

Sakura and Snow

An Alternate Universe X/TokyoBabylon Fanfic

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Preface

Sakura and Snow is a work of fanfiction set in the *X/Tokyo Babylon* universe created by CLAMP, and it's my own personal answer to the question of how to resolve Subaru Sumeragi and Seishirou Sakurazuka's longtime conflict. *Sakura and Snow* left CLAMP's continuity and became an alternate universe fanfic at around book 10 of *X*, but it does contain spoilers for the first ten books. This is also the mature-audiences version of the story, so please read at your own discretion. (You can download an all-audiences version at my Web site, <http://www.firecat.net/fanfics/sakura/>.)

The manga for *X* was published by Asuka Comics in Japan and Viz in the United States; *Tokyo Babylon* was published by Shinshokan and by Tokyopop. A couple of characters appearing in this story were borrowed from the *Tokyo Babylon* anime OVA, which is copyrighted by CLAMP/Shinshokan/MOVIC/Sony Music Entertainment (Japan) Inc. All rights to the original story and characters of *X* are retained by CLAMP.

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Finally, a huge thank you to all my readers. Thirteen years is a very, very long time for you to wait for an ending to this story. I hope it's worth the wait.

Prologue

All over Tokyo the cherry trees were in bloom, but nowhere as luxuriantly as in Ueno Park. The park was unusually empty, though, despite the fine spring weather. Ordinarily it would be a solid mass of salarymen and office ladies, happy, exuberant families and paired-off couples, but today few people were there at all. And of those who did come to spread their blankets on the grass, to laugh and eat and drink as they watched the petals drifting down, most seemed at least a little nervous.

That wasn't really surprising. The talk on every blanket was largely of the earthquake that had struck the city earlier that day. Nakano Sun Plaza had been entirely destroyed. It was a terrible thing.

Heedlessly, though, a few young children ran and shouted under the cherry trees, oblivious to the conversations or the concerns that troubled grown-ups. The rose-pink petals tumbled all about them.

Sakurazuka Seishirou touched the trunk of one particular tree.

He smiled.

Narrow pieces of paper fluttered to the pavement, flashes of white marked by black lettering. They settled onto the concrete, and onto the corpse that was lying there, and onto the blood that pooled around the corpse. Blood soaked into the fibers of the papers like oil being drawn into a wick, and a subtle poison seeped into the ground beneath the plaza, tainting what had kept that place secure.

A tremendous burst of light split earth and sky—

A dragon of power coiled into the air.

Seishirou reached up and drew down the tip of a flowering twig. He let the delicate blooms brush against his cheek. Behind dark glasses, his eyes were closed and peaceful.

He was remembering.

Nakano, after the earthquake...the distant noise of screams and sirens. The sweet taste of power so recently used still filled him. The plaza was choked with rubble, as were the surrounding sidewalks and the streets; broken glass glittered dully on the pavement. Somewhere a fire sent thin veils of smoke into the air, but the smoke and clouds of dust were slowly disappearing, carried away on the wind that had arisen. The sky was growing clear once more.

Nakano Sun Plaza...the sound of hurrying footsteps echoed from shattered walls.

Seishirou turned around. He smiled, very softly, at that approaching person.

“Subaru-kun.”

Seishirou opened his eyes and watched the slow rain of cherry blossoms. The smile did not leave his face. He had not forgotten this one....

No, he had never forgotten this one.

The one that he had permitted to escape him.

The one that he was someday going to kill.

He had already chosen the moment.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Subaru said in a quiet voice.

“Why?”

“To make my wish a reality.”

From Subaru’s hand a star-shaped space sprang out, luminous and growing.

The kekkai of one of the Seven Seals.

Hey, Seishirou called out silently, teasingly, even though the Sumeragi couldn’t hear him.

Now that I know for certain you’re a Seal, Subaru-kun, I’ve decided at last.

I’ll kill you on the final day.

Because you and this fragile “cornerstone,” this Tokyo, have been two projects that I’ve spent a lot of time on and your fates are so closely intertwined—

It’s an elegant conclusion, to finish both at once.

A wind moved strongly through the sakura, combing the waves of Seishirou’s dark hair. It picked out a stray petal that had nestled there and stole it swiftly away. The branches of the trees whispered against each other, soft sound of wood contacting wood. Slow clouds began to pass before the sun.

Sumeragi and Sakurazukamori. Two faces of the coin of onmyoudo, the light and the dark.

It would have been appropriate for us to meet in any event, on the threshold of this human world’s destruction, even if I hadn’t marked you as my catch so long ago. And considering that, considering how long I’ve been meddling in your life already—

Yes. To see you die on the final day would be right.

So for those reasons, I’ll continue to overlook you for a little while longer. For those reasons—

—and for one more.

“You said that you had a wish. Is your wish...to kill me?” He looked so very serious, and Seishirou had to laugh.

“You really are cute, Subaru-kun.”

You really are.

You want to fight me, don't you? Well, I want that too. I want to see how well you'll do against me.

The thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan....

Will you challenge me on that day, Sumeragi Subaru?

Powerful winds whipped around the two practitioners. Their voices rose, one over the other, in words that strove to summon and to deny. Magical forces sang in each syllable, each gesture.

"On makayakisha bazara sataba...jakuunban kohara beisha un."

Torrents of supernatural energy wove around Subaru's hands. He stood fast among the screaming, lashing winds, and his green eyes never left the figure of his enemy.

Seishirou appraised the strength of this opponent. When he was satisfied with his knowledge, he exerted himself in a certain way. The unseen threads that held magic to Subaru's will were abruptly bound.

"On asanmagini unhatta...on bazarato...shikoku."

Subaru gasped.

Seishirou's power hurled Subaru backward, and he struck the wall of the building behind him.

One of the littlest children wailed suddenly, as he tripped on a root and fell. He lay there for a moment, then scrambled to his feet and dashed after the others, crying for them to wait. The children trampled over the fallen petals, and where it had been crushed that tender silk turned darker, like a human bruise.

A stain of blood, spread out beneath the skin.

Seishirou walked over to where Subaru was kneeling and gazed down upon the younger man. Powerful, yes, as the leader of Japan's onmyouji should be: far more powerful than he'd been in the past. Of the seven Seals, he might stand second only to Kamui himself. He was highly trained, intensely disciplined; his workings were carried out with all the skill that single-minded dedication and years of experience could give.

But he was not Seishirou's equal.

There was a flaw in him somewhere, a fracturing of his energies that hindered him from his full potential.

The tremendous promise of his spiritual power had never been fulfilled.

That very combination of prowess and weakness....

Subaru-kun.

You're strong enough now to be an amusing test of my own powers, but not possibly strong enough to defeat me.

Another sure bet like this....

Seishirou laughed again.

How can I resist?

Within the enclosed space of Subaru's kekkai, the winds were diminishing. Seishirou stood over that victim, the one for whom he had so long bent the silent laws of the Sakurazukamori. He had always intended to finish their game someday...and now he knew when.

He smiled down at the injured onmyouji.

"Then...I'll see you again."

Yes.

On that final day.

A child's voice shouted: "Wait! Hey, wait for me! It isn't *fair!*" Small figures scattered in between the trees. The sound of high-pitched laughter echoed among the sakura, gradually dying away into the distance.

That single voice cried out to them again, and then was still.

Seishirou laid his hand upon the tree once more.

Subaru-kun, everything dies eventually. Like this city's future, your time is running out.

It's not that I "hate" you, or that I particularly "wish" for you to die—

It's just something that's going to happen, is all.

I'm the Sakurazukamori, and I'm going to kill you.

It really is that simple.

Still smiling, Seishirou let his hand slip down from the cherry tree. After a little while, he turned and walked away. On all sides the petals fell without surcease, pitiless and beautiful.

Somewhere, a mother was calling for her son.

Chapter 1

Subaru was still sitting in the park. The little fool had been waiting on that bench for hours, his gaze scarcely wavering from the snow-bound cherry tree.

What did he think he'd accomplish there?

Seishirou shrugged off the farsight vision for a moment, letting his mind return to the low-lit confines of his apartment's living room. Picking up the glass by his side, he took a measured sip of its contents, savoring the sweet, pleasant fire of the alcohol. Then he glanced once more across the distance, amused by the persistence of his enemy.

Not such a *little* fool, of course. Not anymore. Subaru had grown taller in the intervening years, his face leaner with developing maturity. He dressed casually, now that he wasn't a victim of his sister's fashion whims, and it made him look less like—how had she put it?—a “dress-up doll.” And the eyes...those were most different of all. They had ceased to be such drowning pools of innocence, shimmering with every emotion that touched his heart. Subaru had had eyes like an animal's, Seishirou thought, eyes that understood nothing—and perhaps there was a time when Subaru might have been flattered by at least part of that comparison. Those eyes had narrowed, though, and they guarded themselves: deep green mirrors no longer full of light. There were things that he had come to understand.

But he was still a fool.

Seishirou looked away from Subaru again, long enough to find the stereo remote. He thumbed it on, and the CD player whirled softly, shifting through its program. As that ended and the low pulse of music began, Seishirou leaned back against the cushions of his chair. He closed his eyes and smiled at the Sumeragi: out haunting Ueno Park on this winter's night, so very like the ghosts it was that family's work to ease.

So restless and so futile...are you waiting for me to discover you there? Will you challenge me, when I arrive to defend the cherry tree barrow? What nonsense. I have better things to do with my time, I assure you. Especially on a night as cold as this.

Did you really think that I would come to you?

Seishirou's eyes opened slowly, one golden brown and one a cloudy swirl of white. He gazed at Subaru with mild curiosity, wondering what passed through the other's mind at times like these.

What is it that you hope for? What do you intend to do? Strike out against the sakura itself? Seishirou chuckled softly at that.

Well, perhaps you're only there to torment yourself.

You've always had a talent for suffering.

Subaru stood up and began pacing in front of the bench, something that he'd done more than once already. Most likely he was trying to keep warm. Seishirou watched him cough briefly, then flick the end of his cigarette into a snowbank. The sound of the cough was quiet, muted by

distance; the music on Seishirou's end nearly drowned it out. After another moment Subaru paused and made a halfhearted attempt to feel for scrying. Seishirou thinned his farsight out deftly, diffusing the field of vision across the entire end of the park, and Subaru, seeking a direct gaze, didn't notice him at all.

Clumsy, Subaru-kun. You're usually not so careless.

Subaru searched for a little while longer, but his determination appeared to waver, and he soon gave up the effort. Seishirou watched him slump onto the bench again. It was like observing something from the corner of one's eye, discerning what could only half be seen. In the dimness and from this new, unfocused vantage, the onmyouji was scarcely visible: a blur of shadow and motion that soon became still.

That waited, as if the gesture itself was what mattered.

Well, I suppose it's not important what your reasons are. There's nothing you can do out there that would affect me. If your presence near the sakura was any sort of danger, I would already have taken care of it. Believe me—

I would not have spared you.

The music changed, shifting into the beginning of the next song. It happened to be one that Seishirou particularly liked, and he let the sound lure him back to his apartment. He listened through the song with pleasure, singing along softly on a couple of the choruses, but still he left open the lightest strand of contact to the park, and he glanced that way from time to time. Subaru hadn't quite exhausted his interest for tonight: there was still the possibility that something might happen, and so Seishirou continued his idle scrutiny, just in case. It was the hunter in him, which could not take its eye from the prey so long as there was any hint of life; it was also the sorcerer's instinct, to be alert to loose ends and forces not accounted for.

He had let Subaru go for a long, long time. Like everything else, though, that respite was a temporary thing.

The song ended. In the silence between tracks Seishirou tapped one fingernail consideringly against his glass, listening to the faint chime of the crystal.

Subaru.

Beautiful and fragile and breakable—and, like all such items, of limited duration, even more so than the rest of this impermanent world. He might so easily have been killed years ago. Indeed, for a while Seishirou had thought there could be no more point to keeping Subaru alive. Then his sister's choice, her dying, had had such dramatic repercussions: Subaru had broken free in that tidal surge of loss and pain, and the unexpected intensity, that flash of power, had renewed Seishirou's fading interest in the boy. Without that he might not have thought to wait: to see how the bent twig would grow, to discover what Subaru might yet become. And then last spring, on that day in Nakano, he had finally found out.

He should be grateful to Hokuto, perhaps. He would consider it.

She had, after all, been his most ardent supporter.

Seishirou looked out musingly at the formless shadow-on-shadow that was Subaru. He was willing to admit that this was an extravagant game. The watchword of the Sakurazukamori was “do not be seen,” and being seen, leave no survivor. Any witness at all was a hazard, let alone a practitioner, let alone the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan, a person who knew what he faced and who held some measure of power. Seishirou’s ancestors would surely not have approved.

Unfortunately for them, Seishirou was quite indifferent to what they might have thought or done. The opinions of the living never moved him in the slightest, so why should the dead matter either? Besides, no one was ever going to know what happened here. The dead were well and truly gone, and there would be no son or daughter to replace him.

Not ever.

After all, the world was about to end.

At that thought, Seishirou smiled again. He raised his drink in a humorous salute to all who had come before him, the murdering and murdered magicians whose blood was in his veins and on his hands. Only he would not die on the cherry tree mound; only he would not shed his life to feed another’s power.

He would be the last of the Sakurazukamori. That fact gave him a definite satisfaction.

Seishirou drank and then lowered the glass, becoming serious for a moment as he did so. He gazed into the darkly translucent liquid without really seeing it, his vision returning instead to that person near the sakura tree.

He had never forsaken what he was. Being that—being the Sakurazukamori—there were things that were required of him. Any person who saw the cherry tree barrow guardian at work had to be killed. No one that the Sakurazukamori singled out for death ever escaped. Such things were not open to dispute: they were an incontrovertible part of himself, as intrinsic to his nature as his height, or the darkness of his hair, or the wide, bright spaces of his mind and self. He was the Sakurazukamori, and Subaru was going to die.

But *not* before Seishirou was ready to kill him.

Seishirou laughed, recovering his usual cheerfulness.

It really is almost time now. Are you ready for that final day? Or will you truly break as easily as this glass after all? All this time I’ve been wondering, I’ve been waiting patiently to find out, Subaru-kun.

How much do you hate me? Will you try to “punish” me?

What are you going to do?

Right now, Subaru wasn’t doing much of anything. Seishirou brought the blurred image back into clarity, since the onmyouji was no longer looking for him. He slipped his point of view around Subaru’s shoulder to look into that grave, emotionless face. Subaru stared past in the general direction of the sakura; whether he truly saw the tree or was merely lost in thought or memory was debatable. There was no movement at all, though, other than the occasional small shift of position. It seemed that Subaru was going to be tedious for a while.

Hmm...well, if that's so, then I'll leave you to it.

Losing interest for the time being, Seishirou drew his attention all the way back to the apartment, meticulously checking his wards as he passed them. He scanned the surrounding area for farsight spying as well, before unweaving the subtle flows of power that he held. As it turned out he hadn't been "followed"—he hadn't expected that he would be—but he was careful of such things nonetheless. It was one reason he felt quite secure, even though he was being "hunted."

Even if it's you, Sumeragi Subaru. Because if the diviner under the Diet Building can't find me, you certainly won't.

But I can always find you....

Always.

Seishirou blinked away the last shadows of his scrying, then stretched languidly. So now that this diversion was over, what was he going to do tonight? He could go out, but he'd seen enough of the frigid winter night already, and he was disinclined to walk around in it. Besides, he was feeling lazy...perhaps he'd stay home and read instead. He had picked up a few magazines earlier in the day; some were "work"-related (those millennial New Age groups put out the most ridiculous fluff, but they could be amusing, and nothing that might remotely touch on coming events should be ignored), and a couple were simply entertainment. That was surely enough to occupy him. However....

However, it was also nice simply to sit, he reflected: to listen to the music and to think of nothing in particular. He probably should enjoy this quiet moment, if only because there weren't so many of them left. It was a rare thing...everything became rare in these last days, and it gave one a pleasant nostalgia, a sense of transience that in itself was a good enough reason for the end.

The magazines would keep for a while, Seishirou decided, and he relaxed contentedly into his chair. He noticed that the glass was still in his hand—nearly empty, and he went to finish it.

"Eh?"

A thin snap of energy sparked in his mind, a fierce crackle of alertness. It ran down his spine and out along his nerves like something alive. Seishirou set down the drink.

Subaru was moving.

He had stood up from the bench and now walked toward the cherry tree. Snow crunched under his feet. Stopping just beyond the span of leafless branches, he reached into the sleeve of his coat and drew out a sheaf of ofuda.

"On."

With a practiced flick, Subaru cast the paper talismans toward the tree. They caught in the air around the trunk and began to glow with a soft fire.

So....

Subaru was actually going to attempt the sakura. This could be interesting.

"On...batarei ya sowaka...."

Branches began to move slightly, although there was no wind. Small swirls of snow, dislodged, scattered to the ground.

“On...batarei ya sowaka....”

Seishirou stood up and paced into the bedroom. He drew up the blind on the large picture window there and stared through his reflection in the glass—then ceased to see anything at all on the physical level, his vision wholly occupied with that faraway working.

“On...batarei ya sowaka....”

The stirring of the twigs transmitted itself to the air; the air began to shake silently, as if disturbed by a tremendous thunder just beyond human hearing. It was power that had begun to wake, and for those with eyes to see the night was utterly transformed. The city sky, never truly black, became so, and the shadows of the park grew thicker and sharper edged. Near the sakura those shadows took on the dull reddish color of rust, and they moved, seeping outward like the slow ooze of blood from a heart that had nearly ceased to beat.

The tree whispered, *Enemy*. Only Seishirou could hear.

Subaru-kun. Do you have any idea what you're attempting?

Subaru clasped his gloved hands in the mitsu-in, index fingers raised before his face as he continued to chant. In the dimness, the light of his magic was the only bright thing. The movement of the air intensified, its vibration verging on an audible moan as it caught up those shadow streamers and unfurled them wider—as it joined with them, so that the shadows and the wind became one swirling, wrathful force that whipped around the inside of Subaru's working with growing violence. Still it could not quite approach him, bound in by the radiance of the ofuda.

No. I'm sure you don't have the slightest clue. And I know you well enough to know that you won't have slept or eaten properly beforehand—that you're coming into this from a place of weakness, as you always seem to.

Well, anyway...let's see how you do.

Raising his voice against the fury of the wind, Subaru began his main invocation, the words a fragile spindle on which to shape the magic.

“On nama samanta vajuranam chanda maharoshana, savata on tiraka hanba sowaka....”

He set his will upon the tree.

Power surged between the onmyouji and the ancient sakura. In four discrete, brilliant flares, the ofuda were destroyed. Subaru let them go without flinching, caught the protective energy they had held and sustained it through his own skill instead...impressive, that. The sound of the wind increased to a snarling wail. Subaru lifted his hands above his head, eyes dark and intense as he repeated the words, as he swiftly bound the three threads of his spell together.

To call forth, to contain, and to cleanse.

You tried this once before when you were only a child, and you failed, as you will fail now. Innocence protected you then from the full consequences of your actions, but you are no longer innocent, and the sakura will kill you because that is its nature. Subaru-kun—

—magic coursed into the space between Subaru's hands—

—you can die here.

“On batarei ya sowaka!”

White fire exploded around Subaru and the tree as he threw his arms wide in the spell's release. The force of his will flamed against the darkness, lit every crevice of the great trunk in a fierce blaze of power. Light dazzled off the fallen snow as he turned night temporarily into day: a spiritual light, as well as a visible one, even as the shadows that he contended with were more than just the darkness that one could see.

They were the dead.

That was what the child-Subaru had felt so powerfully that it had drawn him across Tokyo, from one path of destiny onto another: the suffering and malice of so many victims that they could not be counted. Mindless, speechless, all volition stripped away, their souls were pressed into the barrow and its guardian tree, just as their bodies were buried beneath it. It was their unliving existence that gave the tree its power, their resentment and ravaged humanity that gave it something near sentience: a mind that carried over from tree to seed to sapling, so that it always was renewed. Ally and symbol to the Sakurazukamori, as old as any living thing upon the earth....

Subaru-kun....

Twenty centuries of magic and blood, of hate and death and fear.

Do you really think you stand any chance against that?

Subaru was still sustaining the spell, focusing light that was more than light onto the sakura, striving to reach its heart. His lips moved silently, and there was a frown of concentration on his face. A high degree of skill, yes, but skill alone could only take him so far. At this point it was his personal power against that of the tree, and Seishirou could feel in the magical emanations that he was nearly to his limit.

Despite that, he did not give in. He poured out that power in a constant tide of force, pushing at those boundaries that he could not break...calling, but never being answered.

The tree keened. There was a terrible snapping sensation, as of a branch bent too far that slips free and whips back.

And Subaru was fighting for his life.

That quickly the balance shifted, as the tree's full magic came to bear. Fury whirled out at Subaru, a lash of pure savagery that splintered his warding spell with ease. Subaru snatched back the shards of protective power, spinning them into a desperate shield of brilliance around himself. Wind and shadow roared past him to surround the narrow circle that his magic made. He struck out from that fragile shelter with what force he could spare, but the storm ate his blow at once and

began to drive inward, pressing inexorably closer. Subaru's light intensified as its radius shrank, but his strength wouldn't hold for more than moments. And he knew it.

"On!" Subaru screamed the seed-syllable, his voice almost inaudible over the howling of the wind. His power flared and thinned. Murder raged only an inch of light away from him—

"ON!"

—plunged over him like a wave.

In that instant, Seishirou sent his thought out from the apartment. His illusion manifested next to the trunk of the cherry tree: the perfect image of himself, with every seeming of substance.

He lifted up his sending's hand and his will.

The shadows swirled abruptly away from Subaru. They formed a clear circle around him and from there drew slowly back, wreathing themselves about Seishirou's image with reluctant obedience before fragmenting into the dimness of the Tokyo night. The wind dwindled as well until it had vanished entirely, leaving nothing but the thin bite of winter's cold—a cold Seishirou was aware of through distant senses, although he couldn't truly feel it. It seemed less chill than before, however; the weather appeared to be changing.

Perhaps there would be some more snow.

Seishirou cocked his head, gazing down at Subaru.

Mine, the tree muttered sullenly.

Yes—isn't everyone? Seishirou replied. *Now, hush.* In illusion he stepped away from the tree and walked to within a few feet of the other onmyouji.

Shuddering, trying to catch his breath, Subaru had fallen to his knees, one hand raised warding before his face. The rawness of the air got to him, and he began to cough again. Seishirou inspected him minutely, noting the exhaustion, the stark paleness of his skin, the worn sneakers and the coat whose sleeves fell just slightly short, outgrown years ago—missing no detail, because the Sumeragi was an enemy and a practitioner, and while Seishirou had his whims he was also not a fool. It was possible that this could be a trap, that his sending could be traced back to its source, although naturally he had taken precautions against such a thing...but everything he saw seemed to read the same way. Subaru had nothing left, not the strength nor the magic nor even the will to fight. He had spent it all in the struggle with the sakura.

Some of it, perhaps, even before that.

An onmyouji who worked for the government could have afforded a new coat, if he cared. But you've never been concerned for yourself, even in far more important matters. No self-interest, no self-preservation: you spend yourself too easily, and it makes you weaker than you really are. Seishirou shook his head in a pretense of sadness, even as he smiled very slightly.

That's not the mark of a "pro."

Subaru looked up at him suddenly, and Seishirou found himself still smiling as he stared into those green eyes. They were brilliant with an almost uncanny light, like a liquid gold flash of brightness along the sharp edge of broken glass, and behind the brilliance, empty of life. This light

was a new thing, Seishirou thought—not the luminosity that had once been there. It was more like a reflection from the dark surface of a jewel: an emerald, if any emerald had that deep richness of color. Such beautiful eyes he had always had—had even now, when they were like windows closed against the world. It was a kind of self-defense that he had learned.

“*Seishirou-san*,” Subaru breathed, his voice hoarse and ragged, torn like the thin nonsubstance of a spirit.

“Hello, Subaru-kun.” Seishirou’s own speech sounded flawlessly normal, despite the fact that he wasn’t physically present. His “breath” was even frosting in the air. Perfection of illusion was a point of pride. “That’s a nasty cough you have. Are you seeing a doctor?”

“That was you,” whispered Subaru tonelessly. “Breaking the spell.” The words could have been meant as a question, but Subaru showed no real enthusiasm for the answer. Seishirou chose to ignore them for now. He let his smile soften a little instead, as if showing concern.

“It’s a cold night to be out playing in the snow,” Seishirou remarked. He had “appeared” wearing a coat and now put illusionary hands in pockets. “You should dress more warmly next time.” Subaru was indeed shivering, but his eyes were fixed blankly on Seishirou’s and they gave back nothing.

“If you’re going to be outside for long in the wintertime, it’s also good not to smoke,” Seishirou continued. “Did you know that smoking constricts the blood vessels? You can get frostbite much more easily when the circulation is reduced like that.”

There was no reply, other than the empty stare. Seishirou contemplated that emptiness for a moment, then tried a different subject.

