

DREAMLANDS



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To Russ,
because without his support,
I would never have gotten published.
I just wish that he had seen it happen.

CHAPTER 1

MASON

THE lower levels of Boylston Street were a charnel house. The blast doors to the secure underground section of the building had reopened on their own after slamming shut when something down there had set off the alarm a couple of hours ago. A truly freaky experience, if you asked me, even in my line of work. No one asked.

I went down there with my partner, Wolf Dieter, and a couple of the other Global International Trouble Consultant strike teams along with Jim Murphy, our fearless leader. Murphy looked like he should be an Irish cop in Victorian Boston, and he had all the prejudices they had too, from what I've found out over the years. It was part of the reason he didn't like me, because I was one of the "colored" people. The other part was because I had been in prison. Asshole.

We were all armed to the teeth, so I wasn't too worried about monsters. I was more worried about the blast doors slamming down again and not opening this time. They were made to hold in shit that I didn't want to think about. I was also worried about our pet hacker, Keno Inuzaka, who had been on the wrong side of the doors. I wasn't surprised when Wolf joined me in heading for Keno's room.

Wolf was my partner on a lot of Global International assignments. He was in his mid-twenties, a German national who was in Boston because of trouble back home. I didn't ask him about it, and he didn't tell me. He was a good guy, for an ex-cop. The cop still showed in his buzzed blond hair and his formal manner. He made a good impression when we met the clients. I never did, being an ex-con. For some reason the scars and tats put people off, along with my lack of tact.

Global International was a mercenary organization that was actually a cover for a quasi-governmental agency, called the "Trust" of all things, which hunted monsters, those things that went bump in the night or whenever they fucking felt like it. Not just those monsters you saw out of Hollywood like vampires and werewolves, but creatures that made those things look like gentle lambs.

We didn't always play by the rules, because the monsters didn't. Keno was one of the people we'd broken the rules for.

Keno had been with us for a little over four years, since we'd caught him with his hand in the cookie jar, figuratively speaking. We'd been told to waste him if he caused trouble or bring him back if he didn't. We ended up dragging back a fifteen-year-old Japanese college student who'd thought our database was part of a game site and hacked into it on a whim. It wasn't that our security sucked that much; it was that he was that good. He'd gone through our security like it hadn't been there. I found out later that Keno was some sort of brilliant computer genius who'd gotten a free ride at MIT because he was so smart.

After the first year, I was of the opinion that shooting him would have been better. Keno was a prisoner who never saw the sun and was never treated with anything vaguely resembling dignity. Since he'd been here, assholes had been dragging him out of his room during his off hours for whatever they wanted, mostly computer help or fixing a lab machine. Keno had been turned into after-hours support a few weeks after we brought him in. Not that Keno complained once he figured out what was going on; he just got quieter.

Lately, it had been kind of weird, the few times I had stumbled across it. Almost as soon as he got here, Keno figured out that

protesting his treatment wouldn't do any good. Wolf had protested recently, and it had backfired, getting Keno into more trouble. Wolf and I had been sent out to check out a lot of the Trust's American offices after that one to cool us off.

We'd just gotten back to this mess after being out of the city for three months. Nice fucking coming home party.

"I'm worried," Wolf said.

Murphy looked at the two of us. He was pissed because he thought we should be worrying about James Heiseg, the head of research here, and the other people who had been caught down here. People, in his opinion, who were the ones that counted, not a gook programmer who should be thankful he was alive—his words. I stopped Wolf from slugging him, even though I wanted to as well. Murphy looked shocked. I guess he didn't realize what Keno meant to Wolf or me. I felt responsible for the kid because I had gotten him into this mess; Wolf was about the only friend the kid had. Not too good for the head of security not to figure either of those things out.

We got down to C level and Keno's quarters without too much trouble. There was enough blood, guts, and body parts splattered around that level to make three horror movies, and we didn't see anyone left alive. There was a faint trail of gore leading to Keno's room from the main area, the offices, and labs, stuff that got tracked there more than someone getting killed there. I wasn't surprised to see that the place was broken up when we got to it. Not from a fight, but from someone's temper tantrum, it looked like. It was mostly Keno's books tossed around and the models he had built broken.

"By the numbers," I told Wolf, trying to calm him down. "No body parts here."

There had been enough of them scattered about in the main area. What had happened here hadn't been caused by the monsters. A human one, probably, because Heiseg was one of the ones who had been after Keno's unprotected ass, and it was for more than Excel help. But no one would believe me when I said that, not even Wolf.

Wolf knew Heiseg was a bastard, but he was a straight bastard. I wasn't going to be the one to tell him that rape was about power more than sex, because I didn't want the damned Boy Scout to know he couldn't protect Keno. I knew Keno was doing all right, because I had someone keeping tabs on him for me while I was gone, but I also knew it was only a matter of time before Keno wasn't going to be okay. My putting the word out about him being under my protection had kept the worst of the predators off him, but there was only so much I could do if I wasn't around.

“No blood,” Wolf said, relief coloring his voice. “He’s probably someplace else, safe.”

I checked the bathroom on the off chance he was hiding in there, and we went to explore the rest of the place. The monsters—Hákarl—were dead, torn apart by something else. Hákarl were fucking walking stomachs really, never stopped eating and weren't too picky about what was on the menu, even if it was each other, but I didn't think that was what had happened here. All that was here was the mess they'd left behind, mostly gnawed on techs with a couple of survivors. Not that they were of any use to us, because they were babbling wildly until the medics hit them with some happy juice. They shut up, and I was sure we weren't going to be getting anything useful out of them about what had happened when they woke up again. There also were the bits of Hákarl scattered about, and I had no idea what had taken them out. I didn't like that.

There was still no Keno, which was beginning to worry me. We found that asshole Heiseg, though. He was very dead, and I was kind of happy about that, because I never had liked the man for a lot of reasons besides what he was doing to Keno. He was half dressed, his pants falling off his hips and his shirt unbuttoned. I didn't like that. He also looked softer and more puddingish than usual with blood trickling from his eyes, mouth, ears, and nose.

“Check to see if he wasn't doing something odd,” I muttered to Goose, one of the medics. Goose had been here longer than me and Wolf. He had an air about him like he had seen it all and nothing surprised him anymore. My request seemed to surprise him.

“Huh?” he asked.

Wolf looked at Heiseg and nodded. “See if he was attacked.”

I shook my head. “See if the bastard raped anyone, was what I was thinking.”

Murphy was glaring at us for still worrying about Keno, and I saw a couple of sessions with the company’s head-shrinking psych in our future. Wolf scowled at Murphy, and we headed down to the server level, taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Keno might be hiding down there; it had been his favorite hiding place before we’d been sent offsite, but I was losing hope in finding him. But Keno wasn’t among the dead, so where was he?

“Where’s the *Junge*?” Wolf muttered, echoing my thoughts.

I glanced around. No body parts or bodies. No blood really, not like it was on the upper floors. It was all splatter, like a dog had shaken himself down here. Or several big dogs, from the mess on the walls. “He escaped?”

Wolf glared, knowing that was impossible. “I wish,” he finally admitted.

Wolf was the one who noticed that there seemed to have been more than a couple of monsters down here recently, someone who was wearing sandals and another someone who was barefoot. Both could be Keno, from the size of the prints. But who was the second person? An intruder? Another survivor? It wasn’t like we could get an accurate count on people with all the body parts scattered around.

We got into the server room, which was where all the tracks stopped, right at the door. It was eerie. I half expected to see a horde of the whatevers that had killed the Hákarl behind the door, and there was nothing, just all those machines just humming along happily like they had been working all evening. The fucking things had been off for hours and had turned themselves back on right before the blast doors opened. I didn’t know much about computers, but I knew they weren’t supposed to do that. Wolf and I stared at each other in confusion.

“I don’t think that Keno is here,” Wolf finally said after a few minutes of silence.

I thought about the last few years of the kid’s life; I thought about my time in prison. “And I think that it’s a good thing.”

“Mason?”

I was aware of the cameras that were probably recording every damning thing I was going to say and still didn’t care. “The kid didn’t see the sun or get treated right for as long as we’d had him. There were times that I think that it would have been better if we’d kacked the kid.”

“I know,” Wolf said quietly.

Wolf had spent a lot of time with Keno, watching movies and trying to be a friend to him because he spoke Japanese. I knew about three words in it and none of them polite. I’d have done it even with the language issue, but Keno was scared of me. He’d probably seen my prison record—double homicide and twenty years in a maximum security prison before I was “cleared” by the Trust in exchange for doing their dirty work—so I didn’t blame him for being wary around me. Let me just tell you that it wasn’t killing humans that got me in trouble. The people I supposedly killed had been monsters that just looked human, and those were the ones the authorities had been able to charge me with killing. I had been a suspect in couple more killings, but there hadn’t been enough evidence to charge me with those. All those killings had been monsters, passing as humans.

“We just got to think about where he might be,” I said. “Because he sure in hell isn’t here, and he didn’t walk past us on the way out. So where the fuck did Keno and those other monsters disappear to?”

CHAPTER 2

SAMOJIROU

I WAS practicing my sword *kata* when my lady returned with the Reavers, her devoted guards, darker than ink, man-sized with a blank mask for a face, the wings of a bat, and claws to rend their prey.

I cut one more dummy apart and sheathed my sword. I was aware of the rank smell of my own sweat and the way my *yukata*—a casual, cotton kimono—clung to me as she approached. My lady was as elegant and serene as always even though her pets were splattered with blood and other things. She looked tired, and I knew she had journeyed to the real world. Tamazusa had been gifted with the ability to sense and use gates to travel to other realms, a rare talent. It tired her, though, and she didn't do it often. She had been doing it more often lately, probably for some move in the Game she was plotting.

“Samojirou-sama, I have a present for you,” she purred.

I raised an eyebrow even as I bowed in greeting. “I am flattered that you thought of me, my lady.”

She laughed. It was practiced and empty, the laugh of a trained companion, which was what she had been in the real world. I have never seen the woman make an unpracticed gesture or word in all the

centuries I had known her. “I wish that you could have escorted me. The event was boring and the atmosphere dull.”

“I am sorry that you did not enjoy your outing,” I murmured.

I was content to be my lady Tamazusa’s loyal second, the moon to her sun, as she plotted and planned, scheming in the hate that consumed her to become a Lord in the Dreamlands, the lands where heroes and other beings lived after they died.

Tamazusa and I had been banished here, turned into demons—*oni*—by the treachery and weakness of a coward, Satomi Yoshizane. I had been greedy and disloyal to my lord Jin-yo and deserved my fate, but my lady had been an innocent. She lost that innocence in the hatred she felt when she had been killed unjustly. She cursed the one responsible, Satomi, and embraced the darkness to become an *oni* in the Dreamlands. Here she had become a personage to be feared, a consummate player in the Game of power that is a passion to those here.

I chose to retire to my studies, uninterested in such things. It seemed I lost my ambition when I died for a second time. I’ve been unable to leave the Dreamlands for some time now. It was a mild annoyance, even if I didn’t want to leave, since there was little in the real world that interested me. Tamazusa didn’t usually flaunt her freedom to do so to me. Something must have irked her to make her so careless of my feelings.

“I should have known that the man was common and a bad player,” she continued. “He lacked refinement and intelligence in our earlier dealings. The place was a bloody mess. It looked like a slaughterhouse.”

“Many are unable to entertain as well as you are,” I said with a smile.

To open a gate between the worlds, power was needed. Such power came from the sacrifice of an intelligent being, usually a human. Since my lady Tamazusa had been gifted so, she did not need to resort to that crude method. The practitioners of dark magics were often unskilled blunderers who had a tendency to butcher when a much tidier

sacrifice would do. It wasn't the amount of blood spattered about that raised the magic, but the death of the sacrifice.

Her Reavers looked like they had been fighting. That was interesting. Tamazusa generally didn't get involved in the petty squabbles of humans or other monsters.

"He also thought because he had a dangling piece of flesh between his legs that he was better than I," she snarled.

"You know that men have not changed over the centuries. There will always be the ones who think that because they are a man, they are better than you," I soothed her.

So *that* was what put her out of sorts, dealing with a man who didn't respect her intelligence or her skills. I had thought modern men were wiser than that. I also knew that she had probably changed his opinion of her skill with a demonstration, one he might not have survived, but that didn't matter to me. If the man was a fool, it was better that he didn't annoy the rest of the worlds with it.

"He was thinking with it," she told me ruefully. "I fear that your gift is a bit... bruised."

I looked at her with a puzzled frown on my face. She smiled indulgently at my confusion and clapped her hands. One of her Reavers pushed a bound boy toward me. I shook my head. Bruised was an understatement. He had been beaten badly and was streaked with blood, his dark hair hanging in rat-tails to his hips. He also was naked and limping, shivering uncontrollably, and had a blankness about him that showed he had been pushed to his limits. His left eye was swollen shut, and the same side of his face showed bruises from being slapped or having his mouth forced open. I started to make a comment, when I really looked at him.

He had power, magical and intoxicating, that called to me.

I studied him a few moments longer and then looked sharply at Tamazusa. If the boy recovered his wits, he would be a powerful magic user, a talent not common here. If he didn't recover, he would be merely a well of power to be dipped into often by those who could

manipulate his magic, such as my lady. He would be a tool to be enjoyed in other ways by me.

“You play with fire, my lady,” I said softly.

She smiled coyly. “You just see some of it.”

Tamazusa reached out and stroked his hair. The boy flinched. She moved his hair off his left shoulder, tracing a mark there with her fingernails, leaving faint scratches on his skin. My eyes widened when I saw it; the boy was marked with the sign of one of the *Hakkenshi*. That probably was the source of the magic in him.

The *Hakkenshi* were descendants of Satomi, the one who had caused our demonhood, the coward who couldn’t keep his word, even to his own family. His unjust killing of Tamazusa had caused her to utter a death curse, saying his descendants would be beasts because he had no honor. Those cursed were the children of his daughter Fuse, and they had been scattered across the Kanto region of Japan before they were born by magic to other families.

Satomi’s grandsons, the *Hakkenshi*, had been drawn to the man when they had reached manhood, to defend him against his enemies, of which I had been one. Their adventures had been legendary, filled with sorcery and heroics. Most of Satomi’s grandsons were now here in the Dreamlands. Satomi, fortunately, was not. I had fought and tormented Satomi and the *Hakkenshi* when I was still able to travel to the real world. Our hatred had carried on here, at least on the part of the *Hakkenshi*. I had tired of the hate after a while. Tamazusa focused hers on playing the Game.

“You are bold,” I commented.

She laughed. “They will say nothing.”

I stepped forward to claim him. Tamazusa laughed again, and the prisoner shivered harder. If they discovered it, the *Hakkenshi* would rage over the fact that I was in possession of one of their avatars. However, he was here now and mine.

“What is your name, boy?” I demanded.

“Keno. Inuzaka Keno,” he said hoarsely. I sensed that the boy had screamed himself out to sound like that. What had happened to him?

Then I realized what he had said. Keno had been the name of my lover, one of the *Hakkenshi*, since all of their family names had started with the kanji for dog—*Inu*—fulfilling my lady’s curse that they were to be born beasts. I had seduced Keno to corrupt him. I had fallen in love instead and lost him. Now I stared.

Tamazusa smiled back. “How could I ignore that?” she asked.

“I am deeply in your debt,” I said humbly.

I was. She had no use for such attachments or indulgences, but I, upon occasion, wanted companionship of an intimate nature. I also thought that she liked seeing me occupied in such a manner since ours had never been an intimate relationship. To give me my former lover’s avatar was something she knew would please me. That he was magical was a bonus.

“Just enjoy him,” she said. “The fool had no idea what he had. I killed him.”

I slowly reached out and touched the boy, expecting his shudder. I wasn’t insulted by it. Keno looked like a beaten dog. He was aware enough to understand our conversation and was expecting the worst from us.

“Come with me, and we will clean up,” I said gently.

He was still shivering and resigned to whatever insult I was going to offer him. I smelled more than blood on him and sensed the truth behind my lady’s words. Keno had been raped. I was stirred by anger I couldn’t explain. I didn’t know the boy; what did it matter to me what had happened to him? The power that filled him was what should have mattered, but knowing he had been hurt still filled me with an odd rage.

I guided him to the *onsen* to bathe and untied the ropes on him. “Wash,” I told him.

Keno obeyed wordlessly, cleaning himself thoroughly before slipping into the hot spring. I studied him out of the corner of my eye.

He was biddable, probably beddable, and under the bruises, beautiful. Not like his namesake, this Keno had the fragile beauty of the *sakura*—the cherry blossom. His ancestor had been elegant, possessing a sharp and wicked wit. He also had been a deadly warrior, skilled beyond belief. I had loved that Keno beyond reason, and he had banished me here to save me. Our punishment had been that he could not join me. Sometimes I wondered if that was not better, because there were times now that I didn't know if I had loved or hated the man.

We settled into the hot water, and Keno's shivering eventually stopped. He asked no questions, and that worried me. Too frightened? Too tired? Or knowing too well one of the reasons my lady had given him to me? I wasn't surprised that he didn't recognize me. I didn't know why I was angry that the boy was bruised and obviously abused, since he was not my lover, only a pale echo of him. I noticed that not all the bruises were new, so the fool had been abusing him for a while. Keno was also pale, as if he hadn't seen the sun in a while. Had he been ill?

We soaked quietly in the hot water for a while before I announced, "Enough. Back to my quarters."

Keno's shivering started again. I wondered what else had happened to him besides the obvious. He dried himself off and waited for my orders; I decided to test his control and his reactions. I went over and kissed him deeply.

Kissing was a Western custom Tamazusa had told me about. It was interesting. Keno yielded dutifully, letting me explore his mouth with my tongue. He was not unaware of the custom either, but he was letting me play with him like he was a doll. I caressed his body, my fingers straying toward a very intimate spot. He involuntarily made a small sound of pain when I touched his nether opening. I didn't enjoy that sound. I broke off our kiss and studied him. With his downcast eyes, he was the picture of submission... or fright.

"At this time, I doubt that I will be interested in more. You seemed to be injured," I explained. I was tempted to see how much more than kissing he would be interested in, but I knew that right now he was too frightened for anything more than kisses, if even that.

“I’m fine,” he whispered. “It doesn’t matter....”

Fright it was. The fool who had been Tamazusa’s pawn, if not others, most likely had abused him more than this one time. But there was something else there. Resignation and a dullness that spoke to me of long-term mistreatment colored his tone of voice. What had been happening to the boy?

While *Hakkenshi* were in the Dreamlands, still they had avatars in the real world, their descendants, one for each of Satomi’s eight grandsons in each generation. They had occasionally been called upon to repeat their ancestor’s heroism when Japan needed it.

While I never had seen my Keno in the Dreamlands, I was aware of the others. We ignored each other. Surprisingly enough, I had a civil relationship with their mother, Fuse. I knew that she protected her sons’ avatars with a fierceness that would surprise many who knew of her gentle nature. She would have protected Keno. Something had happened so that she couldn’t; that was going to be to my advantage now.

“Unlike that fool that my lady took you from, I have no taste for abuse,” I said harshly.

He shuddered at my tone of voice. “What do you have a taste for?” Keno whispered.

I smiled, trying to reassure him. “Pleasure. For both of us.”

He looked at me, shocked, before he dropped his eyes. Keno didn’t believe me. I bit back my anger because someone or ones had nearly ruined him. I had seen and caused enough pain in my existence to have no desire for it in my bed. But I might be able to use it to my advantage. Kindness from me after the abuse would bind him close to me. Tamazusa would be able to manipulate his power easily or have someone teach him how to use it for himself, if I desired.

I slipped into a clean *yukata* and handed one to Keno. He took it uncertainly and put it on. He wore it correctly, which I was relieved to see. The boy wasn’t a barbarian, at least. I had heard many complaints

from others here that the Nipponese people were becoming too Western and foreign. Keno wasn't one of those, apparently.

"Follow me," I said.

He was quiet, but I sensed he was studying his surroundings, even with his eyes obediently on the floor. He was an interesting mixture of fear and curiosity. I would enjoy seeing his reactions to discovering the world he was in now.

We passed by one of the maids, and I instructed her to bring us a meal. She nodded and sped off to the kitchen, eager to spread the gossip that I had a companion. The servants knew my lady and I weren't intimate, living as siblings rather than lovers. I have never been interested in women, preferring the joys of men.

We arrived at my apartment. Keno walked in after hesitating for a moment and seemed to be at a loss. He stood there dumbly, and I fought the urge to snap at him. How bad had his life been that he couldn't think without orders? All that power he had, and I could make it all mine. Did I want that? Or did I want a companion more than a doll?

"I fear that I have been rude," I said. "I have not given you my name. I am Samojirou Aboshi."

"What... what do you wish to do with me, Samojirou-san?" Keno asked me softly. He showed no recognition upon hearing my name. I shouldn't have hoped he would.

"You are an unexpected gift from my lady," I said with a slight smile. "I have not thought that far ahead."

Keno flinched. He was too docile, as if he had been a prisoner for a long time. Tamazusa would tell me, but I was reluctant to ask her. It would show that I hadn't been paying attention to her schemes as much as I should have. But since she was also a woman who kept her own counsel, I thought I amused her with my indifference to her plans. It was as if our roles had been reversed: I was the dutiful consort she returned to after her adventures, and I was the one to impress with her

stories and to comfort her on her setbacks, the rare times those happened.

“But food will be brought soon,” I said. “After that, you can rest and heal.”

“I’m fine,” he said, sounding panicked and frightened. “You don’t have—”

“But I choose to,” I said with a touch of steel in my voice. “And you are not ‘fine’, you are injured! Or have you been in pain for so long that you do not know any better?”

“Just... just get it over with,” he said tiredly.

“It?” I asked, confused.

“Hurt... hurting me,” he stuttered. “I’m just property. It—”

“What happened?” I demanded, though I was trying to sound gentle. I didn’t know why my heart ached to hear him so broken. It wasn’t as if I had one after I turned into an *oni*.

“It wasn’t a game,” he said simply.

I didn’t understand him, but the maids arrived with the food at that moment. We both stood there as they set the trays on the table. I gestured for them to leave, and we heard them giggling in the hallway as they scurried away. I rolled my eyes in annoyance. Keno looked tired and confused. I didn’t think he expected the maids to be such happy little things. Their kind always were. The maids are *kashin*, flower spirits, eager to serve and almost incapable of an angry thought.

“Please eat,” I ordered.

Keeping half an eye on me, he knelt at the table but didn’t touch anything until I started eating. It was a simple meal of rice and vegetables, but he devoured it eagerly. I wondered when he had last eaten, from the speed in which the food disappeared.

“Sleep now,” I said when he was through.

I got up and guided him to my bedroom. My futon had been laid out already. Keno stopped when he saw it, shivering a little.

“Was this the first time that you have been raped?” I asked bluntly. I didn’t think being delicate would work with him.

Keno flushed bright red and dropped his eyes to the floor. “He... Heiseg had been touching me for a while. Since... since he was sort of told that he could do anything that he wanted to me. It was weird. He... he has... had a girlfriend, and I thought that I was just imagining things, because who would want me?”

I refrained from asking the boy if he knew what a mirror was. Actually, Keno seemed to be older than he looked, but humans always looked young to me. I wondered if that was why he thought he was property, if he were too damaged to think on his own or believe in himself. Would I enjoy the challenge of fixing that damage? Or should I just take advantage of it? As I had said, Keno had been an unexpected gift. I would have to think about how I would mold him to my needs and pleasures.

“But tonight,” Keno continued. “He came into my room, and I didn’t know what was happening. There were monsters with him. He... he had them drag me out of my room for him. He smashed all my models.”

Keno sounded bewildered as he recalled what had happened. Idly I wondered what a model was.

“We went down to D level. There were more monsters there, eating the lab techs. Heiseg ra—hurt me. He hurt some of the techs while the monsters ate the men. The ones he hurt were all women. Then he hurt... hurt me again, hitting me and telling me that he should let the monsters eat me too. He was still shouting crazy things when that lady showed up. He started screaming, ’cause I think that he knew her and then... then he just seem to swell a bit and explode. Inside.”

“Ah...” I knew that spell. My lady Tamazusa was quite skilled with it, since it was one of the few that she knew, since it was something that as a lord of the Dreamlands she was able to wield. I had

no idea what a lab tech was, but I could see why Keno was in shock. He seemed unused to all violence, not only violence against himself.

“Lie down,” I coaxed. “Sleep. While I am interested in your body, I am in no hurry to claim it.”

Keno obediently curled on my futon, making himself as small as possible. I stared at him thoughtfully before fetching a scroll to read. I would have to treat him gently, which wouldn’t be a chore, with whatever plan I chose. The boy was exquisite, and fortunately, he didn’t remind me of his namesake, which might have influenced the decision I made.

KENO

I WOKE up to my captor staring at me thoughtfully, almost in the same position he had been in when I fell asleep. It was the same way that McGann used to look at me when I first woke up in Boylston Street. McGann was an executive with the people who had held me prisoner and the person who controlled my life, such as it was. I had to ask her for anything I needed, from a toothbrush to books. She was also the one who gave me all my orders, from hacking into someone else’s system and stealing information to helping researchers with setting up a computer—basically anything the Trust wanted me to do. She was the first person I saw when I woke up after I had been kidnapped from my dorm room. McGann was the one who told me that the rest of the world thought I was dead. I didn’t exactly hate her, but I was afraid of her and knew that I depended on her for almost everything in my life. I hated that.

Samojirou looking at me in the same calculating manner frightened me even more than she had. I knew McGann hadn’t been interested in doing *that* to me, and he was, from the kisses and touches last night.

I hurt in places I hadn't thought possible. I shifted and had trouble biting back the low moan of pain. I didn't want to move ever again.

"Do you want to see the healer?" Samojirou asked.

"I'm fine," I insisted.

I wasn't, but I hadn't seen a doctor in a while, not since the Trust got me. Heiseg had raped me, but there wasn't anything I could do about that. I couldn't forget the way he sounded when it happened or the searing pain I felt when he... when he did *that* to me. And I was now the property of a man who wanted to do the same thing. And I didn't know where I was or why the name Samojirou Aboshi sounded familiar to me.

I wondered if I could find a knife and just end it all.

"I do not think so," Samojirou said with a frown.

"Just get it over with," I muttered. For a moment I thought that I'd spoken my last thought aloud, but it seemed Samojirou was just commenting upon my condition. I never wanted to be noticed or thought of as a bother, because that might lead to McGann or her superiors deciding I wasn't worth their time and getting rid of me permanently. I was surprised when Samojirou didn't hit me for being rude to him, muttering like that. Most everyone would have hit me for that comment.

"The maids will be bringing breakfast soon," he said. "I suppose that there is no harm in letting you follow me about for today. Do you practice the art of the sword?"

I curled up smaller, trying to ignore the pain. "I used to."

Samojirou smiled. "Then we can start on your training after breakfast." He hesitated. "I must ask. Do you feel that there is an injury? Are you bleeding?"

I blushed when I realized what he was asking. I didn't feel anything odd since he let me take a bath, but it wasn't like I had a lot of experience in this. I was scared that I was going to have too much

experience with it in the future. “I don’t think so. But... um... how can you tell?”

“After breakfast, we will visit the healer,” Samojirou said smoothly, not bothering to answer my question. “Tan’yu-san will be delighted with the company. I would like him to check on your eye also. Then I will go to the samurai’s practice grounds with you.”

I nodded, and we waited for breakfast in what I thought was a strained silence. I studied him the way he had been studying me, even if I kept my eyes on the floor. I had learned early at the Trust that people got mad if I looked them in the eyes.

Samojirou was tall and slender. He reminded me of a snake, from the way he moved and from what I had seen in the bath last night. I hadn’t been trying to look there either, but we were both naked, so it was kind of hard not to look. Or at least *look* look, as in checking-out looking. Mason had explained the difference to me once.

Samojirou’s hair was shorter than mine, falling to just below the middle of his back, and it was dark brown rather than black. I guess people would have thought he was attractive. The scary lady had been beautiful too. Tall, slender, and elegantly dressed in a very nice kimono, she reminded me of the geisha who wandered around Tokyo, not that there were many of them anymore. Both she and Samojirou were very traditionally Japanese, very sophisticated, and I felt like a country bumpkin next to them. I had been teased in school because my family was very traditional, but now I felt alien, Western, with these two.

It didn’t take long for food to be delivered. A couple of giggly girls dropped off a traditional Japanese breakfast: miso soup, rice, tea, and assorted fruits, vegetables, and fish. Samojirou’s tray had a note on it. He read it with a faint smile. I wondered what exactly his relationship with the lady was. He was impressive and made me nervous. She was scary, and I was relieved she hadn’t wanted to keep me, even if I had to do *that* with Samojirou. She definitely reminded me of McGann with the confidence and power that I saw in her, though I doubted McGann could kill someone with a thought.

I wondered where I was. The place had looked odd from what little I could remember, lush flowers and forest roads, nothing at all like the Boston I remembered from before my imprisonment. This place was rural and underdeveloped. There hadn't been a sun out when we arrived, and it looked like there wasn't one now. From what I could tell, it was like a weird twilight, no sun. But I hadn't seen the sun in years, and I might have forgotten what it looked like.

I was surprisingly hungry, and I ate my breakfast quickly, not eating the fish. I'm a vegetarian, which I never told the Trust, because I hadn't wanted to seem weird or make them think I was too much trouble. It led to a lot of missed meals, but it kept me from being noticed. Samojirou finished his breakfast at a slower pace.

"Were you not fed by your captors before?" he asked.

I looked up from my tray. How had he known I had been a prisoner before? I hadn't said anything, but there might have been something in that note. Or the scary lady could have told him something when I was asleep.

"I am not a seer," he said with a smile, seeing my reaction to his question. "But you are so docile, I thought that it might explain how you are acting. Also there was the small matter of the injuries that idiot inflicted upon you. Not all of them are recent."

"Years," I whispered, not bothering to lie. It didn't matter, really. "I... I had made a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?" Samojirou asked.

I hesitated, bowing my head. "It wasn't a game, Samojirou-sama."

I thought I had told him something like this last night. I remember food and getting cleaned up, but everything else was a blur. But I had no doubt that Samojirou was a lord wherever this place was. *San*—mister—was an acceptable form of address in Japan, but *sama*—lord—seemed to fit much better.

"You mentioned that before," he said softly. "I do not understand."

“I thought that their servers—it’s a place called the Trust—were a game site, and I hacked into them,” I said. “I was caught, and they took me back to their headquarters, and I haven’t left there for years. They wanted me to hack into other databases and to protect theirs. The rest of the world thinks that I’m dead. My parents....”

Samojirou looked confused. I knew that we were speaking the same language, Japanese, even if his had an old-fashioned sound to it, like he was my grandfather or something. He didn’t look any older than Wolf did, his late twenties. The scary lady looked like she was my age. But both of them felt older, for some reason, and not just because of the dialect of Japanese they were speaking.

Samojirou didn’t know what I was talking about. He didn’t show it, but I knew he didn’t understand. Not because he was stupid, but because he hadn’t heard of such things, telephones or servers or video games, which was almost impossible in this day and age. There was also something odd about the maids, now that I thought about it. It wasn’t anything that I could name, just a feeling that they didn’t look right.

“That explains much,” he murmured.

“A server is like....” I didn’t know how to explain this to someone who didn’t have the basic concepts. I realized that this place didn’t have electricity or running water. It was like I had stepped back in time to the Tokugawa era, from what I had seen. I didn’t remember how I had gotten here, because one moment I was being led to the server room by the scary lady and her Reavers, monsters I knew about from working on Heiseg’s reports, and then we were all here. Wherever here was. It didn’t seem any better than Boylston Street, because I was still a prisoner and this Samojirou person wanted me like Heiseg had. I shuddered at the thought.

“Does it matter?” Samojirou asked after I fell silent. He looked concerned for a moment but then smiled. “If you are done, then we should seek out Tan’yu-san.”

“I’m done, Samojirou-sama,” I said. Why did it matter if I was done? I was his property, and he could do whatever he wanted with me.

He got to his feet gracefully. I was less than graceful and ended up stumbling and falling. I was surprised when Samojirou managed to catch me, because he had been across the room a moment before. I still flinched at his touch.

“I should have known,” he murmured. “No matter. Keno, please trust me.”

“Do I have a choice, Samojirou-sama?” I asked softly.

I waited for the hit I deserved for questioning him. Most of the Trust personnel would have hit me for being that rude. The techs had a tendency to slap me—“to keep me in line” was the phrase they used. The strike teams just grabbed at me in odd places and called me a pretty boy and other names. Early in my captivity, I had taken to hiding down in the server room to avoid both groups. I had known for a while that what Heiseg did to me was going to happen, since my door didn’t lock. I just didn’t know that it would hurt so much.

“Not really,” he admitted ruefully.

Samojirou leaned down to kiss me again, and I let him. This kiss was just as demanding as the last one had been. It hurt a little because of the bruises on my face too. When he finished, Samojirou had an odd look on his face. He wasn’t happy about how I kissed, or maybe it was because I just let him kiss me. Well, it wasn’t like I really knew what I was doing. I hadn’t been interested in kissing anyone before the Trust grabbed me, and afterward, the one guy I had wanted to kiss acted like I was a kid.

I’d had a huge crush on Wolf Dieter for the last couple of years, which was stupid because he was the man who had dragged me out of my dorm room and taken away my life. But he was the only one who really talked to me, since he spent time with me in either the cafeteria or my room when he didn’t have to. I knew that it was stupid to have a crush on Wolf when I knew he was straight, but I was pathetic enough to have the hots for the man who had imprisoned me. I thought part of it might have been that I wanted Wolf to be my first, no matter what happened afterward. It didn’t happen though, and now I was the captive of a scary man who was trying to be nice to me.

CHAPTER 3

SAMOJIROU

TAN'YU shook his head and started to examine Keno when I introduced him to the healer. I let them have the privacy they needed for this and retired to the garden outside Tan'yu's rooms to think. Keno was an odd mixture of submission and cleverness. I knew he was still confused about what was happening to him, but he also was studying me and this place despite all his downcast looks and subdued manner. The world he had come from was so different than this one.

From what my lady Tamazusa had said, his world ran on electricity, the power of lightening harnessed. He was noticing there was nothing like that here. The Dreamlands are a simpler place because of the magic they contain, which is at odds with modern technology. It takes a while for the new ones to adjust to this. My lady and I live in the traditional manner of our time in natural surroundings with servants and the sprawling gardens we enjoyed.

Thinking of Tamazusa brought her to me, and I spied her crossing the garden, walking toward me. She smiled and shook her head when she was by my side. "I should have known that you would care for him gently."

I smiled. "I fear that this was not the first time that he had been 'bruised' in such a manner, so I wanted to have Tan'yu-san examine him."

Her eyes darkened. "I had hoped that... no matter. How is he?"

I shrugged. "Frightened. Confused. And docile."

"He must taste as sweet as he looks," she teased.

"I must thank you for telling me of that odd custom of kissing," I said.

"And knowing you, you have not gone beyond that," she half scolded me. "He is a gift. Enjoy him."

"When it will be enjoyable for him also," I reminded her. "I have no taste for pain."

Her eyes darkened. "I wish that you had been my patron earlier."

We looked up when we heard the *shoji* door to Tan'yu's rooms slide open. Tan'yu caught sight of the two of us and immediately knelt. Keno was slightly slower, puzzled about what he had to do, but he paid his respects to Tamazusa in the same manner.

"And how is Samojirou-sama's companion?" she asked.

"Not as damaged as was thought, Tamazusa-sama," Tan'yu said. "He will heal soon." I noticed Keno was bright red, embarrassed by this.

Tamazusa walked over and lifted Keno's chin gently. "He is beautiful. So delicate. One would almost think that he was a woman."

I laughed. "You know that I enjoy such beauty."

I liked pretty young men, not the ones who had over-muscled themselves as fighters. Keno would never be like that, since he was boyish, even with his haunted eyes. I prized androgyny in my companions. I thought I might dress Keno as a woman when I showed him off to the society here. It would also hide who he was from Fuse and her sons.

“One would think that he should be called Sakura-chan rather than Keno-chan,” Tamazusa said thoughtfully.

“In certain situations, that might be true,” I agreed.

I knew what she was hinting at. It wouldn't do for Fuse's informants to know too soon that I had this prize. We all spied on one another, playing a Game with complicated rules, and to an outsider, incomprehensible ones, having to do with honor and pride. But such things happened when one was almost immortal. We could be killed by violence or accident, but *oni* were almost indestructible. While I was not an active participant in the Game, Tamazusa was. I knew that Fuse was also, with her sons.

Keno looked adorably confused over the conversation. I would explain it to him later, but I sensed he was not one for schemes and plots or other kinds of deceptions. He also needed to be tutored in the protocol for my lady's court. Lessons, many of them, I saw in his future, besides ones with a katana. I had decided during the night that I wanted a companion more than a doll. Keno seemed to be clever, beautiful, and someone I wanted to explore. It might have been because he was my lover's avatar, but it also might have been because of himself. I knew this wasn't the Keno I had fallen in love with, but I did want to see if I could love him too.

“Such innocence!” she exclaimed, letting go of his chin.

I laughed again. “He has been sheltered to a certain extent, but I doubt if he considers himself an innocent.”

Keno didn't seem to mind that we were talking about him. The note Tamazusa had sent with my breakfast informed me that Keno had been a prisoner for a number of years, kept captive by an odd organization that hunted our kind, taking care of their machines, as he had said earlier. She didn't tell me how she had come in contact with the one called Heiseg. I didn't care, nor did I care about how messily he had died. In my mind, it had been too quick. He had been betraying his own kind. Hypocritical of me to think so, but I had learned loyalty over the intervening centuries.

Tamazusa looked at me thoughtfully. I could see that she thought I was besotted with the boy. I wasn't; however, he *was* someone I could mold for my own pleasures. Keno could become an entertaining companion with the correct education.

"If I may take my leave of you, my lady?" I asked Tamazusa.

She nodded, and I gestured for Keno to follow me. He froze, wondering what he was supposed to do.

"Bow low again, boy, and follow your master," Tan'yu hissed.

Keno clumsily did so and scurried after me as I strode out of the gardens.

"And what did Tan'yu-san tell you?" I asked when we were walking toward the practice ground.

"That... that I was just... um... slightly torn, no need for stitches," Keno stuttered. "You—I'm just repeating what he told me—you shouldn't have sex with me for a couple of days."

"Probably longer than that," I said, considering the distaste he had shown for intimacy. "But for now, I wish to test your skill level with the sword."

"It's been a while," Keno said, "and I didn't do a lot of working out before—"

"Do you want to know where you are now?" I asked him.

Keno shook his head. He was afraid to ask, afraid to act like he had a right to such basic information.

I wanted to curse again the ones who had abused him but kept my tone disinterested and calm. I didn't want to frighten him again. "You are in the Dreamlands," I said. "The place where *oni* and other magical beings live. I am an *oni*."

Telling Keno of my true nature might frighten him, but I felt I should be honest with him. The boy wasn't a fool; he knew this place was different from where he had been.

He stopped. “That’s... Heiseg was doing research on that. I... I thought that it was just craziness.”

“As you can see, it is not,” I said.

So that was how my lady knew the fool. The man had meddled in things he didn’t understand, magic and power beyond his ability. It didn’t matter now, because the fool was dead. He deserved his fate, because of the rudeness to my lady and the betrayal of his own people. I have no doubt, hearing about the damage from Keno, that the man enjoyed hurting those who had been working for him.

“It... it seems like a nice place,” Keno said after a few moments. He was trailing behind me, uncertain about where he should be. I thought that would be a problem with the boy for a while. It was something those idiots had caused, imprisoning him the way they had.

“I like it,” I said.

I did. I just wished I had the option of leaving.

We arrived at the practice grounds for the samurai. Keno shrunk toward me when he realized the place was full of men. I was sure that was because of where he had been. The others who had been abusing him had been the warriors of that place, from the note my lady had sent me.

I found Okita, the master at arms, and gestured to Keno. “I need to know the level of his skill, Okita-san.”

He smiled. “How do you know he had any training?”

“I asked him.”

“You know that if you have been lying, boy, that this is going to hurt,” Okita pointed out to Keno.

Keno nodded. “I know. A couple of years ago, I was decent. Now... I know that it’s going to hurt afterward. I’m in rotten shape, sensei.”

Okita roared with laughter. Keno's honesty was refreshing after the posturing he had to deal with from new recruits. "Call me Okita-san," he said.

"I do not need him to fight for my lady; I am just seeing if he can defend himself," I told Okita.

"And you will be sparring with him in another manner soon." Okita cheerfully leered. Keno flushed adorably even as he shivered in fear.

"That," I said coolly, "is none of your business."

Okita just grinned wider before bowing and walking off to check on the others practicing here.

KENO

I HURT. The master at arms, or whoever Okita was, had me work until I was too sore to move. Not that it was hard right now, because I still felt sore from the monsters and what Heiseg had done to me. Samojirou just watched. I was shaking at the end of the *kata* drill, and I wondered again if being here was better than Boylston Street.

Okita was tall with long hair pulled back loosely, wearing a dark green kimono and *hakama*. Most of the men who were here were big and scary, like most of the Trouble Consultants at the Trust. Also, some of them looked strange to me, like the maids. It might have been because they lived in the Dreamlands and were demons like Samojirou. I didn't know; I'd thought that Heiseg was insane when he wrote about this place. But I was here, and it was so different from Boylston Street. I was still scared, but Samojirou was being weirdly nice to me. But I also knew this place was a lot more formal. Murphy never expected me to bow to him. In fact, I knew there were a lot of times that he would have been happy if I had just faded away. He didn't like me. But here

there was bowing and manners I hadn't used for years and rules I didn't understand.

"The boy has some talent," Okita said. "But no stamina."

"I know," Samojirou said silkily. "And now I think that a soak will do him some good."

I wanted one. I felt icky. I had stopped hurting for a while and now I was again. Or I was hurting in a different way because of all the exercise. I used to run up and down the corridor outside my room and the stairs for exercise, but I was very willing to admit that I didn't get a lot.

"Follow me," Samojirou instructed.

I bowed to Okita and obeyed. I felt like a puppy trailing after a boy or an accessory for the man. What besides *that* did he want from me?

I washed up and settled into the tub with a sigh. I wasn't surprised to see Samojirou join me. He acted like a man who enjoyed the nice things in life. Right now, for me, the *onsen* was very nice. I knew that soaking in a hot tub of water was something I could become very addicted to. Samojirou hadn't done more than watch me, which was somewhat scary, but even naked, he didn't seem interested in more than this. Thankfully the tub was big enough that we weren't touching each other.

"I think that you should train with Okita-san," Samojirou said. "Along with some lessons to rectify your shocking lack of formal etiquette. More lessons to train you to be an amusing companion for me, including calligraphy, the tea ceremony, *ikebana*. I am certain you lack knowledge in those areas."

I nodded and tried not to feel like a bug. I didn't know any of those things.

Samojirou smiled. "I have been told that the men of today are shockingly ill-educated, grubbing after money like a merchant. Or like you, fascinated with one thing and neglecting others."

I didn't say anything. Samojirou frowned, and I felt my stomach turn over. What had I done to make him angry with me?

"It is allowed for you to answer me," he chided gently. "You would be a very boring companion if you did not talk to me."

"I will take any lessons that you choose to give me," I said quietly. "And... and I did kind of just deal with computers in high school. Math too, but I studied the sciences more than anything else."

What did he want from me? I was his fuck toy, just like the TCs and the techs called me. He didn't have to be nice to me. Or was he being nice now so he could be bad to me later? I didn't know what to do, and I hated that. As bad as it was back in Boylston Street, I knew what to expect, what to do. I knew who to avoid and who wouldn't bother me. Here I didn't know the rules. I wasn't too good with people to begin with; how could I understand someone who wasn't human?

"I think that you will enjoy them," he said. "I fear, however, that modern science is not something that works in the Dreamlands. Now get out of the tub, dry yourself off, and stretch out on my bed."

"But..." Tan'yu had said that he shouldn't! But it didn't matter; I was Samojirou's property. I started shaking and couldn't stop.

Samojirou frowned, confused. "I am not..." He paused, seeing me panic. "A massage, nothing more, since I am in no hurry to taste the joys of your body."

"Thank you," I whispered.

My throat felt tight and my mouth dry. Even if he said he didn't want to do *that* with me, he had scared me. It would be as easy for him to hold me down and hurt me as Heiseg had.

"You do enjoy men in this manner, do you not?" he demanded.

I bowed my head and didn't say anything. It didn't matter what I wanted. It never had after the night I was taken from my dorm room.

"I see that those fools harmed you more than I believed." Samojirou growled. "I did not believe that you would be willing, not

after the abuse. But if you are not a lover of men, I will not force you. I have a very good relationship with my lady, and we have never been intimate.”

“I have been attracted to men more than women,” I said slowly, knowing I had to tell him something. And that was kind of true. “But it is not like I have talked to many people in the last few years.”

Samojirou smiled. “That is a good answer! I will not punish you for being honest.”

I didn’t believe him. He frowned again, and I scrambled to follow his orders. I was on his futon soon after with a towel underneath me. I didn’t relax as he started to work on my hands and arms, moving down my body. The oil warmed to my skin and smelled spicy. I didn’t calm down until he started on my feet, when I finally realized he was telling me the truth and wasn’t going to do anything with me. It felt good, and by then I was half asleep. Samojirou had hummed as he worked, which reassured me.

“You can sleep now,” he murmured.

I made some sort of noise, I thought. I was sleepy, and it wasn’t hard to follow that order. I didn’t mind missing lunch to get some rest when I felt this good.

SAMOJIROU

I DIDN’T miss that Keno took a while to relax under my hands. As tempting as it was, I refrained from making his massage more intimate, even though I wanted him. One wrong touch and I knew that all my hard work would be wasted, since he would tense up again. I let him sleep as I went off to arrange for his tutors. I knew he would follow any order I gave him; he was that cowed. I just had to make those orders agreeable so that he would trust me and regain his spirit.

He was still asleep when I came back a few hours later. I smiled at the sight. Tan'yu had warned me that he would sleep a lot for the next few days as his body healed itself. He had also warned me that Keno seemed ignorant of his own body or pleasure, from some of the answers he had gotten to his questions. I wasn't surprised to hear that.

Yukiko, one of the maids, delivered the midday meal to us. She giggled at the sight of Keno asleep as she set down her tray. I was glad to see it was a cold lunch that would keep. I wasn't going to wake him up unless I had to.

"You should join him, master," she whispered. "He looks lonely."

I frowned, and she scurried away with a smile. I shrugged, stripped myself of my kimono, and curled around Keno. He woke up, frightened, but calmed down when all I did was hold him. He smelled wonderful, and I slowly ran my hand through his hair. It was like silk, and I played with it as we lay there.

"Samojirou-sama?" he asked huskily.

"Just resting a bit," I said. "This is enjoyable to me also. It is not always about sex."

"Oh."

He was naked, and I was tempted. However, I knew that he wouldn't enjoy it, so I resisted the urge to play with him and coax him into pleasure. We just lay there until I heard his stomach growl. I laughed and kissed the top of his head. "Our midday meal is here. Do you want to eat? I have much to tell you, and you have been sleeping for several hours."

"I'm sorry," Keno whispered.

"Tan'yu-san warned me that you would be sleeping a lot," I said.

"He mentioned that, Samojirou-sama."

"Tan'yu-san scolded me for letting you spar with Okita-san," I said.

He didn't think he was important enough to tell me that Tan'yu had wanted him to rest since I wanted him to spar. If I had ordered him on a forced march, he would have done so even if he were half dead. I felt him blush at my comment. I thought he had trouble considering anyone scolding me.

"All he talked about was... ah... sex," Keno murmured. "And that I needed to heal and sleep."

"He is not angry with you," I assured him, since he sounded frightened. I was going have to remember to treat him very gently. "And he had agreed to tutor you on the etiquette of my lady's court."

"Thank you, Samojirou-sama," Keno murmured.

I smiled and kissed the back of his head. "You are not stupid. It is just that the real world does not prize manners the way that we do here. I fear that we are a bit old-fashioned here. And you do not have to address me as lord when we are alone."

"Thank you," he repeated.

"Let us eat, and I will tell you more about the lessons that I have arranged for you," I said. I liked the way he smelled, and I wanted more than a chaste kiss. I pressed lightly into him, letting him feel my desire for a moment before I rolled away from him, and Keno shivered, but I knew it wasn't from desire. "I just wanted to show you that I have some self control."

