had to go to him. Ranmaru needed her. She was running so fast that one of the straps on her *zori* sandals snapped and she ended up falling to the floor with a splat right on her face. *Ow*. Nagi rubbed her nose painfully and took off her *zori* sandals so that she could continue to run down the halls. She finally made her way out of the castle and began to run in the direction of where Ranmaru and Kenmaru were battling each other.

Best friends...were fighting each other to the death. Nagi shook her head; she couldn't allow this to continue. Not over her. She knew how much Ranmaru cared for Kenmaru. He had confided everything to her. She understood Ranmaru. And his real reason for fighting...

She had to stop them somehow - they were *nakama*, comrades. And not only that Ranmaru considered Kenmaru to be his brother. They shouldn't be fighting at all. Not when Kenmaru was merely confused by his emotions. Kenmaru didn't want Nagi's love - he just wanted to *be loved*.

Nagi began to cough suddenly, violent coughs that wracked her entire petite frame, and she put a hand in front of her mouth. When she pulled her hand away she looked down at the palm of her hand in surprise - there was blood.

Nagi risked looking behind her and could see the Grim

Reaper's shadow there, and it was enormous. Its face was well defined at this point and she could see its glaring eyes and leering, twisted grin. His mouth was open wide as the Reaper was laughing with glee. Soon, he would harvest her soul. She was going to die. She truly only had *minutes* of life left. *Dammit!* There was so much she still wanted to do, so many moments she had hoped to share with Ranmaru but now she could only do one thing for him...

Ranmaru...she couldn't let him die. She loved him and the thought of him dying or of him suffering broke her heart. No, she wouldn't let him die! She wouldn't let Kenmaru kill him! And if she was able to she would try and save Kenmaru too. She would do this even if she only had one breath left in her frail sickly body. She would try.

Nagi took a deep breath; steeling herself, and gathered her strength before running towards the two combating Celestial foxes. She could see that Kenmaru was doing something very foolish and summoning the legendary Black Fire - a fire that was so powerful it could consume everything in its path, but it was also a hellish fire that had a price when used. It was known to consume the user's insides if used recklessly.

Ranmaru had frozen in place. Kenmaru had just unleashed the Black Fire attack upon him and Ranmaru realized there was no escape-

Nagi leapt into action and stepped in front of Ranmaru and raised her hand, shielding Ranmaru with her purifying holy and spiritual *miko* powers, which she allowed to flare to life around her in a blue-tinged light. She put everything she had left into protecting Ranmaru and tried to put in enough energy to reach Kenmaru too, but protecting Ranmaru was all she could manage as she felt her body giving out on her...

This was all she could do in her final moments. Protect the man she loved. She had wanted to do *something* though and if that meant being able to save the man she loved more than anything - even life itself - then so be it. That would be the mark that she would leave behind.

"Nagi!" Ranmaru cried out as Nagi shielded him from the



Black Fire attack. He was surprised by how powerful she had seemed in that moment, almost invincible. His Nagi really was a powerful *miko* indeed. He couldn't help but admire her. One mere touch and the *miko* before him could have purified him instantly.

She then managed to purify and nullify Kenmaru's attack completely. And then it was over. Nagi sunk to her knees in exhaustion. And she could see the Grim Reaper's shadow rising up off the ground behind her, his scythe swinging through the air-

Ranmaru was at her side and saying - something. She opened her mouth to speak. She had to let him know that this was not his fault, that she was dying because of her sickness and she had also wanted to say goodbye.

But Ranmaru left her to face off with Kenmaru once more before she could get the words out of her mouth and all of her strength suddenly seemed to leave Nagi. She simply allowed herself to collapse upon the ground once she realized that it was futile to get Ranmaru's attention in his current state, and now that she no longer had enough time...

She watched Ranmaru and Kenmaru fight and knew Ranmaru would win. Nagi smiled happy with the knowledge that at least her love would survive. But she also felt a little sad for Kenmaru. She had wanted to help him too somehow. "Ranmaru, my love...*sayonara. Aishiteru*, I love you. Someday, I hope the path of one of our many lives will cross again..." She murmured before her eyes closed.

The Grim Reaper's shadow was now fully materialized behind her and he swung his giant scythe down upon Nagi's frail looking body - harvesting her soul and sending it to the afterlife once and for all. Where her soul would wait until it was one day reincarnated...

"What a tragic love those two shared." The Grim Reaper mused aloud, "Humans really are so very interesting. Perhaps, the two of them will find each other again someday. It's a pity that Ranmaru will never know what she tried to say to him in the end. But that's human life I suppose - short and full of regrets. She is the first soul I didn't want to reap. Nagi, if I could have given you

more time I would have, but it's against the rules. I wonder if she can forgive me." The Grim Reaper shrugged. "What's to be forgiven anyways? I am Death after all. I'm only being true to my nature..."

The Grim Reaper was looking at his scythe pensively before he sensed someone's approach and by her aura he knew that this woman was pure evil. He turned to see none other than the dark *miko* witch Kagura approaching Nagi's fallen form. *Ah, the two of them were twin sisters. Surely, Kagura will be saddened by her sister's passing...* The Grim Reaper mused to himself.

But Kagura seemed unaffected as she approached Nagi's fallen form, her face a cool mask of indifference. She removed a dagger from within the folds of her *haori* sleeve and then used this dagger to reach down and swiftly cut a lock of Nagi's hair. She then reached inside of her sleeve to pull out what the Grim Reaper saw was a small doll made of straw. Kagura took the lock of hair she had stolen from Nagi's corpse and pinned it to the doll. Next, Kagura bent over Nagi and grabbed her hand pricking one of her fingers with a long metal pin. A small round bead of blood formed on the very tip of Nagi's pale finger and this single drop of blood Kagura also added to her doll.

The Grim Reaper's eyes widened in disbelief, "What are you doing, *miko* witch?" He demanded in a harsh tone.

Kagura turned to eye the Grim Reaper curiously, "You're still here, Grim Reaper-*sama*? Don't you have better things to do like perhaps going and reaping more human souls? And besides, this is really none of your business, Grim Reaper-*sama*. The matters of us humans or of the living don't really concern you, now do they?" Kagura smirked before then returning her attention to the straw doll in her hands. "Now, it is complete. With this doll I can fulfill my curse upon Nagi! Izanami! Goddess of pestilence and plague I call upon your power! In exchange I give you my body and my soul! Hear me! Oh great goddess! And grant me my wish!"

A fierce ominous wind began to pick up and blow around Kagura, the Grim Reaper and Nagi's corpse.

SPEAK, MERE MORTAL. YOUR WISH SHALL BE GRANTED. ONLY BE PREPARED TO PAY THE PRICE. Came

a booming voice that echoed through the air as dark clouds began to move past swiftly overhead and in seconds the entire bright blue sky had been consumed by darkness and had turned pitch black as thunder sounded angrily in the distance.

Kagura smiled triumphantly, it was only a *miko* after all who could directly communicate with the gods and goddesses like this. Only a *miko* as powerful as her would ever have been able to get the attention of the Goddess Izanami as she had! “I wish to seal and curse this girl’s power and Sight in her next life! Let her no longer be a Seer, who can foretell the future! Let her only see a future filled with Death! Let her powers as a *miko* be buried. And let her Sight be closed off so that she will no longer See the Unseen.”

“NO!” The Grim Reaper cried out in shock.

LET YOUR WISH BE GRANTED, MIKO WITCH. The goddess’ booming voice echoed through the air, NOW YOU SHALL PAY ME THE PRICE FOR YOUR WISH. ALL I ASK IS FOR YOUR BODY AND SOUL AND FOR YOU TO SERVE ME FOR ALL ETERNITY. FOR NOW YOU SHALL BE MY EYES AND EARS UPON THE EARTH...

Kagura put a hand over her heart as it was suddenly clenching painfully in her chest. She was having a heart attack. She gasped and then fell over dead.

NOW ARISE KAGURA...YOU BELONG TO ME NOW. YOU SHALL DO MY BIDDING FOR ALL ETERNITY. YOU ARE NOW NOT DEAD BUT NOT ALIVE. NOR ARE YOU UNDEAD. THIS IS THE GIFT I HAVE BESTOWED UPON YOU...IMMORTALITY.

Kagura’s finger twitched and then she began to awaken once more, though the Grim Reaper could see that she was dead and that her body was now basically that of a revived corpse. He was also able to see that her soul was tied to her body strangely and that even he was unable to touch her soul. Such was the pact of immortality made with the goddess of pestilence and plague. Kagura was a living dead monster, no, more than that. An abomination, a creature of pure evil that would need to consume the souls of other living humans in order to survive or to become

more powerful. The Grim Reaper could no longer harvest her soul since Kagura's soul now belonged to the Goddess Izanami.

Kagura laughed with delight, "Power! I can feel the dark power flowing through me! I have become Izanami's vessel upon the earth! I am immortal! Invincible! Perfect!"

The Grim Reaper shook his head at the poor, deluded woman. If only she knew...

Immortality always has a price.

Kagura gave the Grim Reaper one last haughty look before using a teleportation spell and disappearing.

Once Kagura had disappeared the Grim Reaper walked over to Nagi's fallen form and helplessly fell to his knees by her side. He could See the curse that now inflicted her body and her soul. Next to the poor girl was the cursed doll. Kagura must have forgotten it in her elation at becoming immortal. The Grim Reaper reached over and listlessly picked the doll up when a sudden idea came to him. He could not break the dark curse that Kagura had placed upon Nagi however-

He *could* do something. The Grim Reaper reached his hand up to his face and sinking his fingers and nails into his flesh he ripped out his own eye. His eye glowed with a mysterious red light. He then took his eye and held it directly above the straw doll. "Let Nagi possess the eyes of the Grim Reaper in her next life! So mote it be!" He let go of the eye and it hovered in the air just above the doll before it began sinking down into it where it then disappeared. The Grim Reaper smiled, pleased with himself. *This way she'll have limited sight but she'll also be able to See me...perhaps that could be of some use to her since all she will be able to prophesize will be Death. If she can also See Death then perhaps this curse could become a blessing in disguise for her. Or rather a new Destiny. Next time, Nagi I want you to fight against me. Someone who can fight against Death will be born. This will be rather interesting I think. How fun. I can hardly wait.*

END OF FLASHBACK

Kusanagi awoke from her dream with tears in her eyes. "Ranmaru!" She cried out but then realized that he was right there in her arms, snuggling against her. His body was warm and he wore a contented expression on his face in his sleep. *Is this real?* Ranmaru's shaking had stopped and he was now sleeping

peacefully, though she realized with a blush that he was nuzzling his nose right between her breasts. Kusanagi's heart was still beating a mile per minute. Just what was that? A dream? A vision? A memory fragment from one of her past lives?

Could she really be Nagi? Had she and Ranmaru been in love in their past life? But - wait - no. Ranmaru had never died so it was only her own past life. Ranmaru was still the 'same' Ranmaru. But then again...he was so very different from the grinning Ranmaru she had glimpsed in her dream. The way he had been smirking as he fought against Kenmaru while enjoying their fight seemed so very different from the cool mask of indifference Ranmaru now wore when fighting.

The Ranmaru who had loved fighting, who had been strong, powerful, and confident. Like a blazing fire. Warm, unpredictable, destructive, deadly, yet beautiful. He had fought with a careless grin on his face. He had even shown *emotion* when he had looked at her. When Ranmaru had called out her name after she had protected him - she had seen *it* in his golden eyes: *love*. He had truly loved her, well, Nagi at least.

But then how did Kusanagi feel about Ranmaru? She didn't love him right? What did it feel like to be in love? That feeling that Nagi had felt when she was afraid she was going to lose Ranmaru, the man she loved - it was the same wasn't it? To what Kusanagi was feeling right then about the possibility of losing Ranmaru to hypothermia. Fear. Desperation. Love.

The feeling was exactly the same as it had been over five hundred years ago. How could she have been so blind? Kusanagi put a hand to her heart.

She loved Ranmaru.

So many thoughts and feelings filled Kusanagi all at once. What should she do? What should she say? How should she act? She wanted to tell Ranmaru that she loved him. She wanted to explain to Ranmaru what had really happened five hundred years ago...

But, something inside of her stopped her.

Doubt.

That emotion that she had seen in Ranmaru's eyes when

he had looked at Nagi, that love. It wasn't there when Ranmaru looked at her now. Did that mean that Ranmaru no longer loved her? Or rather that he didn't love the current her? How was she to truly know his feelings as long as Ranmaru was a Spell-Collared *yokai* slave?

She had to free him and find out the truth about his feelings. Until then - she decided she would keep her feelings a secret from Ranmaru. Hopefully, if she freed him he could heal and return to the way he was before. To that man that she had fallen in love with...

Kusanagi clenched her fists at her sides. Ranmaru had been broken. But why, whom...? That *miko* witch from before perhaps? She had done this to him, broken and changed the man she loved. That bitch would pay. Kusanagi unconsciously dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands until they bled.

But now was not the time for hate but for love. Ranmaru...her darling Ranmaru. There had to be some way she could help him heal faster. She used to be so powerful...she was sure Nagi would have been able to do something. Then it came to her like a lightning bolt. A kiss.

The kiss of a *miko* held great spiritual power behind it, and would be even more effective in lending Ranmaru her strength since they were 'bonded' or rather held a bond because of the magical Control Collar.

A kiss then. Kusanagi nodded having made up her mind. She then leaned forward and pressed her lips to Ranmaru's before she could change her mind. *This man...how I love this man. How I love Ranmaru.*

A pure white light began to surround Kusanagi as she kissed Ranmaru and willed her power to flow into him. Ranmaru began to wake and thought he still had to be dreaming since Kusanagi was kissing him!

Ranmaru's eyes widened as Kusanagi continued to kiss him and then he noticed the bright white light that was surrounding her. Ah. That's why she was kissing him. That was a brilliant idea! Ranmaru scolded himself for not having thought of it earlier. Ranmaru cupped Kusanagi's face in return and ran his tongue over her bottom lip, intent on deepening their kiss. Kusanagi gasped in surprise realizing that Ranmaru was now

awake and Ranmaru used that opportunity to plunge his tongue into her mouth. Kusanagi surprisingly complied and surrendered herself to Ranmaru, letting him deepen their kiss and take control.

A little thrill went through Ranmaru as he felt Kusanagi give control over to him. *Damn girl, this isn't like you at all.* Ranmaru thought amusedly. But Ranmaru sure as hell wasn't complaining since as long as he got to kiss the lips of his beloved he couldn't be happier. He took control of their kiss and Kusanagi melted into his embrace with a sigh. *I love her...how I love this woman in my arms...*

A bright light began to surround them both as they continued to kiss each other passionately. And they became swept away by the power they had created and caused to flow between them. The power...the emotions...the love...it was all flowing through them and around them in a whirlwind.

This was no ordinary kiss. But a touching of souls, a bonding of sorts - and Ranmaru could feel Kusanagi's power entering his body, healing him, and giving him renewed power and strength. He could feel the wounds in his arm and leg closing.

The collar around his neck was also glowing and pulsing with light while obeying Kusanagi's unspoken command: Heal him, give him power, my power, my strength, my love.

A few moments later they were both forced to pull away from each other since they had run out of air. Both were panting for breath and both wore matching blushes on their faces.

Both would have to agree - that was one hell of a kiss.

"Whoa." Both Kusanagi and Ranmaru said simultaneously and then both of them turned even redder.

"If I had known it was going to be that good - perhaps I would have let us do this more often." Kusanagi hesitantly teased, though not meeting Ranmaru's eyes.

Ranmaru's jaw dropped. *Okay, where is the real Kusanagi? And what have the Alien Body Snatchers done with her?* But no...this was the real Kusanagi before him now. Ranmaru felt warmth and hope blossom in his chest.

Kusanagi laughed and used her index finger to close his jaw, “You can stop gaping like an idiot, Ranmaru. It was just a kiss.” Her expression then turned serious. “Now, tell me, how are you *feeling*?”

Is this a trick question? Ranmaru wondered and worried if he should answer that truthfully because a certain part of him was feeling *very* good just then. Oh, right, he realized that she was asking about his *health*. Cough. Ranmaru smiled warmly at her and let a little emotion, a sliver of the love he held for her, shine into his golden eyes. He wasn’t used to showing his emotion like in the old days but he could try. “I’m fine now - thanks to you, Kusanagi.”

Kusanagi’s breath was taken away by that smile, that look. Both were so unlike Ranmaru after all. Usually, he just looked at her with this almost bored, indifferent look on his face. But now...perhaps, there really was hope that Ranmaru could return to the way he once was. Kusanagi quickly composed herself and smiled back. “Good, then let’s go rescue Roze, Kaze, Sora and I can’t believe I’m saying this but – Gunnar too. They’re waiting for us.”

Ranmaru nodded but then the familiar scent of Kusanagi’s blood hit his sensitive nostrils and he reached out to grab her hand suddenly. Frowning Ranmaru looked down at the palm of Kusanagi’s hand and saw that it was bleeding where Kusanagi’s own nails had cut into her flesh.

“Oh, that’s nothing I just-” Kusanagi began to explain, but was unable to say more when Ranmaru suddenly lowered his head and began to lick her wounds. “Ranmaru, what are you...?” Kusanagi trailed off as Ranmaru let more of his saliva flow out in order to heal Kusanagi’s wound. The feeling of his warm tongue on the open palm of her hand was sending pleasant little shivers running down her spine and the butterflies in her stomach were beginning to flutter restlessly. “*Ranmaru...?*” She breathed. They really shouldn’t be doing this now. For some reason, now that her feelings for Ranmaru had changed the simple act of him touching her like that was making her feel all kinds of different things that she had never felt before.

Ranmaru pulled back after a moment and gave the breathless Kusanagi a smug smirk. After all this was over, they

definitely needed to talk. Well, talking was overrated anyways. Kusanagi could talk since she was good at that, and as for Ranmaru? He would just listen. And then maybe she would let him kiss her again. He was definitely looking forward to that.

Kusanagi shook her head to clear her dazed state. She had almost let herself get carried away in the moment. They would have plenty of time for *that* later, after she had managed to free Ranmaru from his Control Collar somehow. *That?* Kusanagi blushed. *No!* She shook her head again to clear her mind of such thoughts. Now was definitely not the time to be thinking about *that!* *Ack!* Kusanagi gripped her head and moaned.

And Ranmaru watched her antics clearly amused. He could watch her all day. She was definitely better than TV, he nodded to himself.

Reluctantly they finally pulled apart from each other and Kusanagi turned around so that Ranmaru could dress in private.

"I am ready, *Oujo-sama*." Ranmaru informed her in his dull voice.

Kusanagi turned around smirking and nodded. "Good, now transform into your nine-tails form, Ranmaru!"

Ranmaru's golden eyes sparkled, "*Hai, Oujo-sama*." He did as he was told and transformed into his large nine-tail fox form. Kusanagi swiftly mounted him.

"Let's go!" Kusanagi declared and Ranmaru nodded in agreement. They made their way out of the cave and then Ranmaru took off into the forest and headed back towards the fortress.

Kusanagi and Ranmaru continued their way past wolves, chimera dogs, SP - and finally they had managed to make it back to the lab. Ranmaru had transformed back into his human form once they had begun to face SP in the hallways of the fortress. He and Kusanagi had managed to take the SP out easily using a fierce combination of martial arts and fire attacks.

Meanwhile, Nadya and Dr. Wolfram were setting up for the doctor's next experiment.

Dr. Wolfram was having a hard time hiding his excitement. "There, the preparation for my next experiment is

finally done! Hell yea.”

Nadya seemed hesitant, a worried frown on her face, “Doctor, are you really sure about this? This process has never been used on a human before-”

Dr. Wolfram spun around to glare at Nadya, his bi-colored eyes flashing, “What did you just call me, Nadya? What did I tell you about calling me that filthy word!” He growled at her.

Nadya gasped and immediately bowed, a repentant look on her face, “Forgive me, Doctor. I meant no offense. What I meant to say is ‘wolf’ not ‘hu-’.” Nadya caught herself from repeating her mistake again. “I just...are you sure it will be safe?”

Dr. Wolfram put a hand on Nadya’s shoulder and she looked up at him straight into his eyes. “Nadya, this is my destiny.” Dr. Wolfram declared before walking over to one of the containment chambers and stepping inside. The SP closed and locked the door behind him, their eyes flashing red while they were under the doctor’s control. In the other containment chamber, which was attached to the one that Dr. Wolfram had entered, was a live wolf that was missing one eye. “Finally, I will be able to become my true form. Whatever happens don’t stop the procedure.” He gave Nadya a sharp look and Nadya meekly nodded.

Ooo~ I just love it when he glares at me like that. Nadya inwardly cheered.

Nadya then reached out her hand, hesitating as it rested on the control lever before she took a deep breath and pulled it down. Both of the containment chambers began to glow with a green light. This light enveloped the wolf’s body and the wolf appeared to be unharmed before the light then traveled to flow down from the top of the containment chamber that Dr. Wolfram was in and into his body.

Dr. Wolfram cried out in pain as his DNA code was being altered. His body spasmed and convulsed violently and it appeared as though he were having some sort of epileptic fit before he collapsed to the floor of the containment chamber. Dr. Wolfram then began to claw at the inside walls of the containment sphere with a desperate, almost feral look in his eyes. Both his pupils were becoming slanted...

Nadya was tempted to stop the procedure right then and there, so had to look away. She bit her lower lip and patted the head of her winged-cat Leon in order to calm herself. Leon purred loudly in response as he tried to offer Nadya comfort. "Don't worry Nadya, he knows what he's doing."

Kusanagi and Ranmaru arrived at the lab at that exact moment, both were looking a little worse for wear since their clothes were ripped, torn and dirty, and they were also sporting cuts and bruises.

Nadya caught sight of them and furrowed her brows in frustration. "Dammit, not them again. SP! Get them!" She waved her hand forward in their direction.

The remaining SP surged forward but so did Ranmaru, and he was moving faster than the naked eye could follow - with a series of quick kicks and punches Ranmaru took out the remaining SP in seconds. Ranmaru's fist connected with the wolf mask of one of the SP and it was cracked open. The fallen SP warrior lay on the ground unmoving and Ranmaru and Kusanagi couldn't help but notice that the man's face...was not a normal face at all, but resembled the face of a monkey.

"What the hell?" Kusanagi wondered aloud as she reached over and yanked the helmet off of another of the fallen SP and found the same thing to be true of this man as well.

Nadya smiled grimly at them, "Did you really think the good doctor, would have filthy, disgusting *humans* working for him? Oh no, Doctor is so smart he found a way around that. Those things you see on the ground, really they're quite useless aren't they? They used to be human but...my Master was kind enough to turn them into monkey men. Personally, I think it's an improvement. You see, my Master got his hands on some caveman DNA and by combining it with the DNA of a monkey he then used the DNA alternation process to cause these men to regress into their original state. Because of the monkey DNA their minds can still be controlled by the Doctor, who as you've probably noticed has the ability to control animals. And they're just smart enough to be able to understand any vocal orders we have to give them as well. But certainly they aren't smart enough

to think of things like betrayal.”

Kusanagi’s jaw dropped. Those men were...regressed humans? Monkey men? Could this get any weirder...?

Just then a ragged cry of pain caught both Ranmaru and Kusanagi’s attention and they turned to see Dr. Wolfram inside of one of his own containment chambers. His body was glowing green and his muscles were bulging oddly in places as his DNA was being altered. The light in the machine was flickering since it was consuming more and more electricity and power as the process continued. Kusanagi’s eyes widened in horror, had Nadya betrayed Dr. Wolfram? “Nadya! What are you doing to him?”

Nadya’s expression was grim. “I am fulfilling his wish.”

“Ranmaru! Get Wolfram out of that thing immediately!” Kusanagi directed him.

“*Hai, Oujo-sama,*” Ranmaru bowed with a slight smile and then took off towards the containment chamber.

“No!” Nadya cried out as she rushed after Ranmaru, “The process must not be stopped halfway!”

But Kusanagi stood in Nadya’s path, and raised her fists getting into a fighting stance. “Let’s finish this, Nadya.”

Nadya raised an eyebrow at Kusanagi, “K The Bitch, do you really think you’re a match for me? You don’t even have your usual weapon with you. That wooden stick or sword or whatever you want to call it. You won’t last five seconds against me – a witch!”

Kusanagi gave her a cocky grin, cracking her neck from side to side, “We’ll see about that.”

Nadya and Kusanagi’s duel began. Nadya wasted no time in punching forward while at the same time releasing a telekinetic blast at Kusanagi, which she managed to dodge. “Not bad, you do have pretty good battle instincts to be able to avoid an invisible attack like that, Kusanagi. It’s always surprised me.” Nadya conceded.

Kusanagi shrugged, “Well, at least something good has come from people trying to kill or kidnap me all the time. I’ve become quick on my feet, that’s for sure. And Nadya, you ain’t seen nothing yet!” Kusanagi declared.

“Oh really? Then how about this!” Nadya challenged as

she directed her hand at some nearby metal debris that was lying on the floor of the lab and that was obviously a pile of spare parts. With a wave of her hand Nadya sent these pieces of metal flying towards Kusanagi.

Kusanagi ran and dodged out of the way, rolling, crouching, and then standing once more. *Shit*. How was she supposed to get in close and get past Nadya's defenses if she couldn't exactly *see* where Nadya's telekinetic attacks were coming from? Relying on her battle instincts alone was one thing but-

If only I could see Nadya's attacks somehow! Come on! I used to be able to do things like this! I can't be weaker than Nagi! Kusanagi focused her eyes on Nadya and something unexpected happened. As Nadya lifted up a chunk of metal to fling Kusanagi's way Kusanagi saw something weird - a blue whirlwind of energy swirled under the chunk of metal and it was this energy that propelled the object towards Kusanagi. Was this Nadya's telekinetic energy made visible?

But that didn't make any sense. Nadya attacked Kusanagi again and Kusanagi watched as this spiral of energy came towards her and Kusanagi dodged it easily only to feel a harsh burst of air blow past her at that exact moment. *Wind?*

That's it! Nadya didn't have telekinesis abilities. All along the witch had elemental control over wind! And now for some reason Kusanagi was able to See the wind.

Meanwhile...Ranmaru leapt up and punched a hole in the containment chamber that Dr. Wolfram was still inside of. A 'hole' may have been an understated way to explain what Ranmaru had done since half of the containment chamber had basically been blown away by Ranmaru's one punch. The machine immediately shut off. Ranmaru reached out and grasped Dr. Wolfram by the front of his shirt and roughly pulled the limp form of the doctor out of the machine. Wolfram then looked up at Ranmaru with eyes full of fear, and he was trembling. Ranmaru loosened his hold and the doctor suddenly smiled, one fang peaking out from his lips. "Just kidding."

Dr. Wolfram unexpectedly brought his head forward and headbutted Ranmaru hard. Ranmaru was immediately forced to let go of the doctor and leap backwards out of his way. Dr. Wolfram leapt down and landed on the ground with a loud thud due to the side effect of the DNA alteration process having doubled the doctor's muscle mass and therefore doubling his weight.

Ranmaru and Dr. Wolfram faced off, standing in front of each other while sizing up their opponent. Ranmaru could see that Dr. Wolfram's pupils were now slanted just like an animal's and sharp fangs were revealed when the doctor smiled at him. Ranmaru got into a fighting stance, however, prepared to face off with the doctor.

Dr. Wolfram's smile widened eerily, "So you plan on fighting me, Ranmaru?" His words were like a caress. "Don't you need your sword in order to defeat me?" Dr. Wolfram waved his hand in the general direction of the lab and Ranmaru spotted his sword, Kuroki Ryu in a small, domed containment chamber. Attached to the sword were a series of wires and these wires appeared to run to a super computer, which was taking various readings on the sword. "I've been studying your sword, Ranmaru. It's pretty fascinating. Nadya told me she could see a dragon spirit that was attached to your sword. Is that true?"

Ranmaru turned his attention back to Dr. Wolfram and narrowed his fierce golden eyes at him. "I do not need *that* sword in order to defeat you, Wolfram. A powerful kiss protects me now." A half-smirk formed on Ranmaru's lips as he remembered the kiss he and Kusanagi had shared back in the cave.

Dr. Wolfram raised an eyebrow at Ranmaru, "A *kiss*?" He then leaned his head back and let out a loud guffawing laugh. He then lowered his head to wipe a tear from his eye before turning his attention back to Ranmaru. "You're a pretty entertaining bastard, Ranmaru. It sucks but I'm going to have to kill you now. Are you sure you won't reconsider joining me?"

Ranmaru shook his head. "I will never join the likes of you."

A dark frown marred Dr. Wolfram's handsome face, "Then you intend to kill me. BUT YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S GOING TO DIE!" Dr. Wolfram rushed forward and attacked, his

fist flying.

And Ranmaru countered using his legs to kick, delivering a spinning roundhouse kick to Dr. Wolfram's jaw just as the doctor delivered a punch to Ranmaru's face. The two continued to exchange kicks and punches. Dr. Wolfram was concentrating on delivering powerful punches to Ranmaru's face while Ranmaru used his long legs in a somewhat defensive manner to block Dr. Wolfram's attacks, but Ranmaru also managed to deliver blows of his own. In martial arts using one's legs gives one a great defense since the reach of one's legs is longer than the reach of one's arms. Ranmaru used this theory and put it into application in his fight against Wolfram.

Ranmaru moved sideways and Dr. Wolfram's fist collided with the back wall forming a crater there, pieces of cement flying up into the air.

Whew. That had been a close one.

Dr. Wolfram was becoming more and more irate, and more and more beast-like as their fight progressed. Ranmaru caught sight of Dr. Wolfram's teeth lengthening and whiskers began to become visible on the sides of his face. "Hold still dammit and let me kill you! With my bare hands – no. With my claws. Eat this! Wolf Claw Attack!" Dr. Wolfram surged forward and moved past Ranmaru's defenses to grasp Ranmaru's shoulder painfully sinking his claws deeply into Ranmaru's flesh.

Crack

Ranmaru staggered backwards grasping his broken shoulder and Dr. Wolfram was laughing gleefully. Wolfram licked the blood off his claws and Ranmaru watched as Dr. Wolfram's hair began to stand on end and his ears began to become more elongated and pointed. Dr. Wolfram was looking less and less human by the minute.

"Hey, you taste pretty good, you bastard. I think I want to taste more of your delicious blood!" Dr. Wolfram declared as he attacked, "How about I show you my true form, Ranmaru. Then you'll see that we really are like brothers. I told you before that I was a wolf trapped in a man's body. Now I can feel the blood of my true kin flowing through my veins, pulsing within me,

howling to be released. Demanding for my inner beast to be set free. Hell yea!” Dr. Wolfram laughed maniacally as he allowed himself to then transform and in seconds his body had morphed and shifted until standing before Ranmaru was no longer a man, but a large wolf with golden fur, one brown eye, one icy blue eye, slanted pupils, long fangs that were protruding out of the creature’s mouth, and large, menacing looking claws.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened. Dr. Wolfram had truly become a wolf.

Dr. Wolfram pounced at Ranmaru and wrestled Ranmaru to the floor. In his human form Ranmaru was no match for the sheer brute strength that Dr. Wolfram’s wolf form now possessed. In his human form that was. As Dr. Wolfram sunk his teeth into Ranmaru’s arm Ranmaru concentrated on his own transformation-

Ranmaru then shifted into his nine-tailed fox form before he turned his head to sink his sharp teeth into Dr. Wolfram’s neck in retaliation.

Both the wolf and the fox let go of their prey to leap apart from each other and put some distance between them to plan their next attack. The two beasts now faced off with each other. Ranmaru may have been at a disadvantage as far as teeth and claws were concerned, however, Ranmaru had a few tricks up his sleeve.

Foxes have always been known to be notorious tricksters after all.

Ranmaru opened his mouth and unleashed a large fireball at Dr. Wolfram, who dodged and leapt out of the way. Ranmaru released more fireballs at Dr. Wolfram in quick succession in the same manner, but Dr. Wolfram simply avoided the attacks and then ran at Ranmaru quickly - leaping up into the air and towards Ranmaru.