“Have you been busy with ‘work’?” He had a pretty good idea of what Subaru had been busy with lately, but Subaru might not know that. The only response was another coughing fit: longer this time, and harsh. Sighing to himself, Seishirou glanced at the backs of Subaru’s hands as he waited for it to pass. They were gloved for warmth, not protection, and Seishirou could sense the presence of his stars quite plainly: signs invisible to ordinary eyes, but not to his. They were like a beacon to him, always, and if he chose he could reach out through the link they made and feel Subaru’s life like a small, warm glow between his own hands. Subaru had never made any effort to mask the signs, although it was conceivable that he could. It was as if he wanted Seishirou to find him, to come to him...well, of course he did.

He meant to track down and kill his sister’s murderer, after all.

The coughing ended, but Subaru didn’t look up or speak again. Silence strung itself out between them, the same strange silence as at their last meeting, only perhaps even bleaker on Subaru’s part. There wasn’t even movement this time, no flicker of involvement in his face, no physical reaction to Seishirou’s presence—only that slight trembling as he knelt there in the snow. It was as though he had gone away inside, was no longer alive to anything.

It was sort of boring. Idly, Seishirou played with his illusion a bit, letting the edges of his coat stir and ripple as if moved by a strong breeze. He let the “breeze” catch his own hair and even

Subaru's, swirl the loose snow that had fallen from the sakura in sparkling drifts around the two of them—those were effects that took work, moving the real with the insubstantial. Snow pattered gently against Subaru's face, but he didn't even flinch.

Hmm.

How best to stir some reaction?

"The sakura broke your spell," Seishirou said at last, allowing a gentle amusement to show in his voice. "It's not without defenses. Don't you remember, Subaru-kun? That day when we first met?"

You performed your first exorcism on this tree, and it stung you, didn't it? It would have hurt you a lot worse that time, if you hadn't been so little threat. You were so much a child that it could hardly even see you.

So innocent...but not any more.

Subaru said nothing, his eyes fixed on the snowy ground at Seishirou's feet. The illusion would leave shallow footprints when it departed, a detail that pleased Seishirou, even if Subaru seemed oblivious. Could it be that Subaru didn't realize that it *was* an illusion? Did he think that Seishirou was actually present?

"Perhaps you don't remember. Perhaps you'd prefer to forget. Is that your wish, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru's voice was like a sleepwalker stumbling through a room, awkward and remote and slow. "I only wish for one thing,"

An answer. It was remarkable.

"To kill me?" Seishirou asked, still smiling, and he swept out one arm in invitation. "Would you like to try it now?"

It would be laughable if Subaru tried to attack his illusion, but it probably wouldn't happen. Even if Subaru mustered the will, he seemed to be too weak. A monosyllable reply, then, or just more silence...so Seishirou was a little surprised when Subaru looked up at him again, as blank as the surface of a pond, and as transparent. It was as though Seishirou could see right through him, and nothing was even there.

"If I kill you, I become you," Subaru said without the least inflection: not hatred or anger or fear. There wasn't even a sense of expectation in the words, whether of good or ill, but only a hollow vacancy.

It was very odd indeed.

To cover his slight perplexity, Seishirou laughed.

"There's more to the rite of succession than that," he responded. He thought back, trying to remember what he could have said all those years ago that might have suggested the idea. "I didn't know you were interested, Subaru-kun."

“I will not,” Subaru said dully, fatally. “I will not commit that wrong.” His voice was resolved, for all that it was so flat and lifeless, and Seishirou felt a little interest wake in him again. There was something there at last, besides the silence.

“Wrong to kill me?” Seishirou asked then, swift and gentle as the touch of fire. “Or to become me?”

Subaru didn’t seem to hear. He was still speaking, but the words came more sluggishly: falling hard, like stones, and requiring a breath of recovery afterward.

“...no matter what happens,” he mumbled, “...no matter...how much....”

“Subaru-kun—”

“No matter,” Subaru was muttering, “no matter, no...matter,” as if he had lost the connection of the words, his mind wandering even with his enemy standing there before him, and suddenly Seishirou put it all together, the paleness and trembling, the too-bright eyes, the cough—

Fever. A bronchial infection as well, probably.

“Working” when you’re this sick? Honestly, Subaru-kun.

Perhaps on some level Subaru recognized that he was rambling. He breathed “no” one more time with demented quietness, and then shut up.

There was silence again.

Well, Seishirou thought, that’s that.

He looked up at the moonless, starless sky, clouds flushed vaguely pinkish by the city’s glare. It was indeed about to snow—no, it *was* snowing; the first small flakes were already descending, trailing down from above one by one. A couple of them passed through the body of his sending as they fell. They marred the effect of the illusion, but the flaw was very small, and it no longer seemed especially important. He was nearly done anyway.

Seishirou let his gaze turn back to Subaru.

I wonder if you’ve really decided not to try to kill me, or if you’re just delirious. He shrugged, not giving the question much thought. *It doesn’t matter anyway.*

You couldn’t kill me.

You couldn’t be the cherry tree barrow guardian, even if it was that simple.

I used to imagine that you might at least challenge me someday. Now, I’m not so sure. I thought—

Well, never mind.

A little wind kicked up, stirring Subaru’s hair for real this time and making the occasional snowflakes swirl sideways. It carried a star of snow past Seishirou, and he watched that white fleck dance by.

Maybe I should kill you now and get it over with. In the condition you’re in, I could do it all the way from here. You would never be able to stop me.

Maybe I should....

“Shall I?” he murmured, more to himself than anything else. Subaru glanced up spiritlessly, then let his eyes drift down again, their gaze leaving Seishirou like light leaving a blown-out candle flame. He bowed his dark head and was still.

Almost as if he were expecting to die.

As if he were waiting for it.

“No,” Seishirou said.

He flared the black coat that his illusion was wearing around “himself.” Dim lights flickered in the depths of its shadow like the flashing of falling leaves, muted pale greens and silvery greys. Their swirling movement transformed itself into a sighing of the air as he evoked the sakura wind, not the red, rage-filled fury of the dead but the other wind that was his own to call, cool and strong and achingly beautiful. With its coming, he briefly brought down the darkness of a full maboroshi around Subaru—but Subaru had already fainted, was falling forward into unconsciousness, letting go the tenuous grip of his will over mind and body. Seishirou watched as he toppled, observed the green eyes glaze and close, and then, shrugging once more, let the wind take all the magic, sending and maboroshi both, and unravel it into nothing.

A pair of sakura petals spun out on the last breath of wind, and as it faded they fluttered to the ground. They came to rest gently next to Subaru, two fleeting stains of pale rose against the snow.

Soon after, they too vanished.

Seishirou looked at the dark, reflective surface of his bedroom window. For a moment, he could still see Subaru’s senseless form crumpled on the ground before the cherry tree. Then he shut the farsight image from his mind entirely, tied off the ends of power, and released them, terminating the spell.

He let the blind fall closed.

The thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan.... he thought.

You’ll have to do a lot better than that.

The apartment was silent. The CD must have ended while he was “out.” Well, he’d listen to it again on some other night. He wandered back out to the living room to turn off the stereo, and as he did he noticed the drink that he hadn’t gotten around to finishing. There wasn’t very much of it left.

Seishirou picked the glass up and stared at it.

It had been a disappointing encounter. He was confident, though, that Subaru did have more to offer. He remembered the easy skill with which Subaru had balanced the disparate forces of his spell, the swift reaction to the breaking of his ward, even sick as he’d been...remembered other nights, other workings, a boy’s deep, unfailing dedication to what was required of him, a pure heart that held nothing back, and then a white-hot explosion of suffering and betrayal. Subaru had resources to drawn upon that he might not even be aware of.

Perhaps when his health improved he would recall what had happened tonight, his failure, and fight harder because of it.

One could anticipate such things, Seishirou thought, and smiled.

“Fight harder, Subaru!” Isn’t that what your sister would say?

I can almost hear her now....

Seishirou turned the glass in his hand, gazing into its circular mouth in a very brief moment of reminiscence. That small amount of wine swirled somewhere indefinite at the bottom of it. After nine years, he had gotten used to the curious flattening of his vision: the loss of depth perception was something he noticed only at certain times, usually when he was thinking about the past.

He had been doing a lot of that this evening, he realized. It was a very bad habit, even when one was incapable, as he was, of feeling regret.

Seishirou knocked back the rest of the drink and then yawned.

Although it wasn’t yet excessively late, he decided to call it a night.

Chapter 2

Seishirou had awakened early, after his usual dreamless sleep, and having dressed, made coffee, and smoked the first cigarette of the day, he was tending to his plants.

He took a certain pleasure in them. They were attractive to look at, and he'd found that the twice-weekly ritual of grooming and watering had its own benefits. That small amount of care was like a very minor meditation, producing a subtle centering effect with almost no effort on his part. In addition, seeing the plants thrive was a source of satisfaction, especially since he'd challenged himself to use no magic in their care. And he hadn't lost a single one yet, although it had been touch-and-go with the two ferns.

He was examining those now, parting the fronds with gentle fingers as he checked for dead or dying growth. They were his favorites—he found their airy grace deeply appealing—but they were also troublesome. They were constantly threatening to shrivel up and die. It was the arid heat in the apartment that did for them, he had discovered, but humidifying trays and proper vigilance in watering seemed to be turning the trick. Anyway, the ratio of dead shoots to green, living ones was much improved: there were only a couple of brittle fronds, which he picked off diligently. Both ferns were dry, though, as all the plants seemed to be this morning—dry and a bit dusty.

“Well, how about a shower?” he asked them. “Would you like that?”

He imagined that they would like that very much. Scooping the ferns off the spiral plant stand, he carried them into the bathroom. Rather than risk dropping anything, he made a second trip for the little inumaki at the top of the stand. Humming off and on to himself, he pinched out a few of its growing tips so as to encourage greater fullness, then tucked it into the crook of his arm and went to gather the half-meter dieffenbachia from the corner by the bed. He glanced out the window as he passed. It certainly wasn't sunny, but at least it was somewhat bright outside. The cloud ceiling was high and thin, a very pale pearly gray. A substantial amount of snow had come down overnight: he could see the fresh layer of whiteness mantling the low roofs opposite. Below, however, the street cleaners had probably already reduced it to the usual thin brown sludge.

Leaving those two plants with the ferns, Seishirou went back to the kitchenette to freshen up his now-lukewarm coffee, and also to collect the ivy from the window there. As he poured a new cup from the coffeemaker, he eyed the happy little decorative pot that the florist shop had sold the plant in. It was very cute, he thought, but one of these days he was going to have to find something slightly more...appropriate. The ivy could stand to be pinched back as well, but he decided to leave it for the moment. Perhaps he could let grow it longer and train it up the side of the narrow window. It would be more pleasant to look at than the wall of the neighboring building. At least the large picture window in the bedroom did offer its expansive view of sky and rooftops, and in the distance parts of downtown Tokyo. It was one of the apartment's better features.

He took the ivy and his coffee into the bathroom, put the plant down with its colleagues on the shower stall's white tile floor, and switched the spray to a gentle setting. While the water pattered down onto the leaves, he turned and looked back into the bedroom. That was another benefit to having plants, he thought: even though these were few and mostly small, they still managed to transform the energy of what without them was a somewhat boxy room. They gave it a much-needed quality of life and vibrancy.

Still, it wasn't a bad apartment, only perhaps a little ordinary. He'd lived in places that he'd liked better, but this one sufficed for his needs. And it did have what all real estate agents claimed was most important—"location"—even if not every person would agree that it did. It was distant from Tokyo's center, yes, but not inconveniently far from mass transit, and it had the distinct advantage of absolutely no major kekkai in the vicinity, and thus little danger of earthquake or nearby magical battle. That had been his primary factor in choosing it. Even Dragons needed to sleep, and having the roof fall on his head in the middle of the night was not something he wanted to experience.

At one point he'd been invited to join Kanoe and her children in their lair, but of course he had declined. The thought of living under the Government Building was amusing, but aside from that the idea didn't appeal to him at all. It made them all too obvious and attractive a target. Besides, he'd always been a solitary hunter—it was his nature—and although he understood his role in the coming events precisely, he didn't consider involvement in the end necessarily to mean involvement with the other Dragons of Earth. It certainly wasn't required that they all live together. The Seals were doing that, and he was amazed that they hadn't killed each other off yet and saved the Angels the trouble.

It might have been fun to take Kanoe up on her offer though, just to see how long he could hold out against the temptation to merge Yatouji Satsuki's parts with her computer permanently. He had to chuckle at the thought. Children, these days...but the girl was very good at what she did, and that really was what mattered.

As he saw it, the others would do their things, and he would do what he was best at, and as long as no one got in anyone else's way it would all be satisfactory.

The plants had probably had enough, and Seishirou turned off the shower before too much dirt could wash out of the pots. He decided to leave the plants there until they drained. Wandering back out to the bedroom window, he sipped at his coffee and gazed across the snowy rooftops toward the distant view of skyscrapers.

No, not a bad place at all. Of course, his favorite apartment had been the one in Shinjuku, above the clinic. It had had so much *space*. Walking into it had been like an act of liberation, like an indrawn breath. But now those high-rises made the area a deadly place to live, and anyway he couldn't have stayed there after the conclusion of his little bet with Subaru. He accepted that completely—it was simply one of the minor inconveniences he'd had to deal with as a consequence of his actions. Giving up veterinary practice had been another. This enemy would

watch animal hospitals, knowing the little that he knew, and one could not *hide* a clinic. It would be ridiculous. As much as the novelty of being hunted amused Seishirou, he didn't intend to make things quite so easy for the Sumeragi. He had found other ways to earn his living.

It was a pity, though. Using his patients as alternates had been such an elegant solution to the problem of magical return. But of course, there were a lot of other lives in Tokyo....

Thinking about Shinjuku and the clinic and the year of their bet, Seishirou remembered the previous night's play under the cherry tree, Subaru's peculiar behavior, and his eventual collapse. He wondered if Subaru had wound up spending the entire night out in the snow. His curiosity tugged at him, insistent as usual, and he gave into it with a smile. Focusing himself, he caught lightly at power and threw a faint thread of seeing out toward the familiar locale of the sakura. For a place he knew so well, it took no time or effort at all...no, Subaru wasn't there. So he'd come to his senses eventually and taken himself home—either that, or someone else had found him and carried him off, which Seishirou supposed could be possible. Still feeling inquisitive, Seishirou extended his senses further, sweeping out across the city to where he knew Subaru lived.

At a certain invisible boundary he stopped short and with utmost care began feeling for that well-known presence, for the answering touch of his signs. The house where the Seals hid was warded exceptionally well, its interlocking walls of warning and defense masked to all magical perception, even his. At best, one might notice a sensation as of a flash of sunlight or the shifting suggestion of a cloud: nothing solid or certain, nothing that would draw the eye or the mind, but an indiscreet touch would alert the will that had created it, and a direct attack would unquestionably be met with violent return. Seishirou suspected that it was the work of the girl from Ise, and he admired its subtlety.

He wondered how Subaru would feel, though, if he knew that he was Seishirou's entrance into this warded sanctuary: that the marks carved into him were a gateway through which Seishirou's farsight, at least, could pass those secret walls. If this means of passage were not potentially so useful, Seishirou would be tempted to let him discover it just to observe his reaction. However, that would be a terrible waste. There was much that could be learned from watching these Seals, and someday he would want to do far more than merely study them. That flaw in their protections would be invaluable then. Seishirou did not confuse his play and his work; he would never throw away such an advantage merely for the sake of his own amusement.

He wasn't sure precisely where the wards began and ended, but he knew that they didn't extend to the place where he was, and so he remained there, sending out that silent, most intimate call. Nothing answered, nothing opened up to him within the wards. Subaru was not there, either.

His gaze soared up and away from that place, flashing back to his body after casting one last glance at the nondescript building. Nobody would guess that it was the only home and headquarters of the Dragons of Heaven. Six of the seven Seals lived there, and the seventh, the woman from the soapland Flower, visited with great frequency. Seishirou couldn't resist a slight,

feline grin. None of the other Dragons of Earth knew the identity of the seventh Seal. None of them had even been able to track the Seals to their hideaway or to discover, let alone pierce, those shifting, enigmatic wards.

So there, little Satsuki-kun. Your computers don't know everything yet.

Back in his apartment once more, Seishirou stared speculatively out the bedroom window. Subaru wasn't in either of the two most likely places. Therefore, he could be anywhere. Tokyo was a very big place, and it would be too tedious to feel his way across all of it, seeking for the occult brilliance of those stars. There was a quicker way.

Seishirou raised his cup to eye level. There was still the slightest hint of steam rising from it. Good. He blew lightly on the steam, and as it swirled and spun away from his breath he wove that movement into the semblance of wings fanning the air, into claws and gray-white feathers, sharp beak and bright hunter's eyes—a peregrine, pale and ghostly, and far smaller than the eagle shikigami that he used as a weapon. He called the bird out of the air and onto his hand. Reaching into himself, he summoned up the recollection of Subaru, the image and essence, the soft radiance of life perceived through the conduit of the bond that marked him—felt the actual bloom of that life then, faint and tenuous against his palm, and let it pass into the creature that he had made.

“Please find this person.”

The bird cried without sound and hurtled from Seishirou in a flash of translucent feathers, passing through the window's glass and disappearing rapidly into the pallid winter sky.

Seishirou took another sip of his coffee and contemplated snow for a minute or two.

Like the ringing of struck crystal, the peregrine's psychic cry echoed in his mind. It had found its quarry.

Sometimes it was just so much more efficient to delegate matters.

He let his perception fuse with the shikigami's, watched the city wheel madly beneath its circling flight, and then felt its small, mindless exultation as it stooped from the sky toward a certain building, one that was eminently familiar.

Shinjuku General Hospital.

Subaru-kun, why am I not surprised?

In casting his spell, he had noticed that the pulse of life was thinner than usual. Obviously, this was the explanation. Subaru had been ill enough last night, and after an extended vigil in the cold it was no surprise that he needed to see a doctor. Subaru had always been vulnerable to sickness and its complications.

The bird winged invisibly through the substance of the building. Walls and corridors blurred by it, a flicker in Seishirou's sight. It swerved left suddenly, flew through a door and between a set of cloth partition-walls, and alighted on the foot of a bed. Emptily its yellow eyes stared at the bed's occupant, and at the array of monitors, lights, and transparent strands of tubing that

surrounded that person. It understood none of these things. It knew only that it had achieved the purpose of its creation, and now it waited with insentient patience for its form to be dispersed.

Seishirou, who did understand the significance of the equipment, studied it for a moment through the bird's eyes. Then, with a minor releasing of his attention, he allowed the shikigami to fade back into a ghost of steam and vanish.

No, he wasn't surprised at all. He smiled a little at Subaru, who was so cutely predictable. Of all the onmyouji of the Sumeragi clan since time out of mind, Subaru had to be the only one who ran himself into the ground so consistently and with such small regard for his own body. This time, though, he really seemed to have outdone himself.

Seishirou finished his coffee in a leisurely way, then went to clean out the cup and the coffeemaker. Once he'd tidied up the place and put back his plants, he'd go out. There was that little shrine he had been meaning to see to, with its kekkai...and perhaps he would stop, on his way, and pay a bedside visit to a certain onmyouji.

* * * * *

Seishirou strode easily down the hospital corridor, carrying a small, tasteful arrangement of flowers. None of the hurrying doctors or nurses spared him a second glance. Of course not; after all, he was entirely unremarkable, and they were much too busy with the victims of an unsettled city, the people caught in earthquakes, strange explosions, fires, or simple human violence such as rioting and looting. They had better things to worry about than whether or not his visitor's pass was in order.

Tokyo was not a healthy place to live these days.

Soon he reached the correct wing of the hospital and found the room that he was looking for. He slipped inside. It was a large public ward, but the bed he wanted was conveniently situated next to the door. Seishirou had been observing his target off-and-on for most of the trip, so he knew that Subaru at present was unconscious and alone; he therefore stepped through the privacy curtain with perfect unconcern, not even bothering to prepare himself for discovery or a fight. It seemed as though Subaru was likely to be out for a while, and if he threatened to wake he could always be lulled back to sleep again.

Seishirou drew the curtain closed behind him and looked down at the still form of the person he'd come to see. Subaru had certainly had livelier moments. He was thin and drawn, and the wintry-sky color of the hospital gown he was wearing did nothing to contrast with the stark pallor of his skin. One slender arm lay atop the covers; his hand was wrapped in bandages, and they had him on an IV. He had tubes down the throat, too...how unpleasant. All in all, he was looking less than lovely.

Seishirou cradled the flowers in one arm as he picked up Subaru's chart from the end of the bed. He peered at the schizoid spiders of the doctor's handwriting. Advanced pneumonia,

frostbite...no loss of digits, though. Well, that was some good news. Apparently he'd been found unconscious and with no identification: that was even more good fortune. If his name had hit the hospital's computers, it would have all been over quickly. Seishirou doubted, however, that Satsuki checked up on every anonymous patient. Subaru was safe, at least for now.

You've fought her before and won, but right now you're at a bit of a disadvantage.

I'd probably have to do something uncivilized if she tried to interfere with my fun.

He continued to study the chart. That was quite serious medication, and Subaru was on some sort of respirator. *I think you're going to be here for a while, Subaru-kun. I wonder if your friends are looking for you? Well, I probably shouldn't stay too long, just in case. Amusing as it might be to play with them, I do have errands that I need to attend to. They'd only be a distraction, and not so very appealing a one.*

He would go in one more moment, he decided, but—he glanced at the monitors. He just wanted to do his own examination first. Those vital signs looked poor, and the record on the chart was puzzling.

Not responding to treatment?

Seishirou let the chart drop back into its place and walked toward the head of the bed. Reaching to brush back the dark bangs, he touched Subaru's burning forehead; he ran his hand down the length of the thin arm and measured the thread of the pulse. He frowned just a little.

No, that *wasn't* very good.

Seishirou passed his hand over Subaru's face and down his body: not actually touching him this time, but probing for inner energies, the bright, fiery currents of life. After a moment, he stopped short. He went back and checked that life force again, thoroughly, just to be sure, and found the same thing. It was...weak. In fact, it was *very* weak, much weaker than it ought to be—that fire was barely perceptible at all. It was a scant flickering under his fingertips that wavered and at times hinted it might disappear. He dug deeper into Subaru, eyes half-closed as he concentrated on sensations other than sight or physical feeling. He brought his hand to rest over Subaru's, over the mark inscribed there, and let that serve as a channel guiding him far down into the tenor of Subaru's body. A dim light pulsed through the bandages, the lines of the star diffused by the gauze into a featureless glow. The heart rate on the monitor fluttered, and he felt the small increase of its beat through those other senses—Subaru's unconscious reaction to this invasion—but it was a surface matter only, and not what he sought to uncover.

Seishirou reached down as far as he could go without entering the inner landscape of Subaru's heart. He touched the place where spirit joined with body, the true source from which that life, that fire, sprang, but it felt cold under his touch and somehow empty, like a room on which the door had just been shut and locked. Empty...he laid gentle, noncorporeal "fingers" on Subaru's will to live, and he felt...ash.

Ash.

Seishirou moved his hand away, ending the exploration. He rubbed his fingers together absently, as if the sensation was from something that might linger on his physical being.

It wasn't the feel of the death that he dealt in. The death that he brought came swiftly, with surprise—the sudden strike from the dark, the ordinary and familiar turned to something “other.” Not this slow, extended fading-out of life. Nonetheless, he recognized these signs. This kind of thing....

It was something that most medical doctors never comprehended, and even if they did were not able to treat. No one could. It was the person's inner self that decided to live or not to live, and if the will chose not to fight then all the medicines or machines in the world couldn't save more than an empty, hollow shell. A hearth without a fire...a place without inhabitant.

Without any desire to live, Subaru would die here. He wouldn't even last until the final day.

It seemed their game already was over.

Seishirou gazed at the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan, unconscious in the hospital bed. Around them the machines hummed quietly and occasionally pinged. He looked down into that stillness and wondered, as he sometimes did, about the impulses that moved other people, or that failed to move them sufficiently.

He couldn't imagine what it was like, just to give up on life like that.

What happened, Subaru-kun? I wonder what it was that broke you, after hanging on this long. Did you just fail one too many times? I thought you were a little bit stronger than that.

In the end, it seems that not even your “one wish” was enough to keep you alive.

To have Subaru give out on him like this was something of a letdown. He'd rather been looking forward to the end.

I should have expected it, though. You've always been ready to lie down and die, sometimes for the most foolish reasons.

You've given me the win so easily.

You didn't even really try to fight.

Well, now you're dead, Subaru-kun...and after all the time I've put into you, it's sort of a pathetic way to end matters, isn't it?

Whether I kill you, whether I just leave you to die here—there's hardly any difference at all.

It made the whole affair rather stupid and pointless.

But I'll kill you anyway, before I go. You are my kill, after all.

Still, it's pathetic....

Was this what you were heading toward, all that time?

Is this all that you're good for, Subaru-kun?

Seishirou stared down into the bed, feeling his jaw set in what he admitted to be disappointment, and he felt something else then, a strange tension, an unaccustomed tightness in his body that matched a sort of mental resistance: a emotion that felt hot and sour and at the same time sweet in its unfamiliarity.

Anger.