"You..."

I sat up. "I think that the worst that I will do now will be to make you eat naked."

Keno blushed as he sat up, rubbing his eyes. He knew I was wearing only a *fundoshi*—a traditional cotton loincloth. I stood up and put out a hand to help him up. Keno stared at it for a second before accepting it; I tried not to feel pleased at this small victory. I led him into the other room, where the food was.

“Keno, I have arranged for more than Tan’yu-san to tutor you,” I said. “There are any number of my lady’s people who are willing to teach you. But....”

Keno’s face turned up to mine. He didn’t say anything, and I noticed how he kept his eyes on the floor, not meeting my gaze. “Due to a whim of mine, you are to be called Sakura when you are with them or when we are in public.”

He didn’t say anything, only nodding.

“Keno?”

He shivered. I had frightened him, but I wanted an answer. He looked up, eyes dull, as he remembered something unpleasant. “When... when they took me, later... I was told that my papers had the name Watanabe Shiro on them. Not that I ever saw them.”

I bit back my anger at the fact that those people had stolen his life and his name. “Names have power,” I explained. “That is why you will be Sakura.”

Keno frowned and nodded. “But like now, you’re going to call me Keno? Just when—”

I laughed. “When I escort you as my companion to any number of entertainments or with any of my lady’s people, you will be called Sakura-chan. And it is then that you will address me as Samojirou-sama. Right now, you don’t have to be that formal.”

“Oh.”

Keno seemed overwhelmed by that thought, and I motioned for him to sit down. “Eat. I assure you that the pickles are delicious.”

“Thank you,” he whispered.

I didn’t understand why; it was but a simple meal of fruits and vegetables. Not all of them were available in the real world, not that I knew of. Or they simply had not been in Japan when I was alive. I studied him while we ate; Keno seemed unaware of my scrutiny, eating slowly. I realized his slenderness was more like starvation, because he

was too thin. That made me furious, but I tried to control my anger because I didn't want to frighten him.

“Did they not feed you?” I demanded.

He winced at my tone of voice and shook his head. “There were times it was better that I didn't go to the cafeteria. Then there were the times that it was closed, or they were serving something that I couldn't eat because it had meat in it. I drank a lot of coffee.”

“You do not eat meat?” I suddenly remembered the untouched fish on his plate. “I will tell the kitchens that, so they know when they make a tray for you. Also, there are enough around here who have also made that choice that you will have something to eat at my lady's entertainments.”

Keno protested. “You don't have to....”

I leaned over and touched his ribs, avoiding the bruises. He still flinched. “This shows me that I should.”

He blushed. “Thank you for the massage. I feel less sore.”

I was pleased that he accepted my touch. I also didn't miss the fact that he dropped his protests about his diet. I had a feeling he was too afraid to argue with me. I shouldn't have been surprised since he had been a prisoner for years.

“I want to warn you that my lady's samurai will be less well-behaved when I am not there,” I said. I didn't miss the color draining from his face. What did he expect them to do? “You will be subjected to all sorts of advice on how to ‘handle’ me. Please do not be too disturbed about it.”

“Samojirou-sama?” Keno squeaked.

I didn't miss the formality he used. Keno was clearly too frightened or cowed not to address me in a formal manner. “If my lady ever took a companion, he or she would be teased in the same way. They are a rough lot. However, they will not hurt you.”

“I... I think that I understand,” he said slowly. “I thought, though—”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, hanging his head.

I knew what he was doing, submitting to me so I wouldn’t hurt him. I hoped I could coax out his true nature over time. I wasn’t still certain that he was interested in *nanshoku*—manlove—from the answer he had given me.

“You are allowed to ask questions,” I said gently.

“I thought that you and your lady were... um... together. Married,” he blurted out and cringed, waiting for a blow from me.

I watched him thoughtfully. He had no knowledge of who he was, who I was, or what had happened. I didn’t know if I was angry or sad about it.

“At one time, in the real world, she was my consort,” I said. “However, in this place, I seem to be hers. But we have never been involved in such a manner. She thinks of me as her older brother.”

Keno smiled. It was a small one, and I liked it. He was beautiful with that smile.

“You are amused by this?” I demanded. I shouldn’t have because he flinched at my tone of voice.

“I...”

“Keno, I am not angry,” I said. “Merely curious.”

“The Americans, well, they’d call you a house-husband,” Keno stuttered. “I just thought it was funny that you two had such a modern, American relationship. A lot of men would feel threatened by the fact that your lady is in what is considered the ‘man’s’ role. You... you’re proud of her.”

“I am trapped here; she is not,” I said simply.

I was saddened that she had lost her humanity when she was killed and banished to the Dreamlands. While watching Tamazusa extend her influence and power over the years had been fascinating, I thought it wasn't worth her sacrifice.

"I'm sorry," he said.

I looked at him. He truly was. Keno knew what it was like to be trapped in a place not of your own choosing. "I was banished here because I had failed to defeat those who were my enemies. That was after my lady had embraced the darkness, and I chose to reject my humanity. I... it was better than being destroyed. I am content here."

That was not the whole story, but I knew he wouldn't be able to understand what had been done to us. Keno was innocent of the bloodshed that had soaked the *Sengoku Jidai*—the battles fought for land and power with magic and armies. His ancestor had been part of it, but the modern age seemed to be a gentler era.

"But you want to be able to walk out of the door without being shot," he said to himself.

"I do not think that would happen," I said wryly. "There is not a door for me to simply 'walk out of'."

Keno frowned. "I don't understand."

I laughed. "It would take years of study under the sorcerers who are here for you to do so. Just accept that it is something that you cannot control. I was trapped here because I lost to one who chose to banish me instead of killing me."

Keno frowned but nodded. I saw he was thinking about it as he finished his meal. I didn't underestimate his cleverness, and I knew he would try and puzzle out why I couldn't leave.

CHAPTER 4

KENO

TAMAZUSA'S estate was huge, as in the size of several city blocks. I explored it with Samojirou over a couple of days, since he wanted to show me around. While I had thought I was living in the Tokugawa era, I was wrong. No one talked about it, but I knew it was an older era than that, even if everything felt weird and off to me.

The buildings didn't have any kind of running water or electricity. There was a primitive bathroom system that was as clean as anything back on Earth—or as they called it here, “the real world.” There was one long building, which was one story tall and branched off in a couple directions like branches on a tree. It was the main house, where Tamazusa's and Samojirou's apartments were located, as well as all the public rooms. There were also a couple of smaller buildings that were U-shaped, where the samurai and the servants lived. All of those buildings had porches surrounding them that connected the wings and buildings to one another. Further in there were a couple of smaller buildings used for tea ceremonies and other things. As I said, the place was huge, and scattered between all the buildings there were a lot of styles of gardens, from tiny wild flower gardens to a huge one with a pond in it. The entire estate was surrounded by a three-meter-high thatch and white-washed plaster wall. I wondered what it was there to keep out.

The estate seemed bigger than the Imperial Park in Kyoto. It was so different for me, different from a small room in an underground office building. What was even more impressive to me was that Tamazusa also had a small town with a castle about eight kilometers away that she was in charge of and another estate in the capital.

There was an elegant simplicity to the life I was living now. Tamazusa and Samojirou lived traditionally and didn't like a lot of furniture and clutter. It wasn't that they didn't have a lot of things; it was that they weren't shown all at once. A nice vase, one scroll picture, and a *kojii* screen might be all that decorated a hall the size of a lecture hall at MIT. There were murals on the walls of the public rooms, but in their living quarters the walls were usually white or tan.

I was dressing in kimono and *yukata*, like I had when I was little. They were soft and comfortable, better than anything I had been wearing before. McGann usually dressed me in sweats and hoodies, things that were cheap and warm more than stylish, not that I cared. Now I was relearning to move in kimono and *hakama*—the loose pants a lot of the samurai wore around here.

My days were filled with lessons on calligraphy, flower arranging, incense mixing, literature, and the tea ceremony: all traditional Japanese pursuits, which was why they had sounded familiar when Samojirou told me what he wanted me to study.

I was busy from morning to night. I'd say dusk to dawn, but I never really saw the sun in this place. I was tired in the beginning and would just curl up on the futon at the end of the day. I didn't even stir when Samojirou joined me. Eventually I stopped wanting to scream when I woke up with him curled around me, thinking he wanted more than just to sleep with me. It was comforting in a weird way. I had been lonely before, and no one ever touched me except to hurt me. Heiseg didn't count with the not-hurting touching thing because he made me feel dirty even before he hurt me. Samojirou acting the same way made me feel safe, in a strange way. It might be because he never hurt me in the weeks we were together, even though we both knew he could just hold me down and do *that* to me.

I didn't see much of Samojirou. We had breakfast together, and he would stop by my lessons once in a while, but nothing more than that. I ate lunch and dinner alone or with the samurai. They teased me a lot and called me Samojirou's "Blossom," because to them, I was Sakura. But they didn't hit me, and they weren't mean to me, even if I didn't understand all the jokes they made.

In the evenings, sometimes we spent time sitting together, with Samojirou and Tamazusa asking me what the real world was like now. I learned they had been here for centuries, and that thought just overwhelmed me, causing me to spend a morning trying to understand being alive for that long. In Samojirou's case, being a prisoner for that long. I didn't think I could ever understand it.

Samojirou had his own routine, and I wasn't part of it, yet. I found out from the samurai that Samojirou was a scholar, and he spent a lot of time studying the classical literature of Japan and other cultures of the Dreamlands. I knew I was being trained to join his life as his companion, which was why I had to study everything I was. It didn't anger me as much as it should have, because I actually enjoyed my lessons.

I knew from Heiseg and Boylston Street that it could be worse. Samojirou kissed me a lot, and there was some—a lot—of touching, but he didn't hurt me. He talked to me and expected me to answer him. He didn't mind if I had opinions about something. There was something else going on that I didn't know about, but after the last four years, I wasn't questioning my good fortune. I had enough to eat and the illusion of freedom. I had learned not to want more than that.

I enjoyed working out with Okita and the rest of the samurai. They all seemed proud of me when I improved and started holding my own with them in practice bouts. And Samojirou was right, they were all filled with advice on how I should "handle" him. That caused me to blush a lot, so they teased me even more. But it wasn't mean teasing, they respected him and Tamazusa. It took me a while to understand that, because I didn't understand their humor.

In fact, in the beginning, I didn't understand what they were talking about most of the time. A lot of it was because of cultural

differences; in the beginning I'd never understood what the TCs were talking about most of the time either. Later.... I didn't want to know. I just couldn't understand joking about sex. I thought sex was painful and scary, so why would someone want to joke about it? But I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut, because I didn't want those people to know how ignorant I was about it.

So after training with the samurai, the rest of my day was usually filled with different lessons, like on manners and the arts. It was fun to learn about flowers and writing and literature, and I felt that all the new things I'd been learning would make my head burst, but it was good after just existing when the Trust had me.

One odd thing for me was the way Tamazusa's Reavers followed me around like bodyguards. I didn't know how many were around, but one or two were always near me when I left Samojirou's quarters. It freaked me out at first, but when the samurai didn't make a big deal about it, I started to ignore them. Samojirou was amused that they acted like that, so I wasn't worried about them, even though they were scary. I vaguely remembered them from that night in Boylston Street—as the “good” monsters, as weird as that sounds. They killed all the other monsters—the Hákarl—that were eating people. Tamazusa controlled the Reavers in some way, because they had obeyed her, from what little I remember.

When I felt stronger, after I had been here about a week, I started lessons on how to be a girl, or more precisely, a *tayuu*—a prostitute—since I was supposed to be one when I went someplace with Samojirou. I learned how to walk in the high *geta*—sandals—they wore and manage the heavy, colorful kimonos and the large obi that was part of their outfit. I also learned how to flirt, tease, and sound sexy to a man. In short, to be everything I was not but what Sakura would be.

I should have been angry about these lessons. But I couldn't be. Samojirou wanted this, and I bowed to his will. I never forgot that the man owned me, no matter how kind he was to me. I knew he could hurt me, and no one would say anything about it. He still scared me sometimes, but all he seemed to want was for me to be a good companion to him. I still didn't know if I liked men or women for *that*, but Samojirou seemed to be letting me make up my mind about it.

My tutor for being a *tayuu* was a tiny woman called Yoshinoko, who looked older than my grandmother. The maids were in awe of her, and she commanded the respect from even the roughest of Tamazusa's samurai. When she came to fetch me for my first lesson, I was in the practice yard. I was sweaty and out of breath, just having finished the morning's practice. I wondered if I could shrink into the ground as she studied me. Yoshinoko was dressed in a simple but elegant kimono. The only reason you could tell she wasn't a married woman was the way her obi was tied in front. She wasn't even wearing any makeup.

"You?" Yoshinoko asked. She sounded scandalized.

I blushed, and the rest of the men laughed. Yoshinoko slapped Okita on the arm with her fan. He stopped laughing, and so did the others.

I bowed to her. "It's the will of Samojirou-sama."

"You seem to have some manners, boy," she said, frowning a little. "Escort me back to my chambers."

I bowed and followed her out. I felt I was more of a trailing puppy than an escort. I felt like that a lot here. She studied me some more, including watching me wash and change into clean clothing. She continued to frown, and I wondered what I had done wrong when the silence stretched out uncomfortably.

"You will do," Yoshinoko finally said. She smiled. "In fact, I am going to enjoy this."

MASON

I GOT stuck listening to the ice bitch Romejinoff whine about the tragedy of that fat pig Heiseg's death. Anya Romejinoff had been his live-in piece of tail. She was tall and blonde with fine features and pale skin, a woman who walked and acted like she was a supermodel, even

though she had dual doctorates in something weird. She could have been a model, if the American public realized that women were supposed to have these things called hips and breasts. Romejinoff wasn't what you'd call fat. I'd call her—if it didn't sound so faggy—lush.

My problem with her was that she had been living with Wolf and fucking Heiseg before Wolf caught them at his place, in their bed. It nearly killed him. And now the bitch was crying on Wolf's shoulder, and he was letting her.

I was still worried about Keno but glad we couldn't find a sign of him. He hadn't been among any of the remains that had ended up in anonymous bags. We ID'd those bags by DNA. All the coffins had been closed-casket and sealed, filled with some sort of weight so that it seemed like there was a whole body in there.

Murphy was being an asshole and blaming Keno for whatever happened, because Keno had to be the mad genius who had summoned those things, since he was gone. Never mind that Heiseg had been the expert at weird shit. Never mind that the kid was so scared he wouldn't say "shit" if he had a mouthful. Wolf and Murphy were still arguing about it, and I was keeping my mouth shut. Murphy knew my opinion about what had happened. He also thought I should be on the back of the bus most of the time. I would have sworn Murphy hated monsters only slightly more than he did non-whites. Fucking asshole.

What stopped everyone's bitching was McGann walking into the room. The woman looked tired, and while I had had to put up with one prima donna, Romejinoff, McGann had a half dozen fuckin' stupid assholes demanding she pull a miracle out of her ass and find out what had happened. Those assholes were also known as Trustees, the ones who ran our merry band of monster killers.

The Trust was founded sometime after World War II when America and the rest of the world figured out that Hitler had been making deals with things that weren't human, monsters that lived in places humans couldn't, things that hated us and were not entirely of this world, pretty much the shit we now hunted full-time to keep the

rest of humanity safe. America had decided it was going to clean up those monsters along with the rest of the mess from the war.

Our “cover” was that we were a mercenary group, Global International, which actually paid most of the bills. Two-thirds of the guys on the payroll had no clue what we really did. If the public knew what the fuck we were doing, there would be a bigger stink than even I wanted to think about. It would make some of the shit that went down over cloning look like a fuckin’ tea party.

“I have the reports on the ten survivors,” McGann announced wearily.

“And?” Murphy asked.

I shrugged and went to get her a cup of coffee. Not that I usually gave a flying fuck about being nice, but Romejinoff had her claws into Wolf, and he was the gentleman of our partnership.

McGann flashed me a tired smile. She knew the score, since she also was one of the better telepaths the organization had—or at least one of the saner ones—besides being head honcho at Boylston Street and the local shrink for us. She didn’t have much of a life outside this place, but a lot of us didn’t.

She knew I was being nice because Wolf couldn’t be. She was slightly shorter than the ice bitch, a lighter blonde and skinnier. Someone that most of America thought a woman should look like—a clothes hanger—because her talent took a lot of energy. I thought she was hot, though, because she definitely had a better personality than the ice bitch. I wasn’t just a tit man like most people thought I was.

“While there are the usual psychiatric reports, the Trustees thought that this was serious enough that the telepaths at Waltham should do brain dives,” McGann said.

Waltham, our nuthouse, had their own ’paths who got stuck with these types of shitty jobs. They also were usually only a couple of baby steps from being *in* the nuthouse instead of working at it. While ’paths were rare, they also burned out fast because they couldn’t handle half the shit they picked up—their brains were like radios on loud all the

time around other human beings. You were good enough, though, you could turn down the noise and save your sanity. About one in ten thousand human beings, according to the gossip I heard, could be a 'path.

“And?” Romejinoff demanded.

“Yeah, how did the gook do it?” Murphy demanded.

Wolf's fists tightened at that comment. McGann glared at Murphy. Hell, I didn't know what she was pissed about. We all knew that Murphy was a racist, but she was one of the white folk, and he'd never say something like that about her. Or he might because she was a 'path. I hadn't been surprised to find out he didn't like them either. I wasn't too fond of them myself, but it wasn't something they could help, just like skin color.

“It wasn't Keno,” McGann said softly.

Wolf relaxed, and I felt a weight lifted off me. Not that I had thought he'd done it, but Murphy's opinion was a popular one; not the gook part, but that Keno was the bad guy because he had finally snapped, killed a shitload of people, and escaped. I wasn't going to be the one who pointed out such small details like the kid had never shown any backbone before this and that it was fucking hard to escape through two feet of ceramic-metal alloy blast doors. Gossips never liked those tiny details.

Romejinoff was looking at McGann. I noticed the bitch still looked damned good even if she had spent the last hour crying on Wolf's shoulder; or maybe she had been faking it to get closer to him. Romejinoff was many things, but stupid wasn't one of them. Wolf “comforting” her for her grief would get her closer to him and maybe back into his bed. She was also one of the reasons I had been hoping Wolf would finally realize that Keno had the hots for him and maybe do something about it. Fussing over the kid would have kept her off his radar.

“What happened?” Romejinoff asked, her voice quivering. “James—”

“While none of the survivors are too coherent, they have almost the same memories,” McGann said. “Keno is innocent in all of them. In fact,” she paused, “it seems that he was a victim also.”

“What happened?” Wolf demanded.

McGann at least had the brains and the balls to look guilty. That’s one of the things I liked about her: she could admit that she screwed up. “It seems that Heiseg took advantage of him.”

Wolf looked blank, trying to figure out the euphemism while Romejinoff looked pissed. Her English was better than his. Better than mine, in fact. “James would never!”

“It’s not about sex, sister,” I snarled. “It’s about power, and McGann and Murphy let it be known that they didn’t give a shit about Keno from the beginning.”

“Fuck off!” Murphy protested.

“Shut the fuck up,” I growled. “Kid spent most of the time hiding when he realized that. Techs always were pushing him around, and I know a couple of the TCs wanted to hear him squeal like a pig because he was so pretty, but they hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Not like Keno was going anyplace.”

“You don’t have to be so crude,” McGann murmured.

“Crude would be mentioning the fact that *James*,” I said, mimicking Romejinoff’s tone, “did more than Keno that night. He nailed all the techs who still had something for him to stick his cock into. All the women, at least, because the men were dinner for Hákarl, and after he fucked the girls, he let the Hákarl eat them.”

“Kairns!” McGann protested.

“Heiseg had traces of a lot of people on him that night,” I continued. “And enough crap in his system to do them all, plus assorted other drugs. The man was bugfuck insane with all the shit that was floating through his system.”

Romejinoff looked like she wanted to go through the floor. Wolf started rubbing her back as she started crying again. Murphy was pissed. “What about the monsters?” Murphy asked. “The Hákarl?”

There had been about three dozen of the damned things, torn apart either by each other, arguing about dinner, or by something else. By another kind of monster, from the tracks we found during clean up. They were probably the ones that had marched in from nowhere, the ones I was certain had Keno. Although he was probably safer with them than he had been here, even if they *were* monsters.

“They seemed to have been summoned by Heiseg,” McGann said. “Anya, I am so sorry to say this to you, but I don’t think that James was a well man. There are some anomalies on his psych reports that I was not told about. I think that the stress of his studies had gotten to him.”

“He was working longer hours,” Romejinoff said slowly. She looked embarrassed. “I thought that he was having an affair, but I didn’t want to confront him about it. But he would come home occasionally smelling of another woman’s perfume after working most of the night. I thought that....”

I was pretty sure she hadn’t wanted to lose her comfy bunk with the man. The ice bitch was smart, but she was also a whore. Romejinoff had an education and options, so I never understood her putting up with Heiseg, who was an asshole and a snob. Personally, I thought he was scum and that Romejinoff had been fucking Heiseg to get back at Wolf for something.

“Why didn’t you...?” Wolf trailed off.

Romejinoff just looked at him. I wanted to smack him. Even I knew that dishing dirt on your present fuck to your past one isn’t a good idea. Wolf looked confused, and McGann shook her head. He really was *that* nice a guy. I knew Romejinoff was hoping he would take her back. I was hoping she’d be shipped back to Russia.

“That isn’t something that most women want to talk about,” Murphy said.

I was surprised he was being that tactful, but he liked Wolf and realized that the guy wasn't too swift about dealing with women. Wolf thought they were ladies all the time. I *never* thought they were ladies. It saved me a lot of grief that way. "So what happened?" I asked when the silence stretched out uncomfortably. McGann looked a little uneasy. I stared at her, kind of confused. "I just told her that her man was nuts and fucked half the victims, so it can't get any worse," I pointed out.

McGann nodded after thinking about it for a second. "It seems that Heiseg was the one that opened a gate with some sort of ritual. He killed one of the lab assistants to do so. No one saw him do it, but they saw the results. Plus he was covered in blood before the Hákarl came. The gate was opened, and over three dozen Hákarl rushed in. Heiseg let them loose on his staff. He then took a couple with him and came back with Inuzaka. While the monsters were... the rapes began."

McGann looked uncomfortable. I didn't have the heart to tell her that with Keno, it had only been a matter of when he would be raped and that he had known it. I thought of the destruction in his room too. That bastard had broken Keno's toys because he could, as a warm up for other things.

"Different monsters showed up later, apparently controlled by a very beautiful woman. Oriental, probably Japanese from her appearance and dress. By this time, most of the survivors weren't too coherent, so their memories are scattered, and it's hard to figure out what happened. But James knew the woman, and they quarreled. Actually, he raved at her about something. She then killed him with some sort of spell that liquefied his organs and bones."

Romejinoff swallowed heavily. I was impressed by the amount of damage done. Considering what had happened to Keno, I actually wanted to thank the woman for killing the fucker.

"The woman had her monsters kill the Hákarl. I think that her monsters are what are known as Reavers." McGann said. "Then she took Keno with her and left. From what Wolf and Mason told me, it was through the server room on E."

"Why Keno?" Wolf asked.

Murphy whined. “Yeah, it isn’t like the hacker would be of any use to her—”

“Just shut the fuck up,” I snarled. “I hope to fuck that he’s being treated better with her than he was here. Not that it would be fucking hard. Shit, being dead is still better than this place.”

McGann stared at me. I already knew that I was going to get a couple of sessions with the woman to “readjust” my attitude. At least she wasn’t going to be doing it by fucking with my brain, which she could do, but by trying to bore me to death with getting me to “discuss” the feelings I had about Keno and my job.

She looked at Anya, some sort of secret chick look. They stared at each other for a moment, and Anya asked suddenly, “Wolf, could you take me home?”

Wolf didn’t even bother with good-byes and escorted Anya out like she was made of crystal or something. I didn’t like it, but I figured McGann wanted him out of the way for some reason. It was probably so that he wouldn’t get caught in the middle of me and Murphy fighting, because he liked both of us. Wolf was getting caught in the middle of our fights too often.

“That bitch got her claws back in him,” Murphy said.

I snorted. “We agree on something then.” Murphy glared and shrugged.

McGann spoke. “The Trustees want to know what happened. They are very willing to repeat the experiment.”

We both looked at her. I didn’t know about Murphy, but I was shocked. What they were thinking about was murder, plain and simple, because you had to kill someone to get this ritual thing to work. Even *I* knew it was a bad idea. Those fuckers were insane to even think about it.

“Caitlynn, thirty-two people died!” Murphy practically shouted. “Even the Trustees can’t think that it was worth it!”

McGann looked resigned. I felt sorry for her because she had to have listened to this shit with the Trustees. No wonder she sent Wolf home. He'd be a lot worse about bitching at her about this, because he firmly believed we were the good guys, even with some of the shit we'd done, like keeping a scared kid prisoner in the home of the brave and the land of the free.

"James," she said quietly, "this is the only documented success of creating a gate and contacting the Dreamlands... or wherever that thing opened to."

"Caitlynn!" Murphy exclaimed. He sounded really pissed.

"How much worse were the other times?" I asked her. "How bad was the mess then?"

McGann looked at me with something almost like respect. Murphy was staring like I had started to recite Shakespeare; I had thought of something he hadn't.

"All the other documented incidents, going back to the turn of the last century, ended with the total destruction of the site involved." McGann said. "There have been about seven others that we can piece together. There might be more."

Murphy scoffed. "How do we know that...?"

"The woman," I said, finally getting a clue. "She showed them that something more than monsters live there. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. Depends on what condition we find Keno in."

"Kairns is right," McGann said. "I will talk to Anya tomorrow to see how much she knew about Heiseg's work and if she can or will work the ritual. If not, the Trustees have to find someone who can."

"I don't like the bitch," I said. "But I don't think that she's willing to kill someone. She'd fuck 'em instead. So don't be too surprised when she says no. And who the fuck are the Trustees going to kill for this?"

CHAPTER 5

KENO

I HAD been studying for several weeks when Yoshinoko suddenly announced that I was ready to be seen in public as a woman. Not that Samojirou had ever seen me dressed as a *tayuu*, even if we were sort of living together. He usually saw me in the dark, plain kimono and *yukata* I liked to wear, not the brightly colored, extravagant creations I wore when I pretended to be a woman. I had even started to be flirty when I was dressed like that.

I had thought that the fine cotton kimonos I wore every day were nice, but dressing as a woman brought me to a whole new level of luxury. The silk for the undergarments was the softest thing I had ever worn. The material felt wonderful, and I had worried for a little while that I liked dressing up like a woman far too much. It wasn't just that I did it for Samojirou's whim, but it turned into something I enjoyed, like the other lessons. I wasn't too sure what that said about me.

Samojirou and, to a certain extent, Tamazusa were happy with me. If that meant wearing women's clothing and actually enjoying what I was doing, that was all right with me. It wasn't like anyone here didn't know what Samojirou was interested in doing with me. The other samurai respected me as a fighter, no matter what else I did or

wore. I could hold my own against them in a fight now, and to them, that was all that mattered. Not what I did outside the practice field.

I was pleased that I could slip into my “public” face so easily, talking in the women’s dialect, walking in those high sandals, and handling a fan easily. I had also been trained to use the fan as a weapon to defend myself if I had to. I didn’t know if I could, though; I also didn’t know if I could hurt someone with a katana, no matter how good I was at practice with a *bokken*—a bamboo sword.

“There is a kabuki performance tonight in Edo that Samojirou-sama wants you to attend with him,” Yoshinoko said.

I didn’t say anything since Yukiko was doing my makeup. It was the traditional white face of the geisha and the *tayuu* with the back of my neck unpainted, because a naked nape was sexy. Yukiko helped me into the three under-kimonos and three over-kimonos, all different shades of red, with a bright yellow obi, its patterns woven in gold and silver, tied in an elaborate bow in the front. My hair was piled on top of my head in elaborate loops, held in place by an assortment of combs and pins. It was all heavy, and I fought not to tilt my head forward because of the weight. My bare feet peeked out from the layers of clothing, and I couldn’t understand why someone would find them sexy and attractive.

I still wasn’t comfortable with Samojirou’s interest in me. Why did he have to be interested in *that* with me? Besides that, I was happy here. Stupid, but after the last few years of my life, I could live like this. I knew I couldn’t come and go freely, but I had made friends among Tamazusa’s samurai, I saw the sky, and I wasn’t getting hurt or feeling worried about being raped. Samojirou stopped before things got too far, because he knew I was scared. I was getting less and less scared about it since he was being so nice, but I still didn’t know if I could do *that* at all.

I was nervous because I hadn’t left Tamazusa’s estate since I was brought here. From my reading, I was aware of the fact that the Dreamlands would be about the size of North America, if I had converted the ancient measurements to more modern ones correctly. Part of my studies here had included geography as well as literature and

texts on philosophy. While there was a portion of the Dreamlands almost as big as Japan in the real world, there were other sections from other nations, like the Incans and the Egyptians. There were monsters that lived in their own areas too; things that even the Reavers were wary of attacking.

Yukiko chatted about anything she could think of to relax me. It should have been annoying, but it was soothing, and I felt a little less nervous. When they were done with me, I was arranged like a statue in the middle of Samojirou's public room for his pleasure. I calmed down when I was finally left alone, but I started to get nervous again when he entered, dressed in an elegant light blue silk kimono and *hakama* decorated with several *mon*—heraldry symbols and coats of arms. A samurai had several, depending on his rank and clan.

“You look perfect, Keno,” Samojirou said.

He reached down to help me up, and I rose gracefully. “I am glad that I please you, Samojirou-sama,” I murmured, falling easily into the woman's manner of speaking. He had never heard me like this before.

“Keno, I just want you to enjoy yourself tonight,” he said.

“I've never been to a kabuki performance before,” I said, “I'm thrilled to go.”

Samojirou smiled, and my stomach did a funny flip. I was sure *that* might happen tonight. I was scared, but I trusted him. He hadn't hurt me or called me names. I just wasn't ready to forget what had happened. It was stupid and petty, but all I remembered was the hurt and that Heiseg enjoyed hurting me, taking something else away from me, calling me awful names and just acting crazy. When I was able to forget, I might be able to respond to Samojirou with more than simple acceptance of his kisses and caresses.

WE traveled to Edo by the shadows. Samojirou was able to travel through them, stepping from one place to another like he was

teleporting, using shadows. It felt... different. I was cold for a second, and then we were there, within a few heartbeats, it seemed. I wondered how he was able to do that. We had arrived just outside the building, mixing in with the crowd there easily. It turned out that the performance was in a theater Samojirou had permanent seating in.

“You are fine, Sakura-chan?” Samojirou asked.

I looked up with a smile. “That was fun, Samojirou-sama.”

“I was worried that you would be disturbed by it; some are,” Samojirou explained as he led me to his seats in the theater. He looked guilty. “I hadn’t even thought about your reaction to it.”

“It was cold, but not bad,” I reassured him. “Not scary.”

The theater wasn’t fancy like American ones. There was a stage at one end and seating in front and balcony seats along the sides. The walls were plain wood, and the seating was mats on the floor. Our seats were just a simple balcony the size of two tatami mats, about six by six, with a wall two feet high at the front. We left our sandals at the door, and I sank gracefully to the floor. I looked around, curious about the place.

There were two bento boxes and a bottle of saké in one corner. I saw men moving among the crowd below, selling snacks and drink. The private boxes, like ours, apparently had food delivered. The crowd of commoners below was noisy, and they ignored us, but I noticed there were a lot of people in the private boxes discreetly studying us.

“Samojirou-sama?” I whispered.

“I have not come here with a companion in decades, since Tamazusa has no interest in kabuki,” he murmured. “They are intrigued and wonder who you are. There have been rumors, but then there are always rumors. However, it is known that I have a new companion and am now ready to show you off to the rest of society.”

“Rumors?” I asked.

Who knew I was with him and Tamazusa? Why did it matter? How important were they? I had never really thought about it, but the

large estate and many people there hinted to me that they were important people. My stomach did a slow flip when I realized that Tamazusa and Samojirou were probably very powerful lords. I felt like an idiot that I hadn't figured it out before, because I should have. I wasn't stupid, and I should have known that only rich and important people would live like that.

“Say nothing of where you are from,” Samojirou ordered. “It might be unpleasant for you if you do. Visitors from the real world who are still living are rare.”

“You want me to lie?” I asked.

He smiled down at me. “I want you just to say nothing. Smile at them and hide behind your fan. It is none of their business who you are.”

“As you wish, Samojirou-sama,” I murmured obediently. Silence was the best for me really, since I didn't want to embarrass Samojirou by saying something stupid.

The first act went quickly. I had no problem following the stories with some help from Samojirou, who made quiet comments to me about the performances and the actors. There was an intermission, and that was when the trouble started.

Two samurai who had been staring at us for the entire first act made their way over to us. I sensed Samojirou watching them, and he was annoyed that they were bothering us. I had served him saké and snacks during the performance, proud that I was both graceful and neat while doing so, as I had been taught by Yoshinoko. I was too nervous to eat, but Samojirou gave me sips from his saké bowl, acting like we were a lot closer than we were, like we were really lovers. I was glad the makeup hid my blushes.

The two samurai looked to be about the same age as Samojirou, but I'd learned over the weeks that here, that meant nothing. They could be actually that age or a millennium older. They were both dressed elegantly in dark blue patterned kimono and *hakama* with several *mon* decorating them. Both were handsome men who had an air

of competence around them. I also knew from the looks in their eyes that they could use the swords they wore.

“You must introduce us to your companion,” the taller one said.

“It has been so long since you were here with someone, for a moment we thought that it was your lady,” the second one chimed in. “But then we all know your taste isn’t for women.”

I dropped my eyes and stared at the floor. I sensed that many in the audience were watching us, and I wondered exactly what was going on. There was a tension in the air that made my stomach turn. I could see why Samojirou wanted me to remain silent. I doubted that I could even speak right now.

“Sakura-dono was a gift from my lady,” Samojirou said.

They grimaced. I wondered why. It wasn’t like either of them had been unkind to me.

“And where are you from, Sakura-dono?” the taller samurai asked.

I glanced at Samojirou in panic. I wasn’t supposed to talk, but to not answer a direct question was rude.

“I don’t think that Samojirou-sama cut out your tongue,” the shorter one commented slyly.

I blushed because I knew what he was hinting.

“Did not your mother teach you any manners?” Samojirou asked. He didn’t sound threatening, but there was a hint of anger in his voice.

“Sakura-dono,” the taller one said solemnly, “I am Inusuka Shino, and this is my brother, Inukawa Sousuke.”

I bowed for both of them. I didn’t know what was going on, but I knew that for all their friendliness, they didn’t like Samojirou. It could be for any number of reasons, but I sensed an old hatred between them. But if they were brothers, why did they have different last names? Well, not very different, they started with the same kanji, *Inu*, the same

kanji my family name started with. Why did their names sound familiar to me? It was teasing me, a memory just out of my reach.

“They come from a large family,” Samojirou said. “Eight brothers, but not all of them are here.”

Inukawa glared, as did his brother. I guessed that comment made them mad. I didn’t know if I wanted to know why. But it took their attention away from me, which was probably why Samojirou had said it.

“I had nothing to do with that!” Samojirou snarled at them for the glares.

I looked at them in confusion, wondering what I was missing. Inusuka took pity on me and smiled. It was strained and false, but he was trying. “An old argument. One of our brothers isn’t to be found in the Dreamlands.”

“As I told your mother, Fuse-hime, I do not know what had happened. And it is not like I have not searched this place with her for him over the centuries,” Samojirou reminded them.

Inukawa looked at me. “I don’t think that you are going to be able to remain silent around our mother. She will get you to talk.”

It should have sounded threatening, but it wasn’t. While Inusuka seemed to be a much more focused man, Inukawa was more easy-going. But not any less dangerous.

Inusuka frowned thoughtfully. “Give our respects to your lady,” he said abruptly. “I think that it would be better if we return to our seats now.”

They made their way back to their seats, leaving me confused. Samojirou seemed to be happy and angry at the same time. “That was interesting,” he said softly.

“Samojirou-sama?” I asked.

He smiled. “And how do you like your first experience with kabuki?”

“I’m enjoying it very much,” I said shyly. “I... thank you.”

“I am glad that you enjoy it. I have not had a companion who shared my interests for a while.” He laughed softly. “I had feared that I was becoming dull.”

“You...”

“Yes, Sakura-chan?”

I felt hot, and I knew I was blushing again. “You have given me a lot. I would never consider you dull.”

He looked at me thoughtfully as I poured him more saké. He said nothing, and I felt my stomach starting to slowly roll over. It was the familiar mixture of fear and curiosity I felt around him. I was certain that tonight, *that* was going to happen. My fear must have shown in my eyes because Samojirou looked concerned.

“You may enjoy it,” he said softly. “I told you that I had no taste for pain in my bed.”

“I understand, Samojirou-sama,” I murmured.

We couldn’t say much because the performance started again. Even as I watched the actors perform below me, I was very conscious of Samojirou and those two strange samurai watching us.

I WAS half asleep when we arrived home, the saké I consumed making everything seem out of focus. I drank more than I should have because of being nervous about this moment. Samojirou wasn’t surprised to see Yukiko waiting in his rooms to help me undress. She managed to help me out of most of my kimonos, makeup, and the hair ornaments. I just stood there, and she did all the work. She scurried away when Samojirou strode in the room, dressed only in his *fundoshi*. I just stared at him, my mind too tired to think. I started shivering when he smiled.

“Keno, I know that you are tired.”

“You own me,” I muttered.

“You are still frightened?” he asked.

“I don’t... don’t laugh... I don’t know what to do,” I cried. “It—”

“I know that you were sheltered and those fools abused you,” he said. “Just relax.”

His reassurances made me shiver harder, and I was visibly shaking. Samojirou frowned and tugged me over to the futon. He carefully undid the cord that held my last kimono together and slipped the garment off. We were wearing only underwear now. Samojirou leaned over and kissed me; he felt very warm. I let him control me. He was used to this. I seldom kissed him back or fought what he was doing. Samojirou didn’t end our kiss until I stopped shaking. It was hard not to be frightened. He was aroused, and I didn’t think he was going to be satisfied with a few touches tonight. The saké I had drunk had suddenly gone straight to my head, and I was having trouble keeping my eyes open. But if I closed them, the room started spinning.

“Sakura... Keno, was that distasteful?” he asked.

“It’s going to hurt,” I blurted out. “I don’t want *that* with you. It hurts, and everyone tells me that you won’t hurt me, but it’s not like I can say no.”

“You can say no,” he said gently.

I started crying. I didn’t believe him. Samojirou hugged me, and I curled up on his lap crying, eventually winding down into hiccups. I cried myself to sleep, feeling stupid and childish the entire time.

CHAPTER 6

SAMOJIROU

I SHOULD have known Keno was still frightened of me, or at least of sexual relations. Since he had been reduced to tears at the end of the evening, I hoped he was just overwhelmed by the saké and the excitement of leaving the estate. I had known Inukawa and Inusuka would be there. It was time that my Keno was introduced into our society. I couldn't keep him sheltered from his family forever.

The Dreamlands were vast, covering many lands and civilizations. My lady's lands held several small villages filled with peasants to till the land. Scattered around Nippon were cities, mostly small, but a few larger ones, like Edo or Osaka, served as neutral ground for those who played the Game. I had escorted Tamazusa to them many times over the centuries, for plots she had woven. I had also enjoyed the theaters and other places of entertainment there. I was looking forward to showing Keno off in them. While I might not be able to leave the Dreamlands, I was able to travel freely throughout Nippon and beyond, stepping lightly from one shadow to another. It was a talent few others had.

Soon, Keno and I would be attending an *ikebana* event on the far side of the Nipponese Dreamlands. I was certain Fuse would be there. I doubted I would be able to hide who he was from her, but I hoped.

What I needed to do was bind the boy to me so he wouldn't want to leave me. He didn't seem to want to leave, apparently content with his life with me. By treating him gently, I hoped that would be his inclination. I was not going to lose him as I had his ancestor. "Lose" was a good word. I wasn't lying when I told the other *Hakkenshi* that I was unable to find their brother in this place.

I had been deeply, madly, and wildly in love with the first Inuzaka Keno. We had conducted a passionate affair, hidden from his brothers during the years the fighting had raged across the Kanto plain during the Warring States era. His family had entertained no idea about what he had been doing with me or what he had been doing for his grandfather, serving as his pet assassin. In the end, Inuzaka had ritually banished me, trapping me in this place. He had believed it was better than killing me.

I had discovered that we were never to meet again after finding the rest of the *Hakkenshi* here. They were angry, and over the centuries, their anger had not cooled much. I thought it was because they missed their brother Keno—and that I was perhaps the reason he was not here.

If Fuse discovered I had her son Keno's avatar in my care, she would be angry, as would her sons. I didn't think they would attack me or my lady, but they could prove to be bothersome. For that reason, I had to bind this Keno to me. I had hoped sex would be the key, but Keno showed no more interest in that now than he had in the beginning. He trusted me, though, and was willing to admit to me that he was frightened and uninterested in the pleasure I was offering him. He had cried in my arms, falling asleep, knowing I wasn't going to hurt him for his refusal. To him, sex was a frightening and painful thing, even after I had shown him I could be gentle. I wanted to kill his abusers over and over for doing this to him.

Keno sniffled and nuzzled my chest, innocent and endearing, cried out and asleep. I was proud of the elegant sophistication that was Sakura, but this moment was priceless. Yoshinoko and the others had done a wonderful job training him; he had been poised and confident in the face of his brothers' questions. The trouble had only started when we had arrived at home. Sighing, I pulled the covers over us and settled down to sleep.

I WOKE the next morning with Keno still sleeping in my arms and my desire for him returned. He moaned softly, and I tightened my embrace. That woke him up. Keno jerked his head up, and I kissed him, rough and demanding. He struggled for a second and went limp.

“Trust me,” I hissed.

Keno didn’t say anything, but he cautiously stroked my arms and shoulders.

“I just want—” I began.

It was incredibly frustrating, his fear and his ignorance. Okita had informed me that he didn’t understand the jokes and the teasing but took it good-naturedly. Okita had been worried about where he had been raised; he hadn’t thought that even Buddhist acolytes were so ignorant. In fact, he was certain they knew more about pleasure than Keno did. I had refrained from snapping at him, saying it wasn’t any of his business, but the men had become fond of Keno.

“Get it over with,” he whispered. “Maybe... maybe it isn’t as bad as I remember.”

“Was that... how old are you?” I asked him in horror. Maybe the issue was that Keno was younger than I thought he was.

“Twenty,” he whispered, cringing, not understanding I wasn’t angry with him, but with the ones who had hurt him. “I had just had a birthday, before... I’d been there for four years. No one... they treated me... Mason and Wolf were nice, but....”

No wonder he was as ignorant as he was. Isolated and imprisoned, abused by his captors. Rape hadn’t been the worst thing he’d worried about, and I doubted he had been treated gently. Okita had informed me that it had taken a long time for Keno to stop cringing when he trained with them, to become comfortable with trading blows with the others.

“I had hoped that you would lose your fears,” I said thickly. I didn’t want to say this, but we couldn’t go on in this manner. I would lose him, and I didn’t want that. “But I think that it would be better if you moved into the barracks with Okita-san and the rest of my lady’s samurai.”

Keno started shivering, shutting his eyes tightly. “Whatever you want, Samojirou-sama,” he said dully.

“They will not hurt you,” I said, confused and angry.

Why did he think they were like the animals that had him before? If he stayed here, with me, I would let my desire overrule my good sense, and Keno would suffer. I would continue to enjoy his company; I had liked last night too much to deny myself much longer. Keno had enjoyed it also, so I doubted it was my company that was issue.

I rose and dressed. Keno made a move to get up, and I ordered, “Stay there.”

I strode out of my rooms in a fury and wasn’t surprised to see the servants and the others scattering out of my way. An angry *oni* wasn’t something many of them could deal with. *Oni* are one of the more powerful beings in the Dreamlands, and this place was just as in the real world, where the weaker served the stronger.

Tamazusa found me in the iris garden an hour later.

“I see that Keno-chan is not to your taste this morning,” she said.

I looked at her. “He is too much to my taste. And he fears me. I have failed.”

Tamazusa shook her head. “He trusts you still. It’s just that he is still ignorant of the power that is in him. That is part of what is attracting him to you. I think... I think that it is time that we told him about that, at least.”

“And about his family?” I asked.

She smiled and studied a flower, thinking about what she was going to say before she stated it. “There is no reason to tell him about

them. The princess would send him back to the real world, and I feel that is not the best place for him. What I have seen there was barbaric.”

“He should move into the barracks,” I said. “Because—”

“You almost overstepped your bounds?” she asked. “Keno’s introduction to adulthood was with fear and pain, being with those people. I know that has warped him. He should have been coaxed into it. From what Yoshinoko has told me, he would have been a wonderful *tayuu* or even a geisha.”

“Sakura-chan was a wonderful companion last night,” I said. “But the evening ended in tears.”

“Too much saké,” Tamazusa dismissed briskly. “See what happens on your next outing.”

“As you wish,” I said listlessly.

She glared. “You have been a thoughtful companion over our centuries here. I just want you to be happy. It seems that our little prize can provide that for you. Time is not something that any of us have to worry about.”

I bowed to her. “Then I should see how he is doing.”

She smiled. “He is still in your rooms, and according to the maids, he’s asleep again.”

KENO

SAMOJIROU didn’t mention the incident when he came back to his rooms, and he didn’t send me to the barracks. Stupid as it sounds, I still trusted him. I knew he was frustrated, and I felt like I was leading him on, sleeping with him and not doing *that* with him. I liked him a lot;

Samojirou was smart, we could talk about almost anything, and he was very patient with me, but I still wasn't ready to have sex with him.

That evening I had dinner with Tamazusa. It was nice and relaxed, even though I felt there was something she wanted to tell me.

"How did you enjoy your introduction to kabuki?" Tamazusa asked me toward the end of the meal. We had been talking about various happenings on the estate and my lessons.

"I liked it," I murmured, instinctively falling into the female dialect. I had been using the male one before. Tamazusa was talking about my girl persona, so I felt I should talk like a woman with her.

"But afterward," she continued.

I blushed, knowing she knew I had cried like a baby in Samojirou's arms about *that*. They told each other almost everything; they really were like siblings in that way. "I... Samojirou-sama said that I didn't have to. He was very kind to me when I had drunk too much saké."

"I told you that he was thoughtful man," Tamazusa said cheerfully.

"You and Samojirou-sama both have been very kind to me," I said humbly.

She smiled, looking thoughtful. "You are someone that kindness comes naturally to and for."

I looked down at my bowl of rice, biting my lower lip, remembering when people hadn't been so kind to me. About the TCs who had pinched me in odd places, the scientists who would wake me up in the middle of the night to fix something for them, and the techs who were abusive because something had gone wrong with their experiments.

Tamazusa's concern and Samojirou's weird affection for me was a hundred percent better, because no one had been kind to me in a long while. Wolf and even Mason had tried, but they were away a lot, and they had been sent away because they tried to protect me from Heiseg.

Because of that I had been alone on the two worst days of the year, the day I had been captured and my birthday. Not that anyone had remembered my birthday, but it had been nice to have company for it, even if Wolf didn't say anything about it. He didn't know about my birthday at all.

Tamazusa must have seen something in my eyes, because she sighed. "I meant not to remind you of past ills."

I smiled, wanting to make her feel better. She was still impressive and scary, but I now knew she was a nice person. "You didn't mean to. And there are times that they are not far from my mind."

"Ah," she sighed, "your distaste for intimacy with Samojirou-sama... he will not hurt you. He is drawn to you and does not mean to frighten you."

"I know," I murmured, feeling stupid. "He's been very nice about the fact that I still can't do *that* with him."

"He has mentioned that you have gotten better about kissing," she teased, ignoring the fact I couldn't say the word *sex*. I had trouble even *thinking* that word.

I blushed. I had, even if I didn't really respond to what he was doing. I was less stiff about it and let him explore more and more of me. I could enjoy what he was doing to me if I didn't think about how it might end. I knew it wasn't fair to Samojirou. I never thought that I wouldn't be hurt, no matter who had gotten to me first, Heiseg or one of the TCs. With Samojirou, I could almost forget the fear. He didn't want to hurt me like others had.