The two beasts wrestled each other viciously on the ground as Wolfram landed on Ranmaru, both were fighting for supremacy, with teeth and claws ripping and biting into each other. This time Dr. Wolfram managed to sink his teeth into Ranmaru’s neck and were his teeth growing? “I’m going to rip you apart, you bastard!” Dr. Wolfram snarled.

Ranmaru countered the attack by latching onto Dr.

Wolfram's upper arm, and green ooze began to gush out of the wound. Was that what Dr. Wolfram's blood looked like now? Ranmaru wondered. However, Ranmaru was beginning to see dark spots in front of his eyes-

Nadya raised her hand to attack Kusanagi again and this time Kusanagi could see it - the wind! Kusanagi moved sideways so that the attack sped past her and Kusanagi then ran towards the unsuspecting Nadya.

"Impossible!" Nadya breathed as she raised her other hand to attack Kusanagi with a blast of wind-

But Kusanagi saw it coming and dodged easily. Kusanagi smirked as she was almost upon Nadya now. "You're about a hundred years too early to take me out Nadya!" Kusanagi declared as she let her fist fly forward and into the side of Nadya's face.

Nadya cried out from the force of the blow and her eyes widened when she thought she could see a blue-tinged light enveloping Kusanagi's fist, "Spirit...energy...?" She gasped as she was blown back.

Nadya rolled across the ground and tried to will her body to move but to no avail.

"Nadya!" Her bat-winged cat Leon called out as he flew over to Nadya worriedly.

"Dr. Wolfram..." Nadya mouthed as she reached her hand towards him. She could see Wolfram still battling Ranmaru and could see the green ooze that was flowing from the doctor's wounds. "Doctor..." Nadya murmured before she passed out.

Her familiar Leon worriedly licked at Nadya's hands while trying to wake her up. "Nadyaaa!" The cat mewed pitifully.

No! I can't die here! Not like this! Ranmaru had promised Kusanagi that he wouldn't leave her alone! Ranmaru began to gather his *yokai* power around him until red flames suddenly engulfed and surrounded his body, flaring to life.

The flames became hotter and more powerful as Ranmaru poured more of his energy and power into them. And Dr.

Wolfram was forced to let go of his hold on Ranmaru's neck. But Ranmaru didn't let him get off that easily and applied more pressure to his grip on Dr. Wolfram's front leg and managed to bite through the wolf's leg as Dr. Wolfram leapt backwards.

Green ooze gushed out from the wound on the wolf's body where his right leg should have been.

Ranmaru tossed the limb aside and the severed limb immediately began to disintegrate before it turned into a puddle of green goo. Ranmaru wondered if the green blood was a side effect from the genetic, DNA alternation process. Ranmaru's nine tails were swishing back and forth behind him in a majestic manner as he gathered more of his power around him; the true power of the nine-tailed fox was about to be revealed.

Dr. Wolfram and Ranmaru faced off with each other once more and prepared to launch their final attacks. The two beasts rushed at each other and attacked - both passing the other as they executed their most powerful finishing moves.

Ranmaru coughed blood and almost fell forward in a faint-

Before catching himself and remaining standing.

Dr. Wolfram looked back over his shoulder at Ranmaru calmly, "Not bad...I really could have conquered the world with a comrade like you at my side..." Dr. Wolfram suddenly fell forward to where he lay on the floor unmoving.

Ranmaru turned to face his fallen opponent, blood dripping down from a slash wound across his chest. He really should finish the good doctor off, he decided. Not one to leave his enemies alive since it was unwise, Ranmaru padded over to Dr. Wolfram's fallen form and watched as parts of the wolf's body were turning into green goo. Had the doctor used too much power? And this was the result? Was he already dying? For some reason the idea of 'finishing off' the doctor didn't sit too well with Ranmaru.

Normally, Ranmaru would show an enemy no mercy but...to kill Wolfram while he was down, while he could no longer fight? It just didn't seem honorable to Ranmaru. Had their battle been destroying him? Why would Wolfram go to such lengths against him? Why would he risk his life to such an extent, for what? For that inane goal of purging the world of all humans

and giving the earth to animals? It was ludicrous. The wolf's body transformed back into Dr. Wolfram's human form and Ranmaru noticed that the stump of Wolfram's severed arm was trying to heal itself...

Just then, however, a loud explosion rocked the lab-

Ranmaru turned to see that the containment chambers had been destroyed. But where was Kusanagi? He caught sight of her then - standing there, surrounded by flames, an odd, pleased sort of sadistic grin on her face, and she was twirling a grenade pin on her index finger playfully. Ranmaru shivered. Kusanagi had been the one to destroy the DNA containment chambers. Chaotic flames leapt and reflected in Kusanagi's emerald green eyes and she almost seemed to be in some sort of trance as she approached the flames...

Like a moth to the flame...*No!*

"Oujo-sama!" Ranmaru mentally cried as he rushed over to her while still in his nine-tail fox form.

Kusanagi turned and blinked at Ranmaru confusedly, and then her emerald eyes became less hazy and sharpened. "Ranmaru...oh god..." Kusanagi looked around at the chaos the lab had been engulfed in. "The fire...we have to get Roze, Gunnar, Kaze, Sora and all the other animals the hell out of here - NOW! Come on!"

Kusanagi rushed towards the door, which led to the corridor where the prison cells were. Ranmaru shifted back into his human form and followed close behind like a second shadow. Though this shadow Kusanagi didn't really mind. Kusanagi quickly found Roze and Gunner, "Yo!" She saluted them. "I'm here to rescue you." Kusanagi eyed the complex looking, electric locking system. "Dammit, there's an electric lock-"

Ranmaru stepped past Kusanagi and placed his hand on the lock. He then sent a small fire blast at it and the electric lock exploded. The barred door suddenly swung open. *"Yatta!"* Kusanagi slapped Ranmaru hard on the back appreciatively. "Good boy! Release all of the other prisoners, err, animals! As well as those poor chimeras!" Kusanagi directed him.

Ranmaru smirked, *"Hai, Oujo-sama."* He said with an

elaborate bow as he rushed off to destroy all of the electric locks.

Another explosion sounded in the distance.

“What was that?” Roze asked worriedly.

A guilty look crossed Kusanagi’s face. “I kinda...blewupthelab.” She said the last part in a rush.

“Kusanagi-sama!” Roze chided her.

“I don’t think this place is going to last much longer.” Gunnar pointed his index finger upwards, indicating there were now cracks running along the cement of the ceiling. “We need to get the hell out of here, like five minutes ago.”

“I know,” Kusanagi nodded in agreement. “As soon as Ranmaru and the others are ready we’re outta here.”

Kaze and Sora ran up to Kusanagi as soon as they were free. “Sora! Kaze! My babies!” Kusanagi gushed as she hugged them both, tears in her eyes, “I’m so sorry, boy.” Kusanagi apologized to Kaze upon taking in his changed appearance. “I wish I had managed to come sooner...”

But Kaze’s tail was wagging happily back and forth anyways and he licked the tears off of Kusanagi’s face, as if to say - ‘Don’t even worry about it! I’m okay!’

“*Oujo-sama*.” Ranmaru began concernedly.

Kusanagi nodded, “Right, let’s go!”

The group headed back down the corridor and back out to the laboratory to find that the entire place was now in flames. The problem was that the exit they needed to get to was directly across on the other side of the lab-

Smoke filled the air and Kusanagi, Roze, and Gunnar knew there was no way they could make it across. *Perhaps, the animals could though...*Kusanagi was musing to herself.

As the group was hesitating Kaze suddenly ran into the lab and towards the dragon, which Dr. Wolfram had chained to the wall.

“Kaze!” Kusanagi cried out and would have gone after him if Ranmaru hadn’t grabbed her arm.

“Ranmaru! Let go!” Kusanagi insisted but Ranmaru held fast.

Kaze opened his mouth and bit down on the large chain that was keeping the dragon captive and managed to bite through the chain using his *yokai* power.

The dragon immediately took flight as soon as it was free and flying upwards crashed through the ceiling and made his way out of the fortress and into the open sky beyond.

Kaze ran back towards Kusanagi and the others, but not before swinging his horned head at the glass containment chamber that held Kuroki Ryu, and shattering the glass so that Ranmaru's sword fell to the floor with a clatter. Kaze picked up the sword in his jaws and carried it back towards Ranmaru and the others.

"Kaze!" Kusanagi opened her arms as her dog barreled into her. Kusanagi scratched Kaze's head affectionately, "*Yosh!* Good boy! You saved the dragon and Ranmaru's sword. Now if we can only save ourselves..."

"I'll carry Kusanagi. Roze will ride Sora. Gunnar you can ride Kaze." Ranmaru directed them in his monotone voice before he shifted back into his nine-tail fox form.

Kusanagi did as Ranmaru had suggested and mounted him. She shut her eyes since the smoke was burning them and wrapped her arms around Ranmaru's neck in a trusting manner.

Roze and Gunnar followed suit and jumped up onto Sora and Kaze.

Ranmaru rushed ahead of everyone and opened his mouth as he then unleashed a giant fireball that sped across the room and towards the exit. This fireball sucked in all of the surrounding flames creating a temporary escape path.

Ranmaru ran forward with Kaze and Sora following close behind.

At one point Kusanagi opened her eyes as Ranmaru was rushing through the burning lab and she caught sight of Nadya holding an unconscious Dr. Wolfram in her arms. Her bat-winged cat Leon was perched on her shoulder, and the witch's and Kusanagi's eyes met.

Kusanagi wondered if they could possibly survive...

All of the other animals followed Ranmaru's lead and made it safely past the lab and into the corridor beyond. But they didn't stop there and continued on their way running down the hallways of the fortress, which would lead them to the exit and

back outside.

Finally, the entire group, animals and all, had made it safely to the outside where it was currently snowing. Ranmaru and the others turned to watch as the fortress caught on fire, explosions could be heard rocking the building from within, and flames burst out of windows on the upper levels.

Kusanagi shook her head thinking to herself that there was no way Nadya or Dr. Wolfram could have survived that.

More explosions rocked the fortress from within and the ground around them began to shake with the force of the explosions. The snow that was on top of the mountain behind the fortress shifted ominously, making a rumbling sound-

Uh oh. Ranmaru had a really bad feeling about this as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

Ranmaru quickly transformed back into his human form, “Kusanagi, the mountain - I believe there could be an avalanche.”

Now that Ranmaru was in his human form Kaze rushed over to him and handed Ranmaru his sword, Kuroki Ryu, that he had held in his jaws. Ranmaru gratefully took his sword and stuck it in his belt.

Kusanagi’s eyes widened, “An avalanche? Oh shit. This just keeps getting better and better.” Kusanagi reached into her jacket, pulled out her cell phone and flipped it open. “It’s me. Come and pick us up. Now. You have the coordinates.” She flipped her cell phone closed. “My private jet should be here shortly.” Kusanagi informed them.

Another explosion rocked the surrounding area and Ranmaru’s keen eyes could see that the snow had already started to shift on the mountain and move forward-

“Think we’ll make it?” Kusanagi asked casually.

“No.” Ranmaru deadpanned.

“Run!” Gunnar declared.

Ranmaru and the others all ran down the mountain and through the forested area along with the animals, which had all been imprisoned in the fortress and which were following close behind just as the snow on the mountain began to slide down-

The avalanche had begun.

The sheet of snow first hit the fortress as it came crashing down and buried it completely in mere seconds.

Burying Nadya and Dr. Wolfram along with it...

But Ranmaru and the rest continued to run until they reached a clearing where they were met with a dead end and a sudden drop off that overlooked a ravine.

Uh oh.

The group turned to see that the avalanche was coming towards them more swiftly now and that it was almost upon them.

When-

The sound of a plane approaching was heard and Kusanagi looked up to see that her private jet had arrived to the rescue-

Just in the nick of time. Kusanagi frowned and decided if her pilot had waited just until the last moment to make his entrance dramatic she'd hit him over the head with her *bokken* a few times to knock some sense into him.

The jet quickly touched down upon the snowy ground, and the door was immediately opened along with an automatic staircase, which came out and touched the ground. Ranmaru, Kusanagi, Roze and Gunnar quickly ran up the stairs and into the plane. Kusanagi rushed to the cockpit. "Quick! Open the cargo hatch!" She directed the pilot.

"Huh? Why?" Her pilot questioned confusedly but then he looked out of the window and spotted all of the animals and strange looking chimera. "You can't be serious-" Kusanagi glared back at him and he swallowed audibly. He let out a resigned sigh before activating the cargo hatch to open. Kusanagi flashed the pilot a sparkling smile in thanks before rushing back out of the plane.

"Sora! Kaze! I want you to help herd the animals into the cargo bay!" Kusanagi commanded them.

Sora and Kaze both nodded and began to help herd the animals in one direction so that they all began to file into the cargo bay.

Kusanagi watched and continued to direct them until the snow was practically upon them-

Ranmaru picked Kusanagi up from behind, "*Oujo-sama!*"

Wrapping his arms around her waist and carrying her into the jet plane. "Time to go!"

Kusanagi struggled in his grip, "But there are still a few animals left out there-"

Ranmaru shook his head, "There's no time, *Oujo-sama*."

"Ranmaru let me go!" Kusanagi argued with him and continued to struggle.

Ranmaru ignored the way his Control Collar was tightening around his neck as he disobeyed Kusanagi's order and simply held onto her more tightly instead.

"Take off now!" Roze directed the pilot.

The pilot nodded, "*H-hai!* Right!" The pilot accelerated and began to pick up speed. The snow was hot on their heels as the plane began to roll over the snow while getting ready for take off. Finally, the pilot managed to get the plane to lift off just as the avalanche of snow passed underneath them where they had been only seconds before.

Whew~

Kusanagi ran to the window to see what would happen to the two remaining animals that they had been forced to leave behind, and watched in surprise when the dragon they had also rescued swooped down and grabbed a creature, one in each of its clawed hands, before swooping back up into the air.

Just before the snow would have buried the two creatures the dragon had managed to swoop down and save them! Kusanagi and the others all cheered at the sight.

Kusanagi's eyes sparkled with delight, "You see, dragons have always been misunderstood creatures."

"Oh no, I recognize that look." Roze moaned, "Uh, uh, no way - you are not going to adopt that dragon Kusanagi-*sama!*"

Kusanagi pouted in response, "Aw~ come on Roze. It's just so cute! *Pu-lease*. And we have plenty of room for it back at the estate-"

"No means no!" Roze huffed as she crossed her arms over her chest, "That thing is huge. Think about what it *eats*."

"Think about what it *poops*." Gunnar mused aloud.

Roze shot him an exasperated look.

"What?" Gunnar questioned and chuckled, amused by the entire situation. "So this is why you've been stealing rare,

endangered or magical creatures, Kusanagi? All this time you wanted them as pets? Ha! And here I thought you were selling them on the black market!" Gunnar ruffled Kusanagi's hair, "You're actually a *nice* little lassie aren't you?"

Kusanagi blushed at the older man's attentions and quickly batted his hand away. "*Mou!* Don't treat me like a child Gunnar!"

Roze sighed heavily, "Don't encourage her, Gunnar. Those animals are nothing but trouble. And who do you expect to take care of all those animals anyways, hmm, Kusanagi-sama?"

Kusanagi smirked, "Why Ranmaru of course." She picked something out of her ear and flicked it off into the air in an obstinate gesture. "I can't be concerned with such menial labor. It's beneath me."

"That was *so* uncute." Ranmaru pointed out.

"What was that, you *baka*?" Kusanagi demanded, spazzing out and shaking a fist at him, her voice beginning to rise in volume.

Ranmaru plugged up one of his ears knowing that his *Oujo-sama* was about to go off on one of her rants again.

Gunnar chuckled, "I see you have your work cut out for you, Ranmaru. That must be one hell of a job being...what do you call it again?"

"I'm her *Samurai* Butler." Ranmaru informed him simply.

Gunnar nodded and stroked his goatee thoughtfully. "Right, you're her butler. And nothing more?"

Ranmaru blinked, surprised at the question and Kusanagi immediately hit Gunnar over the head for the comment.

"What the hell is wrong with you, *mou!* Geez! There is *nothing* going on between me and Ranmaru, hmph!" Kusanagi crossed her arms over her chest and frowned deeply at everyone.

"Denial." Gunnar coughed.

"Riiight." Roze echoed in agreement also pretending to cough.

"Ah, young love. I envy those two." Gunnar told Roze conversationally, who blushed for some reason.

"Bullshit!"

Ranmaru had to plug both his ears at Kusanagi's loud exclamation.

Ranmaru then looked at Kusanagi with an unreadable expression on his face, *I have to tell her...*

Kusanagi looked back at Ranmaru and smiled. *That I love him.*

At Clothilda Tavern somewhere in Germany (does one really need to know?) Kusanagi and the others were all celebrating their victory over Dr. Wolfram and the witch Nadya. Gunnar Martin and Ranmaru were enjoying a drink at the bar together while Kusanagi was trying to show the locals how to sing karaoke, Japanese-style along with Roze.

Gunnar ordered a scotch on the rocks and turned to Ranmaru, "What are you having?"

Ranmaru hesitated wondering if it was alright for him to be drinking. Should he ask Kusanagi for permission? He turned to find her and saw her off singing with a bunch of Germans, while chugging an entire bottle of *sake* while Roze tried to stop her. Ranmaru felt a trickle of sweat form on his brow at the sight. Where had Kusanagi even managed to get that bottle of *sake* anyways? Ranmaru quirked his head at this odd sight and shook his head. Something told him that he didn't think that his *Oujo-sama* would mind...

"Make that two," Gunnar told the bartender who nodded.

"Coming right up, gentleman." The bartender began to fix their drinks. "At least, they're not letting the animals drink...bunch of weirdos." The bartender muttered to himself as he grabbed a bottle of scotch from the back wall.

Gunnar gave Ranmaru a speculative look, "So do you always ask Kusanagi for permission before you do things?" Gunnar reached into his jacket and pulled out two cigars. He handed one to Ranmaru, who wordlessly took it. "Cigar?"

Ranmaru eyed the cigar curiously and shrugged. He thought about what Gunnar had just asked him. "Well, yes, of course. I am her butler and she is my Master. I live only to serve and obey her-"

Gunnar lit his cigar and took a puff before blowing out the smoke in a series of rings. He cut Ranmaru off, "But not to

love her?”

Ranmaru's eyes widened. "I'm only her butler--"

Gunnar leaned over and lit Ranmaru's cigar for him. "Ah, but how does Kusanagi really feel about you? Does she only see you as her butler?" Gunnar pressed taking another puff on his cigar, "Damn that's good. Cuban. Hurry up and smoke it."

Ranmaru looked at his cigar before he took a puff. He let out the smoke slowly and a pleasant mellow feeling washed over him. It was nice. "I do not know." He admitted.

Gunnar watched Ranmaru carefully and saw that he must have liked the cigar since he began to take another puff but it would have been hard to tell just from the emotionless expression the man wore on his face.

Gunnar shook his head, bemused. "You're an interesting guy, Ranmaru. Hard to figure out. Hard to read, that's for sure. But tell me how do you really see her? As your Master or...something more?" Gunnar insisted.

Ranmaru narrowed his golden eyes at Gunnar. They were treading on dangerous ground.

Gunnar put up his hands in a surrendering gesture, "Hey now, don't glare at me like that. Gee, you can be scary. I was only asking - I already know the answer to my question anyways. I just wanted to make you say it."

Ranmaru bristled at the audaciousness of this man's assumption. *The nerve of this guy!*

The bartender set their drinks down before them. Gunnar picked up his glass of scotch and motioned for Ranmaru to do the same.

Ranmaru followed suit and Gunnar clinked his glass with Ranmaru's. "Cheers." Gunnar said before taking a sip of the drink.

Again, Ranmaru mimicked him and took a sip of the scotch. He had to admit this was also quite good. His eyes widened slightly in surprise. Ranmaru took another guilty sip.

Gunnar chuckled before he looked down at his drink and began to swirl his scotch thoughtfully, "I'm only asking you because...I don't want you to grow up and have regrets like I do.

Since you're still a young man."

Ranmaru almost spit out his drink at that last comment. He was over five hundred years old for god's sake!

"You see, no matter how strongly you feel something in your heart it becomes meaningless if you don't convey this to the other person. You have to tell her how you feel, Ranmaru. Or else you may end up losing her or realize it's already too late..." Gunnar looked off towards Roze, with a wistful expression on his face. "I am but my own executioner since I choose to do nothing..." Gunnar muttered to himself as he took another sip of scotch. "But that's what it means to be a hard-boiled man." Gunnar nodded to himself knowingly.

Ranmaru followed Gunnar's gaze and caught sight of Roze. *Ah, I see. Gunnar must like Roze-san.* "It doesn't really matter how I feel because I know I can't make her happy. I'm not worthy of Kusanagi." Ranmaru admitted and voiced one of his biggest doubts.

"Isn't that for Kusanagi to decide? A person's happiness varies from person to person. Who are you to say that you won't make Kusanagi happy? Ranmaru, you have to tell her how you really feel. You know, be a man. A hard-boiled man wouldn't let something simple like a love confession stand in his way."

"But I have lost my words of the heart." Ranmaru explained forlornly, hanging his head, his bangs shadowing his tortured expression.

Gunnar put a hand on Ranmaru's chest, directly over his heart, "No, they're there. They're just locked away. And do you want to know why? You're afraid. You're afraid of loving her...of getting hurt...of being rejected. You've locked up your heart far away, deep inside of you, but now it's time to open the door to your heart again. You trust Kusanagi don't you?"

Ranmaru nodded. "Yes, with my life."

"Then you have nothing left to worry about. Open the door to your heart, Ranmaru, and speak to her. It's the only way." Gunnar's eyes drifted back off towards Roze again.

Ranmaru followed his gaze once more. "Maybe," Ranmaru began with a half-smirk forming on his lips, "But maybe you should take your own advice. You're not that old, you know."

Gunnar blinked and then sighed while shaking his head, "It's too late..."

Ranmaru's brows drew together, "It's never too late as long as there's *life*." *Nagi...*

Gunnar chuckled, "Hey now, who's giving who advice here, hmm?"

Ranmaru just grinned and shrugged.

Gunnar's eyes widened at the sight. "Now there's a real smile! I didn't think you could smile like that. There's hope for you after all, you stoic bastard!" Gunnar affably joked as he raised his glass, "A toast - to the lovely ladies."

Ranmaru raised his glass in return, and clinked it against Gunnar's. "I shall toast to that." *Cheers indeed.*

Roze grabbed Kusanagi's arm as she tried to chug down a bottle of *sake* while singing *First Love* by Utada Hikaru. "Kusanagi! What's up with you tonight? This isn't like you. You rarely drink *this* much - at least not unless there's something really bothering you. Hmm, what's wrong?"

"Not like me?" Kusanagi asked, voice slurring, "Hell yea, its not like me~ It's not like me at all~ Who am I again Roze? Oh yea...I'm a heartless bitch! Cheers!" Kusanagi took another swig of her *sake* bottle, "And so you want to know *why*?"

Kusanagi leaned in to whisper into Roze's ear, "I've realized that I love him. Ha!" Kusanagi leaned back and laughed.

Roze's eyes widened. Kusanagi had realized that she was in love with Ranmaru? Did a pig just fly past the window? No wait - one actually did.

"But that's..." Roze's brows furrowed, what was the problem again? "Great. You have to tell him how you feel! Ranma-" Kusanagi quickly covered Roze's mouth with her hand.

"Shhh!" Kusanagi looked around the tavern suspiciously, "I can't tell him yet. I have to find a way to free him first and then tell him how I feel. It's the only way I'll really know if what he's telling me in response is the truth...his true feelings."

Roze sighed. Teenagers - they always had to make everything so damned complicated. But she nodded back

knowing it would be impossible to change the stubborn Kusanagi's mind. Kusanagi took her hand back. "I see..." Roze looked off towards Gunnar and Ranmaru and smiled upon seeing that they appeared to be getting along rather well. "But if you wait too long, you may miss your chance."

Kusanagi followed Roze's gaze and smiled goofily, "Ooo~ Aha! I think you have the hots for the handsome detective don't you? Don't worry Bloody Rose, I think you still have what it takes!"

Roze blinked back at Kusanagi in shock. "Hai?"

Kusanagi reached over and grabbed Roze's glasses before yanking them off, "Oi! Gunnar! Roze wants you to sing her a love song! *Whee~*"

Roze turned pink. "Kusanagi!" But her eyes and Gunnar's met and they smiled at each other shyly.

Gunnar gave her a cheeky grin and then shrugged, "Sure thing, Bloody Rose." He got up and headed towards the stage. "Any special requests?"

Roze tapped her chin in thought, "How about *All I Want Is You – U2.*"

Gunnar nodded and took out his guitar.

Where did he hide that? Roze mused.

"Alright then! Here I go! Prepare to be impressed." Gunnar gave Roze a playful wink.

Kusanagi smiled as she watched Gunnar serenade Roze. She looked over towards Ranmaru and their eyes met - emerald green clashing with golden yellow. Before they both looked away...

I have to tell him that I love him.

I have to tell her that I love her.

They both thought at the exact same moment.

CHAPTER 7

The truest love is a love everyone is against

The very first thing Kusanagi did the next morning was ride Sora to the Inari Shrine in order to consult old *miko* Akane about how to free her Spell-Collared *yokai* slave, Ranmaru. If anyone would know of a way to free him it would be her. The *miko* was very wise and had helped Kusanagi during all those times when she needed supernatural consultation, advice or help. Akane knew of the existence of the Other World, the world that Kusanagi could not see but knew about.

She left Sora at the bottom of the shrine steps and quickly made her way up the steps and towards the main shrine building. As usual, Akane was at the top waiting for her.

“I’ve been expecting you, Kusanagi.” Akane greeted her, a twinkle in her brown-red eyes.

Kusanagi bowed, “Old *miko* Akane, I need your help...”

Akane nodded, “Come inside, child, there you can tell me all about, *hmm~?*” Kusanagi nodded and followed Akane into the inner shrine where they both sat down across from each other on either side of a low table. Incense was burning and the smell of jasmine wafted through the air. Kusanagi’s eyes drifted to the altar that was directly behind Akane and saw that several weeping candles had been lit there; the flames were dancing, reaching their fiery hands upwards. The candlelight eerily flickered across Akane’s face and for a moment Kusanagi

thought that Lady Akane's eyes had glowed red. *Naw*. Kusanagi shook her head.

Akane steepled her fingers before her, "Now tell me what troubles you, child."

Kusanagi got straight to the point, a steely look in her emerald green eyes, "I wish to free my slave, Ranmaru."

Akane's eyes bulged out of her head. "You want to WHAT?" Kusanagi raised an eyebrow at her outburst. Akane was usually so calm and composed. But Akane quickly recomposed herself. Cough. "I see...are you sure?" Akane seemed nervous and troubled, and so (probably to calm her nerves) she took out a long, ornate pipe from within her *haori* sleeve along with some tobacco. She then began to stuff her pipe slowly before lighting it. She then took a long draw from her pipe before blowing the smoke into the air and towards Kusanagi.

Kusanagi waved her hand spastically in front of her face as the smoke was sent her way. *Ew. Pipe smoke*. Kusanagi hated the smell of cigarettes and pipe smoke. "Yes, I have to do it. Whatever the cost."

Akane's eyes narrowed into thin slits. "May I ask why?" She blew a few rings into the air carelessly.

Kusanagi blushed and began to fidget with her hands. She looked away as she responded, "I want to tell him how I feel...and I want to hear his response without worrying about if the Control Collar is affecting his answer..."

Akane's frown deepened. "So, you've fallen in love with the demon, my child?"

Kusanagi nodded and slammed her hands down on the tabletop before her, "*You* must know of a way to free him! You're my only hope, Akane-sama. *Please*. You have to help me."

Akane looked thoughtful as she took another puff of her pipe, and blew out the smoke slowly into the air; it began to curl into tendrils around Kusanagi who ignored this since she was so intent on Akane's response. "There is a way...but...I feel you should be one hundred percent sure of your feelings for him before you make such a decision." And then she smiled almost pityingly at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi's brow furrowed, "What do you mean?"

“I believe you should know the *truth* about Ranmaru. About what he really is...and the past you both share together.” At this point the entire inner chamber of the shrine was filled with curling wisps of smoke...

Kusanagi could barely breath, her lungs felt heavy, and she felt very tired all of a sudden. It was a struggle just to keep her eyelids from drooping. “I don’t understand. Do you mean my past life? How do *you* even know about that?” A thrill of fear went down Kusanagi’s spine - just who was this old miko *really*. That she would know of Kusanagi’s and Ranmaru’s past lives, or of what happened over five hundred years ago...

Akane smiled evilly, her eyes flashing red as she blew another cloud of smoke Kusanagi’s way, “I know much more than you would believe, Kusanagi. And soon you will know the truth about the man you think you love. That man who is really nothing more than a monster. Now, sleep...and dream...and remember...the truth...Nagi-*chan*.” Akane began to chant the words to a spell that would put Kusanagi under a hypnotic sleep and that would summon long forgotten memories of her past to replay them as a dream.

Akane’s voice was fading away and Kusanagi struggled to keep her eyes open, internally beginning to panic. She couldn’t allow herself to fall asleep or to dream! She only dreamed of Death after all. But then again she had dreamed a little about how much she had loved Ranmaru right before she had died in her past life. She couldn’t help but admit that she was curious about all that. How had Ranmaru and Nagi first met? How had they fallen in love? Had it been love at first sight? Had they always gotten along? Or had they fought - like Ranmaru and herself? Like a cat and a dog?

FLASHBACK

Over five hundred years ago...there were two twin sisters, Nagi and Kagura, who were both *miko* and who lived in a small village in Japan. Though the two girls looked almost identical they couldn’t have been more different than night and day. Nagi was soft-spoken, refined, serene, shy, ladylike while her sister Kagura was strong, loud, and had a fiery temper. For generations

the girls born into Nagi's family all possessed and had the gift of Sight and were Seers. But Nagi, although she possessed the Sight, had been born sickly and each time she used the Sight she put her health at risk. Because of this Nagi only performed ritual fortune telling for the village once a year.

The townspeople praised, showed favoritism to, and gifted things to Nagi – the more powerful of the two sisters. While they ignored Kagura purposefully and shunned her since she did not possess the Sight. This caused Kagura to become mean spirited and harbor ill feelings of jealousy and envy towards her sister. Kagura had also developed a spoiled-brat attitude and was always trying to get the attention and acknowledgement of the villagers as they continued to ignore her due to her lack of supernatural abilities. Thus she lived in her sister's shadow...

Nagi, however, had no idea that her twin sister felt this way. She loved her sister very much and admired her strength. Her sister Kagura would oftentimes go swimming at the river that lay close to the village through the nearby forest. Nagi would follow Kagura there and simply kneel on the riverbank to watch her strong sister swim. "One day, I wish to be able to swim like you do, sister..."

Kagura splashed her way up through the water and shook her head at her sister, water droplets flying through the air, "You mustn't dear sister - think of your health. You're much too delicate to swim. Don't even think of it."

Nagi sighed heavily, she was used to these sorts of lectures being directed towards her all the time, but it was still tiring. "Yes, I know...but I can dream can't I? It must be such a nice feeling - to swim like a fish with the water flowing past you."

And so Nagi dreamed.

Elsewhere, around the same time in the heavens, there lived two Celestial War Generals - Ranmaru and Kenmaru. They were the Goddess Inari's two top generals, whom she had raised and trained herself. They had been brought up as brothers. They were her best and most powerful warriors. Ranmaru and Kenmaru were also the best of friends and had fought side by

side in countless battles winning wars for Inari. They even slept side by side at night like brothers since Kenmaru was afraid of the dark and Ranmaru, who was the braver of the two, would comfort him.

However, Ranmaru was also the more powerful of the two and on occasion he saved Kenmaru's life when his own recklessness put him in danger. Kenmaru began to resent his best friend because no matter how hard he tried he couldn't surpass Ranmaru. To make matters worse, Inari also showed favoritism towards Ranmaru. She praised, loved, and almost worshipped Ranmaru even. Kenmaru felt that this was like a knife being twisted in his back every time he saw Inari's adorning gaze land on Ranmaru when he wasn't looking.