Subaru had managed to make him angry, just the littlest bit.

The feeling stopped him instantly, and he savored it, the differentness of it. Rare, exceedingly rare for anything to disrupt his usual equilibrium. Pleasure or displeasure, amusement or boredom, those sensations were one thing, but *anger*...he could count on one hand the number of times he'd been angry since he'd come into his full power, and he'd probably have fingers left over for the victory sign. There were just so few things that could thwart what he desired.

With all the other emotions that he didn't know, that he had never even experienced at all, simply to feel this one little spark was to him a most amazing thing.

He stood there and explored the feeling with fascination until it started to fade. Then he turned his attention back to its cause.

Subaru-kun, he thought, and smiled.

Maybe you've given up. But I haven't.

You're not going to escape me quite that easily.

Most definitely not.

Seishirou took a moment to deposit his flowers by a neighboring patient; it amused him, to think of the person's surprise upon waking. As he returned to Subaru's bedside, he flung the swift, subtle touch of a spell across the mind of the attendant at the nurses' station who was supposed to be watching the patient monitors. A simple diversion, along with the assurance that nothing could possibly be out of the ordinary...the attendant was ridiculously easy to distract. Satisfied with his result, Seishirou lingered only briefly, looking down at his currently unresponsive prey. Then he leaned over the bed and confidently began detaching Subaru from the machines. As he did so, he suddenly grinned.

He'd never stolen a body from a hospital before.

It promised to be entertaining.

* * * * *

Seishirou flipped back the covers one-handed and eased his "guest" down onto the bed. Subaru was heavier than the boy he'd once been, but he was certainly still manageable. Straightening, Seishirou surveyed the sprawled form, then shrugged out of his coat and went back to the other room to hang it up. Returning, he stowed Subaru's belongings in the closet and began to disentangle the onmyouji from the hospital blanket.

There had been no complications. Under the guise of illusion, no one had even seen them leave the hospital: Seishirou had just walked out, with Subaru over his shoulder. After that, a "borrowed" car had gotten them back to his neighborhood without much fuss. It had been a while since he'd driven—he'd almost forgotten how much fun it could be. He had been circumspect, though, and the transportation in question now rested happily on a side street a safe distance

from his apartment building, not even scratched. Then a short walk, and a quick trip up in the freight elevator, and here they were. Subaru had stirred and whimpered a little in the car, threatening to wake, but a light touch on his mind had sent him back into unconsciousness. Otherwise, the trip had been perfectly quiet.

Really, the whole thing had been pretty easy.

He unwrapped Subaru the rest of the way from the blanket and began to arrange him on the mattress. He couldn't resist running his hand through Subaru's hair as he laid the young man's head on the pillow. Subaru had always had such soft hair, as light to the touch as the down feathers of a bird, much finer than was usual for dark hair. Seishirou trailed his fingers through it once more, then ran them around behind Subaru's ear and down onto his neck to feel for the pulse. Faint, as was to be expected. He cupped his hand lightly under Subaru's jaw, cocked his head and listened to the wet, almost bubbling rasp of Subaru's breathing, which had grown more labored during their journey. Soon he was going to have to do something about that.

Seishirou lay Subaru on his back and straightened out his legs. He really was too thin...the hospital gown had ridden up a little; Seishirou went to pull it down, and it was then that he noticed two small scars on the front of Subaru's thigh. They intrigued him—he didn't have any idea of how Subaru had come by them—and he examined them closely. Short, each one only a couple of inches long and very straight...it had been a cutting tool of some sort. Too crude to be wind-razors, though, and besides these were stab wounds, not slashes. It hadn't been a sword, either, judging by the size of the cuts, so most probably a knife...Seishirou touched the scars, probing at them carefully. Magically healed as well, he suspected. The smoothness and subtle silvering of the scars gave it away.

If they'd been magically healed, Subaru could have acquired them any time in the last nine years. Not knowing "when," Seishirou surely couldn't determine "how" or "why." But maybe he could do something to find out.

Jealous lover, Subaru-kun? he mused. *Well, at least they missed.* Seishirou tugged down the hem of the gown. He pulled the covers up over Subaru, drawing Subaru's arms out and laying them on top of the bedspread. Having settled Subaru more or less to his satisfaction, he noted once again the effort Subaru was making to breathe and decided he probably ought to get to work.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, one leg curled underneath him, and closed his eyes. Reaching inside himself, he swept away all distractions with the swift ease of practice, finding the center he needed almost instantly. A breath...another breath...he breathed into the stillness of magic, that place of clear and perfect intention, and from that clarity he put forth a silent call.

He nudged at the "mind" of the barrow tree, and it stirred to his touch.

Hello, he said.

You, the spirit acknowledged, recognizing him. Seishirou caressed it with his will and it submitted at once. It opened up to him even as it lapsed back into slumber, and he reached into

its restless, dreamless sleep, into its heart, to tap its core of power. He brought that power back into himself.

Fire.

Red and gold fire moved into him, fire that wasn't swift but slow, as slow as sap rising in ancient branches, fire that didn't sear with pain but that burned nonetheless, a sweet, fierce almost-pleasure that pulsed in every part of his blood. Fire of life and growth...fire springing from the ashes of death....

Fire. His heart beat more quickly, and he could feel a sweat break out. On one level he registered these changes, while at the same time he concentrated on the power itself, on embracing it fully and turning it to his desire.

He tamed it. Inside him, the power coiled and flowed ceaselessly, contained by his will. At its touch, the incipient ache in his back faded away; the desire he'd been feeling for a cigarette vanished. He shaped its force slightly, while he was at it, and let it pass through his lungs, clearing away the damage that smoking inevitably caused.

Seishirou opened his eyes then, still holding onto power. The room around him seemed exceptionally vivid, every detail sharp and immediate. The living things—himself, the plants, and Subaru—were almost shining, as if their edges had been limned with light.

He reached out and placed one hand on Subaru's forehead, while with the other he took up one of Subaru's bandaged hands. Bringing it to his face, he touched the back of it to his lips. He opened the way between them, letting that healing fire travel into Subaru's body, and the power swept in as irresistibly as a tide, although Seishirou muted some of its force by channeling it through himself. It flowed into every part of Subaru, a liquid, burning stream that surrounded each physical illness, each hurt, and dissolved it into nothing, that took all pain and weakness and in their place restored the body's inner strength, its natural inclination toward health and life.

It took only moments as Seishirou guided the energy through Subaru, watching closely to be sure that nothing was missed. As he did so, he passed his awareness over that one thing he was curious about, those scars...recent, he discovered, a week or two at most. That was intriguing. Then the healing was done, and, satisfied, he unloosed the magic's power. The flow of fire surged back into its place, returning to the sakura, all but the small residue caught in their bodies, which Seishirou allowed to bleed off into the air. That red and gold light spiraled out around the two of them, shedding tiny wisps of flame before disappearing.

In the stillness of the next instant, Subaru took a slow, deep breath, and then after it second, clear and without any trace of difficulty. Seishirou lowered Subaru's hand from his face. He unwound the bandages on it, freeing Subaru's fingers, and turned it in his own. There were no blisters, no marks of frostbite. Seishirou touched the pulse point at the wrist and felt the steady strength of its beat.

Good.

Seishirou made sure that the bonds of sleep were secure on Subaru, and then stood up and stretched, shaking off the lingering, distracting energy of the healing magic. It had worked very well. He had never healed anything so serious, had in fact never healed anybody but himself, and that only very minor things, but he had been fairly confident that he could manage this. In fact, had his eye not been injured in the middle of a hospital, in front of doctors and nurses who had immediately taken him into their care and who had had certain expectations of the duration of the healing process, he probably could have fixed that as well. Perhaps the doctors' surgery and medicines were to blame, or perhaps they were not, but by the time he'd extricated himself and turned his attention toward such matters it seemed some window of opportunity had passed. Nothing he'd tried had had any effect on his damaged vision.

Oh, well...it wasn't that important, and right now he had other things with which to concern himself. Healing Subaru physically was only half the battle.

He'd get to the next bit in a minute.

Seishirou walked around the room until he felt reasonably settled, then went back to sit by Subaru again.

Feeling better, Subaru-kun? I imagine you are.

Now that we've taken care of your body, it's time to do something about your spirit.

I think I know what the problem is, and it's probably my doing. I left you alone for far too long. I let the trail get too cold, and you've always been a low-key sort of person, haven't you? You're very passive when left to yourself. Perhaps you need a little more encouragement, a little inspiration.

I think it's definitely time to stir the pot.

He noticed that he had only unbandaged one of Subaru's hands, and he stretched across Subaru's body to get the other one. He unwrapped the gauze, and then, still leaning over Subaru, he paused. His gaze had caught on Subaru's face, which no longer had that bluish paleness or the deep shadows under the eyes. From there he found it wandering, tracing the vulnerable arch of Subaru's throat as he lay with his head turned slightly to one side, traveling down the vague outline of his body, all that was revealed beneath the blankets; and Seishirou felt the sudden, distinct urge then to touch both what he saw and what he didn't, became aware of the familiar sensations of desire.

He chuckled at himself. Healing magic did have certain side effects.

It was true, too, that he had always found Subaru extremely attractive. He smiled, remembering how long and seriously he had debated with himself at the beginning of the year of their bet. If he were truly to behave as if he "loved" someone, if he were to protect that person from everything, did that forbid him from seducing the person in question? He had wanted to achieve verisimilitude, after all. It was the same pride in his art that led him to perfect his illusions, down to the last detail. In the end, he had come to the conclusion that it was purely situational. To "take advantage" of Subaru would be "wrong," but if Subaru offered him any

encouragement, any answering sign of desire, Seishirou was permitted to consider him fair game. Unfortunately, Subaru had been impossibly naive, not to mention vehemently modest, and had ignored or fled in panic from any suggestion. So much for that.

Every life has its lost opportunities...ah, well.

He picked up the gauze and began rolling it. Fortunately, he had never invested himself too heavily in sex. It was a pleasant and necessary release, one that he made sure to get often enough that frustration never distracted him from more important things, but it also tended to cause complications. For that reason, he had been sticking with paid professionals recently. It was just so much tidier and more convenient.

He finished with the bandages, went and got a drink of water, and by the time he came back to the bed he had managed to put the inclination out of his mind, at least for the moment. He sat down again and laid his hand over Subaru's face, fingers once more touching Subaru's forehead lightly. Taking a few deep breaths, he found his way back to center. "*Soubou akyasha*," he murmured then, "*kyarbaya on ariky...maribori sowaka*."

He didn't always use the words. He chose to this time, as a focus. It was not a time to allow distraction.

"Soubou akyasha...kyarbaya on ariky...maribori sowaka."

This was the potentially difficult and dangerous action...

...to enter another person's heart...

...especially a person who was your enemy.

"Soubou...akyasha. Kyarbaya...on ariky. Maribori..."

He let his conscious mind slip free, from one body into another. Falling...

"...sowaka."

...into the dark.

He landed and gazed around. It always amazed him how dark it was inside other people—how dark their dreams were. Seishirou rarely dreamed, but when he did he found himself in endlessly open, radiant spaces, luminous and clear.

Never in such darkness.

And Subaru was in here someplace. Seishirou began to search, moving as silently, as softly as he was able to through that black and empty space—and the movement was very silent, very soft indeed. With the ease of power and the grace of long familiarity, he made himself seem no more than a part of that soundless night, invisible to any observation. There was always danger from the innermost defenses of a person, if one was seen as an invader: the threat of psychic rejection at best, and, at worst, outright attack.

Seishirou did not intend to be seen at all...not yet. He'd find Subaru first.

I marked you, Seishirou thought, *and you're here*.

Certainly, I'll find you.

It was the surety that led him, as he had known it would: the knowledge of Subaru that was the inner-world reflection of those Sakurazukamori stars engraved onto the flesh. At this level of existence, it was the thought that was important, and it was that which brought him at last to a place very deep in Subaru's heart.

Seishirou regarded the barrier before him. It was black against the blackness all around. The surface, though, seemed almost to catch a light that wasn't there. It had the shimmering, reflective quality of a soap bubble and gave a similar impression of delicacy, but it wasn't at all transparent. Nor, Seishirou suspected, was it quite so fragile.

He walked around it. It was in fact a globe, but not so very large—a little larger than a person. It seemed to float there weightlessly. Of course, there wasn't really ground to float above, just space, and Seishirou was only "walking" because he liked to imagine that he was, but he knew better than to worry about such things. Instead, he continued to study the sphere.

Soap bubble indeed, he thought, amused. Or a pearl, maybe.

A Dragon's pearl....

A little daringly, he put out his hand and touched the surface. It was neither cool nor warm, and the texture felt like glass, but when he tapped it gently his fingers made no sound at all.

Interesting.

He left his hand there a moment longer as he finished assessing the barrier, and then decisively he drew it back.

He called power into it—

—and *struck*.

He hit the barrier hard, and it shattered in absolute silence, broke into large and jagged pieces as though it were glass after all. Black shards hung in midair, revolving slowly, soundlessly, obscuring what lay beyond, but then through them he caught a glimpse—

—a glimpse of Subaru, turning to look at him: a stark flash of wild green eyes as Subaru *saw* him at that moment, as Subaru recognized him, was shocked aware—

"Hello, Subaru-kun," Seishirou said with a smile, "it's me."

And he leaped out of Subaru's heart.

Chapter 3

Seishirou stood between the window and the bed, the thin, weak light of the winter's day coming in at his back. He watched his still-unconscious visitor. Beneath the magical sleep that had been laid upon him, Subaru was restless now, his eyes flickering under their lids, his fingers knotted in the bedspread. Something inside him knew that things were amiss.

The shield that he had been hiding behind had been broken.

Seishirou walked over and reached down to stroke Subaru's hair and his face, then sat down once more on the bed. It was probably about time to let Subaru wake up so that they could get on to the third part of the plan.

I've healed you.

I've opened your heart.

Now, I'll hurt you.

Not too much, of course. Just enough pain to prod Subaru into action, replacing his apathy with a new, fresh sense of purpose—sort of like lancing and cleaning out an infected wound. He was positive that Subaru would be a lot more energetic when it was done.

You're going to bleed a bit now, Subaru-kun.

You'll find it very therapeutic, I'm sure.

He slipped the bond of sleep from Subaru, who almost immediately made a soft sound and began to stir. Seishirou pivoted slightly, so that Subaru was to his left side. He raised his head and gazed serenely out the window, although he still kept a watch on his patient from the corner of his eye.

Subaru's own eyes began to come open in small, fluttering blinks. He stared off to one side, sleep-fogged, and shifted his head against the pillow, looking confused. Seeming to register that he wasn't where he ought to be, he rolled his head. His eyes tracked slowly across the room, taking in his surroundings...and Seishirou, sitting next to him. Subaru's gaze stopped there with the natural inevitability of a falling leaf settling to the ground. "Seishirou-san," he murmured, still seeming not to know where he truly was, or when, as if it might be that the last nine years had been a dream.

Seishirou turned his head and let Subaru see the other eye.

There was a frozen moment.

"You!" Subaru gasped, and he scrambled upright.

It was not a polite word. Health obviously hadn't restored his boyhood manners.

Seishirou smiled and said, "Feeling better, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru's gaze whipped around the room, seeking an exit.

“It seems you’ve been pretty sick,” Seishirou went on blithely. “You look a lot more fit now, though.” Subaru tried to bolt from the bed. Seishirou’s arm flashed out, so quickly that it was almost invisible, and Subaru rebounded from it and fell back onto the mattress.

“A little rest...and some food...”

Disoriented, Subaru tried to leap to his feet. Seishirou uncoiled gracefully from the bed, and as he did, he swept Subaru’s legs out from under him in a casual, thoughtless manner. Subaru went sprawling.

“...and you’ll be good as new.”

Subaru thrashed his way back to a sitting position.

“Are you hungry? I’ve made some soup.”

The look Subaru gave him was a priceless blend of near-hysteria and fury. Seishirou controlled himself sternly to keep from laughing.

“Just wait there, and I’ll go heat some up.” As he moved around the end of the bed, Seishirou added, “Better get back under the covers, Subaru-kun—you don’t want to catch a cold.” He looked rather pointedly at Subaru, who abruptly realized just how little modesty the hospital gown left him and snatched the blankets over himself with a glare. Seishirou beamed and strolled out of the room, although still with a certain amount of caution. He didn’t quite turn his back upon the other onmyouji.

Out in the kitchenette, Seishirou turned up the heat beneath the tea kettle and stirred the pot of soup that he’d left simmering. His eyes were on what he was doing, but he kept his other senses entirely attuned to the bedroom. He heard and sensed no movement at all, could feel no gathering of magical energies.

Perhaps Subaru still was in shock—it seemed that he actually was going to wait.

Seishirou ladled out a bowl of soup and made tea for Subaru and for himself. Fishing a breakfast tray from the closet, he arranged everything on it neatly and carried it into the bedroom. Subaru was sitting rigidly upright, staring out the window with a fixed determination. He remained silent and immobile as Seishirou entered the room, but his body language clearly was declaring martyrdom.

Seishirou set the tray down in front of Subaru, who flicked a cursory glance at it—and at him—and then went back to glowering at the view. Seishirou reseated himself comfortably on the edge of the bed and helped himself to his tea.

“It looks like it’s going to snow again,” he remarked, following the direction of Subaru’s stare. The clouds had gotten a bit lower and heavier, and their gray color had deepened. “It’s unusual, this much snow so early in December.” Subaru did not respond.

“Is something wrong?” Seishirou asked, putting on his best “concerned” expression. He let his gaze drop to the tray, then rise slowly back to Subaru’s face, aware of Subaru watching him sidelong while pretending not to. “Well,” he said at last, “I know I’m only a poor bachelor, Subaru-kun, but I don’t think my cooking has ever done you harm.”

Subaru rather obviously bit back a response to that. He ducked his head instead of speaking and tried hard not to look at Seishirou or the soup. He had to be ravenous after his illness and healing, though, and the soup *did* smell good—Seishirou actually considered himself to be quite a competent cook. Subaru couldn't help glancing at the tray once or twice. Seishirou sighed and gazed with mournful patience into his tea, playing the part of rebuffed host while he calculated how long Subaru would hold out.

Not long, as it happened. Subaru's hand crept out furtively, and he picked up the bowl of soup. He sniffed at it, tasted it, and then warily began to eat. Seishirou favored him with a delighted smile.

He wondered a bit, though.

You're being awfully quiet, Subaru-kun. And it isn't just that you're not speaking; other than that rather feeble attempt to escape, you haven't done anything. That's a bit too pliable, even for you. Not even an incantation...although it's true that you're probably still too drained to be effective with your spells. Perhaps you're just biding your time until you've gotten your strength back.

Well anyway, I'd better start shaking you up a little.

He let Subaru take a few more slow swallows of the soup. "My condolences," he said then, "on the death of your grandmother."

Green eyes flicked up above the rim of the bowl and stared into his face for a moment before dark lashes veiled them over.

"I saw the announcement in the papers...a stroke, wasn't it?" Seishirou nodded to himself seriously. "At least it seems that she didn't suffer." He watched Subaru's fingers on the bowl, the subtle tension in them, which was all that Subaru allowed himself to show. "It really is the end of an era, isn't it, with the passing of the older generation. Even in that company, she was a remarkable woman. Truly remarkable...."

"I respected her."

Perhaps Subaru was contemplating the nuances that Seishirou had put into the phrase: the implications of where respect was given and not given. Seishirou allowed him some time for that.

"Did you go to Kyoto for the funeral?" Subaru looked up at him again with that same stiff wariness, met Seishirou's eyes briefly before wincing away. He didn't speak, but that might have been a short, curt nod of his head as he lowered his gaze. He took a sip of tea and returned to the soup.

"Is the soup all right?" Seishirou asked. Subaru hesitated, and then nodded again, just a little.

"Good," Seishirou said, with pleased emphasis. Subaru's eyes came up, which was what Seishirou had been aiming for; Subaru glanced at Seishirou's face, and once more there was that flinch. Before his gaze could shift entirely away, Seishirou inclined toward him, a slight but emphatic move that snared Subaru's attention: that caught him looking and held him fast.

“Subaru-kun,” Seishirou said, staring intently into that pale face, those strikingly dark eyes, “do you still blame yourself—” and he indicated his own eye “—for this?”

Subaru’s breathing stilled. And yes, the mirror was cracked, vulnerable places in his heart were losing their defense, because there was an instant of pain in the green depths of his gaze before he camouflaged it by reaching for his tea. His hand was shaking, though; this time there was no doubt. He really was an amazing one for self-recrimination.

“I thought we’d already had our talk about this,” Seishirou said, amused. He’d never understood Subaru’s obsession with this guilt. “I’m not the one who’s blaming you, Subaru-kun; that’s your own choice in the matter.” He gestured to his lost right eye again. “There’s nothing you could have done for this.”

“I was afraid you were going to go blind,” Subaru said, breaking his silence at last, in a way that Seishirou hadn’t expected. The murmured words were so soft and so taut with strain that he sounded almost hoarse. “Because you already wore glasses anyway. I wanted to get you a seeing-eye dog. I would have gone all the way to ‘Morristown’ for you, if it had meant that.” Something twisted in his face and voice, and he ducked his head once more.

He really was exceptionally cute.

“That was sweet of you, Subaru-kun. Unnecessary, but sweet nonetheless...I never really needed the glasses, you know.” Seishirou sat back comfortably. “I appreciate the thought, however.”

“Seishirou-san.” Subaru’s quiet voice had gone flat, and his manner had suddenly become very formal. His gaze was fixed on the stitching of the bedspread. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” Seishirou asked quizzically. After all, “this” could be any one of a number of things.

“*This*. Why—” Subaru lifted his hand, the beginning of a gesture of distress, then dropped it swiftly as he caught himself. He was trying very hard to hang onto his aloofness and self-control. “I know I was sick,” he said, “and now, I’m not. And also, underneath the tree...was it last night?” Seishirou nodded. “I remember you being there. I would have died, the spirit was too strong and it would have killed me, but you stopped it. You broke its spell.” Subaru’s voice rose a little, despite himself, once more growing tight with stress. “And then waking up here, and this,” he managed not to slop soup as he held up the bowl. “*Why*, Seishirou-san?”

He looked into Seishirou’s face as if it might offer him some revelation, and Seishirou smiled tenderly back. “I’m not a wasteful person,” Seishirou said then, the tone as caressing as the words themselves were cold. “I don’t throw things away before I’ve finished with them.”

He watched the impact of those words on Subaru, observed the further shattering taking place behind Subaru’s eyes, in his heart, in his soul.... *Did you still hope, Subaru-kun, that I was your friend?* He appraised those places of weakness, measuring them, because if Subaru broke too easily, too entirely, he would be little good at the end. But something at Subaru’s core still

held, the discipline required of an onmyouji sustaining him, perhaps, and although his eyes were filled with pain, they did not fill with tears.

“Bastard.” Subaru breathed at last, the word thin, sharp, and aching. “Bastard....

“I loved you.”

Seishirou blinked.

Loved?

It gave him pause. Hokuto had mentioned something to that effect once or twice, but he hadn’t really credited that it was so.

Considering the strength of her intuition, maybe he should have.

It certainly put a whole new face on things.

“Did you?” Seishirou said lightly. Despite the surprise, he had retained his smile. “Did you really? *What* did you love, Subaru-kun? You never even knew who I was.”

“I...no...you were....” As Subaru struggled, Seishirou leaned forward across the breakfast tray that separated them. He let the mask of ordinariness slip as his stare bored into Subaru’s confusion—the hunter’s gaze, carelessly intense—and Subaru froze as he had time and again: froze just like the helpless and betrayed teenager he had once been, like the little child who had looked up into a sakura’s flowering branches and met a killer’s eyes.

Seishirou reached out across the small distance that separated them. He laid a hand against Subaru’s cheek.

“You mistook ‘congeniality’ for ‘a nice person,’” Seishirou said, his voice very gentle. “You believed in every word I said, everything I did.” He leaned nearer still, until his breath touched Subaru’s face. Subaru shut his eyes. “That was *painfully* stupid.”

He removed his hand from Subaru and sat back again, his manner now unconcerned. “Ah well,” he said, shrugging, resuming his usual bantering tone, “I guess it’s true after all. You got all the magic of the Sumeragi clan, and your sister inherited the brains. Too bad—”

He had been expecting the inchoate cry of rage and anguish, had felt it building for some time—had expected as well the bowl of soup that was flung at him in fury, and he threw up an instant small shield to deflect it.

Somehow, though, he hadn’t quite expected Subaru to lunge at him physically, hurling aside the tray: a two-fingered jitsu strike aimed directly at Seishirou’s good eye. Seishirou jerked his head aside. He felt only the wind of Subaru’s strike as it skimmed past him and thought that he’d been missed entirely until sudden pain flowered along his cheekbone. He grabbed at Subaru’s wrist, and with his other hand he caught the onmyouji by the throat. Green eyes blazed at him with a fire not so very unlike madness; Seishirou met that rage with cool laughter in his own. He dug his fingers into Subaru’s windpipe, cutting back the flow of air.

“Subaru-kun, you’re getting a little over-excited,” he murmured. “I think it’s time for you to rest now.” Subaru struggled against his grip, and he tightened his fingers further.