"But there is a reason that Samojirou-sama cannot stop touching you, besides that he is a very passionate man," Tamazusa shared after a delicate drink of her saké.

"And that reason is?" I asked her, sipping at my tea. I was avoiding alcohol after last night. I didn't want to end up crying again. I was proud that my voice was steady.

Tamazusa smiled, proud of the control I was showing. I had gotten it all from my time in Boylston Street, because I couldn't show those people any sort of weakness.

"I fear that I had not been honest with you about why I had taken you from the real world," Tamazusa said.

"You rescued me from Heiseg and my life there," I said huskily. "It is I who should be thanking you about that."

"But I did so for very selfish reasons," she protested.

"But you did so," I said, my self-control slipping, sounding needy and raw. "Your reasons do not have to be pure. You were willing to do it. That is all that matters to me."

"Even if I handed you to Samojirou-sama as a present, without thinking about your feelings about the matter?" she demanded harshly. "I treated you as I had been treated in the past."

"At that time, I was unable to think," I said. That was why she didn't seem to like men in *that* manner; she had been someone like me at one time, powerless and frightened. I thought she might really have been a *tayuu* or worse.

"Samojirou-sama was... *is* very kind to me. You both took care of me when I needed it. I was in shock that night, and Samojirou-sama could have just hurt me like Heiseg had. He didn't. You could have hurt me or given me to your samurai, for them to hurt me. You didn't. You both have treated me as if I were part of your family. I haven't been treated so well since I left my parents' house."

Tamazusa looked worried. She put down her saucer of saké and shook her head. "I cannot tell you everything that you need to know at this time."

I nodded, knowing she had been hiding a lot from me, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Stupid, I know, that a couple of people being nice to me after I had been numb for so long made me not care about the secrets they might have been hiding from me. But despite the fact that they were demons, they were treating me better than the

humans had. "I am grateful for whatever you wish to tell me." I said softly.

Tamazusa smiled. "Samojirou-sama is attracted to you because of the magic that is in you. That is also the reason that the Reavers follow you around. They are attracted to unusual power."

I shook my head, confused. "I'm not magical or special."

She laughed, a polite trill that confused me. I didn't know why she thought that was funny. "You have magic. I sensed it in you when I saw you, even after Heiseg had abused you the way that he did. He thought that he was the one that had power." She frowned. "He was a fool and insulting."

"He had connections," I said, "the backing of several of the people who ran that place. I'm nobody. He wouldn't have been punished for hurting me. He had been told more than once that I didn't matter."

Tamazusa reached out and touched my hand gently. "You matter. You have power. I am assuming that Samojirou-sama will be arranging for that training sometime in the future."

"Why should he?" I asked bluntly. "Wouldn't it be better for him if I were powerless?"

"Samojirou-sama chose to have you educated so that you will be an amusing companion to him, instead of treating you as a thing," Tamazusa said. "I think that in the future he will send you to be trained to be a powerful companion also."

"But why?" I asked, confused.

Samojirou having me trained to work magic was very different from him having me learn the tea ceremony. It probably wasn't different from having me practice with the samurai in the mornings, even though everyone knew I wasn't expected to be a fighter. Samojirou had been very clear about that; he only wanted me to be able to defend myself in the future, so no one would be able to hurt me again.

“Because he made a choice the night that I gave him to you,” Tamazusa said softly. “One that I had hoped he would make. He chose to have you become his companion, rather than a doll for him to play with.”

“I am grateful that he made that choice,” I said. “I will study anything that he wants me to and make him proud.”

Tamazusa smiled. “He is proud. And happy with you. Please remember that he will never hurt you, as others have done.”

I bowed my head, humble and subservient.

SAMOJIROU seemed to have lost all interest in doing *that* with me. In fact, we started sleeping on separate futons that night. It wasn't that he ignored me, because I woke up sometimes with more covers tucked around me or with Samojirou watching me. That should have scared me, but it didn't. Samojirou was still being nice to me. While the kisses had stopped, he hadn't stopped touching me. Now that I knew part of the reason, I didn't tense up when it happened. In fact, I started to like it, probably because I knew it wasn't going to go beyond touches for now.

Samojirou and I went to an *ikebana* exhibit the following week. While I liked flowers, I didn't understand the complications of arranging them or the subtle messages they sent to people, even with the weeks of instruction. I also knew it usually took years to master the art of *ikebana*. Thankfully, Samojirou was willing to explain things to me, telling me in a low voice what I needed to know, so he wouldn't disturb the others. We were examining a display when a girl and her dog, a large grey animal as tall as her waist with a sharp-angled face and pointed ears, its tail curled tightly on its back, came up to us. I noticed that the crowd seemed very interested in her talking to us, even as they drew back. I thought that if there were a fight, they didn't want to get involved, but they wanted to watch. It had been like that at the theatre too; I guess beings who lived here weren't too different from humans in that way.

“Fuse-hime,” Samojirou said, bowing low to her. “It is always a delight to see you here.” His tone of voice grew less cordial as he looked at her dog, which was sneering at him. “And you, Yatsufusa-sama.”

I blinked and examined her appearance. She was the mother of those two samurai from the theatre? She didn’t look old enough to have children! She looked younger than they did; she looked younger than me. And even stranger, *hime* was an honorific meaning princess. Fuse was wearing a rose-colored kimono with sleeves the length of an unmarried girl’s, just a little shorter than my sleeves. The dog with her snarled silently at Samojirou, even after he had politely greeted him. Because of that, I assumed that the dog was Yatsufusa. I bowed to the both of them.

“And your companion?” she asked.

“Sakura-chan was a gift from my lady,” he said.

“And where did your lady find such a delightful young lady?” Fuse asked

“My lady travels widely,” Samojirou said. “As you know. She meets a lot of different people.”

“So practiced a reply, you must have been asked this often.” Fuse said dryly. She smiled. “But... ah. I had thought that your lady had mistaken your tastes. She has not.”

So she knew I wasn’t a real girl. What did that matter? I was as comfortable in this outfit as I was with a katana in my hand. Maybe there was something wrong with me because of that, but I didn’t care. Yatsufusa-sama still looked angry, and I wondered if he was going to attack Samojirou. I moved between the two of them. I couldn’t tell who looked more shocked, the dog or Samojirou.

“Ask my lady if you want to know where she found Sakura-chan,” Samojirou told her coolly.

Fuse looked annoyed for a moment. “As if we speak,” she said softly with a smile. “Where are you from, Sakura-dono?”

I glanced at Samojirou in fear. He had told me I couldn't speak to anyone. I didn't blame him; I knew I would tell them something stupid or wrong if I were allowed to talk. I didn't miss the change of address. - *Dono* was a term for lady. Fuse was addressing me as if I were another noble.

"Don't be an idiot, Samojirou-sama," Fuse scolded him. "I will find out."

"But in such a public place?" he asked her drily.

She smiled. "Ah... you just like teasing me."

"Let us wander, Fuse-hime," Samojirou said. "I fear that my blossom does not know too much about blossoms. She will benefit from our discussions. Did you see the display over in the corner? The use of bamboo is interesting."

Fuse laughed, and her dog stopped growling at Samojirou. I felt the tension dispersing into the air. Fuse wasn't going to give up, but she wasn't going to question me yet. I felt out of my depth; these two were playing some sort of game. For all her apparent youth and innocent looks, this girl was as dangerous as McGann. I was going to have to remember that.

I WAS getting undressed when Samojirou entered the room. He was dressed in a *yukata*, fresh out of the bath. Yukiko smiled, and she squeaked and scurried out of the room with my outfit, giggling.

I tried not to be nervous because I was dressed only in a *fundoshi*, since I was going to bathe soon. Samojirou looked like he wanted to kiss me but was staying out of reach.

I wanted to tell him he could come closer, but instead I asked, "Who is Fuse-hime? Why is she dangerous?"

Samojirou looked at me strangely. "And why do you say that?"

“She feels like it,” I murmured. So I felt like an idiot. They had spent the afternoon discussing flowers and arrangements and gossiping about others here, nothing serious. While I didn’t say anything, I was included in their group, just like her dog had been. I had learned that Yatsufusa really didn’t like Samojirou. But Samojirou wasn’t always nice to him, either. “She’s nice. And you like her, like you like Tamazusa-sama, but she’s dangerous-feeling, and I don’t know why. It’s confusing.”

Samojirou came over and gave me a hug, nuzzling the top of my head. He didn’t seem to want to do more than hold me, so I tried not to tense up. The talk I had with Tamazusa earlier this week made me understand why he did this a lot, even if I wasn’t always comfortable with it. I was getting better about it, though.

“I fear that I have not been totally honest with you,” he said.

I tensed up. He wanted to try *that* again.

Samojirou sighed, knowing why I was acting the way I was. “While I still find you desirable, I will respect your wishes. I fear that I had underestimated the damage those barbarians had done to you.”

“I... I don’t want to be a cocktease,” I said, talking to his chest, wanting to try and explain why I was being such an idiot. “They... the TCs kept calling me pretty boy and grabbing and pinching me. Before... before Heiseg hurt me, I knew that it was going to happen. There wasn’t anything I could do to stop it. Or I could have let one of them ‘protect’ me from the others. If I... I let that person do *that* with me. But... but I wasn’t sure that it was worth it, because I didn’t know if he’d be lying to me. I was just glad when the monsters came. They’d kill me, and I wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore. I didn’t think....”

“Keno,” Samojirou whispered.

“What did I do wrong?” I asked him pitifully. “I wish that they had killed me in my dorm room.”

“I am glad that they did not,” Samojirou said, his voice very soft.

I opened my mouth to say something, and he kissed the top of my head again. Samojirou was gentle and understanding about my fears. I had to stop being so skittish around him.

“While we are not intimate, I enjoy your company. Eventually, I promise you, you will enjoy such things with me.”

“If you say so,” I muttered.

The kissing was getting easier now that I was confident that he wasn’t going to do more. I had even started kissing back a little and touching him on my own. Tamazusa telling me why he acted like this around me made me a little bolder. It was weird that someone would want me just for me or the power inside me.

He laughed and stepped back. “I assure you that you will eventually understand such things are pleasant. There are things that I could do, but I do not think that such steps will be needed.”

“What steps?” I asked.

“Curiosity is a good sign,” he assured me with a smile. “I think that there are sections of my lady’s library that you eventually will need to be better acquainted with.”

I blushed. I knew what he was talking about. I had limited access to the library. The librarian, Hikura, didn’t let me wander. He didn’t let anyone wander.

If I had been assigned something to read by either Okita or Yoshinoko, he got it for me. But I also knew from what her samurai had said that for a lady who didn’t seem to be interested in such things, Tamazusa had a lot of erotica. Or it could be Samojirou’s. They called them *Shunga*—Spring books. I knew enough about art and things like that to figure out that the books were like the erotic picture books popular during the Tokugawa era. Tamazusa might have collected them like I used to collect manga, even if she didn’t like sex.

“But back to our topic of conversation,” Samojirou said smoothly. “Fuse-hime is an intelligent young woman, and they are always dangerous. But what I have not told you before this is the reason that

my lady took you from where you were. She took you because of the simple reason that you have power in you.”

“Tamazusa-sama mentioned that to me when we dined,” I said. “I understand that it wasn’t because she was trying to be nice.”

Samojirou looked embarrassed. “When my lady brought you back, we did not know if your wits would survive what had happened to you.”

“You took care of me and were nice to me,” I said. “Don’t think that doesn’t matter to me. So what if it wasn’t because you just wanted to do something nice for me. You... you—”

“Insist that you dress as a woman in public and say nothing to strangers,” Samojirou snapped.

“You know the word *no*,” I said, shaking. We had never argued before now. He told me what he wanted, and I did it. *That* was the only thing I had refused. “That night I cried, and you didn’t get mad. You don’t like it, and I hate the thought of *that*, but you aren’t hurting me over it. Do you know—”

Samojirou hugged me. “Shh...”

“So you want to use me because of the power that I have. I know that happens. I’ve been used by everyone since I was taken from my dorm room. You... I don’t feel like a prisoner here.”

“You are not,” Samojirou assured me. “It is—”

“Where am I going to go?” I asked wryly. “I know that I don’t have any place to go. I know that you could have hurt me, like Heiseg did. You and Tamazusa-sama are good to me.”

“I am glad that you think so,” Samojirou said smoothly. “So you are not angry that I was not honest with you? That my lady and I might want to use you for your power? Your magic?”

“What would you be doing?” I asked him. “How? Do I need to...?”

Samojirou laughed. “Such curiosity! But one of the reasons that I cannot leave you alone is that I am attracted to the magic in you. I want *you* too; I enjoy your spirit as well as the power that dwells within you.”

“You’d get it if we did *that*?” I asked, confused and worried. He must be really mad if I wouldn’t do that with him and it was a way to tap into this power he claimed I had. I didn’t feel powerful. I felt small and stupid because I couldn’t forget what had happened to me.

Samojirou laughed and hugged me again, and I oddly felt better. “No, I will not, but there are some interesting Tantric rituals we can try in the future. In little while, we can think about training you to use the power that you have.”

“Um,” I muttered. It sounded really simple. So why did I feel like there still was something he wasn’t telling me, another secret he was hiding from me? And why didn’t I care?

CHAPTER 7

MASON

I HELPED Wolf clean out Keno's room. It was sad that he had more books than anything, but I thought the kid read a lot to keep occupied. Wolf kept everything, including the trashed models, and put it all into storage at his place.

McGann asked me a lot of questions about how I felt about cleaning out Keno's room and the other shit that went down. She seemed happy with the bullshit I fed her, even knowing it was bullshit. I thought she just wanted the T's crossed, the I's dotted, and me and Wolf flying under the Trustees' radar. For once we both wanted the same thing. But most of the time, we shot the shit about "normal" things like sports and movies we liked. I thought she liked just having an hour to relax in between all the other shit going on. If my sessions with her gave her some rest, I wasn't going to bitch about them. Going to the company shrink was actually a good thing around here, believe it or not.

The only thing I really got pissed about was the fucker they got to try and open the gate again. He was a rude asshole, and I didn't like him. His name was Ralph Fairinox. He was short and twisted-looking, and I didn't trust him in front of me, never mind at my back. He reminded me of the weasels I had dealt with in lockup, sleazy and

backstabbing, running to the guards to rat you out to them for privileges. He was about my age, sallow with greasy, grayish-blond hair. D and E levels had been declared off limits, but he spent a lot of time poking around down there. Anyone who had been there after that night didn't want to go down there anymore. The new crew of techs who came in was just as put off by the place as the rest of us were since they had heard the stories about that night.

Romejinoff had to work with him, even if she wasn't going to do the dirty deed with him. In fact, I thought McGann had wiped that nasty little factoid from her mind after she asked her about it. I didn't like it but thought it was good idea, because I didn't like knowing about shit like that. I was surprised McGann didn't do the same to me.

Romejinoff spent a lot of time with Wolf, mostly telling him about how much of a scum Fairinox was to her. I wasn't surprised that that the ice bitch latched on to Wolf like a lamprey as the days went on. She wanted him, and she distracted him from what was happening, but I still didn't like it. There were also hot and cold Trustees running through the place, so we all had to keep our noses clean. Some I didn't mind, like the sweet little old lady called Elizabeth Peabody-Stewart Adams, who even I knew it would be bad to mouth off to, even if she looked like a nice grandma. Others, mostly Erik Collins, were assholes and got on my nerves, so I tried to avoid them. Most of the Trustees thought they were something special because they believed they ran the place. I'd like to see how they acted with a Hákarl chasing them for lunch.

“Collins is harassing Anya,” Wolf said one morning. Boylston Street had been buzzing like a beehive for a little more than a week. Most of it was bullshit, like they were going to shut this place down or that we were all going to get shipped out to different branches of the Trust because we let Heiseg pull the crap he did. “Fairinox's doing the same thing.”

I just shrugged, and he got pissed. “Mason—”

“Her rep's bitin' her on the ass,” I said bluntly. “Both of them think that she'll fuck 'em. I don't know if she will and don't care.”

Romejinoff's got the rep of being a piece of easy tail. She should have someone like McGann move in with her if she's worried."

Wolf frowned.

"I don't like her. I really don't like that she screwed you over and that you're opening yourself up to having it happen again," I said. "Just don't have her move in with you. You can't afford to have another bed burning at your place."

"I don't think—" he started,

"She will, because she was like this before you hooked up, and you aren't going to be able to change her."

Wolf frowned some more as Murphy walked into the room, cutting off my explanation that Romejinoff had been a whore for a while and not the kind with a heart of gold. "Fairinox wants to talk to you both about Inuzaka."

Murphy sounded confused, and I didn't blame him. He wasn't calling Keno a "gook" any more, which was a good thing. If he did, Wolf was going to have to pull me off the man, if he didn't beat me to killing him. I missed the kid, not that he'd talked to me much. But Keno had gotten used to me, and I viewed it like I was dealing with one of the feral cats in my neighborhood. Just feed him and don't crowd him, and he'd eventually trust you. We'd gotten to the trust part, because he knew I wasn't after his ass and had given him some protection, as well as fed him. Then he'd gotten pretty all of a sudden, and Murphy and McGann had declared him open season.

"Where's the fu—"

"Mason!" Wolf exclaimed.

"Server room," Murphy said. "Talk to the man. Nicely. Or else—"

"We will be in deep shit," I said tiredly. "And you will terminate my ass."

Termination wasn't being fired; it was being dumped in a field with a bullet in your brain, mutilated enough that you couldn't be ID'd. It rarely happened, because a TC usually went bugfuck insane or got eaten before they got into that much trouble with the big bosses.

Murphy opened his mouth to say something else, but I talked over him. "Doesn't fucking matter. I stopped thinking that we were the good guys after Keno."

"The day Mason behaves with the authorities, I'm taking him to the infirmary to see if he's sick," Wolf said. "We'll talk to the man, but it isn't like we can tell him a lot. You sent us off site for three months before this happened."

Wolf sounded pissed, and I didn't blame him. He hadn't wanted Keno to be alone at Christmas, and he had been. All because he had told McGann that Keno should be treated with respect. I'd been a little more blunt. I'd asked Murphy when Keno had become part of the company benefits. The man had had a screaming fit after that comment, and I was on the road with Wolf as soon as he'd calmed down enough to give us our orders.

"Just talk to the man," Murphy snarled. "And remember that the Trustees want him here."

I shrugged, and Wolf hustled me out the door before I could piss Murphy off some more. We were quiet for the elevator ride down. There really wasn't much to say, and I didn't want anything caught on tape that could be used against either of us.

Fairinox was looking at the scratches on the doors to the server room when we got down there. They hadn't been there before that night. "What took you so long?" he asked sharply.

I winced. He sounded like a pissed-off hooker. His voice was high enough to be a woman's too, and I wondered if he was missing a few more things besides his brains and morals.

"The fucking elevator's slower than shit," I said. "What do you want?"

"What do you know about Keno Inuzaka?" Fairinox demanded.

“We treated him like shit,” I said.

Wolf winced. I know that we had this good guy/bad guy act going, where I was the bad one, but he didn't think I should be pushing things like this. Murphy's threat of being terminated was a serious one, because who'd miss us? I was a foster kid and had been in prison. Most of the other guys were like that, off the radar from their families and the government. No one would miss us. And even Wolf had figured out I wasn't Murphy's favorite person.

“Besides that,” he barked.

“He was a programmer, and we couldn't figure out how he got into the servers,” Wolf said, trying to save my ass, as usual. “Once we had him on site, he was productive, working on any project he was thrown. Genius really, just not too good with people.”

“Kid was scared shitless most of the time,” I added.

“What about his family?”

I shrugged, and Wolf looked confused. “Most of that shit, you'd have to talk to the suits for,” I said. “He didn't talk about them. He didn't say much about anything to anyone.”

“He was from the Kanto area, some city just outside Tokyo,” Wolf said after thinking for a second. “That was all I knew. Even with me, he didn't say much.”

Fairinox jumped on that. “You? Were you good friends?”

Wolf glared. “The kid wasn't friends with anyone, not like that. If he was....”

“So he was still a virgin?” Fairinox demanded.

Wolf looked uncomfortable. I was just getting pissed off. “According to the reports, he got raped by Heiseg that night. I don't know if it was the first time or not.”

Wolf snarled. “Mason—”

“Shit, it isn’t like it’s a secret, unless that was dropped from the report. Heiseg raped anything that didn’t move fast enough that night. Probably was dropped because people never want to find out that dirty bit of news.”

“What about the incident in November?” Fairinox asked, voice still strident.

I shrugged. I had been out on assignment that night, so I came in on the tail end of the mess. But Heiseg had been bothering Keno enough that I figured he wanted a bit more than help with his spreadsheet if he was bugging Keno at that time of the night.

Wolf looked angry. “Heiseg tried to drag Keno off to fix something. He told him no, and Heiseg hit him. I had walked in on it, because I wanted to check how he was doing since he had been looking sick earlier. Keno was shaking, and he looked exhausted. Heiseg still got him to work on his problem. Keno looked like he had the flu, but it didn’t stop him from working. He never saw the doctor about it, either. He was too scared to, I think.”

“And then what happened?”

“I reported it, and Heiseg reported it too. Me and Mason were shipped off site until the night of the incident after that report, because... because I told Ms. McGann that Keno should be treated with more care than he had been from us,” Wolf said. “I wasn’t hearing about anything after we were off site, but—”

“The kid was doing okay, staying in the server room more than anyplace else, according to what I heard,” I said. “But it was a rough three months for him. Murphy had declared him open season, according to the reports I got, since we were off site so long before Heiseg went nuts.”

“So that wasn’t it?” Fairinox muttered, sort of talking to himself. “Why did that woman take him? Why not one of the others? Why not more of the survivors?”

“Well, shit, why did that asshole do it?” I asked.

Fairinox looked at me funny, and I wanted to haul off and hit him one. But I wasn't that much of a dumb fuck. "You know how fucking crazy you have to be to think that something like that is going to work?" I asked.

"Mason!" Wolf groaned. I thought that he was having visions of being the one who had to shoot me. I could have told him that neither McGann nor Murphy would make him do it. They liked him a lot better than they did me, so they'd never give him the termination order. Wolf would hear about what happened from someone else after a few days worrying about me.

"Heiseg's notes show that the man was having some issues," Fairinox said snidely. "But he was hiding it well from his co-workers and his girlfriend. Now yours, it seems."

I moved to block Wolf from hitting him. Romejinoff was getting to be a sore spot. I was going to ask McGann how fast she could have her ass shipped out to Alaska or maybe someplace even further. The moon was looking good to me right now.

"Ms. Romejinoff and I have known each other for a while," Wolf said stiffly.

"Getting back to Keno," I said. I really didn't want to hear about the shit Fairinox was dealing. I wasn't happy about Romejinoff either, but I wasn't going to tell him that. "We don't know why that chick wanted him."

"According to the survivors' reports," Fairinox said, "The woman was dressed in an old-fashioned Japanese outfit. What do you know about that?"

I shrugged. "Not something that I give a flying fuck about."

"That isn't something that either one of us really knows about," Wolf said, glaring at me for being so uncooperative. "What about the experts?"

Fairinox sniffed. "They can't tell me anything. I don't know why you think—"

“And two grunts are going to pull the answer out of our ass for you?” I asked.

He looked pissed, but I thought he liked it too. The guy was an asshole, but he wasn’t being a snob. I knew that most of the “experts” the Trust had wouldn’t have liked my attitude either. This guy liked the fact I wasn’t kissing his ass, even if it was annoying. But I knew that bowing down to the guy would just make things worse.

“I like you, Mr. Cairns,” Fairinox said, grinning nastily. “And I am really going to enjoy sending you through that gate.”

It was about a week later that we were pulled into a briefing. It wasn’t one that had been on the schedule, but I wasn’t surprised to see Fairinox in the front of the room with Collins. Fairinox was looking smug, and Collins had a wad of papers in his left hand. The place was crowded with TCs, as well as some of the experts on staff.

Wolf and I looked at each other, and I knew from the sinking feeling in my stomach that we were screwed. We grabbed some seats, and I settled down to see the show, trying to enjoy it even though I knew I was going to get fucked over by whatever happened here.

I was surprised to see McGann was here, as well as Romejinoff. One or two of the language guys too, plus other types of eggheads. The rest were TCs, about a dozen from a couple of different teams, but not from mine or Wolf’s. We usually worked with the same set of guys, because knowing the people at your back usually kept you from becoming monster munch. Mrs. Adams—who had bigger balls than Collins, I’d found out during the last couple of weeks—was here too. I’d seen her stop some of the shit Collins and a couple of the Trustees were handing out. I’d wanted to hug her after she was through. The room settled down when Fairinox went to the front.

“As you all know,” he started, “a few of weeks ago there was a breach in this facility. We have found a way to find out who attacked us and attack them, destroying them.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from pointing out that Heiseg was the nut who attacked us. But I guess that wasn't too popular an idea right now. I looked at Wolf and saw the same pissed off confusion I was feeling in his eyes. This was going to be a bullshit mission, just like the one that made us drag Keno into this life. Unfortunately, the rest of them were eating this all up.

“We will be able to open a gate at 0700 tomorrow,” Fairinox announced, “just outside the server room. We will be sending through a heavily armed strike team, which includes a couple of translators and scientists. While the territory can be considered hostile, we may be able to find allies there.”

Collins stepped up. “I just want to tell you how proud I am to be part of this. We are finally able to take our fight back to the source.”

Now Wolf was looking like he was eating up this bullshit, even though he *knew* it was bullshit, along with a lot of the others. All of the ones who were ex-military were buying this line of crap. I was never in the military, so I saw it for the crap it was. Mrs. Adams did too, from the look on her face. She looked like she wanted to kick Collins's ass. I guess that not all the Trustees thought this was a good idea. Made me like the woman a lot more.

Collins droned on for a few more minutes, hitting all the high points, before naming the lucky group that was going to be dragged into this. I wasn't surprised to hear Romejinoff was on this mess, because she hadn't given him any incentive not to give her this shit. But I also thought Collins was a big enough asshole that even if she had given it up for him, he would have sent her on this trip anyways. I wondered if that's why she hadn't put out, because she had figured it out too.

McGann probably was the same story; she was being sent because she wouldn't bend over for the man. I would have thought that he would have sent one of the less sane 'paths on this mess. Murphy was in charge, and he looked fucking *thrilled* about it. I guess he didn't like the fact that he was going out in the field after being at a desk for the last ten years. Wolf and I were the first TCs named to go, and there was a bunch of other ones. At least none of the Trustees were going along.

But they were sending more than two dozen people through this gate thing. Was I the only one who thought it was a one-way trip because Fairinox wasn't coming with us?

WE were suited up and ready to go the next morning. Forty-pound pack on my back along with enough firepower to stop a rhino in its tracks, with all the guns I was dragging along. We were all loaded for bear, and I noticed that Fairinox was doing his little fucking voodoo thing on the floor above us.

I thought he didn't want to take a chance on one of us shooting him for what he was doing. I was certain that most of them didn't know what this was costing us—what it was costing some poor fucker. McGann looked like she was gonna be sick, and I didn't blame her.

I knew Fairinox was done killing his victim when the sparkly fucking circle showed up, like out of some bad sword and sorcery movie. Murphy had us hustled through it before you could say “motherfucker.” All of us ended up puking our guts out on the other side, feeling like it had been the worst rollercoaster ride in the universe. I didn't see the damned thing close, but I felt it. I didn't like that feeling. And I sure as hell didn't like where we ended up.

We were in a forest without any signs of human habitation. No trails that I could tell, just a lot of trees and rocks and leaves on the ground, looking like it should be someplace in New Hampshire or Vermont, but with bamboo as well as pine trees. The place was hot, and it was raining. I was miserable after the first minute, since my clothes soaked through that fast in the rain.

Murphy started swearing when he got his shit together. I could see why, and I wanted to laugh. McGann looked like she was scared shitless, and Romejinoff was glued to Wolf's side, looking as white as a ghost.

The linguist who had been behind me, Thompson, hadn't made it. Or most of him did, but he didn't survive the journey. He was missing

below the waist, cut off and fused neatly, like he was the top half of a store dummy or something. Not here five minutes and we had our first casualty. I lost the urge to laugh.

We were missing other people too—the rest of the strike team. That was eighteen people, and I had no clue where they ended up. I hoped it was just that the sparkles shut down before they got through and not something else, like they were trapped in that rollercoaster ride.

“Take care of him,” Murphy said tiredly. “Then we got to figure out what to do.”

I nodded, and Wolf came to help me. I was pretty sure Murphy had a plan, but he wanted input from McGann before telling us. Digging a grave was a lot better than figuring out what to do. When we were done, Murphy grabbed Wolf to scout the place out, leaving me to shovel dirt on top of Thompson alone.

Digging in a forest with roots and shit wasn’t fun with an entrenching tool, so Thompson didn’t get much of a grave. When I was done, I went back to the group. Murphy went over and muttered some things over the grave, being a good Catholic boy.

We were all spooked.

“We’re going to try and make contact with the natives and see if we can find out who that woman is,” Murphy said. “There seems to be a small holding a couple of clicks to the east, from what Wolf saw when he climbed up a tree to survey the area. We can start there.”

“How the fuck do we know that she’s the bad guy?” I asked. Murphy glared. I didn’t back down. “What she did was wrong, but it ain’t like we’ve got a leg to stand on with the morals crap.”

“That’s enough!” Murphy snarled.

“He has a point,” McGann said softly. They stared hard at each other.

“No,” Murphy finally said.

McGann shrugged. She had protested, and between what the two of us had said, the other two would hopefully start asking questions about what it was we were supposed to be doing here. I did a head count. Of the two dozen who were supposed to go on this thing, five of us were here. Wolf, Murphy, and me as the grunts and McGann and, God help me, the ice bitch as the brains. We were so fucked.

CHAPTER 8

SAMOJIROU

THE rainy season came, and we were trapped inside. Keno proved to be a fairly decent Go player—a strategy game he said was still popular in Japan today. And we took turns reading aloud to each other, the classics and other books. But even during the rainy season, there are entertainments in the cities, and so we went out once or twice a week. I didn't want to travel further than the borders of Nippon with Keno right now. Next rainy season, we would travel farther, and I would show him the beauties of this place in the other lands.

Keno had met all of the *Hakkenshi* at one time or another at the gatherings we went to. He had not broken from his public persona while he was with me at any time. Keno was the perfect companion, attentive and discreet, enjoying his time out with me more than I had ever imagined. While he was having issues with intimacy, he had stopped acting like I was going to abuse him when we were alone. He showed no curiosity about sex at all, unfortunately, but he was losing his fear of it. Kissing became much more enjoyable. We settled into a comfortable relationship, discovering all we could about each other, but it was almost as passionless as the one I had with my lady. However, I had hints from Keno that he was beginning to feel for me also, from the way he was responding to me now.

I took Keno to a *koto* performance put on by one of the neighboring lords one night, several weeks into the rainy season. The *koto* performance had two of the *Hakkenshi* in attendance also. While Fuse had retreated for a time from the game of discovering who Keno was, she still sent her sons out to spy for her. There was usually one or two of them at the same event when and wherever Keno and I appeared in public. This time it was Inuta Konbunjo and his nephew-brother Inue Shinbee. Inue was the son of his sister and had become one of the *Hakkenshi* after her death.

They watched us. I wanted to snap at them to leave us alone, since I was tiring of their attentions. Keno ignored them, flirting with me shamelessly. I was amused and hopeful. It was a beginning for us, because he had never acted like this in public before.

The place was crowded, since when the rains came many wanted to leave their estates and castles. The performer was also talented and beautiful, which was an additional attraction. Her patron was strutting around in his pride. The others here were all men of breeding, accompanied by well-mannered and beautiful companions. It was like we had never left Edo, and I could see why Tamazusa hated these things at times. Before, I simply went when I tired of my own company, but now I wanted to show Keno a good time. I was no better than any of the others here, but Keno was enjoying himself.

I was eventually separated from Keno, which didn't worry me. He was able to take care of himself, and there was no one here who would harm him or even offer him a discourtesy, since all knew he was my companion. While I was not the power my lady was, I was still someone to be feared. I didn't worry until I also lost sight of Inue and Inuta. I broke off my conversation as soon as I was able and went to look for Keno. I trusted Fuse, but I didn't trust her sons at all. To have both of them missing wasn't something that I liked, and I wasn't going to let them take Keno from me.

I found the three of them in the corner of the garden. The place was deserted because of the night and the rain. There was a faint mist that gave everything an unearthly glow. Inuta and Inue had managed to trap Keno, and he was huddled in a corner. I couldn't figure out why they didn't get closer until I saw the knife in his hand.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. Even in the dim light, I saw Keno shaking. “Get away!”

I was on them before they realized it. Keno made an odd sound and shrank back further. I pulled Inue back, shoving him on the ground with a growl. I probably wasn't calming Keno's fears, but I was furious to see him like this. “Sakura-chan,” I said in a low and, I hoped, calming voice, “what is wrong?”

“They want to do *that* to me!” he cried.

“I assure you that they want you for quite a different reason,” I said. It didn't reassure him. It wasn't meant to. I didn't want him to relax quite yet.

Inuta looked confused, like the ox he was. Calm and friendly, I doubted he thought beyond what he had been told about myself and Keno. He was clever, but not one for deep thought. I blamed this entire incident on Inue, Fuse's favorite. He had frightened Keno, and I didn't like that at all. Inue bounded up, and thankfully, Inuta held him back.

I didn't know when I had become more than fond of Keno, but there was something about him that attracted me, something different than his ancestor or his power. Love had snuck up on me again.

“He wouldn't talk to us,” Inuta said. “I simply—”

“I told your mother that if she wanted information, then she should ask my lady,” I snarled. “Sakura-chan—”

“He does look like a flower,” Inuta remarked, trying to defuse the situation.

“Only you, Samojirou-sama, would indulge in such perversions,” Inue sneered. “A man dressed as a woman. A whore. He should be called Chrysanthemum.”

I wasn't surprised to see Inuta slap him on the back of the head after that statement. Inue had just insulted Keno in front of me, implying that he was a low-class whore and not my consort.

“You have no manners!” Inuta exclaimed, embarrassed and annoyed. “Your mother would be so ashamed. Go back into the house and wait for me. I will try and straighten out this mess. Or do you want Samojirou-sama to call on our mother tomorrow?”

Inue stomped out of the garden, acting as if he were a child instead of a warrior.

“Do not think that you can smooth this over,” I hissed.

He shrugged. “Shinbee spoke without thought. We are curious about your companion. I had hoped that he would speak with us if he was not with you. I did not think that he would react so badly.”

“He has been abused in the past,” I said reluctantly.

“You just sought to protect him?” Inuta asked in surprise. “We thought that—”

“That I was being selfish?” I said dryly. “That I was tormenting you for spite? While I do not like all of you, I have come to terms with the anger I had for your grandfather. Especially after I saw how he treated your mother, you, and the others. The man was scum.”

Inuta grimaced. Satomi hadn’t been accepting of the fact that one of his grandsons had been a lower-class samurai, barely above a farmer, before he discovered that he was a *Hakkenshi*. “Mother wanted to know more about Sakura-dono. When I came out here, Shinbee had already driven him to this. I wanted Sakura-dono to calm down before I sent Shinbee to look for you. I... I did not trust him alone with Sakura-dono. He was not very nice to him.”

I motioned for him to step back, and I went over to talk to Keno. “Do you want to go home?”

He shivered and huddled further. “I am sorry I ruined your evening, Samojirou-sama.”

“This is not your fault,” I said gently.

“I... I’m...” Keno stuttered. “Can we go home?”

“Did you answer their questions?” I asked.

I kept my tone gentle, though I was furious. What had Shinbee done to frighten Keno like this? What had he said to him? Keno had gained a lot of confidence in himself over the last few weeks, and to see him reduced to this was disturbing. But he considered his place with me home, and that was comforting.

“I told them to talk to Tamazusa-sama,” Keno said plaintively. “But he wouldn’t stop. He kept getting closer and closer, and he was frightening... threatening me.”

Keno started crying, sobbing, and he dropped his knife. I leaned in to scoop it up, wondering where he had been carrying it. I knew *why*. Only a fool would wander around without protection. I handed it back to him, and he looked at me in confusion.

“We had better go home now,” I said.

Keno nodded. I turned to Inuta. “You and your mother will be hearing from me about this,” I said coolly.

Inuta nodded, bowing deeply before kneeling to humble himself before me. “I apologize for Shinbee’s rudeness. I will inform Mother of why you will be calling upon her. I am sorry that we... I have frightened Sakura-dono.”

“You are a brave man,” I said. He smiled, knowing that Fuse would be furious with him and Inue. “Give my regrets to our host.”

Keno stood up and went willingly into my arms. I smiled down at him. “Hold tight,” I said as we stepped into the shadows.

MASON

WE were about a half a mile from where we started when we were surrounded. The rain had stopped, but the air was still moist and nasty. We were slogging through woods that barely had a path, and I was glad

I had boots on, because I spent most of my time tripping over rocks and roots. The weak glow that passed for moonlight was useless to see by. Murphy didn't want to use the flashlights because we would be too easy to see.

One minute we were alone, and the next we were surrounded by monsters. Murphy did something that was smart and stupid at the same time: he tried to shoot one of them. Not that I blamed him; if something was popping out of nowhere in our business, then it got shot. But what sucked was the fact that none of our weapons worked. The look on his face would have been funny if it wasn't for the fact that we were defenseless.

Mixed in with the monsters were men who were dressed funny with big nasty swords. Not that I was really worried about them, but I had just found out that my nice submachine gun was nothing more than a club now. I felt really pissed and embarrassed about being overpowered by a posse of extras from a bad costume epic. The monsters were Reavers, and I didn't know too much about them besides their name. I was a point-and-shoot guy and could barely tell one monster from another at times.

All I knew about these were that they were clever fuckers. Most monsters were just eating machines, but not these guys, and it wasn't because they had no mouths. They always seemed to pop up at the wrong time and place—and not just at the gate at Boylston Street. I had done a little research about them, trying to find out who the chick had been. I learned about Reavers, not that there was much to learn about them. There was nothing about her.

The muscle boys didn't seem to be in charge of the damned things, since they looked like they were working together. Not that I could really know, because none of these people spoke English. All I knew for sure was that we were screwed. They surrounded us quickly, and while Murphy wanted to fight, the rest of us were willing to take a wait-and-see attitude. I didn't like surrendering, but I followed Wolf's lead when he dropped his gun and put his hands up. McGann was still looking freaked out, and Romejinoff was useless. Combine all that with the lack of firepower, and it made Wolf's move the smart one.

“Fucking gooks,” Murphy muttered.

“I hope that they don’t know fucking English, or they might get pissed at that one,” I hissed. He gave me a dirty look.

“Japanese,” Wolf said. “Samurai. You don’t want to anger them.”

The posse didn’t bother grabbing our weapons. They were quite content to just herd us in the direction they wanted us to go. They all had this look about them, like they could kick your ass before breakfast without even working up a sweat. I ended up helping McGann a bit because she was stumbling worse than I was. They were marching us at a steady pace through the countryside, and gradually we were walking on paths someone seemed to be taking care of. They were in better condition than the roads in Boston, but that wasn’t hard. Potholes were thicker than shit and fucking deep on Boston roads, like small cars would disappear in them deep.

The rain started again as a mist that was more annoying than anything else. I was getting chafed by my wet clothing, which was a little heavier than I wanted my clothes to be, because this place was like fucking sauna.

“You okay?” I whispered to McGann.

“Just tired,” she said.

I tried not to snort, since she looked like shit. “Something to do with your mojo?”

She looked at me. It was supposed to be a secret that McGann was the company ’path. I knew by accident. I knew Murphy knew, but I didn’t think anyone else did. I didn’t blame her for not wanting people to know about it, because even with the rules the ’paths worked under, you got paranoid about the stray thought at times. Like the one I occasionally had of her covered in whipped cream and chocolate sauce. She was hot, even if she had more testosterone than most of the guys in the organization. And she was my boss, but that didn’t stop me from having fantasies about her.

“It might be,” she finally admitted after thinking about it for a while.

“Tell me if you need anything,” I said.

She nodded, which showed me she was closer to a breakdown than she would admit, to depend on me for something.

We walked for a while before we got to any sign of civilization. The posse marched us into a walled compound. The outside walls were tall, about eight or ten feet, and I thought they were made out of a mixture of plaster and something else. Tough enough to stop any animal or monster that might wander around randomly, and I wondered what was out there that was worse than Hákarl. Or it might have just been the style of building, since I didn’t know shit about architecture.

We were escorted through a small gate room area, which almost freaked me out when I realized archers were drawing a bead on us when we spilled out into a huge courtyard. I mean huge, because the place looked bigger than the Public Gardens, even with the poor light and the mist. There were lanterns all over the place, and I could see a handful of smaller buildings and a sprawling one with a tower off in the distance, besides the big one in front of us. Everything was one story except for the tower. Weird. One of the guys who captured us wandered off, but the rest of them stayed to keep an eye on us. I guess he was getting whoever owned this place. They were all staring at us, and I was pretty sure they didn’t see a lot of blacks or Europeans here.

“We are so fucked,” I muttered.

Murphy looked at me like I was nuts. “I’d figured it out before this,” I said harshly.

Wolf was looking around, checking the place out. Murphy was doing the same. McGann was shivering, and I moved closer to Romejinoff.

“Be useful and keep an eye on McGann; if the shit hits the fan, pair up with her,” I said. “And get off of Wolf’s ass, it’s the worst place to be in a fight, trust me.”

She looked at me like I was something nasty she had stepped in but nodded and moved to McGann’s side. I moved closer to Wolf.

“We have such a fun fucking job,” I said.

Murphy shot me a dirty look.

Wolf shrugged. "This looks vaguely familiar," he muttered.

"It's a nice place, but I still don't want to be here," I said.

There was some sort of commotion in back of us, and I turned to look. Some tall guy was walking through the front door like he owned it, with a woman beside him. He looked pissed off, and she looked cute, like a little doll, with what she was wearing. Both of them looked dressed up in fancy duds, while his were some dark color, hers were eye-catching bright colors, even in the bad moonlight. She had some sort of white crap on her face and enough weird wooden stuff in her hair for three women. I guess it was some sort of jewelry. They hadn't bothered with an umbrella, but their clothing didn't look wet. I wondered where the hell they had been, because this place didn't look like it had anything like a nightlife. We had checked the place out, and this was about the only sign of civilization for miles, besides little huts even I figured farmers or serfs lived in between fields of rice or whatever they grew here for crops.

The man stopped, and one of the Reavers wandered over to them with the head of the posse to talk to him. I guess he owned the place. I nudged Wolf, and he turned around.

"I guess that someone is having a bad night," I said. "Or he doesn't like unexpected company."

I wasn't surprised to see that the Reaver moved so it was standing between us and the chick. After a minute of talking, they all started to walk forward. The chick was taking these tiny, weird steps, swaying slightly. I noticed that her shoes were high, like bad pimp shoes from the seventies. Romejinoff was sneering, and for some reason that pissed me off. I knew there wasn't a lot that woman could do in a society where swinging a sword was a guy thing, but Romejinoff wasn't one to throw stones about shit like that. She could be his sister or his wife, so Romejinoff shouldn't be such a bitch about things. I was surprised that one of the Reavers was hovering over her like a fucking nanny and she was cool with it. The chick stopped for a second to stare at us and then started moving again, the head guy herding her away from us outsiders, like we were going to hurt her or something.

“The Japanese don’t have a high opinion of other races and cultures,” Wolf said quietly.

I snorted. It would be nice to see Murphy getting the shit he usually handed out. “It isn’t the first time that I was considered an ignorant nigger,” I said.

Wolf looked confused. Some shit doesn’t get understood, no matter how long you were in the country, and Wolf didn’t understand racism at all, from what I could figure out. We all waited in the compound for a couple more minutes before being “escorted” into the big building. If the wait had been to make us nervous, it worked.

KENO

I WAS ashamed that I had broken down like that, but Inue had been hissing threats, and Inuta was just so *big*! I panicked and had a feeling that they were going to drag me off someplace that wasn’t nice and hurt me.

“I apologize for my unseemly behavior, Samojirou-sama,” I whispered when we arrived back at Tamazusa’s compound. We were outside it, which surprised me.

“I was hoping,” he started, “that things would not get that far. I am going to have to invite their mother to tea and discuss her sons’ shocking lack of manners.”

“But I—”

“Inue-sama frightened you,” he said kindly. Samojirou leaned over and kissed the top of my head. “And you have been doing so well! Okita-san mentioned that you have been getting better when you spar.”

“Okita-san is just being kind,” I said. “It’s only because he has been helping me.” I tilted my head back to look at Samojirou. Okita

had gone out of his way to reassure me that it was okay to hit the others back, that I could do the best I could, and that they wouldn't get mad at me. I had finally started believing it a couple of weeks ago.

Samojirou smiled and motioned to my knife. "And you should put that back where it belongs," he said. "I hope that you will not object to a small walk before we go home? I know that the gardens are delightful, but there is something about nature at night that is pleasing too."

"I would enjoy that," I murmured.

So that was why we were outside the walls. The night was nice, a bit damp though. I wasn't too hot, even under all the layers I was wearing. The trouble would be toddling along in my high *geta* on the rough paths. But I thought that was some of the reason Samojirou wanted the walk. It was an excuse to touch me without scaring me. We walked, Samojirou making snide comments about the other people at the party, which eventually got me giggling. I know, guys didn't giggle, but dressed like this, I giggled. We weren't too far from the estate when Samojirou stopped with a small frown.

"Someone has been through here recently, and it does not look like someone who belongs here," he said.

I wasn't worried; he still had his swords, and I had my knife. We quickened the pace, though, until we arrived at the compound. I couldn't see what he had, but his night vision was much better than mine, because he wasn't human anymore. Samojirou strode into the place, and Okita hurried over to meet us.

"Tamazusa-sama felt someone gate into her territories and sent us and the Reavers to check it out in case there was some sort of trouble. We found those outlanders. One is dead, buried in the woods, killed as he arrived by their magic," he told Samojirou. "We brought the others back here, as she wanted."

One of the Reavers moved closer to me, standing between me and the strangers, spreading its wings a little, so they couldn't really see me. I knew that it was to protect me and was oddly touched. I didn't know when they had stopped being scary monsters; I didn't know what they

did with or for Tamazusa, but a number of them were always there. I couldn't tell them apart, but that didn't seem to matter. There was always one with me, looking out for me when I was not with Samojirou.

"My lady's plans are always wise," Samojirou said. "And will she talk to them?"

"In a few minutes," Okita said. "We are waiting, to put them off guard."

"I will join her," Samojirou said. "She is in the main hall?" Okita nodded. "Give us five more minutes or so before you bring in the outsiders," Samojirou instructed.

Okita nodded again, and we started walking to join Tamazusa. I wondered what I was supposed to be doing. Did they want me there? Or in Samojirou's quarters? What was the Reaver guarding me for? Granted, these were the first people who didn't belong here, like me, who I'd seen. They were probably a threat, since they were outsiders. I had figured out that people who weren't part of your clan or your group weren't to be trusted. It was strange that Tamazusa had brought me home like she did, without restricting what I could do. I thought she knew I was harmless.

I passed by, trying to get a look at them without looking like I was gawking. I had a lot of practice at this from my time in Boylston Street. I stumbled when I realized two of the men were Wolf and Mason. It was hard to tell, because they were in armor, but it was them. I wondered how they had gotten here. I recognized Murphy after that, and then McGann and Romejinoff.

I waited until we were out of earshot before I spoke. I knew I should feel bad about telling Samojirou about the others, but with the exception of Wolf and Mason, none of them had ever shown me any sort of kindness. I owed them nothing.

"Samojirou-sama," I whispered. "I know the ones who are in the courtyard. They are from the place that I had been before here."

Samojirou stopped and looked at me, frowning. “They are some of the ones who abused you?”

“Yes,” I said, “and no. Mason and Wolf, they tried to be nice. I think that it was because they felt bad about what had happened. Mason, he brought me coffee and didn’t want anything in return, and he protected me from the others, the mean TCs. Wolf... he tried to be nice, but there wasn’t a lot that he could do. He talked with me, though and kept me company when he didn’t have to.”

“Then you should be there when they are questioned by my lady,” he said.