Ranmaru was of course completely oblivious of the Goddess' attention and could care less. But Kenmaru was different. He had a heart and one that craved love. A love that Inari denied him and bestowed upon the ungrateful Ranmaru instead. What Kenmaru desired more than anything else in the world was to be loved and to be praised by someone - to be acknowledged.

Because Ranmaru was the more powerful of the two generals he felt it was his responsibility and duty to look out for his brother-in-arms, Kenmaru. And so for this reason he oftentimes followed Kenmaru and took it upon himself to watch out for him. This was also because Ranmaru felt that the bond that he and Kenmaru shared ran deeper than being blood brothers - they were comrades, brothers-in-arms.

Kenmaru didn't see it this way however. He felt that Ranmaru was looking down on him, pitying him for his lack of power and strength. He believed that Ranmaru must consider him *worthless*, pathetic, weak – if he was so sure that he needed looking after.

Kenmaru continued to train vigorously in order to become more powerful. He had vowed to himself that one day he would show Ranmaru and Inari his power and force them to acknowledge him.

But no matter how powerful Kenmaru became it still

wasn't enough. He never seemed to be able to please Inari and he found himself living in Ranmaru's shadow...

Then one day...Kenmaru had been training fiercely to gain Ranmaru and Inari's acknowledgement when he heard that the Goddess Izanami had gotten her hands on a powerful, new War General known as Kogarashi. Kenmaru saw his chance. If he could defeat Kogarashi he would prove himself to both Ranmaru and Inari. And so he went off alone to face Kogarashi.

On a grassy hill, by a cliff, Kogarashi was looking down upon an endless valley when Kenmaru, wearing his signature red *samurai* armor, and who had his silver hair tied back in a short ponytail, approached the powerful-looking warrior, who was dressed in all-black *samurai* armor. The *yokai kami* before Kenmaru had long black hair and when Kogarashi turned around to face Kenmaru once he had sensed Kenmaru's presence Kogarashi revealed that he had fierce, ruby-colored eyes.

Kenmaru drew his sword and pointed it at Kogarashi, "I hear you're Izanami's new War General Kogarashi...I have come to challenge you to a duel! I am known as Kenmaru!"

Kogarashi's eyes narrowed at Kenmaru and he could tell that he was a fox demon by his scent, "Ah, you must be one of Inari's Fox Generals that I've heard so much about. I gladly accept." He unsheathed his own sword.

The two War Generals attacked each other - their swords slashing through the air and clashing while sending sparks up into the air. Slash. Block. Slash. Parry. Kenmaru smirked - they were evenly matched. He could do this! He would defeat this guy and Inari would praise *him* and Ranmaru would be impressed by *him*.

But, Kogarashi began to summon his true power and that of the cursed Muramasa sword he possessed so that a dark aura of energy surrounded him and his sword, before he attacked Kenmaru once more-

Kenmaru raised his sword to block the attack - and he could see the image of a spirit coming out of the sword and flying towards him. Kenmaru's eyes widened in fear - just what was *that*? A spirit...in the sword?

Their swords clashed but with a burst of power Kogarashi was able to shatter the blade of Kenmaru's sword. A sword that had been gifted to Kenmaru by the Goddess Inari. A sword that

had been forged in the fires of heaven itself!

Kenmaru's eyes were wide in disbelief, "That power! It's incredible! You must tell me, what is that power? I must know! Tell me!"

Kogarashi moved his sword through the air, not pausing to finish Kenmaru off now that his sword was broken and he was defenseless. A swordmaster without his sword was as good as dead after all.

"My power? This is the power of a cursed Muramasa sword!" Kogarashi declared.

"Muramasa?" Kenmaru breathed in awe, "A cursed sword...? I want...that power..."

"Now die!" Kogarashi aimed his sword at Kenmaru's eye, prepared to run his sword straight through Kenmaru's skull-

However-

Someone stood in Kogarashi's path and blocked the attack, steel skidded against steel as Ranmaru skillfully deflected the blow away from Kenmaru's head but Kogarashi's sword sliced off Ranmaru's ear instead.

"Ranmaru!" Kenmaru cried out in shock as he watched the blood gushing from Ranmaru's head.

Ranmaru half-smirked, however, appearing to be completely unaffected by the blow he had just received, "Kenmaru, what did I tell you about hogging all the fun for yourself?" Ranmaru then turned his attention back to Kogarashi and pressed his sword forward forcing Kogarashi back.

Kogarashi looked at the intimidating man who was before him now. He too appeared to be one of the two fox generals he had heard so much about but...the man had just gotten his ear sliced off and he was still smiling. Kogarashi shivered and his sword was trembling violently in his grip. Kogarashi's cursed sword was afraid.

Kogarashi knew that at his current battle level he would be no match for this general. Kogarashi's current cursed sword was also nowhere near powerful enough to fight against this general and his own cursed sword. So, Kogarashi, cursing his luck and his own cowardly cursed sword sheathed his sword with

a shake of his head. *Pathetic, worthless sword. If I am to face a man as powerful as he is I will need to find a better sword.*

He looked past Ranmaru at Kenmaru, “Keh, it seems our duel has been interrupted. Perhaps, we shall continue it some other time, Kenmaru.” He then turned his attention to Ranmaru. “And as for you...I can’t wait to cross blades with you when I am ready. I will find another cursed Muramasa sword - one that isn’t such a coward like this one, and then I shall kill you.”

Ranmaru grinned, “*You kill me?* You can certainly try.” Ranmaru sheathed his sword. “I shall be waiting.”

Kogarashi nodded and then disappeared.

Ranmaru turned back to Kenmaru, blood dripping down the side of his face and reached his hand out towards him, “You alright?”

Kenmaru batted Ranmaru’s hand away angrily. He had watched the exchange just then. Kogarashi could care less about fighting *him* - he just wanted to fight Ranmaru. Kenmaru had already been dismissed as being weak. Everyone was always ignoring him for Ranmaru...*Why must I continue to live in Ranmaru’s shadow? Why!*

“Don’t touch me! I can get up on my own, I’m not a baby.” Kenmaru spat as he stood up on his own shaky legs.

Ranmaru blinked at his brother in confusion and then shrugged it off. As long as Kenmaru wasn’t hurt...nothing else really mattered.

Back at the Celestial Palace of the Heavens...Ranmaru’s head had been bandaged and his wound cared for. Word spread like wildfire about Kenmaru’s brush with death, his near defeat, and how Ranmaru had saved him from Izanami’s new War General, Kogarashi.

Ranmaru and Kenmaru were sitting silently in their room together. Ranmaru not really understanding the ‘silent treatment’ Kenmaru was currently giving him...

Ranmaru was calmly sipping a cup of green tea that he had prepared when Inari suddenly burst through the door looking frantic, “Kenmaru! Ranmaru!” The Goddess Inari was a flamboyant, playful and mischievous goddess with long, coppery-colored hair that reached the floor in curls, and sparkling

gray-lavender colored eyes. She was wearing a pure white *kimono* that was draped over her shoulders in such a way to reveal her cleavage in a seductive manner, and her lavender-colored *obi* sash was tied in front in a large and dramatic bow. Half of her hair had been styled up into a bun and several long, golden chopsticks had been stuck into her hair on either side.

She too had heard about the duel obviously. Kenmaru looked up, a hopeful expression on his face. The way she had said his name just then - had it truly been tinged with worry?

Inari eyed Kenmaru worriedly but her gaze then moved to Ranmaru, who still wore the bandage circling his head, "Oh Ranmaru!" Inari rushed over to him and hugged him close, throwing her arms around him.

Kenmaru's jaw dropped. *Wha...?*

Ranmaru just remained unmoving in her embrace. Not really feeling anything. A slight widening of his eyes was the only emotion he showed. "Inari-sama?"

"I'm so glad...you're alright." Inari wiped a tear from her eye dramatically. "I was so worried when I heard about what happened. Ranmaru...you need to be more careful."

Ranmaru nodded obediently, "*Hai*, Inari-sama." He said in a dull tone.

Kenmaru clenched his fists at his sides, *Why?* Why did it always end up like this? Why was it always *him*? Inari didn't even care about him...Ranmaru didn't care about him either....no one did!

Kenmaru got up and fled the room. Inari called after him concernedly, "Kenmaru-kun?"

Ranmaru grabbed her wrist and shook his head at her when she would have gone after him, "Sometimes us men just need to be left alone."

Inari frowned but nodded in agreement, "You're probably right."

Kenmaru ran and ran until he felt his legs would give out beneath him. Where was he running to exactly? Hell if he knew. What did that matter anyways? He just wanted to get away, far

away. So he continued to run until his footsteps were taking him into the forbidden lower levels of the palace...

And that's when he heard a voice. *Kenmaru...I've been waiting for you...come to me, Kenmaru...*

Kenmaru turned his head this way and that, nearly giving himself whiplash. A voice-! Where had it come from? "W-who's there?" Kenmaru's voice was tinged with fear.

Do not be afraid Kenmaru....I am your ally...now come and speak with me...

"Ally?" Kenmaru mused aloud and shook his head. "I have no allies...no one understands me."

Ah, but I do. I've been watching you, Kenmaru. I know of your suffering...how you love Inari...how Ranmaru has stolen that love...how you hate living in Ranmaru's shadow...

"Shut up!" Kenmaru gripped his head, "SHUT UP! Get out of my head! You don't understand! No one does! You don't know me!"

But I do...and I can give you what you want. Your heart's true desire.

"My heart's...true desire?" Kenmaru let his hands fall away from his head and looked up.

Yes, power. I can give you the power to defeat Ranmaru and make Inari acknowledge you!

"Defeat...Ranmaru? But he's my brother...I don't..." Kenmaru trailed off uncertainly, biting his lower lip.

You hate him don't you? For what he's done. He's made a fool out of you. But together...we can show him who the stronger one truly is!

"I don't know..." Kenmaru struggled, his mind in conflict.

Are you going to continue to live in his shadow forever? Are you going to let him steal Inari's love? She should love you, you're the only who truly cares about her. Ranmaru doesn't care - he doesn't even have a heart anymore. He's become a killing machine. Inari needs to learn to appreciate you...you deserve to be loved. You're better than Ranmaru. The sweet voice caressed Kenmaru's ego temptingly.

"I'm...better?" Kenmaru's eyes widened, no one had ever said something like that to him before, no one had ever acknowledged him before...

“Where are you?” Kenmaru questioned suddenly out of curiosity.

This way...follow my voice... The voice urged Kenmaru on.

Kenmaru buried his doubts and made his way down the corridor and deeper down into the forbidden chambers of the palace where the walls, ceiling, and corridors themselves had been carved entirely out of solid rock.

Finally, Kenmaru found himself entering a chamber he never knew existed and there in the very center of the chamber was a sword. A single sword that had been sealed away. There was a large circular seal or ward drawn into the floor filled with symbols and spells, and in the very center of this seal was the sword. The sword itself was suspended in midair by several metal chains that were wrapped around the sword’s entire length and that were attached to the walls of the stone chamber. On the chains Kenmaru noted that *o-fuda* had been wrapped around the chains in different places.

The sword thrummed and pulsed with dark energy. A power so intense it made Kenmaru gag. “What...who are you?” Kenmaru gasped.

I am a cursed Muramasa sword...I am a spirit who has been tied to this sword. My name is Suzaku. The sword informed him.

Kenmaru’s eyes widened, “Suzaku? You mean one of the legendary Four Heavenly Beasts?”

Yes.

“But how...and why were you imprisoned and sealed away like this?”

There are two sides to every coin...there always exists good and evil...black and white...light and dark. The God Suzaku also has two sides. I am his other side but because I am different I have been shunned by those in heaven and misunderstood - thought to be evil. When I watched you and learned of your plight, however, you gave me a new purpose. I knew that I must help you...

Kenmaru was in awe, “Me? But I’m just...” *No one.*

You are special Kenmaru...I can see that. And together we

can show everyone in heaven just how special you truly are. Now...are you with me?

Kenmaru still hesitated, "I don't know..."

Come Kenmaru...you saw it for yourself in your battle against Kogarashi. The power of a Muramasa...a power that you too can possess...

"The power...of a Muramasa..." Kenmaru licked his lips. The power that Kogarashi had possessed and controlled - it had been incredible. It had even been able to shatter a blade, which had been forged in the fires of heaven. "What must I do?"

Break the seal upon me...that won't be too hard since you are a Celestial fox. Summon your fox-fire to burn away the o-fuda...and reach out and take me.

Kenmaru blinked, that was it? *Well, here goes nothing...*

Kenmaru summoned his fox-fire and burned the o-fuda. He then reached his hand outwards towards the sword - he was immediately met with resistance, some kind of protective force field or defensive barrier.

Good...just keep going...you can do it Kenmaru. If anyone can break this seal it is you...only you have that power....

Kenmaru gritted his teeth and summoned his *yokai* power, giving it everything he had in order to move his hand forward to grasp the sword. "*Hooryah!*" When he finally managed to grab the sword all of the chains immediately unwound themselves from around the sword and clattered to the floor ominously.

"I did it!" Kenmaru declared, looking down at the sword happily.

Yes...we did it. Now, the greatest power in the heavens is yours Kenmaru...allow me to give you a taste of my true power...

The sword allowed some of his intoxicating dark power to flow through Kenmaru's body.

Kenmaru's cheeks flushed, "The power! Such power!" Kenmaru began to laugh, ecstatic, "I can't believe this! No one will be able to stand in my way now!"

Our way, The sword corrected, Yes, together we shall turn heaven upside down.

Kenmaru was oblivious to the sword's evil thoughts since he was so caught up in his new power. "Ahahaha! Finally I shall show Ranmaru my true power! Ranmaru!"

Meanwhile, Ranmaru was completely oblivious that his brother had come to resent him this way. He loved his best friend - in his own way. He fought to protect Kenmaru and to bring Inari victory. There was no other reason - besides enjoyment, but Kenmaru and Inari's safety were always at the forefront of his mind. He cared about nothing else.

He had no idea that Kenmaru was suffering like he was and if he had known he would have gladly given him Inari's praise and love. Ranmaru didn't have a need for such things, not anymore. After all, Ranmaru no longer had a heart...

Ranmaru's mind was now filled with nothing but swords and battle. He was addicted to the HEAT of battle, that moment when one puts their life on the line while hanging on the thread between life and death, that thrill, the excitement, the rush - it was all that Ranmaru craved. He had a hunger for it, an unquenchable thirst.

If he could die fighting against a truly strong opponent - Ranmaru would die happy.

Ranmaru hadn't always been this way however. But he had sought the power to protect Kenmaru and Inari, the two people he loved and cared for the most - and lost his humanity in the process. Power had consumed him until he had become a killing machine. Until he even forgot the real reason why he was fighting in the first place.

That was until the day Nagi and Ranmaru met...

Nagi had snuck out of the shrine to take a moonlit stroll. It was so beautiful out right then with a new blanket of snow covering everything and a full moon shining overhead...

But then against the stark white landscape Nagi, with her green, lacquered, paper parasol in hand, spotted something up ahead. Something sinisterly RED.

Nagi cautiously approached and then discovered Ranmaru face first on the ground and bleeding to death...Nagi gasped at the sight of the blood and nearly fainted right then and there. *It's a MAN! A wounded man! Oh my! What should I do?* Nagi hesitated

about what she should do and decided to turn the man over - after all it couldn't have been very comfortable to be like that with one's face buried in the snow. So Nagi turned him over, which was hard work since Ranmaru had been in his full, golden, *samurai* armor and was extremely heavy, but somehow the frail girl had finally managed it.

Panting for breath, Nagi looked down at the man's face and blushed. She had never before seen such a beautiful man. His face was so refined it could have easily been that of a woman's. He had such thick lashes, and red pouty lips. But his nose and chin were masculine, square and majestic. He had hair that looked like melted copper and golden tanned skin. Ranmaru stirred and opened his eyes-

Golden yellow clashed with peridot green-colored eyes. Nagi's heart leapt in her throat. Was this what they called love at first sight? Nagi wondered to herself, mesmerized and unable to tear her eyes away from Ranmaru.

Ranmaru also looked at her curiously as if she were an oddity, "A woman...am I dead? She must be an angel of death, come to take my soul to the underworld. Maybe hell won't be so bad..." Ranmaru murmured to himself before passing out again.

Nagi blushed at his words and nearly passed out. This was all just too much - too sudden! But - she looked down at the man's unconscious form and decided she had to help him somehow.

Nagi rushed off and managed to find a sled, which she decided to 'borrow'. She then brought this back with her and struggled for several minutes to move Ranmaru's body onto it. Finally, after having managed this feat she decided to take him to the inner sanctum of the shrine. Only her sister and herself were allowed there and so Ranmaru would be safe from prying eyes.

Safe because she had noticed his slanted pupils and pointed ears and striking *golden* eyes. It only made sense - a man that perfect, that beautiful could not be human. So that meant he was either a *yokai* or some fallen *kami*...

Nagi painstakingly managed to take Ranmaru to the inner sanctum of the shrine and once there, blushing madly and fainting once or twice, she then stripped him of his armor, and somehow managed to treat his wounds. Finally, completely

exhausted Nagi collapsed half on top of him, passed out, and she slept.

Elsewhere...Kagura felt strange. She woke up from the most unusual dream and felt oddly flushed. This feeling...it was something she had never felt before. No wait - was this something her sister Nagi was feeling? But what would have caused her sister to feel something so intense? Curiosity getting the better of her, Kagura snuck into the shrine and to the inner sanctum where she spotted her sister taking care of a MAN!

He was no ordinary man either; he had hair the color of melted copper, sun-kissed almost bronze skin. He was beautiful. Kagura's heart fluttered and beat wildly in her chest. *This man...!*

This feeling...! She had never felt anything quite like it before. This restless feeling as she looked at him and was drawn to him. She wanted to get closer but it was Nagi who was caring for him. And then Kagura held her breath as Ranmaru began to wake...

Ranmaru awoke to...warmth. And he looked down to see that some strange human woman was lying on top of him! *Such insolence!* His eyes widened considerably as he recognized her as the woman from earlier - his Angel of Death. She must have saved him and it must have cost her since she wasn't looking very well. Her face was flushed and her breathing was irregular. Ranmaru put a hand to her forehead and sure enough he felt that she had a fever...

Ranmaru felt a twinge of something in his chest; some unidentifiable emotion was there. Something he had never felt before. What could it be? He stroked her hair slowly, wondering what he could do to help her. He suddenly felt so helpless for some reason.

Kagura, who had been watching the entire scene, let her mouth drop open in complete shock.

A few minutes later, Nagi awoke and quickly pulled back away from Ranmaru when she realized she had been sleeping on

him. Her face turned red when she saw two golden eyes watching her intently - he had been awake? *Oh my dear god!* “Y-you’re awake...how are y-you feeling?” She stuttered nervously.

Ranmaru nodded, “I’m feeling much better thanks to you. It was you who saved me, correct? Thank you.”

“Oh, it was nothing.” Nagi smiled and tapped the tips of her fingers together as she looked away.

Ranmaru tried to sit up, “I must go.”

Nagi snapped her head back to look at him in surprise, “Go? Go where? You can’t - not with those injuries.”

“I have a war to win.” Ranmaru declared, a serious look on his face.

“*Sensou? War?*” Nagi frowned darkly, “I don’t think you quite realize the situation that you’re in, *demon*. You’re going to stay here until your wounds have healed properly. I didn’t just go through the trouble of saving your life to have you go and die in some meaningless battle! And do you even know who I am? I am Nagi, the Head *Miko* of this village. I also happen to be extremely powerful.” Nagi let her power flare around her, “One wrong *touch* and *poof* you could be instantly purified by my power.”

Ranmaru’s eyes widened. This frail, sickly woman was a *miko*? And one with such power? “You’re a *miko*.” This woman held a great inner strength for a human. Ranmaru was impressed. He smirked. “So be it then, human woman. I shall remain here until I am fully healed. You could have just admitted you didn’t want me to leave.” He winked at her.

Nagi blushed, “Y-you wish! D-demon!”

Ranmaru furrowed his brow, “Why did you save me anyways, *onna*? As a demon I am your natural enemy.”

Nagi shook her head, “I am a healer. On the battlefield everyone who gets hurt is equal to me. I will help heal anyone. I do not choose sides. No side to me is right or wrong.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to think that way?” Ranmaru questioned curiously. This woman was an enigma.

Nagi nodded. “Yes, but it’s what my heart tells me to do.” She placed a hand over her heart. “It’s my way of the *miko*. Just like *samurai* have their own way of the warrior or *bushido*. Everyone has a path that they chose to follow.”

“Your...way? Your...path?” Ranmaru blinked at her. *What*

is the path that I have chosen? What is my way? An enigma indeed.

Over the next few days, Nagi looked after the stubborn War General. Whenever he was left alone for too long he began to train by doing sit-ups, or one-handed pushups using his index finger to support his entire weight when he thought Nagi wouldn't catch him.

"356...357...358..." Ranmaru muttered to himself as he continued to do his one-fingered pushups.

Nagi's eye twitched when she had caught him in the middle of such incomprehensible training. In fact, she had ended up catching him several times at such training and had readily yelled at him in response. After all, if such crazy training didn't put strain upon Ranmaru's already injured body what would? And Nagi was going through all of this trouble to make sure Ranmaru healed as quickly as possible and yet he seemed to want to undo all the work she had done with his stupid training. *Men!* Nagi shook her head in disbelief.

Kagura, who had been spying on her sister, was surprised to see her usually shy and hesitant sister hitting a grown demon man over the head with a large paper fan!

But Ranmaru would just give Nagi an amused look in response and promise not to do something again - but of course he did anyways.

During their days together, Nagi noticed something odd about the demon man. Ranmaru wasn't like those in the village, who were always telling her not to move, speak, or over-exert herself. Telling her not to live. Ranmaru didn't treat her like a sickly person, but as just a person.

Meanwhile, Kagura continued to watch from the shadows as Nagi took care of the mysterious demon in secret. Kagura was surprised that her sister hadn't even bothered to mention this to her. Kagura clenched her fists angrily at her sides at the thought. The demon man was obviously extremely powerful but around Nagi he seemed almost gentle. Kagura watched as their 'bond' of patient and healer drew them closer together. And all the while

she could *feel* what Nagi was feeling - the excitement, the uncertainty. But above all...the *love*.

Kagura put a hand to her chest over her heart, "Ranmaru..." How she longed to be near him as well. It wasn't fair that her sickly sister got to monopolize Ranmaru all to herself - it just wasn't fair! This was torture, what Nagi was putting her through...

Nagi was with her sister one day at the river while she was watching her sister swim enviously. It was such a beautiful, sunny spring day, and the water had looked extremely inviting. Nagi wished she could swim but it was not allowed because of her weak legs. Kagura devilishly showed off by doing impressive dives and when she had finished her exercise for the day left Nagi sitting there forlornly on the riverbank alone. Nagi frowned at the water and made up her mind. *What's the point of living...if you didn't live?*

Nagi decided to try swimming on her own. She waded out into the river and slowly began to try and gain her balance but the current was stronger than she had anticipated and she suddenly felt the water sweeping her off her feet. *Epp!* Suddenly the water was carrying her away and the current reached up and grabbed Nagi to pull her under the water completely.

Luckily, Ranmaru, who had been stalking, err, following Nagi around saw what she had done and immediately dove in after her. *Silly human woman!* He thought angrily to himself as he swam towards her. *What was she thinking?*

Ranmaru pulled Nagi out of the water and carried her back to shore before dumping her on the riverbank unceremoniously. *Plop.* "What are you crazy? What were you trying to do - drown yourself?" Ranmaru didn't like this notion one bit, and his heart clenched at the thought. Was Nagi really so unhappy?

Nagi became flushed with embarrassment. "No...I was just trying to swim." She admitted in a low, hesitant voice.

Ranmaru blinked. "You don't know how?"

Nagi shook her head. "I'm not even allowed to try. They say I'm too weak...my legs have a problem, you see. They told me to never try swimming. That I would surely die." She tapped

the tips of her index fingers together uncertainly. *Why am I telling him all this?*

“I think they have a point.” Ranmaru deadpanned.

Nagi looked up at him then, her expression fierce. “I know but I wanted to try for myself anyways. I don’t care if I die. I wanted to know what it was like to swim...and so I tried. I don’t want to live a safe life in a gilded cage. I want to live my life to the fullest. Even if that shortens my life I don’t care. This is my only wish - to be free and to live my life the way I want to live it.”

Ranmaru blinked at her. For a human woman she was certainly brave and he found himself once again being impressed with her. He reached his hand out to her, “Come then.”

Nagi looked at his hand in confusion. “What?”

Ranmaru didn’t know why he was doing what he was doing. Perhaps he had taken leave of his senses to be concerning himself with this weak human woman but- “Come, I’ll take you swimming. You won’t drown with me looking after you.”

Nagi hesitated before putting her hand in his. “Alright.” She blushed fiercely and nodded.

Ranmaru then had her get up on his back so that he could carry her piggyback style and into the water. With her riding his back like this he swam through the water and let Nagi enjoy the feeling of the water rushing past her. He told her to hold her breath and then he took Nagi underwater and when she opened her eyes she had been able to see silvery fish swimming past them. It had been amazing. They broke through the water and Nagi began to laugh out of sheer happiness. Ranmaru for some reason found himself chuckling along with her.

Kenmaru, along with his new sword Dark Suzaku in hand, went off in search of Ranmaru determined to find him and challenge him to a duel. He was surprised to discover that Ranmaru was not in heaven but had somehow ended up on earth. Ranmaru had also failed to return from their last battle against Kogarashi and the goddess Izanami, but Kenmaru hadn’t been too worried about him since Ranmaru was pretty much invincible



after all.

And that's when he found Ranmaru in the presence of some human woman. Kenmaru's jaw dropped as he watched them together - laughing and smiling. *Whoa, chotto matte! Wait a sec! Ranmaru - laughing and smiling?* That was inconceivable. Ranmaru seemed to be teaching the frail looking, human woman how to swim too. Kenmaru's eyes widened. Since when did that emotionless automaton, that killing machine, laugh or smile anymore? It was like he was watching an entirely different person or rather it was like watching the 'old Ranmaru', the one he had grown up with, and trained with before they had both become War Generals and before the Heavenly War...

And that stung most of all. *So, he can still smile and laugh like that? He just can't do so when around me then?* Kenmaru's spirits fell. *He must care for this woman...he's acknowledged her. He's picked her over me. Once again I am cast aside and ignored. Once again, someone is chosen over me. Dammit! That girl...that woman...just who is she...I must know!*

Kenmaru became immediately curious about the woman, who had been able to make Ranmaru laugh and smile like that, and so he began to spy on the two of them and their forbidden love from the shadows...

Around the same time as the Heavenly Wars were going on, fierce human wars were also being fought down on earth. It was the feudal era – *Sengoku* Period, or the Era of the Warring States in Japan. Two feudal lords, Nobunaga and Yoshimoto, were fighting an intense battle and there was much bloodshed and casualties on both sides...

Nagi was a pacifist and did not believe in war. She was also an adept healer and so after the battles would heal *samurai* from both sides.

However, this was unacceptable to the feudal lord known as Yoshimoto. He told her that she would have to chose her side, but Nagi refused arguing that to her since she was a healer anyone who was injured was therefore her patient.

This angered Yoshimoto greatly so that he decided to

send assassins after Nagi to take her life during the night.

After their fateful swimming day, Ranmaru continued to follow Nagi around like a second shadow, while keeping an eye on her. He felt unworthy to go to her side, however, once he found out about her ideals concerning war and life when he had one day followed Nagi out onto a battlefield and watched her as she had tended to the fallen *samurai* on both sides. This is when he realized how extremely different from one another they were. They were truly from two different worlds. He was the Darkness in love with the Light...

His hands were already stained with blood...while Nagi was still pure, innocent, and good. Everything that Ranmaru himself was not. He didn't want to touch her or get too close to her because he felt his dirty, bloodstained touch would corrupt her - taint her innocence and purity, which were qualities that Ranmaru was intrigued by.

There was this rift or gulf between them that Ranmaru knew could not be so easily crossed.

And so Ranmaru stayed away and merely watched Nagi from the shadows because she still fascinated him - he couldn't bare to be apart from her for too long, but did not know how to name this restless emotion that he was feeling for her either.

Then one night as he was sitting on the roof of the shrine while stargazing the assassins Yoshimoto had hired arrived to take Nagi's life.

Ranmaru recognized them for who and what they were almost immediately - assassins. They had the stench of blood and death around them. They were cloaked in shadow and dangerous. Ranmaru could sense their auras of murderous intent. *But why would someone send assassins after Nagi?* Ranmaru shook his head, unable to fathom it.

The assassins burst through the windows and into the shrine where Nagi had been praying in front of the alter.

Nagi turned to see the men dressed in black and then watched as they raised their hands. She caught sight of the gleaming daggers they held in their hands. The candlelight in the room flickered off their blades ominously as they charged forward-

Nagi's eyes widened in fear and she gasped. She tried to

scream but was paralyzed with fear. Was this to be her end?
Ranmaru!

But then at that moment Ranmaru burst through the roof, making a gigantic hole there with Kuroki Ryu - Ranmaru liked to think it was a 'short cut'. Others like Nagi whose eye twitched as she watched Ranmaru jumping down from the ceiling, may have thought this act had been pure 'over kill' and perhaps merely a ruse to make a dramatic entrance in order to impress a woman. The shrine! I can't believe he just did that! That...baka!

Ranmaru landed and stood between Nagi and the assassins. He then raised his sword in a one-handed grip casually before him and pointed it at the assassins.

They all stopped dead in their tracks.

"Close your eyes." Ranmaru told Nagi as he moved forward to attack.

But Nagi did not close her eyes and watched as the five *ninja* closed in on Ranmaru. But he seemed to move much faster than they did and in seconds he was cutting them down one by one - his sword flashing and glowing through the air. The candlelight gleamed off the beautiful blade of Ranmaru's *katana*, which seemed to glow with a sinister red light. Blood also splattered and streamed through the air as Ranmaru's sword sliced and cut through his opponents. He decapitated one - to then cut off the arm of another -

Paralyzed Nagi had been unable to tear her eyes away.

Ranmaru had already decided that he would show these men no mercy. When he had realized these men were after Nagi's life a strange need or protective instinct had overcome him as well as an emotion that he could still not name. He felt possessive of Nagi and didn't like the idea of anyone touching a single hair on her head.

He had decided in that split second that he would fight and kill to protect her. To protect. It was the first time Ranmaru would raise his sword in order to protect someone so consciously and not just fight for the sake of fighting like he normally did - for the mere thrill of battle. Or at least this is what Ranmaru believed since he still wasn't able to remember the real reason

why he was fighting: fighting to gain power, gaining power in order to fight. Ranmaru was trapped in an endless cycle.

The reason, which was to protect Inari and Kenmaru...the reason he had forgotten due to being consumed by Power itself.

He had enjoyed killing these men, who had foolishly tried to harm the woman he loved. And he had been smiling during their slaughter.

When Ranmaru had finished he turned to see if Nagi was alright and saw to his horror that she had *NOT* closed her eyes but had instead kept her eyes wide open and that she had seen *everything*.

Her eyes were wide, her pupils dilated. She was trembling with fear as she gazed upon him...splattered in blood...

She was afraid of him.

Ranmaru swiftly turned his back to her so that she would not see him in his current state. His heart constricted painfully in his chest at that look Nagi had given him. She feared him and probably *hated* him for what he had done since she did not believe in killing.

“Don’t look at me.” Ranmaru’s voice cracked slightly, and he swallowed. “You must hate and fear me now. I certainly must disgust you...” He clenched his fists, his claws digging into his hands until they bled.