“Sleep, Subaru-kun,” he whispered.

“Sleep.”

He reached out with his magic. Subaru fought him, all the way down, Subaru’s will wrestling to escape the bindings that Seishirou lay upon him, but the combination of anoxia and the pure force of Seishirou’s intention overcame him at last. He slumped, unconscious, into Seishirou’s arms.

Seishirou let the limp form fall to the bed. For a few moments he examined Subaru, making certain that the bonds of sleep were fast, before he tucked the onmyouji back underneath the covers. He straightened out the blankets, then smoothed Subaru’s rumpled dark hair once more.

The remnants of soup and tea were splattered all over the wall and the floor, and there was broken china as well...he would have to clean that up. On the way to the kitchen, though, he paused, going over to the full-length mirror instead. He turned his head to study his reflection, the red mark seared along the left side of his face, barely more than a few centimeters below his eye. Not even a direct touch, but merely the power in the blow brushing past him...a killing blow, possibly, if it had landed squarely and with enough force.

A blinding one, certainly.

Nasty, Subaru-kun. I honestly wasn’t sure you had it in you. And the fact that you managed to fight against my spell.... Perhaps I need to be a bit more careful around you. It would be a waste if you forced me to finish you too soon.

Seishirou touched power, extending himself to catch the slightest wisp of healing flame. He used it to smooth away the mark.

Still, I’d much rather be surprised than disappointed.

Only...you’re not going to surprise me quite like this again.

He grinned at his now-unblemished reflection and went to get the mop.

* * * * *

Subaru stirred a little, deep in disturbed slumber, a prisoner of those magical bonds...and Seishirou, standing by the head of the bed, gazed down at him and wondered.

What do you dream about these days, Subaru-kun? Still the sakura? Still the wind in its branches, the flowers falling, and the blood?

Still “that person” you met, underneath the cherry tree?

He was curious. Dreams were endlessly fascinating to him, who so seldom had them, and he knew from past experience what Subaru’s dreams were like: lovely and sad and strange.

Maybe you’re dreaming of your sister, dying, in magic and blood and white shikifuku.

Seishirou looked at his watch. His intention was to keep Subaru asleep for the rest of the afternoon, to restore the onmyouji’s strength before giving him one last trial. There were hours yet to go, and he was feeling bored and restless.

He really wanted to see what Subaru was dreaming.

If anything is ever going to kill me, he thought with amused resignation, it'll be my curiosity.

Still, if he were sufficiently careful and didn't allow himself to be drawn in too deeply....

Seishirou toyed with the possibility, then decided to go ahead, to be just a trifle reckless. It wasn't as though he'd never spied on Subaru's dreams before. He would just look on for a little while, stealthily, and Subaru would probably never even notice.

And if Subaru did, it would be an interesting test.

Having made his decision, Seishirou acted upon it at once. He reached inside for and embraced that center—

—he shut his eyes and dropped into the dark.

He found himself there instantly, in the customary blackness of dreams: that endless, infinitely reshapable landscape. He passed through it with fluid grace, letting his sense of Subaru guide him to a spot just at the edge of the sleeping consciousness. There he found a promising vantage point—a place that felt “higher” than any other place, like a rocky crag or a rooftop—and he settled in to wait and to watch.

Dreams, he had discovered, often came to the observer.

After a few seconds, he could feel something like a slow wind or a current of invisible water approaching the place where he was. It passed him by obliviously, but the fringes of it touched him—

—opened to him—

...dark...still dark, but very cold...dark glass, and a landscape rushing by behind Subaru's lit reflection, a rumpled landscape unrelieved by lights, traveling at high speed...coldness that had nothing to do with the heat from a radiator beneath the window, a cold that was inside, an empty soul....

And the rushing became air, and a child's voice called out, high and light: “I'm sorry...I couldn't hear very well because of the sound of the wind....”

And another voice, his own voice, spoke: “Who was that person...?”

And blood...blood falling onto the sakura's petals, blood spreading out onto white cloth...the deafening rhythm of a heartbeat as it accelerated....

Who....

A person, two people, vanishing into the sakura blossoms....

Two people vanishing....

A smile—

There was a sudden wrench as the flow of images and sensations stopped, and then there was stillness. For a moment, Seishirou felt a strange sense of presence, almost like a familiar person pausing at the far end of a room to turn and to look back. There was an odd quality to that presence, something that didn't quite belong...but it passed, and nothing seemed to be alerted to

him. He took a cautious breath, then glanced down into the darkness. A figure was lying there, sprawled on the black, nonexistent ground: a teenaged boy, the slight body wearing his sister's bright choice of clothing, the long, dark fringes of hair brushing his face, those green eyes closed in sleep.

That's me, Subaru's voice said quietly.

I was sixteen.

There was no light, but the figure was perfectly clear against the darkness.

Sixteen....

Sometimes Subaru appeared to feel it necessary to narrate his own dreams. Seishirou had noticed it before and found it charming, if bizarre.

Nine years have passed since that time, the soft, disembodied voice whispered, *and nothing has changed.*

Nothing ever changes.

After so long, on that day in Nakano—

...smoke and dust, the sudden shock of winds, the distant cries....

—still, I couldn't do anything.

Facing that person, I tried to fight him and failed.

I failed...again.

A shadow moved in the darkness—a person. Advancing slowly, it sank down next to the unconscious boy. Its form remained unclear; only pieces of it could be seen, a vague outline of the body, the knees as it settled to the ground, the hand that reached to caress the boy's face.

"Because of you."

A familiar voice.

That figure leaned forward and came into clarity, entering vision as if light were flowing over it, although there still was no light at all. It was Subaru as well. The young man's expression held an emptiness that might be mistaken for serenity.

He touched the teenager's face again.

"You...."

"You're the part of me that still can feel something. That's vulnerable to pain, to confusion...and to other things."

The long fingers stroked the sleeping boy's brow, and then withdrew.

"It may be that you're a good person, but...you're weak."

"Because of you, I lost the fight that day in Nakano Sun Plaza. Because of you, I can't fulfill my promise. I can't do what I must...."

"Because of you."

“Therefore....” The older Subaru picked up something that lay beside him, a slender object wrapped in white cloth. He undid the ties around it, and the cloth unfurled to reveal the ceremonial knife of the Sumeragi clan. Still without expression, he raised the sheathed blade up before his face.

“Therefore,” he said, as gently as a petal falling to the ground—

“I’ll kill you.”

Slipping the scabbard free of the blade, he raised his hand to strike....

“Hello! What are you doing?”

In the darkness, the soft, high-pitched voice rang like a chime. Subaru lifted his gaze to meet that of the white-robed child standing before him. He stared into those wide, guileless, entirely innocent eyes that understood very little of what lay in front of them.

That hadn’t yet learned the significance of murder.

Subaru’s hand began to tremble. He looked down at his sixteen-year-old self, and the mask of his expressionlessness broke. His gaze became stark and horrified.

The sixteen-year-old opened his eyes.

I couldn’t do it.

The scene froze, like a still shot from a movie. It cracked, as though made of glass. The fragments began to fall apart from each other, to separate and drift upward, weightlessly. They carried pieces of the three figures away.

To become the person capable of that....

I couldn’t do it.

The tableau faded until it vanished altogether into the darkness.

Even though there are things that are expected of me, even though there are things I said that I would do....

To do that....

To become that....

I can’t.

Snow began to fall like stars, appearing from a pinkish sky: the small flakes growing larger, dancing down. There was a soft sound, like wind moving in branches.

But if I do nothing at all, Subaru murmured, what then? What kind of person does that make me? After all that’s happened, just to do nothing....

The past would become meaningless.

And so would I.

If only there could be some other way....

The impression of the moving branches had become more distinct. They were almost visible, a slender, shifting lattice that was deeply familiar to Seishirou: the light and shadows and sounds of a grove of sakura.

So I was thinking about it: about whether there was anything I could do that would make a difference, any difference at all. Even if it only was a little thing....

Even if it only was for me.

An action without an evil consequence.

And then I had an idea.

If I could go back...if I could do what I was trying to do all those years ago, and exorcise the sakura....

Wouldn't that be worth something, at least?

To find what I've been looking for for so long....

Wouldn't that make everything all right?

But then, in that too...I didn't succeed.

Streams of darkness grew across the sky. They began swallowing up the snow. The darkness spread wider and wider until, after only a few brief minutes, there was nothing more to be seen.

So all I wanted then was to die.

And even that was denied me.

Through the darkness of this place of dreams, the wind was still blowing. Seishirou could feel it; it touched his face, fanned his shirt against his skin.

Now, I have no more answers.

There was just the darkness, the wind...and the voice.

"Seishirou-san."

Seishirou turned. Subaru was standing behind him, facing away but looking back over his shoulder: Subaru as he was now, pale and much too thin, with the flimsy cloth of the hospital gown billowing around him in the wind that also stirred the fine dark silk of his hair. His eyes as they looked at Seishirou were wholly green, pupilless, unseeing, as if they focused on infinity, and yet somehow aware. The two of them faced each other, their long, white shadows stretching out into the night.

"Seishirou-san," Subaru breathed. "In this dark place, you are my only landmark...my only guide. You are the only meaning that I know."

In the manner of dreams he was suddenly near—he was reaching out his hand to touch Seishirou.

"Who am I?" Subaru whispered.

That hand came to rest over Seishirou's heart.

"Who are you?"

Seishirou opened his eyes with a jolt.

He looked down at Subaru, lying there in the bed, and he checked closely to make sure the spell of sleep was secure. It was. Subaru slept: still now, and quiet, with his breathing the only motion. Seishirou watched him for several minutes, just to be certain.

Interesting little psychodrama, he thought then, coolly.

How your mind functions, I just can't imagine.

No harm done, at least. Subaru hadn't struck at him, hadn't tried to ensnare him in the dream. He probably hadn't even realized that he was speaking to the actual person, rather than to a construct of his own mind and memory. Subaru had had trouble before, distinguishing dream from reality.

So that was all right.

Seishirou filed the events of the dream away. He would consider them further at some other time. He realized then that he was propping himself up on the wall, and he pushed himself to his feet with a sigh.

A few minutes down, and the whole rest of the afternoon to go.

So what was he going to do now?

* * * * *

He was still restless.

He had been pacing in the bedroom. Now he stopped beside the window again and gazed out at the lowering gray clouds. It was really very dark for early afternoon.

Definitely more snow coming.

Perhaps it was the gloom that had him feeling somewhat out of sorts. He could appreciate most kinds of weather—sun, rain, snow, wind—and was equally comfortable with daylight and darkness, but the atmosphere at that moment wasn't quite any of these, as if it were hovering, waiting on the transition point of becoming whatever it was going to be.

He wished it would just get on with it.

Perhaps the feeling was adrenaline, too—the tension of having one's enemy in one's own bed, helpless though he might be. Perhaps anticipation, thinking of the final part in today's little play....

He was going to let Subaru sleep, and wake alone, and then, if Subaru were capable of it, allow him to fight his way out of the apartment. Seishirou had been working on the set-up. Some wards, a few with backlash built into them, some set spells as traps, definitely some form of illusion—perhaps himself in illusion, to finish it. Let Subaru think that he'd faced down his enemy and gotten away.

I'd thought as much, and now your dream has confirmed it: there have been too many failures. You have so much promise, you're so intriguing to play with, and it would be a shame if you broke now underneath their weight. A very small success will give you hope, and that false hope will sweeten the event when the final day comes.

Of course, that assumed Subaru did manage to run the gauntlet and get out alive. But if he didn't—well, then he wouldn't have fulfilled his purpose as a challenge. In that case, it would be just as well if he died today.

But you'll make it, Subaru-kun.

I'm quite certain that you will.

Seishirou frowned and rubbed his temple. He'd had a bit of a headache earlier and had taken care of it, but he could feel it returning. He focused on his breathing for a minute or so, readjusting the levels of his body's energy flow. That seemed to do the trick; the nascent pain melted back into nothing. He glanced out the window once more.

He would have to find a new apartment once this was over. The plants, too, would probably be lost in the scuffle...ah, well. Neither was a great concern. Actually, he thought, the situation offered a pleasant prospect for change. He had the luxury of plenty of money and very little future in which to spend it. Perhaps he might live someplace truly palatial for a while. It would be a novelty.

He looked at Subaru again, who was naturally still asleep, and then prowled into the living room. He ignored the pile of magazines that was waiting for him. Earlier he'd started on them but hadn't quite managed to finish, and just then he didn't feel like reading. He picked up the remote control instead.

Rather than choose a CD, he decided to skim the airwaves. His usual station, unfortunately, was in the middle of a DJ talk session that he tended to find misguided and shallow at best, and outright stupid at worst. Leaning on the back of the chair, he thumbed the seek button and listened to the whisper of static as the radio shifted upward through the stations. It stopped at the first clear signal. A song was just ending in an indeterminate trail of notes, and the DJ mixed the next song in practically on top of it: a couple of lines of repetitive chant, sung by a male voice. It didn't sound too promising. They were followed by a rising surge of instrumental music, shimmery and full of synthesizers and drums, and then the voice began singing in English.

Love....

Devotion....

Feeling....

Emotion....

Who allowed people to import this kind of thing? Impatiently, Seishirou pushed the seek button.

...-orever Dream....

Kore ijou arukenai....

Oh tell me why...oh tell me true....

Ugh, Seishirou thought. He hit the button again. On this third try he found an enka, and he made it through about three lines of that before giving up and switching off the stereo in disgust.

He tossed the remote control onto the side table. His lighter and a pack of cigarettes were lying there, where he had left them after his last smoke, and it reminded him that he sort of felt like having another. He picked up the pack...hmm. He could have sworn there'd been one more cigarette. Well, no matter; there should be a pack in his coat as well, he thought. He walked over to the rack—

Damn.

Fortunately there was a vending machine downstairs. He checked the spell on Subaru again, grabbed a handful of change, and headed out.

There had definitely been cigarettes in his coat, he thought as the elevator doors closed on him. He distinctly remembered buying a new pack this morning on the way to the hospital. He must have dropped them or left them behind somewhere. It was an unusual carelessness on his part.

Distraction, he murmured to himself, recognizing its effects then. *Very dangerous....*

Subaru-kun...it's you, isn't it?

He had allowed himself to become a little too preoccupied with his “visitor,” he was realizing: too focused on his game and on the possibilities of the future. If he weren't more careful, it could become a problem. He needed to tie the matter up soon, so he could return his mind to what he was about in the present.

There was calculated risk, and then there was stupidity.

The doors opened, and Mrs. Nakamura from the fifth floor got into the elevator. The two of them bowed and exchanged polite greetings. “Sakurazuka-san, you're not going out, I hope,” she said, looking somewhat askance at his shirtsleeves. He smiled down reassuringly.

“Oh, no,” he replied, “just to the lobby for cigarettes.”

Mrs. Nakamura, in her large and very fluffy second-hand fur coat, was most certainly going out. The elderly mother-in-law of a friend had just died, she informed Seishirou, and she had offered to help with the “arrangements.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes...it's a terrible thing, Sakurazuka-san! Youko went upstairs to visit her one day, and there she was in the middle of the floor, all covered in blood! It was as if her heart had just exploded!” The woman shook her head. “I'd never heard of such a thing.”

So that was where the backlash for that particular spell had hit. Seishirou suppressed a sigh. It was so random, not having precise targets for his magical returns. He would have to adjust his protections to try to bounce the next one further away. Too many deaths this close to him would be suspicious.

“She always did have high blood pressure, though....”

It was a very slow elevator.

“Oh, and Sakurazuka-san? Ko-chan's kitty has gotten out of the apartment again—if you see it, would you please try to catch it for her?”

If your child was the least bit careful with the creature, or—perish the thought—trained to close doors behind herself, you wouldn't be putting the building on alert for that cat every other week.

"I'll keep an eye out for it," Seishirou said, grinning down at Mrs. Nakamura. She looked up into his face and almost managed to restrain a little squeak. Perhaps he hadn't chosen the best way of putting that—and he really should have worn his glasses, even on this little trip. He kept an old pair around for when sunglasses weren't appropriate; they were enough of a focus to distract people somewhat from his eyes. His stare had been a bit disconcerting even when he'd had a matched set.

He gave her his politest and most innocuous smile, and as they stepped out of the elevator on the ground floor he touched her mind just enough to fuzz the memory a little. No, he wasn't anything out of the ordinary...not at all. He got his cigarettes from the vending machine and decided not to risk the elevator again. It made him feel claustrophobic anyway. Definitely, his next apartment building would be something luxurious and decadent, if he could find one of those that wasn't a Shinjuku high rise. He pulled open the door to the stairwell and took the stairs at a lope.

As he reached his own floor, he caught a flash of white at the edge of his peripheral vision. He looked up and saw something small and four-legged vanish around the corner of the next landing.

Aha.

He went up a couple of steps further. "Here, kitty, kitty," he called. What was its name? He could never remember. "Puss, psss, psss, psss...come here." The creature had stopped and was staring through the railing at him with its pale green eyes. It was white with orange and black markings: a lucky, three-colored cat. He continued calling to it softly, inching up the stairs with his fingers held out invitingly, and after a moment it padded back down to the landing, came around the corner, and stretched out its neck to sniff at his hand. He scooped it up. The cat struggled briefly, but he held it by the scruff and crooned to it until it relaxed. He scratched under its chin, and it began to purr.

Animals were so easy to deal with. All it required was that certain combination of gentleness and firmness.

Seishirou carried the cat back to the apartment, cradled in his arms. He went first to check on Subaru. He was being exceedingly cautious—even if Subaru were able to unravel the spell while still asleep, which was not an easy trick, it would have taken more time than this—but he didn't feel at all inclined to take chances. And especially not now, when he'd identified Subaru as the source of his distraction and possibly of that strange restlessness he'd been feeling as well.

Very soon he'd start to work on getting Subaru out of the apartment. First, though, he wanted that cigarette. He took the cat into the kitchenette with him and set it down on the counter. Leaving it to its own devices for a moment, he put the kettle on for tea. He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply and with pleasure. Much better. The first cigarette after a healing always burned

going down; he hadn't really been able to enjoy that one. He felt a little of his jumpiness fade away.

The cat had its front paws up on the window sill, investigating the ivy. "That's not for you," Seishirou told it, and he picked it up again. It acquiesced happily. He stroked the short, soft fur, thinking, running things over in his mind...he scratched between the cat's ears and in the little hollow between its shoulder blades, listening to its warm, vibrating purr...he slipped his fingers underneath its chin to scratch there, and as it raised its head, its eyes shut in ecstasy, he gently closed his hand around its neck and crushed the fragile windpipe.

The water was boiling. He put the struggling cat down on the counter and went to prepare the tea. Slowly he sipped tea and smoked his cigarette as he watched the cat thrash and choke, trying to draw breath through its collapsed trachea, until at last, with a final brief spasm, it died.

He mashed the cigarette out in the ash tray. Stepping over to the cat, he ran his hand along its body, the fur just as soft in death as it had been in life.

Gratuitous, he thought. He hadn't really needed to do that.

But then, everything died someday. That was just the way things were.

And a little girl was going to discover, when her kitty didn't come home, that the world was an uncertain place, where nothing that one "cared" about could ever be secure. It was a useful lesson to remember. Of course, she wouldn't have much of a lifetime in which to benefit from it, what with the world coming to an end and all. Well, it didn't really matter, one way or another.

In the end, nothing really mattered anyway.

He looked down at the cat's twisted face, the slight froth of blood on lips drawn back from sharply pointed teeth, the eyes rolled up so that their green was half-hidden and the white sclera was visible.

For an instant, looking at those pale eyes, he saw vividly Subaru lying in death, the white shikifuku splattered with red and the dark green eyes half-closed.

He took a sharp breath—

He looked down at the cat again.

It was just a cat.

Its green eyes were nothing like the color of Subaru's.

A hallucination? he wondered. A foreseeing? He wasn't usually inclined toward either, but the vision had been so clear, so...real. Gingerly he reached out and touched the fur again.

Soft, and still, and very dead.

It was just a cat, after all.

Just another broken thing.

For some reason, looking at the corpse began to annoy him. Taking a garbage bag from under the sink, he stuffed the tiny body into it. He wiped down the countertop with a dishcloth, then tossed that into the bag as well. Walking out of the apartment and down the hall to the garbage

chute, Seishirou shoved the bag through the door with perhaps a little more vehemence than was strictly necessary. He let the door thunk shut.

He stared at it for a long moment.

Anger, he realized.

He was feeling anger for the second time today—inexplicable anger and restless energy and the distinct sense that something was wrong. And his headache had come back again. That was out of the ordinary too.

Subaru.

He turned and strode back to his apartment, grabbed hold of the door knob—

It refused to turn.

His fingers brushed the empty fabric of his pocket—

He'd left his keys inside the apartment.

He'd just managed to lock himself out.

Seishirou took a couple of deep, centering breaths. He shifted his mental focus, blocked out the disturbing feelings, and made the headache's discomfort vanish from his conscious mind. He should have done that much earlier. Very calmly, he sent a minor bolt of magic through the locking mechanism.

The door swung open, and he stepped inside.

Almost immediately a flood of dizziness hit him. He gritted his teeth and made it to the couch on nothing more than the determination not to fall on his face. Dropping onto it, he leaned back against the cushions and pushed his hands wearily through his hair. His body felt weirdly drained of energy, but his mind was already hunting fiercely despite its disarray—was going back over the day's events, looking for clues that would let him track the mental and physical disruption to its source, because none of this was not normal, not for him. Somewhere, something had happened. He touched the magical traces of his workings and followed them. Had something gone wrong? Some outside influence that he hadn't taken into account...a bad aspect or...or an alignment of forces...or maybe...

...a spell?

If only he wasn't so...

...tired.

He realized that he'd started to slide sideways. He slid until he was lying down, his cheek coming to rest on one of the pillows of the couch. The apartment was still spinning, but he didn't notice it as much from here, and that felt pretty good.

And he was just going to close his eyes for one moment.

Just going to go to sleep.

Wait a minute, he thought, *I absolutely can't sleep now.*

Subaru's still here....

He pried his eyes open with difficulty, tried to raise his head but didn't get far—and as he fell back again, his eyes drifting closed, a tremendous wave swept in on him. It was an undertow of power that dragged him toward unconsciousness, even as he identified it for what it was—

The healing spell...coming back....

The wave swept out once more and took Seishirou with it.

Chapter 4

The space of his own mind surrounded him: wide, high, and luminous with a muted gold light. He was looking up into the “sky.” A crack had opened in it, and the crack was spreading jaggedly, relentlessly. Inside, there was nothing in particular. There was no wind, but he could feel the force of that broken sky pulling at him. It made him ache, bone-deep, soul-deep, in a way he didn’t really understand.

He braced himself and stared at it defiantly. He set the force of his will against it, but it would not obey. The crack continued to widen inexorably, and it threatened to swallow everything, to take into itself all those pieces that he was made of. He held onto them fiercely as he raised his hands to fight—

The magic did not come.

Looking up, he felt that damaged sky tearing at him, trying to rip things away, and he didn’t know what he could hold onto in this place, if his own abilities weren’t enough, didn’t know how to defend himself against the danger.

He looked, and he was...afraid.

Afraid.

He clung to his sense of himself, and he glared into that sky.

He was Sakurazukamori.

He must not lose himself to this.

And then, all at once, there was a cool wind that reached him, and the scent of water, and a soft sound like the crying of birds. He felt a strange and sudden peace. The crack in the sky above him began to melt away.

Seishirou fell back into a dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

He woke slowly, drifting out of unconsciousness. It seemed as if he must have been dreaming, but the details were all vague. Still feeling a little muzzy-headed, he cracked his eyes open, letting the room swim into focus around him. The steady glow of the overhead light was reassuring after...wait.

Light?

He snapped alert immediately, lifted his head and started to get up, because it had been mid-afternoon when he’d fallen asleep, he remembered that clearly, and he definitely hadn’t been the one to turn on the light. He looked around and—

—*Subaru*—

—was curled up in the chair across from him.

Subaru's legs were drawn up beneath him, his arms were wrapped around his chest, and his eyes were closed. He appeared to be asleep.

Seishirou allowed himself to exhale. Swinging his legs off the couch, he sat up slowly and very carefully, wondering how much time had passed, what had happened while he was unconscious. Something fluttered down from the back of the couch and landed beside him.

Paper.

He had caught a glimpse of thin, graceful calligraphy.

Snatching up the talisman, he turned it over and stared at it. It was...it was....

A ward?

"You were dreaming," Subaru said.

Seishirou looked at his adversary. Subaru was awake after all, regarding him with a taut stillness that seemed to speak of hard-won inner control. At least the inclination to rip Seishirou's face off appeared to have left him. Seishirou glanced down once more at the piece of paper in his hand. It had been torn from the note pad by the phone, he noticed, the incantation written out in ball-point pen. He frowned at it very slightly before he caught himself and smoothed his expression into something more neutral. Crumpling the paper into a tiny ball, he shot it at the wastebasket across the room. It bounced off the wall and went in.

Three points, he thought, almost absently.