I nodded. I wasn’t going to tell him no; that thought never even crossed my mind. I also knew they weren’t going to recognize me. I had usually been dressed in sweats and T-shirts around them. I trailed behind Samojirou, as usual, when he walked into the main hall.

The place was impressive. It was about seven meters wide and seventeen meters long, maybe a bit bigger, since it was laid with *tatami* mats, the traditional floor covering used here. Tamazusa was kneeling at the other end, looking imposing and elegant, even in a simple black kimono. She looked like a statue, but I saw that she was happy to see Samojirou. He strode quickly to her and started talking, while I hurried behind him. I automatically bowed in greeting when I got close. She smiled.

“Samojirou-sama mentioned to me that you know these people,” Tamazusa said.

I nodded, my mouth dry, wondering for a second if I was doing the right thing. Then I remembered how scared I had been over the last few years and how good these two were to me, and I knew I was doing the right thing. I wasn’t betraying anyone here by giving Tamazusa information about Murphy and others in the Trust.

“I had been wondering if someone would try to come here,” she mused. “I would like you to attend me also,” she said. “Do not hesitate to tell me something that you think is important.” She hesitated for a second. “Sak... Keno, we were not any better than those who held you before. I simply gave you to Samojirou-sama, as if you were property.”

I shook my head. I didn't miss the fact that she stumbled over my name. I felt that I was Sakura more than Keno at times. Samojirou seemed to be the only one who remembered my given name. "Tamazusa-sama, I owe them nothing. You have given me a life. You may think that it is nothing, but it is the world to me. I don't want to see Mason and Wolf hurt, but that's about it."

CHAPTER 9

MASON

I WAS marched into the most fucking intimidating room I had ever been in, including the courtroom I had been sentenced in. It was big, it was covered in gold leaf on the walls and ceiling, and it was bare as all hell, no fucking furniture. The back wall was painted with some sort of mural of trees and flowers, and the place was lit with strange-looking lamps. More muscle boys and monsters were lined up on either side of the room, watching us like we were going to attack them or something. At end of the room with the mural were Mr. Pissed Off, the chick, and another woman.

That woman was more scary and impressive than McGann ever was. She was dressed in a dark outfit, and she was also kneeling on what looked like a pile of mats, raised above everyone here, sitting as still as a statue and radiating an “I own every fucking thing I see” vibe to me. The chick was kneeling behind and to the left of her on the floor, and Mr. PO was standing behind both of them. Even I could figure out from the set up that this woman was the one in charge. I just wanted to know who the players were supposed to be. Why was she in charge and not a man? Not that I had anything against women in power, even McGann knew that, but in places like this, weren’t men in charge and women barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen? Who was the chick? Where the fuck were we, actually? Why hadn’t they killed us?

Murphy and Wolf took the front, McGann and Romejinoff were in the middle, and I was tail-end Charlie. Most everyone in here looked at us like we were trash. Well, not the Reavers, because they had no eyes. I was pissed, but since Murphy was getting the same treatment, amused too.

“What are you doing here?” the woman demanded.

I was surprised she knew English. I was pretty sure no one else did. She didn’t have much of an accent, either. You could always cut Keno’s and Wolf’s with a knife. So us Americans were right, and English was spoken every place, even wherever this place was.

“We...” Murphy started before lying through his teeth, “we are simple explorers.”

She looked down her nose at him. She wasn’t buying that line. I wanted to tell her that as invasion force, we were a bust, so could she get us home? But I wasn’t too sure Murphy wasn’t telling the truth by the fact that we *were* just exploring the place even if we’d been loaded for bear. It was just that I knew the Trust, and I didn’t think they were interested in *only* exploring this place. Turning it into a wasteland or their own private fief was more their style. I had heard some rumors about what was going on with Global International and some of the “hot spots” they were working, shit I knew the UN didn’t know about. Stuff that the American public would shit bricks about if they knew or cared about it.

“I am Tamazusa. I know that you opened a gate in my *kuni*, and I know that you are not from here. What do you want?”

“Why are my people and I here?” Murphy demanded. “We did you no harm! We were just traveling to the nearest sign of habitation.”

“You are here because to wander around this place without protection will get you killed,” Tamazusa said coolly.

The chick hissed something rapidly, and the woman answered her. I didn’t know what either one of them were saying; it wasn’t English. I thought the man would be even more annoyed that he wasn’t in on this, but he just stared at us like a snake or a cat. I had the feeling

that he was the muscle here, while the woman was the brains. I just had to figure out the chick. The woman in black was probably Mr. PO's wife. Maybe this was a place that women ran things, like the Greek chicks, the Amazons had?

McGann swayed for a second, and I stepped forward to catch her. "It's her," she hissed, and she straightened up.

It took me second to figure out what she was talking about—I guessed the woman here was the one who had been in Boylston Street. But where the hell was Keno? I can see why she wasn't telling anyone else, because the woman would want to know how we got that information. A 'path could be someone who was killed on sight here, and you didn't want to tip the bad guys to your secret weapon. Our other secret was that Wolf spoke Japanese and was fairly fluent because of Keno.

"How do you know that we don't have protection?" Wolf blurted out. Murphy shot him a dirty look for talking out of turn.

Tamazusa smiled, and I saw that she was beautiful. "I know that the things that are called guns do not work here. So you are defenseless. There are many who would take advantage of this. I will not. You will be my guests and discuss your 'exploration' with me in the morning. It is late, and you must be tired."

Murphy nodded. He knew there wasn't a lot he could do or argue about talking longer with this woman. Tamazusa clapped her hands, and a couple of the posse strode forward and started motioning where we were supposed to go.

AS prison cells went, it wasn't that bad, one big room with what looked like sleeping bags laid out for all of us, but no other furniture. I'd be pissed, but I'd figured out that these people didn't do furniture or a lot of decorations. There were a couple of murals on the wall, flowers and some other stuff. It was pretty, but I didn't like the paper walls. Snack trays were delivered by a couple cute, giggly girls, and it would

have been nice, except for the fact that the posse and the monsters were patrolling the area so we wouldn't wander off.

"Don't eat the food," Murphy snapped.

Wolf shrugged. "She won't poison us yet. In fact, things could be a lot worse."

"She's the one who was in Boylston Street that night," McGann said.

"She was the one who killed James?" Romejinoff quivered. She was trying to look cute and helpless. It might have worked if I didn't know what a cunt she was.

"Someone that tough and mean is what's needed to be in charge of this place," I said. "She's both. Fucking impressive."

I didn't add that I thought she was hot, but from the way McGann was looking at me, she'd caught that thought. Or it just could be that she knew me; I did have a rep for thinking too much with my dick at times.

"You noticed that too," Wolf said. "I didn't catch what the other woman was telling her. The accent was too odd, and she was talking too low. It sounded like they were talking in Japanese, but it just didn't sound right."

"What was with the way she was dressed?" I asked. "The white face makes it look like she's from a minstrel show."

"She's a whore," Romejinoff sneered. "The makeup and what she was wearing, that's the clothing of the pleasure class."

I bit my tongue so I wouldn't comment that it took one to know one, and Wolf looked faintly embarrassed. I guess he didn't like knowing that about a woman. "In Japanese society, most wives don't mind that their husband has a mistress, but usually they don't live with them," he said.

"This is an isolated place," Murphy said, "it's kind of hard to keep your bit on the side in a house away from the wife."

“She also might encourage it to keep him out of her bed,” Romejinoff said nastily.

“And while Tamazusa might be in charge here, she may keep that man around because she needs one to deal with the others around here,” Wolf said. “But I noticed that she was the only one who told us her name.”

“Not like *we* were being too friendly,” I said.

“Interesting power structure here,” McGann said thoughtfully. “This Tamazusa is definitely in charge; I just don’t know about the relationship between her and the other two. While she might be married to that man, I can’t tell. He could be her chief retainer or her husband or her brother. That other woman might be an advisor as well as the man’s mistress. She could be Tamazusa’s mistress. They could all be family, for all we know. We just don’t have enough information to know what is going on here.”

McGann started nibbling on what food was there, volunteering to be the guinea pig for us in case Tamazusa was going to poison us. I thought it would have been better if it were Romejinoff, since that bitch was useless to us and it might solve a couple of problems if she bought it.

“Not bad,” she said, after a couple of bites.

“If you can say that when you’re dying from those gooks poisoning you, then I’ll believe you,” Murphy snarled.

“That fucking attitude is what’s going to get us all killed,” I said. I kept my tone even. Now was not the time to be dealing with this shit. Throwing that word around wasn’t a good idea, even if no one else spoke English. For all I knew, all these guys spoke English, including the fucking Reavers. Murphy glared at me. I glared back. “She knows English. How many of her people know it? And where the fuck is Keno?”

“If she’s the one who was in Boylston Street, as Caitlynn said, then we should ask her about him,” Wolf said.

“He might not be alive,” McGann said gently. “None of the people here are human, that much I know.”

“No shit,” Murphy sneered.

“So don’t be such an asshole, and we might get out of here,” I said. “And how the fuck are we supposed to go home? You know the mojo that can do it? Without carving up someone for it?”

“What do you mean?” Wolf asked.

“I *mean* a sacrifice is needed to get our asses out of here,” I snarled. “Like the one that got us here. Isn’t that right?”

Dead silence followed that announcement, and I didn’t like the way Murphy was looking at me. Wolf and Romejinoff looked shocked, while McGann just looked tired. I guess by spilling the beans that way, I was gonna be the one carved into chitlins to get the rest of them home.

SAMOJIROU

I WAS proud of Keno during the interview with the outsiders. He had warned my lady about what exactly the weapons the outsiders carried did and what danger they were to us, showing her his loyalty to her, not that I doubted it. Keno also explained who these people were, since Tamazusa didn’t ask for their names and the outsiders didn’t have the courtesy to give them to her. These outsiders had no manners.

We waited until the outsiders were settled before walking back to our rooms. They were in the same wing as we were and far away from Tamazusa’s quarters.

“Samojirou-sama,” Keno said when we were back in our bedroom. Yukiko wasn’t there to help him, but I was very willing to do so. She was taking care of the outsiders, showing them that we had

manners by the way we were treating them as guests instead of prisoners. "I... could we share a bed tonight?"

I smiled. "I think that is a delightful idea."

I didn't know why he wanted to, but I knew I would feel better if he were curled in my arms tonight. I didn't trust the outsiders, even with the Reavers and the samurai patrolling my lady's home.

"Let me help you get ready for sleep," I said.

I carefully undid the layers of kimonos, placing them in a corner on their rack. The maids could take care of the mess in the morning. I teased the combs out of his hair. Keno removed his makeup, and I marveled at the transformation. Out of the kimono and makeup, Keno looked like the warrior that he could be. He was combing out his hair when he looked up with a small frown.

"I'm going to continue to be girl Sakura, since there are TCs here," he said. "It... I don't want them to know that I am here. Not so much Wolf and Mason, but the others. I don't trust them not to hurt me or do something stupid."

I nodded and leaned over to give him a kiss on his forehead. "I must confess that I am selfish, and I do not want you to talk to them."

Keno was silent, watching me as I made my own preparations for bed. When I was settled in my futon, he crawled in with me.

"I don't want to talk to them," he whispered, burying his head on my chest. "Murphy... just let me tell you that his favorite word for me is 'gook'. It's some sort of insult that I don't understand. Mason and Wolf... I just want to tell them that I'm all right."

"What does TC stand for?" I asked. I had no idea what he was talking about. I was too pleased that he had willingly joined me in bed. Keno relaxed and talking in my arms was more than I had expected tonight. In the beginning, he would have been stiff and unresponsive at my attention to him. I kissed the top of his head again.

"Trouble Consultant," he said drowsily. "But McGann and Romejinoff aren't that."

“What do they do?”

“They don’t go into situations like this,” he said. “Romejinoff’s mean and calls me names. She was living with Heiseg. McGann, she stared at me a lot. She’s kind of in charge at Boylston Street too. I got most of my assignments from her.”

“Interesting,” I said, keeping my tone just the opposite. I knew he had no idea what he was telling me, that this was important to Tamazusa and myself. Information about the enemy always was. So they might be what they claimed if they were sending noncombatants here with their fighters. “What did this Romejinoff woman do besides abuse you?”

“She’s an expert on ‘esoteric science’,” Keno said. “I have no idea what that is supposed to be.”

I laughed, and Keno burrowed into my arms. “You find the oddest things funny,” he said sleepily. In a few minutes, he had dropped off to sleep, and I gradually drifted off myself.

MY Keno was still sleeping when I awoke the next day. It was early, so I simply held him. I didn’t realize that he was awake until he spoke.

“I don’t want to leave with them,” he said quietly. “I’m happy here. You and Tamazusa-sama are kind to me. I didn’t even freak out at the thought of sleeping with you.”

“I am glad,” I said. That had been one of my worries—that he wanted to go back to the real world. I didn’t know why he would want to, but I had been irrationally worried about it.

“You want to try?” he asked.

“You have nothing to prove to me,” I said softly. “That you are offering is enough.”

I felt him shift and relax when I refused his offer. He wasn't as certain about it as he had appeared. And I didn't want to be rushed or interrupted, so I was willing to wait.

"I feel that I should discuss the outsiders with my lady," I told him. "To see what she wants to do with them."

"They probably slept in shifts," Keno said. "I'd have thought...."

"What?" I asked.

"That there'd be more of them. McGann and Romejinoff aren't people who go out in the field. Neither is Murphy. So why are they here? Why isn't it a strike team of all TCs? Exploring isn't what's happening with them. They managed to open a gate here for another reason. And how did they get here?"

I laughed. "We understand that. But it is your information about who these people are that is important. I think something they plotted did not end as it should."

Keno frowned. "That might be true; I don't know. I think that this is the first time that they've done something like this."

"Or the first time that it succeeded. I also think that you should continue with your morning as planned," I said. "Okita-san wants to see you on the practice field before breakfast. If he is not there, there still will be someone to spar with. In fact, it might be something that would impress the outsiders if they saw it."

Keno looked up at me with a frown on his face. The boy had no idea how skilled he had become over the last few months. He wasn't a strong fighter, but he was quick. Deadly remained to be seen. I didn't want him to kill. His ancestor had been covered in blood before I had known him. I wanted this Keno to be the innocent he was for a while longer, if not forever.

He leaned over and kissed me before sitting back on his heels. "I don't know if I should. What if they see me?"

I smiled. "Then they will see a warrior."

Keno stared back, a confused look on his face. He didn't think of himself as fighter. He didn't realize it was just one of the skills he had learned here. While he was quick-witted, he was hopeless in poetry or *roku* contests, because he lacked the literary references he needed to create a poem in harmony with the rest of the contestants. But he enjoyed listening on the nights the samurai had the contests. He had a beautiful hand for calligraphy, a growing interest in *ikebana*, and was adept with the tea ceremony. He flirted with me in public with a confidence I never thought he would have. Keno was a consort I could prize. If only he would realize it, I would be happy.

“Would you be angry if they didn't see me again?” Keno asked.

I thought for a second. “You mean that you would prefer to distance yourself from those who knew you before?”

I wouldn't call them his friends. Not with what little that he had or had not told me. As we had shared quiet talks in the evenings, over tea, looking at the stars, I had gotten to know him more than he knew. And I didn't want him to be hurt by these people. If he wanted to hide, then I would let him.

Keno nodded, and I smiled. “I do not think that you need dress as elaborately as you do for the evenings. Something simple would do. And do not hesitate if you feel a need to defend yourself.”

Keno nodded and thought for a second. He frowned, looking up at me uncertainly. “I think that you and Tamazusa-sama should know this. Wolf's pretty fluent in Japanese. We... we talked a lot. He speaks a couple of other languages too. I think that Romejinoff does too. That might be the reason that she's here, but McGann's an administrator; she shouldn't be here.”

I nodded, trying and succeeding in hiding the joy that I felt. While it was not strictly honorable that Keno had shared this information, it showed me that he was more loyal to Tamazusa and myself than to the ones who had been his friends. Keno was making his own choices about his life. One of them was to tell me something I knew the outsiders would want to keep hidden.

I leaned over and brushed my lips across his forehead. “Thank you for telling me this.”

Keno blushed. “I forgot about it last night. Stupid. Um, I should have remembered. Wolf... Wolf was about the only person that was nice to me.”

“You have not betrayed him,” I assured him.

He looked guilty and frightened. But he nodded after a moment and got dressed for his practice bout. After he was dressed, Keno hesitated for a second before he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and ran off to the samurai’s practice yard. I couldn’t help but feel inordinately pleased by the small gesture.

CHAPTER 10

MASON

I GOT stuck with last watch. The girls didn't get guard duty, since Romejinoff was useless and McGann wasn't feeling too good. I was the only one who was awake when Tamazusa walked into the room like she owned it. Well, she did. She wasn't alone either. Mr. PO was with her, and a couple of muscle men. No monsters, and I liked that.

I nodded good morning to her and leaned over to wake up Murphy and Wolf. She looked faintly peeved, and I grinned. "I have no fucking manners, trust me. Am I supposed to bow or something?"

Her face went blank, and Mr. PO looked amused. "Tamazusa-sama, are you not always telling me that no one has manners nowadays?"

So he spoke English also, in the same bland, accentless, "I should be on television" tone she had. I wondered how they had learned it. There didn't seem to be anyone else around here who spoke English.

She sighed and nodded, gesturing to him. "This is Samojirou Aboshi." He bowed at all of us.

No one said anything. I got up and sort of bowed and started gesturing at myself and the rest of the party. "Mason Cairns. James

Murphy and Wolf Dieter. The ladies are Anya Romejinoff and Caitlynn McGann.”

The rest of the group looked shocked. I thought Murphy should have handled this, or McGann, but Murphy wasn't saying anything. I knew I beat Wolf by a hair doing the introductions. That and I actually acted like I had something called manners. I usually didn't, which was why I was the tough/bad cop when I worked with anyone.

“What should happen is that you all need a trip to the *onsen*,” Tamazusa announced. “Your clothing is too heavy for here, and you....”

“Stink,” I finished for her.

She wasn't amused. I knew that I should fucking fear her after what had happened to Heiseg, but I couldn't resist being a smartass. She was dangerous, and while her maybe-husband was the one who was walking around with the sword, she was the one to watch. Hell, I didn't think she worked up a sweat turning Heiseg into JELL-O. I wondered if people just croaked when she said frog. And while I thought she was beautiful, I didn't want to get into bed with her. It could have been because she could fuck me over, and I liked fucking women who were less dangerous. Or it could have been that she was giving off a “not interested” vibe that meant she *really* wasn't interested, if even I could pick it up. So what did Samojirou do for his jollies? The chick from last night? Why did Tamazusa put up with it? Why did she only have one name, and he had two? Why was I sweating the small shit for once?

“Shut up, Cairns,” Murphy growled. “And what makes you think that we're going to—”

“Do you have a choice?” Samojirou asked. “It will be better and more comfortable for all of you if you bathe. We are here to escort you the baths and supply you with clothing that is more appropriate to the climate here. We can talk while we soak, and then you may break your fast. I assure you that this is just what it seems.”

I shrugged. I didn't believe the guy, but I was sweaty and dirty, and I wanted a hot bath. Coffee would be nice too. I doubted that they

had that here. From the snacks last night, tea was what was served here instead. Some sort of alcohol too, rice wine according to Wolf. McGann was the only one who had touched it. She had liked it and mentioned that it packed quite a punch. It was probably about the only thing that let her sleep.

“Samojirou-sama, would you escort the gentlemen to the *onsen*? The samurai’s. I will take the ladies with me,” Tamazusa said.

Even I heard the order in her tone of voice. He wasn’t pissed though; he expected her to give the orders. He was... amused wasn’t the right word, but it was close. What was their relationship? Married? Relatives? He was her boy toy? It was bugging me because I needed shit like this explained to me and then I was happy. That was about the only reason I was almost obsessing over their relationship.

“Of course, my lady,” he said. He looked over at us. “If you will follow me?”

I shrugged, Wolf looked blank, and Murphy was pissed. Wolf was retreating into being a good little tin soldier, and I expected him to start on the name, rank, and serial number crap. I didn’t blame him. I didn’t like that we were fucking prisoners, but there wasn’t a shitload I could do about it. It wasn’t like there was any place for us to go. I just hoped that these people weren’t softening us up to be a sacrifice or something else weird. We got one of the muscle men with us, and the other one stayed with the women. I was worried for a second, but decided McGann could take care of herself.

Samojirou led us out of that room, into a garden, down a long path, and past an open space. I didn’t need Wolf to tell me that this was their version of a gym/practice area. There was a bunch of guys standing around and heckling a couple of the guys who were practicing. I was kind of relieved to see they were using wooden sticks instead of the real thing.

Samojirou stopped to watch with a huge smile on his face. I was mellow about it, but Murphy looked pissed again. Yeah, I wanted a hot shower, but it wasn’t going to kill me to wait. I was impressed by the way the guys were going at each other. The shorter one was quick, but I wouldn’t want to get hit by the other guy. He was built like a brick

shithouse. Not that there was a lot going on, most of the time it was them standing still, and then a flurry of activity, and then the two of them sprung back. I thought Samojirou was driving in the lesson that his people could kick our asses. I didn't blame him; he didn't want his people hurt by our stupidity, even if Tamazusa was the one calling the shots.

"I fear that I—" Samojirou started.

"That's Keno," Wolf blurted.

I looked again. The little guy had his hair pulled up into a high ponytail. There was a look of concentration and determination on his face that I could see even this far away. I'd seen that look when Keno was hacking for us. He was handling that stick like he knew how to use it, with a confidence I'd never seen before. That was a scary thought: Keno with a real weapon in his hands.

Wolf started to step forward, and I grabbed him. He glared, and I shook my head. I was glad that Keno was okay and shit like that, but I didn't want Murphy to scream at him. I had a feeling it wasn't a good idea. Samojirou looked at me and smiled, that same snake feeling coming off him that I got the night before.

"There is no one here with that name," Samojirou said coolly.

Wolf opened his mouth to argue about it and closed it again.

"Fucking gooks," Murphy muttered.

From the way Samojirou stiffened, he knew what that meant. We all just had to figure out what Keno had told them, if he was still here. Or was that the reason we were still alive? Keno was protecting our asses? I didn't like that. Samojirou smiled at us coldly and motioned to keep on going.

We got to this hut, for lack of a better term, after a quick walk to the end of the practice field. I stepped inside, and the place looked like a very high-class bathroom with a big tub, filled with steaming water. If the thing had bubbles, I would be in heaven.

“Scrub down first,” Wolf informed us, “everywhere. Then you soak in the tub.”

“I see that one of you is a civilized being,” Samojirou said.

“I told that nice lady that I had no manners,” I said.

I started stripping down. I had no trouble with being naked around Wolf and Murphy. Prison made me lose a lot of body issues. Wolf peeled out of his clothing, no problem. Murphy glared us at all for a minute and started washing. What I didn't like was that Samojirou was getting naked with us. I guess he hadn't had his morning shower either.

Out of his clothing, he reminded me more of a snake than ever. There wasn't anything I could put my finger on, but I knew he was *off*. Maybe it was the fact that his body was hairless. I wasn't checking him out, but it was something I noticed. And it wasn't like he wasn't staring too. I was pissed for a second but I remembered that he probably hadn't seen a black guy before, or it could be the tattoos, since I had a lot from the joint. Some of them were nice and others weren't, but all of them were part of me, and I wasn't ashamed of them.

I wasn't going to start nagging him about Keno, because I wasn't that much of an idiot. Subtlety was what was going to get us information. Thinking and planning, two things I was piss-poor at. I knew my limitations. I wasn't dumb, but that shit was beyond me. I didn't have the patience to deal with it.

I scrubbed down and joined Wolf in the tub. Murphy eventually got in, peeing and moaning. I noticed that Samojirou was checking out Wolf too. The hot water relaxed me, and I had the stray thought that this was probably helping McGann.

I looked over at Samojirou. “You two aren't doing anything weird with the girls?”

Murphy coughed at me for calling McGann a girl. Wolf looked worried for a moment.

Samojirou shook his head. “I assure you that my lady will not take advantage of your ladies' virtue. She... such things are distasteful to her.”

I was about to say more when the gang from the field wandered in, talking and laughing. I wasn't the only one who noticed Keno wasn't with them. It wasn't hard: most of these guys were adult, tall, and well muscled, something that Keno wasn't. Wolf and I exchanged glances, worried about him.

"Who's the big guy?" I asked. "And where... He got his ass kicked, didn't he?"

"He is called Kazuya-san. He is a squad leader here."

The Kazuya guy was talking a mile a minute, waving his hands around, looking pissed and happy at the same time. I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on. The rest of them were teasing him, and I would have sworn that money or something was changing hands with a couple of them. I looked over at Samojirou.

"If I understand what you are saying, then yes, Kazuya-san was not the victor here," Samojirou said slyly.

"So the winner doesn't hang with the posse?" I asked.

"Posse?" Samojirou repeated, sounding confused. I liked the fact that he had no clue what I was talking about.

I waved my left arm around, hoping it wasn't an insulting gesture. "The men here. They all work for Tamazusa-sama. They are what my people would call a posse. A gang—"

"A squad or cadre," Wolf added. "Not to be—"

"Both of you...." Murphy started, sounding really pissed.

I looked at him. Wolf went blank again, and Samojirou smiled, bland and dangerous at the same time.

"I understand that you are all different races, different people," Samojirou said. "Does that mean that you are from different groups? Or are all the same 'posse'?"

"Fucking A, Mason!" Murphy exploded. "What—"

“We work together,” Wolf said quickly, trying to have Murphy not melt down on us. “All of us. McGann and Anya are scientists. They study things.”

Samojirou nodded. I wasn’t too sure, but I bet he had picked up the sneers Romejinoff had been throwing the chick. I wasn’t too sure what their relationship was or even if there was one. They could have just gone out to the local equivalent of a movie or something like that yesterday, as friends. For all I knew, she wasn’t fucking him and was here because she wrangled Reavers.

Murphy was acting like he had a very large stick up his ass, but then, I *was* managing to piss him off more and more often lately. Him being angry wasn’t anything new to me.

“You mentioned that you were exploring the Dreamlands,” Samojirou said, ignoring the tension Murphy was giving off. “What were you looking for?”

Now was the time to mention that we were looking for someone named Keno, but something made me keep my mouth shut. Wolf didn’t say anything either. Murphy looked surprised that we were both keeping our mouths shut.

While the rest of the posse was cleaning up and slipping into other tubs, they were checking me, well, all of us out. I actually was a little freaked out about everyone staring at me. Last time that had happened, I had ended up in the infirmary after an ambush in the yard. I kicked ass, but I had been outnumbered. A couple of the guys started looking at my tattoos and gesturing and talking to Samojirou. He looked amused at the questions.

“The men want to know if the additional coloring is natural, or if it is not, what they mean,” Samojirou said to me, not waiting for Murphy’s answer about the exploration, giving him time to think up a bullshit story.

I was beginning to think that neither he nor Tamazusa cared why we were here. Maybe how we had gotten here, but not really. I wondered if Murphy and McGann had even bothered with something like a cover story. Me? I really didn’t care. But I was curious about

why these two weren't upset about finding us here, and how they had managed to track us in the middle of the woods, when we didn't even know where the hell we were.

Murphy snorted over Samojirou's words, and I resisted the urge to pop him one. Sad thing was that the only ex-cop in the place gave me less shit about this than everyone else. Murphy and the rest of the ex-military guys were always acting like I was an idiot because I had been in prison.

"They're tattoos," I answered. "I got them when I was in prison."

Samojirou nodded and translated. Wolf shook his head and said, "You might have put your foot in it."

I shrugged. "What else is new?"

More talking and Samojirou nodding a lot. I was surprised these guys didn't act like he was the boss, but they respected him. So that meant that Tamazusa really was in charge. I guess the trick of turning someone's insides into JELL-O got you a lot of respect. But I thought that even without that, the woman had a huge set of brass ones.

"Our tattoos are more colorful," Samojirou said eventually. "That is why they asked."

"While I know that only the Yakuza are tattooed," Wolf said, "many people get tattoos where we are. It is a fad for the young right now."

"Fucking idiots that should know better," Murphy said. "If my kids—"

"I think that it might be over when Sean and James get old enough," Wolf said.

Samojirou smiled. "Your children?"

"Grandchildren," Murphy growled. He remembered his manners for a moment. "They live with me because their father is in the military and their mother was killed in an accident."

“And if I may ask, why you were in prison?” Samojirou asked me.

“I killed a couple of monsters that looked human,” I said bluntly. Wolf and Murphy winced. So much for me being polite to our host. They should have known it wouldn’t last. “They were hurting kids, but that never came out at the trial. They were things that were just wearing human suits.”

“That can be said of some of us here,” Samojirou said with a smile.

“Only if you’re actually a Hákarl and squished yourself into that body like it was clothing. That’s what I meant. But they were too messed up to tell what they were, and I got a trip to the slammer.”

Samojirou nodded, looking thoughtful. “That is an interesting story.”

“I ain’t going to freak out and start whapping the Reavers,” I said. “Not unless they start it. I don’t like ’em, but the feeling is probably mutual.”

“You know what they are?” Samojirou asked.

I was getting a weird vibe off the guy, but it could have been because he was playing some sort of game. The guy was definitely a suit and should be watched, but me playing dumb and friendly wasn’t going to matter if there was a plan and I didn’t know it. I thought he knew it too and was just going to let me run my mouth off and see what he could get from me.

“Just what the scientists tell me. Bat wings? No face? Horns? They tell me that’s what’s known as a Reaver. I don’t know what they do besides stand around and be creepy. Usually hanging with another monster.”

Wolf winced, knowing it was an insult. I laughed shakily, hoping that Samojirou didn’t decide killing me was a good idea because I had insulted him by accident. “Shit, that sounded bad.”

Samojirou smiled. “The Reavers are my lady’s allies.”

“Fuck,” I swore. JELL-O, here I come. “Well, I meant to say that they hang around with other uglies. And while I get myself deeper into this, I don’t think that she’s ugly or a monster. She hasn’t shown me anything that would make me think that.”

Samojirou smiled a strange smile, and Wolf and Murphy just stared. I was in deep shit and was going to get reamed a new one as soon as we were alone. But I didn’t think either Samojirou or Tamazusa were going to be the ones to do it, so I was happy. Because either one of them could rip me a new asshole for real—not figuratively.

KENO

I WAS finishing my drill with the samurai when Samojirou came by with Wolf, Mason, and Murphy. I wasn’t really paying any sort of attention to them. We’d had bow practice, and now it was the time for individual practice bouts. A few of the other samurai had sparred, but now it was time for me to spar with Kazuya. He was one of the squad leaders here and as big as a mountain. He was also one of the gentlest men I knew, when he wasn’t swinging a sword.

“Do not hurt me too badly, Blossom,” Kazuya teased.

I didn’t think I was going to be able to hit him at all, never mind hurt him.

Okita laughed. “You are fast enough, Sakura, to get past his guard, and you are not going to hurt him, no matter what he tells you.”

I didn’t know. We were using *bokken* and practice armor without helmets or face protectors. Stupid, because I was the only one who really had to worry about a head injury. I wasn’t going to be able to hit Kazuya on the head unless I levitated. He was good enough that he wouldn’t hit me, even by accident. Trading blows with a wooden sword wasn’t as deadly as using steel, but I was usually a bit bruised from my

practice sessions. No one meant to injure me, but bruises were something that happened to everyone; they just healed faster than I did because they weren't human.

I wasn't surprised that Samojirou wanted to watch me spar. He liked that I was good enough to keep up in practice with men who had centuries of practice with a katana. I was surprised to see that Wolf, Murphy, and Mason were with him.

"Ah, that is true love," Kazuya said. "A man who still wants to see you sweaty and panting even if it is not because of him."

I blushed bright red. I usually did when someone mentioned something like that to me. I also wasn't too comfortable with him throwing the word love around. I trusted Samojirou, and he liked me, but I didn't think it went beyond that.

There was general laughing at my reaction, but I spent more time blushing with these people than I cared to remember. Not that they were crude, but the samurai managed to tease me a lot, about my blushing especially.

"If all your blood is going to your head," Okita called out, "then it is not going anyplace else."

That made me blush harder, but everyone settled down after that. Kazuya and I studied each other for an opening, before moving in for the strike. Whoever said that a samurai's fight was won or lost with the first blow wasn't lying. Kazuya shifted, and I moved in, we traded blows and jumped back. I had gotten in a hit on his ribs, and he hadn't touched me. My arms ached from countering his blows, but that was it. We circled some more, and I ignored everything else around me. We had a couple more clashes before Okita called a halt to practice.

"You won, Blossom," Okita called out.

I grinned, proud about it. I was hot and sweaty, and I had earned that victory.

Kazuya laughed. "You are getting good."

"It is all because of everyone's help," I said humbly.

“The outsiders were impressed,” Okita said. “They watched you closely.”

I didn’t say anything, wondering if anyone had recognized me.

“They are strange-looking,” Nishiyawa said. He was one of the lesser samurai with Tamazusa, quiet and shy. “But then, when I was alive, Tokugawa had us as isolated as the Dreamlands.”

“The darker one is from Africa,” Okita said. “Or most of his ancestors were. The others are European. But I think from what they were saying that they are all Americans.”

Nishiyawa frowned. “That place.”

I understood the distaste he had in his voice. The Americans forcing Japan out of isolation had caused a lot of problems. It wasn’t that the Japanese had thought they could ignore the rest of the world, it was just that they knew how the Westerners would treat them and wanted to avoid it.

The samurai all patted me on the back and went off to the samurai’s bath while I went back to Samojirou’s rooms. I didn’t bathe with them, even when I wasn’t avoiding Murphy and the others. I had gotten teased about it in the beginning, but Okita understood my reluctance to be with them. I rushed back to clean up and get dressed. I was relieved to see Yukiko was waiting for me.

“You have time,” she said as I almost dove into the bathroom. “I will call you when you need to get dressed. You have time to soak.”

I washed hurriedly and slipped into the hot spring. I had gotten into the habit of soaking after practice, before I studied. In the beginning, it had been because I was too sore to move without it, but lately it was because it was nice. Samojirou sometimes joined me, if he didn’t have a breakfast meeting with Tamazusa. Lately, he had been spending a lot of time with me, reading in the same room where I was working or studying. It was nice.

Yukiko poked her head in the room after several minutes and chimed, “Time to get out.”

I climbed out and dried off. I dressed in my underclothing and kimono, with Yukiko helping me tie my obi. I could dress myself when I was dressing as a man, but with women's clothing, you needed help. Yukiko also did my makeup for me, the white makeup even covering the back of my neck. She piled my hair up in a simple bun, fastening it with small combs. Yukiko decided I needed to wear a more "modern" style this morning, and my obi was tied in the back in an elaborate knot. I looked like a respectable young lady when she was done, my kimono a light blue with an abstract design woven into it. I also wore shorter sandals today.

"Thank you, Yukiko," I said. She smiled and bowed, flitting away to do whatever else she needed to do today.

I made my way out to the southern gardens, where Tamazusa would be having breakfast with the outsiders. I arrived there before her and used the time to make sure everything was set up for breakfast.

I bowed low to Tamazusa when she arrived with McGann and Romejinoff. Tamazusa was dressed in the elegant, simple black kimono she favored. I didn't think I had ever seen her in another color. She wore it as if she was an older woman, the neck high and collar tight against the back of her neck.

Romejinoff and McGann were in simple kimonos, chosen so they looked good with their blonde coloring. I had started to notice these types of things under Yoshinoko's tutelage. Their kimonos were of a lesser quality, falling between what I wore and what the servants wore. I didn't think that McGann noticed, but I was sure Romejinoff had. There was this look on her face that told me she wasn't happy. I wasn't surprised to see Tamazusa treating them as guests and not prisoners, because she was a nice person. From what I knew of the other lords here, they would either be prisoners or be dead.

"Sakura-chan, may I present to you Romejinoff-san and McGann-san," she said in Japanese. I got the hint that I wasn't supposed to know English.

I bowed to them, a fraction too shallow, but neither of them noticed. "I am pleased to meet you," I said huskily in Japanese.

Neither of them looked twice. Tamazusa nodded, and I went to help the servants serve breakfast, even though it wasn't something I was supposed to do. McGann murmured her thanks to me in English when she was served, but Romejinoff acted like we were feeding her slop and took her rice gracelessly. Tamazusa frowned, and I went to retire behind her after I served her. Tamazusa started to attempt to carry on conversation with them while we waited for the men to arrive.

CHAPTER 11

SAMOJIROU

I TRIED not to show the excitement I felt when I discovered that two more of the *Hakkenshi*'s avatars were in the Dreamlands. The ones Keno called Mason and Wolf had the mark of the *Hakkenshi*. It had been interesting to see their reactions—or the lack of them—when I showed them Keno. They didn't accept my statement that there was no one called Keno here, but they didn't argue with me. The one called Murphy didn't care and was most insulting in his manners. I didn't kill him, because it would upset my lady. Wolf and Mason were also most amusing in the bath, relaxed and willing to talk to the rest of my lady's men. I didn't mind playing translator, and the bath was more enjoyable and informative than I'd thought it would be. Mason was the most talkative and the one who fascinated us the most, because of his coloring.

The three of them looked confused when, instead of their own clothing, I gave them *yukata* and *fundoshi* to wear. There was a lot of joking with the samurai as they explained how to wear it. Their leader, Murphy, grumbled about bathrobes and no manners. I wasn't going to be the one who told him he was the one with no manners. I wanted to hurt him because of what Keno had told me about him.

“It is time to discuss your ‘exploration’ over breakfast with my lady,” I said. “Please follow me.”

I led them through another garden, the beauty of which they didn’t appreciate, and we arrived at the pavilion in the middle of it, where the others were waiting for us. Keno looked adorable, dressed in a subdued blue kimono and a modern-style obi, made up, and his hair piled on his head in a bun, with no jewelry. He was in the background, letting my lady lead the discussion with the two outsider women, who also were dressed in kimonos. The one called Romejinoff could say nothing without sounding insulting. Tamazusa was amused, slowly fanning herself. I doubt if they realized the fan she carried had steel spines and could be used as a weapon as well as being decorative. Or that Tamazusa could take that woman’s head off easily and without a second thought if she wanted to.

We arrived as the maids were delivering the rest of the meal. I thought the outsiders were confused by their happy giggles. I didn’t know what they expected; those who served here did so because they chose to. I wasn’t claiming that it was paradise, but they were happy here. Many of the maids’ race ended up in the pleasure quarters or serving their betters in other ways.

I bowed when I saw my lady. “I apologize for my lateness; the samurai and our guests were having an interesting discussion.”

“I hope that you did not cut it short on our account?” Tamazusa replied.

“My foot couldn’t get any deeper in my mouth,” Mason said with a grin. “So it was better for us to get the hell out of Dodge.”

She shook her head. She didn’t get the reference but wasn’t going to ask, simply accepting that he was teasing her, in a manner of speaking. Interesting that he was treating her that way, since I also saw the respect he had for her.

“You’re lookin’ good,” Mason told McGann when he sat down next her. He was a bit awkward, but so were the rest of them. I was surprised he had commented on her appearance.

“I wish I had a camera,” McGann murmured. “You in that outfit would be a picture for my office.”

Mason laughed, and Wolf shook his head. Murphy opened his mouth to say something and closed it. They all started eating.

Quiet and sitting behind my lady, the outsiders ignored Keno like they were meant to. McGann looked at him strangely once or twice, but that was about it. Keno really looked and acted differently dressed as a woman, which was probably why the others didn’t recognize him.

Tamazusa turned the talk to the “exploration” they had claimed to be doing without a map or supplies. We hadn’t really gone through their equipment. The maids had unpacked it, though, and reported to Tamazusa and myself what they had found there. Since most of it was modern, I doubt any one of us really knew what we were looking at.

“I think that you would benefit from talking with Hikura-sensei, my librarian,” Tamazusa said.

Romejinoff muttered something that was probably insulting in a foreign tongue. The rest of them listened politely, except for Mason. He seemed more interested in the food than the discussion. I sensed that he was one who could play the buffoon easily, because he was more intelligent than he acted. I had seen that with the deft explanation he gave about the Reavers.

There were several patrolling the area, concerned for both my lady and Keno. Reavers are attracted to unusual power, such as the magic my Keno had and my lady’s ability to sense and create gates. My ability to travel in the shadows in the Dreamlands and the real world was something that I gained when I became an *oni*. However, there was no real power to the talent. I could also see that the Reavers were making the others uneasy. Mason was muttering unkind things and occasionally glaring at them.

“I didn’t think that you would have a place like that,” McGann said of the library.

Of all who were here, she seemed to be the only one who had any kind of diplomacy or training in it. She was tired and strained, though,

as if she were ill. Was she reacting badly to being in the Dreamlands? I have heard of such things before, and I was so relieved that something like that hadn't happened to Keno.

Tamazusa laughed, and it sounded like the chiming of bells, and as empty to me. The others seemed relieved that she had laughed. "My estate is vast and well-equipped. I have much here for Samojirou-sama's and my amusement. He is a scholar and has immersed himself in his studies here."

"My lady is too kind," I murmured.

I had spent the centuries studying and enjoying myself, but I was always hers to command. I had enjoyed the leisure to do so here, something I had never had in the real world in the time that I had been born.

Romejinoff said something that had Wolf looking horrified. I wondered what language she was speaking, because it wasn't English or anything that I recognized.

"But breakfast should be finished before we go there," I said, "And I know that Hikura-sensei lingers over his rice and fish, flirting with the head cook."

Tamazusa smiled and shook her head. The head cook, Soiko, was a fox spirit and had been leading him on a merry chase for decades. She was as amused by their relationship as the rest of us.

"This isn't near the ocean," Wolf said. "How do you get fish?"

"There are ways to ship goods about," Tamazusa said after a shrewd look. She was amazed he mentioned it. "Also, most of the fish here is fresh water; there is not an ocean that is close by us."

"Where is the nearest ocean?" Murphy asked.

Of all the outsiders, he was the only one who was unable to use chopsticks. I was surprised that the one called Mason could, even if he showed little grace doing so. Murphy attacked his food as if it were the enemy. I almost felt pity for him, but McGann was helping as much as she could, which didn't endear her to him for some reason. I didn't

know the relationship between them, but it felt hostile, as his was with Mason. He was more courteous to Romejinoff and Wolf. I wondered why and made a mental note to ask Keno about it later.

“Samojirou-sama?” Tamazusa prompted me, when I seemed lost in thought.

“I think that it would be a hundred *ri* north—over a week’s journey to the ocean which is near the Northerners’ area. The ones with the disgusting eating habits.”

It was that they ate too much butter and drank too much beer, making them smell bad. They also didn’t bathe often enough. They were either blond or red-haired, so with the exception of Mason, these people would fit in with them. But I could see on the outsiders’ faces that they thought the Northerners ate human or demon flesh. I wasn’t going to enlighten them. I wanted these people ignorant of any allies they could gather here.

“If you want to explore, it would be better to go south or west,” I said. “There are still some areas that are wild there, with scattered small settlements. You would just have to worry about the wildlife. Can any of you shoot a bow?”

“A bow?” Murphy asked. “Are you sh... kidding me? Why don’t you people have any decent weapons?”

I shrugged. “A bow is a decent weapon. As is a sword. A gun or what you call a submachine gun? Those are just things that destroy and are not elegant.”

“Did I thank you for giving us a nice bunk?” Mason said suddenly. “I can’t use either of them. I have a knife, but I know that does jack shit against a monster.”

Tamazusa smiled coolly. Mason was acting the fool again, but he was the only one attempting to be polite. Wolf was too stiff, too aware of how easily this could become a trap. Murphy was too hostile, and Romejinoff was the rudest woman I had ever met. McGann was trying, but she was clearly ill, and Murphy’s hostility was hindering her efforts.

“Toward the East are the towns and castles of other lords of the other *kuni* of Nippon and beyond that is the ocean,” I said. “If you wish to meet them, either I or my lady can introduce you to them. I will warn you that they have no tolerance for rudeness.”

McGann understood my warning and winced. She understood that very few would tolerate this group. Fuse would, but she had the patience of a Buddha. I would, however, not let her get near Wolf or Mason if I could help it. The other lords were as proud and touchy as a samurai could be. And I wasn't even going to mention the nonhuman territories, filled with monsters that made Hákarl look like playful kittens. Only people this arrogant would run into danger without testing the waters first. For those who hunted and studied monsters, they had an appalling lack of common sense. Or their masters could be using these people as sacrificial goats.

“That sounds very interesting,” McGann said. “What are the Dreamlands like?”

Tamazusa laughed. “You are asking a very silly question. The Dreamlands are a reflection of the real world. The Dreamlands just *are*.”

“And what are you doing here?” Murphy semi-growled.

Tamazusa snapped her fan shut. “That is a very rude question.”

Mason looked up from his food, “Like asking a chick her weight or how old she is. I thought that your wife would have you trained by now.”

“When you actually see a woman besides those whores—” Murphy started.

McGann buried her face in her left hand, and Romejinoff rolled her eyes. I was fascinated by the fact that Wolf was embarrassed by this conversation. I didn't blame him, because such squabbling showed the lack of unity in his group. But did he truly think that any of us had not heard of the word “whore” before?

“I know enough not to be an asshole to the people who are our hosts,” Mason retorted.

“Could you not fight in front of our hostess?” McGann hissed, blushing bright red. “Act like you both aren’t choking on testosterone!”

Wolf coughed as if something was caught in his throat. Tamazusa stared at all of them, amused by their gross lack of manners that allowed them to squabble in front of us. I wondered again why they were here. If the leader couldn’t control—or at least act like he could control—his men, he had no business leading them. Members of this group, it seemed, would kill each other given a chance to. That was interesting, but it didn’t answer my question of why they were here. I wondered if they had been sent here just to get rid of them.

“What is testosterone?” Tamazusa asked after a minute of strained silence, looking at the group in front of her. These people were straining the limits of the politeness that had been drilled into her by her training as a companion.

“Macho bullshitedness,” Mason said with a smile.

At the same time, McGann said, “It is a hormone in men that is related to aggression.”

“Hormone?” I asked.

McGann looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry; I forgot that you aren’t that technologically advanced. It’s a substance that is produced in the human body, like blood. There are a lot of them, men and women even have different ones. Hormones have something to do with how feminine or how masculine someone is.”

“Interesting,” I smiled. “We—at least I—have not bothered to follow the discoveries and changes in the other world. I know that my lady has always been more interested in such discoveries. I have centered my attention on other things. However, there would be others that might be interested in such things in the other lands.”

Murphy and Romejinoff had the same faint sneer on their faces. Mason looked thoughtful, as if he wanted to ask a question but had changed his mind. The other two were just absorbing what we were telling them. Wolf and McGann were the ones to watch; they were clever and could think on more than one level, unlike Mason, who was

a blunt weapon. I wondered why Murphy was the one in charge when Wolf was much more clever. He deferred to the older man, and there was some respect there, but Murphy was too blinded by his prejudices to be a good leader.

The rest of our breakfast was finished in silence, Keno staying behind Tamazusa until we were done, eating his breakfast quickly.

“Sakura-chan, could you tell the kitchens that we are through here?” she asked Keno in Japanese. “And then attend me at court today.”

Keno bowed and hurried off to do her bidding. Romejinoff stared after her, but I thought it was simply jealousy I saw in her eyes. Keno was much better looking and better dressed than she was. I didn’t think she knew that Sakura was anything other than she appeared to be.

“I must leave you in Samojirou-sama’s hands right now,” Tamazusa said. “I have duties and appointments that I cannot neglect.”

“A moment before you leave us, my lady,” I said with a bow. “There might be an unexpected visit from an old friend of mine today.”

Tamazusa nodded, and we drew to one side, out of earshot of the outlanders. “Mason and Wolf are *Hakkenshi* avatars,” I said. “That might bring the princess to us. There was also an incident with Inue-sama and Inuta-sama last night. She may come to talk to you about your gift to me, even though I said that I would be calling on her.”

She nodded. “And how is your blossom?”

“Wanting to avoid these people,” I said. “It was his idea to dress as Sakura, not mine. But the outlanders have seen someone here that they think that they know.”

“Thank you for the warning,” Tamazusa murmured. “I doubt that the princess will come here today; it will take some time for her to convince her sons to allow her to travel here, to say nothing of her consort.”