Nagi seemed to snap out of her stupor when she watched a drop of Ranmaru’s blood hit the floor of the shrine. Ranmaru had risked his life to save hers. He had saved her. And now he was in pain. She watched as his body shook and he dug his nails into the palms of his hands, awaiting her judgment. Was he so sure of her condemnation? Nagi went up to Ranmaru and wrapped her arms around him from behind, resting her cheek on his back. Ranmaru gasped and stiffened in her embrace.

“*Yoshi, yosh, shhh*, it’s alright now. I don’t hate you, *baka*. How could you think that? You saved my life...” She stroked Ranmaru’s hair.

Ranmaru was in shock. Nagi was trying to comfort *him*? After what he’d just done? His heart was pounding frantically in his chest. What was this feeling...? He stopped trembling and turned around in her embrace to face her. He reached out...hesitated and then reached out to cup her cheek fondly...

To his surprise Nagi smiled at him in response, "Thank you." How could she bear to look at him covered in blood? How could she still look at him with *that* look on her face? One of acceptance and something more...? Ranmaru shook his head, unable to believe it.

"How can you stand to look at me?" Ranmaru questioned in confusion. "How can you let me touch you? Don't I frighten you? Don't I revolt you? I'm a murderer...I killed those men..."

Nagi was serene as she nodded, "You protected me. The only justifiable fight is a defensive one. Tell me, Ranmaru why do you fight?"

Ranmaru's brows furrowed, this is what he too wished to know. He shook his head despairingly, "I do not know."

Nagi placed a hand over his heart. "But you do know...there must be others out there that you are fighting to protect. Others that also mean a lot to you and whom you care for. Can you think of no one?"

Ranmaru's eyes widened as the images of Inari and Kenmaru popped up into his mind. "Inari...Kenmaru..."

Inari...The Goddess of the Harvest? Nagi mused and shook her head. *Naw.* She smiled warmly at Ranmaru. "You see, you knew deep down all along. The true purpose of your sword. Try not to forget this Ranmaru, try not to let the Power consume you again and turn you into a beast..."

Ranmaru nodded. This woman had been able to see into his dark heart and had been able to solve his riddle. Inari...Kenmaru...the reason he fought...was for them. All along, he had the answer deep within himself...

Ranmaru was confused. He couldn't get Nagi out of his head. What was this restless feeling? He wanted to be with her forever, just to be near her, and for no other to touch her...much like...a life-mate! *That's it!* Ranmaru realized that he wanted Nagi to be his life-mate. However...the union between a *yokai* and a *miko* was forbidden. But...he still wished to be bonded to her - for her to belong to him. For that to happen, he needed to mark her...

And so, the very next day, after having come to the realization that he loved Nagi, Ranmaru went to seek her out. She had been in the shrine lighting incense when Ranmaru carelessly burst through the front door and approached her with swift strides. He kept walking forward to Nagi's surprise and grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

Nagi blinked at him in shock, "Go? Go where?"

Ranmaru turned and looked deeply into her eyes, a myriad of emotions swirling in his golden depths and making Nagi's breath hitch in her throat. "I wish for you to become my life-mate."

Nagi's brows furrowed, "Life...*mate*?" She blushed slightly since that couldn't be like it sounded right?

Ranmaru nodded, "Yes, a life-mate is someone a celestial fox chooses to spend the rest of his life with and whom he is mated to. Someone to bear his pups. To you I would become someone much like a 'husband' but this bond is much stronger than the human marriage vow. I believe the human way to describe my feelings for you Nagi would be this word called 'love'. I am not sure that I understand the concept of love entirely, however, I simply want to be near you, to be together with you always. I do not want any other man to look at you. When I look at you I feel things I have never felt before." He put a hand to his heart. "It hurts but I know I must have you by my side. Is that love?"

Nagi blushed, her heart pounding in her chest, "You...love *me*?"

Ranmaru nodded and then frowned at her expression, "Do you not feel the same?"

Nagi shook her head vigorously, "No, it's not that but Ranmaru the union between a *miko* and a *yokai* is forbidden by heaven. We can't...." *Be together.*

"But you do love me though?" Ranmaru pressed as he cupped her cheek and looked searchingly into her peridot colored eyes.

"Yes, I love you." *She breathed.*

"And do you want to stay by my side and no one else's? For all eternity?" Ranmaru continued.

Nagi looked back at Ranmaru confusedly. "Well, yes,

but-”

Ranmaru nodded. “Then it is settled. We shall become life-mates. Do not worry. I merely wish to form a ‘bond’ between us. I understand that our *physical* union is forbidden. I will not take your innocence. Instead we will form a *spiritual* bond between us. This will merely ensure that we can stay by each other’s sides forever.”

Nagi blushed at the reference Ranmaru had made to her virginity. “Then what-?”

“I wish to ‘mark’ you as my own. Will you permit this?” He gave her a hopeful look.

Nagi nodded hesitantly not quite sure about what he meant.

“Then come with me. You must trust me. I will not harm you in any way.” He reached his hand out to her.

Nagi placed her hand in his and smiled, “I know.”

Ranmaru then swooped Nagi up into his arms and carried her out of the shrine. They headed out into the forest and made their way to their favorite meeting spot beneath the ancient cherry blossom tree. A full moon was shining down from overhead, making the pink and purple cherry blossom petals glow eerily...

Ranmaru gently set Nagi on the ground, and then stepped close to her. He cupped her face again and began to lean down- “May I taste you?” *I only want to be near her...*

Nagi closed her eyes and tilted her head up in response.

Ranmaru leaned over and gently pressed his lips against hers, treating her like spun glass or fine porcelain. Afraid that too harsh a touch would cause her to shatter.

They kissed each other lovingly before Ranmaru then removed his lips from hers and placed his lips instead on the side of her neck. He kissed, licked, and nibbled her sensitive skin there making Nagi shiver pleasantly in response. In this way he prepared her-

Ranmaru’s incisors lengthened and he slowly, as gently as possible, bit down into her flesh-

Nagi gasped and blushed at the bittersweet feeling of Ranmaru’s fangs piercing her.

And in an instant it was over. He had marked her as his own. Now, if Nagi would mark Ranmaru in return the bond between them would be complete.

“Nagi...now you must...” Ranmaru purred in a low rumbling voice in her ear.

Nagi blushed scarlet. “Me? I couldn’t possibly...”

Ranmaru looked deeply into her eyes, “You can, and you must in order for our bond to be complete and for it to last forever. Nagi...”

Nagi gathered her courage and swallowed, before nodding to herself. “*Yosha*. Alright, Ranmaru...” She began to lean forward, while opening her mouth slightly-

However-

“Ranmaru!” Came Kenmaru’s urgent sounding voice, as he popped out of nowhere.

Nagi eyed the pale man who had suddenly appeared curiously. He seemed oddly effeminate but there was also this dangerous aura around him similar to Ranmaru’s. *Could he be the brother that Ranmaru has mentioned?* The man had silvery hair, which was tied back into a short ponytail, pink almost red eyes, and he was wearing a long white *kimono* that had red camellias on it. This man was beautiful but there was also something *unsettling* about him that caused Nagi to shiver.

Ranmaru turned to face Kenmaru, slightly put-out, “Yes, Kenmaru?” *Talk about bad timing...*

“Ranmaru is he...?” Nagi piped up curiously.

“Oh, this is my brother-in-arms, best friend, and fellow War General, Kenmaru.” Ranmaru introduced him.

Kenmaru bowed low before Nagi and daringly took her hand to place a swift kiss on it before Ranmaru could have stopped him, “A pleasure, Lady Nagi.” He looked up at her, his pink eyes glittering.

Ranmaru’s eyes narrowed at Kenmaru since he had *not* told Kenmaru Nagi’s name. Kenmaru smiled innocently in Ranmaru’s direction. “So sorry to spoil your fun, but Inari needs to see us both immediately...” His grin broadened when he saw that Ranmaru was reluctant to leave Nagi at such a crucial moment. They had been so close to completing their spiritual bond...

Ranmaru sighed heavily and turned to Nagi, “We shall finish the ritual some other time.” He leaned forward and kissed Nagi’s forehead sweetly. “My love.”

Nagi blushed and fidgeted nervously with her hands, tapping the tips of her index fingers together. “Alright, Ranmaru.”

Ranmaru turned to Kenmaru a slight frown on his face. “Let us go then, brother.”

Kenmaru nodded, an amused half-smirk still on his face, “Right.”

Elsewhere, Kagura had *felt* everything. She raised her hand to the bite mark that was now on her neck. She took her fingers away and stared down at the blood on her fingers in shock. *Ranmaru...*

Kenmaru had been watching Nagi from afar.

He had wanted to see what all the fuss was about and had to admit that she was beautiful...with those clear, peridot-colored eyes, that soft, innocent expression on her face. Something tightened in his chest as he watched her and he felt that Ranmaru was very lucky.

Several days passed and Kenmaru continued to stalk Nagi and Ranmaru as they would meet up with each other in secret. *Secretly*. Ranmaru hadn’t even told him about their secret rendezvous. His own brother. This stung. It was yet another blow to Kenmaru’s pride that he seemed to trust Nagi more than he trusted him.

Nagi...she was an enigma. Weak yet strong. Beautiful yet kind and not vain. Powerful yet...sickly. But also...*trapped*. A girl in a gilded cage. The villagers kept an annoyingly close watch on her and didn’t let her over-exert herself due to her poor health. In fact, they didn’t let her do much of anything other than stay at the shrine and pray. They treated her differently and walked on eggshells when around her because they thought she was weak. They didn’t let her enjoy herself very much either and the few times she managed to sneak out to take a walk along the

riverbank she was quickly brought back to the shrine. Protected. Smothered. Suffocated.

She was just like him.

People underestimated her - judged her. Were over-protective and suffocating. Couldn't they just let her breath? Couldn't they just let her be free? She was like a princess trapped in a tower but...

Who was her prince?

Probably Ranmaru. Kenmaru sighed. He too felt trapped. Ranmaru was overprotective and coddled him. He was babysat and Inari was also always there making sure he didn't get himself into trouble. They treated him like a child. They looked down on him.

They looked down on *her*. Yes, they were the same. Kindred spirits. Kenmaru could finally understand why Ranmaru had such an interest in her and why he had fallen in love with this lowly human woman.

But...Ranmaru was her prince. It was Ranmaru who would be her wings. They would probably end up running away together but Kenmaru wished that he could be Nagi's wings instead. His heart constricted painfully in his chest at the thought. He wanted to save Nagi but deep down he knew that the only one suited for that role was Ranmaru...

You love her don't you? Dark Suzaku murmured in Kenmaru's mind.

What? Kenmaru blinked in shock, at the thought. Did he really...?

I felt what you were feeling just now. You care for that woman. You want her, desire her don't you? That's why you've been following them, watching her. Are you just going to ignore your feelings and let Ranmaru steal another Love that should have been yours away? Are you going to sit back and do nothing and let him win? Again?

No...I...but they love each other. It has nothing to do with me. I don't stand a chance...

You're wrong. If that were so why are you crying? You deserve to have Nagi's love. What has that killing machine done to deserve it? The woman could...should be yours. I will give you the power to defeat Ranmaru and to make Nagi your woman...but

first we need a plan and perhaps a powerful ally...

A plan? What kind of plan did you have in mind? And what ally? Kenmaru questioned as he stubbornly wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

The union between a miko and a yokai is forbidden. It can interfere with the very balance of the universe. It can oftentimes result in the creation of a Rule Breaker. I suggest you go to Inari and tell her of what has happened and of how Ranmaru has fallen in love with a human woman...a miko at that. I'm sure the Goddess will be extremely interested to know all about that.

Kenmaru's eyes widened. Why hadn't he thought of that? It was the perfect way to sabotage and break up their love. *And the ally?*

She's over there...right behind you.

Huh? Kenmaru spun around to catch sight of someone, who was hiding behind a tree. However, this person had not been spying on him but rather upon the same couple he had been spying on moments before. It was a woman and for a split second Kenmaru thought that it was Nagi. *Nagi...?*

No, Nagi's twin sister, Kagura. She's in love with Ranmaru. I'm sure she would be more than willing to help you split up Ranmaru and Nagi's love.

Kenmaru smiled at the thought. *I see. Good one, Suzaku.* Kenmaru approached the tree where Kagura was still hiding. "You there!"

Kagura squeaked and fell over onto her backside, "Ack! Who the hell are you, *kisama!*" Her green eyes narrowed at Kenmaru suspiciously and took in his unusual appearance. His silky, white hair that was tied back into a short ponytail, his pink-red eyes, slightly pointed ears, and his red *samurai* battle armor. "A *yokai*..." She instantly became on guard.

Kenmaru smirked. "Close. I am a Celestial War General for the Goddess Inari. I am both *yokai* and *kami*." He bowed with a flourish. "I am known as Kenmaru."

"*Kenmaru...*" The word rolled off her tongue strangely as if she were tasting it. She looked him over unabashedly. He was indeed handsome though not in the same way as Ranmaru. If one

were to compare the two, Ranmaru would be the sun - golden and shinning so brightly that it hurt one's eyes to look upon it directly, dangerous. One would be burned if one got too close to the sun. And Kenmaru, Kagura decided, would be the moon - pale, white, cold, serene, lonely. "What is it *you* want?" She asked in an insolent tone, standing up, putting her hands on her hips, and leveling a condescending glare upon him.

Kenmaru didn't mind her fiery attitude though. In fact, he was rather amused by it. She really was the complete opposite of the refined and lady-like Nagi. He shook his head disbelieving and smirked at her, thoroughly entertained at getting to watch this version of Nagi. "I believe we have something in common, Lady Kagura." He began politely.

"Oh and what's that?" Kagura scoffed with a flippant wave of her hand.

"Unrequited love." Kenmaru revealed, his tone suddenly serious and Kagura gasped. "You see, I love your sister Nagi...while you're in love with my brother Ranmaru. Am I correct?"

Kagura blinked, gazing at Kenmaru now with a calculating expression on her face. "Brother?"

Kenmaru nodded. "Well, like a brother. He too is a Celestial War General, who serves the Goddess Inari."

Kagura's eyes widened, "He's...a god?"

Kenmaru nodded. "But I have a plan on how to split them up. I believe it would be in your best interests to partner with me in this endeavor." Kenmaru carelessly ran a hand back through his white hair; a few strands had come loose.

"Let me get this straight." Kagura began, "You want *me*, a *miko*, to team up with you, a *yokai* and a *kami*?" Kagura snorted. "No way in hell. I don't need the help of a filthy *demon*."

Kenmaru frowned, his expression darkening. "Then you're going to do nothing? And watch your sister's happiness flourish - a happiness that could very well be your own? *Should* have been your own. You look just like Nagi after all. Who's to say Ranmaru would not have fallen in love with you at first sight if you had been the one to meet up with him first. Fate has dealt you a cruel and ironic hand, Kagura. But that's why I want to help you."

“Pfft, and what can you do?” Kagura sneered.

“I will tell the Goddess Inari of their love. She will be most displeased and probably forbid Ranmaru from seeing Nagi ever again.” Kenmaru smiled at the thought. Then Nagi would be free for the taking.

Kagura looked thoughtful at that. “I see, but what do you want me to do?”

“Oh that’s easy. Tell the villagers of Nagi and Ranmaru’s love. The love between a *miko* and a *yokai* is forbidden. They will turn against her and forbid her from seeing Ranmaru. Then, this is the best part - I will make sure that Ranmaru will go and see Nagi, but it will really be *you* pretending to be Nagi. With my fox magic he won’t know the difference. And in return you merely have to make sure that Nagi gets a message from Ranmaru to meet. And when Nagi goes off to meet with Ranmaru I will be there instead pretending to be him. Is that not brilliant? Observe.” Kenmaru declared as he let his body morph and shift until in seconds a perfect copy of Ranmaru was standing before Kagura.

Kagura gasped and then laughed gleefully, “*Ohh~* that’s perfect! I guess you do have a few tricks up your sleeve after all, demon fox. Sounds like we have ourselves a plan. Ranmaru...you will be mine!” A cat’s paw smile formed on Kagura’s face.

“Indeed, we will merely take advantage of their blind love for one another and ensnare them easily with our treachery!” Kenmaru began to join in Kagura’s evil laughter.

Kagura shook her head, “No, no, that’s not how you’re supposed to laugh evilly, try this - *Ohohohohoho~*” Kagura cackled with hand upraised in front of her mouth.

Kenmaru blinked, “Like this? Buwhahaha!” Kenmaru tried to imitate her as he laughed maniacally.

“Close enough.” Kagura shrugged.

When Kenmaru approached the Goddess Inari to tell her the news that Ranmaru had fallen in love with a human woman, Inari had been in her private garden tending to her unusual variety of roses and camellias. As the goddess watered her

flowers they began to grow and bloom in seconds. Kenmaru shook his head, bemused, but Inari *was* a goddess after all so such things were only to be expected.

Kenmaru explained the situation and then awaited the goddess' response with baited breath.

"*Hmm~* so he's in love with a human you say?" Inari didn't sound too concerned as she began to prune her roses with a pair of large, silver gardening sheers. "And she's a *miko* too?"

Kenmaru's eye twitched. Why the hell was the Goddess of the Harvest taking this so lightly? Where was the explosion he had expected?

"*Why that's...simply marvelous!*" Inari suddenly declared, *clapping her hands together excitedly.*

Kenmaru's jaw dropped. *Huh...?* Was he missing something?

A cat's paw smile formed on Inari's face, "You see, I've just been so worried about him and about how he no longer has mercy, compassion nor love in his heart. You know Kenmaru it was all for our sake that Ranmaru allowed Power to consume him and became a killing machine." Inari shook her head sadly.

However, Kenmaru hadn't really been listening since all he had heard was 'I've been so worried about him'. Kenmaru couldn't believe this! Inari was siding with Ranmaru again! He clenched his fists angrily at his sides.

Inari continued to speak. "A Celestial War General without mercy or compassion cannot remain in the heavens anyways. Kenmaru, the Heavenly Council has already been urging me to banish him to the earth and turn him mortal. This would have been for his own good of course. In the hope that over time perhaps living as a human would have helped him to learn about mercy, compassion and love again. But now...this is all just too perfect." Inari's voice took on a tinge of excitement. "I can banish Ranmaru to earth in order to be with the one he loves. But...it is troublesome that she is a *miko*. *Hmm~*" Inari tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"I could turn Ranmaru into a human but I hate to lose my best War General. But the union between a *yokai* and a *miko* is forbidden...so Ranmaru cannot go completely unpunished. Also, I'm worried Ranmaru will accidentally hurt this *miko* woman



because his power is so great. They could never be intimate, you see, unless Ranmaru had some sort of restraint placed upon him.” Inari’s eyes lit up suddenly. “Oh, that’s it! A restraint! A Control Collar should do the trick. It’s ancient magic but it just might work. I shall give the *miko* a Control Collar to place about Ranmaru’s neck that will have a word of subjugation that can activate it. This collar will allow her to control him. That way she can keep his power in check and even punish him if he strays off the right path. As a *miko* I know she will be one to tread a path of mercy and compassion.” Inari nodded to herself, a pleased expression crossing her face. “Mmhmm, this is perfect. Am I a benevolent Goddess or what?”

Kenmaru blinked at Inari in shock. A Control Collar. Shit. He couldn’t let Nagi get her hands on that thing. The collar itself would form a kind of unbreakable bond between the two of them. “Inari-*sama*, allow me to give the Control Collar to the *miko* myself. There is no need for you to descend to the earthly realm. I know how much it tires you.”

Inari carelessly agreed to his offer with a shrug. “Ino, sure, allow me create the collar now.” Inari chanted a spell and began to gather her divine energy into her two hands, which became cupped around what resembled a golden ball of light. She then began to move her hands as she transformed and forged the light into a collar. “There. It is done. Perfect. The word of subjugation will be *Embrace*. Make sure you tell her this. As for Ranmaru’s punishment...he will be the submissive one in their relationship. As you know it’s *natural* for the male to be the dominant one in a human relationship. Ranmaru’s punishment is that he will have to lie below his *miko* during sexual intercourse. Not that I think he’ll mind too much since he will at least be able to be together with his lady love and all.” Inari chuckled as she handed a bewildered Kenmaru the collar. “I’m glad that Ranmaru will finally have happiness for himself instead of being concerned with the two of us all the time aye, Kenmaru?”

But Kenmaru wasn’t listening - he looked down at the Control Collar, his mind working a mile a minute as a plan was quickly forming in his mind.

Are you thinking what I’m thinking? Dark Suzaku questioned in a malicious tone.

Oh hell yes. Kenmaru replied with a secret smile. He'd make sure Nagi would never receive the Control Collar, and instead he planned on giving it to someone else. He had just the perfect person in mind too.

Kenmaru turned to go when Inari put a hand on his shoulder stopping him. Kenmaru turned to face Inari in surprise. Inari merely smiled and placed a white camellia into his *samurai* armor. "For luck." Inari explained. "You have always reminded me of a white camellia, Kenmaru. Camellias are one of my favorite flowers...they're white, beautiful, serene. And they're a lot like you because you're a lot like a white flower Kenmaru, which has yet to discover its true color or its true scent. I know that you will bloom into a beautiful flower one day, Kenmaru."

Kenmaru blushed at Inari's words. "And...what about Ranmaru? What flower does he resemble, Inari-sama?"

Inari tapped her chin thoughtfully until a twinkle came to her eye. "Why he's a red rose of course! They're red, fiery, beautiful, and yet because of their thorns they are deadly. Yes, that's exactly like Ranmaru isn't it? He's already blossomed into such a beautiful flower..."

Kenmaru frowned and clenched his fists at his sides. "Which do you prefer Inari-sama...roses or camellias?"

"Now that..." Inari began playfully while tapping her chin and then she turned to give Kenmaru a warm smile. "Is a secret."

Kenmaru however was not amused.

Kagura requested an audience with the village Elders and proceeded to tell them all about Nagi's forbidden love with the demon Ranmaru. "Unforgivable!" One of the Elders had cried and the rest were all in agreement. They quickly sent some of the village men to seize Nagi and throw her in jail.

Kagura lowered her head to hide the sly smile that was on her face as she heard the Elders' decision. Everything was going according to plan...

Nagi had been praying at the shrine when the men came for her. She turned her gaze to them tiredly. What had she done

now? She wasn't even trying to take a walk...or go see Ranmaru. "Well, what is it now?"

The men quickly grabbed Nagi by her arms and roughly pulled her to her feet. They then proceeded to drag her from the shrine premises. Nagi immediately became indignant. "*Oi!* What's going on? Unhand me this instant! How dare you treat me this way. Do you have any idea who I am? I am Nagi, the Head *Miko* of this village! I have done nothing wrong!" *Lately...*

"*Nothing you say?*" *One of the village men growled, "You lie with a straight face, demon lover."*

Nagi gasped in shock. How had they found out? *Shit.* Nagi hung her head in despair and shame allowing herself to be dragged off by the village men, who threw her into a holding cell.

The Head Elder of Nagi's village came to see her not long after. "*Miko* Nagi, you are hereby forbidden to associate with the demon known as Ranmaru. This is what the Council of Elders has decreed."

Nagi looked up in shock, "But Elder-!"

"Silence!" The Elder barked, "You will remain here in order to give you time to reflect on what you have done and to repent until you agree to my terms for your release."

"What terms?" Nagi's eyes narrowed at the old man.

"Those terms are for you to destroy the demon known as Ranmaru through purification!" The village Elder looked pleased with himself and stroked his long white beard as he waited for Nagi's reaction.

Nagi appeared bewildered and appalled. They wanted her to *kill* Ranmaru? "I could never harm him!"

"Then you shall remain here until you change your mind!" The Elder yelled back angrily becoming red in the face. But then his expression suddenly softened and he sighed heavily as he looked at her thoughtfully. "Nagi, we hate to have to keep you here like this but you must be aware of the gravity of the sin you have committed. The union between a *yokai* and a *miko* has been forbidden by the heavens themselves. This is not about *you* - but about the entire balance of our world. Those born into power such as yourself are not free. Your power comes with certain responsibilities. Please, you must purify him...it is the only way."

Nagi shook her head. "No! I refuse! I love him! I would

rather die first!” She declared, a fierce look in her peridot colored eyes.

The Elder’s expression darkened once more as he gazed upon Nagi coldly, “That can very well be arranged. Let us see how you feel after living in this cell for a few days - I shall return and see what your answer is then. And to think...I’ve always thought of you as a daughter, Nagi. I am extremely disappointed in you right now and surprised by your selfishness.” The Elder shook his head sadly as he walked away, without looking back.

Nagi grabbed the bars on her cell as she called after him. “But Elder! I swear I have done nothing wrong! We never even...bonded! We only want to stay by each other’s side! Where is the sin in that?” Nagi blushed bright red as she said the last part.

The Elder was glad Nagi could not see his face because it was also red. “Silence! You may be innocent of body but you are not innocent of mind! Repent now of your sins, *miko* Nagi! And decide your fate!” He stalked off.

Nagi collapsed to her knees in despair. “*Uso darou...*no way, this can’t be happening. They can’t really expect me to kill Ranmaru can they? I love him. I could never harm him. I won’t do it...! How did they even find out about the two of us? Ranmaru...where are you?” Nagi put her face in her hands and began to cry in a pitiful manner, tears streaming down her face that resembled pearls.

Days passed, with Nagi still locked up in the cell. Alone and thinking of Ranmaru and where he could be and why he hadn’t come to save her yet. *Oh Ranmaru...Has he forsaken me?* She was sinking down into the depths of despair when her sister Kagura suddenly decided to pay her a visit.

“Nagi-chan.” Kagura greeted nonchalantly in a singsong voice.

Nagi, who had been resting on the floor of her cell, and with her back to the front of the cell had to turn around to see her sister in surprise. “Kagura...!” She quickly pushed herself up off the ground and rushed over to the bars to greet her sister. “What is it? Are you alright?”

A strange expression formed on Kagura's face at Nagi's words but she quickly shrugged it off. "Of course, I'm alright. But what about you? When are you going to give in to the Elder's demands?"

Nagi shook her head, "I will never give in. I will not kill him Kagura. I love him." *Though he has forsaken me...*

Kagura nodded, a mischievous smile slowly forming on her lips, "I see...well I guess it's a good thing I brought you this letter from him then." She reached into her *haori* sleeve and pulled out a rolled up letter that she handed to Nagi through the bars.

Nagi's eyes brightened. "A letter?" *So he hasn't forgotten about me after all! Ranmaru!* She unrolled the letter to read:

My dearest Nagi,

How I have missed you. I long to see you. Your sister Kagura told me of everything that has happened and about all that has befallen you. I wanted to go to your aid immediately but Kagura was against this. She advised me to wait and that she would be able to help us - if you truly love me as much as I love you I want you to run away with me. We'll go somewhere far away where we can be together in peace. If this is what you want then meet me tonight under the cherry blossom tree where we always meet. Kagura will leave your cell door unlocked so that you will be able to sneak out. I will be waiting for you, my love, until exactly midnight. If you do not come I will assume you do not love me and I will disappear from your life forever. I will no longer cause you anymore trouble. You will be free.

Love

Ranmaru

Nagi clutched the letter to her chest and sighed longingly. Ranmaru...he did love her after all and cared for her. She had to go to him. He was hurting. She raised her eyes to look at Kagura. "Sister, I must go to him. I hope you will understand. This will be...goodbye."

Kagura nodded. "Oh I understand. More than you think."

Nagi reached out and took Kagura's hand in hers. "Thank you, dear sister, for helping us like this and putting yourself at risk. I love him so much it hurts but...this is also very hard for me because I will have to leave you. And I also love you very much,

Kagura-onee-san.”

Kagura blinked back at Nagi in surprise, mixed emotions flitting across her face. “You love me?”

Nagi giggled, “Of course, silly, we’re sisters after all. I’ve always loved you. I don’t know how I can ever repay you for this Kagura. I will forever be in your debt.”

Kagura shook her head looking torn and conflicted. “There’s no need...” *She claims to love me but in the end she still chooses him over me...that bitch. Doesn’t she realize what she’s made me go through? All of that longing and pain...because of our bond as twins?*

Nagi herself looked unsure. “But you do understand right? You’re not...mad? I could never live with myself if you were.” Nagi questioned beseechingly. She had sensed some sort of conflict within her sister and was worried by this.

“Don’t worry, sister, I understand. And I am not angry with you. Only sad that you must go and that we will never see each other again. I just want you to be happy though.” Kagura assured her, lying through her teeth.

“Oh sister...” Nagi shook Kagura’s hand up and down, “Thank you! I’ll never forget your kindness!”

I’m sure you won’t. Kagura thought as she smiled back, a fake cold smile.

Kusanagi gasped and awoke with a start to find herself back on the floor of the Inari shrine. *Ow!* She put a hand to her neck where it felt like a bee had just stung her and when she took her hand away to then look at her fingers she started when she saw that there was blood on her fingers. *The mark!* Kusanagi suddenly realized. The mark that Ranmaru had given her was back...along with the memories of her past life. Their bond was still incomplete...?

Lady Akane smiled down at Kusanagi assuredly, “So, have you remembered the truth?”

Kusanagi blinked, “Yea...”

“Then you understand why you cannot free him. He killed you. He’s nothing but a monster, a killer-”

Kusanagi glared at Akane and stood up. "A killer? You know nothing. He didn't kill me...he loved me. He saved me from a gilded cage. He let me out and let me really *live* my life. I already know that it's too late to save him from the fires of hell, Akane, but...that's why I'm simply going to scale the wall between us and join him in that hellfire! Now give me the spell!"

Akane nearly face-faulted in shock, "You can't be serious? No, I cannot allow this! He's a demon, Kusanagi. And you're--"

Kusanagi beamed, her emerald green eyes sparkling, "No longer a *miko*. That was my past life and this is my new life. My second chance! We can finally be together. If you won't tell me Akane then I'll have no choice but to find some other way. I will free him...I must go to him!" Kusanagi fled from the shrine.

"No wait!" Akane urgently called after her. "You don't know what you're doing! Argh!" She watched as Kusanagi took off down the steps of the shrine. A frown marred her features. "Did you really think it would be that easy? That you would get to live 'happily ever after' with your prince?" Akane's appearance suddenly shifted and then there standing at the front of the Inari shrine was no longer an old *miko* woman but Kenmaru in his *kimono* of camellias. "I won't let you and Ranmaru find happiness in this life so easily! Just you wait Nagi!"

Meanwhile, Ranmaru awoke from a nap and found that for some reason he was remembering his past with a sudden acute clarity. It must have been a spell, he realized. Since he too now remembered all about his past with Nagi and how they had fallen in love only to be tragically separated. But he also remembered things that he had somehow forgotten, things that he had unconsciously buried deep within his heart. Nagi...she had been the one to see into his heart and discover the answer he had wanted to know for so long. Why was he fighting? For what reason was he gaining power? Inari...Kenmaru...it had been for them. Where were they now?

And Kusanagi...where was she? He needed to see her. Kusanagi...could she possibly be the reincarnation of Nagi? The pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place and everything

seemed to make sense.

Somehow deep inside he had known...known all along that Kusanagi was Nagi. *Somehow I knew...I've always known...Kusanagi...you're really...!*

Ranmaru's eyes widened. It all made sense now, those constant feelings of *déjà vu* whenever he was in her presence. The feelings of love that had developed within him for the woman behind the mask.

I have to see her! Ranmaru had to tell Kusanagi how he felt and also he wanted to ask for her forgiveness for killing her during his battle with Kenmaru. Could she possibly forgive him? Ranmaru reached out his *yokai* senses and searched the mansion only to discover that Kusanagi was nowhere to be found. Sora was also gone which meant she had probably gone for a morning ride.

“*Oi!* Ranmaru get your ass over here!” Came a snarky voice.

Ranmaru turned to see Kusanagi. Phew. She had already returned safely. “*Oujo-sama...*” He greeted as he walked up to her.

Kusanagi smirked. “Ranmaru, I want you to take me somewhere. I need to speak with you alone about something. And I don't want Roze eavesdropping. It's...personal.”

Ranmaru nodded and bowed, “As you wish, *Oujo-sama*. I too have something I wished to tell you...” Ranmaru revealed.