He stretched at length, then put his hand casually to his shirt pocket and found the new pack of cigarettes still there. Tapping one out, he reached for his lighter.

He wasn't about to let Subaru know how badly disconcerted he was.

Subaru seemed calm enough himself, but his eyes locked onto the cigarettes in Seishirou's hand with the intensity of an addict. Seishirou scrutinized him for a moment, then slid the pack and lighter across the coffee table. Subaru set his jaw. He refused to accept the offer, instead lowering his gaze and tracing one finger down the leather upholstery of the chair, as if it presented him with some deep meaning.

Seishirou leaned back, one arm along the top of the couch, and exhaled smoke in a leisurely way. He watched Subaru in silence, unsmiling. Although his mind wanted to race, to try to put together the events of the last however many hours, he didn't permit his attention to wander from the person before him—didn't choose to speak, either, refusing to get caught up in the temptingly easy dance of words, the verbal sparring that could so readily be a distraction. Let the burden of conversation rest on Subaru for a while.

As a result, there was a long silence. Seishirou's cigarette had almost burned down when Subaru finally spoke. "Seishirou-san," he said, then hesitated. When he went on again his voice was very small. "Where is my sister?"

The question seemed tangential. Seishirou had noted the slight pause, and he wondered whether that was what Subaru had truly meant to say. A feint, perhaps? No...that was his own

inclination speaking. Subaru was more direct, more honest than that. And of course he would find this an urgent matter, yet also one that was difficult to express.

“What makes you think *I* know where she is?” Seishirou asked.

“I’ve looked for her a long time,” Subaru replied. “Everywhere I go, I ask the ghosts and spirits that I meet if they’ve seen her. None of them ever has. So I tried, a couple of years ago, to call to her myself. I tried to summon her back from the other world, just to see her, just to speak with her one more time. I know that it was wrong, and that the dead should be left in peace, but still—” He shivered and flinched, abandoning that train of thought. “I couldn’t find her,” he murmured instead. “I called for days, but there was nothing. If she could have answered me, I know she would have. I know it, but—” That flinch again. Subaru was rubbing the back of one hand, and Seishirou wondered if he was conscious of the gesture. “I found the sakura again. I studied it, and I know that the souls of all the people that you’ve...that have died there are bound to the tree.

“That was the other thing I was trying to do that night. I was looking for Hokuto among the souls in the sakura. But she wasn’t there, either.

“So I wondered if you had done something else. If you had done something different...with her.” Lifting his head, he gazed at Seishirou, his eyes filled with a kind of hopeless prayer.

Seishirou frowned again.

“Why would I do something like that?”

The beseeching look vanished instantly as Subaru’s face went cold, and he sat up straight, stiff with the dignity of those who feel themselves made fools of. “Yes,” he said sharply, “*why would you.*” Uncurling from the chair, he stood up and demanded, “Where are my clothes?”

Seishirou did smile then, a very little. “The plastic hospital bag in the closet.” Poor Subaru, too polite even to rifle through his unconscious enemy’s belongings. Turning his back on Seishirou, Subaru stalked out of the room, and Seishirou let him get away with it, that potentially fatal error. He listened to the near-silent sounds of retreating bare footsteps, the noise of the closet door opening in the other room....

His eyes flicked to the kitchenette window, now that he had the chance. It was dark outside. Seishirou looked at his watch, and he almost couldn’t believe it.

He had been asleep for hours.

How long had Subaru been roaming around the apartment?

Lucky, he thought. *Lucky for me that you seem to have reverted to being a pacifist.*

Far luckier than I deserve for being such a fool.

And as he smiled into the empty living room, he ruthlessly suppressed the desire that surged up in him: to walk through that doorway and plunge his hand into Subaru’s heart right now, and in one eruption of magic and blood stop this whole ridiculous, *stupid* affair, which had already taken up so much—too much—of his time and energy. The source of that imperative was nothing more than embarrassment at how near he’d come to disaster, he was certain of it, and such a feeling had no right to motivate him.

Such a feeling did not serve him.

He crushed it in his mind.

He had no intention of being moved by anything other than his will and the necessities of being the creature that he was. And he would play the game out to its conclusion. He had decided the outcome long ago, and he saw no reason to change his mind.

I started this, and I'll see it to the end. I'll finish you when and how I choose. I won't be forced in anything, and especially not in this, Sumeragi Subaru.

I won't be made a fool of again.

Indeed, you should have killed me today, when you had the chance. Well, too bad for you.

I've learned from my mistakes now.

Will you be able to do the same?

He realized then that he was still more than a bit disturbed: probably the last vestiges of the healing spell's return. That wouldn't do at all. As he attended to the low, awkward sounds of Subaru moving about in the other room, taking clothes out of the plastic bag, he carefully put his mind into order, sorting through the bright pieces of its structure, letting them settle comfortably back into their usual configurations. After a while, it felt as if the effects of the backlash were fading. That had been very odd...he couldn't understand why a wholly positive spell, one that he'd performed for himself numerous times, would come back in that way—and if it had, why his protections hadn't stopped it. Maybe it was because he had called more power than usual and had sustained it for longer...or maybe it was because he'd used the spell to heal another person.

Well, he wouldn't do that again, anyway.

Seishirou stretched once more and ran a hand through his hair. He felt quite clear now in both mind and body. There was still one very small, lingering disquiet, though.

He didn't know what had happened to Hokuto.

It was true, as Subaru had said, that the souls of the Sakurazukamori's victims were bound to the ancient tree. What Subaru perhaps didn't realize was that those souls lost their identity in the binding; even if Hokuto had been among them, Subaru would not have been able to find the person he had known and loved.

But when Seishirou had reached out to bind that particular victim's soul, he had found...nothing. A hint of essence that had vanished even as he tried to grasp it, and that was all.

Hokuto had gone somewhere, in the moment of her death, and Seishirou had no idea where she might be.

He had wondered at the time if Subaru had had something to do with it, or if possibly it had been their grandmother's work. If Subaru knew nothing about it, though, then it seemed that neither was the case. Perhaps something else had already claimed her soul, or perhaps her uniquely carefree nature combined with that trace of magical ability had given her the ability to escape his spell.

In any case, a single mislaid soul shouldn't cause any problems. She hadn't been a full-fledged onmyouji herself, after all, and even if she happened to turn up again, he didn't imagine that she could do anything to interfere with him. But he didn't like leaving the matter even the least bit uncertain, and particularly not now, when he felt a new and urgent need to be alert in all things regarding Subaru. He would have to put some effort into tying up that loose end as well.

What a bothersome complication....

Seishirou scowled. The combination of cigarettes and the afternoon sleep had left a vile taste in his mouth. He swung off the couch and strode into the bedroom, ignoring Subaru's outraged yip at being caught half-dressed.

Too thin...seen better.

He didn't speak or offer Subaru more than that briefest glance as he passed through. Best if Subaru left quickly, Seishirou decided—best to give him the opportunity to do so, if he chose to take it.

Seishirou walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

* * * * *

He'd brushed his teeth.

He'd brushed his hair.

He'd gone out into the bedroom and closed the closet door and made the bed and stood gazing at his reflection in the window for more than a suitable amount of time and *still* Subaru was hanging about in the other room.

Subaru-kun, do I have to pick you up and put you out the door?

It was almost getting to that point, Seishirou thought. Shading his eye against the light in the bedroom, he regarded the cityscape outside. Dark, as far as Tokyo ever got dark, and enormous flakes of snow were falling steadily: several inches had come down already, and it showed no signs of stopping.

He could put Subaru to sleep again and leave him in another snowdrift. The idea had distinct possibilities.

Well, no matter what he decided to do in the end, for the moment he had better go out there. Probably Subaru simply felt that there was something else that needed to be said, and once that was taken care of, it was quite likely that he might just leave. He'd certainly had his chance to kill Seishirou, if that was what he wished to accomplish.

And if Subaru had changed his mind and did want to fight him now, Seishirou was entirely ready.

Of course....

He walked into the other room, moving softly despite his house shoes, so softly that Subaru didn't appear to hear him. The younger man was meandering back and forth in short, aimless

steps, a movement not even resolute enough to be called pacing: a restless, directionless energy that could find no other outlet. He stopped by the stereo at last, his back to Seishirou, and drew a finger slowly along its sleek black edge.

As Seishirou came around the side of the chair, Subaru finally seemed to sense him and glanced back over one shoulder: still a suggestion of that broken and betrayed look, but with the pain now sealed behind a certain fatalism. He watched in silence as Seishirou sat easily in the chair, picked up the remote, and began toying with it. Then he turned away, staring down once more at the top of the stereo.

It definitely didn't look as though he was thinking of fighting.

Pacifist, Seishirou thought again. *Well, even if your hatred for me no longer rules you, it doesn't matter.*

There's always your "duty" to motivate you, the fact of your being one of the Seven Seals. There's your consideration for the well-being of other people. I can't believe it's true, as you've said, that you care nothing for the future of the earth.

But even if you don't care for that...

You'll meet me on the final day, one way or another...and you know it.

It's waiting for us both, Subaru-kun.

Seishirou watched Subaru teeter on the verge of saying something and then back away from it. He elected to be patient. Leaning back, he crossed his legs and merely observed the slender figure before him, letting the long moments pass until Subaru chose to speak.

"Seishirou-san," Subaru murmured eventually, "there's one more thing I want to know."

It was a question again, as Seishirou had rather suspected: Subaru was still looking for answers. Seishirou wondered what he'd found to ask about now. One would think that the important matters had already been made abundantly clear to him.

"What if you had lost?" Subaru asked.

"Eh?" Seishirou blinked.

"What if you had lost your bet with me? What then?"

Seishirou thought it over, amused. "I probably would have let you go," he said at length, "I suppose." He might have, in fact, if it had come to that—but it had not, and he had known that it would not, had known that he was not like other people and that the exercise had been largely futile, merely an excuse to play with his prey in a new and interesting way. The play itself was what mattered, and that had been exceptional—even at times like now, he admitted, when Subaru was being vexingly difficult to move, it offered a most unusual challenge. The game had been everything that he had ever anticipated it might be. That he had proven incapable of love after all was not really significant. "I probably would have let you live."

"No," Subaru said, with unexpected vehemence, "that isn't what I'm asking. What would *you* have done then? What would you have done, if you had found out that you could feel something—could you have gone on in the same way, and still been...this?"

Seishirou frowned. “What ifs” weren’t something that interested him, and he rarely concerned himself with them. He had never even considered such a question. He was as he was; there were no other possibilities.

“What does it matter?” he asked. “It doesn’t change anything. I *won*, Subaru-kun.”

“But what if—” Subaru mastered his evident frustration as he turned to face Seishirou. “Why would you even bother?” he insisted. “Why take the chance that I might survive and become someone who could fight you? Why risk the possibility, however small, that the bet might change you, might make you into something that you don’t even understand—why would someone like you make a bet like that!”

His breath caught, stilling the rush of words.

“Are you lonely?” he asked.

Seishirou smiled at the mortal seriousness in Subaru’s face. “You sound like a phone-sex girl,” he replied blandly. “Are you considering a new occupation?”

Subaru’s mouth tightened. He glared at Seishirou briefly before turning away. Drawing himself up, he gathered the shreds of his pride around himself and coldly informed Seishirou, “I’m leaving.”

Seishirou didn’t bother to reply to the obvious. Neither did he trouble himself to follow Subaru with his eyes as the onmyouji left, relying instead on hearing and that “other” awareness of Subaru’s presence to track him as he walked to the genkan and jammed his feet into his sneakers. Seishirou twirled the remote control lightly between his fingers, then tapped the end of it against his cheek as he listened to Subaru take his coat down off the rack and put it on, as he heard the door open. The sounds fell silent for a moment. Then there was a step, and a second one, and the door closed behind Subaru. His presence began receding down the hall.

It was quiet.

Seishirou sat in his chair for another minute or so, listening to that stillness. Finally, he bestirred himself and smiled. It was done with at last: Subaru was out of the way, and even if it hadn’t all gone quite as intended, well, Subaru was alive, and he had plenty of things to think about in the interval before the final day.

He had reasons enough to live. Reasons enough to fight. That much was certain....

Seishirou started out of what threatened to become a reverie. He’d better pack, just in case Subaru decided to be uncivilized and not wait for the appointed time. And while he was doing that.... He lifted up the remote control. Aiming it at the stereo, he moved his finger over the power button, to bring the sound of voices into that silent room.

He stopped.

He stared at the stereo and the featureless wall behind it, unseeing.

The sound of....

The remote slipped out of his fingers. He let it fall to the rug. Standing up swiftly, he strode toward the door. He kicked off his slippers and stepped into a pair of shoes.

In the hallway, he glanced at the elevator. It had left the floor already, of course. Seishirou pulled open the door to the stairs and started down. Taking the first couple of flights at a walk, he calculated the speed of the elevator, the amount of time it had been traveling, and he picked up his pace, began to run then, vaulting the rail at each landing, his footsteps echoing faintly up the stairwell.

He reached the bottom. Stopping a moment, his hand on the fire door, he tried to sense Subaru. Subaru was...not very close.

All right.

He opened the door and looked out across the lobby. Through the glass doors at the other end of that long, narrow hall, he could see the empty, snow-covered street and sidewalk, more snow coming down hard and fast, and Subaru, standing irresolutely just outside the doors, looking first one way and then the other.

Subaru raised his hand suddenly and took a step forward. By some miracle, a taxi passed in front of the doors, the only traffic on the entire street. As it left Seishirou's angle of view it was starting to pull cautiously toward the curb. Wrapping his coat around himself, Subaru hurried in that direction and disappeared from sight as well. Seishirou stepped out of the stairwell and walked up to the front of the lobby. Looking out through the glass, he saw where the taxi had come to a slightly skidding stop. Subaru was talking to the driver through the man's open window.

Subaru nodded then and put his hand on the rear door's handle.

Seishirou opened the door of the building and stepped outside. Neither the streets nor the sidewalks had been cleaned yet; his feet sank into a blanket of whiteness that had only been disturbed by Subaru before him. He took another step, coming out from the lee of the building into the full dizzying falling of the snow.

Subaru turned his head. He looked back from where he was standing with the cab door open, ready to climb in. Seishirou could feel the snow settling onto himself as he returned that gaze, coming to rest on his hair and shoulders, cold wetness melting through the cloth of his shirt.

The two of them stared at each other.

Then Subaru murmured something to the driver. He closed the door and stepped away from the cab. The taxi pulled slowly from the curb, fishtailing a little before gaining purchase. Its red tail lights gleamed briefly through the darkness until distance and the snowfall hid them from view.

Subaru took a step toward Seishirou. He stopped then, hands clenched, as if he had run into an impassable wall. His face was a set mask: a different kind of barrier, giving nothing more away. Seishirou understood. He himself had made it this far, but he couldn't take that next step either. He simply was not capable of it. Though all that lay between them physically was that expanse of whiteness, there were other obstacles—wide gulfs of time, of words and deeds and two irrefutably different natures—and neither one could cross what separated them.

They stood facing each other in the snow.

"I know," Seishirou said then, slowly, softly, his breath a thin mist of frost among the tumbling flakes, "I know where Hokuto-chan is." Subaru went tense and wary and hopeful, all at once: a change in his stance, mostly, but also the least flicker in his face, like fire, like something warm and alive.

"She's...here." It was an effort to say the words. Seishirou struggled with them, who so seldom found himself at a loss, trying to get something across, even though he himself wasn't sure what. "Right *here*. Between—" He made a tiny, directionless gesture, a lift of his hand, palm upward, and wondered vaguely at the helplessness of it. "Subaru-kun, don't *you* feel it?"

And Subaru's eyes widened. He reacted as if struck by the force of a spell: gasped and hunched forward as his knees half buckled beneath him, his arms wrapping about himself, his hands clutching at his shoulders. He shuddered, and Seishirou watched the focus of his gaze shift, his awareness turning inward, looking into himself—and then the flash of recognition, of realization.

Subaru shut his eyes. Light condensed out of the air before him, a silver-white evocation that gradually assumed a shape: an indistinct human form lapped in shimmering layers of brightness, a figure that hung suspended, gleaming, above the snow. Its back was to Seishirou—he couldn't see its face.

Subaru raised his head, opening his eyes once more. Straightening, he held out one hand toward the figure, that glimmering light playing over his anguished, yearning expression. The figure reached out in turn and touched fingertips to his. Seishirou had seen pain and death and what people called love; he had seen the looks that accompanied each of those states, and what lived and moved in Subaru's eyes then was all of those things and far more: feelings so vivid, so alien to anything Seishirou knew that he had no references for them at all and could only watch them in silence.

"I'm sorry," Subaru breathed, his voice cracking on the words. "Hokuto, I'm sorry. Please—*Forgive me.*"

Something intangible moved between them, brother and sister, living and dead—passed like a thought traveling between two halves of one mind. Then—

"Go," Subaru whispered. "*Go.*"

The ghost escaped into the air like a cry—like the cry that broke from Subaru as it vanished, as the light began to fade, a single, fractured cry of utter loss—

But the ghost's flight was a cry of freedom.

The last of the light disappeared from the sidewalk. The snow that it had briefly illuminated into sparkling brilliance continued to fall.

Subaru's hands had dropped. He looked down at them, then up at Seishirou, across the distance that separated them, and he was trembling, his eyes strangely bright, as if they still held traces of that glow...no, it was tears, finally, tears from a soul that perhaps hadn't wept in nine years. Not since that day.... Subaru swayed, then stumbled forward, an unexpected, staggering

rush that made Seishirou take a half-step backward in surprise. He barely had time to register the lack of threat and to suppress his instinctive reactions before Subaru's arms were flung around his chest, Subaru's face was buried in his shoulder, and Subaru was crying, tremendous sobs wracking his entire body, those tears falling free at last.

Seishirou caught his balance on the snow-covered sidewalk, and then he stood very still. He let Subaru spend that grief upon him in the midst of the falling snow, in the muffled silence of the storm-bound city. It was easy enough, after all.... Ignoring the snow melting on his hair and clothes and into his shoes, he concentrated on one thing only: the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan, who was holding onto the precarious support Seishirou offered as though it were the only anchor in his world.

How fiercely people clung to things, Seishirou mused, even when doing so hurt them terribly. How difficult they found it to let go. Subaru had loved Hokuto—his twin, his second self—and in the moment of feeling her death he had drawn her to himself, all the way across the city. He had drawn her soul inside his own heart and had bound her there for nine long years.

And he had never even realized that he had done it.

It was Hokuto-chan who touched me in your dream, wasn't it....

As the head of the Sumeragi clan, whose duty is to bind Japan's onmyouji against the "misuse" of their powers—Subaru-kun, you should have known better.

All those years, you were a prisoner of what you had done just as much as she was. Denying yourself every happiness, every hope, in a quest for revenge that she never would have asked for...trapping her inside those walls you put around your heart, walls of loneliness and pain....

And now that you've let her go at last, here you are. With your sister and your grandmother both dead and gone, you are turning back to me. Is it only because I'm here for you, because I'm convenient? Or is it because I'm truly all that you have left?

Subaru-kun, I think perhaps you still feel love for the person you once thought I was. I think that's why you spared my life.

You should know better in that regard, also.

He laid a hand gently on Subaru's back.

But then...is it so different with me?

I too should have known better.

You were right.

You were right, and I didn't even realize it until you left me to the silence and your words came back to me—

"Are you lonely?"

Of course....

Of course.

Seishirou stared at the lacy stars settling to rest on Subaru's coat: flakes of snow forming patterns, touching each other, spreading into networks of white. How could one be other than

lonely, when in the whole world there was only oneself—and “other people,” who were nothing more than shadows?

Nothing more than things.

Ordinary people, who were no more than half present in their own existence, let alone in his, consumed by fleeting, futile wishes and continual distractions; whose bravery was at best the stupid, blind bravery of the ignorant and whose attention was a flimsy, uncomprehending thing; who knew nothing, understood nothing at all outside their small lives, felt nothing but fear in the face what he stood for...he could not really perceive them, any of them, as real. He could acknowledge whatever courage they showed when struck by great or little difficulties; he could ignore them, when it suited him, as being utterly insignificant; he could watch the endlessly repeated joys and tragedies and everyday, mundane occurrences of their lives, but he could not fit himself into their world, or them into his. *Could not*—not without destroying himself, and in the end he knew he wanted to continue more than he wanted that other thing.

But still that emptiness, that sense of lack, remained.

And then there was you, Subaru-kun: a child...and a practitioner. Mine completely, to do with as I wished. And so I made that choice.

When I made that bet with you, I was so young myself. I don't think I was really conscious of what drove me. There was only that sense of hunger, of wanting something that I couldn't identify.

You were like me, and yet entirely unlike. I thought that I might find that thing in you.

I didn't know what seeking it would mean.

Since that day you have always been with me. When nothing else could move me, I bent my life around you. Waiting for you to grow up, playing out the one promised year, and then, when the chance arose to hold onto you—for you to continue to exist until the moment when my purpose was fulfilled, and my own life began to approach its end—jumping at it despite every instinct, despite everything I know, foolishly....

Without intending it, I let myself grow to be affected by you.

I'm no longer able to imagine a world where you don't exist.

Almost seventeen years—almost half my life—you have been that constant presence.

My adversary.

My plaything.

My beautiful and pure reflection.

You are something that reacts to me, that acknowledges what I am...that I can talk to, even if it's only inside my own head, like this....

And you have become necessary to me, to who I am.

In the very act of making the bet, I lost.

Snowflakes spun down all around them. As he tilted his head back, looking up into the sky, they touched his face: gentle, feathery touches.

But still, Subaru-kun, after all of that....

I don't love you.

I think perhaps I really am not capable of it.

I don't feel anything for you. No regret, no remorse for all the pain I've caused...nothing that would stop me from hurting you again. I only feel that emptiness inside me, and the fact that you fill it, a little.

I don't really care for you. I don't feel love....

I don't even know how.

Well...it doesn't matter, does it?

It doesn't really matter after all.

All that matters is that you continue to exist until it's time for you to die. That you give me something to struggle with, something to speak to...

...so I know that I am not so absolutely alone.

The snowflakes were falling into Seishirou's face as he gazed up, catching on his eyelashes and threatening to blind him. He raised his hand to brush them all away. They left a tiny dampness on his skin.

He looked down at Subaru then, crumpled up against him, whose sobs were quieting at last, and whose trembling seemed nearly to have ceased. Seishirou smiled with unmerciful tenderness. He wiped the snow from Subaru's shoulders and from his dark hair, and as Subaru straightened, his eyes still dulled and glazed with pain, Seishirou slipped one arm about him and turned him around.

Seishirou began walking toward the door of the apartment building, and Subaru went with him silently, without the least hesitation.

Chapter 5

Seishirou hung Subaru's coat on the rack and, shaking the last of the snow from his hair, stepped out of his shoes and up onto the floor. As Subaru bent to attend to his own shoes, Seishirou left him there, moving off somewhat aimlessly in the direction of the kitchenette counter. He felt secure enough at the moment to step away like that—he didn't think Subaru could muster the resolve to do anything without more time to recover. Besides, he needed to consider what he himself should do next. It was definitely a peculiar situation, and one that he didn't entirely grasp. He wasn't even sure why he'd brought Subaru back upstairs with him, let alone why Subaru had come.

He paused and glanced back. Subaru was sitting on the edge of the genkan to unlace his sneakers, his face wearing the closed look of utter exhaustion—exhaustion of the heart, not the body, although probably he was still weak physically as well. There had been too much shuttling back and forth between tension and relief, and Subaru always seemed to feel everything so intensely. Whatever closure he had achieved with his sister's ghost, the process could not have been easy.

What exactly it had been that had passed between them...Seishirou could only wonder about it, and that wondering reminded him of the distance he could not traverse, that space between himself and other people. He looked across the room at Subaru, and although with the damage to his eye he couldn't precisely gauge the width of the floor that separated them, he suddenly was aware of every inch of it, and what kept him apart was infinitely more vast.

Then his eye trailed up along the line of Subaru's body as the other finished with his laces and began to stand, and for a moment the rose fire of the healing magic came back to him: the fire, and the heat....

Perhaps there was a certain distance that he *could* cross, after all.

He walked back toward Subaru. As he approached, Subaru turned to look up at him, balancing awkwardly with one foot half-out of its shoe, his expression still translucent with shock. Seishirou stopped at the raised edge of the floor. With the extra height the step gave him, it was like looking down at the teenaged Subaru again, only the proportions of the tall, slender body were different, and the close-cropped hair, and the face.... He stared into the face that was raised to his for a long moment. Then he leaned forward, cupping a hand under Subaru's chin, and kissed Subaru gently on the lips.

He could feel Subaru become still, the mouth against his own going taut and surprised at the contact, but Subaru didn't struggle or try to break away. He held Subaru there another moment before releasing him. Then Seishirou straightened, gazing down into those eyes that were wide with startlement.