“I look forward to our evening meal,” I said formally with a bow and smile. Tamazusa bowed back and went on her way. I didn’t envy

her, dealing with the quarrels and problems of her court today. She enjoyed it, though, and took great joy in those details of ruling.

“Where’d she have to go?” Mason asked.

“My lady has court today. She gives justice one day every month,” I said.

“But there doesn’t seem to be anyone around here,” McGann said.

I shrugged. “The estate houses between fifty and a hundred workers, depending on the season. She has a steward, for lack of a better term, who runs the estate for her, with some help from myself. Then there is Okita-san, her master at arms, who trains her samurai. I train with them upon occasion. I also lead the samurai into battle for her, but that hasn’t happened recently. But she is also lord over several lesser lords and townships. The townsmen and merchants come to her for advice and justice. There are also others, lords of the *kuni* and foreigners who would wish to speak to her in this setting. My lady travels to her *donjon* today for this. She prefers that to having the rabble overrun her estate.”

“So she’s actually lord of this land,” Romejinoff sneered.

I shrugged. “It is something that she enjoys. I lost my taste for the politics needed a while ago.”

“It figures she wears the pants,” Murphy muttered.

I didn’t think he realized how good my hearing was. I ignored the insult, even if I didn’t exactly understand it. McGann looked appalled, and I wondered again why this man was their leader. Was it something about the place they were from that they only allowed those whose brains were rotted and prejudiced to lead them? Heiseg had been the same, from what Tamazusa had told me.

“Let us see if Hikura-sensei has finished his morning meal,” I said. “Though I think that he might be overwhelmed with the amount of visitors.”

Wolf shrugged. “Why don’t you see if Okita-san is willing to have me and Mason?”

“But there is the issue of language,” I pointed out to them. “None of my lady’s samurai speak English fluently, and you apparently don’t speak Nipponese.”

“Pantomime goes a long way,” Mason said.

“I also know German, Russian, and Norwegian,” Wolf offered. “Do any of the samurai speak those languages?”

I nodded, noting that he left out his fluency in our language in this list. “A handful speak some language other than their own. But usually the ones who are multilingual are the merchants.”

“Wouldn’t they have to be?” McGann asked.

“It is useful to know the language of those you are dealing with so that you know how much you can cheat them,” I said dryly. “Such miscalculations are usually fatal if they guess wrong.”

“But—” Murphy protested.

I shrugged, “They are merchants. The lowest form of life, barely above the unclean.”

All of them looked upset over my pronouncement. These outsiders were amazing ignorant. That was still the attitude in my homeland, as far as I knew.

“I think that Hikura-sensei would be as interested in meeting all of you,” I said. It also would be interesting to watch because he spoke several human as well as demon languages.

WE arrived at the library while Hikura was bustling around doing his morning routine. He seemed surprised to see someone this early, and I could tell that the outsiders were horrified to see someone who was so obviously nonhuman aside from the Reavers.

Hikura bowed low, announcing in Japanese, “You honor me with your presence!”

“Please speak English,” I said, “since the outsiders seem to only have that tongue.”

Hikura nodded and continued in that language. “And what does Samojirou-sama desire of me?”

“The outsiders are explorers; they wish to see the maps of my lady’s lands and those that show the Dreamlands.”

Hikura bowed and disappeared into his realm to gather what the outsiders needed.

MASON

THE library was the last place I wanted to be. Tamazusa was letting her boy toy show us around while she went off and did the real work. It didn’t piss me off as much as it should have. I knew that the two of them were treating us as if we were just a minor inconvenience and weren’t taking us seriously. I knew we hadn’t put our best foot forward with these people; we were all bitching at each other, and this was just the first day we were here. If these two ever clued into the snide comments the ice bitch was making, our asses were grass. I didn’t know what she was saying, because it was all a language that only Wolf knew, but the look in his eyes told me volumes. It was probably telling this Samojirou guy the same thing. Romejinoff was making really snide comments, because she thought that she was better than everyone here. She wasn’t, not on her best day.

The library was a little room that didn’t impress me. It was empty except for a couple of low tables, because these people had something against furniture. We had sat on pillows to eat breakfast, and I had thought Murphy was going to pitch a fit. There was a trick to sitting in robes that none of us knew; I had almost showed Tamazusa a lot more than either of us wanted her to see. But we all managed to sit without flashing anyone, and breakfast wasn’t that bad, for being weird soup,

rice and fruit, and fish and vegetables. I didn't stab anyone with chopsticks, so I was happy.

I also found out the name of the chick: Sakura. She seemed to be some sort of maid or something, because she sat behind Tamazusa while she played hostess, but they both ate with us so I knew it wasn't poisoned. She ran off at the end of the meal when Tamazusa had given her some sort of orders. That was how I figured out her name. And Tamazusa seemed to like her, from the tone of her voice. But there was something else that was going on, from the low-voiced conversation she'd had with Samojirou before he dragged us off to the library to get us out of her hair.

"Where are the books?" I blurted.

Samojirou laughed. "Hikura-sensei will fetch what you need to know. He doesn't allow anyone but Tamazusa free rein in his dominion."

McGann nodded. "There are libraries from where we are that do that. The staff will find what you are looking for."

"I doubt that Kairns has been to a library in his life," Romejinoff muttered.

"I don't go too often either," Wolf remarked.

I thought Wolf was pissed at her attitude. I didn't care. I could read what I needed to and could write a report fairly legibly. Books weren't something that really interested me. I thought of all the books I had packed up from Keno's place and knew that he'd have liked being here.

Hikura brought out a couple of rolls of what I thought was wallpaper at first but realized were their "books." He carefully put them down and unrolled the first one. The librarian was a little roly-poly blue guy with a beak of a nose that would make a Muppet proud. He didn't look too impressed with us either. Hikura was someone you could tell had never been human, because his skin was scaly and an odd color blue, and he had a very long nose. He was a shorter than me and very

round, with green eyes that looked like they should have been on a frog because they bulged out.

“This is Nippon,” he announced. His accent was heavy and almost unintelligible. It made me feel a lot better, because I’d had a feeling that everyone here who knew English was going to sound bland and model perfect. He gestured over the scroll he had unrolled. “These are the territories that Tamazusa-sama controls.”

I looked at it. The map was really pretty, and I couldn’t figure out a damned thing on it. Wolf frowned and looked down and the rest of them huddled around the table. I just stood back and tried to make some sort of sense out of the pictures.

“You do not wish to study this?” Samojirou asked me.

I looked at him. We were about the same size, but I was packing a bit more bulk. He made me nervous. I thought he knew it because he just smiled like he was trying to sell me something, and I wasn’t buying it. I thought he knew it too.

“It’s pretty,” I said truthfully, “but without some sort of key, I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

I resisted asking him if his hobby was selling used cars, because he seemed slick enough to be a salesman. “Hikura-sensei would be overjoyed to explain it to you,” he offered.

I shrugged. “I can see it from here and hear most of what he is saying.”

“Knowledge is power,” he said seriously.

“What kind of knowledge do you want?” I asked.

Samojirou looked surprised at the question, but he continued to smile. I thought he liked being surprised like that. “You would not believe what I know,” he murmured.

“Tell me,” I challenged.

He merely smiled, and I knew he knew where Keno was. I wanted to throw him against the wall and choke it out of him. Samojirou knew

that too. “I have studied many things over the centuries. You need to be more specific.”

“While the wife runs the place.”

He laughed, and everyone looked at us. Hikura looked like he was waiting for orders to attack us or something, and I realized there was muscle under all that roundness. He wasn’t as harmless as he looked.

“Kairns!” Murphy yelled.

“I assure you that Kairns-san simply is talking with me,” Samojirou said.

Everyone nodded, and Hikura went back to his lesson. I was pissed, but more at myself than anything else, because he had managed to get under my skin.

“While Tamazusa-sama was my consort, she was never my wife,” Samojirou said.

I blinked. “What’s the difference? And small words, I’m dumb.”

He stepped back so that our conversation wouldn’t disturb the others. “There is much that I cannot tell you.”

“Or won’t?” I asked dryly.

That earned me another look of respect. Something was going on. Samojirou knew this entire plan had been fucked from the start and that we were all arguing like children for some reason. Not that we all got along usually, but this was beginning to be embarrassing. And what was this “centuries” crap? The man looked like he was Wolf’s age.

“There is much that depends on your knowledge of certain things,” Samojirou said. “I will not bore you with ancient history, but she was never my wife, nor did I ever treat her as such. It is sufficient to say that Tamazusa-sama rose to lord of this *kuni* because of her talent and her intelligence. I chose to help her further her ambitions, for a number of reasons.”

“And not because she has a set of brass ones,” I muttered.

“I am afraid that I do not understand the reference,” Samojirou said with a smile, making me think that he completely did.

“Nothing,” I said. So they weren’t together; that explained the Sakura chick. Maybe. “But how ancient is the history?”

“Are you asking me my age?” Samojirou asked.

He was laughing for some reason. Okay, I wasn’t the smoothest interrogator the Trust had, but he didn’t have to act like this was joke. I shrugged, wanting to punch him in the mouth. “You aren’t a chick. You never ask *them* that.”

“I think that if I understand the slang that you are using, you would consider me a cock?” he asked.

“You said it, not me,” I said. “But you say ancient history. For some people, that’s yesterday. For others, ancient has a different meaning.”

Samojirou smiled and nodded. “I was born in the year of the metal serpent, ten cycles ago.”

I stared at him. “That means nothing to me.”

“And that is why I told you that,” he said smoothly.

“Son of a bitch!” I cursed.

He laughed, and I was wondering what was so damned funny, because he knew what I meant. The others looked over at us again, and I decided it was easier to try and deal with the fucking map than with him.

CHAPTER 12

MASON

ONE headache and three maps later, it was time for lunch. Samojirou trooped us all into a big mess hall, like he was our nanny or something. Wait, no, he was here to make sure we all didn't kill each other more than he was worried about us hurting his people. I wasn't too put out when I figured out that we were eating with the other warriors, the guys I had dubbed the posse. Still no Keno though. Maybe the posse might be willing to take me and Wolf off Hikura's hands. The man was about as interesting as mud, but he was having a lively discussion with McGann and the ice bitch, even if she had been sneering like a bad villain from a Saturday morning cartoon for the entire lesson, something about maps and languages and research, shit that bored the crap out of me.

Romejinoff looked around; the sneer was back on her face. She just figured out that she was eating with the help. I wanted to point out to her that she was damned lucky they weren't eating her—and I didn't mean *out*. McGann had that same pinched look on her face that I had, trying to figure out what I was looking at on the fucking map. I guess so many people around was giving her a headache.

Lunch was communal, with the couple of dozen guys passing around bowls of stuff. Rice, veggies, and stuff I couldn't identify, but I

was betting it was fish. Meat didn't seem to be on the menu at all. I recognized the bruiser, Kazuya, and wandered over to him. Samojirou frowned, but he didn't do anything else. I thought he figured out it would be easier to rescue me than control me. He was trying to herd the five of us, and I thought I was giving him the least amount of trouble besides Wolf, and the most entertainment.

Kazuya looked down at me and grinned. I was a big guy, but he had me by a head and looked like he could wrestle a bus and win. I stooped a little and pantomimed hair on my head, pulled up in a tail. Which was fucking funny, since I shaved my head, a habit I'd kept from prison.

"Where is he? The guy that kicked your ass?" I asked slowly. Not loudly though, because while I was an ignorant American, I knew that volume didn't help anyone figure out English any faster. "I'd like to talk to him."

Kazuya laughed his ass off at my charades. I grinned and shrugged. "The kid with the hair. From this morning."

The big guy shook his head and started speaking really fast to a couple of the others. Both of them were smaller than me and looked to be fresh out of school, but something made me think they were older—maybe the centuries crack Samojirou made had something to it. They all looked confused and a little pissed. There was a lot of arguing back and forth in Japanese, and then the youngest-looking one turned to me. His hair was pulled back in a braid. Most of them had long hair, and all of them had it in some sort ponytail, out of their way for a fight. None of them were wearing the weird hairstyle you usually see samurai wearing in pictures and bad movies. But even with all the long hair, I didn't think of them as girly or anything. Keno had been girly with his hair, but then, we didn't let him cut it for all the time we had him. McGann kept saying she didn't think that he should be near anything sharp.

"I am Seki. We think that you should talk to Samojirou-sama about his blossom," the kid said. His English was slow and halting, but I could understand him easily enough.

"Huh? What the fuck?" I asked. "I just want to talk to the kid."

“He is someone that you should talk to Samojirou-sama about,” Seki repeated firmly.

I looked at all of them. None of them looked happy with me. The rest of the room was staring at us, and I realized I had fucked up. I didn’t care. I was willing to take a beating from Kazuya if I got some information on Keno. “When did this blossom show up?” I persisted.

Seki looked at me, weighing how much he wanted to tell me, and there was a lot more arguing between the three of them. I noticed Samojirou was just sitting there and smiling, not helping them at all. I thought he kind of knew what I was doing and was giving me enough rope for me to hang myself.

“Several weeks ago,” Seki finally said. “In the beginning of the fourth month. We are well into the eighth one now.”

So it wasn’t Keno, because he had only been missing a little more than a couple weeks. So where was he? And why was someone called Blossom kicking these people’s asses? “He always that good?”

“I think that is enough,” Samojirou finally said, coming over to us. “You should eat.”

I shrugged and went to my seat. The rest of them were already eating, Murphy scowling at the food like it was a personal insult since it wasn’t meat and potatoes. He looked up when I tried to fold myself underneath the table.

“Don’t fucking cause trouble,” Murphy snarled. “Not over a gook programmer.”

Samojirou scowled at us, and I knew he knew what that word meant and wasn’t happy Murphy was calling Keno that. I glared at Murphy. “Why don’t you just shout nigger in the middle of a NAACP meeting?”

“What are you talking about?” McGann demanded.

“I think that our babysitter knows what that word means,” I hissed. “And he don’t like it.”

I was pissed and wondering if Murphy had left his brains on the other side of the rollercoaster ride. He usually wasn't this stupid, but I hadn't worked with him in the field. In fact, I thought this was the first time I'd seen him out from behind a desk. The man was old to be running around after monsters. I was getting up there too, and I knew it was a young man's game, monster hunting. I had a couple more years left in me before I was pulled out of the field, unless I became monster chow first.

"Nigger?" Murphy repeated with a grin. It wasn't a nice one. Romejinoff and Wolf looked confused, and McGann looked faintly disturbed.

"No," I snarled. I didn't care that we were now the center of attention, everyone in that hall looking at us. "That's the other insult that you shouldn't be fucking throwing around."

"You have no sense of humor," Murphy grumbled.

"I'm not the one you have to worry about," I said. "No one here has to put up with your shit. I do. Which is why I haven't fucked you over for being an ignorant asshole."

I got up and moved back to Seki and Kazuya. "If I stay with the boss, I'm gonna fucking slug him."

Seki looked alarmed. Samojirou was at the other end of the room, talking to someone, ignoring me again. "You shouldn't talk about your lord like that."

I was confused, and I got fucking angry. "That asshole isn't my fucking lord! I just work for the same people that he does. Shit, Wolf's usually the one that I'm teamed up with or I got my own posse."

"So you are *ronin*?" Seki asked.

"I don't know what you mean," I said honestly.

Samojirou was still at the other end of the room. He looked over at me, and I waved. He smiled at us and shrugged. Seki nodded, and I guess he was giving him permission to talk to me. "I won't ask about Blossom. But what is a *ronin*? *Sama*? I think that it's a title because

you used it with Samojirou and Tamazusa.” Seki looked appalled at my ignorance. I shrugged. “I don’t know a lot of fancy shit; it’s not my job. And while you hear about all those folks that get a degree in prison, I never thought that it was worth it. Who was going to hire someone fresh out of prison, even if he has a fancy piece of paper?”

Seki looked faintly confused. “I have no idea what you are talking about. So could you explain some things to me, and I will tell you what you have asked about.”

I noticed that he didn’t promise to tell me about Keno, but I nodded my agreement. “Ask away.”

“What is it that made you so angry with your leader?” Seki asked.

I hesitated and realized it didn’t matter. “He was throwing around some pretty nasty fucking insults, and it pissed me off.”

Seki nodded, but I could tell that he wasn’t getting it. “Trust me, gook and nigger aren’t something that you should be calling people,” I said.

There was a lot of discussion and waving of hands. I swore that Kazuya couldn’t talk without waving his hands around. It was funny, really. Seki finally worked out everything with the others, and he turned back to me. “*Ronin* is a samurai without a lord. It is a bad thing for a samurai to be without a lord. *Sama* is our word for lord. It is both a term of respect and a title. Tamazusa-sama is our lord.”

“And you respect Samojirou-sama,” I said.

“He is our lady’s councilor, as well as her confidant,” Seki said. “They....”

There were some chuckles from the others, but I ignored them. Murphy was glaring, and I was ignoring him. Samojirou I couldn’t really ignore, but I was working on it. “How long they been together?”

Seki looked uncomfortable about that question. I waved my hand and smiled. “Never mind. I work in a place that half the shit we do is need-to-know and if you had to ask about it, then you didn’t need to know about it.”

Seki looked confused. “That doesn’t sound very wise.”

I shrugged. “I don’t make the fucking rules, but I know that I got my ass raked over the coals because of it. Like I have no fucking clue why Murphy’s the lead on this.”

“You think that it should be you?” Seki asked, and I thought he translated my comments to the others.

“Fuck, no,” I said with a grin. “Wolf or McGann.”

“Um, who—” Seki started.

“Either the tall blond guy or the shorter blonde chick,” I explained. “The other two are being bigger assholes than usual, and I’m not trusting them not to fuck up walking and talking, here. Wolf’s been my team lead before, and McGann always has her shit together.”

He told the others that. I felt slightly weird about it, but it wasn’t like I was telling them something they didn’t know about already. As an invasion force, we sucked, and I thought that more than anything else we were going to self-destruct. It wasn’t like I was telling him about the incident in Boylston Street or that we were missing a shitload of people who didn’t make the bus. I hoped they had just missed the ride out and weren’t lost like Thompson’s legs.

“So what do you do?” Seki asked.

This was the tricky part, but I decided not to bullshit him. “I shoot monsters.”

More talking, and Kazuya said something. I was waiting for the punch I deserved. Seki asked, “With a bow?”

“Nah,” I said, “with those pretty clubs that we came here with, they actually work other places but here. You shoot things with them.”

They all laughed when Seki translated that, but I also saw the crowd around me getting bigger. “So what do you consider monsters?” Seki asked.

I shrugged. “Reavers, only because they piss me off. They’re usually standing around like they’re waiting for something or posing

for the cover of a magazine. Hákarl or anything that hurts kids or innocent bystanders.”

I knew that described what we had done to Keno, so I knew that I wasn't much better than the monsters. Hell, if he was Samojirou's "blossom," I hoped he was happy here.

“We are allied with the Reavers,” Seki said.

“I don't see them hanging around with you,” I said.

Someone said something else, and Seki shrugged and asked, “You don't have a problem with a woman in charge of you?”

I laughed. “If she's got her shit together and is willing to make the nasty decisions, then she can run the op. Some guys don't like a chick running things; that's never been my problem. Some of the female shooters have huge issues with the guys when they're on an op. Not with me. Wolf... well, he thinks that they're ladies even when we're all knee deep in shit. I thought that you'd have a problem with it more than me.”

Seki talked with the others, and I sat there and got something to eat. I let them do their thing. Samojirou eventually came over to us, and I grinned. “Can I stay with the cool kids?”

He looked confused for a second, and he and Seki started talking, with Kazuya adding a few more things. I wanted to stay as far away from Murphy as possible. He was getting on my last nerve, and I was ready to kill him. I always knew he was a prejudiced SOB, but he usually wasn't this stupid about it.

“I think that it would be acceptable for Seki-san to guide you,” Samojirou finally said.

I snorted. “He's babysitting me. You know and I know it. You got stuck looking after us.”

Samojirou smiled, amused at my bluntness. “I assure you that I prefer it to my lady's court.”

I nodded. I hesitated for a second and then said, “Murphy spent a couple of tours in ’Nam. I don’t expect you to know about that, but that’s why he doesn’t like Oriental people. He actually don’t like anyone that ain’t Irish, it seems, but anyone that isn’t lily white, he really don’t like.”

Samojirou looked at me, a measuring glance wondering if I was telling the truth. “That is interesting.”

I shrugged. “He’s an asshole, but he’s my asshole. So ignore the shit that he’s spewing, if you can?”

KENO

TAMAZUSA’S court was a fascinating place. She had a building dedicated to it at her *donjon*, in the castle-town that was eight kilometers from her estate. I had forgotten how big Tamazusa’s holdings were. It was an hour’s ride, being carried by runners in a closed carriage. That or by ox cart was the way most people traveled here. Horses weren’t that popular because they tasted too good to the monsters, so no one used them much in Nippon. I hadn’t been to court before because I had no reason to be.

I knelt behind her and looked decorative. She had scribes to record her judgments, and Okita and his squad were there along with a couple of Reavers to protect her in case there was trouble. I knew I was here as a favor to Samojirou, to keep me away from Murphy and the rest of them. I was aware that Wolf and Mason had seen my bout with Kazuya. No one recognized me when I served them, either; I almost felt as invisible as I had back at Boylston Street. I liked it, that I got that close, and they didn’t know it was me. I guess I made a really good girl.

Believe it or not, I actually paid attention to what was going on. I didn’t understand a lot of it, but I got to know some of the customs and

laws for this place. Tamazusa settled things amiably for people. The lords and the important people got to talk to her first, and after she dealt with them, she broke for lunch, even though there was a number of merchants and farmers waiting to talk to her. They expected this, though, and no one seemed upset. I guess that the merchants and farmers were accustomed to waiting. They weren't all human; I saw some things that barely looked it waiting for Tamazusa's judgments.

We retired to a small side room, and Okita and his people went to get something to eat while I served Tamazusa the food that had been delivered to her, thinking to eat afterward, since there was enough for two. The Reavers stayed with us, but I didn't think it was to protect us. I had figured out that Okita and the others were there to look impressive more than anything.

"Keno," Tamazusa said. "Please eat with me."

I settled down and waited. I figured she wanted to talk to me about something. I sipped at my tea, waiting for her to start the conversation, as was proper.

Tamazusa smiled. "And how are you and Samojirou-sama doing? Did you enjoy the *koto* performance last night?"

I nodded. "The music was wonderful. The people were interesting to watch too."

"You do not mind that Samojirou-sama does not want you to talk to them?"

I hesitated. "Ah... it's better that way. I don't know all the rules yet, even though Tan'yu-san has been very good about teaching me them. I was never very good with people. I like watching them more than anything. I don't understand who everyone is yet, though."

Tamazusa laughed. "And about the outsiders?"

I hesitated again. "I just would like Wolf and Mason to know that I am all right."

"And the others?"

“I don’t really care,” I said honestly. “They were my jailors.”

Tamazusa shook her head. “As are Samojirou-sama and myself.”

“I wasn’t feeling much then,” I said. “I barely remember that night, except for the pain.”

She frowned and stared into her tea. I thought she was remembering something that wasn’t nice. “Your first time, it is not pleasant, even if you know what to expect. I... my choices were limited when I was alive. I was sold off to the highest bidder, and even though the man did not want to abuse what he had spent so much on, it was demeaning.”

I blushed and hung my head. We had had variations on this conversation before, but she hadn’t been this graphic before. Most of it had been more like “Trust Samojirou-sama.” and “He would not hurt you.” She looked up and shook her head. “And I know that you did not know what to expect, and I know that idiot did not care or know what he was doing.”

“But—”

She frowned and leaned in, speaking softly. “Some men have an interest in that entrance, even with a woman. I—”

“Thank you, Tamazusa-sama,” I squeaked, cutting her off, because it wasn’t something that I wanted to hear, even if it was rude for me to interrupt. I just figured out why she really didn’t like sex, because she had had to do *that* with men she didn’t like, and her distaste carried over to the Dreamlands. Poor Samojirou, he was a sensuous man stuck with two people in his life who had no interest in sexual pleasure. “It’s just... I’m still scared.”

“With a considerate partner, it is not unpleasant,” she said bluntly. I wanted to die of embarrassment. I really didn’t want to be having this conversation with her; it was like my mother trying to explain sex to me and just as embarrassing. “Though I have never been with Samojirou-sama in that manner, I know that he is a considerate man. If things had been different....”

I waited a second after her voice trailed off. She seemed to be lost in her own memories. I let her think for a minute before reminding her that I was here. “Tamazusa-sama?”

She looked at me and smiled. “If things had been different, I would have been more than his consort. I would have had his sons.”

I blinked. Since they didn’t know anything like artificial insemination, it meant that Samojirou and she would have had sex. That thought made my brain stutter, since I knew that Samojirou doesn’t like women like that. She smiled, reading my shocked look correctly.

“We would have, Keno-chan, for all that he was not interested in me.”

“Um—”

“He is, however, very interested in you,” she continued. “Could you allow him to show you that he is a gentle man and a considerate lover?”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. I had a hard time with her telling me that Samojirou was a good lover when she had never done *that* with him. I guess she knew from past lovers he had been with here. I wondered what would happen to me if he got tired or bored with me. “It wasn’t just that night, even though I had had that threat for a while. A lot of the TCs tried to do stuff to me. The techs were better; they just slapped me around.”

“That is not better!” Tamazusa scolded me.

“It wasn’t weird,” I said. “But I have no interest in doing *that* with anyone!”

Tamazusa smiled and shook her head. “I assure you that there is much that you can do that will give you pleasure without penetration. Have you even allowed him to try? I know about the night that you were reduced to tears. Samo... Aboshi has had many lovers over the centuries, and they all have parted on good terms, because he is a thoughtful man. He has given me much joy and has been very supportive of my goals. I only wish the best for him.”

I bowed my head and thought about what she had said—including using Samojirou’s first name, a true sign of intimacy—as I nibbled on my meal. Tamazusa smiled and after a couple of minutes started talking about what the afternoon session would be like.

AS for the evening meal, it turned out to be more informal than my midday meal. Tamazusa and Samojirou were dining alone. The outsiders and I ate with her samurai, which I had done over the weeks here. I wasn’t surprised that Mason had made friends with Kazuya and his squad. I sat as far away as possible from the Boylston Street group, and Okita tried to keep them from getting into trouble by eating with them. He was talking to Wolf in German, which angered Murphy a lot, since it meant that Wolf was doing all the talking. I was surprised that Okita knew German.

Dinner conversation with my group centered around gossiping about the strangers and teasing me about my win with Kazuya. Several of them declared their undying admiration for me and flirted with me. They hadn’t seen me dressed as Sakura, even though they knew Samojirou liked me dressing up. I flirted back because I knew that was all that it was, harmless flirting. No one from Boylston Street gave me a second look. It looked like I was the only other woman eating here besides McGann and Romejinoff, so I was sure they would guess I wasn’t a woman, even if they didn’t figure out who I was.

Romejinoff caused trouble at the end of the meal when she made a snide remark to Wolf, in Russian, I thought. One of the samurai near her, Takehito leapt to his feet with a hand on his sword, hissing furiously. I guess he understood Russian. The rest of the group around him didn’t look happy, but they hadn’t gone as far as he had yet. But things got tense, and I wondered if this was a good time to send for Tamazusa.

“What the fuck did you say?” Mason snarled. “How fucking stupid are you?”

Romejinoff looked pale, and McGann looked a little sick. Wolf and Murphy were both embarrassed, and Wolf started to talk really fast in German to Okita. I guess he wasn't willing to let them know that he spoke Japanese, even with this incident.

"Get Tamazusa-sama," I hissed. She might be needed to calm this down, because Okita was beginning to look annoyed. I was surprised that one of the lesser samurai ran off to get her on my order.

Things remained tense until Tamazusa and Samojirou showed up, because nothing was calming Takehito down. And Romejinoff wasn't helping any, because while she was apologizing, she wasn't doing it in the correct way or even sounding sorry while she was doing it.

"What is going on here?" Tamazusa demanded.

"Tamazusa-sama, the outsider woman made a remark about your hospitality and your intelligence," Okita said stiffly. "Takehito took exception to the tone and nature of the comment. It also seems that, from their reactions, her companions had no idea what she said, except for the one called Wolf."

Tamazusa stared at Romejinoff, clearly angry. "It seems that you cannot act in civil company, from all the reports that I am getting about you from my people. I think that it would be better if you stayed in your assigned quarters from now on, Romejinoff-san."

"You can't keep us prisoner!" Murphy blustered.

She smiled coolly. "I am simply keeping her alive. Takehito has the right to take the idiot woman's head for whatever insult she gave me or him. And she was a fool to think that there would be no one here who would understand her words. We are not ignorant savages, no matter what you think."

Mason was wisely keeping his mouth shut. McGann nodded and stood up. "I thank you for your hospitality," McGann said with a bow. She didn't do it right, but she at least tried. "And I apologize for the rudeness of my companion. I will make sure that something like this doesn't happen again."

Tamazusa bowed back. “Do so. You people would try the patience of Buddha. Do you not understand where you are?”

Romejinoff looked like she wanted to say something, but McGann glared her into silence. It was a glare that promised her a very long talk about her behavior. She shot the same look at Murphy. I had a feeling it was going to be a very long night for all of them.

Okita escorted all of them out, and I felt the tension drain out of the room when they all left. Takehito finally sat down, muttering and glaring at people.

“And what did the woman say?” Tamazusa asked him.

“She implied, Tamazusa-sama, that we are unwashed barbarians because we had no technology. That you were a woman of no honor because you were not catering to her whims. That she was too good to be eating with us. If it were the first time that it had happened, I could ignore it. But she had been like that for most of the meal. I do not know why her man has not beaten her for her rudeness,” Takehito said.

Tamazusa smiled. “Because he was just as rude. He is now dead.”

“But I thought that the blond man, Wolf, was her man. She acts like a riverside whore with him most of the time,” Takehito protested. “And he tried to warn her that she was acting rudely.”

“I guess that she thought that flaunting her charms would make him interested in her,” Tamazusa said dryly. “Some women do not know the value of subtlety.”

Samojirou came over to me and smiled. “May I take you away from your admirers, Sakura-chan?”

I giggled and nodded, letting him help me up. As he escorted me away, he remarked. “It was a good thing that you sent for us. The outsiders’ ignorance will be their undoing, but I do not want blood spilled here. Even theirs.”

I shivered at the casualness he had talking about killing people. I hated some of them, but I didn’t want to kill them. But killing Romejinoff and Murphy would probably save Wolf and Mason. I

didn't know if I could condone or plan their deaths. But I knew that most everyone else here could.

“My lady and I have finished discussing business,” Samojirou said, dropping his voice down to a husky tone. “Would you join me in a walk in the southern garden?”

I fluttered my fan and smiled up at him. “I would be honored, Samojirou-sama.”

CHAPTER 13

SAMOJIROU

KENO was slowly removing his makeup, clad only in his *fundoshi*. Yukiko had come to remove his kimono to be cleaned and to help him pick out something to wear tomorrow. She giggled and gossiped for a couple of minutes with Keno before she left. I didn't think he realized how much the servants and the samurai adored him. Keno was starting to unpin his hair when I murmured, "Allow me."

He stopped, and I started kissing the back of his neck. He moaned softly, relaxing after a moment's hesitation. I had never done this before. I had always kissed his lips. I skimmed my hands lightly over his body. I appreciated the new muscles I felt there. Keno was making soft sounds of pleasure that aroused me beyond belief. I pressed my body into his and was surprised when he shivered and pressed back.

"Keno," I whispered, "do you trust me?"

"Mmmm...."

"Keno...." I repeated. I stilled my hands.

"Trust you," he said. He sounded very dazed.

I was curious about this change of attitude but accepted it. He had been very flirtatious on our walk. I continued to kiss the back of his

neck, overjoyed when I felt his hands shyly stroking me and eventually worming their way underneath the *yukata* I was wearing. His hands never went below my waist, but we spent several enjoyable minutes this way.

I moved my lips, licking a path down his spine, before I turned him around and pressed him gently onto his back. I thought that I had pushed him too far, but he just shivered.

“Keno, I am not going to hurt you,” I whispered.

“Um...”

I could see he was getting nervous again and tensing up. “I will not penetrate you,” I promised.

“But...” His confusion was endearing and apparent. “What...?”

I leaned over to kiss him some more, careful not to act as if I were trapping him. He tensed up a little but started fumbling with the obi on my *yukata*. I stopped kissing him and pulled back. “Keno...”

He had never been this bold before, and I was hoping that he wasn't doing this because he thought he had to. The timing was too coincidental, with the outsiders arriving. He wasn't exactly trying to bribe me with his body; it could be that he just wanted to reassure me that he wanted to stay here.

“Samojirou-sama, I...”

Suddenly I didn't want to hear it. I started kissing him again, letting Keno timidly explore my body. I brushed my hand down his body and fumbled with the tie on his *fundoshi*. He squeaked into my mouth, surprised, but obediently lifted his hips when I stripped him of it. I broke off kissing him and stripped off my own clothing as well. I was surprised to see that my hands were shaking as I did this.

Keno looked dazed and frightened as he sprawled before me. He was aroused, and he blushed when he realized I was staring at him. I was hard, and I wanted him. I was pleased I was able to coax a response out of him.

I leaned over and touched him, slowly stroking my fingers up his leg until I reached his erection. I fondled his sac, and he arched into my touch with a whine. His hands were curled by his side, and he whimpered helplessly as I explored him further. I was careful not to touch his opening, but I stroked the smooth skin above it. Keno writhed and made the most amazing sounds. I switched my attention to his shaft, petting it as if it were a small animal before wrapping my hand around him, stroking up and down.

“Samo—” Keno choked out.

He blindly reached out and tried to pull me down for more kisses. I let him and shifted my body so I was lying on top of him, our shafts touching, when I let him go.

“Ah....” he breathed into my mouth when he felt us together. He shuddered, and I moaned.

I worked my hand between our bodies and wrapped it around both of our erections. While I wanted to take it slow before, I was impatient to feel him take his pleasure with me. I had waited for this for so long, for Keno to lose his fear of me, of intimacy.

Keno started whimpering again when I stroked us, the pearls of our pleasure smoothing my movements. I wanted to make the same sound as well but moaned into his mouth instead. It didn't take long for him to quiver and start arching into my touch again. Keno was young and innocent of any sort of pleasure, it seemed; I wasn't surprised that he had no stamina. He seemed to ignore the fact that I had him trapped, and he even wrapped his arms around me and ground our hips together.

I groaned. The sound seemed to trigger Keno, because he spent his seed. I followed him into pleasure when he was done and collapsed on top of him. I stroked his hip as he tried to control his breathing.

“Samojirou-sama,” he sighed. He experimentally moved underneath me, surprised at both the joy he had found and the sensitivity of his genitals now.

“Keno....” I said as I rolled off him. I didn't want to feel like I was crushing him. At times I forgot how slight he was. Keno rolled

over and nuzzled my chest. He seemed to like doing that a lot; it was an endearing habit with him. I smiled down at him and combed his hair with my clean fingers.

“We’re a mess,” he announced sleepily.

“It was not distasteful to you?” I asked.

He sighed. “No, but I don’t think that I’m ready for much more than this. You’re... ah... impressive.”

I laughed and allowed him to fall asleep.

KENO

THE next morning I woke, looked down at the mess that had dried on my stomach, and blushed. Samojirou leaned over to kiss me, amused that I was so shy now. I was shy because I had no idea why I did that last night or how I was supposed to act now.

All right, I did what I did because I was tired of being afraid. I just didn’t know what to do *now*. I liked what had happened, but I didn’t know if I was ready for something more. It didn’t help that we both had woken up... interested. I’m not saying it hadn’t happened before, but usually one or the other of us acted like it wasn’t happening. Samojirou was good to me about that, not teasing me about something I couldn’t control.

“Do we have time...?” I asked Samojirou. Time for what I didn’t know, but I wasn’t ready to just get up and pretend it didn’t happen.

“And what brought about this change of heart?” Samojirou asked.

I looked down at the floor, but he reached down and tipped back my head, staring into my eyes. “You do not have to use your body as a bargaining chip.”

“Samojirou-sama!” I squeaked, very embarrassed. “I had never even thought of that!” Tamazusa might have tried to put that idea in my head, that Samojirou wasn’t someone to be scared of. I had known that for a while, but last night was the first time I had actually acted upon it. “I’m just tired of being afraid,” I said softly. “I don’t know if I can do more than this right now, but I wasn’t scared last night.”

“We have time for you to explore,” Samojirou said.

“Me?” I asked, trying not to sound too shocked to him. I was curious, because that was my nature, but I was willing to let Samojirou do what he wanted. Frankly, he seemed to be more excited about this than I was.

“Are you not curious?”

“Um... I never thought of it,” I said quietly. “I’ve spent most of my time not thinking about *that*.”

“Then may I explore some more?” Samojirou asked.

I nodded after a second, blushing furiously as he started kissing me again, pleased that I kissed him back. I gently stroked his back, and eventually we rolled over so I was on top of Samojirou.

“I think that you might find this more comfortable,” he whispered huskily, rubbing my back. “And you may be less formal now, since our relationship seems to be changing. Here, you may call me by my given name.”

I didn’t say anything, but I leaned down to kiss him. I started moaning softly and rocking against him. Samojirou hooked his legs over mine as I skimmed my hands over his body, fumbling and tentative. I felt stupid for a second and then just didn’t care when passion drove any kind of thought out of my mind. Our bodies grew slick with sweat, and Samojirou let his hands slip further and further down, until his fingers were brushing against my opening.

“Samo... Aboshi,” I moaned into his mouth.

“Keno, I will not hurt you,” he promised.

I didn't say anything, whimpering because it felt so good, and bucked against him. I was close. Samojirou grabbed my hips and ground me into his. I whined, fighting him, wanting to move more than anything.

"Do not—" he started to say as I spilled, hot and slippery, writhing in his grip and whining. Samojirou held me through my climax. When the shuddering stopped I lifted my head, feeling dazed and sounding drunk. "I'm sorry."

"Touch me," Samojirou said harshly.

I blinked at him, not wanting to move because I felt so good, and I wrapped my hand around his shaft. He was hard, and I tentatively pumped once, marveling at the differences between the two of us there. Samojirou was bigger and thicker than me, not that it mattered. I hadn't jerked off all that often, between the fear of getting caught and the fear that whoever found me would take advantage of me. That was all he needed, though, and he released with a groan, coating my hand and my stomach with his stuff. It was sticky and made me feel good.

"Aboshi," I said with a sigh, "that was good, but I'm sleepy again."

I was tired, drained from the passion we shared. It was strange to call him by his first name, but I guess if we were sort of doing *that* with each other, it made sense.

He laughed. "We have time for you to have a nap if you want."

I didn't say anything, instead curling up in a ball beside him. Samojirou wrapped himself around me, his arm around my waist.

"This is nice too," I whispered before slipping into sleep.

WE both woke up a little while later and hurriedly bathed and dressed for breakfast. Samojirou was slightly late escorting the outsiders to breakfast, which was another private audience with Tamazusa. I didn't

think they knew how honored they were that they had both Tamazusa and Samojirou entertaining them.

I knew Yukiko had helped the outsiders this morning, because she had mentioned last night that she was to attend them. Another one of the maids had helped me dress this morning, smiling when she realized what had happened. I didn't realize that so many of the servants thought what Samojirou and I did was their business. But thinking about it, it made sense. There was very little privacy here, with the way that things were laid out, so the servants knew everything about us.

Romejinoff and McGann still looked awkward and unattractive in the kimonos they were wearing. Tamazusa had a sly smile on her face concerning our tardiness, and she was pleased at the cause, even if she didn't say anything. I went to kneel behind her, eyes downcast and the picture of modesty.

"About time," Murphy muttered. A glare from McGann silenced him.

Mason looked thoughtful for a second and started eating. I was curious about the arguments that most likely rocked the outlanders' quarters last night. Tamazusa would tell me about them later.

"I know that we have been terribly rude to you," McGann started.

Tamazusa smiled. "I understand that our customs are strange. But you must understand that you are in a strange land with no weapons and no one that speaks your language. You seem to be terribly ill-equipped to be here. Many of my fellow lords would have lost patience with you before last night. Those outside the territory of Nippon are even more dangerous and difficult to deal with. Do you understand that?"

McGann and Wolf looked at each other and nodded. "I again apologize for my people," McGann said.

"Can I hang out with the cool kids again?" Mason asked when she was finished. He rolled his eyes at McGann. "I promise that I'll eat all my veggies, and I won't try and piss people off."

Wolf snorted slightly, and I was amused by his humor, even if I didn't understand it. Mason said a lot of things that, after years in Boston, I still had no idea what he was talking about.

"I think that Kazuya-san's squad is willing to watch Kairns-san today," Tamazusa said.

Mason grinned. "Thanks, Mommy."

Tamazusa shook her head. She didn't know if she should be angry with the man or encourage his outrageous behavior. He watched her with respect, which is why she didn't do anything. I had heard rumors that Mason was like this with McGann too.

"Can Wolf come out and play too?" Mason continued.

Tamazusa frowned. "I have heard no promises out of him."

Wolf looked confused for a second and glanced at McGann. She nodded. McGann didn't seem to like the fact that Mason and Wolf were separated from the group, but she wasn't going to argue about it, in case they were all confined to their quarters.

"I promise to make Mason behave, Tamazusa-sama," he said.

Tamazusa laughed. "I think that Okita-san and his people would be men who you would be interested in talking to," she said.

"I would be willing to escort the ladies to the library again," Samojirou announced. "I know that you were curious to see what we have for our books of science and other learning."

"If Hikura-sensei is willing to have us," McGann murmured.

I didn't miss that comment; she was trying to be polite, knowing Romejinoff wasn't going to be. But I thought McGann knew that leaving her alone wasn't a good idea either.

"And to make up for my negligence of you yesterday, I will escort you around my estate personally, Murphy-san," Tamazusa said. "Attend us, Sakura-chan."

I bowed, and Murphy looked blankly at me, still not recognizing me. I felt good about it; I liked fooling them like this.

It never failed that I noticed how huge Tamazusa's estate is. Most people in Tokyo and the surrounding areas lived in either small apartments, or, if they were lucky, a small house with a tiny yard. All the houses were squished into small neighborhoods, piled on top of each other. I grew up in a house and yard that would fit into the section of the estate that was Samojirou's apartment. My yard had been smaller than his garden. And that had been considered roomy.

Here, however, everything was spread out. I estimated the estate was about fourteen acres in area. There were all the public areas, like where the samurai ate, the kitchens, and the rooms where Tamazusa met visitors—a different room depending on the person's rank. There were also the different teahouses scattered around the place, as well as the separate quarters for the servants and the samurai. Plus there were all the odd buildings that were needed for maintaining the estate.

Deep in the sprawl of buildings, all connected to each other with covered porches, were Tamazusa's and Samojirou's apartments. Gardens of different types covered all the open areas, from a tiny iris garden to one that had a waterfall feeding a pond that one could boat on.

Tamazusa showed Murphy everything except the private rooms. She told him the history of the place, about the flowers in the gardens, and chatted with him, like she hadn't a care in the world and Murphy was an honored guest. Murphy didn't say anything and acted bored and polite. I wanted to hit him, because he was being shown a great honor and he was acting like an ignorant foreigner. I didn't know why I thought he'd act any better. He seemed more worried about the escort that trailed after us, a squad of samurai who didn't want either one of us to be alone with any of the outsiders.

At the end of the tour, Tamazusa led Murphy to a building that was a cross between a gazebo and a teahouse.

“Please remove your sandals,” she said.

Murphy did so with a lot of grumbling. I didn't attempt to help him. I didn't want to get that close to him, since I didn't know what he would do if he ever figured out who I was. Tamazusa and I slipped out of our sandals and stepped onto the porch. Tamazusa clapped her hands, and a half-dozen maids swarmed around us to serve tea and sweets. It wasn't a formal tea, but we all watched respectfully as the tea was mixed before us in priceless cups and handed to each of us with a bow and much ceremony. Even Murphy seemed to behave for this. Things went wrong after that.

"You and your husband seem to be pretty important people?" Murphy asked.

Tamazusa smiled. "Samojirou-sama is my consort, not my husband. He advises me on matters of my estate and of the *kuni*."

"That why you don't mind the bit that he has on the side?" Murphy asked.

I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me. I was glad for the makeup, because he couldn't see me blush.

Tamazusa looked at him and shrugged. "Sakura-chan is a very dear member of my household."

It felt really good to hear that. She wasn't lying. She and Samojirou cared for me more than anyone else had since my parents. They weren't human, but I didn't care. They loved me in their own ways, something I hadn't had in ages.

"Samojirou's screwing her," Murphy said crudely. "From what I've been told, this 'dear member' is dressing like a whore. She doin' you too?"

Tamazusa turned cold and furious, and I wondered how I was going to explain to the outsiders that she had turned his insides into liquid. I laid a hand upon her arm, hoping it would calm her down. "Did you expect better of him?" I asked her softly in Japanese.

She looked down and shook her head, replying in the same language. "You have a kind nature, Sakura-chan, which is why

Samojirou-sama loves you. I would think that you would want this man dead for this insult too.”

“He is rude and stupid,” I said slowly. “Keeping him alive is a trial to the others. I have no doubt that one of the outsiders explained what I dress as. I am comfortable dressing and acting as a *tayuu*, so why should his accusations be insults?”

“Because he is a rude man, like that other woman,” Tamazusa said. She glared at him and switched to English. “Sakura-chan reminded me that outsiders do not understand our customs and that I should not be upset at your ignorance.”

Murphy glared. “So she’s a whore? You her pimp? She doin’ the rest of them here? She was pretty chummy with them at supper last night.”

Tamazusa rose gracefully and picked Murphy up easily, showing him the strength she had. “You are confined to your quarters. I cannot believe the filth that is spewing from you. If anyone else had heard this, you would be dead.”

He sputtered, not believing how strong she was, twisting in her grip. “You gook bitch!”

Tamazusa raised her voice. “Guards! Show the outsider back to his room. Have him talk to no one.”

She turned and looked at me. “I am sorry that you had to be subjected to that. It seems that those who are in power at that place are ignorant and prejudiced. I should have killed him.”

I looked up and told her the truth. “He isn’t worth it.”

I was surprised that she hadn’t when he called her a bitch, but I thought she was also willing to wait and kill him later, when she got more information out of him. I didn’t know if I should have been horrified or admiring.

CHAPTER 14

MASON

THE next couple of days passed by slowly, and it drove me nuts. These people couldn't be bothered to hurry about anything. The only thing that stopped me from going stark raving mad was hanging with Kazuya and the rest of his squad. Wolf and I went to the posse's morning workouts, but we didn't see Keno again. In the afternoon we hung out at their barracks or trailed after them on their rounds, which was kind of interesting because this place was huge and we got to see a lot of it that way.

It was also better because Murphy was under house-arrest along with Romejinoff for pissing off our hosts. Neither one would say what they said to piss off people, but I could guess. Murphy alone with Tamazusa and that Sakura chick probably hadn't been a good idea. McGann was trying to keep the rest of our asses out of a sling and alive. I tried to help by not being too much of a screw up and not demanding to know what happened to the kid who I thought was Keno.

General shit like patrolling and weapons practice are always boring. But sometimes you get something really good out of it, like being in the right place when visitors showed up.

I was trying out what little Nip I had picked up with Seki when four guys hauling some sort of carriage box between them trotted up to the main gate and shouted out a greeting. I didn't know what that fuck they said, but Seki looked like he was about to shit a brick as he shouted orders and hurried down to meet them. People scattered, and I decided that following him sounded like a good idea.

A girl stepped out of the box, looking like she should be stepping out of a magazine cover, because she looked fucking perfect. I guessed that she was about sixteen. She was wearing a light pink kimono and another pink kimono over it. She was gorgeous and had her hair tied back with a simple bow, even though it fell below her ass. Seki hit his knees as soon as he saw her, and I kind of did the same. After a couple of minutes, Samojirou hurried out to meet her with a smile on his face. He bowed to her, and they starting jabbering away at each other before he escorted her inside the estate. I saw the guys with the box disappear into what I knew was the servants' area. I didn't understand how primitive things were here until I realized that was her transportation. We stayed on our knees until Samojirou and the girl were out of sight, and I got up with a groan. My knees weren't made for kneeling.

“What is it with that guy and chicks?” I asked Seki.

He looked horrified. “Samojirou-sama and Fuse-hime are friends. But she has never visited here before.”