Kusanagi raised an eyebrow at him suddenly curious, “Oh?” Smirk. “Good, then let's go. Transform into your nine-tail fox form now!”

Ranmaru nodded and obeyed her command.

He transformed and Kusanagi quickly mounted him, “Let's go!” She pointed off towards the forest surrounding the estate.

CHAPTER 8

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger

Ranmaru and Kusanagi had traveled deep into the forest before Kusanagi told Ranmaru to stop. She leapt off of him when they had reached a section of the forest where there was a small, bubbling creek flowing past. It was a peaceful area and the sound of the creek added to the tranquil feeling of the place. The sun was already beginning to set and the sound of cicadas chirping began to fill the air.

Kusanagi fidgeted nervously before she turned to face Ranmaru, a blush tingeing her cheeks pink, “Ranmaru, I remember...everything.”

Ranmaru blinked at her in confusion. “You remember what exactly?”

“It’s me - Nagi.” She informed him suddenly.

Ranmaru’s jaw dropped open in surprise at her direct admission. But then he closed it since it was just as he had suspected all along. The mysterious *pull* he had felt to Kusanagi ever since the very beginning when he had first laid eyes upon her. It had been their one-sided bond. Kusanagi really was Nagi’s reincarnation. There was no longer any doubt in his heart. Ranmaru nodded back in acknowledgement.

Kusanagi put a hand to the now visible bite mark that was on her neck - it was bleeding.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened at this - the mark! It had reappeared on her flesh along with her recovered memories.

Kusanagi smiled and stepped forward, “Yes, Ranmaru, I remember *everything* especially about how I loved you...”

Ranmaru’s breath caught in his throat. Kusanagi...Nagi...did she really...? He searched her eyes eagerly for a sign.

Kusanagi seemed to notice this and saw the doubt that was swirling in the golden depths of his eyes. “I love you, Ranmaru.” She said slowly as she stepped forward and stood on her tiptoes to place a kiss on Ranmaru’s lips.

Ranmaru was still too shocked to properly react at first but then he tentatively wrapped his arms around Kusanagi and brought her close. He began to eagerly kiss her back.

Chuu~

Kusanagi pulled back, a serious expression on her face, “The bond we have is incomplete...you once said that for our bond to be complete and everlasting that I would have to mark you in return, correct?”

Ranmaru nodded, stunned.

Kusanagi ran her hand through Ranmaru’s hair, “It must have been painful for you to have a one-sided bond. Don’t worry, soon the two of us will be properly bonded and then our souls will be one for all eternity.” Kusanagi gave him a warm smile.

Ranmaru was in too much shock to properly form a response as Kusanagi began to kiss his neck-

Ranmaru breathed in deeply of his mate-to-be’s scent.

His eyes widened.

Meanwhile, Kusanagi rode Sora as hard as she could back to the Kimamura mansion estate. She had to see Ranmaru as soon as possible and tell him everything! Even if she didn’t know how to free him yet. Now she knew and understood more than ever why she loved him. *Ranmaru....!*

Kusanagi rode Sora into the menagerie and quickly dismounted. She then ran out and towards the mansion house. She raised her hand to knock at the front door, but the door suddenly creaked opened of its own accord, and standing there with a half-smirk on his face was none other than Ranmaru!

Kusanagi’s fist was still raised to knock before she lowered it in a stunned stupor. “Ranmaru!” Kusanagi flung herself into his arms. For some reason she felt like she hadn’t seen him for over five hundred years!

Ranmaru appeared stunned and remained stiff in her

embrace until he slowly, hesitantly wrapped his arms around her in return. “*Oujo-sama?* Milady?”

Kusanagi pulled back, a slight blush on her face, “Oh sorry, Ranmaru...I...there’s something really important that I need to tell you.”

Ranmaru raised an eyebrow at her, “Oh?”

Kusanagi took a deep breath. “I...remember...my past life. I’m Nagi.” She looked back at him expectantly.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened in shock before a happy expression crossed his face and he reached out to cup her cheek fondly. “Nagi? Somehow...I always knew that it was you.”

Kusanagi blinked. “You did? But how?”

Ranmaru smirked confidently. “Because I still love you.”

Kusanagi gasped. Ranmaru...loved her? Then...she had to tell him that she loved him too. “You...love me? But what about the Control Collar? Is it affecting what you’re saying to me?”

Ranmaru chuckled. “No, silly, besides you *remember* now how strongly I once felt for you right? So why would my feelings have changed? No, I’ve loved you all along.” Ranmaru explained urgently.

Kusanagi was in shock. “Ranmaru...I...”

Ranmaru put his index finger to Kusanagi’s lips. “There’s somewhere I wish to take you. There’s something that I want to show you. I think you’ll like it.”

“But...where? What?” Kusanagi questioned dazedly.

“Now that’s...a surprise.” Ranmaru gave her a playful grin. “*Yosh.*” He swooped Kusanagi up into his arms and rushed off with her into the forest using his *yokai* speed before Kusanagi could even think to protest. In only a few moments, they had reached a clearing where in the very center stood an ancient cherry blossom tree. The tree was simply enormous, its trunk had to have been at least five feet wide and the height of the cherry blossom tree outdid many of the other trees in the forest.

The cherry blossom tree’s trunk was an unusual silvery gray color and it was peeling off in places, which was natural for this kind of tree. The boughs of the tree were large enough and low enough that one could climb up and sit in them if one wished. And the cherry blossoms themselves were incredibly beautiful: blossoms of petals in pinks, purples, and whites. There

was also a strange knot on the tree that resembled a heart and that looked oddly familiar to Kusanagi...

It reminded her of the very same cherry blossom tree that she and Ranmaru used to meet at for their secret rendezvous and picnics. But it couldn't possibly be the same tree right? Ranmaru gently set her down and then Kusanagi approached the tree to reach her hand out to it, placing her hand on the knot that was shaped like a heart. She closed her eyes and felt a feeling of nostalgia flow over her. This tree...it *was* the same one. The tree that held so many happy memories but also...

A shiver went down Kusanagi's spine as she remembered. This tree had also witnessed the moment when she had encountered Kenmaru here when he had disguised himself as Ranmaru in order to get close to her and then he had kidnapped her. Kusanagi had a strange feeling of déjà vu creeping over her suddenly.

Ranmaru approached her and took her hand in his while looking at the beautiful cherry blossom tree; a wind was blowing through the forest sending a scattering of pink and purple cherry blossom petals through the air all around them.

"Beautiful." Kusanagi breathed.

Ranmaru turned to gaze upon her instead, "Indeed."

Kusanagi turned to see that Ranmaru was NOT looking at the cherry blossom tree but at herself. Gulp. Blush. "Ranmaru...?" There were butterflies fluttering in Kusanagi's stomach but there was also a sense of unease there. Kusanagi shook her head; there was no reason for her to feel uneasy now.

Ranmaru cupped her cheek once more and stroked her cheek with his calloused thumb, "Do you remember why I brought you here over five hundred years ago? I wanted to mark you as my life-mate."

"I remember."

"Kusanagi...do you wish to be bonded to me?"

Kusanagi brought up one of her hands to touch the still tender bite mark on her neck. "I'm already yours aren't I? I just have to mark you in return for our bond to be complete right?"

Ranmaru frowned but quickly masked his expression and

smiled fondly at her instead, “That bond of ours...was broken. It must be redone.” He ran his hand through her wild hair. “We can redo the bond. But only if you’ll let me. Only if you really want me...?” Ranmaru trailed off uncertainly, biting his lower lip and looking unsure of himself.

Kusanagi gulped nervously, but she nodded. “Yes, I want you Ranmaru. Because...I love you.” There! She had actually managed to say it. Kusanagi’s eyes widened a bit in surprise at herself.

Ranmaru smirked smugly then, “And I love you too, Kusanagi.” He murmured as he leaned forward and captured her lips hungrily with his own.

Kusanagi sighed in contentment and Ranmaru took the opportunity to deepen their kiss, feeding of the sweetness of her mouth.

Kusanagi’s knees were going weak and she felt herself being lowered gently to the grassy forest floor-

Ranmaru straddled her and continued to kiss her passionately while running his hands up and down her body boldly. “Kusanagi...” He breathed in his throaty voice. “You are so beautiful. Let me touch you...let me taste you...let me make you *mine*. Please.” He begged.

Kusanagi was lost to his fiery touches and found herself simply nodding dazedly in response. She trusted Ranmaru...

Kusanagi could feel Ranmaru unbuttoning her shirt but she didn’t care. She was so lost in the tantalizing new sensations he was causing her to feel. His mere touch was leaving pleasant tingles and heat in their wake along her skin. In seconds her shirt along with Ranmaru’s had been flung to the forest floor.

Ranmaru leaned over and kissed her once again before then trailing his kisses down her neck, to her collarbone...down between her breasts until he was taking one of her breasts into his mouth. He sucked and teased her nipple until it hardened at his attentions.

Kusanagi’s back arched as she pressed her body up against Ranmaru’s more and Ranmaru pressed his body down to meet her own. Kusanagi was able to feel the evidence of his arousal as it pressed against her stomach - the proof of his love and desire for her. He truly *wanted* her. This alone caused the

butterflies in her stomach to flutter nervously. *Oh my god! Oh my god! This is really happening...we're really...going to make love! I think I'm going to pass out!*

Ranmaru slid one of his clawed hands up her school uniform skirt and slipped one of his fingers into her already moist panties to tease and stroke the pearl between the petal-like folds of her womanhood.

Kusanagi moaned and wantonly pressed herself up against Ranmaru's touch. She wanted more. She wanted him inside of her...

Ranmaru began to slide Kusanagi's underwear down and soon her panties had also been thrown to the forest floor.

Ranmaru leaned over her and kissed her passionately once more to distract her from what was about to come next-

He began to gently spread her legs apart as he settled himself between them, "This is how it should have been done. This is how a Celestial fox truly takes a life-mate and makes a bond." Ranmaru informed her, an odd tinge of bitterness to his tone.

Kusanagi blinked up at him breathless and her expression turned somewhat confused, "What...do you mean?" She panted.

"When our bodies become one and we reach our climax together that is when I shall mark you and you shall mark me in return. Then we will be bonded for all eternity. A 'chaste' marking of each other's necks - a pathetic spiritual bond like that is no true bond at all. A bond like that can easily be broken. A man who makes a bond like that is not a *real* man. No, it will be I who will truly possess you - mind, body, and soul."

Kusanagi furrowed her brows, and felt a twinge of unease in her heart. "Ranmaru...?"

Ranmaru reached down to release his manhood from the confines of his suffocating butler's trousers. "Soon, Kusanagi, you will be mine." He positioned himself over her, prepared to take her-

Meanwhile, Ranmaru's eyes widened and he gasped when he smelled Kagura's true scent - one of death and decay. It had

been masked somehow, by some spell but-

Ranmaru could See past her spell and saw her for who she truly was.

Ranmaru could also feel and recognize Kagura's presence, and so knew that it was her quite easily. But why? How was that even possible? *Bond...?* Ranmaru pondered and his eyes widened realizing that was the only way. *How has this happened? I never marked her...only Nagi. So then why?* Ranmaru came to a sudden horrifying realization. *Twins.*

Ranmaru almost felt like laughing. Kagura had almost tricked him but because of the bond they shared she was unable to. It was ironic to say the least.

The bond between the twins must have run deep indeed for his bond to Nagi to have transferred to Kagura as well. Ranmaru had heard of such phenomena though concerning twins. How twins were oftentimes able to communicate with each other telepathically, how they could sometimes feel what the other was feeling, know when their twin was in danger and even share pleasure. Was this why Kagura had been so obsessed with him for these past hundreds of years? Had Kagura felt everything that Nagi had been feeling too when they had been together? *Oh God,* Ranmaru realized with a sickening feeling in his stomach. *She felt everything.*

The sheer gravity of this revelation began to sink in. *Kagura...all this time you...* Ranmaru could finally understand *why* she had done all those things to him in the past and why she had acted the way she had. But that still didn't mean that Ranmaru could forgive Kagura so easily for everything that she had done to him.

Ranmaru suddenly pushed Kagura back and could now See that there was a leaf talisman plastered to the very center of her forehead, and which was glowing. It was a fox spell and one that Kenmaru must have given her. Ranmaru reached out and removed the leaf from Kagura's forehead and her image shimmered like a mirage before the illusion was broken. Then standing before Ranmaru was no longer the image of Kusanagi but the figure of Kagura.

"*Kagura,*" he growled, "What is the meaning of this?"

Kagura stumbled back when the spell had been removed

and frowned. “*Achatta*. Damn...I guess the cat’s outta the bag.” She put her hands out in a helpless gesture. “And to think I was so close to marking you as my own. We would have been bonded for all eternity, my love. It’s such a shame don’t you think?” Kagura purred and as she innocently stood there Ranmaru watched as the plants and grass that were around Kagura began to wither, blacken and die almost ominously.

Ranmaru’s eyes narrowed at her dangerously. “Where’s Kusanagi? Just what are you up to?”

Kagura put on an innocent expression and pointed to herself playfully while pouting, “*Me~?* I do believe you’re mistaken, Ranmaru darling. *I’m* not the one up to anything really. But Kenmaru is.” She smiled evilly.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened. “Kenmaru? So it really was him all those times that I thought I sensed him. He’s still alive. Where is he? What has he done to Kusanagi?” Ranmaru demanded.

Kagura tapped her chin thoughtfully, “*Sanaa~ Hmm~* I wonder...”

Ranmaru reached out and grabbed Kagura by the front of her *haori* shirt bringing her close in order to glare deeply into her peridot-colored eyes, “Tell me.”

Kagura’s eyes widened in surprise, “*Achatta...*I never knew you could be so...*forceful*, Ranmaru.” She reached out to caress his cheek. “*Hmm~* I think I kinda like it.”

“Shut up.” Ranmaru growled. “Now tell me where Kenmaru and Kusanagi are. What is he planning?”

“He plans to mark her as his life-mate, of course. Kenmaru cast a spell on her so that she remembers *everything*.” There was a note of foreboding in Kagura’s tone.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened and he looked back at Kagura questioningly.

“Oh yes, that was no lie. Kusanagi *is* the reincarnation of Nagi. And now she remembers everything about the two of you...” Kagura trailed off with a note of mocking sadness in her voice.

Ranmaru, however, was looking pleased. *She remembers*

me...our love...our bond...

Kagura smirked at Ranmaru's hopeful expression, "I wouldn't look so happy if I were you. I think you're forgetting something very important, Ranmaru. When I say Kusanagi remembers everything this also means that she remembers what happened at the very end of her life. Oh yes, she'll remember all about how you killed her. Do you really think that she will forgive you for that? Or will she hate you for it? I wonder..." Kagura began to cackle evilly.

Ranmaru paled. *That's right...how could I forget?* He had accidentally killed the woman he loved because he had used too much power during his battle against Kenmaru. He had forgotten, no - had wanted to forget, had purposefully buried those memories of the truth and of Nagi deep inside of himself. That was why he had also forgotten about how Nagi had been the one to give him the answer he had been searching for all that time through countless bloody battles. *Why do I fight...?*

Ranmaru...!

Ranmaru looked around the forested area suddenly. He could have sworn he had just heard Kusanagi's voice in his mind, calling out to him.

Kagura gave him a pitying look.

Then Ranmaru realized something. "You're not going to tell me where they are - are you?"

Kagura cackled, "*Oh~* I've been figured out. You're absolutely right, Ranmaru darling. My role here is merely to stall you and give Kenmaru enough time to mate with, and then mark your beloved Kusanagi."

"M-mate?" Ranmaru flushed.

"Oh yes," Kagura purred, "Kenmaru has more balls than you when it comes to things like sex. You see, unlike you, Ranmaru, Kenmaru is a real man. He's going to perform a true Celestial fox bond with Kusanagi - one that will bind them together mind, body and soul. Not just the mind and soul...like the spiritual bond you tried to perform with Nagi five hundred years ago. This will be a deeper bond - one of flesh and blood. One that cannot be broken once it has been carried out." Kagura watched amused as Ranmaru frantically looked around the forest. "It's too late, Ranmaru. You won't make it in time. I can *feel*

them together after all. So I know *exactly* what's happening. Gods, his touch...it's turning me on..." Kagura ran her hands over her curves sensually. "It's making me so *hot*. He's just about to take her and Kusanagi is about to accept him. Kenmaru *will* take her and then you will lose Nagi forever!"

Ranmaru's fists clenched at his sides angrily. *Kenmaru!* There had to be a way to find Kusanagi in time! But how? *The bond! That's it!* Ranmaru closed his eyes and concentrated on sensing Kusanagi's presence. Now that she had recovered her memories the partial bond should have been awakened as well - he should be able to find her. He could still save her.

"This estate is much too large for you to find her in time. Give it up. It's over. You've lost." Kagura teased mockingly.

...*Kusanagi!* He searched frantically and reached out his *yokai* senses to find her and then - *There!* He had managed to locate her spirit energy signature. Now, if only he could send her a message through their bond. Would it work? He had to try...

Kusanagi...! It's me Ranmaru! That's not me, Kusanagi! Don't you See? That's Kenmaru! I'm coming for you now, Kusanagi. Just - hang on!

Elsewhere in the forest, as Kenmaru was kissing Kusanagi passionately while sliding in between her legs Kusanagi suddenly heard Ranmaru's frantic voice in her mind - or rather she heard a voice that rang through her very soul...

Kusanagi...! It's me Ranmaru! That's not me, Kusanagi! Don't you See? That's Kenmaru! I'm coming for you now, Kusanagi. Just - hang on!

Ranmaru...? Kusanagi thought in shock. But Ranmaru was here with her now, wasn't he? Unless...could she truly See or would her sealed and cursed Sight not work? She decided to try anyways...

Kusanagi focused her eyes on 'Ranmaru' willing herself to See the truth.

And then Kenmaru's image began to shift and shimmer until with a *poof* Kenmaru's illusion spell had been broken and it was no longer Ranmaru who was hovering over her but

Kenmaru!

“Oh shit, Kenmaru!” Kusanagi cried out aghast.

Kenmaru blinked down at Kusanagi in surprise at her exclamation. He then noticed the long tendrils of his silvery white hair that were cascading down around him and onto Kusanagi’s naked upper torso sensually. Kenmaru fingered a lock of his hair pensively. “Ah, so you’ve managed to break the illusion spell. Impressive.”

Kusanagi immediately closed her legs and tried to shove Kenmaru off of her, “Get the hell off of me, you sick bastard! Don’t touch me!”

Kenmaru frowned down at the now struggling Kusanagi, and his expression turned exasperated. “*Achatta...*how troublesome. And everything was going so smoothly up until this point too.” He pouted in an immature fashion, like a boy who had been given a present only to have it taken away. Kusanagi kicked his leg painfully in the knee. *Ow. That HURT!* “Kusanagi, now don’t be difficult. You were enjoying my caresses just a few seconds ago. Why the sudden change of heart? I know you desire me. In fact, I can *smell* your desire, you know. So there’s no use lying to me. Why don’t you just be honest with yourself and give in...”

Kusanagi glared up at him heatedly. “That’s only because you tricked me. I thought you were Ranmaru! I could never desire *you*, you bastard! Oh yes, I remember all about you...it’s all your fault that I died! And that Ranmaru has suffered! All because of your immature selfishness!” She beat her fists angrily upon his chest.

Kenmaru...I had wanted to save him too. It wasn’t my love he wanted...but to be loved. A voice echoed in Kusanagi’s head making her stop her blows.

Kenmaru looked down at her confusedly. “What do you mean it was my fault that you died?”

Kusanagi saw an opening during Kenmaru’s moment of hesitation and took it - head butting Kenmaru fiercely.

BAM

“Ow!” Kenmaru cried out in a rage as he saw stars. “That hurt, you little bitch!”

But Kusanagi didn’t stop there and now that Kenmaru

was in pain used this opportunity to bring up one of her knees to knee him hard in the groin, right between his legs. *Sick pervert!*

Kenmaru howled in pain and Kusanagi was able to kick him off of her. Kusanagi stood up and wrapped one arm around her bare chest. *Shit...where the hell is Ranmaru?* Kusanagi looked around the forest clearing frantically.

Kenmaru pushed himself up off the ground. Half of his *kimono* had come off revealing his alabaster chest. Kenmaru was extremely angry. His perfect plan was falling to pieces all around him and he wasn't even sure why. How had Kusanagi even realized that it wasn't him? His plan had been flawless - perfect! *Dammit! This isn't how it's supposed to go!* Kusanagi was supposed to be his life-mate willingly and the bond would have made Kusanagi love him. She was supposed to want and desire him as he wanted and desired her. *Dammit all to hell!* A fiery aura began to surround Kenmaru as he approached Kusanagi. He had no choice but to *make* her understand. He would force her to love him.

Kusanagi took a step back in fear but glared defiantly back at him, "I pity you. You think you can force me to love you but it won't work. You can't force love - you can't make someone love you, Kenmaru. That's NOT how love works. All you're managing to do is make me hate you even more!"

Kenmaru glared at her, his eyes glowing red. "*Urusai!* Shut up! I will make you mine! You'll see, you *will* love me!" Kenmaru declared as he leapt at her and pushed her roughly to the ground. He grabbed a hold of Kusanagi's wrists and pinned them above her head while straddling her and sitting on her legs so that she wouldn't be able to kick him again.

Kusanagi looked up at him and pity shone in her emerald green eyes. "I don't think you even really know what love is Kenmaru because if you did you wouldn't be doing this. When you love someone - truly love them - you wish for *their* happiness above your own. They come first. True love is...sacrifice. So tell me Kenmaru, do I look happy to you?"

Kenmaru paused in order to really take the time to *look* at Kusanagi - tears were streaming down her face, and her eyes

were filled with a mixture of emotions: fear, hate, defiance, pity. But past the pity it was the fear and the pain that was most prevalent. He was making the woman he loved cry...? *Why?*

“Nagi...had wanted to help you Kenmaru. She understood that you didn’t really love her. That you just wanted to be loved. But I’m sorry Kenmaru I can’t love you - at least not in the way you want me to. I love Ranmaru.” She explained as she urged him to understand.

Kenmaru looked down at Kusanagi as if he were seeing her for the first time. “Kusanagi...*omae...you...?*” *Oh God, what the hell am I doing? Why am I doing this? Nagi is the woman I love right? She’s the last person that I would ever wish to harm and yet...?*

However-

“KENMARU!” Came Ranmaru’s furious voice.

Ranmaru, who was in his nine-tail fox form, with Kuroki Ryu held between his jaws - pounced at Kenmaru and knocked him off of Kusanagi and to the ground. Ranmaru’s claws dug into Kenmaru’s shoulders as he pinned him down, piercing his delicate flesh there and drawing blood.

Ranmaru tossed his sword aside and growled down at Kenmaru - ready to rip his throat out if Kenmaru so much as twitched.

Kenmaru trembled in fear, his pupils dilating - he could sense Ranmaru’s overwhelming aura of bloodlust and murderous intent. Ranmaru was out for blood. His blood. And when Ranmaru was this way there was no stopping him. He was about to be killed!

“Karas! Save me!” Kenmaru cried out in a whiny, high-pitched voice.

A crackling bolt of lighting was flung Ranmaru’s way. It hit Ranmaru, who was forced to leap away and off of Kenmaru.

From out of the forest came a cloaked and hooded figure with a bird skull mask on his face, a silver aura was crackling around him menacingly. Ranmaru recognized that scent - Karas. The Lightning Demon. Ranmaru growled low in his throat.

The wind began to pick up ominously through the forest, clouds were rushing across the quickly darkening sky, and in seconds the sky had become blotted out by a pitch-black

darkness. Dark pink cherry blossom petals were blowing through the air and swirling around them madly.

Karas walked forward towards Ranmaru while Kenmaru quickly got up and stood behind Karas. *The coward.* Ranmaru shook his head at him. Ranmaru picked up his sword with his jaws and then transformed back into his human form.

His golden eyes darted over to where the half-dressed Kusanagi was. She was kneeling on the forest floor with one arm wrapped around her bare chest, and Ranmaru saw that there were tear tracks on her face. She had been crying. Ranmaru could *smell* her tears. A cold rage filled Ranmaru at the sight of a broken-looking Kusanagi. His fiery, spastic, loud, whirlwind...*His* Kusanagi was...

Kenmaru *would* pay. Anger and rage were consuming Ranmaru, but he knew that he would first have to get past Karas.

Ranmaru unsheathed his sword Kuroki Ryu and summoned his *yokai* energy so that a brilliant crimson aura flared to life around him. He pointed his sword at Karas-

Karas approached Ranmaru with calm steps and removed his skull mask and his cape with a flourish. Sapphire eyes clashed with gold eyes as the two combatants stared off. Karas then followed suit and unsheathed his sword removing it from its scabbard.

Karas summoned his *yokai* power around him and a silver, crackling, electric energy surrounded him and his sword. Both combatants began to power up - their auras flaring wildly around them. Their energy auras becoming so powerful that it was as if a harsh wind had begun to blow through the forest and Kusanagi found that she was almost blown back by the sheer force of it.

And then they rushed forward to attack each other. Their swords clashed in a deadly manner, steel skidding along steel. They then leapt backwards away from each other and swung their swords forward simultaneously-

“Fire Blast Attack!” Ranmaru yelled.

“Million Volt Attack!” Karas shouted back.

The two *samurai* released their energy attacks upon their

opponent at the same time. The lightning and the fire attacks clashed in midair, but then the lightning attack began to overpower Ranmaru's fire attack. The lightning hit Ranmaru and he cried out in pain as the electric shocks coursed through his body.

"Ranmaru!" Kusanagi cried.

Thunder boomed and lightning flashed across the dark sky overhead like silver paint being splattered across an all-black canvas. Kusanagi's hair began to stand on end from the electrical charge that was in the air all around them.

Ranmaru quickly pushed himself up off the ground. He didn't want Kusanagi to worry about his well-being. "I-I'm alright." He declared as he staggered forward and then getting a second win attacked Karas once more. Again their swords clashed, spirals of red and silver energy coiling up and twisting into the air.

Kuroki Ryu...let's get this guy! Ranmaru spoke to his sword.

Whatever you say, you bastard. Let's kill him! Kuroki Ryu agreed happily, chuckling darkly in response.

Ranmaru's aura began to increase as he and Kuroki Ryu combined their powers and the image of a black dragon with crazed red eyes could be seen rising up and out of Ranmaru's sword.

Karas calmly raised an eyebrow at this display of power. "A cursed Muramasa sword *ka*? Fancy that, I have one too, *gozaru*, I dare say." Karas began to commune with his own Muramasa sword. "Byakko." He said in a low voice and suddenly Karas' spirit energy aura increased dramatically.

"Holy shit!" Kusanagi cursed as she was flattened against the ground due to the intensely powerful spirit energy aura that Karas was suddenly giving off in waves. "Ranmaru...!"

Ranmaru's eyes widened as he felt Karas' new spirit energy level - it was unreal. Just what spirit possessed Karas' cursed sword anyways?

But this question was soon answered as the phantasm of a white tiger emerged from out of Karas' sword. Ranmaru recognized the spirit for who he was, "Byakko...one of the Four Heavenly Beasts...shit." He swore. *This is not good.*

Ranmaru was also struggling to remain standing as Karas' energy aura bore down upon him. He turned to see how Kusanagi was doing-

And saw her being pushed against the ground. *Kusanagi!*

Karas smirked. "It isn't wise to take your eyes off of your opponent, *gozaru*. Million Volt Attack!" Karas declared as he swung his sword forward and unleashed another lightning attack upon Ranmaru.

Ranmaru raised Kuroki Ryu to block the attack but he didn't have enough time to shield properly and was blasted back. Ranmaru grunted in pain as he was once again hit with the powerful electric attack. He bit down on his lower lip refusing to cry out lest he worry Kusanagi.

Tears filled Kusanagi's eyes, however, as she continued to watch the fight. *No, not again*. She watched as Ranmaru struggled to stand - it had taken him longer than the last time. She noticed. Someone she cared for was slowly being killed before her very eyes by the lightning demon Karas. *Not again...*

Ranmaru staggered to his feet, and held Kuroki Ryu out before him in a two-handed grip. He couldn't lose - he had to protect Kusanagi. "Dragon's Breath Attack!" He swung his sword forward. The fiery attack took the form of a dragon made entirely of flames as it flew through the air and towards Karas-

Karas smirked and followed suit, "It's about time you got serious, I dare say." He waved his sword forward, "Tiger Claw Attack!" Lightning in the form of curved blades went flying through the air and towards Ranmaru.

Once again the two attacks clashed in midair, but the curved blades of energy from the Tiger Claw Attack sliced through Ranmaru's fire attack easily and hit him dead on once more.

Ranmaru's mouth opened in a silent scream as the attack hit him and he was sent back skidding across the ground. But he stubbornly managed to keep both feet on the ground and remain standing.

Karas frowned at his obstinacy. "You're one tough, son of a bitch, I dare say. However, you have yet to experience my full

power! White Tiger Attack!” Karas swung his sword forward again and the energy attack that appeared this time took on the shape of a giant and ferocious looking tiger, which leapt through the air and towards Ranmaru-

Ranmaru acted quickly. “Dragon’s Breath Attack!” He swung his sword and the energy attack he released was in the form of a dragon that flew forward to engage in battle with the tiger.

The tiger and the dragon shaped energy attacks clashed against each other fiercely in the air. The two animals appeared to be attacking each other with their claws and teeth viciously as Karas and Ranmaru both fed more and more of their *yokai* energy into their living attacks.

But with one more flare of his power Karas was able to overpower Ranmaru’s attack and the lightning went crashing through the air to hit Ranmaru.

Ranmaru couldn’t help the bloodcurdling scream that was finally wrenched out of him this time as the million volts struck his body directly. Ranmaru collapsed to the ground, his body appearing slightly singed and blackened in places. Smoke was even coming off of Ranmaru’s body where it had been badly burned and his body was twitching from the aftershocks of the electricity that was still coursing through his body.

Karas looked down at Ranmaru’s fallen form pitilessly, “You are quite pathetic, I dare say. But that’s really all one can expect from someone who decides to go up against one of the H4 alone. That was very foolish. Now-” Karas summoned his *yokai* energy so that it spiraled around him and Ranmaru could feel Kuroki Ryu suddenly vibrating violently in his grip. *What’s happening...?*

And then Kuroki Ryu was suddenly torn out of Ranmaru’s hand and the sword went flying to Karas’ waiting hand.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened as he figured out what was going on. *Electromagnetism?*

Karas looked down at Kuroki Ryu interestedly. “A powerful cursed Muramasa sword, I dare say, but it was still no match against us, aye Byakko? Your sword’s mind is broken, Ranmaru. It doesn’t even remember who he truly is so how could



he be expected to be able to use his *true* power? It's a pity, Ranmaru. I had expected something...*more*." He sneered and raised his sword. "Now, to finish this..."

Meanwhile, Kenmaru was straddling Kusanagi while shielding her with his body against the force of Karas' spirit energy aura. Kusanagi looked back up at Kenmaru in shock. "Kenmaru...?" *He's protecting me...?*

"I can't have you dying just yet." Kenmaru explained with a strange lopsided smile on his face. "There's something I still need to tell you."

"Kenmaru...you...?" Kusanagi furrowed her brow as she looked up at him pensively.

But her attention was then drawn away from Kenmaru when she heard Ranmaru's yell of pain and then watched in stunned disbelief as Karas somehow stole Ranmaru's sword right out of his hand using what appeared to be telekinesis or something like it. *Shit*.

Karas now had both cursed swords, one in each hand. "I shall finish you off using your own sword, I daresay." Karas declared as he raised Kuroki Ryu and then tried to control the sword. But then Karas unexpectedly cried out in pain as Kuroki Ryu burned his hand and his mind. The sword fell from Karas' throbbing hand as he reached up to grip his head, which was now thrumming with pain.

Karas shook his head in disbelief. *That mind* that he had encountered when he had reached out his own to seize control of the sword - it was broken, yes, but it was also...a completely uncontrollable maelstrom of insanity and madness. An intensely powerful but completely psychotic presence. No one should or would be able to control a broken sword like that one. The power was barely being contained. It was like a hurricane of dark *yokai* energy just waiting to be unleashed, which meant someone was still holding back this chaotic power somehow with his will...but who...?