“I don’t love you,” Seishirou said. “But I want you.” It was truth, as much truth as he had ever given Subaru. Seishirou followed the ripples that those words caused in the deep green water of Subaru’s stare, the shifting, interlocking movement of emotions that had to be, at best, contradictory. He didn’t wait to determine what exactly those emotions might be, or for Subaru to respond. Instead, he bent down again with patient slowness, never taking his eye from Subaru’s face, from Subaru watching him draw nearer—and then Subaru tilting his head back, his eyes closing this time as their mouths touched once more and he yielded like cloud or water to the subtle pressure of the kiss. Seishirou let his own eyes shut, savoring the feel of the Sumeragi, that perfectly delectable surrender. He slid his arms around Subaru and kissed him more deeply, felt Subaru’s lips trembling against his in the same way that sakura petals trembled the moment before the wind took them, and with the same softness, as Subaru’s mouth parted for him and let him in.

Yes.

He was getting a crick in his neck, though.

Seishirou tightened his arms around Subaru, lifting him up. Startled, Subaru gasped as his feet left the ground; he managed somehow to kick off his shoes before Seishirou swung him over the floor. As Seishirou set Subaru down, he noticed that, now that they were on the same level, Subaru’s eyes were just about even with his own chin.

Almost perfect....

He put his hands on Subaru’s narrow hips and drew Subaru close against his body. He could feel Subaru shiver as they pressed together. He nuzzled into Subaru’s hair, still spangled here and there with drops of snowmelt, kissed his face, his mouth, ended with a light, lingering brush of his parted lips against Subaru’s, only a suggestion, before drawing back—and Subaru followed him, leaned marginally after him as he retreated, Subaru’s eyes flickering open in confusion. They looked up into Seishirou’s, and Seishirou read there fear—yes, more than a little—doubt and uncertainty, but also...wanting.

Seishirou grinned. He picked Subaru up again, scooped him entirely into his arms, and Subaru didn’t fight it any more than he had as a boy all those years ago, only tensed a bit before relaxing warily into the carry, letting his own arms slide around Seishirou’s neck and his head bow onto Seishirou’s shoulder. He was certainly a lot easier to move when he wasn’t dead weight. Seishirou got them both into the bedroom without any awkwardness, even in the narrow doorway.

There he set Subaru down on the bed—laid him back deliberately, and Subaru did not resist. Seishirou could tell from the sudden catch in his breathing that Subaru had at least some idea of what might be coming. He wasn’t as perfectly naive as he had once been. Seishirou smiled and settled onto the bed as well. Leaning over Subaru, he resumed the kiss: slow at first but building in intensity as he felt Subaru answer him, Subaru responding so much more readily now, kissing back with deeper and wider passion as he learned the way of it—

Your first kiss, Subaru-kun? Was that truly your first kiss, and you're what, twenty-five now? I must say—even if it's you, I'm a bit surprised.

Am I really the first one to touch you...to be with you like this?

Did you save yourself only for me?

Seishirou found that a pleasing thought, and he let his tongue move once more between Subaru's lips, where quite possibly no one but himself had ever been. Subaru made a soft sound against him, and his arms came around Seishirou's body, pulling him close. Perhaps Subaru surprised himself with his own desire—he broke the kiss abruptly and turned his head to the side, breathing hard. Seishirou gave him a moment to think things over. Then he brought up his hand and touched Subaru's face, began running his lips along the curve of the other's jawline, tilted the head back and began kissing the slender throat, feeling Subaru tremble at the touch. He shifted all the way over onto Subaru, letting Subaru feel the weight on top of him, moved slightly against him, testing—

There's more, Subaru-kun.

Oh, yes.

He felt Subaru reacting to this in body and breath: reacting with desire, the slight frame quivering with it, the first hardness of awakening need beginning to press into Seishirou's thigh, an echo of his own. Subaru gasped quietly and tipped his head back further, arching his neck for Seishirou's exploration. Those arms wrapped about Seishirou's body shifted and began hesitantly to move. Subaru's hands traveled along the lines of Seishirou's back and shoulders, feeling the definition of his muscles through the still-damp cloth of his shirt; they slid up into his hair, tangling gently in the black strands...it felt good. Seishirou purred and continued to concentrate his own attentions on Subaru's throat, tugging down the collar of the black turtleneck in order to do so. One of Subaru's hands slipped forward to touch the right side of Seishirou's face—

Seishirou flinched.

"Sorry," Subaru whispered breathlessly, "I'm sorry...." He began to pull his hand away, but Seishirou seized it and held it where it was—not the touch itself, Seishirou decided at once, that had bothered him, only the unexpectedness of it, coming from his blind side. Seishirou rubbed his cheek against that captured hand, then kissed it, the palm, the long, graceful fingers, the back. He began to trace the Sakurazukamori star with the tip of his tongue, watching Subaru's eyes all the while and noting with interest the twinge of pain that they betrayed. Subaru knew perfectly well what the gesture signified, and yet he submitted to it wordlessly, with what seemed like acceptance. Such a thing was very typical of Subaru. Seishirou found that gentle nature no less foreign and intriguing than he ever had.

And as Seishirou closed the last side of the star and raised his head, he found himself still staring into those green eyes: eyes that were unguarded now, but at the same time unreadable beneath the surface impulses of fear and of desire, their liquid depths harboring an enigma that he didn't quite understand. He wanted that, he realized—wanted to own that mystery just as he

owned so many other parts of Subaru—and that wanting, unwarranted and strange, somehow complemented and heightened the purely physical hunger that he felt.

To desire someone quite that much was new for him.

He found it rather extraordinary.

Releasing Subaru's hand, Seishirou laid claim to the other one. Deliberately, he performed the same slow ritual of caresses with lips and tongue that ended once more with the outlining of that sign carved invisibly into the flesh. Lifting his mouth from the back of Subaru's hand, Seishirou smiled.

Never doubt that you're mine, Subaru-kun. Never doubt that you belong to me.

I can't love you. Perhaps I can't really understand you for what you are....

But I can have you.

And I will.

He was fairly certain, as he let go of that hand, that Subaru also understood these things.

Seishirou began to rake his fingers up and down Subaru's chest and stomach unhurriedly, in long, covetous lines, tracing the shape of the body beneath the turtleneck's thin cloth. Feeling Subaru's nipples already erect, he brushed fingertips against them, a feather-light and teasing touch through the shirt's fabric, encouraging their hardness. It amused him to see Subaru's instant reaction to even that muffled contact, and so Seishirou played with him a bit longer, laying soft, intimate touches on Subaru through the barrier of his clothing and observing his delightful small shudders at those no more than half-realized sensations.

Finally Seishirou tired of that game and decided to move on. Tugging Subaru's shirt out of his jeans, Seishirou slipped a hand under it, caressing the flat hollow of Subaru's stomach. He stroked his fingers up Subaru's sides as the young man writhed exquisitely, then caught the shirt and pulled it all the way up, drawing it off over Subaru's head and sending the dark hair into a disarray that was half dampness and half static. Stripping the shirt from Subaru's arms, he tossed it aside. His mouth descended onto Subaru's neck again, now that it was bared entirely—sucked at the skin, played gently over those places where the bruises he'd left earlier that day still lingered, licked at the hollow of Subaru's throat. He felt Subaru's fingers then, fumbling at his wrist; turning his head, he observed with amusement that Subaru was trying to get the buttons at his cuff undone.

Sitting up astride Subaru, Seishirou offered his wrist where Subaru could reach it more easily. Subaru undid those small buttons with intensely focused concentration, then the ones on the other sleeve as Seishirou brought that arm forward as well. Seishirou tilted his head back and to one side, staring at the wall with half-lidded eyes, while those gentle fingers moved against his throat (danger, long-held instincts murmured, *danger*, but with a slight effort of will he chose to ignore them) and then traveled down his chest, button by button, finally pulling the front of his shirt out of his pants to get at the last few. Seishirou inclined his head to gaze down at Subaru again, and he smiled. He shrugged the shirt off in a slow roll of his shoulders, aware of Subaru's

eyes upon him...no, not all that bad, he was sure. And as he let the shirt fall over the edge of the bed and moved his hands to the belt of Subaru's jeans for the next stage of undos, he returned the favor, taking in with an amused scrutiny everything that was revealed as Subaru's clothes continued to come away.

There was nothing unpleasant in Subaru's form, he decided. Even that almost painful thinness—there was a certain spare beauty in it, with nothing of excess. It was as though the boyish slenderness had been drawn out, attenuated in the young man, had become all long limbs and lean, arching lines like a graceful sapling, a subtle play of flesh over the bone. In his paleness and apparent fragility Subaru seemed ethereal, as if he might at any moment vanish into the bed. But he was warm and alive, he responded to the touch...he shuddered again as Seishirou slid the jeans and shorts off over his hips, releasing him, inhaled sharply as Seishirou trailed fingers up the length of his shaft....

Human, indeed.

Smoothly Seishirou divested himself of the rest of his own clothes. Then he allowed Subaru to explore him briefly in turn, to touch him with shy, hesitant touches that made pleasure flower in him almost startlingly. He nearly closed his eyes as Subaru's hand encircled him, a tentative stroking that raised the need he already felt into fiercely throbbing urgency—

No.

Controlling himself, he reached down to interrupt gently the movement of Subaru's hand.

Not yet.

There was a lot more to be done, first.

And then Seishirou began the seduction for real: began to stroke his prey afire, every nerve and every fiber of his body; to claim Subaru yet again, this time with the pleasure. He ran his hands and mouth over Subaru's body without haste, learning its ways and studying Subaru's reactions. He permitted himself to miss nothing, not the slightest flutter of motion or whisper of sound, and he returned again and yet again to those places that brought response, retracing those pathways, wearing them deeper, shaping them to accommodate greater and greater ecstasy. He felt the hammering of Subaru's pulse against him as he did these things, listened to the occasional low, half-suppressed cry, and he watched, when he was able to—when he was not otherwise occupied, his head lowered to take into his mouth the small rose peaks of Subaru's nipples or to taste the vulnerable skin of the onmyouji's throat—watched the flashes of sensation pursuing each other across Subaru's wonderfully expressive face and eyes.

He brought Subaru to the edge, finally, with the steady, rhythmic motion of his hand sweeping up and down Subaru's length, matching the arch and surge of Subaru's hips as Subaru responded to him, to that touch—brought him there and then left him without warning, letting him fall back from that verge. He pulled his mouth from Subaru's, his fingers uncurling from Subaru's shaft before the other could quite break through into release. Subaru moaned.

His timing had been good, Seishirou thought, watching the small shivers of near-orgasmic pleasure fade, feeling the sudden spike of sexual energies in Subaru's body returning for the moment to a lower pitch. Then, with deliberate slowness, Seishirou moved his hand between Subaru's thighs, caressingly but careful not to give Subaru any means of reaching climax. He parted Subaru's legs, letting his touch slide downward and back until he found what he was seeking.

He pressed two fingers inside of Subaru.

He could feel the instant tensing of Subaru's entire body, and looking into Subaru's eyes he read easily enough the realization that was dawning there.

Oh yes, Subaru-kun. Just exactly like that.

Only, more so.

He leaned into Subaru against that tightness, feeling for...there. Subaru jumped at the touch. He quaked as Seishirou's fingertips found the sensitive area of his prostate and began to knead it. Turning his face away, he shut his eyes.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou murmured, sliding his other arm around Subaru and pulling him into a close embrace, his lips grazing up the side of Subaru's neck and into the hair, his breath fanning the black silk strands. He half-lifted Subaru, half-turned him, still gently working his fingers inside Subaru's body, until at last the tension in that closed, inward-focused expression eased just slightly: became acceptance of this new feeling, this different and strange pleasure mixed with pain.

At that, Seishirou slipped his fingers from inside Subaru. He pressed Subaru face-down onto the bed. Sliding his hands up onto Subaru's hips, he guided himself into position, and then, without hesitation, he pushed sharply in. He entered Subaru's body through that narrow gateway, feeling the intense tightness of it and the heat, the rough pleasure that it could afford him, and Subaru surrendered to this as well, only making a brief cracked sound and clenching his fist in the bedspread.

Seishirou pulled back a little, then thrust forward again, more deeply. Dimly, he heard Subaru groan. It was all that one might want, that fever-hotness and that fierce constraint, and he could feel his own breathing threaten to become ragged and more urgent. He controlled it and began to move within Subaru in a sure, swift cadence, sensation growing as he did so like a tide being raised toward storm-height, higher with each wave of motion. Putting a hand beneath Subaru, he took hold of him once more and stroked him in accompaniment to the surging of their bodies.

He was aware of the slight, slick sheen of sweat that covered both their skins—he lapped at Subaru's shoulder greedily, letting the salt taste break upon his tongue. He could feel the hard angle of Subaru's pelvic bone digging into him a little, could feel Subaru, having already been so near once, suddenly arch back against him and gasp, and then go still except for a faint quivering and the wet stickiness spilling across Seishirou's hand; but these things were losing importance in the face of his own imperative. He began plunging in and out of Subaru, faster now—*faster*—

feeling the fierce pulsations of pleasure as they expanded rapidly, demanding more attention, insisting on more—

He drove into Subaru again—

—and again.

Again—

And the last wave broke, a rushing culmination that raced through him in ripples of flame. He breathed into it, into that abrupt release, and lunged into Subaru one last time, possessing the onmyouji absolutely and completely as ecstatic pleasure burst in bright, hot drops inside his mind and body, like his seed breaking free into the darkness of Subaru's flesh. Fire flooded him, all of him, indescribably, and then, slowly, it fell away. He watched it go, watched each echo passing through him before vanishing once more...vanishing, like a disturbance on the surface of a lake that smooths itself out, the water returning inevitably to quiet and to calm.

Seishirou looked down at the slender V-shape of Subaru's torso, at the back of his dark head, his face hidden in the crook of his arm. He felt simply the clean, empty lassitude that usually followed climax. It would be easy and pleasant to abandon himself to that, to lie down and drift in the quietness that followed release, but he probably shouldn't. He sat up, withdrawing from Subaru's body, pulled his hand out from under Subaru and wiped it absently on the bedspread. He would have to wash that later.... Rising, he went to the closet and got his robe, taking it with him as he went into the bathroom to cleanse himself of the traces of blood and come. When he came out a few minutes later, Subaru hadn't moved significantly.

Perhaps he had fallen asleep.

Wandering out into the main room, Seishirou collected his lighter and cigarettes from the coffee table. He took one of the stools from the eating side of the counter and swung it around into the kitchenette. He sat down there, in the half-light that reached him from the living room fixture, and lit up a cigarette. Slowly he breathed in the rich, familiar smoke.

The experience had been entirely satisfactory.

In a way, though, there was something almost disappointing about that.

Whether he came at the hands and mouth of a soapland girl, or in the body of his enemy and other, the physical pleasure was very much the same: enjoyable enough, while it lasted, but just as brilliant and as transient as any other thing. He could not build upon it...he could not make it into that human connection.

And it didn't tell him anything about what it was to love.

He knew better than that, of course. After all, it was foolishness to think that sex could solve anything. For what the evening had been, it had been very good, and he took it for that, and savored it, and then set it away, gently, into memory.

Seishirou heard sounds of movement from the other room then, and he put his reflections aside, becoming attentive again: listening and waiting. It seemed his "guest" was awake after all. In a little while, Subaru appeared in the doorway. It took him a few moments to locate Seishirou,

sitting in the unlit kitchenette; when he did, he approached haltingly, almost disjointedly, as if neither body nor mind were quite functional yet. He probably was sore, too, and Seishirou realized that they should perhaps have used some sort of lubrication. Subaru had put his jeans back on, but he was barefoot and wore Seishirou's shirt. Seishirou wondered if that was significant, or if it had simply been the first article of clothing that had come to hand.

As Subaru came to the end of the counter, Seishirou pushed the cigarette pack wordlessly toward him, and this time Subaru accepted, tapping one out with quiet dignity and a steadiness that belied the awkwardness he'd shown coming across the floor. He didn't meet Seishirou's gaze, however. Seishirou held out his lighter, and as Subaru leaned close the flame's glow flickered over his face, the gold of it flowing across his pale skin, leaving shadows here and there, at the line of his jaw, and in his half-closed eyes. The cigarette caught, and Subaru straightened up and nodded, murmuring a polite thank you, then retreated. There was a wooden chair in one corner of the kitchenette—Subaru went over and curled himself up on it, as if trying to make himself unobtrusive, and then lapsed into stillness, doing nothing but staring into space. Seishirou watched him for a minute, but he didn't seem to notice, lost in whatever thoughts might be going through his mind.

Perhaps there were no thoughts at all. Perhaps Subaru had withdrawn into himself and was merely existing until the next force came to act upon him. He had been like that occasionally in times past...perhaps he still could be.

Leaving part of his attention on the onmyouji, Seishirou returned to his own silent musings.

No, nothing had really changed in him, but now he was aware of the motivation that had escaped his conscious mind until tonight: aware of that hunger, that hidden need...that loneliness. He was a bit disturbed that he could act on such an impulse for so long without recognizing it. If there was one thing that he counted on, one thing that was true and certain in his life, it was his own self-identity, the knowledge of who and what he was, that intimate familiarity with his capabilities and with every aspect of his mind, heart, and body.

Sakurazukamori. That was the largest part of it, as necessary to him as breathing: the piece of him that gave shape to all the rest.

Being the killer, being the cherry tree barrow guardian....

Should he be lonely?

Should he permit it?

Seishirou stubbed out his cigarette and clasped his hands thoughtfully before his mouth. It was a difficult question. For a brief moment he found himself wondering if any of the others who had come before him had felt loneliness, wondered if they had been capable of love, or if that lack was unique to himself.

Then, he shrugged. Really, he didn't care. Whether they had been like him or not—

It didn't matter.

There was only himself now, and the one important thing was that he recognized what lay within him, acknowledged it, and then took steps to make certain that it served his will. A “feeling” couldn’t betray him as long as he was aware of it, as long as he was watching out for its effects.

And now, he was.

There was a short, violent burst of coughing from the corner, as Subaru’s newly healed throat and lungs protested the cigarette. Seishirou smiled wryly to himself. Funny that it had been the healing spell’s return that had broken him open, that had cracked his mind wide enough to let him see such things. Just as he had used that living flame of power to clear away the shadows that had clouded Subaru’s body—to restore Subaru to a normal state of health—in just that way the magic had tried to “restore” *him*, opening him up inside to reveal this hidden thing. He had meant to probe Subaru’s damaged heart and instead had found something quite surprising in himself.

Healing out, healing back, although not as I might have intended it...and because there wasn't any "harm," my protections didn't function. I understand now. Still, I can't help but wonder, Subaru-kun, if you hadn't warded me then...

...what might you have found, when I woke up.

That feeling of disintegration, which he remembered quite clearly from his dream, the pull from that fractured sky....

Would he even have been recognizable as himself?

It's ironic, isn't it, Subaru-kun? In trying to protect me, you may well be the reason that I'm still the person I am. Still the same person...in the end, I haven't really been changed.

It's ironic.

Seishirou shrugged again, abandoning that thought, and returned to the issue at hand. What should he do about that “loneliness”? What action, if any, could he take? To block the ache from his mind would be at best a temporary solution, no more than what he had already done for years unconsciously, and he suspected that trying to eradicate it completely would somehow be unwise. In any case, he found as he considered the matter that he didn’t particularly want to make that attempt, didn’t want to lose even that slight, strange awareness of lack. Even this “feeling,” odd and uncomfortable as it was...it was still a part of him. And anything that was part of him, he would not let go.

So instead of destroying it he would leave it be, Seishirou decided, simply remaining at all times aware of its existence and its possible ramifications, in much the same way that he would allow Subaru himself walk out that door tonight and live for the few brief weeks until the final storm broke and he died as Seishirou had always intended that he should. It was overconfidence, perhaps, that Seishirou considered both Subaru and the need he answered to be acceptable dangers. Perhaps that surety was a weakness in and of itself. But he was aware of that too. It also was a part of him, and he would no more relinquish it than he’d allow his eye and his will to leave the prey that he had chosen.

He would not let Subaru go...at least, not permanently.

After all, Subaru's life—and death—still belonged to him.

For tonight, though, Subaru could certainly leave: just like the little bird in a nukume dori painting, allowed to escape the falcon's claws and fly into the sudden respite of an open sky. Yet sooner or later the day would come for it, too, and the little bird would fall, its bright feathers scattering over the snow.

He had always liked that image.

Seishirou nodded to himself, then glanced at Subaru.

"Subaru-kun, wake up. You're going to fall off the chair."

Subaru sat up with a start. He uncoiled partway from his seat, putting one foot down on the floor, and as he moved the long tail of ash at the end of his cigarette fell off onto the linoleum. "Sorry," he began automatically, and fumbled for the ashtray on the end of the counter.

Seishirou couldn't help smiling slightly at Subaru's obvious and very appealing confusion. Still so easily flustered, even now.... Reaching into the cabinet underneath the sink, Seishirou pulled out the dustpan and broom. He went over to where Subaru was sitting and, kneeling, began to sweep up the spilled ash. "Go and get dressed," he said gently. "I'll call a cab for you this time. On a night like this, to find one just driving by—I doubt you'll be so lucky again."

"I want to stay with you."

Seishirou glanced up at Subaru, the briefest of glances, and then dropped his eyes, hiding his amused expression. He had rather thought so, seeing Subaru come out of the bedroom in his shirt. It seemed that Subaru was once more beginning to harbor illusions about the person he was, as well as about what this night might possibly mean. Seishirou bent forward, chasing a bit of stray ash that had fallen under Subaru's chair. "Don't be silly, Subaru-kun. You can't stay here—"

"I know what you are."

The sudden, raw starkness in Subaru's tone stopped him at once. His gaze flicked up again.

"*Sakurazukamori*," Subaru said, the word taut and fierce, spoken with a strangely complicated intensity. "I know. I want to stay." Seishirou found himself staring at Subaru, into the shadowed places of those green eyes that had always communicated far more than language could for Subaru...and indeed, Subaru's voice faltered a little as he met that stare.

"If- if you'll have me," he said.

Of course, there were all sorts of very good reasons why Subaru absolutely could not stay. Seishirou reached for them, but he found that they somehow weren't coming to mind—were scattering even as he looked for them, like light fracturing on ripples of deep green water. Subaru was still looking at him, those beautiful eyes filled with something aching, and Seishirou wasn't at all certain of what it meant.

Then Subaru reached out toward him, moving very slowly, a deliberate and careful gesture that couldn't be construed as danger. No, not even a spell...he pushed his fingers into Seishirou's bangs and lifted them, brushing them aside, then ran that quiet touch like rain down Seishirou's

cheek. His hand slipped behind Seishirou and drew him forward—drew him down until Seishirou's head was resting on Subaru's knees.

Subaru began to stroke his hair with gentle fingers.

And just for one moment, Seishirou closed his eyes.

Chapter 6

Seishirou woke up with an arm wrapped around his waist. Fortunately he remembered the circumstances at once, before he did anything untoward to its possessor.

He lay quietly for a moment, recalling the events of the past days, then craned his neck to look behind himself. He was lying on his side at the very edge of the mattress with Subaru curled right up against his back, that one arm holding him close. Subaru seemed to be asleep, his cheek pressed to Seishirou's shoulder. Behind him stretched a wide and perfectly empty expanse of bed.

Seishirou groaned and let his head fall back against the pillow.

After another minute he stirred and opened his eyes again. He was awake now, and he didn't think he'd be able to go back to sleep like this.

He might as well get up.

Cautiously, then, he began to extricate himself from Subaru. With a great deal of care and patience, he managed to work his way out from the embrace and stand up. Subaru promptly rolled over into the space he'd vacated and buried his face in Seishirou's pillow with a little sigh. Looking down at the sleeping onmyouji, Seishirou suppressed a sigh of his own. Instead he shuffled his feet into his slippers, and, locating his robe, threw it on over his pajama bottoms. He wandered into the bathroom and paused, staring at the new toothbrush in the rack next to his own.

There was something almost surreal about the whole situation.

As he brushed his teeth, his gaze roamed the little room, taking in other changes: extra towels, an additional washcloth, the various necessities he'd gone out to buy for Subaru after that first night. He wasn't at all accustomed to the idea of living with someone; it had been a long while since he'd done so. The last time had been...hmm. Actually, it had been not so long after the conclusion of the bet. She had been a very nice girl, as he recalled—a bit unconventional, to agree to an unmarried live-in arrangement, but she had been vivacious and *very* pretty. Rather exceptionally so. He had thought it would be pleasant to have her always around him.

Then the first night had arrived, after she'd finished unpacking and settled in. They had shared a bottle of sake, and she had talked so happily about her friends and how she couldn't wait for him to meet them, about taking him to visit her parents in Kamakura, about all the things that they would do together, "their" lives that they would share with each other...how her eyes had sparkled with the wine and with the absolute purity of her happiness. And he had looked into those eyes and seen a future of parties and clever answers to the question "So, what do you do?"; had seen the possibility that she would come to wonder why he went out into the night alone; or, if he hid such matters as he was capable of doing, that she would question why certain things did not connect, why there were places in her memory that were vague and unclear. Being an alert

and sensitive woman, she would inevitably sense on some level that he did not belong to her in the ways that she might wish. There would be recriminations eventually, Seishirou had realized, there would be squabbling and other unpleasantness, and she would probably always remain ignorant of the real reason behind these things—the reason being simply that she was trying to make the two of them into an “us,” a single entity, when she had no knowledge at all of the person he was.