I shrugged. “What about the girl Sakura that's always with him? Tamazusa-sama and him are chummy too. Then this one shows up. You'd think that the guy didn't have time for this shit with everything else he does around here.”

I didn't know what it was exactly, but Samojirou wasn't sitting around and drinking beer while Tamazusa worked. He just kept things running while she did whatever a lord did in this place, plus the gossip I heard that he was a scholar too.

Seki looked like he wanted to strangle me.

“What did I fuck up this time?” I asked.

Seki had learned that I had no clue about any of the manners that ran this place and that it would be a waste of time to kill me. Wolf had explained to me the first night here that samurai were allowed to kill anyone who looked at them funny without being punished. That it hadn't happened to one of us yet was a fucking miracle.

"*Hime* means princess," he said.

"Are they friends 'friends' or what?" I asked.

Seki took a deep breath, looking like he was counting to ten before he answered me. "Samojirou-sama is a follower of *nanshoku*."

"*Nan* what?"

"Samojirou-sama is a lover of men. He is Tamazusa-sama's councilor, not her lover."

"He's gay? Not that it surprises me, because he looked at McGann like she wasn't hot," I said tactlessly.

Seki rolled his eyes. "I like women, but her blondeness does not interest me either. Or the other woman who sneers all the time."

"Blondes aren't my thing either, but ya look, at least. He didn't. And if he's queer, then why is he sleeping with the Sakura chick?"

I had figured out the sleeping arrangements the second night we were here. Tamazusa was as far away from us that she could be. Samojirou was in the same section we were, and he was rooming with Sakura, who may or may not be hot under all the white face she was wearing. I never saw her without it, and while she wasn't dressed as nicely as Tamazusa was, she was still wearing some very nice clothing, from what I could tell. She was dressed better than the maids and definitely better than McGann and Romejinoff. For someone who was supposed to be a hooker, I hadn't seen her less than fully dressed. Seriously, she was dressed as a someone's kid sister, I thought, didn't say much to anyone, and didn't act sexy or try to attract your attention. The rest of the guys here teased her, and that was about it. I had decided that Romejinoff was giving us a load of shit when she called Sakura a hooker, doing it to get the rest of us into deep shit if we mentioned it to Tamazusa or her boy toy.

Seki rolled his eyes, translating what I had said. “Because Sakura isn’t a woman?”

My brain broke. I had prided myself on my ability to tell a tranny from a real woman since I had gotten out of the joint. But he had me fooled. The chicks around here were all flat-chested, but that shouldn’t have mattered. I had seen him with the maids and Tamazusa, and I would have sworn they were all women. Obviously I was getting old and losing it. I changed the topic of conversation fast, because that was something I really didn’t want to know. Call me old-fashioned, but I always thought that guys should wear pants or whatever was the local equivalent here.

“So why is it unusual for Fuse-hime to be here? ’Cause if she came by a lot, you wouldn’t look like a fucking wreck when you found out it was her.”

Seki frowned. “It is a long story.”

“It usually is,” I said. “Spill it. Not like I’m gonna tell anyone.”

Seki looked uncomfortable. “It is a long story that started ages ago in the real world. It has to do with Fuse-hime’s father and Tamazusa-sama.”

Kazuya rescued his ass from me after he said that, and I wanted to scream in frustration, because I was finally learning something around here. But I still had some interesting information, and I had better tell Murphy that there were more players on the field, someone we might be able to get as an ally. I doubted it, though, because this was also one more thing that he and Romejinoff could fuck up.

I THINK Murphy looked like he was going to blow a gasket. We had been dumped back into our room shortly after the princess arrived, and he was pacing back and forth nervously.

“A princess?” he repeated again. “A princess doesn’t show up alone without even a maid. That kid was pulling your leg.”

“All I know is that she is someone important who hasn’t visited here before,” I answered.

It was an argument I was getting sick of. If Wolf had said it, Murphy wouldn’t have acted like he was lying. Wolf was sitting in the corner, just keeping his mouth shut. Romejinoff looked at me like I was full of shit, and McGann just looked tired.

“I got the same information from Okita,” Wolf said finally. “The girl is of a high rank, and she doesn’t visit here at all because of a very old feud. She and Samojirou are friendly acquaintances. They were all surprised that she didn’t come here with her consort, some guy called Yatsufusa. But since he and Samojirou really don’t like each other, it’s a good thing. But they all think that something serious is going to happen because she’s here.”

“So how do we get to her?” Murphy asked. “You know that they didn’t want her to know that we were here from the speed that they dumped us back here.”

“I’m betting it’s more because they don’t think that we can behave,” I said.

Murphy and Romejinoff glared. I smiled. “Yeah, you two made such a good impression on them.”

Romejinoff flushed. I still hadn’t a fucking clue about what she had said that pissed off everyone, but I could guess. Samojirou was doing us a big favor by not killing Murphy, because for guys who looked like they were extras out of a bad movie, they knew all the nasty words he had been throwing about. I had a sneaking suspicion that these people knew a lot more about the modern world than we thought. Not a lot, but they weren’t as primitive and isolated as they wanted us think they were. Or there was something here that we knew nothing about, which was more likely. I knew that something was being hidden from us. That was the vibe I was getting off Samojirou, but I thought it was because he knew where Keno was and wasn’t going to tell us, not that we had mentioned him after the first morning. I was surprised Wolf hadn’t torn the place apart looking for Keno. Or maybe he’d figured out that this was a better place for him.

“I memorized the maps that we had been looking at that morning,” Romejinoff said. “I can draw them again.”

“Hikura hasn’t been too forthcoming,” McGann said, “but I got some information out of him about other lords. A little bit about the other lands of the Dreamlands too.”

Murphy grunted. I realized there was a lot more going on here than I knew. It figured that there was a plan and I hadn’t been included in it. I didn’t know if I was relieved or pissed off.

“There are about ten squads of five to defend the estate, as well as servants and other workers,” Wolf said. “Plus allies that she can call upon if there’s fighting. Along with the men that she has stationed at her castle, plus the Reavers.”

“The place is fucking huge,” Murphy said. “And that bitch walked my fucking feet off looking at it all. And that girl who was with us didn’t say a damn thing.”

I decided to keep to myself that “she” wasn’t a girl. I didn’t want Murphy to scream and bitch about that too.

“You got anything to add?” Murphy sneered.

“We’re fucked,” I said. “Unless you pull a fucking miracle out of your ass, are we getting out of here? You think that we can find someone else here and pull ‘you and him fight’ while we pick up the pieces, you’re an idiot. None of these people are going to fall for that one.”

“Kairns!” Murphy growled.

“You do know that these two are keeping us around because we amuse the fuck out of them,” I said. “They don’t think that we’re a threat, and I think that they’re right.”

Murphy scowled. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, you fucking—”

“Don’t say it,” I said. “I know that you’re an asshole and prejudiced, but you’re not stupid. Stupid shit has been coming out of

your mouth since we got here. Romejinoff isn't that far behind in that department, as that little scene the other night showed us."

Both of them started shouting at me, but McGann looked thoughtful. Wolf looked like he wanted to be anyplace else but here, and I didn't blame him. Those two idiots were giving me a headache.

Everything stopped when the door slid open, and Seki walked in, followed by a couple of samurai and Reavers. They were all good at pretending they hadn't heard us shouting at each other, because since the walls and doors were nothing but thin rice paper there was no way they couldn't have heard us. I also knew that Seki understood a lot more English than he let on.

"My lord would have you all join her for dinner with Fuse-hime," Seki announced.

I believed I spoke for most everyone when I said, "Fuck."

DINNER was in a garden I hadn't really seen before, because the place was filled with flowers, most of which I didn't recognize. McGann looked better now, and Wolf probably just hoped we got through dinner in one piece. I wondered how many gardens were in this place, because I kept finding more of them.

It started out all right, cute little maids serving us, the princess chick, Tamazusa, Samojirou, and Sakura. Now that I knew that Sakura was a guy, I was staring at him. He did have the girl thing down pat, with downcast eyes, a soft husky voice, and sort of flirting with Samojirou from behind a fan. I didn't hear the voice too often, because he only talked to Samojirou and only when Mr. PO asked him a question. I wondered why and decided I didn't care. Their relationship was probably as strange as the rest of the shit around here, even if they *were* a couple of guys.

Small talk was made with the nice princess chick, with Samojirou and Tamazusa translating her comments, because she didn't seem to know English. She was polite and tried to be nice to us.

Murphy was looking smug for some reason, and that was getting my back up. I basically didn't trust the man, which was a sad fucking opinion to have about your chief of security and the guy who gave you your orders. Wolf had to have the same opinion. I never thought I would see the day. On the whole it wasn't bad, and I was starting to relax when the shit hit the fan.

KENO

ONE minute we were eating in the western garden, and then there was this odd sound and a whirling ball of light appeared. Wolf grabbed at me, but I slipped out of his grasp. Murphy grinned and punched Fuse. She wasn't expecting it and suddenly crumbled.

"No!" I screamed and dove for her.

We both got sucked into the glowing thing, Murphy and the rest of them following us. I ended up on my hands and knees, shuddering helplessly, wanting to empty my stomach all over the floor. I didn't remember that from the first time; I didn't remember much after Tamazusa had rescued me from Heiseg, so that didn't mean anything. But I knew enough now to know that I was back in Boylston Street.

When I got my stomach under control, I crawled over to Fuse. She had sat up and was looking dazed. I didn't think that anyone had ever hit her before.

"What happened, Sakura-chan?" she asked.

"We... we're where I was before I was with Tamazusa-sama and Samojirou-sama," I said.

I wasn't allowed to say more, because someone grabbed my arm and pulled me away from her. I fought him. "Don't you—" I half screamed.

I realized that it was one of the TCs who had me. His name was Krauss, and he had always made comments about how pretty I was and had kept touching me. I managed to break out of his hold and dropped into a defensive crouch in front of Fuse, holding out my fan. Part of my lessons with Okita and Yoshinoko were on how to use a fan as a weapon. I was very good with a fan.

"You little shit," Krauss snarled.

There was a lot of shouting, and it seemed that everyone else was back here, all right. It was confusing with all the noise. I was angry and scared, more for Fuse than myself. I was afraid that what they did to me would happen to her.

"Fucking freak," someone else said.

"Why did you think that taking her was a good idea?" Mason was shouting in the background.

"That bitch—" Murphy started.

"You're a fucking idiot," Mason retorted, "She isn't Tamazusa. A week with the woman you can't recognize her? Or you just wanted to fuck someone over, and she was convenient?"

"Kairns, keep your fucking mouth shut," Murphy roared.

Wolf came up and stood beside Krauss. "We aren't going to hurt you," he said soothingly in English. He stooped down and looked at me. "Oh my God! Keno, it's you! We thought that you were dead."

I just looked at him until he repeated it in Japanese. I seemed to have forgotten English. Or I was in shock and reacting in slow motion. It didn't matter that he hadn't known who I was; I hadn't wanted him to know, because he would have told the others, and they would have tried to make my life miserable, and Samojirou and the others would have killed them.

“Her family is going to be angry that she is missing,” I said simply, ignoring him. “She has a large family.” I wasn’t going to explain to him anything else about her family, because it wasn’t his business.

“Sakura-chan?” Fuse asked. She was behind me and sounded scared and confused, and I didn’t like that. She hadn’t even done something stupid like I had; she had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. “This is not a nice place, is it?”

“It isn’t,” I said in Japanese. “They might want to do bad things to you. I don’t know why you’re here.”

“Because the one called Murphy is very angry,” she sighed.

“Keno, you can’t believe that we are going to hurt you or her,” Wolf said.

“I spent most of my time here hiding,” I hissed in Japanese. I wanted Fuse to understand this. “Murphy and McGann didn’t care about me unless it interfered with my work for them. I couldn’t eat half the time, I lived on coffee and fear, and while Heiseg was the first man who raped me, he wasn’t the only one who thought of it.”

Wolf stared, shocked and confused.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Krauss shouted. He had been part of the group that had been after me. I thought that they were going to do something over the holidays, but I always managed to hide or something else would grab their attention, and I would gain some time. I had run out of it the night that Heiseg had opened that gate.

“Your name is Keno?” Fuse asked me quietly. “I knew that it was not Sakura.”

“Yes,” I said. “Samojirou-sama insisted on calling me Sakura. He told me that I reminded him of one.”

“What did he do to you?” Wolf asked, horrified. He was staring at the clothing and the makeup. I thought he was mad because he didn’t recognize me. Why should he? I was a very different person now.

I looked up at him. “Samojirou-sama treated me with respect. He talked to me. He took me places; Samojirou-sama realized that I had brains and an opinion about things. He—”

“Dressed you as a woman!” Wolf exclaimed.

“Fucking freak,” Krauss repeated.

“He also knew the word *no*,” I shouted. “He didn’t hurt me.”

Wolf looked at me, and I thought he realized what I meant by hurt. Samojirou had gotten a scared, confused kid and taught me to respect and defend myself. People here were going to learn that if they tried anything.

“Enough of this shit,” Murphy yelled.

I didn’t know what he was talking about until I felt a sharp pain in my back. I half turned around, confused, and started screaming when the electricity started pouring through my body. I was still screaming when I passed out.

MASON

I HAD no clue what was going on when it happened. I got shoved through that fucking light and back to Boston. We got everyone through this time, including a couple of extras: Fuse and Sakura. I had no idea what was going through Murphy’s mind—or lack thereof. If he had confused either of them with Tamazusa, he was losing it. Tamazusa was always dressed in dark colors, and these two were wearing brightly colored kimonos. My argument with Murphy about what a screw up this was stopped when I heard Sakura screaming. I turned around and was horrified when I saw that he was being tasered. Then I realized Sakura was Keno. I should have known, but I had thought Sakura was a girl until recently.

The kid was harmless and probably had just been trying to defend the princess. Wolf looked like someone had punched him in the gut, and Krauss was holding him back, keeping him from grabbing Keno and getting his ass jolted too. The girl didn't know what was happening, and I walked over and leaned to pick her up. I got her on her feet, and I wasn't surprised to see that she was shaking. She muttered something in Japanese under her breath.

“English?” I asked.

She looked at me. She saw that I was the reason she wasn't getting rushed by the rest of the TCs. Keno had stopped screaming because he had passed out, and Wolf was trying to wrestle his way out of Krauss's hold. Keno was being dragged off someplace, and while I knew I should follow, I figured he'd want me to look out for the girl. Wolf finally punched Krauss out and followed Keno to wherever he was being taken. He would look after the kid, and I'd protect Keno's friend.

“Not much,” she admitted. Her English was worse than Keno's, the accent much thicker, no wonder Tamazusa and Samojirou had translated all her comments for us. “It seems—”

“What the fuck are you doing, Mason?” Murphy snarled.

“She's a civvie you dragged back here,” I yelled.

“She's going to be an interesting specimen to examine,” Collins, behind him, said.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I snarled.

“She isn't human,” Romejinoff said.

“So?”

That didn't matter to me right now. Maybe I was losing it because she was cute and innocent-looking, but I doubted it. I was beginning to think that the monsters I was killing for these people had been like us, someone who had fucked up an op and ended up stuck in a place where they didn't know the language or anything. Except for the fucking

Hákarl. I still thought that those things were on the shoot-to-kill-on-sight list. I was starting to rethink that instinct with the Reavers.

Collins was pissed, and McGann was confused. “But—” she started.

“Murphy dragged her ass back here,” I said. “She shouldn’t be here. She’s an innocent bystander. Remember those?”

McGann gave me a tired look. She always looked fucking tired, and she was useless. Collins was gloating, and Murphy smiled, smug. I knew it was a losing battle, but I wasn’t giving up.

“Mason-sama, I am your prisoner,” Fuse said. I looked down at her, and she looked scared and tough at the same time as she spoke. “I understand much now. Samojirou-sama was very wise in the way that he treated Sakura-chan.”

“Keno,” I said automatically.

“His family name?” she asked me after a second.

It took me a minute to understand what she was saying. “Inuzaka.”

She looked shocked, and I couldn’t figure out why. But I went with her when the techs moved in to take her away.

CHAPTER 15

MASON

I MADE it my business to be with her when they did the preliminary work up on her. She was stripped, poked and prodded, and made to wear the fucking ugliest jumpsuit in the world. They had brought the largest one they could find, and she had to roll up the arms and legs so she wasn't tripping over them. Fuse was shaking by the end of it, and I bullied one of the techs into getting her a cup of tea. He gave me grief about it until he realized I was in no mood to take his fucking shit. Fuse wrapped her hands around the mug and huddled on the floor when he came back with it. I had seen a lot more of her than I should have, but I wasn't going to leave her alone. I thought that me being there made people a lot nicer to her during all this. It stopped them from trying something stupid too.

“Mason-sama...”

“Just Mason,” I corrected. “I’m not a lord. I know about five words of Nip, and that’s one of them.”

“You are being kind to me,” she said softly.

I shrugged. “Keno right about your family going apeshit about you going missing?”

She nodded. “Murphy could not have had a better plan if he were a scholar of Sun Tzu. My family and Tamazusa-sama have been at odds for a long time because of my father. That I disappeared under her protection will anger all of my family, and they will descend there in much fury, being led by my consort. There will be much fighting if this is not controlled in some way.”

“That Yatsufusa guy is your consort,” I said.

She appeared shocked that I knew his name and smiled. “Yes, him. He won my hand in the real world when he brought my father the head of the enemy general, who was an *oni*.”

“That’s a tough act to follow,” I said after a moment of silence.

“I do not understand,” she said.

“What did he do for your first anniversary? Americans celebrate every year that they are married.” I know I sounded stupid, but I was getting her to talk. She also was looking less shocky and lost.

She shrugged gracefully. “We were dead by then, and my sons were scattered to the winds to be reborn.”

It took me a minute to understand what she had said. “Fuck, I didn’t mean to....”

She laughed. “Mason, it was a long time ago, and part of why I am in the Dreamlands. I was betrayed by one who had wanted me at one time. He repented and did penance, but I died, as well as my consort. But if I had lived a normal life, I would have never become what I am today.”

“What about Tamazusa?” I asked, remembering how upset she had been when Murphy had asked her why she was in the Dreamlands.

Fuse was embarrassed by the question. “My father betrayed her. He went back on his promise to her and killed her.”

“No wonder she’s pissed at your father and the rest of your family,” I said.

Fuse looked down at her mug. “I do not wish to talk about it.”

I wasn't going to argue with her, since it didn't seem to be any of my business, really. I was glad when one of the techs came into the room. Her name was Nina, and she was built like the ship Columbus had sailed, tubby and short. She was old enough to be my mother and an ex of the Women's Army Corps. Her hair was bluish-white and pulled up in a bun, and she was the best in the blood-drawing business.

"Strip, Kairns," she ordered. "I want your clothes and ugly ass."

"Not in front of the lady," I said, but I took off my shirt and stripped down to my birthday suit when Nina glared. I turned around, at least, so I was just flashing Fuse my ass and not anything else. Nina wasn't someone you argued with, because she stuck you with needles, and it wasn't a good idea to piss her off.

"You ashamed that you don't measure up?" she asked me as she gave a pair of scrubs to wear.

Fuse made an odd noise, and we both looked at her. "I am so sorry," she cried, blushing. "It is not... I never...."

"I know," I said gently. "I got a lot of stares when I went to the hot tub thing with Tamazusa's posse. I didn't think that you've seen a black guy before."

"Or one with so many bad tats," Nina said. "The illustrated man, you aren't."

Fuse was staring at something, but what, I didn't know.

"I promise that I'm not a gangster," I said jokingly. Wolf had mentioned that their gangbangers were the only ones who got tats.

I felt her gently touch my back, down toward the bottom of my spine. She pulled her fingers back as if I had burned her. "That is not a tattoo."

I shrugged. "A birthmark."

It was, an odd-colored thing in the shape of a weird flower. I remember getting a slice there, and it healed without a scar when I had been scared that my fucking spine was cut. No one wanted to do any

work over it for some reason. I never showed it off, but I had never really hidden it, either.

“And Samojirou-sama saw you in the *onsen*?” she asked.

“I saw him too, so we’re about even,” I said after figuring out that an *onsen* was the hot tub thing we had been in every morning. “No biggie. Lots of people seen me naked.”

“Most of them ran screaming because he’s butt ugly,” Nina said.

She snapped a tube around my arm and drew all the vials that she wanted. Stick went in on the first try. Gave her some cheek scrapings and stepped into the john to give her the other thing she wanted. When I stepped out, Nina was chatting with Fuse like they were old friends.

“Mason isn’t a bad kid,” she was telling her.

“She’s married,” I said about Fuse. “And a nice girl, which is why I’m sticking like glue to her.”

Nina nodded. “I’ll tell Eppie to take her in. Whatever you are, honey, you aren’t a monster.”

“Eppie?” I asked.

“Elizabeth Peabody-Stewart Adams,” Nina said. “We were in the Women’s Air Corps together, flew a lot of taxi runs in World War II.”

“I can’t see her being an Eppie,” I said. I was tired, and my plan had been to get my squad to watch her. But I didn’t know how long I was going to be able to keep that up or if my squad would go along with it.

“Her initials were EPS then, so Eppie,” Nina said. “She had lied about her age and learned to fly a f’ing plane when she wasn’t old enough to learn to drive. She’ll tell Collins and the rest where to go.”

“Thanks, Nina,” I said. “How’s Keno?”

Nina shook her head. “Not good.”

SAMOJIROU

ONE minute the outsiders were here, and then they were gone, the air stinking of magic and violence. I wouldn't be upset, except for the fact that Keno and Fuse were also missing. I had seen Murphy standing near Fuse before it happened. The garden looked like a windstorm had been through it, and all the flowers were dead.

"Keno!" I screamed.

Tamazusa was swearing, and her loss of composure shocked me. Her hair fell down her back in tangles, and her kimono was in disarray. "They dared!"

The Reavers and her samurai descended on the garden running and searched the area for the outsiders.

"The enemy is gone," Tamazusa snapped. "They gated out of here. I will find out what they did even if I have to chase them endlessly through the worlds!"

"Sakura-chan and Fuse-hime were stolen by them," I snarled. "I will kill them! He is mine!"

"I would have sworn that the outsiders had no knowledge of who he was. Who she is," Tamazusa said.

"Never underestimate the power of spite and greed, my lady," I said. "I am thinking that this was merely a target of opportunity and luck. Those buffoons could not plan, from what I could tell by observing them."

Tamazusa snarled. "Then they have luck that *tengu* envy."

"I cannot go after him," I said. I knew what I sounded like, raw and needy. I was showing her a weakness she could never understand. "I am trapped."

Her eyes softened, apparently understanding, even if she had never shown such a weakness. “I will recover your blossom,” she promised. “But I will need help. The princess’s sons. Find them for me and bring them here. Tell them the truth.”

“All of it?” I asked.

She nodded. “That their mother was stolen from my protection, and that we seek her and the avatar of their brother Keno.”

I bowed and started on my search for the *Hakkenshi*.

THE first one I went to was Inusuka Shino. He would be able to rally the others, and I could trust him not to kill me on sight, like Inue Shinbee or Inuyama Dousetsu might if we weren’t in a public place. Inue was an angry child, and I had done Inuyama a grave disservice centuries ago when I killed his half-sister Hamaji. The illusions I had spun had killed her, even if it had been Inuyama who had done the deed. He had hated me for that ever since. That Keno had managed to banish me instead of letting him kill me hadn’t helped when we met again in the Dreamlands.

I was not surprised that Inusuka kept me waiting in one of the lesser gardens. He and Inukawa Sousuke lived together with Hamaji. While many speculated on the nature of their relation, I simply didn’t care. I studied the plum blossoms with a growing sense of panic and rage. I didn’t know how long I was out there before Inusuka came to me, trailed by Inukawa.

“What are you doing here?” Inusuka asked suspiciously.

“And where is that delightful blossom of yours?” Inukawa added.

I turned to them, hiding my clenched fists behind my back. “That is part of the matter that I need to talk to you about.”

Both men froze. They knew it had to have been something serious that brought me to them but had hoped I had some other reason for walking into their power.

“Your lady mother decided to visit me to see what I would tell her about Sakura-chan and to apologize for the insults of your brother Inue-sama. There was an incident at a gathering that we both were attending,” I said. “At the same time, there were outsiders who were also enjoying my lady’s hospitality.”

“Outsiders?” Inusuka asked quietly. Too softly, and the look in his eyes was deadly. “From the living world?”

“Those that hunt our kind managed to gate into my lady’s territories,” I said. “Rude and ignorant, they did not realize that their weapons would be useless here. They claimed to be simple explorers, but that was a falsehood. My lady sheltered them because she did not want one of her rivals to. While not treating them as honored guests, she treated them with more respect than they deserved. And then they betrayed her!”

“What happened?” Inusuka demanded.

“I fear that they managed to gate out of my lady’s control,” I said. “And they were not alone.”

“With our mother!” Inukawa howled.

“And Sakura-chan,” I hissed. “They were the ones who abused him before. They were the reason that he was so shy.”

I didn’t tell them that he was their brother. The look of horror on their faces that Fuse had been taken to the real world was enough. I didn’t know what horrors they were imagining, but I could tell them that their nightmares were far short of what might be happening to her.

“My lady can gate into the place that they are most likely holding your mother,” I said. “She will go with you, and I can help gather your brothers and your father for this.”

“While you hang behind,” Inukawa snarled.

“I am trapped here!” I said painfully, angered by the implication that I was a coward. “Bound to this place so that I would not interfere in Satomi’s plots again and stripped of any power I had aside from my control over the shadows.”

“We will go with you and add our voice to yours when you talk with the others,” Inusuka said. “Let us give our leave to Hamaji.”

I nodded but stayed behind. The lady and I had never gotten along. She had never forgiven me for using her to channel the spirit of my lady before she had been rescued by Inusuka. I didn’t blame her. I studied the plum blossoms further, waiting and hating having to, wanting nothing more than to be able to rescue Keno.

The next *Hakkenshi* we went to was Inukai Genpachi. He had been a lower-class samurai when he was alive, and that hadn’t changed in the Dreamlands. He stayed at the edge of the pleasure quarters in the Dreamlands’ spectral version of Edo instead of living in a *shonen* like most of his brothers. I wasn’t surprised to see that he was gambling in one of the dens there.

Inukai straightened when he saw us and gathered up his money. There were some protests, but they were all silenced when the scum saw us. Inukai didn’t say anything until we were out of the place.

“What happened?” he growled.

“Our mother has been stolen into the real world,” Inukawa said.

Inukai snarled. “There is more.”

He would know that. For all the man was an ignorant fighter, there was something about him that let him know things that were better hidden. It was an annoying talent, at times.

Inusuka grinned. “Do you think that Samojirou-sama would actually be honest with us? The man does not play the Game, but he keeps his own secrets. He will tell us in his own time.”

Inukai nodded. “I will tell Konbungo and Shinbee to meet us at our brother Dousetsu’s dwelling. From there we can watch Samojirou-sama avoid getting his throat ripped out by our father.”

“We need to gather our brother Daikaku also,” Inukawa said.

Inukai grunted. “Daikaku is on a retreat, meditating. We would never be able to find him in time. But his wife should know where he is. She will have him meet us at Tamazusa-sama’s estate when it is time for us to leave.”

“And how do you know this?” I asked.

“His wife has told me in the past of such things,” he said. “I go over there to check on her, since a woman alone needs a man around to fuss over.”

I wondered if there was something else that was going on and decided I didn’t care. The *Hakkenshi* were close; over the centuries they had become a power to be feared here. It was their disinterest in the Game that stopped them from becoming a power in it. But then, the *Hakkenshi* had always been better as tools than as players.

KENO

I WOKE up with a light shining in my eyes. I was naked and tied to a chair. I felt like I had been beaten, because I hurt all over. I remember jerking helplessly from all the electricity that was flowing through my body. The room was really cold, and I noticed I was shivering. Murphy, another man I recognized but didn’t know his name, and a stranger were all staring at me. The stranger felt bad to me, and I knew the other man was a Trustee, even if I didn’t remember his name. I wondered what had happened to Fuse and had visions that she was being treated the same way. Or worse. I had realized over the years that a large proportion of the people here were sadists.

“What did you tell them, gook?” Murphy asked.

He hit me, striking me across the face. I choked and felt my head slam into something hard. I saw stars or something and felt like I had

been hit by Kazuya. I opened my mouth to say something, and he backhanded me again. I decided that saying nothing was the best thing, since he wasn't interested in hearing me anyway. I knew that was true when he started hitting me in the stomach.

After a few minutes of that, the stranger barked, "Enough!"

Murphy hit me one more time and stepped back, rubbing his hands. I was choking and gasping for breath, tears running down my face. The stranger pulled my head back by my hair, studying me. My ribs hurt, and I was having trouble breathing. I thought Murphy might have cracked a few of them.

"Why were you taken?" he demanded.

It took me a minute to realize what he was saying, because my brain was screaming that him touching me was a bad thing. "I don't know," I lied.

The guy let go off my hair and stepped back. "He just needs his hands and his brain to program for you, if you trust him anymore."

The Trustee guy sniffed. "Crude, but accurate. And we can always trust him because he knows what the alternatives are, and we do have people who will make sure that he is loyal. The talent that he has is rare, so we shouldn't permanently damage it. Don't be such a thug, Fairinox."

"I'll ask you one more time, boy, why, out of all the survivors of that fuck up, were you taken?"

"There were survivors?" I gasped.

That was the wrong thing to say, because Fairinox shook his head. "Let's leave this in Murphy's capable hands, Mr. Collins. He'll get the answers that we want from the boy."

That made me shiver harder. Murphy grinned. "I'll get some help, and the gook will spill his fucking guts."

The other two left, and Murphy stepped out of my line of sight, talking on his cell phone. “Get a couple of the boys down here. The kind who don’t mind getting their hands dirty.”

While he was waiting for his reinforcements to arrive, Murphy ranted. He started with gook and finished with cross-dressing faggot. Fuck was used a lot. But what had gotten these three angry was that Fuse was under the protection of one of the other Trustees and was hands-off after the initial examination. Mason was her protection. I thought that Wolf was doing something that he didn’t like too, from what Murphy was screaming about.

Krauss and someone else showed up. I didn’t know who he was. Krauss was acting like he was a kid on his birthday, and the other guy was grinning. Whatever they had planned, it wasn’t going to end nicely for me. My stomach flipped over.

“Get the fucking gook to tell us what he knows about that gook bitch and the rest of her operation,” Murphy snarled at the two of them.

He stood back and let the other two do whatever they wanted to me.

I WASN’T surprised that no one asked me questions. I was beaten, loosening most of my teeth, blackening both eyes, and breaking my nose. A couple of fingers were broken and more toes, along with a rib or two. I had passed out while being tossed between the two of them like a punching bag. I woke up curled in a corner, covered in my own filth and theirs, as well as blood, while I took inventory of what was broken. I hurt too much to figure out if I had been raped. I was thinking not, because that was something Murphy wouldn’t like. Too gay for him. I was going to keep thinking that, because I didn’t want to think that it had happened again.

Murphy was sitting in a chair, grinning. “What do you know, gook?”

“Nothing,” I said in Japanese.

That pissed him off, and he leaped up and kicked me in the stomach. “English!”

“I don’t know anything,” I repeated in my native tongue when I could breathe again.

He kicked me again and repeated the question. Every time I answered in Japanese, he stomped on something. I guess kicking was boring him. I was screaming a few minutes into this, but I was stupid and stubborn enough to keep on not speaking English for the man. I didn’t know why I was doing it. Maybe I was hoping someone would rescue me. Or that Murphy would kill me, and it would be all over.

I was curled up and sobbing hysterically when Wolf rushed into the room. He was looking a little wild and stared at Murphy in horror. The man had taken a break from kicking me, but you could tell what had been happening.

“You know that I would have sworn that Keno was suffering from a classic case of Stockholm Syndrome, which he was getting some counseling and treatment for, which was why he was out of circulation,” Wolf said. “He sounded like... Keno acted like he was happier in that place than here. I thought that they had done something to him. But then I bumped into Krauss and Steele.” Wolf paused for a second. “They’re both in the infirmary. Broken hands are the least of their worries.”

“You trust the fucking gook after what you’ve seen?” Murphy demanded. “He was their fucking pet. He probably told them everything that they wanted to know about us. He was probably spilling his guts since they picked him up. Shit! He got Heiseg killed.”

Wolf started swearing in German. He scooped me up, and I started beating on him to let me go because I didn’t want him touching me, because I hurt, because I was filthy. Wolf held me, even though I was using a lot more skill than he thought I had. He just waited for me to stop fighting him. When I had exhausted my strength, he carried me out of there. He paused at the door. “You’re relieved of duties until an internal investigation is done. Along with Collins and Fairinox.”

“You’re full of fucking shit!” Murphy roared. “Who has the authority?”

“Elizabeth Adams and my grandfather, who is also a Trustee,” Wolf said coldly. “But you knew that.”

Murphy sagged, and that was the last thing I saw before I passed out.

CHAPTER 16

KENO

I WOKE up someplace else, my eyes bandaged. “I don’t know,” I slurred before anyone could ask me anything.

“Keno-chan,” Fuse chided me, “you are safe now.”

She gave me a straw, and I sipped the water, thinking it was the most wonderful thing in the universe. I wanted to cry when she pulled it away, but I also knew that too much might make me sick.

“They didn’t hurt you,” I mumbled.

“Mason-san was very kind to me,” she said. “But I do not think that these people know how serious this issue is.”

I wanted to say something, but I drifted off again. When I woke up, I felt a little better and tried to sit up. I could wiggle my toes and fingers, but I had trouble moving because I was so tired. The bandages were off my eyes, and I was relieved I could see again. I was clean, and that felt wonderful. I wanted Samojirou, though, and tears started to slip down my face.

“Keno-chan, you are safe,” Fuse said. She was wearing a bright orange jumpsuit that looked dreadful on her. She looked tired, and I

was worried about what had been done to her. I didn't say anything, but I heard her hissing at someone. "What did you do to him?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Don't..."

"I know why Samojirou-sama did what he did." Fuse told me quietly.

"He can't leave," I choked out. "There's no door."

She sighed. "He will send someone because he cannot," she promised. "And I know that my consort will come, if not my sons."

"Family," I muttered. "Didn't tell them anything."

"Keno," Wolf said gently.

"I hurt," I announced. "Not like last time, though. That was a surprise. I didn't think—"

"You were just beaten," Wolf assured me, sounding a little panicked. "They didn't..."

Why wasn't I surprised that he couldn't say it either? The man didn't want to think that it could happen to me or anyone. I had thrown enough hints out about what was happening, and he had done nothing! I had hoped he might be able to stop it like Mason tried to do. I would have done anything for Wolf if he had stopped the other TCs from abusing me.

"Just beaten!" Fuse snapped. "Do not be such an idiot."

I couldn't believe she sounded like that, like she was his mother. Mason came and saved Wolf from getting yelled at more, I swear.

"Quacks don't want you to get coffee yet," he said. "But you... you looked good when you kicked Kazuya's ass."

I struggled but eventually managed to sit up. I didn't hurt as much as I did before, and I wondered about that. I probably was on some good painkillers if I was this pain-free after the beating I received. I felt really weird, though, when I realized I wasn't wearing anything more than a pair of shorts. I blushed, but Fuse just smiled.

“You are doing well, Keno-chan,” she said softly.

“How do you know my name?” I asked.

I felt like I should still be Sakura, but that was something I didn't want these people tainting. I knew they knew about it, but I didn't want them calling me that name. That was what Samojirou called me. A new name for a new life, even if he still called me Keno sometimes. I knew then that I didn't want to be Keno anymore. I was tired of the abuse I got as him.

Fuse smiled. “Mason-san was kind enough to tell me. I now know why Samojirou-sama insisted on calling you Sakura. A very good move in the Game. We would have never guessed it was you otherwise.”

“I don't understand,” I said.

She gently touched my left shoulder, the one with my birthmark on it, asking in English so Mason would understand, since we had been speaking in Japanese. My English seemed as far away as the moon to me, so it was hard for me to understand her. “You were born with this mark, were you not?”

Mason and Wolf crowded around the bed and stared at it. Wolf frowned. “I have one that looks like that on my right shoulder,” he said, sounding confused.

Fuse turned and stared at him, looking very angry. Mason and Wolf stepped back in surprise. “I assume that you spent time in the *onsen* with Samojirou-sama also?”

“Fuck, what is the problem?” Mason asked. “You don't like the fact that we take baths?”

“Samojirou-sama,” Fuse said quietly, “does not play the Game. Not like his lady. Over the centuries we have been friends. I would have thought that he trusted me. I know that because of the past and the hate that he has no love for my father or my consort, but I did not think that he would not tell me this.” She laughed bitterly. “But it also is that I never asked him.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, lady?” Mason asked.

Fuse shrugged. “You three have the same birthmark. How common is that?”

“A lot of people have birthmarks,” Wolf said.

Mason frowned and tilted his head one way and another, staring at my shoulder. “It looks like mine, if it was on one of you pale guys.”

Wolf stared at my shoulder and slipped off the T-shirt he was wearing. I wanted to hide under the blankets, but I looked at his shoulder. It was like looking in a mirror, his birthmark looked like mine, just on a more muscular shoulder.

“Where’s yours, Mason?” Wolf asked him.

“Above my ass... butt,” he said, glancing at Fuse. I was amused that he was trying to watch his language around her. From what I could figure out, he didn’t even do that for McGann. Then it dawned on me what he had said.

“You were naked with her?” I squeaked.

Mason blushed, I swear. “Hey, the tech wanted my clothes. It was Nina, and I stripped before I really thought about it.”

“Mason-san was very kind and worried about leaving me alone. I assure you that he was a gentleman. And it is not like I have not seen something like that before,” she protested. “I did have a brother.”

“I thought that Keno said that you had a large family,” Wolf said.

Fuse smiled and shrugged. “I do. I have eight sons.”

Mason and Wolf stared. I knew she looked young, and that orange thing made her look tiny and helpless, which didn’t help.

“She does,” I said. “They’re all going to be coming for her, and it isn’t going to be nice.”

“Not all,” Fuse said sadly. “One had been lost to me for centuries, but I have found his avatar.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? What the fuck is an avatar?” Mason asked. Okay, I didn’t think that anything or anyone would stop him from using that word, even if he was trying to be polite around people.

“I told you, but there is so much that you would not understand. My family, my consort and my sons, are part of the Dreamlands because they were heroes in a time that needed them. They defended my family’s honor, even when they did not have to, since my father had no honor,” Fuse said.

“Try us,” Mason said. “We ain’t as dumb as we look.”

Fuse smiled. It was an odd smile, like she was his big sister and he had just done something really smart. “It was a time of war. The capital had been burned a generation before, and the land was in chaos. It lasted for over a hundred years.”

“The start of the Warring States era was the Onin War, when the capital was burned in the fighting. After that it was deserted and thought to be haunted in the empty areas,” I explained. “Japan had been ruled by an aristocratic elite before the war. It was then controlled by the Shogun and the warrior class. Eventually the Tokugawa would impose order, control the emperor, and isolate Japan until Perry and the Americans forced it open.”

“Before the Tokugawa,” Fuse continued, “it was a time of magic, filled with fantastic feats and bravery that have been unmatched since then. The Tokugawa suppressed much of this, and it only survives as tales one would tell children or as legends. No one believes that it could be real.”

“What the fuck happened?” Mason demanded.

Fuse looked uncomfortable. “My father held Awa, one of the ancient *kuni* that is now called Chiba, near Tokyo. He won it by the strength of his arms. Before him, it had been held by Samojirou-sama and Tamazusa-sama, who had stolen it from a samurai called Jin-yo. My father attacked their castle, using peasants, tricking his way in. Samojirou-sama killed himself rather than submit. That is when he became an *oni*.”

“A what?” Mason asked.

“You’d call him a demon,” I said quietly.

Mason shook his head, and Fuse continued. “Tamazusa-sama he found in the women’s quarters. She pleaded her innocence and blamed the entire incident on the dead Samojirou-sama. She is beautiful and knows how to use that to her advantage; she had been trained to do so. My father believed her and promised that she would go free. But one of my father’s men protested his decision and claimed that it would make him look weak to release her.” Fuse looked embarrassed. “My father was a weak man. He broke his promise to an innocent woman and sentenced her to death. He beheaded her in the courtyard as if she were a common criminal. She cursed him and embraced the darkness to become what she is now.”

“What did she say?” Wolf asked gently.

Fuse looked up at him. “She said that his descendants would be beasts, because he was a man who could not keep his word. He scoffed at her curse.”

I wondered why this sounded familiar and if this was part of what Samojirou had been keeping from me. I knew that it was important, but I wasn’t angry with him for keeping secrets. Samojirou was a man who would keep secrets and that was simply part of who he was. Besides, if they had told me this before, I didn’t think I would have believed them, even knowing that I was the only human living on Tamazusa’s estate. If the samurai hadn’t been demons like Samojirou or Tan’yu, then they were some sort of spirit, like the maids. Yukiko had said once that she was a flower spirit, which was why she enjoyed working on an estate filled with gardens.

“Years later, Awa was under famine. I was to be married to Kanamari Daisuke, a samurai of my father’s, the son of the man who convinced my father to kill Tamazusa-sama. My father asked for help, and we were invaded by our neighbors, the Anzai. Tamazusa-sama and Samojirou-sama were their allies, even if they were *oni* and of the Dreamlands. The Anzai army was filled with monsters and *oni*. They defeated my father’s army, and all looked lost. But it was not, because of my consort, Yatsufusa. My father in jest offered him his heart’s

desire for the head of the Anzai general. Yatsufusa gave it to him. After his destruction, the army fell into disarray and left our lands.”

“And you guys got married,” Mason said.

I guess she had mentioned this to him before. But Yatsufusa was the name of the dog that was with her all the time. Was she talking about what I thought she was talking about? Why wasn't I shocked?

Fuse nodded. “My father did not think that he needed to keep his word to the family dog and so didn't.”

“What the fuck?” Mason shouted. “You and a dog?”

Wolf looked a little shocked too. Fuse opened her mouth to say something, but I talked over her. I knew this, even if I didn't know how.

“Their union was blessed by a priest. They lived together for a year in a cave in the wilderness of Awa until they were found by Kanamari and he killed them. It had been a union of their spirits. With her dying breath, Fuse slit open her stomach and released the spirits of the children she had been carrying, so that their spirits would not turn into *oni*. Eight sons, one for each bead, for each Confucian virtue on her rosary, were the spirits she released. A year later, boys began to be born to families whose name started with the kanji *Inu*, or dog. Satomi's grandsons were beasts, fulfilling the curse that Tamazusa-sama made,” I said.

“We ain't Nips,” Mason said, gesturing between himself and Wolf. “And I think that you are nuts if you believe this.”

“So why do we all have the same birthmark?” Wolf asked.

Fuse shrugged. “It was a time of magic. And after my sons' deaths, the magic lived on in their line. The avatar, their spirit reborn in one of their descendants, was marked with the sign of the house of Satomi, a peony. Usually it meant nothing. But once in a while, the avatar was called upon to do wondrous and heroic things. My descendants were scattered over the centuries as the world changed.”

“So you think that we are avatars of your sons?” Wolf asked.

MASON

KENO dropping that bombshell wasn't something I expected. He seemed to think that it was normal to have a dog and a chick having kids. But the more that I thought about it, while it was freaky, so was being able to turn someone's insides into JELL-O with a word or hanging around with demons that made Miss Manners look like a crack whore. Keno probably had lost it, and that was okay, because he was back with us now. We'd take better care of him; maybe I'd get him to my place on the weekends, and he'd get better. Or at least Wolf and I would get the sharks to stop circling him.

But I noticed how good he looked. More muscular. Not built, but he had gained something swinging a sword. Before, the kid always looked wasted, and I wondered if it was because he had been scared most of the time. Would he go back to being like that? Were a bunch of fucking demons better at taking care of him? Probably, because I doubted that either Tamazusa or Samojirou beat the crap out of him for information or fun like Murphy just did. More than beat, from what I heard, not that he looked like it now. The bruises were fading to an ugly yellow—something that shouldn't have happened for a week or so.

I didn't like it, and I glared at Fuse. She had done something to him. She was shaking her head and looking sad and proud at the same time. "You remember," she said to Keno.

Keno looked at her, confused and scared. "Not really. Bits of the story. But I always thought that there was something more, another reason that Samojirou-sama was nice to me."

She beamed like she was his mother and he had brought home a straight-A report card. They both looked like they should be in high school, not prisoners of a weird organization. "What do you know of Samojirou-sama?"

Keno blushed. “He likes me. He’s been very good to me. Samojirou-sama wanted me as his companion, and we talked. I studied a lot, anything that I wanted to after a while. We went places.”

Wolf frowned. “He dressed you as a woman! He called you by another name—”

“He told me why,” Keno replied. “It wasn’t like he just told me that my name was Watanabe Shiro. He told me that I was called Sakura because names have power. Because I reminded him of a flower.”

Wolf looked like Keno had just punched him in the stomach. We had papers that said that Watanabe Shiro was Keno, not that he had ever used them. Kid hadn’t needed them because he never left the underground section and hadn’t seen the sun in years, not until last year when Wolf managed to charm McGann into letting him take Keno outside once a month. I’d tried it before, and Murphy had shot me down. So this Samojirou guy taking him places must have fucking thrilled him. Suddenly I felt more like a shit than usual when I thought about Keno.

“That’s so gay,” I muttered, the last bit he said sinking into my brain.

They all looked at me in confusion. Things got worse then, because Kate Murphy walked into the place like she fucking owned it, trailed behind by one of the security guys. He looked grateful when Wolf waved him off and ran back to his station. No one wanted to mess with the boss’s wife.

Kate Murphy was known as Kate to a special few and ma’am to the rest of the crew, including me. She looked good for her age, since I’d never guess that she was a grandmother, looking at her. No lines on the face and a good figure, with no grey in her hair, but I always thought that was because she was coloring it. Mrs. Murphy used to be part of the medical section before she ended up taking care of her grandkids, Sean and James. Her daughter-in-law had been killed in a car accident, and their father was in the Army, so she got the job. We never got along because I didn’t always watch my language around the little ones and something about bussing the kids to public school, not that it mattered, since they were enrolled in Catholic school.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“Need-to-know, Kate,” Wolf said tiredly. “And you don’t need to know everything that is happening with your husband.”

“He told me that he can’t come home for a couple of days and that I should drop some things off for him,” she said. “Then I get a call from little Caitlynn McGann asking me if Jim had ever had issues with his temper or trouble from his time in the Army. What’s going on? And don’t give me need-to-know, because I know too much right now about this place!”

“Jim—” Wolf started.

“Tell her the fucking truth,” I interrupted. The little Caitlynn comment made my brain hurt. I got the bad mental image of McGann in a Catholic schoolgirl outfit and pigtails. Scary and hot at the same time; better than her in just whipped cream, better than her in a French maid’s outfit. Sue me because I’m a perv, but it would be worth getting my brain scrubbed by McGann to see her like that. “Murphy decided that beating the shit out of someone was a good way of getting information. Not that he did it himself; he had a couple of other guys do it.”

“You?” Mrs. Murphy sneered.

“He has honor,” Fuse snarled back, coming to my defense. “He would not hit a woman.”

“My Jim would never!” Mrs. Murphy screamed.

“He struck me and took me prisoner!” Fuse answered in a quieter tone. “And then ordered the beating of Keno, because he defended me.”

“Wolf?” Mrs. Murphy asked. She didn’t want to know. I didn’t blame her. It wasn’t something you wanted to know about the man you were married to. “Please.”

She was looking at Keno and Fuse. She had been a nurse, so she could tell Keno was looking a lot better than he should, if the beating was recent. It had to be recent if Murphy had just gotten in trouble. Both Keno and Fuse looked young and scared, not someone you

usually found hunting monsters. She knew this. She also fucking knew that her husband had screwed up and didn't want to believe it. She wanted to blame it on me or someone else. She wanted Wolf to tell her it was all right and that she could take Murphy home.

“The *Hakkenshi* heal fast,” Fuse said. “And I helped him. What mother wouldn't?”

“You aren't his mother,” Mrs. Murphy said waspishly. “You look like his sister.”

“I am older than I look,” Fuse said. “What do you know of your husband's dealings?”

Mrs. Murphy shook her head. “I refuse to believe that these two children are part of this.”