Ranmaru. Karas' eyes widened in realization. *It can't be...how can he possibly...?*

"How is it possible that Ranmaru is able to control Kuroki Ryu using his own power? It's impossible, *gozaru*." Karas mused aloud, "Dammit." Karas looked down at the fallen sword and

decided not to even try touching it again. It was much too dangerous - even for him. "I cannot afford to underestimate Ranmaru. If he has the power to control a sword of such insanity...I must finish this quickly." Karas walked towards Ranmaru and raised his sword, Byakko. A crackling electric aura surrounded him and his sword, "Million Volt Attack!" Karas cried as he slashed his sword at the fallen form of Ranmaru.

Ranmaru cried out as his body was hit with the attack again and his body convulsed violently. Karas returned his sword back to its scabbard with one fluid motion. It was done.

"RANMARU!" Kusanagi screamed.

Karas turned around to walk away-

But then, Ranmaru began to chuckle and suddenly staggered to his feet, blood dripping down his chin, "Did you really think I would go down that easily? You'll have to do better than that."

Karas' eyes widened dramatically, "Very well, have it your way." Karas summoned his lightning elemental control ability and without bothering to use his sword to add extra strength to his attack he simply raised his hand up into the air, so that crackling, electric energy began to gather there into the palm of his hand. And it was this electric attack that he then flung at Ranmaru.

Ranmaru was hit with the attack and was blasted back with a grunt of pain.

However-

To everyone's surprise Ranmaru got up once more. "*Madda madda...not yet...*" Ranmaru staggered forward towards Karas, swaying on his feet. "I won't be defeated...I must protect her...Kusanagi..."

Karas narrowed his eyes at Ranmaru amazed that he was still alive. Although the man did appear to be half-dead. Karas shook his head in disbelief. "Just what are you? This time you will die!" Karas gathered more lightning into the palm of his hand and then flung another bolt of lightning Ranmaru's way.

Ranmaru was once again hit with the electric attack and blasted back, this time going head over heels and landing on the

ground with a sickening crack.

Kusanagi's pupils dilated in fear and horror as she watched. "Ranmaru...no...not again. *Yamate*, please stop. Can't you see? You're killing him!"

"That's the general idea." Karas informed her coldly, watching Ranmaru's body closely now.

And then, to the sheer disbelief of everyone watching Ranmaru managed to stand once more. He was swaying on his feet but managed to stagger forward. He suddenly coughed up a great deal of blood and it didn't seem like the flow of blood would stop before it finally did. Then Ranmaru slowly began to make his way towards Karas, painstakingly putting one foot in front of the other. "I will...protect her..." He murmured in a low voice, and his golden eyes became clouded over. He appeared to be in a daze or half conscious.

Karas felt a chill of fear go down his spine. Just who the hell was this guy? He appeared to be...unconscious, and yet he was still fighting, still moving forward. It was unreal.

Kusanagi watched in horror as the Grim Reaper's shadow began to form behind Ranmaru. It was quickly increasing in size before it then began to peel up off the ground in a slow eerie manner. The shadow then began to solidify and materialize until the full form of the Grim Reaper was now standing behind Ranmaru. The Reaper's eyes were glowing red, his mouth was wide open in an amused leer, and he raised his giant, deadly scythe high up into the air prepared to swing it down upon Ranmaru once and for all-

I have to kill this bastard. I have to give it everything I have left! He has to die! Karas raised his hand, prepared to use one last final attack against Ranmaru, "Million-"

"NOO!" Kusanagi yelled.

"Volt Attack!" Karas finished as he sent the attack upon Ranmaru.

It hit Ranmaru, who didn't even cry out since he was already unconscious. His body simply fell forward and he hit the grassy ground face first. "Ku...Kusanagi..." Came his low, barely audible voice as Ranmaru had regained consciousness.

Kusanagi gasped and watched completely terrified as the Grim Reaper swung his giant scythe down through the air,

bringing it down upon Ranmaru, ready to harvest his soul-

However-

The Grim Reaper's scythe stopped exactly one centimeter away from Ranmaru's neck and it remained there, poised, waiting-

Wait, what? What could Death be waiting for? Kusanagi thought frantically. *Could that possibly mean that Ranmaru was actually still alive!* Kusanagi's heart was beating madly in her chest. *His life must be hanging on by a mere thread.* Ranmaru simply lay there unmoving, however, and *looked* pretty dead. Blood was streaming down his chin. His body was battered and broken.

A fierce look came into Kusanagi's eyes. She couldn't let Kenmaru or Karas find out that Ranmaru was still alive - she had to do something. She had to save Ranmaru somehow. But how? How could she stop Kenmaru...what was it that the maniac wanted anyways? She'd give him all the money in the world if only...*That's it!*

Karas and Kenmaru appeared to be watching Ranmaru's body intently with baited breath to see if he would get up again. So they heard Kusanagi quite clearly when she spoke up, "Pathetic." Kusanagi pushed herself up off the ground and walked over to Ranmaru's fallen form. She used her boot to dispassionately turn Ranmaru's body over and looked down at him with a cold, condescending expression on her face.

Ranmaru was slowly opening his eyes...

"Pathetic...worthless...useless slave." Kusanagi said each word in a slow cruel manner. "You can't even protect one girl. Well, guess what, you pathetic bastard. I just remembered something - you killed me five hundred years ago. Oh yes, I remember everything quite clearly now. It had all been a bit fuzzy still, but for some reason I suddenly remembered it just now - the truth. During your battle against Kenmaru you used your full power and forgot all about me, and blasted me into the next world! You killed me, you bastard!" Kusanagi could see that Ranmaru was trying to sit up. She couldn't let him do that and so she brought her booted foot down hard on his stomach. And this

time she used her true strength. Ranmaru coughed up blood mixed with bile. "I hate you." Her voice was filled with venom, and Kusanagi's eyes flashed angrily as she looked down at Ranmaru as if he were scum. "You disgust me...you're weak...how could I ever love someone like you?" Kusanagi scoffed, waving her hand carelessly through the air.

Ranmaru's eyes widened and for once his face and eyes mirrored exactly what he was feeling. His own mask had been shattered - his heart broke at Kusanagi's words, breaking into a million pieces. Complete and utter sadness and despair reflected in the golden depths of Ranmaru's eyes, which were the window to his soul. And Kusanagi watched as she broke him...

She masochistically forced herself to watch what she was doing to him - and a little piece of her died inside of herself as she did so.

But Kusanagi couldn't allow herself to show or feel even the slightest bit of doubt because she knew that Ranmaru would be able to tell if she was lying because of their one-sided bond. She had to fool him completely and therefore she had to bury her emotions deep inside of herself, lock them away in her heart, so that Ranmaru would not be able to see or feel them. A mask. The Queen of Masks put on her most strong and powerful mask yet. Her ultimate creation that she had formed over the years:

Her Bitch Mask.

She smiled down at Ranmaru sadistically as if she enjoyed his pain, and reveled in her revenge. She licked her lips and then turned towards Kenmaru. "Kenmaru...I've been such a fool. All this time you were right about me...us. We're kindred spirits you and I. We're the same - we understand each other don't we? The gilded cage people tried to put us into - even Ranmaru was suffocating me with his feelings. When I just wanted him to leave me the hell alone. To be free. He did the same to you didn't he? He underestimated us. We don't need him though, do we? In fact, we never needed him.

He's pathetic...so very pathetic. But you...you have *true* power. You've gotten so much stronger, Kenmaru. I can see that you've been gaining true power all this time. And you protected me just now didn't you? Ranmaru was about to kill me again accidentally, but you...protected me. Oh Kenmaru!" Kusanagi

rushed up to him and flung herself into his startled arms. "Can you ever forgive me? I've been so blind, so stupid! All along...I had the love of such an incredible man but I took it for granted!"

Kenmaru was completely stunned and remained stiff in Kusanagi's unexpected embrace. His eyes widened like saucers and his jaw dropped open in shock. *Is this really happening...?* "Nagi..." Kenmaru shook his head and quickly pulled himself together. "Of course I forgive you. The real question is will you forgive me? You were right...I was going about winning your heart all wrong. I...don't know anything about love. But...when you love someone you...give them things right? How about that? What is it you want, Nagi? I'll give you anything you desire. Ask for the moon and the stars and I will grant your wish!" Kenmaru's tail was wagging behind him excitedly.

"*Hmm~* what I want is..." Kusanagi tapped her chin thoughtfully and then looked Kenmaru directly in the eyes. "You."

Kenmaru thought he would faint.

"I know, I know, it all seems so sudden doesn't it?" Kusanagi put her hands out in a helpless gesture. "I *know* you won't believe me if I suddenly say that I love you...but then how about I prove it to you *neh?* Let's get married!" A cat's paw smile formed on Kusanagi's face.

Kenmaru's brow furrowed, "Married?"

Kusanagi nodded. "Yes, I know you Celestial foxes have your whole 'bond' and 'life-mate' thing, but us humans have 'marriage'. To *me* - a *human* girl - a vow made in holy matrimony means more to me than any mere 'bond' ever could. Do you understand? I will swear by my God that I love you and that I will love you until Death do us part. Will you accept this?"

Kenmaru was still looking a bit perplexed but then he suddenly began laughing at the craziness of the situation. "You want to marry *me*? This is just...perfect! Of course, I'll marry you, Nagi!" Kenmaru declared happily as he picked Nagi up and began to spin her around.

"*Mou!* Kenmaru!" Kusanagi whined playfully as he spun her, "Behave." She whacked him playfully on his chest and

smiled warmly at him. “I love you. And I’m going to prove it to you, Kenmaru. So that way you will trust me. And then we can truly be together. On our marriage night we can perform the Celestial fox bond ritual, if you wish too.” Kusanagi tapped Kenmaru’s nose.

Kenmaru’s red eyes glittered with desire and anticipation, “Kusanagi...”

Karas, however, was giving Kusanagi a suspicious look. “How do you know she speaks the truth, Kenmaru? Human women...are not to be trusted. They change their moods and their minds like that.” Karas snapped his fingers. “Perhaps, this is all an elaborate ploy to save...*him*?” Karas returned his attention to the ‘corpse’ of Ranmaru and eyed it curiously. *He still can’t be alive...can he?*

Kenmaru looked pensive but then shrugged. “Perhaps, but...” He walked over and looked down into Ranmaru’s stricken face – Ranmaru’s eyes were indeed open and Kenmaru’s and Ranmaru’s eyes met. Tears were streaming down Ranmaru’s face but he didn’t have the strength to move or say anything. Kenmaru looked into Ranmaru’s eyes and saw that he was broken. Kenmaru had won. “You were right Karas, the son of a bitch is still alive! But Ranmaru would know the truth because he is bonded to Kusanagi. If she were lying now...he wouldn’t look so broken-hearted. No, she speaks the truth. She truly has broken his heart and spirit. She has chosen me.” Kenmaru said in awe. “She really does love me...”

“Shall I finish him off?” Karas questioned, watching Kusanagi closely for her reaction to his words.

Kenmaru just laughed carelessly, “Finish him off? You will do no such thing. That would only be putting him out of his misery. I’ve already won. Kusanagi has broken him...and chosen me. I couldn’t be happier! This is all just too perfect!” Kenmaru grinned boyishly.

Karas took his hand off of the hilt of his sword, “I see. So be it.”

Kenmaru was beaming like a young boy on Christmas day, “Perhaps, I’ll even invite him to our wedding! Ha! That would be simply marvelous! What do you think, my pet?” Kenmaru turned to Kusanagi to get her opinion.

Kusanagi smiled tremulously back. "It would be fitting wouldn't it? I have a few other friends I'd like to invite if you wouldn't mind, my love?"

Kenmaru waved it off, "Of course! I could deny you *nothing*, my pet. I intend to make up for all the wrongs I have done to you in the past. Your every wish and whim is but my command, my princess."

Kusanagi's eyes sparkled, "Nothing? I think we need to go shopping."

Kenmaru chuckled, "Women! But alright. We can most certainly go shopping if that is your wish. In fact, let's go out and buy you the most expensive wedding dress in all of Tokyo! Oh and you'll need a ring too! I'll find you the biggest diamond in all of Japan!"

Kusanagi smirked. "Sounds like a plan. I'm so glad I decided to marry someone who is not only powerful but rich too." She gushed and praised Kenmaru as she looped her arm through his.

Kenmaru preened under her compliments. "Stop! You're making me blush." But truthfully Kenmaru didn't want Kusanagi to stop her compliments. This is what he had dreamed of having all along. Someone who acknowledged him and loved him. *Love me, Kusanagi! I want you to love me more and more, until you love me more than you ever loved Ranmaru.* Kenmaru picked up Karas' cloak and wrapped Kusanagi up in it. "I can't bear for any other man to look upon you. Karas - go and get the limo ready for us. We depart immediately!"

Karas bowed. "Yes, Kenmaru-san." The *yokai* disappeared with a *pop* as he used a teleportation spell.

Kenmaru swooped a giggling Kusanagi up into his arms bridal-style. "Come, my love, let us go. Farewell, *Ranmaru*~ If you manage to survive you can come to our wedding! It will be quite the event, of that I can assure you!" Kenmaru declared in a singsong voice before with another *pop* he and Kusanagi had disappeared from the forest clearing as well.

Her words had been like multiple daggers to his

heart...and when he had tried to reach out to her through the 'bond' all he felt was coldness. She was telling the *truth*. It was what he had feared all along – that Nagi would not forgive him for accidentally killing her that day five hundred years ago.

Well, now he had his answer. Not only did she not forgive him - she hated and despised him now that she remembered. She had called him a pathetic, worthless, useless slave. Kusanagi had oftentimes insulted him without really meaning it but she had never called him a *slave* like that before. And to add insult to injury she had chosen Kenmaru over him. She even claimed to have loved Kenmaru and that all this time she had been blind.

Even worse was the fact that Kenmaru had protected Kusanagi earlier during his battle against Karas - from himself.

Ranmaru tried to move but there was simply no strength left in his body. He sighed heavily. He could already feel his regeneration ability slowly taking effect. He would survive this. But Ranmaru found that he didn't *want* to survive. He wished he could just disappear, run away into the arms of-

Death.

Death would be his liberator from all this pain. Death was suddenly his new best friend. He would welcome Death with open arms...

Ranmaru's vision was still hazy and as he blinked upwards he thought he suddenly saw someone. A hooded figure wielding a giant scythe. The Grim Reaper...? Death?

Impossible...I really must be losing it. Ranmaru thought.

And then Grim Reaper's mouth was moving. *Do you think your death will really make her happy? You fool, don't make me kill you...*

I really must be hallucinating. Ranmaru shook his head and gathered all of his strength to sit up. *Where's my sword?* He spotted Kuroki Ryu lying in the grass not too far away from where he was. Ranmaru staggered to his feet and stumbled over towards his sword and collapsed next to it. Then Ranmaru gathered his remaining strength to sit up once more, folding his legs beneath him. He ripped open his shirt and picked up his *katana*.

The blade glowed pink and red as the cherry blossoms were reflected on its surface...

Ranmaru held up and positioned his *katana* so that its tip was pointed at his stomach. He would commit *seppuku* and die. He had dishonored his Master by failing to protect her - he could not live with the shame and dishonor, but more so he could not live without her love...

No! The Grim Reaper cried, feeling his scythe moving of its own accord down towards Ranmaru's neck.

Crazy bastard! What the hell do you think you're doing? Kuroki Ryu shot back into Ranmaru's mind as he tried to resist Ranmaru's control upon him.

But Ranmaru stubbornly ignored both of their voices - thinking he was only imagining them anyways. He truly must be going mad, or perhaps he already was mad.

He brought his *katana* upon himself.

Kuroki Ryu flashed through the air-

However-

Ranmaru opened his eyes and blinked at the figure before him. It was the pink-haired cat girl - Katsumi. She had both her hands wrapped around the blade of Kuroki Ryu, and the sword was cutting into the delicate flesh of the palms of her hands so that streams of red blood were running down her arms. The smell of burning flesh also wafted into the air suddenly as Kuroki Ryu resisted being held by another.

Katsumi had stopped the blade.

Ranmaru's eyes widened in shock, his golden eyes clearing slightly as they focused on her, "Katsumi?"

"Don't underestimate me, bastard sword!" Katsumi yelled to Kuroki Ryu as she summoned her own *yokai* power, her cat ears and twin *nekomata* tails appeared as well as a dark pulsating aura, which formed around her. "*Hooryah!*" Katsumi cried as she wrenched the sword from Ranmaru's grip and flung it aside. She then got down on all fours and hissed at the sword as if she expected it to get up and attack her on its own.

When she thought Kuroki Ryu would remain where it was she then turned her attention to a stunned Ranmaru, "Ranmaru! What were you thinking! What happened? Where's Kusanagi?" Katsumi demanded, resisting the urge to slap him since he looked

so beat up already.

Ranmaru blinked at the tears he saw shimmering in her blue eyes. Katsumi wasn't crying over *him* now was she? No, that would be silly - after all Ranmaru was worthless. "Katsumi? I...Kusanagi...she..." His voice cracked on Kusanagi's name and he found he couldn't go on.

Katsumi was surprised to see the very open and visible pain reflecting in his usually emotionally shuttered eyes. A pain that was so intense it made her gasp. "Ranmaru, tell me, what happened?" She asked very slowly. What could hurt Ranmaru so much? She hadn't realized it before but he truly looked so...broken. What had driven him to want to commit *seppuku*? *I mean like who does that anymore? Mou!*

Ranmaru opened his mouth to try and speak but his strength suddenly left him and he passed out into Katsumi's waiting arms. Katsumi shook her head. "Ranmaru *no baka*. I'll get you fixed up and then I'll make you tell me *everything*."

Ranmaru awoke to find that he was in his bedroom back at the Kimamura Estate. But strangely enough he found that he couldn't move...*huh?* He looked down at himself to see that his entire body had been wrapped in white strips of cloth, which must have been bandages. The bandages had been wrapped in such a way that he resembled a mummy. Ranmaru's eye twitched. No, he was positive - he looked *just* like a mummy. *What the hell?*

"Oh, Ranmaru, you're awake...are you feeling better?" Katsumi questioned him innocently from his bedside where she was seated in a chair. Ranmaru used all of his strength to turn his head in her direction and saw that she was peeling an apple with a rather large and sinister looking knife...

Ranmaru blinked and gathered his strength to sit up in bed. *Katsumi? Ah, she must have tended to my wounds hence the odd bandages.* "Katsumi...how long have I been sleeping?" He noticed that it was still nightfall so perhaps he had only been out a few hours at the most.

Katsumi's expression turned serious. "Since yesterday-"

Ranmaru immediately freaked out. *Yesterday? But then...Kusanagi is...!* Ranmaru tried to get out of bed but he was

surprised when Katsumi suddenly shoved him back hard onto the bed. Ow. He was an injured man here. Didn't Katsumi realize that? Or was Katsumi a hell of a lot stronger than she looked? Ranmaru eyed her curiously. Ranmaru opened his mouth to speak-

And Katsumi stuffed a piece of apple into his mouth and glared at him. "Uh uh, you're not going anywhere until you explain to me what happened and where Kusanagi is!"

Ranmaru felt his heart clench painfully in his chest. *Kusanagi...* "She's with Kenmaru."

Katsumi's eyes widened. "You mean that same creepy bastard who stuck a Control Collar on me and forced me revive Kusanagi's dead parents?"

Ranmaru nodded, stoic.

"Then...like oh my god, we have to go and save her! We-" Katsumi began frantically.

But Ranmaru was shaking his head, a broken look on his face. "She chose to go with him, Kat."

Katsumi stopped freaking out and narrowed her eyes at Ranmaru. "What? What do you mean? You're not making any sense Ranmaru. Argh, just spit it out already!" Katsumi grabbed him by the shoulders and started shaking him since she was beginning to get frustrated by his stoic nature.

"She loves him...and she hates me." Ranmaru managed to get out.

Katsumi blinked and then blinked again. "*Nani?* Is this why you tried to kill yourself? You think Kusanagi hates you? Ranmaru *no baka!*" Katsumi suddenly slapped Ranmaru hard across the face.

Ranmaru stared back at her in utter shock.

Just then, the door to Ranmaru's bedroom was opened and Roze stepped inside, "Katsumi, I got you some more bandages. Oh, Ranmaru, you're awake, I-"

Katsumi then grabbed the front of Ranmaru's chest by his bandages and began to shake him back and forth, roughly, and rather violently. "Ranmaru *NO BAKA!*"

Roze felt a trickle of sweat form on her brow.

“Uhhh...Katsumi, you’re really going to kill him if you continue to do that. *Oi*, Katsumi-chan!” Roze raised her hand in their direction in a supplicating gesture.

In a stunned stupor Ranmaru noticed that Katsumi had tears in her eyes. “You’re such an idiot...how could you think Kusanagi *hates* you? I know for a fact that she loves you.”

Ranmaru didn’t want to dare hope. “But she *said*-”

“Said?” Katsumi cut him off, “Ha! Words are cheap, meaningless. Do you actually know how she was *feeling* when she said this to you?”

Ranmaru nodded. “Yes, I felt her feelings through the bond...there was absolutely nothing. Just coldness.”

Katsumi smiled suddenly. “So, you’re saying that even through the bond that the two of you share all you felt was a void of nothingness? No emotions at all?” Katsumi was beginning to look excited and was leaning in closer to Ranmaru with an expectant look on her face.

Ranmaru furrowed his brow in confusion at her, perplexed, “Well, yes...”

“Aha!” Katsumi declared, “That’s it! Tell me Ranmaru shouldn’t she have been feeling *something* as she was looking down at you and saying such hateful things? Like anger? Hatred? Or even lust for Kenmaru? And yet you claim that even through your bond all that you were able to feel was absolutely *nothing*. Right?”

“That is correct.” Ranmaru wasn’t quite sure where Katsumi was going with all this...

“You *baka*! Don’t you see? She locked it all away - she locked all her emotions up in her heart so that you wouldn’t be able to know how she was truly feeling. She must have been trying to save you or something...” Katsumi tapped her chin thoughtfully as she looked over Ranmaru’s battered form.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened with this realization. Katsumi was right. It had been a void of nothingness. Had Kusanagi really deceived him in order to save him? It just seemed so...unreal. Ranmaru didn’t dare hope...

But against his will hope began to swell in his chest.

“And considering how beat up you were when I found you there half-dead it all makes sense.” Katsumi grinned.

“Kusanagi knew that you would die and so she did the only thing she could think of to save you - lie. Something that she’s actually quite good at. She put on her Bitch Mask. And even you weren’t able to see through it. She’s the Queen of Masks and deception after all so that’s to be expected!” Katsumi was now giddy.

Ranmaru was floored by Katsumi’s unerring logic. If she was right...! But...there was still something that confused him. Kusanagi knew that he was practically indestructible so then why had she just assumed that he would die? “Katsumi, but how did Kusanagi know for sure that I was going to die?”

“*Baka*, you haven’t figured it out yet? What Kusanagi is able to See? Kusanagi is able to See the Grim Reaper.” Katsumi informed him simply.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened. So his suspicions all along had been right about that as well. Kusanagi was a Death Prophetess. One who could foretell people’s deaths and not only that she could See the Grim Reaper when he came to collect people’s souls. But how did Katsumi figure this out? “But how...?”

Katsumi smirked, her two tails swishing behind her playfully while a dark aura surrounded her suddenly, “I’m a *nekomata* - we have ‘ties’ with Death. I may not be able to See the Grim Reaper but I can *smell* him when he fully materializes. And his scent is on you...he almost had you, Ranmaru. But...Kusanagi once again stopped Death from harvesting another soul.”

Ranmaru thought back to how he thought he had imagined seeing the Grim Reaper. Had that NOT been a hallucination after all? Had that actually been real? Ranmaru gulped. And more importantly why had the Grim Reaper tried to speak with him?

But also if Katsumi was telling the truth and Kusanagi not only loved him BUT had deceived Kenmaru so that he would not be killed - that would mean Kusanagi was in grave danger and needed his help! “I must go to her.” Ranmaru struggled to get off the bed.

Katsumi whipped out a *naginata* and thrust the bladed weapon forward.

(Note: a *naginata* is a spear-like weapon which consists of a long pole with a curved blade on the end and which was a popular weapon of choice for female *samurai* during the Sengoku Period in Japan due to its long distance attack range.)

Ranmaru gulped, it had imbedded itself in the wall *right* next to his head.

“I missed.” Katsumi declared a menacing aura forming around her, “And just where do you think you’re going, Mister? After I went through the trouble to nurse you back to health there’s no way I’m letting you out of my sight! I was even gracious enough to peel an apple for you! Most guys would kill to have a cute girl like me peel an apple for them but you – ha! I didn’t even hear a ‘thank you’ come for your lips. You’re not going anywhere Mister. Not until Doctor Katsumi says so...got it?” She leveled her blue eyes on him.

Women are scary.

Ranmaru nodded to himself vigorously at the thought. Who would have thought that Katsumi had this freaky ‘other side’ to her? But then again he supposed everyone had their own masks...

Ranmaru sighed heavily and ran a hand back through his mussed up, coppery colored hair, “Katsumi...you *must* understand why I must go to her.”

Katsumi nodded, “I do but you don’t even have a plan do you? It was the lightning demon Karas who did that to you wasn’t it? Before we go and face them we have to-”

The sound of the Kimamura mansion’s doorbell being rung was heard.

Katsumi and Ranmaru both turned to look at Roze expectantly - she was the Kimamura family’s head maid after all.

“Oh yea!” Roze jumped when she realized why they were staring at her, “I’ll just go...and get that. Yea.” Roze went off to answer the door. Roze opened the front door and it was simply the postman. He handed Roze a letter before leaving. Roze looked down at the letter and saw that oddly enough the letter was addressed to Miss Katsumi. She quickly returned to Ranmaru’s bedroom to see that Katsumi and Ranmaru were currently having a staring match-

Roze cleared her throat to announce her presence.

Katsumi turned her attention to Roze, “Who was it Roze?”

“The postman. He gave me a letter. It’s for you actually.”

“Me?” Katsumi blinked. She had never received a letter her whole life.

Roze handed her the letter and Katsumi tentatively took it from Roze. It had an *expensive* looking envelope, Katsumi could tell. It had been made with thick paper and Katsumi’s name had been scrolled across the outside in golden ink. Katsumi extended her claw and used it to carefully open the envelope. She pulled out the single card that was inside to discover that it was none other than a wedding invitation. The card was also a high quality, thick stock of paper and in golden embossed letters it read:

Kurosaki Katsumi
The honor of your presence is requested
At the marriage ceremony of
Lady Kimamura Kusanagi
 &
THE Kenmaru (CEO of TSUBAKI INC.)
Saturday, the ninth of Decemeber
One o’clock in the afternoon
St. Mary’s Cathedral, Tokyo
Please RSVP

Katsumi blinked. ‘*THE*’ Kenmaru? *What an arrogant bastard indeed. Wait a sec, this...Sunday? That’s tomorrow night! Shit! She couldn’t let Ranmaru see the invitation or else-*

Ranmaru noticed Katsumi’s panicked look and quickly snatched the invitation from her hands before Katsumi could grab it back. His eyes swiftly scanned over the invitation.

“*Oi!* Ranmaru!” Katsumi complained.

Ranmaru’s eyes widened after he had finished reading the invitation. “Kenmaru...” He clenched the invitation in his fist. *That bastard. He’s going to pay!* Ranmaru tried to get out of bed once more but Katsumi placed the tip of her *naginata* to his throat.

“Try me...” She hissed.

Ranmaru opened his mouth to respond when the doorbell

suddenly rang again and then was pushed multiple times. Someone was apparently impatient.

“*Mou!* I’m coming!” Roze declared as she left the room.

Roze returned a few moments later with Shinichi, Orihime, and Haruka all in tow. They also all had matching wedding invitations that they had received from Kenmaru in hand. And they were all wearing angry and confused expressions on their faces. They burst into Ranmaru’s bedroom and immediately began making a fuss.

“*Katsumi~!*” Haruka whined as he sauntered into the room, “Why is Kusanagi-*chan* marrying some guy named Kenmaru? *Why~?* Why hast thou forsaken me, Kusanagi-*chan!*” He moaned, raising his arms up as if beseeching the heavens for an answer.

Katsumi’s eye twitched and she pointed her *naginata* at Haruka, “She’s NOT getting married she-”

But before Katsumi could say more Orihime had caught sight of the wounded and bandaged Ranmaru, who was still lying back in bed, “Ranmaru darling!” She quickly rushed to his side and shoved Katsumi out of the way. “Oh my god, what happened to you? Don’t worry I’m here now. I’ll take very good care of you.” Orihime pulled out an apple and quickly began to peel it. She cut it into small pieces before she then held a slice out in front of Ranmaru’s face. “Now say *ahhh~*”

Ranmaru blinked. What was with girls and shoving apples down your throat by force when you were sick? Ranmaru shivered.

Ranmaru was about to open his mouth to speak when Orihime took that opportunity to shove the piece of apple into his mouth. She beamed. “I knew you would like *my* apples!”

Ranmaru groaned in despair. Could things get any more complicated?

Munch, munch

Shinichi had opened a bag of potato chips and was shoveling handfuls of the greasy, shrimp flavored chips into his mouth, “Whoa, Ranmaru you’re all beaten up dude. Katsumi what’s going on?”

Katsumi sighed and ran a hand back through her bubblegum pink hair, “To make a long story short, Kusanagi’s been

kidnapped by this guy Kenmaru and is being forced to marry him.”

Shinichi nodded, “So who’s up for crashing a wedding?”

Orihime and Haruka both chimed in at the same time - “Oh me! Me!”

Haruka gave Orihime a speculative look, one eyebrow raised.

She merely shrugged, “Wha? I *love* weddings. It’s an excuse to buy new clothes.”

Katsumi frowned, “This isn’t a game. This is serious. If we’re really going to rescue Kusanagi we need a plan. Our biggest obstacle is Kenmaru’s bodyguard a lightning-type demon named Karas-”

Munch, munch

“Lightning huh?” Shinichi mused aloud. “Well, lightning doesn’t really have an *elemental* weakness, per say. But...I have an idea. That is unless we have to fight fair with these guys?”

Ranmaru, Katsumi, Orihime, and Roze all agreed simultaneously - “Oh hell no.”

A toothy grin formed on Shinichi’s face. “Well just leave the lightning demon to me then-” He turned to Ranmaru. “I’ll be needing your help though.”

Ranmaru nodded, “Of course. I am at your service.”

Shinichi nodded, “Good. This might just work.” The wheels were already turning in the Mecha robot-obsessed boy’s mind.

“I can handle Kenmaru.” Ranmaru declared suddenly. “But there’s one other I am worried about - a dark *miko* witch named Kagura. She’s extremely powerful and should not be underestimated. I don’t think any of you would be a real match for her either...”

“Then who’s going to fight her?” Orihime asked.

“Why my granddaughter Kusanagi of course,” Came Kimamura-san’s confident voice as he strode into the bedroom, making an unexpected appearance.

“Kimamura-san,” Katsumi bowed respectfully.

Ranmaru nodded deferentially. “Sir, what do you mean by

Kusanagi?”

“Oh she should be able to handle it I think as long as she has...” Kimamura-*san* pulled something out from behind his back. “*This*.” Kimamura-*san* had pulled out what appeared to be a *bokken* or wooden sword, but one of a much higher quality than the usual sword Kusanagi was seen with. This *bokken* was also giving off a powerful aura and Ranmaru could see that it was surrounded by a faint white glow of light. “This *bokken* was carved out of a sacred tree...it will help bring out Kusanagi’s latent *miko* powers temporarily. With this she should be a match for Kagura.”

Katsumi looked at the sword, “Like totally awesome.”

“Sweet.” Shinichi agreed.

“It’s just a wooden stick.” Orihime pouted, jealous of anything that was getting more attention than herself.