Usually he found it amusing to weave around himself the tapestry of lies and illusions. On that night, however, as he had gazed at her across all the distance that separated their two worlds, he had considered the prospect of such a future and found it tedious. So he’d put an end to the affair almost at once. It had been rather a pity—she had been quite lovely.

Oh, well. She made a lovely memory, too.

Seishirou rinsed and spat.

Now there was Subaru, who claimed that he did indeed know what he was proposing to live with. Seishirou suspected, however, that although Subaru’s mind “knew” he was cohabiting with the Sakurazukamori, his heart had never truly recognized the fact. To Subaru’s heart he would probably always be Seishirou-san the veterinarian—surely that was the way it was now, the only way he could justify what he was doing. How else could he bear to live with the person who had killed what he’d held most dear, his one beloved sister—a person who used the art of onmyoujitsu for murder, something that it was his clan’s duty to prevent. How else to become the lover of someone who was working to destroy all that his family had ever protected, someone who could kill him at any time, quite without remorse....

Still, Seishirou supposed that it *could* be possible. Subaru might have convinced himself that there’d been some truth to the illusion—that there was a “good person” inside his one-time friend who even now could be redeemed. It might be that a part of him had never really ceased to believe. He had possessed such an extraordinary quality of trust once, a tendency to see only the best in people. Seishirou had frequently found it quite charming, if also rather ridiculously naive.

Splashing away the last traces of soap, Seishirou reached for a towel, shaking his head to clear the water from his eyes. To be so accepting, so blind to the reality of his situation...that was very much like the boy that Subaru had once been. One might have thought that he’d have changed more substantially, but perhaps not. Perhaps behind Subaru’s shell of pain that innocent child remained, essentially unaltered.

Or perhaps this was merely an elaborate masquerade after all.

Lowering the towel, Seishirou gazed at his reflection in the mirror, eyes narrowing as he weighed the opposing possibilities yet again, turning them over in his mind as he had ceaselessly since that night. At last he shrugged. He didn’t really think that Subaru’s change of heart was a lie, but he couldn’t be entirely certain. He would wait, therefore, and be patient, not wanting to make any mistakes in this. Subaru would reveal himself eventually, one way or the other, and Seishirou had no doubt of his own ability to handle whatever might ensue. To kill Subaru out of hand,

merely to end a possible danger...it might be prudent, but it was also an inelegant response.

He could do so much better.

Seishirou hung up the towel. Running a hand through his hair, he made a slight face at himself in the mirror. *Subaru-kun, I probably shouldn't indulge myself like this.*

Really, I'm getting too old to play these games with you.

The ludicrousness of it didn't escape him: the sheer risks that he was taking only because he wanted to explore whether there was satisfaction to be had in tending to this "relationship," to see whether he could be successful in this even without the feelings of love. Although he found parts of it enjoyable enough, he couldn't say whether it wasn't more trouble than it was worth—and while he debated with himself, swinging back and forth between interest and mild annoyance, there was Subaru, quiet and completely inexplicable, constantly present and yet somehow unobtrusive: as gentle and compliant a companion as one might wish.

It could also be that Subaru was insane. He hadn't yet discounted that possibility.

For the moment, though, he'd probably taken about as much time in the bathroom as he could. Touching the door, Seishirou "felt" the room on the other side and discovered that Subaru was up. Preparing himself mentally, he stepped out of the bathroom and caught Subaru in mid-stretch, arms lifting high above his head and the white silk of Seishirou's spare pajamas falling loosely about him, the cuffs slipping back from those slender wrists. Seishirou paused and observed the graceful line of that motion until Subaru, realizing he was there, made a small, self-conscious start. Subaru dropped his arms and smiled shyly at Seishirou.

"Good morning, Seishirou-san."

"Mm," Seishirou answered, a little distractedly, as he watched Subaru rise from the bed and walk toward him, a flowing ripple of white...really, those pajamas were much too large for him, but there was something oddly appealing about it, and the white silk suited Subaru far better than it had ever suited himself. His glance shifted to Subaru's face as the other drew near, and he saw the smile falter, a hint of worry at his lack of reaction. He smiled at Subaru then, putting out an arm to fold Subaru against himself, and he could feel the small, artless breath of relaxation as Subaru accepted the touch and nestled close. Seishirou turned his face briefly against Subaru's hair.

It was pleasant.

He held the embrace for a moment more, then released Subaru with a little pat. Stepping past him, Seishirou went over to begin making the bed.

"I can do that," Subaru offered.

"No, I've got it," Seishirou replied cheerfully. "You might think about getting dressed, though, if you're going out." Last night Subaru had mentioned wanting to get some clothes and other things from the place where he'd been staying. It was a perfectly reasonable desire. "Unless you're planning to go as you are?"

"Um...no," Subaru answered, his tone faintly nonplused, as if he wasn't really sure whether he

was being teased or not.

“That’s good,” Seishirou said, flipping aside the covers so he could straighten out the sheet. He had turned his back on Subaru, leaving himself “open” to attack quite deliberately: it was something he’d done once or twice already just to see what Subaru might attempt. So far the bait had not been taken. “The neighbors would be distraught...although you do look very cute like that, Subaru-kun.”

There was a pause. Then Subaru murmured, “I think I’ll go and get dressed now,” and those words, which once might have been said in skittish avoidance, held a hint of almost-laughter instead, as if in recognition that this *was* teasing, and with that a suggestion of playing along. Seishirou didn’t turn, but he remained aware of Subaru’s every move as the other collected his clothes and wandered off into the bathroom. He finished making the bed, then dressed swiftly himself and went out into the kitchenette to start preparing coffee and breakfast.

Subaru would be seeing his friends today, the other Dragons of Heaven, and that was a bit of a problem. Seishirou watched the flame of his lighter dance as he lit up a cigarette. It could be that Subaru would “escape” him—that Subaru’s entanglements with these people might draw him back unwittingly, or else that Subaru might intend some manner of betrayal after all. It was necessary for Seishirou to go out too, to attend to some “work” he’d been meaning to do, and realistically he shouldn’t plan on being able to return.

Of course, it might be that Subaru really did just want a change of clothes: that he’d cast in his lot with Seishirou and wouldn’t rejoin the Dragons of Heaven. In that case, Seishirou wondered what on earth he was going to tell them.

Subaru’s timing was impeccable; he came drifting out of the bedroom, dressed once more in his jeans and black turtleneck, just as the coffeemaker finished brewing. He smiled at Seishirou again as he sat down on one of the counter stools. Aesthetics was a powerful excuse for keeping Subaru around, Seishirou thought, noting the slow, fluid grace that was unique to the older Subaru, although seeds of it had existed in the boy that he’d been; the luminous smile that was more in the eyes than anywhere else; and the gentleness of the hands that took the cup Seishirou offered and made him think suddenly, surprisingly, of sex: of the way Subaru touched him, the memory of which stayed with him, he found, more clearly than the fleeting experience of release.

Seishirou blinked. Putting that thought from his mind, he held out the cigarette pack and lighter. He wasn’t expecting Subaru to decline politely. “I’m going to quit,” Subaru explained.

“Really.”

“Mmm.” Subaru sipped at his coffee slowly, a far away look in his green eyes, then started and set down the cup. “It’s not for health reasons, or any other kind of reasons, really,” he said, looking earnestly at Seishirou. “It’s just—” Subaru made a small vague gesture and glanced aside, the barest hint of a frown in his expression. “It’s just to quit.”

Seishirou smiled at him. “Subaru-kun, you don’t need to justify yourself to me,” he said, turning away to check on how their breakfast was coming. “If you want to stop, then that’s your

decision.”

“I didn’t want you to be uncomfortable smoking around me,” Subaru replied. “I didn’t want you to think I expected you to change.”

Seishirou looked back at Subaru for just an instant. He wondered if the potential subtleties in those words were truly there.

Perhaps he was only imagining them.

They ate breakfast quietly, exchanging just a few soft pleasantries. When they had finished, Seishirou scooped up the dishes and began the washing-up, deftly fending off Subaru’s tentative move toward helping. As he ran water into the sink, Seishirou asked casually, “So, you’re going out now?” From the corner of his eye, he saw Subaru nod.

“Well,” Seishirou said, smiling at Subaru over his shoulder, “you be careful out there.”

* * * * *

That summer....

He was on the train, coming back from the Sumeragi house in Kyoto, and at his core that familiar knot of smouldering anger and frustration had drawn itself tight. He stared out through the window at the fields they were passing through, fields that shimmered under the July sun, their heat denied by the relentless air conditioning that blasted down on him.

Then a slow blink, a shift of memory, and when he opened his eyes it was the same train, but a different season: there was darkness outside the window, and through his own reflection he could see dim hills rolling by at great speed, their edges smoothed out by snow and by the night. The landscape matched the coldness locked inside him now, a featureless winter covering over old resentments, though sparks of them still lay dormant somewhere deep within, buried in their own ash. A vast frozen nothingness, empty—even though the train was warm, with heat seeping out from all its radiators, that warmth had nothing to do with him.

And as he stared out through the glass a voice in his mind was crying *Free!* over and over, high and crystalline and brittle, while another answered it dully, a soft snow falling over the peal of that cry and smothering its bright sound—

No. You are not free.

Subaru opened his eyes. Looking up from the drawer that he’d been emptying, he gazed at the clouded mirror hanging above the dresser. Dust covered the mirror’s surface; it had been that way when they’d moved into this old house, and he had never bothered to clean it. Through that dust his reflection was a vague outline, nothing more than a shadow.

He turned away. There were a few more items left in the drawer; he removed them, and, bending, placed them in the duffel bag at his feet.

He straightened up and closed the drawer firmly.

The door to the shower stall slid shut, and Subaru let the water's coldness flow around him, a shock against his overheated skin. He turned his face up into the stream. Stretching, he arched his body, his hands clasped against the tightness at the back of his neck, and every impulse toward anger that threatened to bloom in his mind he picked off methodically, until the garden of his thoughts was an empty, orderly place once more. Calm at last, his frustrations and resentments forgotten, he let the steady, gentle battering of the shower become his whole world. It was a brief and precious peace, a time of not-thinking.

Of not-feeling....

He stayed under the cascading water until he began to shiver despite the sultriness of the summer night. Then with slow and measured gestures he turned off the shower, attentive to the balance of each movement. Such focus, such concentration held him perfectly in that place of stillness, a place that he would remain in for as long as he was able. It would break apart around him eventually.

Invariably, it did.

He stopped that thought at once and returned himself to center. Stepping out of the shower, he dried himself and drew his jeans back on. He draped the towel over his shoulders to catch the last drops falling from his hair, then turned off the light and waited the few moments it took for his eyes to adjust before he slid open the bathroom door.

In house shoes, he threaded his way noiselessly up the dark, narrow stairs to the second floor. He hesitated a moment, then looked to the right as he came up the last steps and into the hallway. A dull wash of moonlight fell in a square at that end of the hall, the waning moon's glow thrown in through one small window, and between that illuminated piece of floor and himself a shadow knelt in a half-open bedroom door.

He stopped entirely, looked at that figure, and waited.

"Hey," the monk from Kouyasan said quietly. When Subaru didn't reply, he conjured into his palm a tiny column of energy that hummed and crackled faintly, a sound just at the subliminal edge of hearing. The column cast a faint blue-white gleam over Sorata's face and on the T-shirt and shorts that he was wearing, and lightened somewhat the darkness of the open doorway to Sorata's room. The very edge of its illumination caught Subaru. In that light he kept his own face still and without expression.

"Kinda late to be taking a shower, ain't it?" Sorata asked. "Or now, maybe I should say early...I didn't know onmyouji practiced austerities."

Subaru was silent. The words fell into the tenuous quiet he had found and disappeared. They were not important.

"I know you're one of those scrupulous sorts, but this is just ridiculous—even in the monastery, the first sittings didn't start until four-thirty." Sorata yawned hugely. "That's not for another hour and a half."

“Then why are you awake, Arisugawa-san?” Each word was soft and precise.

“I heard a sound. (And you could call me ‘Sorata,’ especially at this hour),” the monk said, the aside grumbled under his breath. “So I thought I should investigate it. Who knows what might be creeping around at this time of night? Mystical sendings, the minions of the Dragons of Earth, some pervert chasing after my own ‘hidden shrine maiden’....” A pair of tiny insects had begun to circle Sorata’s light. “After all, it’s July, and the middle of a heat wave too. People have been known to go crazy, lying awake sweltering, with no relief in sight.” He clenched his empty fist, his eyes suddenly brimming with emotion. “I have to protect the one I love!”

Subaru stared at him for a long time without speaking. Finally Sorata gave a little start of self-recollection and then laughed softly, changing moods. “But it’s you after all,” the monk said. “So that’s okay.” Lifting his head, he returned Subaru’s look with a level gaze of his own and the slightest of smiles. “Right?”

They regarded each other in silence across the hallway. Then with a faint *bzzzt* one of the insects brushed against the bar of energy. It tumbled toward the floor, singed wings fluttering, and a pained expression came over Sorata’s face. The other insect continued to circle the light erratically.

“Good night, Arisugawa-san.” Subaru turned his back and walked away.

“Uh, hey—!”

Subaru closed the door of his own room behind himself, shutting off further conversation. He could feel a light sweat breaking out on his skin once more as the heat undid all the good of his shower. Glancing at his mattress, dimly visible in the wan light from his window, he chose not to attempt to sleep. Instead, he folded himself slowly to the floor. Sitting there, he drew on those long years of discipline to free his mind from all distraction. He sought after and then touched that place of quiet, that too-temporary haven where no discomfort or pain of any sort could reach him. He touched the deepest of the dark places within himself. There, the needs of the body were nothing.

The needs of the heart were nothing....

For an instant, though, his rebellious memory opened up a vision to him: coppery sunlight on a tatami floor in the Sumeragi house in Kyoto; a pair of innocent eyes that were raised, shy and hopeful, to his own; and then that loneliness, an empty place that could never, ever be filled. He pinched the memory off, the faded head of a flower that had never had the chance to grow aright. Anger rose briefly in him too, roused by the memory and what it signified, before he cut that off as well. Then he closed himself to the heat, and to the past, and to the sense of suffocation that was wed to everything around him on this night. Shutting his eyes as well, he went wholly into the darkness, seeking to endure until the dawn.

Subaru gazed at the ghost of his reflection. Reaching out, he ran his fingertips along the mirror’s glass, wiping away a thin streak of dust. The glass smeared, distorting the image, and he

stopped. Tugging at his coat sleeve, he pulled the end of it over his hand and used that to clean the mirror's surface instead, leaning forward over the dresser to reach every corner. Piece by slow piece, he and the room both became visible in the glass.

When the mirror was clean, he stopped and stared into the eyes of his reflection.

He glanced aside, evading the wide, puzzled stare of his child-self, the silently wounded gaze of the sixteen-year-old boy lying on the ground before him, but as his glance moved he turned the knife in his hand and saw a muted flash of green on its steel blade. It was his own eyes, reflected in the polished metal, eyes that were different and yet still the same—that were inescapable, in this place where there was only himself and himself and himself.

He knew intimately what he had been about to do, and what the cost of that would have been. A part of him still wanted to do it.

He stared into the narrowed eyes that were looking back at him. Something inside him coiled and twisted like a sickness. He raised the knife high once more—

—flashed it down—

—and a cry was ripped out of him by the fierceness of the pain, as he plunged the ceremonial knife into his leg. The darkness vanished, the other selves vanished, and as the landscape of his spell dissolved around him he was huddling on the floor of his room, surrounded by the square of his wards. Before him was the little shrine that he'd erected, the small white-draped table, two vases of greenery and the round mirror that they framed...he tore his eyes away and looked down. Blood was seeping from around the knife, soaking gradually into his sweatpants. He stared at that spreading stain. Jerking the blade free, he drove it down again—a second wound, deeper than the first. There was more pain, searing like fire, a dizzying gush of blood from the original cut. Leaning on the knife, he felt the faint grate of metal scraping bone. His leg throbbed with agony.

There were sudden, pounding footsteps in the hall outside. Somebody shouted, "*Subaru-san!*" and his door was flung open. Sorata took one horrified look, and then leaped across the room toward Subaru. The wards should have held him out, but they were fraying, and the monk tore through them heedlessly.

Subaru yanked the knife clear again. He turned it in his hand, trying to turn it toward himself—but he was cold, as cold as the night outside his window, he was shaking, and a greyness had come over his vision. He was too slow. Sorata had his wrists; Subaru tried to twist away, and the monk's foot skidded in the growing pool of blood. He fell on Subaru, driving his knee into the injured leg, and Subaru choked back another cry.

There was a high-pitched shriek from outside the door. Sorata yelled over his shoulder, "Go and get the others! Go and get them *now!*" That person cried out "Inuki!" and then disappeared. Subaru could hear a vanishing patter of light feet, the sound of urgent voices, drawing rapidly nearer....

He had lost the knife. Somehow, though, it no longer seemed important: all of this was

becoming more and more remote. The greyness was drifting nearer, muffling everything around him; unconsciousness was coming over him, and he was watching it approach—

“Subaru-san?”

Turning his face from Sorata’s anxious stare, Subaru looked at the shrine instead. It had been kicked over in the struggle. From where he was lying he could just see the mirror, which had rolled away to the side. The mirror was cracked by lines that ran from its center outward...it had shattered radially, an exploding star....

Voices all around him were talking about healing, about helping.

Subaru closed his eyes and fell away from them.

Bowing forward onto the dresser, Subaru buried his face in his arms. When he remembered that night now, he felt a dazed horror. At the time, though, there had been only pain and emptiness, and in the midst of that emptiness a swelling self-loathing that had drowned his heart and soul. Afterward, when he’d awakened healed of the physical injuries, opening his eyes to meet the inugami’s calm regard before the dog spirit melted out of the room to tell its mistress that he was awake, the pain had gone, leaving only those other things. Drawing back the covers, he had touched the two small scars on his leg as if they were something far removed from himself. *I’m sorry*, he had said when the others came to him, the words automatic and polite.

Meaningless.

Subaru rolled his head to one side and gazed at the wall. He had never given them any real explanation. They all assumed that grief had driven him to it, grief and despair over the death of his grandmother, but that wasn’t exactly true. For nine years he had let her expectations govern his life, because he himself had only cared about one thing. In his mind, his grandmother’s remembered voice had ordered him to eat and sleep the little that he did, to carry himself in a particular way when performing his “work.” Because of her he had been as he “ought” to be, so that when the day came he would be ready and capable of doing what was necessary. Then she had died, and her death had been the shifting pebble that destabilized the avalanche above it. Once her presence had been removed, there had been nothing to restrain from the things to which his nature led him.

To prevent him from surrendering himself....

As a child, as a boy, as the adult he now was, he had always been the same.

Always falling toward his own annihilation.

Why? he wondered, head still pillowed on the cradle of his arms. *Why am I like this? Being this kind of person...truly I’m the last person on Earth who should be the head of the Sumeragi.*

And instead, he seemed likely to be the last person on Earth who *could* be the head of the Sumeragi. The last one ever...so he had defied his grandmother in a few things after all. Subaru sighed. That and the cigarettes—no matter how many times she had criticized him he had clung to the habit doggedly, devoutly, every breath a breath of silent rebellion, for years his one defiance.

He noticed where his mind was wandering before his hand went into his empty coat pocket, and patiently he halted them both. The craving would stop if he ignored it long enough, and if it didn't, then he could endure it. It was tolerable, more so than other things he had lived with.

To give up cigarettes wouldn't be hard at all.

There's nothing wrong with my mind or my will. I'm an onmyouji, and just to be one there are certain requirements. Although I've seen people who shouldn't practice magic, I know I'm competent—but still, unless I watch myself, there's that darkness.

Unless I pay attention, I fall.

Why?

He couldn't understand that essential movement of his nature, however much he thought about it. He could only feel its truth with the surety of a changing season. When nothing else was present to affect him, when he didn't remember to hold back from that edge, he simply slipped away. Not even an active self-destruction, but just a silent descent, like a frozen rain falling from the sky, a flake of snow coming to rest on a mittened hand and gone in a child's breath.

And he had been alone for far too long.

But now.... Unbidden, a kind of wonder rose up at the thought. *Now....*

There's you.

"In this dark place, you are my only landmark...my only guide." That man looked at him, incongruous mismatched eyes widening, the wind blowing dark hair, white shirt. A person, a person here, somehow warm beneath the billowing cloth, a person who was alive...

...a long-lost love.

Straightening, Subaru tipped his head back, closing his eyes to his reflection. He savored those other memories, still complex and difficult, but so much sweeter.

You...that was you in my dream. I thought so, even though I wasn't certain. Somehow you looked so surprised to see me. I never used to dream of you like that.

And I felt you, too, as if you were truly with me. I felt as I always used to, when I was with you. The same way I feel now—although nothing is as simple as it was, although things have come between us, still there's this feeling....

When I'm with you.

Seishirou-san, why do you make me so happy? How do you sweep everything else aside, so that I think only of you? Even when I hated you, even after everything you did....

Seishirou-san.

You make me want to live.

He struggled out of sleep, heart pounding. Claspings a hand to his throat, he felt the soreness there and remembered that relentless grasp, that smile so utterly without compassion. Now,

though, there was no one else in the room. He was alone. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he thrashed his way clear of the covers and off the bed, almost falling into the big plant in the corner before he caught himself. Bracing himself on the wall, he fumbled toward the window, leaned against the glass, and looked out. Too high, too high to escape that way, weakened as he was...it wasn't a window that opened, anyway. He turned and stared around the place.

Where...?

He was lost, he had no reference points as to where he was or why these things were happening, but there was a door to another room and he had seen that person go through it. Stumbling over, his body still weak and trembling, he supported himself on the door frame and looked out. Another empty room, the living room of an apartment, and on the far side a door stood slightly open, offering a glimpse into the hallway beyond...a trap, absolutely it was a trap, but he took the futile chance anyway and made for that apparent way out in a feverish, slow-motion rush. It seemed to take an eternity to cross that floor, but finally his hand was on the edge of the doorway, he could feel the draft from the hall brushing his bare legs, and he hadn't been stopped. His head spun.

Free? It couldn't be so. And yet...he pulled the door a little further open. He could feel the threads of protective wards, but nothing active, nothing that would prevent him if he tried to leave. The hands he expected to seize him, the voice he expected to hear...there was nothing. Incredible as it seemed, he might be free after all.

Standing in the doorway, he risked a glance back over his shoulder.

And everything stopped.

Eventually he became aware of the rapid beating of his heart. He took a quiet breath. Pushing the door closed, he leaned against it for a moment. Then he turned and picked his way, step by unsteady step, back across the room.

At last he halted by the couch and looked down at the figure that he hadn't even noticed in his earlier headlong flight. That person just lying there, seemingly asleep, sprawled out at full length on one side, a slight, almost puzzled frown creasing the forehead beneath the fall of dark hair.... The world had grown profoundly still around the two of them, its only motion the faint rise and fall of their separate breaths, and then his own swaying forward, the movement of his hand as it hesitated toward the other's face.

The very tips of his fingers brushed Seishirou's cheek. There was no response at all.

His legs were about to give out, and he sank down into a nearby chair. Sitting there, staring at the man he considered his "enemy," he felt in one flash every moment of the history between them—every action and every word, every emotion he had known and every outcome he had ever imagined—and now here was that enemy lying in front of him, truly and astonishingly asleep, the Sakurazukamori for this little while wholly off guard and vulnerable....

He could not do it. The knowledge was bitter yet inescapable. He could not do harm to Seishirou.

Despite everything, he had no wish to be the person capable of that.

He had realized it under the sakura, and as in the past he had tried to forget. Overcome by the need to answer his sister's death, he hadn't wanted to know. But those emotions, the ones he had tried to kill—they were part of his innermost nature, like his gift for onmyoujitsu or his tendency to fall, and if those feelings were removed he would not die but instead would live silenced and crippled and bereft, a walking ghost. He would be empty—and afterward, what then, when nothing was left inside of him, when nothing at all remained for him to give?

What would he become?

Wrapped up in that desolate silence, realizing those things, it occurred to him then that the need to give, so central to who he was, found an odd sort of echo in Seishirou, who in his own emptiness still somehow seemed to *want* something, who wanted to take. If not for that impassible barrier, that unfinished business between them, they could have completed each other perfectly in that respect. The knowledge struck up an old ache inside of him, a pain he was too tired and broken to resist. If only he could forgive—but it was impossible. Impossible ever to let go....

Wasn't that right?

Looking down at the sleeping magician, feeling so exhausted and confused, he couldn't even begin to imagine what would happen next. Instead he sat quietly, near motionless, letting his strength flow gradually back. He let the minutes pass slowly, while piece by piece he turned the past over in his mind, thinking, remembering, watching over the man that he had loved.

For today, sleep. Because I'm with you.

Even if somebody comes....

I'll chase them away.

In all that time, his eyes never left Seishirou's face.

I wonder what you were dreaming of that day. Was I wrong to interfere? Was I wrong to put a ward on you when you started to get restless? I thought that you might be having a bad dream.

I thought you might be afraid.