“Keno's been our fucking prisoner for years,” I said, because she wasn't going to get the luxury of thinking that her husband was perfect and didn't get his hands dirty. “Didn't you know that? Or Murphy never mentioned that he grabbed a fifteen-year-old hacker because the kid got into the wrong fucking cookie jar? That he called him a gook and worse? That he told everyone the kid was open season, so long as he could work afterward?”

“Jim wouldn't!” Mrs. Murphy protested.

“He did,” Wolf said softly. “And we let him. So we aren't that much better.”

Mrs. Murphy sat down shakily on the bed next to Keno's. I was sorry she was getting a few shocks about her husband, but she must have known. She knew that you weren't squeaky clean when you did the messy fucking job that we do.

“Why?” she asked.

Wolf looked uncomfortable, and I felt sorry for him. He liked the Murphys; he was like a son to them and babysat the grandkids for them. They had become the family he had left behind.

“I am one of the monsters that your husband hunts,” Fuse said gently. “I am neither a child nor human.”

“You never hurt anyone,” Keno protested. “Maybe I’m crazy, but I never thought of anyone or anything I met there as a monster.”

He had lost it if he was willing to admit that. The Dreamlands had been crawling with the damned things, from the guys I had hung around with to the damned Reavers. I liked them, but I always knew that they weren’t human. Wolf looked at him with pity.

“*Junge—*”

“Tamazusa-sama saved me from the Hákarl and Heiseg. Samojirou-sama took care of me after Heiseg hurt me. They were kinder to me than anyone had been for a while. I wasn’t scared there. I hadn’t been not scared since you took me from my dorm room.”

Wolf folded. The kid was talking calmly and rationally, and if it was true, then he should be with them. Be with the demons. Because after what just happened to him here, I didn’t think the monsters were the bad guys. Fuse was smiling at him, and Mrs. Murphy looked confused.

“But... he’d never. I know about what he does when things aren’t going well. Wolf, we would never do this to a child!” She pleaded with him. “He isn’t a violent man! Something must have been done to him for this to happen!”

Fuse looked at her with pity. “Your husband was very rude to me and the others for the short time that I had met him. I do not know how Tamazusa-sama dealt with his rudeness the week that he was with her. I would have thought she would have shown him the error of his ways.”

Wolf and I glanced her way. I knew that was what had happened to Heiseg; he had pissed Tamazusa off for some reason. But was it because of Keno? Or because she was PMSing that day? Or had she decided that Murphy wasn’t worth the effort to turn into JELL-O?

Mrs. Murphy just looked confused. “Jim has only been gone a day! He called me when he got back. I was surprised that the mission had been that short.”

Wolf shifted nervously. “The mission was on for five days. We spent four nights in that place. They didn’t try to hide it.”

“What about that?” I asked Fuse. “I was told that Keno had been there for a couple of months when I asked about it. Because of that, I didn’t think that it was him.”

“Time moves differently in the Dreamlands,” Fuse said smoothly. I was thinking she was pulling a fast one on us, because she was starting to sound like Samojirou. But this wasn’t something she really had to lie about either. “It is faster or slower than what is in the real world, depending on where you are.”

“So we’re going to worry about Tamazusa breaking in here soon?” I asked her.

Hell, I couldn’t think of any way of stopping her. No one really knew enough from last time, even with the brain dives, to figure out how she had gotten in. Was it with or without that bastard Heiseg’s help? Or was she able to just come and go as she pleased? And if that was true, why hadn’t she shown up here before? If it had been with Heiseg’s help, would either Keno or Fuse let her in this time? Would Fairinox, if he thought he could get something out of the deal? Was Keno a bomb, and he didn’t even know it? Would he let Tamazusa in and forget he had done it?

Fuse shrugged, unconcerned. “The lady keeps her own counsel, even from Samojirou-sama. I have no idea what she will do. But I know my family will rescue me. They will be angry. It will be deadly.”

Her eyes shifted to Keno. She looked relieved for a second. That made me feel strange, not that I believed what Keno was telling us was true. I wondered why she was missing one of her kids and if she knew the reason why. I was thinking that it was yes. But I also saw how alien she was for a second, how old she was for a moment, even if she looked young enough to be my daughter.

I was about to ask her about that when McGann walked into the room, looking pissed. I wondered what had blown up now.

CHAPTER 17

SAMOJIROU

INUYAMA DOUSETSU was living on the far side of Nippon, isolated from most everyone. The man was not the most social of creatures, given to brooding most of the time. And that was when he was at his most pleasant. Inuyama had hated me ever since the death of his half-sister. Not that he had known the girl or that she hadn't tried to kill herself shortly before that. It was just another grudge he could hold onto and brood about.

Yatsufusa hated me for a different reason. I made his wife laugh, and we had spent a number of years together unchaperoned. He had been on his own quest searching for their lost pup, accompanied by one of their other sons. Fuse and I had been alone. If it weren't for the fact that my tastes were well-known, I doubted that it would have been allowed. Yatsufusa had always been uneasy about his relationship with his lady. I, in some of my unkind moments, had compared it to a modern Western fairy tale I had been told of called *Beauty and the Beast*. Not that it should have mattered, because in this place, appearance was nothing. The body was an illusion for most of those who were here, because none of us were human anymore. We still had the same wants and needs we had in the real world. Yatsufusa's love for Fuse wasn't as pure as it should be, but that didn't mean that it was not deep and true.

However, while most of those here were clothed in illusions, they were of the human sort. Yatsufusa was too proud to be anything but the beast he was, the instrument for Tamazusa's curse along with Satomi's weaknesses. He would not appear to be anything than what he was, a dog. Because of this, many who did not know him thought him to be nothing more than a pet instead of her consort, that he was a lesser thing because he didn't speak or have hands. When I was with them, there were those who thought Fuse was my consort instead of simply a friend.

Yatsufusa simply tolerated me for his wife's sake. I had killed a number of beings who insulted her honor by thinking that she was or would be untrue to her husband because she was with me. They were mostly strangers from other lands in the Dreamlands that we had wandered to while she was looking for the spirit of her lost son, Inuzaka Keno.

We had searched far and wide, from the crowded cities to the barren wastelands, disappointed because we found nothing, even after chasing down the endless rumors about him over the decades. Keno, because of some twist of the curse or vengeance of a *kami*, had never been in the Dreamlands until my lady had gated his avatar here to safety after what had happened with that fool Heiseg. Decades Fuse and I had traveled together, searching for my heart's desire. She had thought I accompanied her because of some mad penance. It wasn't until the end that she had found out the truth. It had shocked her.

Keno and I had been lovers since shortly before he had destroyed the Makuwari Clan, disguised as a dancer called Asakeno, a woman. He dressed that way to hide from his enemies, allowing him to gain vengeance for the death of his father, who had been killed by Makuwari Dai, the head of the Makuwari clan. While Satomi's armies had gathered across the Kanto plain, we had met in secret, aided by the chaos of the times and the fact that Satomi used Keno as an assassin to eliminate his enemies.

It was during the last battle that Keno, along with Inuyama, found out who and what I was by that time—an *oni*. It was then that my lover had to banish me to release the control I had over the armies battling Satomi, filled with demons and undead, destroying the enemies of the

Clan thoroughly. Keno should have killed me and didn't. I learned later that he continued to serve Satomi as his pet assassin until the old man was dead. Inuyama was the only one who knew his secret, and he took it with him to his grave, decades later. The man was humorless and callous, but he knew how to keep a secret.

We all arrived at Inuyama's house, a simple structure isolated in the forest. I was surprised that two of Fuse's sons chose a life of isolation, Inumura being the other, even with his wife here. I was also surprised that his wife tolerated it. But she had known her husband and his habits while they had been alive, and she probably wasn't that lonely with the company of her household and the other *Hakkenshi* to check on her.

Inuyama was in the back, along with Inuta and Inue. Yatsufusa paced restlessly, stopping when we entered into the garden back there. They all leveled hateful looks at me.

Yatsufusa growled, and I fell before him on my knees, humbling myself before him. "I failed to keep your lady safe."

The low growl he gave made the hair on the back of my neck rise. "My lady pledges her aid to you, to help recover her. Those who insulted her in this manner have become her enemies."

"What happened?" Inuyama growled.

"Those from the real world gated to my lady's lands, ignorant of the danger here," I began as I sat back on my heels. "She had been in contact with one from there, but he was a fool. He attempted to open a gate in the real world to here, not knowing the care needed, and let loose upon his own people the Hákarl that hunt in the wild. He enjoyed the fact that they fed upon his own people. My lady killed him and escorted Sakura-chan back here, because he had been a prisoner and abused by those people."

Yatsufusa growled and looked at his sons. Even I could sense the frustration off of him. I knew that he felt trapped and helpless, as I was. "You can follow him into the real world. I cannot," I said, desperation tingeing my voice.

“There is more,” Inukai insisted.

“Sakura-chan is the avatar of your brother, Inuzaka Keno,” I whispered. “That is what I was keeping from all of you.”

“And from him also,” Inukawa added.

“I did not want him to know,” I whispered. “He had no knowledge of who he was.”

“Or what he had been to you,” Inuyama snarled.

“What?” Inue howled, echoed by the others.

“He and our brother Keno had been lovers during the entire war,” Inuyama said. “Even so, Inuzaka did his duty to our grandfather and banished him to end the war.”

“Our punishment was to be separated in the Dreamlands,” I continued. “Centuries apart for the moments of pleasure that we had enjoyed.”

“You dressed our brother as a whore!” Inue screamed.

Inuta, his uncle, grabbed him and hit him on the back of the head. “He treated Sakura-chan with honor. It was a good move, since I doubt that Keno-chan would have understood that he was one of us. Samojirou-sama was protecting our brother.”

“Not that *our* brother ever needed protection,” Inukawa quipped. “Cold bastard that he was. Sakura-chan seems like a nice boy. I would have never known it was him.”

“You lady mother is with these people, and I fear that they will not treat her gently,” I said. “Not from what I had learned from my Sakura-chan. They are stupid in their hate, it seems, thinking that we are all no better than barbarians.”

“Let us go to your lady, and we will ally,” Inusuka said. “I know that this is neither of your faults. You would not have otherwise put yourself into our power so easily.”

KENO

MCGANN walking into the infirmary scared me. She always had scared me, from the first time I had woken up in that holding cell. I got this hollow feeling in my stomach when I realized that she was angry.

“Kate, you shouldn’t be here,” McGann said.

Mrs. Murphy looked confused and angry. I knew that Murphy was married, because he wore a ring. But this woman didn’t look old enough to be his wife. It wasn’t that she looked like Fuse or Tamazusa, young and ageless, but Murphy looked about twenty years older than his wife.

“You call me up about Jim having a temper and hurting someone, and you expect me to sit at home? Jim is good man!” she cried. “I don’t know what happened, but he would never do what Wolf said that he did!”

“Then you should have come to see me, rather coming here,” McGann said. “You aren’t cleared for this anymore.”

“I’ve been a part of this operation for as long as you have!” she exclaimed. “Don’t give me that crap! I remember you when you were in high school, Caitlynn!”

McGann opened her mouth to say something and closed it again. “Jim ordered two TCs to ‘question’ Keno about how much he had told those two about our operation.”

“They never asked any questions,” I whispered. I cringed when everyone in the room looked at me. “They just kept hurting me. Murphy took over afterward, screaming. He kept hurting me because I wasn’t giving him the answers that he wanted.”

Mrs. Murphy stood up, and Fuse moved in front of her. “Do not even think about it,” she hissed. “Do you want to know what was done to him? If I had not helped his body, he might have died.”

“You’re lying!” Mrs. Murphy yelled. “He looks perfectly fine.”

I was hungry, but I wasn’t going to tell them that. I wasn’t going to open my mouth again if I could help it; these people were scaring me, even Wolf. Wolf had this confused look in his eyes. I knew that he was trying understand everything. Not the beating, but that I was happy with Samojirou, about the story that Fuse had told us, and all the other craziness that was happening.

Fuse stepped closer to her. Mrs. Murphy flinched, and I saw how scary Fuse could be. She was almost as cold as Tamazusa. “Keno-chan’s brain had swollen from the repeated blows to his head, his fingers and toes were broken, and his internal injuries were extensive. Your husband was responsible for all of it. Do not blame Keno-chan for this! He is a prisoner, like I am, but I was fortunate to have a protector.”

“And what did you—” Mrs. Murphy sneered.

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Fuse said darkly. “Mason-san has honor and expected nothing in return. The others here think that I am an animal to be studied. He does not.”

“You can’t be serious,” Mrs. Murphy said.

“I believe that the phrase used was ‘interesting specimen to examine,’” Fuse said scathingly. “To you people it means that I would be tortured until I died or was rescued.”

“That wouldn’t—” McGann stopped when Fuse glared at her.

“My family, my sons will enlist Tamazusa-sama’s help in rescuing me. Mason-san simply made sure that someone survived for that.”

“Tamazusa isn’t someone that we should worry about,” McGann said. “Heiseg and the ritual was what let her in her before. Anya assured me that we have nothing to worry about.”

Wolf and Mason looked at each other. Fuse laughed. It was scornful, unlike the polite woman she was, even telling off Mrs. Murphy. “You have angered a woman whom you should not have.

Tamazusa-sama is powerful, and she will find a way in here. She is a woman who knows how to hate,” she finished with a whisper.

McGann looked confused, and I was grateful that neither Mason nor Wolf was telling her how true it was. I guess they didn’t believe it themselves.

“Keno?” McGann demanded.

I knew what she wanted, and I gave it to her. “Tamazusa-sama has always been kind to me, especially since the first night. I don’t think that I would have survived what had happened without her and Samojirou-sama.”

“What did she want with you?” McGann demanded.

“She took me as a present for Samojirou-sama,” I said carefully.

That sounded bad, and Wolf looked horrified. The rest of them were a little more cynical about it.

“Samojirou-sama always treated him with respect,” Fuse insisted.

“And how is that different from nabbing a kid because he hacked into us?” Mason asked sarcastically. “It wasn’t like Keno was living it high here. I’ve seen prisoners in max lockup treated better.”

“And you should know about that,” Mrs. Murphy commented in the same tone.

“Fuck, the wardens never let it be known that it was okay to rape someone,” Mason snarled, “like McGann and your old man did. Or did I read it wrong when me and Wolf told you that Keno was in trouble? That Heiseg was gonna cross the line? That the rest of the staff thought that he was a fun toy to play with?”

“Mason—”

“Well, Murphy had a shitfit when I asked if Keno was part of the benefits plan. Your attitude was that if he could function afterward, what was the problem?”

“Mason, I didn’t mean that!” McGann shrieked. “I didn’t think that the problem was as serious as you thought it was.”

I wanted to crawl under the bed because they were arguing about me. I just started shaking and wanted to be anyplace but here. I wanted to be Samojirou’s rooms, waiting for him, to see how he was. Did he get hurt in what happened? Did Tamazusa?

“That’s what came out, but then we had been treating the kid like shit since we nabbed him,” Mason snapped. “Didn’t matter when he was a kid, but he grew up, and it got messy when he got pretty. Not that Keno should have been slapped around because the samples were bad or you were hung over, but that wasn’t as bad as what people had planned for him. Keno looked like shit all the time. And we all thought that it was normal.”

“Wolf, Jim would never have thought that was all right,” Mrs. Murphy whispered raggedly. She sounded like she was going to cry.

“I don’t know,” Wolf said softly. “He never liked Keno. It was always a fight with him to get him more books or movies. We had several arguments about where I could take him when he finally allowed me to take Keno out of this place.”

I remembered the first time that had happened. We went to the zoo. As soon as I got out of the garage here, my eyes burned, and I had tears running down my face. The sun was too bright after years of dim fluorescents, and it hurt. I was grateful when Wolf handed me sunglasses, looking guilty. He hadn’t even thought about the fact that I hadn’t seen the sun for so long it would hurt me. There were too many people, and it was too loud and bright, even though the place was half empty. We had to stop a lot and just sit because it was too overwhelming for me after years of isolation. I had gotten the impression that a lot of people thought that I was sick or something because I was so pale.

“And he was a complete asshole on the mission,” Mason added. “Him and the ice... Romejinoff. What the fuck did she say that pissed that guy off so much?”

Wolf winced, and I was just glad that they weren't talking about me anymore.

Fuse frowned slightly. "The other woman? The taller one that sneered at everything? To be entertained in Tamazusa-sama's private garden is an honor! She and Samojirou-sama are well known as gracious hosts and thoughtful guests."

Mason shrugged. "Romejinoff was being more of a bitch than usual."

"Mason!" Wolf exclaimed.

Mason looked at him crossly. "I never got along with the woman, you know that. She's a whore who doesn't have to be, with no thought to who she's fucking over when she's acting like that. What the fuck did she say that made that guy want to kill her?"

"Mason," Wolf tried.

"Wolf, that bitch almost caused a fucking riot there," Mason said.

"Mason!" McGann broke in. "Anya is—"

"A loose fucking cannon who shouldn't have been there," Mason growled. "But you and I know that she was there because Collins was being an asshole! How many of us were there because the man wanted us to be? To get rid of us? Because sure as shit, I know that Murphy didn't pick his team."

"You're just being paranoid," McGann said, her exhaustion clear.

"Is he?" Wolf asked suddenly. Everyone stared. "I would never want Anya on an op with me because she has a tendency to not follow orders, and she isn't the most tolerant person that I know."

I shivered, because that was an understatement. She had been Heiseg's girlfriend, and when he was getting weird and touching me, she had been getting more and more abusive, like she knew what he was doing. She was one of the people who liked slapping me a lot, especially if I didn't get her research to her fast enough. She also called

me names in Russian that I knew were bad, even if I didn't understand what she was saying.

“Murphy didn't pick his team,” McGann said. “If he had, Anya and I wouldn't have been on it. He didn't believe that noncombatants should be part of a field operation. Collins's list for who went on this op was one that was influenced by petty spite.”

SAMOJIROU

WE managed to get back to Tamazusa's estate as fast as possible, even if it seemed too slow for me. I hated traveling by normal means, even if none of the others could walk the shadows as I did. I comforted myself with the fact that time in the real world moved slower than it did here. Tamazusa had spent the week I was gone organizing her people and preparing for the battle. Inue had managed to keep his tongue in his head during the journey, so I didn't kill him. I believed Inue realized even his uncle Inuta had lost patience with him.

“A group of my Reavers wish to come with me,” Tamazusa said when we arrived travel-stained and exhausted.

“Good,” I said. “They will protect you.”

She smiled and motioned for the maids to attend us. Bathed and cleaned up, we met for dinner where Inusuka and Tamazusa discussed strategy, and she told us what she knew of the place that was holding Keno and Fuse prisoner. The rest of the *Hakkenshi* listened and commented but deferred to Inusuka's leadership. It had been like that in the real world with their grandfather, Satomi, since Inusuka was his favorite grandson.

I felt helpless because I was not going on this mission with them. I seethed over being trapped here, at feeling powerless. I felt the pity

the others had for me and wanted to writhe in shame. When the dinner ended, Inuta patted me on the back before he went off to arm himself.

“I will care for the boy,” he rumbled. “Sousuke is to protect mother when we find her. The rest of us will fight. These people will know that they were foolish to try this.”

I smiled, wondering if Keno would even trust this man enough to be protected by him. I trudged after them to see them through the gate.

I WAS stunned. One moment I was in my lady’s garden, and the next I was in this ugly grey room. The room was crowded with *Hakkenshi* and Reavers. My lady stared at me, shocked. “You are free,” she whispered.

I spared no thought for the miracle; I was simply relieved that I had been carrying a sword with me. I wasn’t armored like the rest of them, including Tamazusa. I had insisted that she wear armor since Keno had told me about their guns. The rest of them stared at us for a long, stunned moment. Inumura shook his head for a moment before kneeling on the floor and starting to chant. He had been tasked with chanting the spells that would shut down their technology while my lady was expanding her gate to cover part of the area here. Her Reavers would be guarding both of them. After a minute Tamazusa announced, “It is done. The three levels above us are cut off from the outside world.”

When she said that, the lights flickered out, and the machines around us stopped humming. After a second, odd glowing lights came back on, scattering shadows about the place. I knew what I could do to help when that happened.

Inusuka frowned for a minute, revising the plans that he had made. “Shinbee, Konbungo, take the second level above us. Genpachi and Sousuke, take the floor above us. Search carefully, because it is filled with those odd rooms called labs. Dousetsu, Yatsufusa, and I will take the top level.”

I tied back my hair and my sleeves to keep them out of the way of my sword. Inusuka looked at me, and I stared back. The sensible thing was to leave me here with Tamazusa and Inumura, but I would not stay behind when Keno was so close to me. “Follow us up to the upper level,” he said.

“I can use the shadows to travel about this place,” I said. “I will sow confusion among our enemies while you search for Keno-chan and Fuse-hime.”

Inuyama grinned wolfishly. “Good hunting.”

I nodded, bowed to Tamazusa, and stepped into the shadows.

MASON

KENO and Fuse were yanked out of the infirmary when McGann figured out that Keno was okay. McGann had this worried look in her eyes, and I didn’t like the fact that Collins and Fairinox were still hanging about. While Murphy had been confined to quarters on C level, those two were playing some sort of political game with Collins calling anyone he could think of to get him out of this mess. More Trustees were being contacted, and it was turning into a shitstorm.

Wolf decided that sticking to Keno was a good idea, while I continued to play bodyguard to Fuse. I wasn’t surprised when McGann decided to separate them. Fuse was sent down to one of the labs to be examined by a couple of more people, and Keno was going to be questioned by Fairinox and Collins. I didn’t like it but figured Wolf would cover his ass.

We had just gotten to the labs on D level when the lights went out. I was glad that we weren’t stuck in one of the elevators, but I nearly shit myself when I heard the blast doors slam down. They were two floors above us, and I still heard the crash. That wasn’t a good thing.

The eggheads with us looked around nervously after the noise of the crash. I thought their names were St. John and Samuels. Both had been with the Trust for a couple of years, and they were lab rats rather than fighters. St. John was some sort of aging surfer type, while Samuels was a geek who had less manners than I did.

Fuse glanced around in confusion. “Are the lights supposed to do that?”

“No,” I said softly.

She smiled, and I was struck by how cold and McGannish she was at that moment. I stopped thinking of her as a nice girl and started seeing her as someone who could be as hardass as that Tamazusa could be. “I fear that the rest of the day will be most unpleasant for you.”

“What... what are you talking about?” Samuels squeaked.

“My family has come to rescue me,” Fuse said.

St. John frowned. “I thought that the Japanese didn’t believe in taking prisoners and stuff like that, with the way that our guys were treated in World War II.”

She shrugged. “That is after my time. Tokugawa Iyesu had twisted *bushido* into what he believed it to be, and he was a very angry man. My sons will go through the hells to take me back to the Dreamlands, to say nothing of what Yatsufusa will do.”

I tried not to shiver. We had guns and all that shit, so a bunch of guys swinging swords weren’t something to worry about. I went over to the wall and checked the phone at the elevator. There wasn’t even a dial tone. “Shit.”

Samuels was quicker on the uptake than St. John was. He ripped out his cell phone and started to frantically press buttons before he announced, “No signal. I always get a signal since I tweaked some stuff in it.”

“Dude, nothing to worry about,” St. John said. “Go to my office and be mellow until the power gets back on.”

“Your office is on what floor?” I asked.

“A.”

“And what emergency protocols just kicked in?” I asked. “Where did the blast doors close down?”

St. John thought for a second and got this panicked look in his eyes. “Isolation. Shit! Shit! *Shit!*”

“We’re doomed,” Samuels moaned. “Fucking D level all over again. They just cleaned this place out.”

It didn’t help that the armory was on A level and the boss didn’t believe in caches on the individual levels. I wasn’t armed, and I didn’t know if I could get anyone out of this alive. This was a repeat of what had happened a couple of weeks ago. I wondered if the big boys were going to put the place under quarantine this time, because it was becoming a pain in the ass to have this happen all the time. I was pretty sure we were cut off from outside world. I just had to get these people up a couple of levels and hope that someone managed to get the blast doors open. It wasn’t going to be easy, because it was like herding cats with these people on a good day to get them to do shit. This wasn’t a good day.

Fuse smiled at the two of them, and I shrugged. “Your kids gonna bring Hákarl with them?”

She looked shocked and shook her head. “They hunt them for the disgusting things that they are.”

I opened my mouth to say something when something flashed out of the corner of my eye, stepping out of the shadows. It was butt ugly, with a dead white face, horns, and fangs. There was a sword in its hands, and it slashed at Samuels. He screamed and went down like a sack of wet cement. The thing bowed to Fuse and melted back into the shadows.

St. John stooped down to check on Samuels while Fuse just stared off into space. She seemed to be in some sort of shock.

“He’s hurt pretty bad,” St. John said. “We’ve got to stop the bleeding and then hope that we get help soon.”

There was another scream from a different part of the floor, and we started moving toward it, with Samuels slung between the two of us. I didn’t know how many people were on this floor, but I knew that there was safety in numbers. It took us a couple of minutes before I got them into one of the meeting rooms, and during that time, that thing hurt a couple of more of the lab boys. I didn’t like the fact that there were shadows in this place, but we seemed to have lost the monster. I couldn’t lose the feeling that he had herded us into this position.

I had three injured out of ten. All of them badly slashed, and I was worried that we were going to lose one before the power kicked in again. We got them bandaged and comfortable, but the one that was awake was a hurting puppy and going into shock. The other two were already unconscious, and I felt naked because none of us had a weapon. I wasn’t going to let them scavenge in the labs to build a bomb or something where that thing could get them when they were isolated.

I had them settled down and in some sort of controlled panic after a few minutes. That taken care of, I approached Fuse to get some answers. Then I was going to decide if we were going to make a run up to another level. I knew that going down was going to be a bad thing.

“What was that fucking thing?” I demanded, and I hoped it wasn’t one of her kids.

She smiled, thoughtful. “I can guess.”

I waited for her to explain more, but she wouldn’t. “Who the fuck was that?”

“I think that was Samojirou-sama.”

I stared, remembering the smooth snake oil salesman that was Tamazusa’s councilor. He didn’t look like that. Hell, he was a borderline pretty boy almost. “You’re shittin’ me.”

She frowned, trying to figure out what I was saying. “Samojirou Aboshi is an *oni*, a demon. He rejected his humanity at his death.”

“You don’t look like that here,” I pointed out. Which was a good thing, or she would have been cut up like a cow, fast. She still looked cute and innocent, young enough to be my daughter. I had a hard time believing that her grown up kids were coming to kick our asses, even if we deserved it.

“I died, sacrificing myself for my children and the future. My sons had been heroes, so we still look as we did in life.”

I thought about it for a moment, glaring at anyone who got too close to us. “So Tamazusa looks like that now?”

“Tamazusa-sama looks as she did at her death,” Fuse said. “She died—”

“An innocent,” I finished for her. I paused. “You get a chance, tell her thanks for Heiseig.”

Fuse frowned. “I do not understand.”

“She will,” I said.

I was about to say more when the door was kicked in. The lab boys all screamed, and two of the nastiest-looking fighters I have ever seen walked in. They weren’t tall, but they had a look in their eyes that was cold and empty, like some of the lifers I had seen in max lockup. The screams had died down to whimpers, and everyone who could scrambled to get out of their way. I shoved Fuse behind me and wished I had some sort of gun.

“Get your hands off of her!” one of them shouted.

Fuse peeked out from behind me. “Genpachi! Sousuke! Have you no manners?”

“Unhand our mother,” the second one shouted. I couldn’t tell which was which. The taller of the two grabbed my arm and froze, staring at me in horror. “You!”

“Genpachi, I am unharmed. Where are the rest of your brothers? Your father?”

I figured out that Genpachi was the one holding me while Sousuke was the one talking. Their English was rough and heavily accented, but understandable.

“Father, Dousetsu, and Shino are two floors above us,” Sousuke said. “Tamazusa-sama and Daikaku are keeping the Gate open and controlling their technology from the lowest level here. Their guns and other weapons shouldn’t work. Konbungo and Shinbee are exploring the floor above us.”

“You!” Genpachi repeated. “You are an avatar!”

I shrugged. “So your mom says.”

St. John drifted closer to us, which I thought showed a lot of balls and stupidity at the same time. Sousuke glared, and he froze in place.

“That’s your mom?” St. John blurted.

Both of the samurai focused on him, and Fuse shook her head. “Escort me down to your brother Daikaku and Tamazusa-sama, and then you will look for your brother Keno’s avatar. He is not staying here!”

“You ain’t takin’ him with you!” I snarled.

“And you took such good care of him,” she reminded me sharply.

“This is about Keno?” St. John asked. “That kid’s been a pain for a while.”

Genpachi backhanded him, and the rest of the people in the room screamed. It didn’t help that Samojirou did that freaky shadow thing again and wounded another one of the lab boys. I thought he was just as pissed at us about Keno as Fuse was, but she was being a bit more restrained about killing us.

“Fuck!” I screamed in frustration. “You get that asshole off my ass, and I’ll take your mom wherever the fuck she wants to go. While most of these people have been assholes to Keno, they don’t deserve this shit.”

“That would be up to Samojirou-sama to decide.” Sousuke grinned. “He is insulted by your treatment of his consort.”

“I knew that the kid was a fag,” someone muttered.

Sousuke and Genpachi glared at them. Fuse walked up to whoever had said it and slapped him. I wasn't surprised to see that she cold-cocked the guy. I shrugged and grinned at the rest of the room. “Keno's got friends now, so I'd keep my fuckin' mouth shut.”

Samojirou popped into the room again, and the screaming started up even though he didn't try to kill anyone this time. He stalked up to me, and I felt my stomach turn over. There wasn't shit I could do if he wanted to kill me. He stopped in front of me, glaring. “Where is he?” His voice was a guttural growl.

“I don't fuckin' know,” I said in total honesty.

Samojirou snarled and faded back into the shadows.

Sousuke looked at me and said, “You are coming with us.”

I nodded, knowing that pissing these people off was a bad idea. Besides, it might stop that fucker Samojirou from killing any more of the eggheads.

CHAPTER 18

KENO

WOLF and I were taken to one of the interrogation rooms on B. I shivered when I realized what it was. I looked up at Wolf and wondered if they were going to send him away again and beat me up. I was wearing a pair of scrubs and a loose robe, so I was warm, but I couldn't forget Fairinox saying that I just needed my hands and my brains to hack for these people. He had been so ready to kill me or worse. But McGann was in charge of this interrogation, or at least she was asking the questions. She wasn't hitting me or letting anyone else hit me, so I cooperated with her. Collins and Fairinox had been here, but Wolf had glared at them until they had left.

“How much did you tell them about here?”

I looked at Wolf and hesitated. I really hadn't told them about here, but I had talked about my life here with Samojirou and Tamazusa. I had explained how guns worked and had warned them when Murphy and the rest of them showed up. I had told them that Wolf spoke Nipponese too.

“Keno, he can't hurt you anymore,” Wolf said. I didn't know which “he” Wolf was talking about. Murphy? Fairinox? Or Samojirou,

because Wolf didn't like the fact that he was nice to me and that I trusted him?

McGann decided a different approach would work better. "Keno, how long were you with Lady Tamazusa and Lord Samojirou?"

I thought about that; it seemed like a safe question to answer. "A few months."

"And what was your life like with them?" McGann asked.

"I liked it," I said bluntly.

"Why?" she asked, a strange look on her face.

"I wasn't afraid," I said. "And I had enough to eat."

Wolf made this odd noise, and McGann looked a little sick. I was about to add to that when the lights went off and alarms started blaring. There was a loud crash, and I remembered that sound from before. It was the sound of the blast doors closing; the sound that woke me up on the night Heiseg had hurt me.

"We have a breach," Wolf shouted. After looking at McGann, he rushed out of the room.

"Keno, don't be worried," McGann said.

I huddled further into the chair, wondering what was going on. I started quivering when I remembered the last time this happened.

"Tell me what your life was like with them," McGann coaxed.

I started talking just to get my mind off of what was happening. "I'd get up in the morning, and I'd work out with Tamazusa-sama's samurai for a couple hours, katana practice or archery or swimming, depending on who I was with that day. They were nice to me, teased me a bit about Samojirou-sama, but nice."

"Why did they tease you about Samojirou?"

“Because Tamazusa-sama gave me to him as a present the night that she took me from here,” I said. Wolf had walked back into the room as I spoke and made that odd noise again.

“That woman did what?” Wolf exclaimed, like he’d never heard me say it before.

I looked up, but before I could say anything, McGann asked, “What’s happening?”

“We seemed to be cut off from A level, but not the ones below it,” Wolf said. “The power is off. We can’t get to the upper levels, and I have no idea who’s trapped down here with us.”

“Weapons?” McGann demanded.

Wolf shook his head. “Nothing, except...”

McGann nodded. “Last resort. I’d like to go up, but probably getting everyone down to the atrium on C is a good choice. Murphy’s on C in the quarters, and I know that Collins and Fairinox were heading down to that level before this happened.”

Wolf said something in German that had McGann frowning. I thought it was something bad, from the look on her face.

“Move out,” she ordered, and I scrambled off the chair and onto my feet. Wolf looked at the two of us.

“Stick close to me or Caitlynn,” Wolf said. “Don’t trust anyone.”

“I want to get Murphy and anyone else who we can find in the atrium,” McGann said. “You probably are safer with us.”

“I know that,” I whispered. I didn’t want to be with anyone, really, but maybe Mason or Wolf. “Where is Fuse-hime?”

“Mason was taking her down to D with a couple of scientists to run some tests. Samuels and St. John,” McGann said.

Samuels had a tendency to look at me like I was snack, but St. John was mostly on my side. He wouldn’t start anything, but he also

didn't stop someone from doing anything to me. He didn't care enough. But Mason was protecting Fuse, so I knew she was going to be all right.

The emergency lights outside the room were out, and the alarm sounded too loud.

"I don't know where the breach is," Wolf had to yell.

"That doesn't matter," McGann said. "We just have to get it under control so they don't flood the place with cyanide. Collins down here actually is to our advantage because he's a Trustee."

What started was the longest, scariest walk of my life. When Heiseig took me from my room didn't count, because I didn't remember any of that night. Now I wasn't in shock, and Wolf and McGann were doing this weird military search of the level we were on. They found five other people alive and three dead, attacked by something with a sword. Stupid as that sounds, it made me feel better. I didn't know what was here, but it wasn't a monster.

I realized that it was the middle of the night, which was why there weren't that many people here. They all looked at me weirdly, but McGann and Wolf kept them moving and not talking as Wolf led us down to C level. The stairway was pitch black, and we slowed down to a crawl as we felt our way down the stairs. One of the techs sprained her ankle when she tumbled down them. From the way she carried on, you'd have thought she had been seriously injured. I thought that McGann was going to slap her just to calm her down.

We got down to the bottom of the stairs, and Wolf started checking out that level. The only sound that I heard was the harsh breathing of the people with me and the whimpers of the woman who had sprained her ankle. I couldn't see anything, and I doubted that anyone else could.

Wolf opened the door a crack. "I'll be back," he whispered.

We waited in the dark. The door opened again after an endless time, and I heard a scream above and behind me, and a body fell on me. I stumbled forward under the weight and felt something hot soaking

into my clothing. I felt other people trying to catch me and the body, and I struggled to get to my feet.

“He’s dead!” Someone started yelling, which set off the rest of them. There was a stampede to the door and more screaming. I was tossed to one side and felt someone falling on me again, and I passed out.

I WOKE up when Wolf started shaking me. “Keno... *Junge*—”

“I hurt,” I muttered.

I was in the atrium, laid out on one of the couches there. The atrium on C level had been an old subway station that had been isolated from the main branch during reconstruction to the line in the '20s. When the Trust built this base in the '40s, they turned part of it into a lounge area. When I was first here, I hung out here a lot. When things started to get a bit scary, I started to avoid this place. The rest of the station had been turned into various labs, but they had kept the ceramic walls of the original station out here, and the name of the station, Boylston. It was big and echoing, and I wondered why McGann and Wolf chose this place to stay. I heard the muttering of a bunch of people who I knew were scared out of their minds. Things might have been better if there hadn't been a breach before this or if there wasn't the threat of shutting this place down permanently with them in it.

“I thought that you were dead,” Wolf said, hugging me. “We lost three people in that mess and have a couple more badly injured.”

“Someone seems to be phasing in and out, attacking us,” McGann said softly. “We can't tell what's going on; it's too dark. Half the emergency lights aren't working.”

“Shadows,” I murmured. I knew that Samojirou was able to use the shadows to move around in, but he was trapped in the Dreamlands.

“Keno, you all right?” Wolf asked.

My clothing was sticking to me, and all I could smell was blood. I was covered in it, I figured out. That had been the hot liquid spraying on me. “How many?”

McGann looked startled, but said, “We have about fifteen people here, but I haven’t been able to contact anyone else. I found Fairinox and Collins, but not Murphy. We’ve lost about five or six because of the attacks.”

“Someone’s blocking us,” Fairinox announced. I shrank back from him because I didn’t want him to touch me. “There is a powerful magician here.” He stared at me like he had never seen me before. “Boy, I can use you.”

“You’re not touching me,” I snarled. I knew what he wanted. My magic.

McGann looked between Fairinox and me, and it was like she knew what he wanted me for. “You’re not to go near him.”

“You’ve got no right—” Fairinox whined.

“My office, my rules,” she snarled. “And you aren’t pulling that shit here.”

“And I outrank you,” Collins said firmly.

“My people are the only thing keeping you alive from whatever just breached us,” she said. “I don’t think that you understand that.”

“Caitlynn, dear, I don’t think that you understand,” Collins said smoothly.

“We’re out of contact with our people, unarmed, and being picked off one by one, and I doubt that it’s going to stop soon.” McGann said. “What don’t I understand?”

Wolf snorted. There was another scream, and I knew that some else had been hurt or killed.

Collins got panicky. “Do something about this!” he demanded.

McGann looked at him for a long moment before turning to Wolf. “See if you can get down to D level and find any survivors down there. Bring them up here. I’m going lead the rest of them to the conference room just inside the lab areas and hope that a smaller area will stop us from being picked off.”

“You up to a run?” Wolf asked me.

I hurt, I felt like the Tokyo subway had run me over, and I was covered in other people’s blood. I didn’t want to move, and I felt sick to my stomach. But I knew that being with Wolf was safer than anyplace else with Collins and Fairinox running loose. “That sounds like a great idea,” I said.

SAMOJIROU

I MELTED into the shadows, wanting to kill everyone in this place. This had been my Keno’s prison for too long. I faded in and out, killing everyone I saw. I pulled back after my third kill and began to search for Keno. That wasn’t to say I stopped killing the humans here, it was just something that happened in the search for my love. The humans were confused, frightened by the dark and being trapped. I simply took advantage of that. They tried to organize and protect themselves, but they had no protection from someone who struck from the shadows and faded back into them. I found Murphy in a room and struck out, not to kill, but to incapacitate. I wanted to savor my time with him. I bound him and carried him back to where my lady Tamazusa was with Inumura Daikaku. I dumped Murphy’s body at the feet of one of the Reavers. “Watch him,” I said.

Tamazusa smiled coolly. “You give the nicest gifts. His head will look good decorating my garden.”

I smiled and bowed. “You have such excellent taste, my lady.”

Murphy glared at the two of us. His eyes were wild; I thought traveling through the shadows may have disturbed him. It had never bothered Keno. “Fucking gooks! What did that bastard tell you?”

I struck him across the face. “Be quiet!”

He spit at me, and I ignored him. “I go to retrieve my consort, my lady.”

Tamazusa looked at me, her eyes dark and worried. “Take care, Aboshi.”

I bowed to her with a smile and faded back into the shadows again.

MASON

I DIDN'T say anything, but I let the two bruisers take me down to E level with Fuse. I didn't want to fight Samojirou, and it wasn't like they were hurting me. I hoped the lab boys would be able to take care of themselves after Samojirou melted back into someplace else after I couldn't tell him where Keno was. If they didn't panic, they would be fine. I just hoped these guys didn't go nuts and decide that killing everyone was a good idea because we insulted them in some way. Most of the lab guys had worse manners than I did. I did remember to bow to Tamazusa when I was pulled before her. I was sort of surprised to see that Murphy was down here with them too, along with some guy who was kneeling on the floor and chanting.

“Mason-san protected me in this place,” Fuse said. “And he is under my protection.”

Tamazusa smiled. “Because he is an avatar of one of your sons.”

Fuse nodded. “Daikaku's.”

I guessed that was the guy on the floor, because he looked up at us for a moment before continuing to chant. The other two bruisers looked at me with interest, Sousuke shaking his head while Genpechi just laughed.

“Hey, not like I asked for the fuckin’ job,” I objected.

“Where is Keno-chan?” Tamazusa asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I paused, figuring that this was as good a time as ever to tell her this. “Thanks for Heiseg. The man was a dick.”

Tamazusa shook her head. “And how do you know that I had something to do with that?”

I shrugged, not wanting to tell her the truth. “It don’t matter.”

She shrugged, graceful and cold. I smiled, trying to butter her up. It sometimes worked with McGann. I didn’t think that it was working with her. “Can you get Samojirou off my ass? Not that he’s after me, but I bet that he’s making a mess around here that I’m going to have to clean up.”

“He is very upset about what happened,” Tamazusa said, “as am I. If you had had anything to do with the insult that was given us, he would have killed you.”

“What are you going to do with Murphy?” I demanded.

Tamazusa’s eyes narrowed, and I was very aware that I was probably a word away from turning into JELL-O. “He was very rude to me, and he has insulted my honor with what he did under my roof! If Fuse-hime’s consort and her sons had chosen to go to war with me, it would have gone badly for all of us. The balance of power is a delicate one in the Dreamlands. His head will decorate my private garden.”

“Shit,” was the first thing that I could think of saying.

Tamazusa just shook her head. “So crude.”

“He’s an asshole, but he’s my asshole. He’s got wife, kids, grandkids,” I said.

She shrugged and smiled.

I hoped that Kate Murphy had gotten offsite before the shit got loose. I didn't like the woman, but the grandkids shouldn't lose both grandparents at once. I didn't think that I could talk Tamazusa out of playing Martha Stewart with Murphy's skull, but I had to try, even if I ended up a bowl of JELL-O. "He was just following orders. You want one of the big boys. Like the asshole that sent him there."

"I don't need you to defend me from these gooks," Murphy said.

"I'm doin' it because of other reasons, asshole," I said. "And did you take stupid pills recently? Wolf don't need to bury you too. Your wife's a pain the ass, but she doesn't need to be a widow. Fuck, I'd rather see Fairinox or Collins dead rather than you."

"How nice," Murphy sneered.

I rolled my eyes. "Listen, I don't know what shit you went through in 'Nam, but these people had nothin' to with it. Shit, Keno was just a kid who got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you've made his life miserable."

"That fuckin' gook got everything that he deserved," Murphy taunted.

I reached down and hauled him off the floor, so angry I was shaking. "You want Sean or Jim treated liked that? Raped and beaten? Scared and lost because they did something stupid? Losing everything because of one innocent mistake?"

"They wouldn't be stupid enough to get caught," Murphy spit.

"Or too stupid like their grandfather to know when to keep their mouth shut?" I asked before dropping him. If I hadn't, I would have killed him. I took a couple of steps back and punched the wall. If I hadn't, I would have punched something else. Tamazusa and Fuse watched me, looking alike as twins with the expression—or lack of one—on their faces.

"Who is Fairinox?" Tamazusa asked me finally.

“He’s Collins’s pet hoodoo man,” I said.

“Hoodoo?” Fuse asked.

“Hoodoo. Voodoo. Magic,” I said tiredly.

“You shut your fucking mouth,” Murphy snarled. “Don’t tell these fucking gooks anything!”

I ignored him. “Fairinox, on orders of the Trustees, of which Collins is one, sent us to your lands, Tamazusa-sama. There were supposed to be about two dozen of us; that was supposed to be the plan, instead of the five and a half who made it. I don’t know what happened to the rest; I haven’t seen them since I got back.”

“Interesting,” Tamazusa said softly. She stepped closer to me, and I looked down into her eyes, smelling her light perfume. She was hot, and I was tempted to kiss her. But I really knew I’d become JELL-O if I did that, so I didn’t. “And you are telling me this why?”

I shrugged. “Murphy. He’s my asshole, and I don’t want you to do somethin’ to him.”

“You bargain for his life?” Tamazusa asked.

“I do,” I said softly.

Murphy was screaming threats and curses incoherently in the background. I knew I wasn’t his favorite person right now. But I was doing this for Wolf, so he didn’t lose someone else. I knew that as soon as Samojirou found Keno he was taking him out of here. I didn’t like it, but I knew it was better for him. I found myself getting lost in Tamazusa’s stare and didn’t think that it was a bad thing. I could do with some not-thinking right now.

“Find me the one called Fairinox, and I might allow him to go,” Tamazusa offered.

I nodded, my mouth dry. I was choosing who lived and who died, something I never wanted to do, not after Keno’s last disastrous op. I had almost put a bullet in Wolf’s brain, thinking it would be easier and kinder than trying to hump his ass out of there. “I’ll be back.”

SAMOJIROU

I FELT that I was part of a nightmare, searching for my lover and never finding him. I walked through an empty level before I found the stairs to another one. I smelled blood and knew I had been there before. There were bodies scattered about, those dead at my hand and in the panic that followed my attack. I climbed up, my eyes adjusting easily to the dark. I slipped out on what was labeled B level. It was empty, the lights still flickering oddly, and I wandered, feeling like a ghost. I found a human cowering in the corner of a room. He smelled of fear and smoke and other things, and I didn't like it. I hauled him to his feet. "Where are the rest?" I demanded.

"I don't know," he wailed.

"Where?" I repeated.

"They... they—"

"I am looking for someone," I said, my voice dangerously soft.

"Not me, not me," he screeched. "I don't know!"

"I think that you do," I said.

I just wanted to see what he did when I said that. Unfortunately it was to start screaming hysterically and try to tear himself out of my grasp, urinating in his fear. I let him go, annoyed that I had wasted my time with him.

On my way out, I caught a glimpse of myself reflected in a polished section of the wall. What I saw stopped me, stunned. It explained to me the fright the human had shown when I had questioned him.

My freedom hadn't been without a price. What stared back, even without the distortion from the metal surface, was a monster. I looked like one of the more traditional *Noh* masks. I was whiter than the makeup Keno wore as Sakura. I had the horns and nose of a *tengu*. I looked down at the claws I just noticed I had, wondering how I could have missed them before. I was horrific; I could see why my lady and any of the others hadn't mentioned it to me. I was seeing it, and I could barely believe it myself. My heart stopped when I pictured the fear Keno would feel because of this. This was my punishment, the price I paid for leaving the Dreamlands.

I traced my steps back to the stairwell and found that I had missed a level in my original search. I went to what was labeled C level and found a number of humans there. I walked out amid their screams and wasn't surprised to see that McGann was there, trying to keep the sheep in order.

"Where is Keno-chan?" I demanded.

She looked at me and flinched. "I don't know."

I loomed over her, angry. I reached out and grabbed her, pulling her closer to me. I ignored the moans of fear from the rest of the humans and the one idiot who tried to attack me. I flung him across the room. McGann was fearless, though, and I admired her for that. "Where is he?"

"I sent him off with Wolf," McGann said. Her eyes drifted over to a pair of men. They were staring at the two of us. I wouldn't trust them, because they reminded me of *eta* and other unclean things. "It was safer."

Another one of the humans tried to attack me, and I slashed at him with my sword. He fell back with a scream, clutching at his arm. He was lucky I didn't take his head.

"Stop it!" McGann shouted. She turned to me. "The only thing that is keeping us alive is the fact that most of the other Trustees don't want to initiate quarantine with one of their own down here. As this drags on, they aren't going to be as squeamish about one of their own. And we're all going to be dead."

“And what does this mean to me?” I purred.

“Don’t play innocent with me,” she said.

“As you did with me?” I asked her. “Did you not understand the insult that you gave me and my lady?”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t part of the plan. I wasn’t trusted with it.”

“And why should I believe your innocence?” I asked her silkily. I did, though, because from what little I knew of her, she wouldn’t have done something that stupid.

“Because she isn’t stupid enough to lie to you,” a voice said behind me. It was Inuyama.

I turned to face him, keeping a grip on McGann. I saw Yatsufusa and Inusuka with him. “Allow me to introduce you to some of Fusehime’s family,” I said smoothly. “Two of her sons, Inusuka Shino and Inuyama Dousetsu, along with her consort, Yatsufusa.”