Katsumi swiftly bonked her over the head however.

“Ow!” Orihime rubbed her head in pain. “I can’t believe she just did that to me? What is the world coming to?” Orihime moaned.

Kimamura-*san* coughed and adjusted his dark sunglasses on his face. “Also I come bearing other gifts.” Kimamura-*san* pulled out several *o-fuda* or prayer-strips from his sleeves along with some mysterious paper cranes.

Ranmaru could see the faint glow these items were giving off as well. Kimamura-*san* must have empowered each *o-fuda* and crane with his own spirit energy, Ranmaru realized.

Shinichi rolled up his sleeves, “*Yosha!* It looks like we have a plan now Katsumi! I better go get started on the preparations since we have a wedding to crash at 17:00 hours!”

“*Yosha! Ossu!*” Everyone cheered in agreement.

“Like hey, what can I do to help?” Orihime offered suddenly.

“Just try to stay out of everyone’s way.” Ranmaru deadpanned.

“Hey!” Orihime pouted, looking extremely put out.

“She could be the petal-dropper maybe.” Haruka added in a joking manner.

“Of all the idiotic-” Orihime was saying.

When Katsumi cut her off. “Hey, that could actually

work.” Katsumi declared, a mischievous glint in her eye.

Uh oh... Orihime gulped. She had a bad feeling about this.

Chapter 9

Even a camellia can have its own scent

Kenmaru was seated with his legs folded beneath him and with Dark Suzaku in his hands, a thoughtful expression on his face. His wedding to 'Nagi' was mere moments away but he couldn't shake this feeling of unease that things would not go according to plan. He had known Ranmaru all of his life. So he knew that even half-dead or perhaps coming back from beyond the grave - Ranmaru would come to try and stop this wedding. He knew how much he loved Nagi. He had chosen her over him after all. Was he really powerful enough to face Ranmaru on his own? Kenmaru shook his head, filled with doubts in his own ability. He couldn't help but feel somewhat afraid...

I can feel your fear Master. But you have nothing to fear as long as you have me by your side. Dark Suzaku informed Kenmaru calmly. *You wish to defeat Ranmaru and claim Nagi as your woman once and for all correct?*

Y-yes. Kenmaru answered back hesitantly in his mind. *But Ranmaru is-*

We can and will defeat him...however there will be a price. Are you willing to pay the price for the ultimate power and strength? Are you ready to taste true power?

True power...I crave that power... Kenmaru gripped his hands around the sword tightly. He had always been weaker than Ranmaru. This was the only way. *I'll do anything.*

Good...very good. Dark Suzaku chuckled, the pact having been made. Everything was going according to plan.

For the wedding of the century, Kenmaru had chosen one of the largest and most beautiful churches in all of Tokyo, Japan. It was an impressive all-white structure, with colorful stained glass windows, large, dark-wood, double doors, and on the steepled roof there was a gigantic silver cross.

Already guests from Tokyo's elite families and clans (including a few *yakuza* clans) as well as a few celebrities were arriving. Some of the guests also included fellow business tycoons and business partners of TSUBAKI INC.

Several black crows were perched ominously in the trees nearby watching the proceedings curiously. The image of the church and its cross reflected in the dark depths of their liquid-black eyes.

Meanwhile, Kusanagi was getting ready in her own private dressing room. Kenmaru had gone to great lengths to hire her several personal assistants, who helped Kusanagi get ready assisting her with her hair, makeup and getting properly dressed into her wedding gown. Kusanagi had finally become irritated by them all and snapping had ordered the girls out. She needed a moment alone. She sighed heavily and looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror that had been set up in the room for her benefit. She was wearing a Takumi original. The white wedding gown had a strapless, bodice, which had tiny, sparkling, green emeralds sown in vertical lines into the thick, silk material, and the dress had a large, full, bell skirt - the delicate folds of which resembled the petals of a white camellia. The gown had a total of one thousand pearls sewn into the material as well.

Her hair had been tamed and straightened (that alone had taken about 5 hours), and styled in an elegant updo. The assistants had decorated her hair with a series of white camellias. Her piercings had been taken out. But Kusanagi had decided to keep her combat boots on and wore them underneath her dress. *What Kenmaru doesn't know won't hurt him neh?* Kusanagi harbored a secret hope to become a run-away bride. Like in that

sappy American movie she had seen once. Kusanagi shook her head. But if she did run away then it would be the same as writing Ranmaru's death sentence. He was no match for Karas and his cursed sword Byakko. No, there was no running away...

As Kusanagi looked back at her reflection in the mirror she saw a beautiful young woman about to get married but...it wasn't her.

Kusanagi had to admit that she did indeed look beautiful though. The gown alone had cost Kenmaru 70,000,000 *yen*. And Kenmaru had even gone so far as to purchase her a diamond tiara and a matching diamond necklace that had flowers made of diamonds with emeralds in their centers. However, every girl has dreamed about her wedding day at least once. And...deep, deep down Kusanagi had always wanted to get married in a *kimono*. A pale pink and very lady-like *kimono* perhaps one with red roses embroidered into the material. Kusanagi loved roses. *Who am I kidding? I wanted to get married to a man I actually loved. Damn. But now...*

She clenched her fists at her sides in frustration. Ranmaru must really hate her for all those awful things she had said to him. She thought she could hear his heart breaking like a champagne glass hitting a hard stone floor when she had lied to him about how she felt. He would probably never be able to forgive her but...as long as he was *alive* that's all that really mattered.

A bittersweet smile formed on Kusanagi's lips. Finally, she had managed to actually save someone and defeat Death by using her own cursed power. If this was the 'little' that she could do for Ranmaru on her own - then so be it.

She was all alone...no one would possibly help her now. This is what she got for being such a bitch. Because of that she didn't even have any friends...

Kusanagi picked up the bouquet of white camellias that one of the assistants had brought her. Kusanagi brought the bouquet up to her face to smell it. She blinked. The bouquet had absolutely no smell. She hadn't known that camellias had no scent. In a way that made them a very devious flower since they looked like they would have fine scent. They lured one in only find out the truth and end up being disappointed. *I hate camellias...*

Her eyes began to burn but at that exact moment Haruka and Orihime suddenly burst through the doorway-

Kusanagi's jaw dropped.

"Hey there, girlfriend," Orihime chimed as she waltzed in, "Wow don't you look beautiful!"

"But here I thought a bride was supposed to be happy on her wedding day." Haruka clucked his tongue at her and tsked.

"*Shimatta.*" Kusanagi stubbornly rubbed a hand across her eyes. She hadn't realized she had begun to cry.

"Oh no don't do that!" Orihime chided as she grabbed Kusanagi's arm to stop her. "You'll ruin your eye makeup, silly girl." Orihime took out her make-up bag and began to retouch Kusanagi's eye make-up. "*Yosh.* There, now you look spectacular, just like you always do, Kusanagi-*chan.*" Orihime winked at her.

"Orihime...Haruka..." Kusanagi's brows furrowed. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Why we were invited of course." Orihime and Haruka both took out their fancy invitations simultaneously. "I'm going to be your maid of honor right? And Haruka can be like your best man. *Neh?*"

Kusanagi's heart fell. Were they really just here for the wedding and...possibly the cake. "Um, right, sure." She forced a smile. "Of course, you can be my maid of honor, Orihime."

Orihime shook her head at Kusanagi, "Now, that won't do. You're wearing a mask aren't you? But this time I can see the cracks in it. It's...imperfect. Really Kusanagi, that's not like you at all. Tsk tsksk." Orihime waved her finger at Kusanagi. "As a model let me give you a piece of advice. Do you know why I retouched your make-up? Because make-up is a girl's best friend, it's a woman's armor. In life, this is a man's world yea, but us girls have our own secret weapons when we have to go off and do battle in this world of men. And one of them is make-up. So, smile like you always do and look happy and be beautiful. Without Kenmaru being able to see past your mask. Because we both know that you don't want to marry Kenmaru."

Kusanagi gasped, *How did they...?*

Orihime continued. “But we can’t let Kenmaru figure that out or else this whole grand master rescue plan of ours is going to go to the dogs. You’re a pro Kusanagi just like me *neh?* You may not be happy on the inside but you *will* look happy and beautiful on the outside. You have a role to play and you need to play it perfectly. You need to put on your flawless, happy Bitch Mask this time and go out there and knock them dead! Got it?”

“*Minna....guys...*” Kusanagi’s voice was thick with emotion.

Haruka put a hand on Kusanagi’s shoulder, “Only promise me one thing, princess.”

Kusanagi blinked. “What?”

“Never smile like that again. It was extremely creepy.” Haruka shivered. “Creepy sickeningly sweet smiles like that don’t suit you at all – instead just put on your usual evil smirk. That one suits you best.”

Kusanagi’s eye twitched at that.

“He’s here to save you too.” Orihime gave Kusanagi an expectant look when she looked back at her confusedly. “Ranmaru, of course.”

Kusanagi’s eyes widened and her heart fluttered madly in her chest. *Ranmaru is...here?* But then her expression fell. “No.” Kusanagi shook her head. “He mustn’t come here. He can’t defeat Karas. He’ll die. He-”

Haruka put a finger to her lips. “He’s not alone. You don’t need to worry. We’ve all got your back on this. We have a plan. And as much as I hate to say this, if anyone should know what he’s capable of it’s you. Believe in him. He won’t lose a second time.”

Kusanagi blinked at Haruka in surprise. *We?* “But who?”

“They’re all here.” Orihime informed her. “Shinichi, Katsumi and that *komainu* of yours. And they all have their own part to play in this. This is going to be one hell of a performance, Kusanagi. Perhaps, even bigger than my grand debut as a Model Idol.”

“The players have been gathered and the curtain is about to rise.” Haruka smirked, “Let the final act begin!”

“*Yosh.*” Kusanagi agreed clenching hands tightly around her bouquet. She would give Kenmaru a performance to

remember, that's for sure.

Ranmaru watched as the doors to the church were closed, which meant that the wedding ceremony was underway. Ranmaru spotted Karas standing on the steepled roof of the church directly in front of the large cross. He was apparently keeping watch from that high vantage point.

Karas' sharp eyes darted here and there as he looked out for anything suspicious. He knew Ranmaru would come and try to stop this wedding. *That bastard is one tough son of a bitch to keep standing after getting hit with my Million Volt Attack multiple times. If I didn't know any better I'd say the man was immortal. But the only immortal I know is the Lady Kagura.*

Karas had a gut feeling that Ranmaru would come back from the grave to stop this wedding if he had to. He had seen how much Ranmaru loved that strange, dark-haired woman - Kusanagi. How one woman could be the cause of so much trouble Karas couldn't quite comprehend. Women truly seemed to be more trouble than they were worth. Karas nodded to himself knowingly.

That's when Karas spotted something rather surprising and hard to miss...approaching the church was a giant *mecha* robot!

The robot was impressive and at least twenty feet tall. The overall design of the robot was that of a *Samurai* Butler. The robot itself had hulking red, white and blue metal, *samurai* armor along with an ornate, horned helmet on its head. A massive *katana* appeared to be strapped to its back. It was holding a large red shield in one hand, and it was wearing a black, butler's vest along with a red butler necktie.

"You have got to be kidding me...does this idiot really think he can defeat me with something like that? The fool. This is completely ridiculous, I dare say!" Karas let his black, feathery wings emerge from his back before he then leapt down from the roof, flying to land directly in front of the church entrance. He unsheathed his sword and pointed it at the robot. He then reached out his *yokai* senses to find out who was inside and piloting that

thing. Karas was almost certain that it had to be Ranmaru.

But Karas was surprised to sense that it was NOT Ranmaru but sensed the energy signature of a young boy, who also seemed to be very nervous if his energy fluctuations were anything to go by. *Keh. Sending kids to do a man's job. Pathetic indeed.* "You there! I don't know who you are but...it's in your best interest to leave now and take your life with you. You are no match for the great Byakko or me! Even in that giant tin can of yours. I believe that you're forgetting that metal *conducts* electricity, my dear boy. Unless you need a reminder? Now, do you surrender?"

Inside of his *mecha* robot Shinichi smirked. "No sale." Shinichi mouthed before pressing down on a large red button on the control console. Then along the outside of the chest of Shinichi's robot several hatches were opened to reveal multiple cannon ports. Long cannons began to emerge from these ports. Shinichi then used the robot's controls to raise both of the robot's arms and pointed the robot's hands directly at Karas. Shinichi then pressed another button, which caused each of the robot's fingertips to open up and reveal that they were gun barrels. Shinichi adjusted the military hat that he had borrowed from Kusanagi on his head before pressing another button. "Fire!" Shinichi grinned boyishly. "I've always wanted to say that."

From out of the long, metal barrels of the cannons and the gun barrels that were on the robot's hands hundreds of miniature cannon balls and bullets were suddenly fired at Karas, who merely scoffed at this pathetic attempt to destroy him. *Keh, like bullets would actually work against me? Ha!*

Karas moved his sword through the air to block and cut the incoming bullets, but that's when something odd happened as his sword impacted with one of the bullets. Instead of splitting neatly in half as he had expected the bullet instead exploded and released some sort of strange, gooey, paint-like substance that ended up covering Karas' sword in splotches of red, white and blue.

"Paint bullets?" Karas sneered looking down at his sword in disgust, "That won't work against me. This isn't a game, I daresay." Karas gripped his sword in a two-handed grip and charged the robot head on while summoning his lightning power

to flow into his sword-

But-

Huh? Karas' jaw dropped since for some reason it wasn't working. His lightning energy wasn't flowing into his sword like it normally did for some reason. *Wait, could it be? Those paint bullets? Just what are they really? You have got to be kidding me! I have to get this crap off of my sword.*

"Second round! Fire!" Shinichi took advantage of Karas' momentary distraction and pressed down on the red button on the control console for a second time. Again hundreds of paint bullets sped through the air towards Karas-

Karas snapped out of his stupor in time to dodge and cut through the bullets with his sword, but his body was hit with a few of the paint bullets since there were just too many of them for him to avoid. Now he was also covered in splashes of red, white, and blue paint. *Yuck.* Karas touched his arm trying to figure out what this strange substance was exactly, and his fingers came away with the paint that seemed to cling and stick to his fingertips much like gum. It was a strange, gooey, almost rubbery substance-

Rubber...? Karas' eyes widened. "How dare you make a fool out of me boy! Now you shall die!" Karas charged forward and slashed his sword through Shinichi's *mecha* robot as he executed his attack.

Uh oh. Shinichi quickly pushed the emergency eject button.

Shinichi was immediately ejected from the robot and just in the nick of time as it exploded beneath him. Shinichi's chair went flying up into the air and rose just above the flames caused by the explosion.

An orange and black blur grabbed Shinichi and set him on the ground safely.

Shinichi wiped the sweat from his brow. *Whew!* "Thanks Ranmaru, man I need a snack! I've burned up *way* too many calories! I'm starved!"

Ranmaru tossed Shinichi a bag of his favorite shrimp flavored, potato chips. "Here." Ranmaru smirked. "Maybe I'll get

Kusanagi to save you some of her wedding cake too.”

“Gee, thanks man.” Shinichi declared as he opened the bag and began to dig in. His jaw then dropped as he realized something. “Oh my god, did you just try to make a joke? Sweet!” Shinichi laughed amusedly.

Karas watched this scene with an expression of barely veiled disgust. He looked down at his sword Byakko with a frustrated look on his face. He wasn’t sure what was in those ‘paint bullets’ but they had somehow managed to render Byakko friggin useless. *Shit!*

Karas tossed the cursed sword aside in frustration.

Ranmaru turned to face his opponent, a hand on his sword’s hilt. But when he saw Karas toss away his sword Ranmaru removed his hand from the hilt. He came to a decision and grabbing his sword by its scabbard handed his sword to Shinichi instead. “Hold this.”

Shinichi gaped at Ranmaru. “But - I thought you were going to use it to defeat him?”

“I don’t need Kuroki Ryu to defeat him. I shall do so with my own power - with my fists.” Ranmaru declared as he clenched one of his hands into a fist.

Karas smirked bemusedly, “You are a man of honor, I dare say.” He nodded at Ranmaru in acknowledgement of this.

The two combatants both got into a fighting stance before they then rushed at each other. They exchanged fierce blows and blocks before leaping away from each other.

“What’s the matter Ranmaru? Are your injuries from before slowing you down? And why look at that...you’re bleeding already. You shouldn’t be running around and fighting people with those kinds of injuries, I dare say.” Karas’ tone was mocking.

Ranmaru frowned and stared back at the *tengu* demon unfazed. “You wish. Bring it.” Ranmaru declared as he motioned with his hand for Karas to come and get him. “I smell blood on you too. Don’t tell me that little scratch I gave you just now drew blood. Perhaps, you’re the one who shouldn’t be moving around with those injuries hmm?” Ranmaru countered somewhat teasingly while mimicking Karas’ tone.

Karas brought a hand to his cheek in surprise and brought

his fingers back down to see that there was indeed blood on his hand. The bastard had somehow managed to hit him with one of those punches he had barely been able to dodge. "Enough games, it's time to get serious." Karas stated.

They ran at each other and both simultaneously transformed into their true forms - Ranmaru that of a nine-tailed fox and Karas took on the form of a giant crow *yokai*.

Ranmaru leapt up into the air as Karas flew towards him and they passed each other as they both dealt their finishing moves-

Ranmaru landed and coughed up a great deal of blood, stumbling forward. He almost fell over but then caught himself and remained standing.

Karas cried out as one of his wings that had been ripped off fell to the ground.

Black feathers and droplets of red blood flew through the air.

The crows, which had been watching from the nearby trees, all suddenly took flight in fright at their Master's defeat. Their sad and angry caws of despair rang through the air as they flew away.

Ranmaru had broken both of Karas' wings with his last attack.

A bird with broken wings cannot fly...

Karas hit the ground with a thud and skidded forward. The crow demon tried to push himself up but was unable to gather enough strength in order to do so.

Karas had been defeated.

From around Karas' neck a silvery snake slithered off and moved out of the demon man's clothing to where it lay curled up on the ground and then became solid, cold metal once more. Ranmaru's eyes widened at the sight of the Control Collar. Karas had been a Spell-Collared *yokai* slave. *Kenmaru, that bastard...toying with people's lives. He's still such a child...treating people as his playthings. I think it's about time I taught him a lesson, as his older brother.*

Ranmaru walked over to Shinichi and held out his hand

for his sword, which Shinichi gave him with trembling hands. The fight he had just witnessed had been too intense. After Ranmaru had taken the sword Shinichi sank to his knees in relief and watched as Ranmaru walked off towards the church.

Ranmaru kicked the door to the church open and strode inside. He was covered in splatters of blood but he didn't care. He only had two things on his mind at this point: Save Kusanagi, and kick Kenmaru's ass.

He entered just as the priest was saying- "Is there any reason why Kenmaru and Kusanagi should not be married? Speak now or forever hold your peace."

Ranmaru drew his sword from his scabbard and twisted it in his hand so that the blade was horizontally pointed at Kenmaru, "That kiss belongs to me!" He declared, a fierce gleam in his golden eyes.

At the alter stood a podium where the priest was standing behind. In front of the podium stood Kusanagi and Kenmaru. They had both been facing each other but at Ranmaru's sudden appearance they had both turned their attention to him instead. Next to Kusanagi was Orihime, who was dressed in a long, emerald green, bridesmaid dress. Haruka was also standing on Kusanagi's side and was dressed in a slick black suit along with a dark green tie. Then on Kenmaru's side stood Kagura, who was dressed in a similar emerald green dress to Orihime's, however, hers had slits up the sides to reveal her fishnet stockings. Both girls had white camellias adorning their hair and the boys had white camellias stuck in their lapels.

All eyes in the church turned towards Ranmaru and they then took in the sight of his blood splattered clothes and the glowing red *katana* that was in his hand. The guests immediately went into a panic.

"AHHHH!" The crowd of guests screamed and immediately began to make a mad rush towards the side exits as Ranmaru calmly began to walk down the center aisle and towards Kusanagi and Kenmaru with purposeful steps.

Katsumi leapt into action placing an orange hardhat on her head and taking out one of her traffic directing, glow sticks, "Alright! No one panic! Leave in an orderly fashion - this way!"



RANMARU DREW HIS SWORD FROM HIS SCABBARD AND TWISTED IT IN HIS HAND SO THAT THE BLADE WAS HORIZONTALLY POINTED AT KENMARU.....

That kiss belongs to me!!

HE DECLARED, A FIERCE GLEAM IN HIS GOLDEN EYES.

(By all means, give it your best shot.

I suppose....I'll just have to kill you myself...



Katsumi moved her glow stick through the air pointing it towards the exits and directing the crowd.

Kenmaru had been leaning forward to kiss Kusanagi and his hand was still cupping Kusanagi's cheek as she turned her head to look in the direction of the front of the church.

Her emerald green eyes widened as she caught sight of her copper-haired knight. "Ranmaru!" Kusanagi cried happily at the mere sight of him. Her Bitch Mask instantly shattering.

Kenmaru's hand slid from Kusanagi's face and down to his side dejectedly. Kenmaru shot Kusanagi a betrayed look.

Kusanagi turned back to Kenmaru realizing what she had just done. *Opps*. Oh well, she supposed the time for acting was over now anyways. Kusanagi smiled back at him innocently and put a hand behind her head in a bashful manner. "Um, opps?"

Kenmaru's red eyes flashed with pain, "You bitch! You lied to me didn't you?"

Kusanagi suddenly threw one of her trademark smirks his way, "No duh."

Kenmaru's aura flared around him angrily, "You'll pay for that! No one makes a fool out of me and gets away with it! Not even you!"

"*Oi!* Kusanagi!" Orihime called out, "I forgot that your grandfather gave me a wedding present to give to you!"

Kusanagi raised an eyebrow since that was *so* not like him. "Present?"

Orihime reached under her dress and pulled out the long *bokken* sword. She then tossed it towards Kusanagi. "Here! Catch!"

Kusanagi easily moved to grab the sword and her emerald green eyes sparkled as she felt her hand wrap around the wood of the sword. She finally felt at peace having a *bokken* in her hand. As if a part of her had been missing. "I like it." Kusanagi murmured to herself. The sword had a very comforting and powerful presence to it. She'd have to remember to thank Grandfather later, she decided. Kusanagi then held her *bokken* in a two-handed grip before her and pointed it at Kenmaru.

Kenmaru unsheathed his own cursed sword and pointed it

at Kusanagi using a one-handed grip, “You bitch! How dare you betray me? I’ll have you die being pierced by my sword!”

“Yea, I don’t think so, pervert.” Kusanagi scoffed and was about to move forward.

However, Ranmaru rushed at Kenmaru before either Kusanagi or Kenmaru could make a move of their own. “Kenmaru! Get away from Kusanagi!” He leapt up into the air and brought his sword down upon Kenmaru, who was forced to turn and block Ranmaru’s attack with his sword.

“You should be dead!” Kenmaru growled back angrily. “What happened to Karas?” He demanded, a tinge of fear creeping into his voice.

“He’s dead.” A cocky smirk formed on Ranmaru’s face.

Kenmaru’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Dead...impossible! I suppose...I’ll just have to kill you myself!” His voice wavered.

“By all means, give it your best shot.” Ranmaru replied in a nonchalant manner.

Kenmaru growled back angrily. “Argh! There you go again! You’re always looking down on me Ranmaru! But this time I WILL DESTROY YOU! Dark Suzaku!” Kenmaru summoned his sword’s power and he was immediately engulfed in a dark-tinged aura, black flames enveloped his sword and flared outwards.

Ranmaru recognized the power that Kenmaru was now summoning as being none other than the Black Fire. “Black Fire...shit. Kenmaru don’t use it! You’ll only end up hurting yourself!” Ranmaru yelled back.

“Shut up! Why the hell would you care? You want me dead don’t you? Black Fire Attack!” Kenmaru shrieked as he swung his sword forward at Ranmaru haphazardly-

A blast of Black Fire was unleashed upon Ranmaru-

Kusanagi panicked when she saw Kenmaru gathering the Black Fire. Her memories had reminded her of how powerful and destructive the infamous Black Fire could truly be. She had to do something. She had to protect him- “Ranmaru!” But as she rushed towards him her innate battle instincts alerted her to danger just in the nick of time, and she found herself leaping backwards and out of the way of a spirit energy whip, which

came slashing down in her direction-

Kusanagi turned to see Kagura, who was wearing a wicked smile on her face, and had a long, glowing whip made entirely of her own dark spirit energy in her hand. Kagura licked her lips, "Oh I won't let you interfere, Nagi."

Kusanagi turned to face the woman, who she now knew as her twin sister, Kagura. A flurry of mixed emotions filled Kusanagi at this realization: Fear, hope, anger, sadness, confusion. "Sister..."

Kagura laughed. "Ah, that's right you *remember* now, dear sister. How I've been waiting for this - the day I could put you in your place." She attacked, her deadly whip flying forward.

Kusanagi dodged easily. Here they were fighting each other in a battle to the death. But... "Why? We were sisters...why did you hate me so much? What did I ever do to you?"

Kagura frowned darkly. "What? You don't even KNOW! Argh!" She sent her whip forward again and Kusanagi raised her *bokken* to block the attack.

Kusanagi's sword began to glow with a pure white light.

"We were *TWINS* Kusanagi - we had a *bond*. A very special bond. We could share things remember? Thoughts...*feelings*." Kusanagi's eyes widened at this admission. "Oh yes, I felt *everything*, Nagi. From the very same moment that you fell in love with Ranmaru I did too. When you kissed him I could feel his lips upon my own. When he touched you I could feel his sweet, loved-filled caresses upon my own heated flesh. I could even smell his scent...wet grass and dew."

Kusanagi sucked in a breath. "You really felt everything?" She blushed at the thought but then realized what this also meant. It must have been torture to be in love with a man who didn't even know you existed...to feel his loving touch...but know that he wasn't touching *you*.

"Kagura...*omai*...you...?" Kusanagi's expression turned to pity.

Kagura became angered as soon as she caught sight of that pity in Kusanagi's emerald green eyes, "I don't want your pity! I only want vengeance! Now die!"

Kusanagi avoided Kagura's whip attacks and slid past Kagura's defenses to deliver a blow of her own with her *bokken*. Kusanagi moved her sword down through the air in a downward slash. Kagura was blasted back by the force of Kusanagi's slashing attack. Droplets of black blood flew through the air. And there was now a deep, gaping wound on the front of Kagura's chest.

"For what it's worth - I'm sorry." Kusanagi began in a low voice and then looked up at her sister with a beseeching expression on her face. "I had no idea my love was making you suffer that way. I remember how much I cared about you. The last thing I wanted was to make you suffer, sister." Kusanagi gave her sister a searching look, willing her to understand.

Kagura stood upon shaky legs and spat, "Lies! All you cared about was him! Ranmaru! He's all you could see. And I was left all alone with my *longing*. How could you even begin to understand what I went through because of you? Because of you I experienced love...fell in love for the first time. But to someone who didn't even know I existed. *Why* did it have to be *YOU*? Why couldn't it have been *ME*? What's so special about you anyways? But you know, even after having Ranmaru as my sex slave for over five hundred years I still couldn't get *YOU* out of his heart or his head! How pathetic is that?" Kagura laughed brokenly, and more droplets of black blood fell to the floor from the strain on her body that her laughter was causing. "All along you were still there buried deep within his heart. He loved you all along! Don't you see? No matter how hard I tried I could never get him to love me. I'll never forgive you for that. I hate you Kusanagi!" Kagura charged forward-

However-

Because of the deep wound caused by the holy power of Kusanagi's sacred sword Kagura's own dark, evil power had been weakened, and so the souls that Kagura had consumed in order to maintain her eternal youth, beauty, and power began to leave her body through the wound on her chest.

Kagura looked down at the gaping wound, which the glowing souls were escaping from in shock. Normally, such a wound would have healed itself right away but for some reason the wound that Kusanagi had inflicted upon her wasn't closing.

“What did you do? Wha-what’s...happening to me?” She cried out fearfully. *Without my souls I...!*

Kusanagi watched as the souls began to leave her sister’s body and then observed as Kagura’s hand and then her arm began to become wrinkled and old right before her very eyes. Her sister’s long hair had turned completely white. Then Kagura’s skin that was directly around the wound began to rot and angry purple lines began to spread outwards like an infection, beginning to take over Kagura’s body.

“What have you done to me?” Kagura shrieked glaring at Kusanagi accusingly. “You BITCH!” Kagura charged at Kusanagi with a frantic cry. “DIE!”

Kusanagi blocked all of Kagura’s reckless attacks with her sword easily and continued to watch as the souls left Kagura’s body. Kagura’s skin was being eaten away more quickly now and rotting. The more power Kagura appeared to use the more her body began to deteriorate and began to be destroyed. Also the more Kagura used her power the more souls ended up leaving her body. “Kagura stop! If you use too much more of your power you’ll-” Kusanagi tried to stop her.

“Shut up! And die!” Kagura shouted and flicked her whip forward, but Kagura’s rotted arm suddenly fell off due to the fast movement. Kagura shrieked in horror as she clutched the stump of her arm at her shoulder in pain. Her entire body was falling apart now. Kagura turned and suddenly caught sight of her reflection in one of the stained glass windows of the church. She screamed. “I’m hideous! Hideous! Ranmaru darling! Don’t look at me!” She moaned as she sunk to her knees and covered her face with her one hand while letting her long, white hair fall around her to shield her decrepit body and face from everyone’s eyes.

Kusanagi looked down at the pitiful figure her sister had become and slowly lowered her sword. “Sister...”

The Black Fire attack approached Ranmaru-
And hit him dead on.

Kenmaru cackled triumphantly certain that he had

managed to defeat Ranmaru once and for all.

However-

Ranmaru had flung one of the paper cranes that Kusanagi's grandfather had given him up into the air in front of the Black Fire attack. It had created a kind of spirit barrier and had actually managed to protect and shield Ranmaru from the Black Fire attack.

Kenmaru watched as the paper crane was burned to ashes and fell to the ground. His Black Fire attack had somehow been dispelled. By a paper crane. Kenmaru blinked at this phenomena in shock and his mouth gaped open. "*Nandato!* What the hell?"

Ranmaru was in a similar state of shock. *Whoa*. He hadn't really been expecting that to work. *Heh. That was almost too easy. Kimamura-san must really have a high spirit energy level. Just who is he really...?*

"A mere paper crane was able to block my Black Fire Attack? No! It can't be! I won't believe it! Are the Gods in heaven mocking me? No - I will destroy you! Black Fire Attack!" Kenmaru cried as he swung his sword forward once more to release another Black Fire attack upon Ranmaru.

Ranmaru reached into his butler's uniform and pulled out another of the paper cranes before tossing it into the air. The crane appeared to come to life, flapping its wings and glowing with a brilliant blue light, before it formed another protective barrier for Ranmaru. And once again the Black Fire attack was simply dissipated.

"*Sonna...no way...*" Kenmaru breathed as the backlash of using two Black Fire attacks hit him suddenly and had him bending over while coughing violently as he began to cough up large amounts of bile and stomach acid. The Black Fire was slowly destroying his internal organs...

Under normal circumstances Kenmaru's *yokai* regeneration ability would have eventually been able to heal and restore all of his internal organs before Kenmaru could die. However, if Kenmaru continued to battle Ranmaru and used his Black Fire once more, while not allowing his regeneration abilities to heal the damage he had already sustained, then Kenmaru would surely die.

Kenmaru knew this but he didn't care. Even though he

was in so much pain that he could barely remain standing. He still didn't care. He just wanted to win against Ranmaru whatever the cost, and so he was already summoning Dark Suzaku's power for another attack.

"Kenmaru...*omai*...you...?" Ranmaru blinked at Kenmaru. *He's killing himself. But why?* "Why do you hate me so much, Kenmaru?" Ranmaru demanded, his tone urgent. He needed to understand...

Kenmaru let out a bark of laughter. "Why you ask? You sound so surprised, but I've *always* hated you! You used to look out for me, follow me around everywhere, and protect me. Ha! But I knew you were just looking down on me! You pitied me because you thought I was weak! Worthless! And you saved me in front of Inari on purpose to make me look bad in front of her." Kenmaru's voice was taking on a whiney tone, "I just know it! You wanted Inari's love all for yourself - didn't you? You bastard! Dark Suzaku!" He moved his sword forward and unleashed a Black Fire attack once more, which as it moved through the air took on the form of a black phoenix.

Ranmaru followed suit and summoned Kuroki Ryu's power. Ranmaru threw another paper crane up into the air and then swung his sword forward at the same time, "Dragon's Breath Attack!" A fiery red dragon of flames burst out of Ranmaru's sword and flew towards Kenmaru's attack - combined with Kimamura-san's spirit energy.

The two attacks collided in midair - the dragon and the phoenix battling each other.

Pity? That isn't true. That isn't why I protected Kenmaru at all. "You're wrong!" Ranmaru bellowed. "I protected you because you were my brother! My *nakama*! My comrade! And I didn't want to lose you!"

"Lies!" Kenmaru spat, "You didn't care about me or Inari or anyone! You just cared about swords and fighting and power!"

Ranmaru became a killing machine for our sake, Kenmaru. Don't forget that. Inari's voice suddenly rang through Kenmaru's mind.

The attacks canceled each other out in midair and

Kenmaru was left panting for breath and barely able to stand. He could feel it...the acid rising up in his throat. He was burning up from the inside out. *God, it hurts.* The pain Kenmaru felt was indescribable...

Battles? Swords? Power? Yes, Ranmaru *had* sought those things. But he had finally remembered *why* he had sought those things in the first place! "*Gigao!* No! I remember now...the answer to my question! Why do I fight? It was Nagi who helped me to remember Kenmaru! She helped me to remember that I was fighting to gain the power to protect those I cared for. The reason why I sought power at all was to protect you and Inari! But the Power I sought consumed me. And I lost my humanity and my heart along the way becoming a killing machine. I lost my way and began to travel down the wrong path. A path, which left you and Inari behind. This made me blind to the fact that I was hurting you, Kenmaru. I'm sorry. You must believe me."

Kenmaru stubbornly ignored what Ranmaru was saying and summoned Dark Suzaku's power anyways. *Dark Suzaku...it's time to end this. I hereby give you this body...do with it what you will. Become one with me and make my body a sword. A living weapon. A sword that has the power to defeat Ranmaru. This is my only wish.*

So be it. We must not underestimate them Master. That sword...I recognize that spirit now. He is Seiryuu though his mind has been broken. Dark Suzaku responded as the sword began to pulse and glow with dark energy, and then black tentacles of energy shot out of the sword and imbedded themselves into Kenmaru's arm.

Kenmaru screamed in pain in response but then bit down on his lower lip to stifle his scream. *Seiryuu? One of the Four Heavenly Beasts?* Kenmaru blinked. *Ah, so Ranmaru managed to find one of the four legendary cursed swords as well. That bastard just had to copy me didn't he?*

Kenmaru turned to glare at Ranmaru. "Lies! I won't believe you! You don't care about me. You never cared. You stole Inari's love! You stole Nagi's love!" Kenmaru bellowed as his sword and body were engulfed in an aura of black flames.

Ranmaru watched as the dark spirit energy tentacles imbedded themselves into Kenmaru's arm. *Shit.* Suzaku was

taking Kenmaru over! The sword...was killing him. There had to be a way he could save him but how? His words weren't reaching his brother! *Dammit!* "Listen to me, you fool! I didn't even want Inari's love! I just wanted to protect you! And why do you think that was, genius? It was because I cared for you. We can't do this - destroy each other. We're brothers! And we always will be! BROTHER!"

Kenmaru pointed his sword at Ranmaru his expression frantic, "No! Shut up! I can't listen to this! It's all lies! It just has to be because if it isn't then what have I been fighting for all this time? It would mean that you became a killing machine for my sake just like Inari said. No! I can't believe it! Just...disappear damn you!" Kenmaru charged. *It's better this way...Ranmaru. Let's end this...with my death.*

"No! Don't! Kenmaru!" Ranmaru cried. "Dammit! Can't you see that sword is killing you? The Black Fire is consuming you! You'll die!"

But Kenmaru's consciousness was already being consumed by Dark Suzaku's will and all Dark Suzaku craved for was destruction, and so Kenmaru did not stop but instead kept charging forward-

Kenmaru's eyes were no longer red but now pitch black. Ranmaru could see that Dark Suzaku's madness and insanity had consumed him completely. "I am not worthless! You all underestimate me! I won't have your pity! I am invincible! And I will defeat you! I will finally leave your shadow Ranmaru and gain Inari's acknowledgement and then - then - Kusanagi will love me too! Yea! Once you're dead she'll have no choice but to love me! Now DIE!" Kenmaru declared, raising his sword.

From a place deep within himself Kenmaru watched as he and Ranmaru fought. *Love...did I even really know what that truly was? I believe Kusanagi was probably right about me. They all think I'm such a fool. That I didn't know. I knew that she was faking her feelings for me back in the forest. But even so...it was the happiest moment of my life - even if it was just an illusion. Even if it wasn't 'real' - someone had loved me and acknowledge me...*

“Shit! KENMARU!” Ranmaru knew that Kenmaru’s consciousness had been consumed completely by the cursed sword and that there was no longer anyway to reach him. Ranmaru was also out of paper cranes. *This is so not good.*

Kuroki Ryu...I guess it’s up to the two of us now. Lend me your power to defeat Suzaku...

Suzaku you say? Kuroki Ryu laughed insanely. I remember that bastard...oh this is going to be good. I can feel it...the rush. It’s coming. Oh, this is it. The moment I’ve been waiting for. Oh hell yea! Let’s do this Ranmaru you asshole! Die Suzaku-teme! Die! Die! Die!

“Hooryah!” Ranmaru let out a battle cry as he approached Kenmaru, moving his sword through the air. “KENMARU!”

“RANMARU!” Kenmaru cried as their cursed Muramasa swords clashed-

And then they passed each other.

The dragon and the phoenix clashed for the last time.

Ranmaru staggered forward and removed a piece of the now broken sword Dark Suzaku that was sticking out of his chest with his hand. Ranmaru had managed to break the cursed sword, but then it had ricocheted with the last of its own power to fly back through the air and stab Ranmaru while aiming for his heart. What a vicious sword. Dark Suzaku had missed only by about an inch.

Dark Suzaku cried out in rage since his spiritual link to the *katana* and to the material plane had been severed and so he began to fade away. Dark Suzaku’s spirit was being sent back to where it belonged - the netherworld.

Dark Suzaku had been defeated.

Kenmaru looked down at his broken sword blade in a mixture of shock and awe before he then fell forward, bile dripping out of his mouth as the Black Fire that was inside of his body began to consume his body and his organs...

Ranmaru rushed to his side and turned Kenmaru over, “Kenmaru!”

Dark Suzaku’s voice echoed through the air as he faded away. “You were a pathetic Master! You have failed me! And so I curse you with a slow and painful death! My Black Fire will consume all of your internal organs slowly - one by one! Your

heart will be saved for last since it was your heart that wavered in hesitation to kill Ranmaru when we would have had him - and it was in that exact moment that Ranmaru was able to attack us instead and destroy *me* and the sword, which has been my vessel in order to exist in this plane!"

Kenmaru cried out in pain and his body convulsed as one by one the Black Fire was suddenly consuming his organs.

"Kenmaru...you fool..." Ranmaru said in a choked voice. Once again there was nothing he could do to save someone he cared about. He was completely powerless...Ranmaru clenched his fists. He had learned that painful answer too - to another question he had had. What is true power? Kogarashi had said it was enough power to hold dominion over the entire world and be free. But Ranmaru had discovered that true power was merely having enough power to be able to protect those you cared about. And Ranmaru...had so much power and yet he still didn't have enough or rather still failed to possess the right kind of power to be able to save his brother. *True power is the power to protect those one cares for. I have great power and yet I still seem to be lacking this particular kind of power.*

Kenmaru looked up at Ranmaru in shock to see that he was crying. Ranmaru *didn't* cry. Not ever. His eyes widened dramatically upon seeing this. "Ranmaru...you're crying...*for me*? Despite everything I have done to you *and* the woman you love? You really do care about me then? Ha! I never could read you, you stoic bastard! But now I think I finally understand you...and now it's too late. I really have been such a fool. Forgive me, Ranmaru...all I ever wanted was for someone to love me...acknowledge me...I've been so blind! All along I did have someone...didn't I? Brother?" Kenmaru cried out in pain and began to cough up blood this time as yet another of his organs was consumed.

"Kenmaru! Dammit! I never was good with words..." Ranmaru shook his head and searched for something to say.

Kenmaru smirked, "Well, at least you've gotten a bit *louder*. Heh. And I think I know who's responsible for *that*." He looked over towards Kusanagi.

“Ranmaru! Kenmaru!” Kusanagi rushed up to them and watched as Kenmaru convulsed on the ground and cried out in pain while clawing at his chest as if he had deadly scarabs inside of his body that were eating his flesh from the inside out. “What’s wrong with him?” Kusanagi’s eyes widened in horror.

“The Black Fire - it’s consuming him.” Ranmaru informed her sadly.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Kusanagi gave Ranmaru a searching look.

Ranmaru shook his head.

The image of a beautiful golden and red plumed phoenix suddenly materialized in front of Kusanagi, Ranmaru and Kenmaru. “Kusanagi, you have the power to end Kenmaru’s suffering...with a kiss.” The phoenix spoke in a deep, musical and baritone voice. “My other half cursed Kenmaru with this painful death. But by telling you how to break the curse this shall at least prevent Kenmaru’s continued agony. In this way I hope to atone for the malice of my other half. For I too am Suzaku though I am light and Dark Suzaku is my shadow. When Dark Suzaku was destroyed I was reborn once more. I must go now. My soul no longer belongs here in this plane, but in the underworld. *Sayonara...goodbye warriors of Death.*”

A kiss? Kusanagi looked at Ranmaru questioningly, who nodded in return. Kusanagi looked down at the pitiful figure of a man that Kenmaru had become and whom Nagi had once wanted to save. “Kenmaru...” Nagi murmured before she brought her lips softly to his own while she then summoned her purifying spirit energy.

Nagi...help me to remember how to use the power that I need now...just for this moment...

Do not worry. I am right here beside you...as I always am. Together we shall set him free from his pain. Kusanagi’s inner voice informed her.

Kusanagi’s body began to glow with a pure white light and this light was then transferred from Kusanagi and into Kenmaru’s body through the kiss.

Kenmaru’s convulsions and agonized screams suddenly ceased and he now lay eerily still beneath Kusanagi.

Kusanagi pulled back. It was done.

Kenmaru looked up at Kusanagi, with a small sad smile on his face. "I just want you to know. I'm not an idiot. I knew you were faking...but even so, it was the happiest moment of my life, Kusanagi. Thank you."

"Kenmaru..." Kusanagi looked down at him in surprise.

Kagura had been watching and now saw that because Kenmaru had been purified his body was now slowly disappearing, turning into small specks of light that were quickly dispersing upwards towards the ceiling of the church.

"Kenmaru no!" Kagura ran over to his side, "Don't leave me alone! We're partners remember! Kenmaru!"

Kenmaru reached up to cup Kagura's rotting cheek, "Beautiful Kagura, be strong...never give up..." He said before his body suddenly broke apart and dispersed completely.

"NO! KENMARU!" Kagura shrieked and a single white camellia fell from her hair to land on the puddle of blood, which was all Kenmaru had left behind. The camellia quickly became dyed red by the blood. Kagura noticed this and picked up the red camellia and brought it to her nose and smelled it. It smelled like Kenmaru's sweet blood. "I always liked camellias...Kenmaru. You were wrong, you know, they do have a scent and a very beautiful one too."

Ranmaru and Kusanagi were looking at each other, lost in their own little world.

Kagura frowned when she noticed this. *Damn them.* Kagura's fingers clenched around the blood-red camellia in her hand. "It's not fair...it's just not fair. Why do they get to be happy together? No! I won't allow it! If I can't have Ranmaru then no one can!" Kagura stood up quickly and formed an energy whip in her hand. She then charged Ranmaru from behind. "AHHH!"

Ranmaru whose attention had solely been focused on Kusanagi never would have reacted fast enough to the attack if not for his battle instincts, which took him over as they sensed a threat coming at him from behind. In one fluid motion Ranmaru unsheathed Kuroki Ryu and jabbed the sword backwards-

Ranmaru then turned around to see whom he had stabbed through and his eyes widened in surprise to see that it was

Kagura.

There was a slight blush on her cheeks and a twisted smile formed on her face as she reached a hand out towards Ranmaru's face. "That's right Ranmaru darling...kill me...pierce me...again...and again..." She gasped as she gripped her hand around his sword and pulled it deeper into her body. "I am yours...if I can't have you...I refuse to go on living..." Her eyes were wide and there were tears of black blood streaming down her face.

Ranmaru just stared back at her coldly. *This* was the woman who had managed to break *him*? Inari's number one, Celestial War General, Ranmaru? His look turned to one of pity as he gazed upon Kagura as if seeing her for the first time. She was just a silly human woman with an unrequited love, but who had managed to blow things all out of proportion. Galactic proportions. A weak woman ruled by her emotions. "You little fool." He pulled back his sword and slashed it through the air, ridding it of her black blood before sheathing it at his belt. He then summoned his fox-fire so that it enveloped his hand. He then reached out and caressed her cheek one last time and of his own accord. "*Sayonara Kagura.*"

Kagura's expression turned to surprise. Ranmaru had reached out and touched her of his own accord, of his own free will, for the very first time. Ever. "Ranmaru...*sayonara*..." She sighed happily, content.

The fox-fire immediately leapt from his hand and began to consume Kagura's entire body almost instantly. Her body fell over as it was turning to ashes in seconds.

Now that Ranmaru had killed her he felt oddly...*liberated*. He realized how weak and pathetic Kagura had truly been. And to think he had been so afraid of *HER* all this time. Ha! He too had been a fool. "I too am a fool." Ranmaru admitted in a low whisper.

Kusanagi put a hand on his shoulder. "She was my sister. I failed to save her."

Ranmaru turned to face Kusanagi. "And I failed to save my brother. I make a lousy hero don't I? My hands are stained with the blood of countless innocents. And now my brother's blood and Kagura's blood stains my hands as well." Ranmaru

looked down at the mixture of black and red blood that was on his hands. “Surely, I am going to hell. My soul is without salvation, Kusanagi, I-”

Kusanagi cut him off. “Apparently I suck at saving people too. My hands are also stained with blood, Ranmaru. Don’t worry, I don’t want to try and save you like Nagi might have tried. Instead, I want to jump over the wall that’s separating me from hell and join you there!” Kusanagi declared seriously, a fierce expression on her face.

“Kusanagi...” There was slight awe in Ranmaru’s voice. “Kusanagi I-”

But he didn’t get a chance to finish speaking when Katsumi, Shinichi, Haruka, and Orihime all ran up to the couple and began to celebrate the defeat of Kenmaru and Kagura.

“You guys actually did it! Good job *komainu*!” Haruka joked as he thumped Ranmaru on the back.

“You guys were like totally awesome back there!” Katsumi gushed and was looking a bit starry-eyed.

Shinichi gave Ranmaru a thumbs up which to the shock of everyone there he actually returned.

“It’s all thanks to me really,” Orihime began, “If I hadn’t given Kusanagi that sword she would have been defeated.” Orihime began to nod knowingly to herself.

Kusanagi’s eye twitched in annoyance. *Orihime...!* Kusanagi then turned to make sure Ranmaru wasn’t watching her before she pulled out her notepad. She flipped it open to view her hit list and began to cross out all the remaining names.

HIT LIST:

1. ~~Leader of the Shiro Tsubaki Clan and CEO of TSUBAKI INC.~~
2. ~~The lightning *tengu yokai*, member of the H4.~~
3. ~~The *miko* witch~~
4. ~~Maka, the *Rokuro Kubi*, Succubus, member of the H4.~~
5. ~~Koga, Vampire, member of the H4.~~

She frowned as she finished crossing out the names. *Revenge can be bittersweet after all.* A whole lot had happened since she had first created this ‘hit list’ of hers and now she knew

the names and true identities of her once before shadowy enemies. *Kenmaru, Karas, Kagura, Maka and Koga...as well as Ryuugen the member of the H4 whom Ranmaru killed. All those who were trying to make my life a living hell are now dead...*

Ranmaru's attention turned to Kusanagi. "*Oujo-sama? Is something the matter?*"

Kusanagi quickly hid her notepad back into the folds of her dress and shook her head. A smile unwillingly formed on her lips as she met Ranmaru's eyes. "No. Nothing." *Not anymore.*

Ranmaru and Kusanagi looked at each other as their friends came between them. They would find the time they needed to say what still needed to be said when the time was right.

Well, as soon as they were able to find some time together *alone*, that is...

A trickle of sweat formed on Kusanagi's brow and she laughed. Ranmaru looked back at her and began to laugh as well. Their friends looked at them confusedly before joining in on their spontaneous laughter.

The camellia that had been dyed red in Kenmaru's blood slowly turned black due to Kagura's lingering touch upon it and then turned to ashes before it disappeared entirely.

EPILOG

Being nice is not one of the Ten Commandments

Kusanagi and Ranmaru traveled deep into mount Fuji to locate a sacred cave where Kimamura-san had advised Kusanagi to seal away the cursed Muramasa sword, Byakko. Kusanagi followed her grandfather's instructions and using special *o-fuda* that her grandfather had given her she had been able to seal the sword away successfully. Kusanagi sighed heavily as she looked around the dank cave that she and Ranmaru were currently inside of. She still didn't really understand why the cursed sword had to be sealed away literally in the middle of nowhere.

Unless, Kusanagi blinked, had her grandfather purposefully wanted her and Ranmaru to find some time alone together? *That wily old coot! Hmph!* But as Kusanagi looked at Ranmaru askance she found that she couldn't begrudge her grandfather too much.

Kusanagi let out a sigh of relief and wiped her hands together. "It's done."

"Let us return home then, *Oujo-sama*." Ranmaru said before turning to go, but Kusanagi suddenly reached out and boldly grabbed his wrist stopping him.

“Wait!” *Oh my god I can’t believe I just did that...*

Ranmaru turned to face her in surprise, “Yes, *Oujo-sama*? What is it?”

Kusanagi dropped his wrist, “I...” She began to fidget. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you. Well, first off, I think there’s something you need to know. All those years ago, you didn’t kill me Ranmaru.”

Ranmaru’s eyes widened and his heart stopped. *Uso...No way.*

“I was already dying...I used up the last of my life force to protect you from that Black Fire attack but...I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. Or to explain. That was my only regret. Not getting to say...*goodbye*.” Kusanagi looked up then and met Ranmaru’s gaze directly.

“*Oujo-sama...*” Ranmaru looked back at her while trying to get a reign on his emotions. Right then he wanted so much to reach out and bring Kusanagi into his arms.

Kusanagi looked away suddenly feeling awkward and scratched her cheek, “Well, that’s all I really wanted to say. And one more thing actually...” Kusanagi turned to face him, a steely look in her emerald green eyes. “Ranmaru...truth is...I love you.” *There! I actually said it! Yasha!*

“*Oujo-sama...*” Ranmaru’s voice was tinged with surprise and happiness. His mouth quirked up into a half-smirk. He had to tell her how he felt! “*Oujo-sama I-*”

But Kusanagi put a finger to his lips and shook her head. “No, wait, don’t say anything just yet-” She then began to chant a series of words in a low voice that Ranmaru could barely hear and that he realized were in an ancient language.

Ranmaru’s brow furrowed in confusion. “*Oujo-sama?*”

Kusanagi began to glow with a white light and then she reached her hands out to place them on Ranmaru’s Control Collar. She was met with resistance at first from an invisible barrier of some kind, but she grit her teeth and pressed her hands forward, past the barrier, and managed to wrap her hands around the collar while she continued to chant-

Kusanagi flinched as her hands met with the metal of the collar and her skin was burned painfully. The collar wasn’t about to relinquish its hold upon Ranmaru so easily.

When Ranmaru saw her flinch in pain his expression shifted to worry and he was about to push Kusanagi away.

However-

Kusanagi looked at him with a look that paralyzed him as she chanted the final words of the spell. She had to do this, free him...it was the only way she could atone for everything she had done to him.

“I release thee Ranmaru from thy bonds of servitude.” Kusanagi declared lastly and then she pulled the collar off of Ranmaru. It snapped open in two parts. Kusanagi dropped the collar onto the stone floor of the cave when the collar seemed to bite her. *Ow. Was that from the collar?* Kusanagi looked down at her finger to see that it was bleeding and then stuck her finger in her mouth to suck on it.

“And now you’re free, Ranmaru.” Kusanagi looked up at him then, giving him a tremulous smile. She wondered what would happen now. Now that Ranmaru was *truly* free. Now that he could act and speak freely. He really must hate and despise her - after *everything* she had put him through. She had been a total *bitch*.

But this was nothing less than she deserved...her life was now in Ranmaru’s hands...

Most likely, he would leave her. Kusanagi was sure of it. After everything he had suffered because of her...everything she had done to him...she was going to be left alone.

Plain and simple.

Ranmaru slowly approached her and Kusanagi closed her eyes awaiting her final judgment with her fists clenched nervously at her sides-

Ranmaru was looking at Kusanagi in stunned disbelief. Kusanagi, his *Oujo-sama* had confessed that she loved him, and not only that she had used her power as a *miko* to free him somehow! He couldn’t believe it. He wanted, no, needed to tell her how he felt. How much he loved her, but Ranmaru was never good with words and he was filled with so many conflicting emotions just then that he was unable to find the right words to

express how he was feeling. Suddenly, words simply weren't easy to come by. He had been struck speechless by Kusanagi's shy, adorable and cute love confession. *Aw shit.* Ranmaru inwardly moaned. *Talk about bad timing to suddenly lose my way with words.*

Well, what had Ryoga advised him - 'actions speak louder than words' right? Ranmaru stepped forward and cupped Kusanagi's cheek gently while he caressed her cheek lovingly with one of his calloused thumbs before leaning down and placing his lips chastely upon her own-

Kusanagi's eyes snapped open in shock! Ranmaru was kissing her? *Usa!* She gasped and Ranmaru used that opportunity to slide his tongue into her mouth, deepening their kiss while feeding from the forbidden sweetness of her mouth. She tasted like...vanilla. He kissed her so deeply and passionately that Kusanagi felt her legs turn to mush and she could no longer remain standing.

Ranmaru caught her however before she could fall and half-smirked as he looked down at her flushed form. He hoped that Kusanagi would understand him. How much he loved and treasured her. He had tried to put all of his emotions and what he was feeling into that one kiss.

Kusanagi looked up into Ranmaru's golden eyes with a slightly dazed expression on her face. Was she dreaming? Her eyes widened at the expression he was wearing. It was unlike any she had ever seen him wear before. It was just so...open. His eyes glittered as they gazed down upon her, swirling with real emotion. Kusanagi recognized the emotion in those golden depths and couldn't believe it. When she had been Nagi, Ranmaru had looked upon her the exact same way. Could it really be...love? It was the same look of hunger, lust, and love that Ranmaru had given Nagi over five hundred years ago. Ranmaru's smile broadened when he saw a blush blooming on Kusanagi's cheeks due to their closeness.

This was so unlike his usually loud Mistress. He had finally managed to quiet her and it had been by kissing her senseless - he would have to remember that one for future reference! Her expression was also oddly open and honest. Where was her mask? Her eyes too shone with a combination of

love, lust, and desire. Kusanagi's lips quirked into a warm smile but then Ranmaru saw a flash of sadness pass through Kusanagi's emerald green eyes and wondered what was wrong.

This was more than Kusanagi could have ever hoped for. Ranmaru cared about and maybe even loved her back. It was...enough. It was more than enough. And it was certainly worth the price that she was going to pay for having freed Ranmaru.

The Control Collar that had been lying motionless upon the cave floor suddenly began to move like liquid metal as it morphed and seemed to come alive. The two broken pieces merged together and the puddle of liquid metal began to glow with a dark sinister aura...

The puddle of silver liquid then began to morph into the form of a snake, it then rose up and opened its mouth hissing to reveal its long, deadly fangs.

Ranmaru heard its hiss and looked down in surprise. His eyes widened when he caught sight of the silver snake. Before Ranmaru could properly react the snake leapt up into the air and coiled itself around Kusanagi's neck!

Kusanagi cried out in pain as the Control Collar sunk its metal fangs into her neck, blood began to drip down Kusanagi's neck and over her collarbone in red rivulets.

"Kusanagi!" Ranmaru caught her in his arms when she would have fallen back. "What...?"

Kusanagi did not look surprised or afraid, but merely sad and wore an expression of acceptance. She looked up at Ranmaru with a slightly guilty look on her face as he searched her eyes for an answer to what was going on. She reached out to caress his cheek. "I knew this would happen...this is the price I must pay for freeing you, Ranmaru. Grandfather taught me the spell I needed to use in order to free you, but he warned me that he had sensed that Kagura had placed a dark curse on your Control Collar. He also warned me that the curse would probably be deadly for anyone who tried to free you but...I didn't care. I wanted to free you. It was the least I could do after everything I've done to you. I've been a total bitch..." She gasped in pain as the collar sunk its

teeth deeper into Kusanagi's neck.

Ranmaru could sense that the collar was draining her life force since Kusanagi's life force appeared to be getting weaker and weaker. It was like watching a brilliant flame slowly die down. That damned collar - it was sucking out her very soul!

Fear flashed in Ranmaru's golden eyes. "*Oujo-sama!*" He brought his hands up around the collar, which instantly tried to reject him and Ranmaru summoned his *yokai* power. "AHHH!" His red aura flared around him as he managed to grip the collar and then he began to try and break it. The collar, however, fought back and burned Ranmaru's hands mercilessly while needle-like, metal spikes suddenly emerged on the surface of the collar and pierced Ranmaru's hands as he tried to hold on.

Kusanagi saw the blood streaming down Ranmaru's wrists and arms, "No...Ranmaru....don't..." She said in a low voice.

But Ranmaru wasn't listening to her. *This can't be happening! No! Kusanagi loves me...and Nagi has forgiven me. We finally managed to find each other again only to be separated once more!* Ranmaru had to do something - had to save her. But his demonic power was having no effect upon the collar as it slowly continued to drain Kusanagi's life...

Dammit! Why was he so powerless when it came to saving someone's life? Why! Why was he only able to destroy rather than protect? "Dammit Inari...WHY!" Ranmaru roared up to the heavens.

"You called *Ranmaru~*" Came a sweet lilting voice. A ball of golden light seemed to descend within the cave from the stone ceiling, and the image of Inari unexpectedly materialized in front of Ranmaru – long, curly, coppery-colored hair waving wildly about her due to her pulsating aura, lavender-colored eyes shinning as she gazed upon him, a teasing, mischievous and almost child-like smile on her pink, pouty lips, and she was wearing her usual flowing, white *kimono* that was rippling all around her as she landed on the stone floor delicately.

It was Inari, Goddess of the Harvest.

She had descended.

Ranmaru blinked back at her in awe. "*Inari-sama.*"

Inari nodded. "*Sashiburidana!* It's been a while,

Ranmaru-*kun*. I see you're in a bit of a tight spot hmm?"

Ranmaru looked down at the dying figure of Kusanagi in his arms and quickly made up his mind. He looked back up at Inari, a fierce expression on his face. "Save her. I'll do anything, only please save her. Take my life instead of hers if you must."

Inari looked surprised and then thoughtful. She tapped her chin. "*Hmm~* and why do you wish to save this woman, Ranmaru? You know this isn't like you."

Ranmaru swallowed, his words seemed to have returned to him. "I love her."

Kusanagi gasped in a mixture of shock and pain as she overheard him.

Inari smiled, "Love is sacrifice Ranmaru. Are you willing to pay the price in order to save Kusanagi no matter what that price may be?"

Kusanagi struggled to object as Ranmaru nodded adamantly.

"So bit it." Inari's expression had suddenly turned serious. "Repeat the words of the spell after me." Inari directed him as she began to chant and Ranmaru obediently repeated her chanting word for word while still gripping onto the Control Collar.

The snake hissed and cried out when finally Ranmaru was able to pry it from Kusanagi's neck. The silver snake then leapt and wrapped itself around Ranmaru's neck before it returned back to being motionless and solid metal.

The Control Collar had returned to normal.

Kusanagi struggled to stand while gasping for breath, "Ranmaru! No!" She frantically burst out since she thought that the collar must be about to suck out *his* soul instead of hers.

Inari giggled. "Do not worry. His life is not in danger. The 'price' he had to pay was merely his 'freedom'. He has once again become your Spell-Collared *yokai* slave. This exchange maintains a balance, which must be preserved, you see. And if you are to ever lie with Ranmaru he will lie below." Inari informed Kusanagi teasingly with a wink, and seemingly an afterthought.

Lie below? Kusanagi turned bright red at this statement

once she realized what Inari was implying. After Kusanagi had recomposed herself a small frown formed on her face as she turned to the Goddess questioningly. “Is there really no way I can free him, Inari-*sama*?”

Inari shook her head sadly, “He is a prisoner of love. He used to be a demon god. This is his price for getting to be with the mortal woman he loves. This is what Ranmaru wants - what *he* has chosen. It was *his* choice.”

Kusanagi blinked. *His choice?* He had chosen...her?

Inari looked back and forth between the two of them, an amused expression on her face. “Well, I’ll just leave you two alone. I’m sure there’s a lot you two have to...*discuss*.” She purred the last word playfully. “Now take care, you two! I shall be watching over you both, *always~*” She chuckled before disappearing with a *pop*.

“Wait!” Kusanagi called out realizing that she was going to be all alone with Ranmaru...and now she knew that he loved her back. Things had suddenly gotten a whole lot more complicated - that was for sure. She turned to face him somewhat nervously and she couldn’t help but wonder *why* and *how*. It just didn’t seem possible that Ranmaru could love a bitch like *her*. Why would he have given up his freedom for *her*? “Ranmaru why? How can you possibly love me? I’ve been such a bitch...”

Ranmaru chuckled as he stepped forward to ruffle her hair affectionately, “You’re no bitch. I knew all along. I was able to see past your mask.”

Kusanagi blinked. *He knew...? But...how!*

“Instinct.” Ranmaru winked at her, answering her unspoken question. “Remember what you said about animals? They have a sixth sense about people. I knew the real you deep down - she was calling out to me for help. I heard her and responded.”

The real me? My inner voice...Nagi? He had heard her. Oh Ranmaru. Kusanagi’s eyes widened at this revelation but then her expression turned regretful as she remembered something. “I’m sorry I was unable to free you, Ranmaru. I guess...” She reached up to touch his collar with sad eyes. “You’re just going to have to remain my butler for a little while longer. Think you can put up with me?”

Ranmaru surprised Kusanagi by suddenly kneeling before her with one hand across his chest. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, *Oujo-sama*. That was my wish all along – to serve you, Master. Life has never before been so...interesting. Ever since I became your *Samurai* Butler. I don’t want you to change either. I love you just the way you are, even when you’re bitchy.”

“*Oi!*” Kusanagi exclaimed at his comment but then her expression softened. *Ranmaru wants to remain my Samurai Butler. But then...* “But...what now?” Kusanagi questioned nervously, wondering how the relationship between the two of them would change now.

“We take things one day at a time, *Oujo-sama*.” Ranmaru looked up at her, his golden eyes shinning, “I’ve already waited for you for five hundred years. I could wait an eternity for you if I had to. I love you.” He repeated liking the way the little phrase seemed to roll off his tongue.

Kusanagi turned bright red, “*Mou! Ranmaru no baka! Hentai!*” She swiftly bonked Ranmaru over the head. But then Kusanagi broke out into a smirk as she looked down at the handsome man kneeling before her, who smiled up at her in return.

She supposed that in the end he would always be her butler and she would be his bitch.

The bitch and the butler.

Heck, that kind of has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?

Yea right.

THE END

Questions? Feedback?

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