McGann stared at them, silent for a moment before saying, “I don’t know where she is either.”

“A woman pleading ignorance is not safe from our family either,” Inuyama remarked dryly.

“I don’t understand,” McGann said.

I laughed, cold and bitter. “She is not the innocent that my lady was. But I believe her when she claims that she has no knowledge of where your mother or your brother’s avatar is.”

Yatsufusa sneered at me, and I at him. “I search for my own consort,” I said.

“That will be up to Keno-chan, won’t it?” Inusuka asked.

“I don’t understand,” McGann repeated.

I laughed. “My lady was innocent of the crimes that she had been accused of and killed unjustly by their grandfather, placing them under my lady’s death curse.”

Inusuka surveyed the room and shook his head. “Useless.”

My eye was caught by one who trudged into the room. I recognized Mason and wondered what he was doing here. He walked up to me and glared for a second before asking McGann gently, “You okay?”

“I’m fine, Mason,” she said.

“Your mom’s down with your brother,” Mason told Inuyama and Inusuka. “And Murphy.”

“Why?” McGann asked flatly.

“Tamazusa-sama’s pissed,” Mason said. “She wants his head.”

McGann closed her eyes.

“But she’s willing to have someone else’s,” Mason continued. “Then she’s very willing to leave after that. Fuse-hime isn’t pissed at us, which is a good thing.”

Yatsufusa growled at Mason, who shook his head. “Not dissing the lady or anything. We weren’t nice to her, but she didn’t get hurt.”

“What happened?” Inusuka demanded.

“She was poked at a bit,” Mason said, “but nothing mean. Not like—”

“What does Tamazusa want?” McGann asked him, sounding desperate. I sensed that Mason was taking about Keno and tightened my fingers. She made a small noise, and I loosened my grip on her, trying to control my anger.

“Fairinox and Collins,” Mason said quietly. He was angry that I had hurt the woman.

She sighed and shook her head. “I can’t.”

“I can,” Mason said roughly, looking hard and hopeless at the same time. “You know that we don’t have fuckin’ time to argue this.”

“And it will be safer for my Keno-chan if they were gone,” I said.

Mason looked at me. “Not like you’re leaving him behind,” he said.

“That would be up to him,” I admitted.

Mason snorted. “Kid ain’t stupid. He’ll be leaving with you.”

“That is if I can find him,” I snarled.

“I sent Keno and Wolf to find other survivors,” McGann said. “They might be on the other side of this level or the one below it.”

I bowed and let her go. “Then I will see if I can find him.”

Inuyama stepped forward. “I will go with you.”

I looked at him and shrugged, not caring if he were with me. I wasn’t going to argue with him if he chose to search with me since I wasn’t hunting shadow to shadow anymore. “As you wish.”

We walked away as Mason and McGann quietly argued about my lady’s offer, Yatsufusa and Inusuka just watching them. The rest of the humans were cowering in a corner, not wanting to get involved, not wanting to be responsible for whatever decision was made. Fools. No one noticed when two of their number slipped away. They were the ones who struck me as unclean; I knew they were Fairinox and Collins. Inuyama looked at me, and I shrugged. I didn’t care about them.

KENO

WOLF led me to stairs, and we went down to D level. I was hurting but felt a bit better once I started moving. The stairway was just as dark and

scary as the other one had been, but less dangerous because it wasn't filled with scared people. Wolf scouted ahead with a small flashlight he had found. I crept behind him. We got down to the next level without any trouble. Wolf stopped and leaned over to talk into my ear. His breath tickled. "All clear. But we need you to get cleaned up."

"No water," I murmured, "No power."

"You look bad," Wolf said.

"I smell worse." I grimaced. "But let's just get going."

Wolf led me down the corridor. I felt like the village idiot, but I knew I was safer here with the monsters and Wolf than I was with Fairinox and Collins. I was glad Wolf knew that too. He always thought the best about people, but even he figured out there was something wrong with those two. After searching for several minutes, we managed to find eight people, one of them injured, huddled in one of the conference rooms with two bodies. They were all glad to see Wolf; they didn't seem to be so happy to see me.

"Some crazy fucker was chasing Mason about you," St. John said. "Then a couple mean fuckers showed up looking for their mom. That chick didn't look old enough to have kids this old."

"Or scary," someone added.

"What the fuck happened to you?" St. John asked me.

"Trampled," I said, wondering why he cared. He never had before.

"Man, it looks like the crazy fucker got to you," St. John said. "Ugly fucker with a nasty sword. He's the one that's been killing people. I don't know what we did to piss him off."

I looked at Wolf, confused about what was happening. I could think of only one person who would do something like that, and he was trapped in the Dreamlands. St. John continued to talk, babbling nervously, grateful that we weren't an enemy.

"One of the mean fuckers called the crazy one Sam Zero or something like that," St. John said.

“Samojirou?” I asked, shocked.

“Might be,” St. John said. “Was too crazy in here to really get what was going on. The dude, man, he wants you. Called you his consort. The others said that you were their family. Isn’t that the craziest fucking thing that you ever heard?”

“He was banished,” I whispered. “He can’t... he was trapped centuries ago.”

I wasn’t too surprised to hear St. John calling my brothers mean. They were men who were a product of war, of the treachery and anger that was the *Sengoku Jidai*, men who could kill their enemies easily. I knew that Samojirou wanted me to never become as they were.

“I want all of you to follow me up to the atrium on C level,” Wolf said.

The injured tech was going to have to be carried, and that was going to slow us down. Wolf was worried and trying to hide it. I guess me covered in blood was a bad thing for more than one reason.

Wolf picked up the injured tech. I couldn’t tell who it was. We all slowly went down the corridor, with me in the lead, carrying the flashlight. We got to the stairs, after several minutes of slow walking, since the lights in the corridor seemed to have gotten dimmer while we were in the boardroom. It was scary, and all I could hear was the others’ hoarse breathing and the moans of the wounded. I wondered where Samojirou was, if he was searching for me in these too-quiet hallways. I knew there was going to be trouble when we were found by Collins and Fairinox. I stopped when they stepped out of the doorway that led to C level.

“What you want?” Wolf snarled.

“You know,” Collins half purred.

Fairinox didn’t say anything; he just made a grab for me. I sidestepped, trying to evade him. I stumbled into the crowd behind me and almost dropped the flashlight.

“Don’t touch me,” I yelled.

“He’s the reason that we’re being attacked,” Collins shouted.

I swayed on my feet, aware of the frightened people behind me and the fact that I wasn’t armed, that I was smaller than all of the other people, as well as tired and injured.

“Collins, this isn’t his fault!” Wolf exclaimed.

“He is their ally; he led them here!” Collins continued.

Fairinox grabbed me, and I cried out and struck at him, using the flashlight like it was a knife. It wasn’t much, but even thinking about touching the man was making my skin crawl.

He shook his hurting hand and glared. “I’m going to make you scream,” he hissed.

“That monster is killing people because him,” Collins snarled. “He caused the first intrusion and killed all those people.”

“That was Heiseg,” I whispered. I didn’t want to remember that night. I smelled blood, the stuff that was covering me, and remembered the sounds of the Hákarl eating and the threats Heiseg had been shouting when he was doing *that* to me. “He... he hurt me.”

“Let us have him, and you all will be safe,” Collins promised the people behind me.

“Don’t listen to him,” Wolf shouted.

“Who should you believe, me or some foreigner?” Collins asked. “A man that was thrown out his country in disgrace?”

Wolf shouted something in German at Collins. I didn’t know what happened after that. I thought a couple of people pushed Wolf against the wall. I knew that he couldn’t do anything because he was carrying someone. And I knew that none of the frightened people at my back were willing to protect me from Collins or Fairinox.

Fairinox made another grab for me, and I twisted out his reach and into the arms of two men behind me. They grabbed me and wouldn’t let go of my arms. I shouted and struggled, but I couldn’t get

them off me, especially when a third man joined them in holding me, pushing me to the floor.

It took the other five to hold Wolf back when he realized what was happening. I saw out of the corner of my eye that the man he had been carrying had been dumped on the floor like a rag doll. I winced when I saw that he was getting stepped on, remembering the pain when it had happened to me. Wolf was shouting in German and something else. Collins had this smug look on his face. Fairinox was grinning like an idiot, and he stooped down to pat me on the head.

“It’s going to be good, boy,” he crooned. “You’re so bright, so much power.”

“You’re not going to get away with this,” I said, trying not to scream.

“But we will,” Fairinox said. “These people don’t care about you. I’m going to be able to break that spell, and we’ll all go free.”

I looked at him, wondering what he was going to do. It took me a couple of seconds, and then I realized. I didn’t know how or even if I was right, but I knew that Fairinox was going to use me as a sacrifice for his magic. He was so unclean; I was amazed that no one else here saw it.

I started screaming, a mindless wail, trying to attract anyone’s attention. I was able to get out a few yells before someone shoved something into my mouth, some sort of cloth, because they all knew that I would bite their hand or anything else. The rag was too big for me to spit it out. I struggled frantically against the people holding me, knowing I had to escape them and get help, get to McGann and the others.

Wolf was shouting his head off too, but the rest of the group started beating him to keep him quiet. A couple blows to the stomach were all that it should have taken, but even after that, they kept hitting him. Wolf was beaten to his knees by the ones who were holding him, and he landed beside me, semiconscious. Collins was laughing, and Fairinox was grinning at the two of us like a gourmet in a pastry shop.

“Get him over here,” Fairinox told the ones who held me, and they dragged me over to a clear spot on the floor. He pulled out a knife. I was exhausted by this time, but fear gave me another surge of strength as I tried fighting to get free.

“No use, boy,” Fairinox crowed.

He started chanting and leaned over me. I looked at the three men who were holding me. I saw that they were frightened. I tried pleading with them, my words muffled by the rag in my mouth. This wasn't the answer to whatever they were frightened of. Killing me was just going to give Fairinox power and probably make my family so angry that they would kill everyone here, even people who had nothing to do with this. I stared at Fairinox, refusing to be slaughtered like cattle. I'd see my death coming to me. I thought of the regrets I had, that I hadn't been able to lose my fear to do more with Samojirou, that I hadn't told him that I liked him more than I should have, and that I had... fallen in love with him.

Fairinox's voice rose, chanting the climax of his spell, when he just *stopped*.

There was a long second, and Fairinox's head rolled forward and fell beside my own.

The men who were holding me down screamed and let go, scrambling to get away from me. As soon as they let go of me, I removed the rag from my mouth. I rolled over to see how Wolf was and froze at the sight of the monster that loomed out of the darkness above me.

I stared at him, frozen but not frightened. He was carrying a sword that he flicked the blood off of before sheathing it. His face was dead white, there were horns on his forehead, and his hair was tied back. I knew him, though, and did the stupidest thing in the world. I launched myself into his arms, not caring that we were both surrounded by enemies. He hugged me back just as fiercely.

“Aboshi, *dai suki*,” I whispered. I repeated myself to make sure he heard. “I love you, Aboshi.”

I saw that Collins was being guarded by someone, and it took me a second to realize that it was Inuyama Dousetsu. The rest of the men had fled when these two had shown up, screaming hysterically as they ran.

“You are unharmed?” Samojirou asked.

“Mostly,” I whispered to his chest. “The blood, it isn’t mine.” Thinking of blood reminded me of Wolf. “Wolf!” I gasped and slipped out of Samojirou’s arms. I checked on Wolf, kneeling at his side.

His eyes opened, and he tried to smile at me. “*Junge?*”

That was about all he got out before he slipped into unconsciousness. I checked on the other man and couldn’t find a heartbeat, so I figured he was dead. I looked up at Samojirou and Inuyama. “Help Wolf, please,” I begged them.

Inuyama looked at Samojirou and nodded. Samojirou took over the task of guarding Collins, drawing his katana again. Inuyama picked up Wolf and got the strangest look on his face.

Samojirou laughed, but it sounded off. “He is—”

“My avatar,” Inuyama finished for him.

Samojirou and I were still for a long moment. It was weird, because Wolf wasn’t anything like Inuyama from what I could tell, but I had only met the man a few times. Wolf was nice and relaxed, while Inuyama was cold and angry.

“And what are you going to do with me?” Collins demanded. I bet he had been hoping he could have run like the rest of them had.

“Who is this?” Samojirou asked me as he bent over and picked up Fairinox’s head. It should have disgusted me, but it didn’t. I guess such things didn’t bother me anymore. I didn’t know if that was a bad thing or not. Or it could be that I was so far beyond numb that nothing bothered me anymore.

“Collins,” I said. “He’s a Trustee. The head belongs to someone called Fairinox, and he was bad, unclean.”

Samojirou smiled, and I shivered. “I think that Collins will be accompanying us back to my lady’s estate,” he said. He looked at the head in his hand. “And I think that I killed this one too quickly for what he had planned for you.”

CHAPTER 19

MASON

I NOTICED that Collins and his pet hoodoo man had slipped away while I was talking to McGann. Those two were many things, but stupid wasn't one of them. "Fuck!" I half-screamed.

"Mason, you can't be serious," McGann repeated.

"Murphy for Collins is a trade that I can live with," I said. "Even if it gets my ass terminated afterward. Murphy's got family, and that's more important than some tightass Trustee."

"But Mason—" she started.

"They'll all go, and hopefully the rest of the Trustees won't decide that quarantine is a good idea and those fucking doors will open up again."

"And which one of these people are the ones that you want?" one of Fuse's kids asked. He was a tough-looking kid; the mean-looking one had left with Samojirou. I noticed that the dog was looking everyone over like they were a snack. I didn't miss the intelligence in his eyes. That was scarier than the man who was standing by his side.

“The ones that Tamazusa-sama wants booked,” I said. “So I’m gonna start looking for them and hope that this shit don’t get any worse.”

“My father, Yatsufusa, and I, Inusuka Shino, will help you,” Shino said. His English was almost as good as Tamazusa’s.

“Don’t you want to see if your mom’s okay?” I asked.

“You are going to be hunting in this chaos,” Shino said with a smile. “We will help you. I know that my brothers, as well as Tamazusa-sama’s Reavers, will keep our mother safe.”

“You don’t have to,” I said.

“They tried to hurt my mother, did they not?” Shino asked. “As well as my brother’s avatar. We will go with you.”

McGann finally spoke up. “Mason, do it. I’m giving the order.”

“We’ll fucking argue about this later,” I insisted. “Don’t fuckin’ do this. I know what the fuck I’m doing.”

“Mason!”

I leaned over and gave her a hug. “Cover your ass. I don’t trust these idiots not to do something stupid.” I thought I shocked her with the hug, and she didn’t say anything as I walked away with Shino and his dad.

The place was filled with flickering lights, and it was starting to stink with the lack of air conditioning and the smell of blood, shit, and fear. Smells I knew too well from monster hunts and cleaning this place up before, when the same fucking thing had happened. We walked down the corridor, bumping into a couple of more of Fuse’s kids when we got to the stairway. One of them was a big bruiser, and the other one was a short guy.

The big one bowed to us. “Father, Shino,” he said. The little guy was giving me dirty looks.

“Konbungo, Mason-san is looking for the two men who insulted our mother,” Inusuka said. “She is safe with our brother Daikaku and Tamazusa-sama.”

“And who will protect her from the lady?” the shorter one asked snidely.

I wasn’t surprised to see Konbungo hit the little one on the back of the head. I suspected the kid needed that done to him a lot, and I had just met him. “You do not insult our allies, Shinbee. If it was not for Tamazusa-sama’s help, our mother would have been lost here.”

“She—” Shinbee started.

“I don’t think that anyone could have stopped the hoodoo,” I said. “Not that I had a fucking clue about what was going on.”

Shinbee glared, pulling out his sword. “You were one of the ones who stole our mother!”

“Not my idea, kid,” I snapped. “Thought that the boss fucked up and grabbed the wrong girl. Didn’t realize he was just being a dumb fuck.”

“Enough!” Shino barked. “Konbungo?”

He shrugged. “There is no one on the floor above us, and we saw no one coming down.”

“So those two went down,” I said.

I didn’t like it. Keno was on the floor below us, as well as Wolf. I wasn’t worried about either Tamazusa or Fuse, because the Reavers with them would kick Collins’s and Fairinox’s asses without breaking into a sweat.

“Then we will go down,” Shino said.

He gestured for me to go first, and I did. I trusted him not to stab me in the back. Stupid, since I just met the man and I knew that he’d be pissed if he knew what I had seen of his mother. I’d be fucking pissed if it had been my mom.

We walked down to D level, the stairway barely lit. I didn't think that it would be this bad, but the emergency lights weren't working. I opened the door slowly, checking so that I didn't open it on Yatsufusa's nose or something. The dog had been sticking to me like glue.

"It seems that our father likes you," Konbungo rumbled.

"I think it's because I'm an avatar," I said. "At least your mom thinks so."

That stopped all of them in their tracks. "You?" Shinbee growled.

"I didn't ask for the job," I said sharply. "Your mom and Samojirou-sama think that I am, though, and I ain't going to argue with them about it. While I think that Samojirou-sama would sell me shit, telling me that it was sugar, your mom won't. And your other three brothers think that she's not bullshitting them, so I guess that I'm one of you, like Keno. I'm supposed to be Daikaku's avatar."

"What Samojirou-sama is doing to him—" Shinbee snarled.

I turned around and grabbed the breastplate of the armor he was wearing. "That guy treated Keno a lot better than we did here, so don't give him any shit. I ain't proud about what I did to the kid, but Samojirou's treating him a shitload better than anyone has in a long time, even if he's into that weird tranny shit with him. Kid looks good, and he's happy. That's a lot more than he got here."

"Tell us more about how you treated him," Shino said quietly.

I looked at him in the dark, and I was still able to tell he was pissed. They all were, and I didn't fucking blame them. "Kid hacked into the wrong server as a lark. We caught him and brought him back here. That was about four years ago. It would have been a sucky life, even if the TCs and the techs weren't treating him like shit. One of the scientists here, shit, I don't know what he had been doing, but he was talkin' with Tamazusa. She seems to be able to pop in here whenever she fuckin' pleases. Good thing for your mom, pain in the ass for me. But she nabs Keno one night after the asshole that's talking with her decides that opening a gate to the Dreamlands was a fun thing to kill time on a Saturday night. Hákarl is what he got, and he let them eat his

crew. He decides to play around with Keno, and that's when Tamazusa shows up. She takes him back home, and that was three weeks ago for us and about four months for you. But Keno looks good and seems to be happy now, so don't give me shit about him and Samojirou."

Yatsufusa nudged me to get us going again, and I walked out into the corridor. It was still too dark for me to see clearly, but I could hear all right. I didn't like what I was hearing, muffled screams and shouts, screams that didn't last too long, and that scared me, the way that they had been cut off. I waited a second, trying to figure out where they were coming from, because this place was a fucking maze. Yatsufusa snarled and bounded down the hallway to my left. I wasn't stupid; I followed him, with the other three moving like the wind ahead of me, and I was feeling old and slow, trailing behind the pack.

I wasn't surprised that halfway down the long main corridor, we all bumped into Samojirou, Wolf, Keno, Collins, and another one of Fuse's kids, that really mean-looking guy. I thought I'd met them all now, but there was no way I'd be able to keep the names straight. I was panting, slightly out of breath and hating it. Samojirou looked at me like I was something bad, and I glared back. I was trying to figure out what he was carrying. I squinted at it, wishing that the light was a bit better, when I realized what it was. The fucker was carrying Fairinox's head.

"Kairns-san, how delightful it is to see you," Samojirou said snootily.

I ignored him. "You okay, kid?" I asked Keno.

"I'm fine," Keno said. He wasn't; he was covered in blood and looked like shit. "Wolf's hurt, though."

That would explain why the mean guy was carrying him. But I didn't know anything else because the four of them were jabbering away at one another in Japanese. Shino and Konbungo looked really pissed off.

"What happened?" I asked Keno.

“Get me out of here,” Collins demanded before Keno could say anything. “It’s your job to—”

He was about to say something else when Shinbee drew his sword. “You say anything else, and I will kill you,” he said.

That thankfully shut Collins up for a minute.

“They... they kept hitting Wolf,” Keno said. “He... Fairinox wanted to sacrifice me.”

Samojirou handed Fairinox’s head to Konbungo, who took it and stared at the fucking thing like he didn’t know what to do with it. Fairinox had the stupidest look on his face. Samojirou hugged Keno, stroking his back gently. The kid shuddered but let him. I was just surprised that he wasn’t screaming his head off because the man looked like something out of his worst nightmare.

Shinbee sneered, and Shino looked at Collins, a thoughtful frown on his face. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“I am Eric Collins IV.” Collins sneered. “I am a Trustee of this organization.”

I looked at him and decided that the asshole could dig his own grave. I didn’t think that any of these people would be impressed with the man.

Shino just smiled coolly and nodded. “And so you are one of the ones who are responsible for the insult that was done to our mother?”

“Your mother?” Collins repeated stupidly.

Yatsufusa snarled, Shino nodded, and I was aware of the rest of them staring at the man. All except Keno, who was crying in Samojirou’s arms. I wasn’t going to say anything about him doing it. Keno looked like he was at the end of his rope.

“I’d think really carefully about what you say next, since they’re related to the nice chick that Murphy dragged back here,” I told Collins, not that I cared what happened to him. Wolf was barely awake, and I wondered what had happened down here in the dark. I didn’t think that

Keno or anyone else here beat him up, but that just left the eggheads who were trapped down here. I couldn't see them doing anything like this, but I had been caught in some riots in prison, and I knew the things that people did in situations like this. They turned into dumb and vicious animals.

“That thing that Murphy brought back is their mother?” Collins demanded.

Shinbee smacked him, and I shrugged. Collins looked shocked that someone had hit him. I wasn't going to be the one who told him it was going to be worse for him. I wasn't happy about the bargain I had made earlier, but I'd stick to it. Collins wasn't worth Murphy's grandkids being sad. Tamazusa had only wanted Fairinox, but since he was already dead, she might have thought I wasn't living up to my end of the bargain and kill Murphy.

“You're just pissed that you didn't get near her,” I said. I know that it was stupid, but I didn't have anything to lose. “That aside from a couple of moments of embarrassment, she's okay. You didn't fuck her over like you did Keno.”

“And what did he do to our brother?” Shino asked.

I looked at Collins. The shit was sweating bullets now. I thought he realized that he was in deep shit now. “He ordered Murphy to question Keno, an excuse for the man to beat the shit out of him.”

Keno was the only thing that stopped Samojirou from killing Collins right there. His snarl was echoed by all the other weirdoes from the Dreamlands, and Collins almost shit his pants at the sound. I know that he pissed them from the smell.

“We will deal with him later,” Shino said. “Right now, we have spent too much time in the real world.”

“And what about Murphy?” I asked.

“He is with my lady and your mother,” Samojirou said.

“Tamazusa-sama was willing to let him go,” I said.

They all glared. I wondered if they would just kick my ass and leave, when Wolf groaned. “Shit, give him to me.”

“He is injured.”

“Really,” I said sarcastically, “I thought he was just taking an afternoon nap.”

Konbungo snorted, and after a tense moment, Wolf was shifted into my arms. He weighed a ton, and he was cold and shocky. The rest of them closed ranks and started prodding Collins towards the stairs.

“Murphy?” I repeated.

They all started jabbering in Japanese again, and I wondered if we were all going to end up dead. I needed to get Wolf some help, but I didn’t think that was going to happen until these jokers left. I knew I should feel something about Collins, but I couldn’t. I was numb and more worried about Wolf than that asshole. Collins was a dead man, and I knew it even if he didn’t. I was glad Wolf was out of it, because he would try and save the man although it would kill him. Collins wasn’t worth it. I was starting to wonder if Murphy was.

I guess that some sort of agreement had been made between them, because they shut up and started pushing Collins towards the stairs. Samojirou and Keno stayed behind. I just looked at them while Collins was taken to his death.

“Keno,” Samojirou said gently, “I have something to ask you.”

SAMOJIROU

I SHOULDN’T have been surprised at the condition I found Keno in, since I knew these people were barbaric, but I was. Someone here had finally seen the power in him; some filthy scum had tried to kill him for it. I killed the man before he could complete his spell.

Keno had been beaten and was covered in blood but seemed otherwise unhurt. I thought my heart would stop when he whispered that he loved me. He didn't seem to see the monster I had become.

"Keno, do you want to stay here?" I asked.

Those who had been a threat to him were gone. Fairinox was dead, and Collins would be soon. I didn't know about that idiot Murphy, and I didn't care.

Keno looked up at me, his face tearstained. He had been crying in my arms since I had killed Fairinox. He had again been driven to the edge of his endurance by these people. I wanted to take him back with me, wanted to care for him and see that he grew into the man he should become. But if he wanted to stay in the real world, I would let him. I would lose him again to let him be happy.

I was aware of Mason and the semiconscious Wolf staring at us, at me.

"Keno," Wolf whispered. "Don't. We can make things better."

Keno turned and looked at him, confusion and indecision showing from his body.

"Kid, we'll try and keep the sharks off you," Mason said, though he sounded reluctant. "Maybe get you out more. Get you a room with me or Wolf. Get you out of this place."

"You can't promise me that," Keno said. His eyes flickered over Wolf. "He's hurt. You need to get him some help."

"That ain't going to happen unless Tamazusa and the rest of them go," Mason said.

I said nothing, not wanting to blunder and say the wrong thing. Keno deserved to be among the living in the real world. To walk with the freedoms these two promised him.

Wolf began speaking. "We never—"

"Do you know—" Keno started and stopped. "You can't. You can't promise me anything. I know that even if you don't."

“Keno,” Wolf rasped.

“You think that I’m going to forget that people here were willing to sacrifice me, to kill me because of Fairinox and Collins? The same people who beat you because you were trying to protect me?” Keno asked. “Do you think that I can forget that I lived in fear for the last four years?”

“They ain’t human, Keno.” Mason said. I knew he was talking about Tamazusa and myself.

“They’ve been kinder to me than anyone else in the last four years,” Keno said sadly. “So what if they’re *oni*? They’re more human than a lot of people here.”

“You can’t mean that,” Wolf said. “Look at him.” He started coughing a bit. I knew he had broken ribs; I was amazed that the man could argue about the abuse Keno had suffered here when he had witnessed it and had a taste of it himself.

Keno glanced up. He smiled at me, and I held my breath, wondering what he was going to say.

KENO

I GLANCED up at Samojirou. My head ached, and I felt stupid that I had broken down the way I had. I had cried in his arms like I was a *shoujo* heroine.

“Look at him,” Wolf mumbled.

I did. I saw the horns and the claws. I saw him covered in blood, like me, not because he had been hurt, but because he had killed people. For me. Samojirou had killed people who had done nothing to him; they had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He would wash off their blood and feel no guilt about what he had done here

tonight. But I also saw that he was looking at me with worried eyes, afraid of what I was going to say.

“Samojirou-sama has always been kind to me,” I said, wincing at the tone of my voice and the words I had used. I sounded cold and stupid. “He... he... after what Heiseg had done to me, he could have hurt me too. He could have made me into a doll to play with, one with no mind or feelings, because I was that broken by what Heiseg did. Samojirou-sama gave me a home and a life, something I hadn’t had for years. Something that you two can’t give me.”

“Keno,” Wolf whispered. “We can take care of you. Things have changed. We can watch out for you.”

“Can you let me go home?” I asked, raw and needy sounding. “Walk free? Not worry about getting hit because of someone’s bad mood? Let me be free?”

Samojirou was silent beside me, not even touching me. I thought he was afraid to. I knew he wanted it so much. I also knew it wasn’t because of who I had been, but who I was that made him want me, love me. I wanted to throw myself into his arms again and beg him to never let me go. I felt stupid and girly, but I wanted that. Maybe being Sakura for him was giving me these strange thoughts, or it could have been that I didn’t care anymore. Samojirou was willing to let me touch him, something I had craved for a long time. Someone to touch who wasn’t going to hurt me.

“You know that you can’t go home, Keno,” Mason said quietly.

“I can’t go home because I’m dead,” I said.

“Keno,” Wolf wheezed. He wasn’t arguing because he was having a hard enough time breathing.

“How long before I just disappear out of wherever you have me?” I asked.

“You can’t be serious, kid,” Mason protested.

But there was a look in his eye that told me he didn’t think I was being paranoid. They’d come home from a mission, and I’d be gone.

They'd never find me, and I was willing to believe that if they asked anyone about me, the person's response would be that they never had heard of me.

"Keno, please, *Junge*," Wolf pleaded.

Mason sighed. "Wolf, shit, it's better than—"

"With those monsters," Wolf spat out, gaining some strength from somewhere. "They aren't human! Look at that thing beside him!"

"He's got family there," Mason said, shifting Wolf so he could hold him more comfortably.

Wolf shook his head. "They're monsters."

"More monstrous than two men who would take a child from his room and kill him in the eyes of the world because of the innocent mistake that he made?" I snarled.

Samojirou and Tamazusa weren't monsters, the people *here* were. They were worse monsters than the ones that they hunted to "protect" humanity.

Wolf shook his head while Mason looked old and tired, guilty about what he had done. "We didn't know," Wolf whispered.

"What did you think would happen to me?" I half-screamed. "That I would be told to go along my way and not to talk about what happened? That since I was in everyone's power here, that they wouldn't abuse me?"

"He will be cared for," Samojirou whispered. "No matter who he chooses to be with. Loved. Can you promise him that here?"

"Shut the fuck up," Wolf growled.

"Keno," Mason said. "Shit. I didn't know. We thought, shit, we thought it was someone older. Someone who could take care of himself. Then when I saw how scared you were, I couldn't shoot a kid."

Wolf didn't say anything; he was just staring, but I didn't think he saw me. I didn't want to know what it was he saw, because it was something he had to deal with.

"You would have killed him?" Samojirou demanded, his voice colder than death.

"We were supposed to," Wolf whispered. "I couldn't, not after the reason that I had left home."

"Take me home, Aboshi," I whispered, shaking and exhausted.

"Your parents?" Wolf asked.

"Home to the Dreamlands," I said softly. "I know that there is nothing in the real world for me."

Samojirou was blinking at me as if he didn't believe I would be willing to go with him. Wolf was shaking his head, but he wasn't able to say anything or at least anything that I was able to understand. He was muttering in German and a few other languages. I stepped up and kissed him softly on the cheek. "Good-bye. I wish, but... but I..."

I tasted his tears along with the blood. I wished that I could tell him as I was leaving that I'd had a crush on him at one time, that I could almost call him my first love. I felt selfish leaving him, but one look at Samojirou told me I was making the right decision. I could almost physically see the love he had for me.

"Take care, kid," Mason said. He tried to hug me awkwardly with one arm. I hugged him back. "I'll take care of Wolf for you." I believed he knew about my crush on Wolf, even if the other man hadn't figured it out. "I don't trust Samojirou as far as I can toss the guy," Mason continued, "but he'll be good to you. Your brothers are just strange, but I think that they might be good guys. Fuse is a good girl; give her a hug from me. Tamazusa will take care of you; she's a nice lady underneath all her hard-assedness."

"Mason—"

“I thought that wherever you went after the first intrusion was better than this place, and I was right. He loves you, and I think that’s all that matters right now.”

Samojirou looked at us. “You will be able to get help in a few minutes.”

“You leaving Murphy behind?” Mason asked.

“He hurt my Keno-chan and insulted my lady and myself,” Samojirou said coldly.

“I told you he was my asshole,” Mason said. “Don’t... shit, he’s got a wife and family. That’s the only reason that I was willing to trade Collins and Fairinox for him.”

Samojirou sneered. “The only reason?”

Mason suddenly grinned, but it was a tired grin, not a happy one. “Well, I thought that the both of them were the biggest shits I ever saw outside lockup, but that just might have been me.”

“I will ask my lady,” Samojirou said.

Mason nodded. “Tell her thanks again. And I liked hangin’ with the cool kids.”

“And you told Tamazusa-sama that you had no manners,” Samojirou said.

I stepped into his embrace, and we went through the shadows to join the others.

CHAPTER 20

KENO

NO one seemed surprised to see us when we stepped out of the shadows beside Collins and Murphy. They both just stared at us like they had never seen anything like it before. Fuse and Yatsufusa seemed to be hugging, and her sons were all between her and Collins and Murphy. Collins was tied up, and someone had put Fairinox's head on his lap. He was staring at it in horror. I couldn't find it in myself to feel sorry for the man.

"What the fuck?" Murphy yelled.

"My lady." Samojirou and I bowed to her. "Could you take us home?"

"Have you been injured, Keno-chan?" Tamazusa asked.

"Not really," I said. "It's other people's blood."

I looked around and realized where we were. We were down on E level with the servers. The lights were starting to flicker, and I realized that the servers were still running for some reason. I blinked and looked at Tamazusa. "Do we have some time?"

She shrugged. "I think so. What is it that you wish to do?"

I grinned and keyed open the server room, surprised that it worked. Stupid of them, that they hadn't locked out my access code after all this time.

"You fucking gook, don't you even think about that!" Murphy screamed.

Collins was too shocked even to say anything. Murphy stopped screaming when Inue kicked him in the ribs. He kept his threats and curses to a lower volume after that. Samojirou followed me into the server room, curious about what I was going to do.

"Keno-chan?" he asked.

"This is where all the servers for the East Coast are," I said. "I know where the backups are too. And I'm going to wipe them all clean."

I sat down at a keyboard and started to do that, my fingers dancing over the keys on the keyboard. I'm good. I've had to be for the last four years. But when I was working for the Trust, I never showed them all that I could do.

I went through their protocols and safeguards like they weren't there, spawning virus after virus in my path to hunt out other Trust machines hidden in other organizations, as well as all the computers Global International used. Those viruses were just the ones that were noticeable. I also inserted code that wouldn't activate until they started cleaning up the mess.

After I was through trashing their servers, I went after the backups. I instructed them to attack any other Trust servers they were connected to and had them overwrite themselves several times so their data wasn't recoverable. I had ruined these people, I hoped, and it had only taken me a few minutes.

When I was done, I got up and used the keyboard I had been typing on to smash all the monitors and other keyboards, and I smashed that keyboard on the floor. That felt good. Samojirou just watched me with a smile on his face. He kissed me when I was done destroying things.

We walked out of the server room, and Tamazusa looked at us. “And that did what?”

“I ruined their servers, their backups, and told the backups to infect other Trust computers.”

“I do not understand,” she said.

“I destroyed all their records,” I said. “They will spend weeks, if not months trying to clean up this mess. That felt so good!”

Murphy started screaming again. Tamazusa looked down with a slight frown on her face. Samojirou looked at him and used the hilt of his katana to smash the keypad for the server room. The Trust wasn’t going to be able to get into that room easily.

“Kairns-san asked kindly if we could spare him, since we have the other,” Samojirou said, motioning to Murphy.

Murphy started screaming the word nigger, as well as gook, when he heard that.

Tamazusa shrugged, “Since he asked nicely, I suppose that I can. Collins will be entertaining enough on his own.”

Samojirou laughed, and she smiled up at him. Then she did something, and we were standing back in the iris garden.

I wasn’t surprised to see that Okita and a couple of squads of samurai were waiting for us. They took charge of Collins with a nod from Tamazusa. I was glad to see Murphy wasn’t with us. I was shocked to see that Tamazusa and Inumura were drained and pale. Two of the maids approached her, and I wasn’t surprised to see that she went with them. She looked like she was going to collapse. “Please attend to our guests,” she instructed Samojirou.

“I thank you for your help in recovering my consort,” Samojirou told the *Hakkenshi*, bowing low and humbling himself before them.

I knelt and added my thanks to his. “I am grateful for your assistance.”

They all looked at us, and Fuse walked over and lifted me to my feet. She gave me a hug and smiled. “You are one of us, how could we not help? And Samojirou-sama has been a good friend to me over the centuries.”

“I wish to get Keno-chan to Tan’yu-san, my lady’s healer,” Samojirou said. “Do you also need his attentions?”

“I am fine,” Fuse assured him. “Mason-san was most careful of me.”

SAMOJIROU

I WAS back in the Dreamlands. For a moment, I thought that I might be trapped in the real world, as monstrous as I looked, but I had returned to my usual appearance. I was back at home with Keno and my lady. Tamazusa was exhausted, and it was up to me to entertain the *Hakkenshi* and their parents.

After escorting Keno to Tan’yu, I settled our guests in. I knew that our prisoner would be taken care of also. Collins would be dealt with when Tamazusa was able.

Keno wasn’t injured, and I took him back to our rooms. I knew he was tired and needed to rest. I would let him and not worry about our future. I helped him bathe and wouldn’t let him say anything, silencing him with kisses. Keno let me, willing to follow my lead in this.

Keno curled up to sleep, and I lay with him. I didn’t think I could sleep, but I drifted into it soon after he had. We were both woken by a discreet knock on my door. The door slid open, and I was surprised to see that Inusuka Shino and his brother Inuyama Dousetsu standing there. I sat up, and Keno whimpered and turned over.

“And how is our brother?” Inusuka asked.

I looked at him and wondered how I could gracefully get off the futon without waking up Keno. "Asleep, as was I," I said. I got up slowly and tucked the covers around Keno before slipping into a *yukata*.

"We wish to discuss our brother with you," Inuyama said.

"Then we will do so in the garden, so he will not wake," I replied softly. I did not miss that they now named Keno their brother, not just their brother's avatar.

We all adjourned to the garden, kneeling on the porch. I waited for them to start talking.

After a thoughtful minute, Inusuka looked at me and smiled. "And what are your intentions?"

"That is up to your brother's avatar," I said. "Keno-chan chose to come here. He does not have to choose to stay with me."

"Will Sakura-chan?" Inusuka asked.

"That again is up to Keno-chan. Keno-chan, who really is not your brother," I pointed out harshly. "And I hope that he will never be like your brother!"

"Why?" Inuyama demanded.

"Because the Inuzaka Keno who I fell in love with was a man possessed. Did you not see it in his eyes?"

"Keno-chan has the same eyes," Inusuka said.

"He is an innocent," Inuyama said. "Even now, untouched by blood. This is a good thing."

"I hope that he remains that way," I said. "I cherish the boy. I would grieve if he took the same path that his ancestor had."

"We wish him to know that he can stay with us," Inusuka said. "Hamaji would adore the company. If not my household, then with any of us."

“That is a kind offer,” Keno said from the doorway to our room. I wondered how long he had been standing there, how much he had heard of this conversation, but there was nothing in his face or his eyes that would tell me. “But my place is with Aboshi-sama and Tamazusa-sama.”

Inusuka studied him for a few moments before he nodded. “That is your choice.”

“I will not say that it is a good one,” Inuyama said, “but it is one that I will honor. But please know that you are our family.”

“I am only his avatar,” Keno said.

Inusuka nodded, “But I fear that is all that is left of our brother Keno. That is the price that he paid to save his lover. Mother will still fuss over you as one of us, I will warn you.”

“I will consider you all my family,” Keno said with a low bow. “I am honored to be part of it.”

They got up and bowed, sauntering out of the garden. Keno looked after them, a strange look on his face. He eventually walked down and joined me. “Aboshi...”

I leaned over and brushed my lips across his forehead. “Keno, I... you do not have to stay here.”

Keno pulled back. “You don’t want me?”

“Too much, still.”

Keno smiled. “As I do you.”

“I will not—”

“I trust you,” Keno said. “I know that you’re not going to hurt me. I don’t know if we can have sex any time soon, but I think that we can try.”

I smiled down at him. I didn’t expect Keno to lose his fear of sex overnight, but there was a definite invitation in his voice. I leaned over to kiss him again, delighted when he kissed back. I broke off the kiss

after a few minutes, Keno making a soft sound of disappointment when I did so.

“Keno, there is no need for you to be Sakura,” I said.

Keno smiled sunnily. “I like being Sakura. You like her too.”

I nodded, thinking and plotting. Sakura would be the companion in my delights, while I had Keno trained in the magical arts. He needed the training, and I wanted a companion who was thought to be harmless in the Game. Keno as Sakura wasn’t a target. He would be when people realized he was a talented sorcerer.

“I think that I should arrange for your training with magic to begin soon,” I said.

Keno pulled me down for another kiss, and I decided I would let the future take care of itself. I had Keno by my side, and that was enough.

MASON

I WASN’T surprised that Keno left us. I started the slow walk upstairs, supporting Wolf. I didn’t think he was awake enough to realize he was crying. Okay, I’d call it more his eyes watering, because he wasn’t sobbing or anything. I knew he was mourning Keno. The kid wasn’t dead, but I knew—well, hoped—that I wouldn’t see him again. I had just entered the stairwell when the lights came back on. I was at the top of them when the rescue squad found us. They took Wolf off my hands and started treating him.

McGann was with them, and I saw the relief in her eyes when she saw us. I thought she believed Samojirou had killed us.

“How?” she asked when she got close enough to talk without shouting.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. I looked over at the squad and called down, “Check the server room first. I think that Murphy’s down there.”

That got them to hustle faster. I didn’t know if the man was there; Tamazusa might have decided to take him with her, but I hoped not. I hoped that she *had* taken Collins with her.

“You injured?” one of the medics barked. I saw that Goose was taking care of Wolf.

“Just peachy,” I said.

Wolf was bundled off to the infirmary, and I followed him. McGann checked on him briefly before having to go deal with whatever shit she had to. I was still in the infirmary when they brought in Murphy. He looked like shit, but he had enough energy to start screaming when he saw me.

“That nigger was working with the fuckin’ gooks! I want him out of here! I want his nigger ass terminated!” Murphy shouted when he saw me, and the language got worse from there.

I didn’t say anything, because there really wasn’t anything to say. But they let me stay by Wolf’s bed when they brought him back in. Wolf wasn’t injured too badly, but they wanted to watch him a couple of days. He had an IV hooked up to him and a few other things that looked really uncomfortable.

Wolf woke up after a couple of hours. “Keno?” he whispered.

I gave him a drink of water, letting him sip a little before pulling it away. “Gone.”

“I should have—” Wolf stopped when one of the nurses walked in. I watched her do her thing and hustle out of there. Wolf continued like there hadn’t been an interruption. “I should have stopped him.”

“His choice,” I reminded him.

“They’re monsters,” he said.

McGann walked in on that. “They were kind to him, something that we never were.”

“Thanks for having the balls to admit that,” I said. I saw a lot of regrets in her. I didn’t blame her. There was a lot about this I was regretting too.

“Keno,” Wolf said. “He acted like—”

“The kid had the hots for you once,” I said. I thought that shocked Wolf. “Shit, you and me were about the only people who were nice to him, and he was scared shitless of me. Besides the fact that he could be my kid at his age.”

“I didn’t know,” Wolf said softly. I wondered what was in his system for him to talk about this shit. “He... I never thought about him like that. Keno was just a nice kid. He didn’t seem old enough to want something like that.”

“He was twenty,” McGann said. “Though a lot of times he seemed younger. But he isn’t stupid. Keno Inuzaka managed to get his revenge on all of us.”

“What happened?” I asked.

She shrugged. “He destroyed the server room, all our databases, and a lot of GI information. Even knowing he was that good, I am amazed at the amount of damage that he did.”

I opened my mouth to say something stupid, like “You sure it wasn’t one of the weirdoes with Tamazusa?” and then closed it. I didn’t think medieval demons would know how to do shit like that, not if their home was as low tech as it was.

“Man, we’re fucked, and not in a good way,” was all that I could get out.

McGann looked at me and nodded. “And we are all going to be debriefed in the morning. Good night, and I’ll see you then.”

I'D have liked to say that we all lived happily ever fucking after. We didn't.

We all survived debriefing without getting terminated. I thought that was because Mrs. Adams was the one who was running things. The place was filled with Trustees again and a ton of 'paths and magic guys. Most of them were interested in anyone else but me, fortunately.

Collins going missing was bad, but I thought there were a lot of people who were glad it happened. Not that I heard anyone come out and say it, but there was a sense of relief that no one ever found him. The squad finding Fairinox's body was a bad thing for me, but I could truthfully say I didn't know how the asshole bought it. His head missing was a big clue, and we never found that. I was sure that it was someplace on Tamazusa's estate filled with flowers.

Murphy's accusations about me working with the intruders didn't amount to shit. No one could prove anything. And there were a lot of people who didn't want to remember what happened that night. Most of the lab techs who had been caught behind the blast door ended up transferring out to someplace else.

Most of them were willing to swear that I had been forced to help Fuse's kids, that I had been dragged out of that room instead of going willingly. That saved my ass, along with Mrs. Adams remembering how I guarded Fuse from the assholes.

Murphy was eased over into working at the Cambridge branch. He thought I should have been terminated, and nothing was going to change his mind. Me, I just didn't trust him anymore.

Wolf got out of the infirmary and got to spend some time with his grandfather. That the old man was a Trustee saved his ass, as well as him being hurt. Wolf was still the golden boy around here, and that was a good thing for me. He took over Murphy's slot for a while before getting transferred out to another Trust facility out in Waltham. Wolf didn't like the fact that Keno wasn't around anymore, but I kept reminding him that he was with people who cared about him.

McGann, luckily, managed to get out of this mess with her reputation being mostly intact. No one really had overheard our

conversation, so she was safe that way. I also guessed that even the Trust wasn't willing to terminate a 'path without cause. But I'd also heard some rumors that she was going to be transferred out someplace else, along with the rumor that the powers that be thought that shutting this place down for good was what was going to solve part of their problems. I didn't think that it would, but no one was fucking asking me.

It wasn't like life settled back into what it had been for me, either. There was a Keno-sized hole in it, weird as that sounds.

I had seen the monsters that I was supposed to protect the rest of humanity from, and I wondered why we did it now, because those in the Dreamlands seemed better than most of the people—most of the humans—I knew here. Most of the Trustees were shitting bricks because Tamazusa seemed to be able to waltz in and out of Boylston Street. There was always someone on guard in the server room now. I wasn't going to be the one to tell them that I didn't think that was going to protect us from her.

Quite frankly, I didn't give a shit.

KENO

I DIDN'T know how I felt, realizing that I had a family again. I knew I was surprised that Samojirou wanted me trained to be a magician. I had overheard the conversation in the garden between Inuyama Dousetsu, Inusuka Shino, and Samojirou. It made me feel funny that Samojirou had been in love with me before, in love with a man who others considered to be cold and a killer.

“Are you all right?” I asked Samojirou.

We were cuddling on the futon after spending some time exploring one another. We were sticky with each other's seed, and in

my case, satiated. Samojirou idly ran a hand up and down my stomach before he leaned over and kissed me. I kissed him back, boldly thrusting my tongue in his mouth as I wrapped my arms around him. We rocked against each other for a couple of minutes, and I was hard and aching for him again.

“I am very all right,” Samojirou purred.

“I heard,” I said softly, tightening my embrace.

“I thought that you might have.” He sighed. “Keno—”

“You’re in love with me too,” I said. I didn’t know if it should be “are” or “were,” and it didn’t matter to me. “I’m not mad that you loved him.”

“We had so little time together,” Samojirou said.

“And us?” I asked.

Samojirou laughed. “While you are human still, time will have no meaning for you here. We have all the time that there is.”

“That’s good,” I said. “So we have a lot of time for this.”

Samojirou laughed and started kissing me again. Soon I didn’t care about time or anything outside what he was doing with me.

FELICITAS IVEY is the pen name of a very frazzled helpdesk drone at a Boston-area university. She's an eternal student even with a BA in anthropology and history, since free classes are part of the benefits. She's taken courses on gothic architecture, pre-modern Japanese literature, and witchcraft, just because they sounded like fun. She has traveled to Japan and Europe and hopes to return to both in the future.

She knits and cross-stitches avidly, much to the disgust of her cat, Smaugu, who wants her undivided attention. He's also peeved that she spends so much time writing instead of petting him. She writes urban fantasy and horror of a Lovecraftian nature, monsters beyond space and time that think that humans are the tastiest things in the multiverse.

Felicitas lives in Boston with her beloved husband, known to all as The Husband, and the aforementioned cat, who the husband swears is a demon, even though it's his fault that they have the cat. The husband also is worried about Felicitas's anime habit, her love for J-Pop music, and her extensive collection of Yaoi manga and Gundam Wing doujinshi, which has turned her library into a Very Scary Place for him.

Visit Felicitas's blog at http://Iveys_Tales@livejournal.com. You can contact her at Felicitas.Ivey@gmail.com.



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