Even so, when you woke up I was angry. To leave the anger behind, after everything that's happened—I didn't think I could do it. But even though I couldn't set aside that feeling, or any of the others, I still thought that I could walk away from you.

But I was wrong. Even turning away, I was holding on so tightly. Holding onto the past, and to her....

Hokuto—

He froze the thought there: only the word, the fleeting impression of her, the memories as

bright as her brief life, her flashing smile. He didn't call out to her, or speak as if she might be listening. He wouldn't do it.

Not ever again.

I didn't even know, and I should have. I should have seen it inside myself. Those terrible things that I did to her, and to myself....

Maybe it's true that people can never see themselves for what they really are. Maybe it's true that we have to be mirrors for each other, just as my sister, when she was alive, was a mirror for me. In order to understand each other, and to understand ourselves....

Is it that way for you?

How different are you? When you came after me in the snow, when you offered me the key to the freedom of my heart—Seishirou-san, I think you needed me then.

You needed me.

Maybe I can't ever know what really moves you, but even if you don't understand what you've done, even if you don't feel anything like what I feel for you, so long as it's possible that that one thing might be true, that's enough to sustain me. I can live on no more than that. I can live on next to nothing, I can live on air...

...on one wish....

And a soaring though still impossible hope came with that thought, lifting skyward in a transfiguring rush of memory and raw sensation: grief and release, and Seishirou looking ever so slightly confused, with the snow falling into his hair; that otherness as close as his own skin, that touch, surprising and soft, and then a sudden strangeness, pain, a terrifying, incomprehensible pleasure; meeting Seishirou's eyes afterward, one a cloudy white and the other a faint glint of old honey in the dark kitchenette, and seeing the mute astonishment in them as he reached down to touch the other man's face; since then, sensing that constant presence—in sleep, the sound of Seishirou's breathing, the feel of his body....

Peace, in his embrace.

Subaru bit his lip. He wasn't even sure if he'd ever thought of Seishirou like that before the other night. He had been aware of desire in himself, of course, although he'd suppressed it; he knew also that he'd had feelings for Seishirou, and he had tried to repress those as well. But where those two things crossed—that he hadn't looked for before two nights ago, and now he only knew that they merged into a single whole and could not be sundered: two flames joining into one and burning on one wick.

And it felt so good. They had made love again last night, facing each other this time, and he had liked that—had liked being able to put his arms around Seishirou, to pull Seishirou closer, liked the warm breath caressing his throat and the solidity of Seishirou's weight and strength pressing him against the bed, more shelter than he had ever known. That closeness no longer seemed so strange or so alarming. It was growing more familiar, and the lessening of the pain by means of the lubricant cream Seishirou had provided was a further gift above the pleasure,

suggesting that it was possible to be so closely joined and not to hurt. Something like that held implications for his heart as well.

Still, he didn't want to deceive himself.

It's not because you care, or because you're concerned that I might feel pain. It's because you want to keep me by you for a while, and what you desire you don't want to see damaged. I know.... Expecting you to be different than you are will cause only difficulties for us both. So I won't expect anything at all from you.

Having no expectations, all I have, still...is that same wish.

Tears stung at his closed eyes, and he let them slip free for this brief while, now that he was alone. Grief was a blessing, a luxury he no longer needed to deny himself. Such tears purified the memories and premonitions that they arose from, and there were places inside him that needed that touch so badly.

Seishirou-san, I used to think about that day, and the things you said beneath the cherry tree in your maboroshi. And I used to wonder whether, if I had been a better person, if I had been more worthy of love, it might have ended differently. I don't know, I guess I don't really believe that, but still....

In a way, it's true. I did fail you. All that you gave me, whatever your real reasons might have been, all that time....

I gave you nothing.

You said you wanted to see if you could love me. That was your reason for the bet. I might be wrong, but I think that's only half the reason.

Seishirou-san, I want to give you what you most want. More than anything else, I want to grant your wish.

And then, if my own wish can be granted too....

Subaru stood before the mirror for a long while, lingering in that place of mingled hope and grief. At last he started, giving himself a little shake. Enough was enough for now—he had things to do. It was long past time for him to go. Brushing at his eyes, he glanced once more around the small, empty space that he had lived in, then knelt, zipping up the duffel at his feet—

“Sumeragi-san.”

Startled, he glanced toward the sound of his name. Then he stood and bowed to the girl in the doorway. “Kishuu-san,” he murmured, feeling his heart suddenly sink within him, and as he spoke he could hear like an echo that inexorable whisper from inside himself: that soft and bitter voice reminding him still that he was not free.

Chapter 7

A soft wind swirled into the cul-de-sac that opened from a certain quiet street, entering under the beam of a protective torii. It scattered faint trailings of snow across irregular paving stones and made the outflung branches of a small tree scrape lightly against the wall of the low-roofed shrine building that faced the gate. Minutes passed, and then the wind outside the enclosure freshened sharply and shifted away to the east, sending clouds scudding across the sky. As it did so, the breeze that had briefly entered the walled yard lost its force and faded away to nothing.

A small chime hanging by the door of the shrine had been ringing delicately. Its sound fell away into the silence.

The priest who had been sweeping the yard shook himself, as if awakening from a dream. He noticed all at once a man standing in front of the shrine, and wondered that he hadn't observed the person before. Somehow he had the impression that the man had been waiting there for a very long time.

Leaning his broom against the wall, the priest made his way over to the man, who stood facing away from him, gazing at the building. The man turned his head as the priest drew near, tilting it to look down at the small, somewhat portly figure that approached. The priest saw a flash of green and white reflected in the stranger's sunglasses: the white of his own robes and the green of the parka he had on over them for warmth. Behind those glasses, the man was smiling.

Can I help you? the priest asked humbly.

Why, yes, the other replied, his voice soft and filled with amusement. *I think you can.*

* * * * *

"He said you were leaving us."

Subaru looked at the hidden priestess of Ise, met her dark eyes briefly, and then glanced aside. He could still feel her presence in the doorway, though, could sense her standing there and watching him with her usual calm alertness. She was a gathering of shadows in her sober skirt and sweater, like the storm clouds she was named for, and as serene in her outward manner as those clouds were too, before they turned to thunder. Swallowing down his apprehension, he tried to match her quiet with his own.

"Yes," he replied. "I'm leaving."

"Why?"

Inwardly he sighed, though he was careful not to let his unhappiness show. He had hoped—well, never mind. It had been foolishness to dream that he somehow might escape, slipping away without any explanations. He had been so relieved, though, to arrive at the house that the six

Seals had shared and to find only Sorata at home. He had been grateful for that minor respite, and grateful also to Sorata, who hadn't demanded anything at all from him. Instead the young monk had simply listened silently until Subaru's words had stumbled to a close. *We need you*, Sorata had said then, and as Subaru had opened his mouth to reply the monk went on, *We need you whole. Come back to us, okay?* And Subaru had only been able to bow his head wordlessly, closing his eyes against the guilt and powerful release that trust evoked.

That trust...it had surprised him, but it probably shouldn't have. Of the seven Seals, Sorata might well be the one who saw certain things most clearly. It was easy to overlook the young monk's wiser moments, to be misled by his exuberant, boyish nature—and thinking of that, and of Sorata's headlong though still wholly futile pursuit of Arashi herself, Subaru felt a thin but oddly sharp pang. It was the pain of hoping that those two might somehow find a meeting place where they could come together, and of dreading that, after all, there might be no hope for them. He hadn't felt such pain for anyone in years—anyone but Kamui, whose circumstances had been so similar to his own that he wasn't really sure whose agony he'd suffered. It grieved him, and yet it made him feel as though he were slowly becoming a familiar person once again, instead of the stranger who for nine years had been walking through his life.

It also made what he would have to do that much harder.

Arashi was still waiting for his reply, he realized. He blinked and looked at her again. Slender and straight and unyielding as the sword she fought with, the priestess regarded him patiently.

"There's something I have to do," he murmured at last. "It's a personal matter." His gaze flickered aside once more, touching his reflection in the mirror uneasily before dropping to the narrow wooden boards of the floor. From the corner of his eye, he saw Arashi glance down too. Framed by the fall of her black hair, her face gave little away, as usual. Today, though, he thought he saw a glimmer of tension, a stress to her silken smooth veil of restraint that suggested she was trying to conceal some strong emotion. It was her nature to hold her deepest feelings close inside: to be a sky that hid its rain, inflicting neither her pain nor her happiness upon another person. Arashi preferred to guard her privacy; maybe she would respect his in turn.

"You're going to find the Sakurazukamori," she said, immediately shattering that weak hope. He found that it didn't really surprise him, though, that she would make that guess. He hadn't said even so much to Sorata, but it was what any of them would have naturally assumed. He had never made any secret of his reasons for fighting.

And that she would want to know, that she would insist on having the truth of it from him—there was no real surprise in that either. It was simply the kind of person that she was. Clear-sighted and incisive, never turning aside from what needed to be faced, entirely uncompromising in her determination....

"I already found him," Subaru said quietly. Although he dreaded having to confront her over this, he could not lie.

Those few words wouldn't be enough, however. She would never take that answer for what it

was. She would believe that he was still trying to die, but he wasn't, and he couldn't see how to explain it to her: how to explain a mystery as profound as the transition from one life into the next, as inscrutable as what shaped a person's deepest, most essential nature. He only knew in his heart that he was right, that there was nothing else he could do that would offer any hope, and his heart was as mute as it had ever been.

How could he make her understand?

"Sumeragi-san," she was saying as he groped for words, "there can't be that much time left. Surely you'll face him when the final day comes. Isn't that enough?" In her taut voice he heard an echo of how little time remained: a few weeks, maybe a month or a bit more. No one was certain. He could feel the same tension in himself, precious seconds slipping past with every breath. It made him even more anxious to be gone. "Everything that's happened so far, as terrible as it's been, has only been the prelude," Arashi was continuing. "You know that the real battle is still to come. Now more than ever, we can't afford to lose you. We need you to be here, with us."

"No—" and he hurried the rest out before she could respond, "that isn't true. You don't...." *Not as much as someone else does*, he realized, and there was surprising courage to be found in that thought. Taking a deep breath, he let it calm his nervousness, and he slowed, trying to speak patiently and rationally. "There hasn't been any serious fighting since the summer—a little skirmishing sometimes, but nothing that you really need me for. Mostly we've just been waiting. "And if they *had* needed him—no, he was right that they didn't, and it would do no good to worry about things that weren't so. He caught at certainty again and clung to it, a talisman against the difficulty of telling her the truth. "You won't need me for the fight until the final day comes, until the Shinken have been released. And I...I have to go. I...."

"Then not for the fight."

Blinking again, Subaru refocused on Arashi. This time it was her glance that slid sideways, avoiding his in what almost seemed like a flinch. Her fingertips played against the fabric of her skirt, smoothing it unnecessarily. "For us," she murmured, surprising him with the softness of her tone, "if not for any other reason, then because we need you to stay. Because we...because I...." She faltered, then inclined into a bow, her fingers knotting in the cloth to still themselves, her hair falling forward around her face once more. "*Please*," she said, the word low and urgent. Subaru stared at her, and for an instant he thought he saw something tremble in her gaze, an unusually strong flowering of care or concern, its dark petals shimmering, before she ducked her head even further, cutting off that glimpse...a glimpse of something unfamiliar, something outside her ordinary self-sufficiency.

Something that did, after all, suggest a certain need.

He was gaping, Subaru discovered. Shutting his mouth, he quickly glanced away. That wasn't what he thought it was...was it?

That Arashi felt something for him?

Oh...oh no.

No.

It could be that he was imagining it, that being under the spell of his own feelings he saw those feelings reflected everywhere, but he didn't think so. He certainly wasn't imagining her distress. Maybe Arashi didn't realize it herself, didn't fully recognize what had prompted her to make such an extraordinary outburst, but something was most definitely there.

And he found that he couldn't tell her the whole truth, not after that. Even if what she felt was only the barest stirrings of attraction, as he thought it might be, even though it might be kinder in the long run to be as blunt as possible, to tell her that he was leaving because he was given over to one of the greatest of their collected enemies, to make her see that she had nothing that could weigh against that love—he couldn't do it to her.

But neither should he lead her on....

It's no good, he thought despairingly, suffering for her sake, for what he imagined that she must be feeling. *It's no good at all. If we had met in some other time, some other world, then maybe...but even then, I don't think it would have worked out. In some ways you and I are very much alike, and maybe that's what you see in me: a quiet person, a private person, someone unworldly, like you. But Kishuu-san, I think we're too similar. There's no space between us for anything to grow. Maybe it has something to do with being a magical or spiritual person, but...we go to what's opposite us, always.*

And that might be part of it too, that she sensed on some level that he was not for her and therefore he was safe: a distant fellow star, traveling his destined pattern but never coming near, something to be longed for but always out of reach. Nothing that could change the order of her world.

It was a world he understood so well. The resolve that he had misplaced came out from its eclipse, a slow and steady dawning of light. "Waiting," he said softly but with a certain vehemence. Arashi straightened, her expression surprised. "All my life, that's all I've done—and you too, Kishuu-san. Isn't that right?" He met her gaze, noting her puzzlement and slight, startled affront. "It's been the same for all of us, all the ones from the temples and shrines and magical families. All this time being prepared for that final day, even before we knew anything about it. Even before we could understand." He hesitated, then kept on, fumbling his way through the unfolding thought, trying to encompass in words his frustration and urgency so that she might understand. "Aoki-san, what he's suffered...even so, I envy him. I envy him because again and again he chooses this fight. He chooses it of his own free will."

And Kasumi-san, too, he thought, *who of us all has the least reason to be involved*. The two of them...the value of their gift to the human world awed him, now that he thought about it: the sacrifices they made not merely because they had been created for this battle but because they chose it as well, even knowing the price they might be forced to pay. They fought despite that risk.

They fought because they loved.

Whether it was devotion to the memories of particular people and the things that those

people had cared for, as it was for Seiichirou, or whether it was Karen's open-heartedness toward everyone who was lost or lonely, that compassion made all the difference.

And Kamui too—despite everything that the shapers of his destiny had done to destroy any personal attachment, still, Subaru knew, Kamui was in this struggle because there had been people that he had loved, and even though one of those people was dead and the other was sundered irreparably from him, he had never ceased to think of their happiness. That love was what guided him still, what gave meaning to a fight that otherwise would be a heartless, soulless thing, an empty moving of pieces upon a cosmic board.

And Sorata—you, too? Is that why...?

He saw it then, suddenly, brilliantly: a brief glimpse of what the monk from Kouyasan must have seen. It was a hope so very much like his own. He and Arashi stared at each other from across the room, and as he looked deeply into her—really looked—he realized that she simply wouldn't understand. Even the subtle attraction that she felt for him was something she was largely blind to, whether because she didn't know how to read the character of her own emotions or because she didn't want to know. She was so self-contained in her dedication, so ingrained with tradition and the necessity for restraint, the stirrings of the heart must seem at best a distraction, and at worst a threat. No wonder she was always so baffled by Sorata's devotion.

But Kishuu-san, there's so much more than all of this. Sorata knows it, and now I can remember. I had a dream once—a dream that I'll never achieve, but I won't forget it again. I won't forget what it was like, to dream of an ordinary life.

Kishuu-san, I wonder—what do you dream of?

What kind of world would you build?

"So you're giving up?" Arashi demanded, and there was outrage in her voice for all that it remained measured. He could almost hear the ring of metal, could almost see the blade's flash in her eyes. "You're choosing to abandon your place, just because you're tired of waiting? Is that how you honor the ones who've already paid in blood and in grief—the ones who've suffered?" *Like Aoki-san*, and hearing the accusation that she did not speak, he shut his own eyes against it, and against the memories—

—of the liquid red veil that fell thickly, drop by drop, inside a doorway, partially hiding the room beyond, and Aoki Seiichirou standing transfixed before that curtain, his back to the rest of them as he stared through at what it concealed—

—his anguished, stricken cry—

"Do you really care so little for the future of the earth?" Relentlessly, one after another, Arashi's words fell into his soul. Each one settled there, each one leaving its mark like those slow rains of blood that were seared into his memory, each one a death that he had failed to prevent.

Hokuto.

Kotori.

Seiichirou's wife and child....

...a little girl, under a blossoming sakura tree.

"Do you care about *nothing*?"

"No!" There was a flash of mild shock in Arashi's face; he answered her more gently, though he couldn't keep the pain from his voice. "I do care. I care about all of you." It seemed as though she'd forgotten or perhaps just laid aside her more personal appeal, but he thought that she might want to hear those words anyway. And they were true, so true...for him, caring for anything meant caring for everything, and it had left him suspended where he would far rather not be, caught between one side and the other. "That people are being hurt as a result of this war...I do care about it," he said. "That what we do matters...I understand."

"But for you it isn't the important thing," Arashi murmured in reply, "and of what's important to you, the past matters most of all. Am I right?"

Subaru sighed. "No—although for a long time that was true, I'll admit it. But I was wrong. The past is gone. It can't be changed, and it isn't *here*, just as the future isn't here, with us, now. The future doesn't even exist until a choice is made, to do one thing or another. To fight only for the sake of the past that was or the future that might come to be...it's a mistake." Realizing something that he hadn't known before, Subaru drew in a quiet breath. "That's exactly what the Dragons of Earth are doing: just doing everything in accordance with their hoped-for future. But because they've decided that the future is so important, they don't even see what lies between then and now. That's why they fight so fiercely and unfeelingly—because for them there's only 'the future' and nothing else.

"I was like that too, for a long time, thinking only, 'when that day comes, I'll do one thing.' That's why my life has been an empty space. My whole life, just spent waiting for some distant fulfillment...but the present is the only thing we can ever possess."

"But the future...."

"That isn't what we're fighting for, is it? We're fighting to save the 'now.' All those people—we're not fighting to decide the future for them, because we don't have that right. No one group could ever have that right." He shook his head. "We're fighting so that they can decide their futures for themselves. That's what I believe." Turning to glance at Arashi, he was surprised to find himself smiling, having stumbled upon the conviction that he'd longed for and yet hadn't really owned until then. Arashi's dark eyes flickered; he wondered what she'd seen.

"Maybe you're right," he went on, "and maybe I'm needed here, but there's another need too, one that's been waiting for me to answer it for a very long time. If I don't, I may lose the chance forever, so I have to decide. So I've chosen this, even knowing what the cost might be, because otherwise my life will have had no meaning. To be *capable* of choosing—that's what matters to me

now, more than anything else.” He hesitated, realizing how selfish that made him sound, and yet it was the truth. He added, “That we can make such choices, that we can choose for ourselves—it’s what makes us what we are. Even choosing for our smallness, for our imperfections...that’s part of what it means to be human.”

He’d always found it hard to express himself; the things that seemed so clear inside his own heart turned muddled when he tried to speak of them. It seemed, though, that for at least a moment he might have managed to close that gap. He could see Arashi mulling over what he’d said, and her demeanor eased. She relaxed, nodding to him slightly. She was hearing and seeing *him* now—the person he was, not the symbol she expected the Sumeragi to be—she was turning over the pieces of what he’d said in her mind, and although it was obvious that she was unhappy and still didn’t fully understand, for now it seemed that she’d accept what drove him. She made another fractional bow, then took a step backward, clearing the door for him to pass. He tasted sweet freedom in that motion, and for an instant closed his eyes to savor it. Then he bent down and picked up his bag.

“You have my beeper number,” he said. Hooking his arm through the small bag’s strap, he swung it over his shoulder. There was a second duffel on his mattress, and he turned to claim that as well. Everything the head of the Sumeragi clan owned now, in two bags—and himself too, the one thing that truly was his own, and that was already given elsewhere. That was all he had. The Kyoto estate and everything that went with it, he somehow felt, had never belonged to him. “If you need me—if any of you do—you only have to call and I’ll come.” He still wanted to offer her something, and that promise, as little as it was, was the best he could do. That, and the chance to understand...he wondered what else he could say that would be of help.

He glanced up and Arashi nodded once more, silently acknowledging his offer. Her silence, her stillness crystallized something inside him, and as he walked toward the door, toward her, he said quietly, “There really is so little time left. Too little, before the final day. But the future is being made now—every moment, it’s being made.

“Kishuu-san, don’t just wait.”

He stepped past her and into the hall; he was turning toward the stairs—

“Sumeragi-san!”

He looked back as Arashi took a half-step after him. Then the priestess stopped, visibly collecting herself. The hand that she had nearly stretched out to him fell back to her side as she whispered, “Forgive me.”

Subaru nodded gently. “It’s all right,” he replied. “You don’t need my forgiveness. You’ve been patient with me even when I haven’t deserved your patience.” He closed his free hand around the strap of his bag, not wanting to reach down and through his jeans touch those scars once more, not wanting to show how deeply they marked him, body and spirit. It had been Arashi who had healed him on that terrible night, on a suggestion from, of all people, Sorata, who had speculated that the magical shifting of muscle and bone that unleashed the priestess’s sword might be turned

to use upon another person. Just as it had been Sorata who'd ripped through his failing wards, preventing him from doing more harm to himself...those were debts he knew he never could repay.

"You healed me when I needed healing," Subaru murmured, "and I never thanked you for it. And now you've given me another gift. I owe you."

The priestess tilted her head, favoring him with the barest suggestion of a smile. It would probably take her a long time to sort all this out, but at least she was letting him go. He admired her graciousness just as much as her tenacity, and even more so the places where they met like this, in perfect balance. She was so consummately composed, so complete in herself...

No wonder she was lonely, he realized.

He bowed to her again, then turned for the stairs, sensing rather than hearing her follow him, her presence a graceful silence at his shoulder. "Do you want me to explain it to Kamui?" she asked as they walked.

Kamui.... Subaru sighed in resignation. "No," he replied, "I'll do it. I'll stay until he comes home." He hadn't been planning to wait, thinking that it would be easier on everyone if he just slipped away, but to do so would be wrong. He could admit that now. It was more selfishness than he really had a right to, wanting only to escape from a painful situation—and of all the seven Seals, Kamui was the one who most deserved his explanation.

It wouldn't be as easy as this, though.

"Of course he'll be upset," Arashi predicted, her words a counterpoint to his own thought. The two of them reached the top of the narrow stairs and began to descend. "But he'll understand...or if not, then he'll accept it. As long as you believe."

"I do," Subaru answered. His voice was soft but fervent. "I believe."

* * * * *

High above the city, grey clouds flowed across the sky. As they passed, the wind toyed with them like idle fingers playing with a length of silk: gathering and then releasing the filmy cloth, smoothing it thin until light could almost penetrate it before rolling it up again, like a memento to be laid aside. The clouds changed, moment to moment, and with them the quality of the light changed too, from the dimness of a winter day's uncertain weather to a flash of near-sunlight glimmering on the little drifts of snow in the courtyard's corners. Shadows appeared briefly on the shrine's white wall, cast by the tree's slender branches; brightness gleamed on the slickly wet paving stones, then faded away.

In the courtyard, dark eyes stared up at the sky, still wearing an expression of surprise. The light came and went upon them as well.

The man in the black coat lowered his hand from the shrine's front wall. He studied his work. With a nod of satisfaction, he stepped lightly off the porch, then turned to face the building, its

once-pristine wall now patterned with a certain crimson marking.

He pressed his palms together as if he were praying.

He was not praying.

* * * * *

The stairway was narrow and steep, and Subaru maneuvered down it cautiously, trying not to let his bags or his coat get caught up on the hand rail. His mind was restless, with a thousand other places to be and one place in particular, but he tried to restrain it to what was at hand: the worn, grooved wood of each step, the pale flicker of daylight on the floor of the downstairs hall as the December sun came briefly out from behind its cloud, and the necessity of waiting for Kamui, which meant that there was no real reason to hurry down these stairs anyway. He wondered how long the wait might be, and whether Seishirou would be concerned. Should he call? But Arashi would never forgive him if he opened up a phone line across her wards, a channel for magic to cross between two distant places. That was why the phone lay unplugged in a downstairs closet—that, and a well-founded suspicion of everything electronic and even vaguely computerized, a foreboding that had developed in the Dragons of Heaven since the summer's disasters. Even to page Subaru himself, they would have to find a pay phone somewhere safely outside the house.

For a moment Subaru almost smiled to himself. *Excuse me while I call up a Dragon of Earth...*no, that wouldn't be the best thing to say to Arashi.

The thought of the smile faded, though, before a touch of inward pain: the ache of secrets, the strain of balancing between those two halves of his life. Even if it had been all right, if there hadn't been any risk to the other Dragons of Heaven, he would have found it difficult to make that call—and there *was* risk to them if he called, of course. He didn't want to delude himself. As a Dragon of Earth, Seishirou would take any advantage that he was given. For himself, Subaru had no fear at all—he could give himself up wholly to Seishirou's hands and killing instincts—but the others' lives were not his own, and he could not betray them. He would have to be exceedingly careful not to lay temptations before the Sakurazukamori. He would have to avoid drawing the man's attention to the Seals any more than was strictly necessary.

But when it did come down to that—when the Dragons of Earth did move against the Dragons of Heaven, and it was inevitable in the end that they would—what was he going to do then?

Subaru sighed hopelessly to himself. To be a Dragon of Heaven, deep down at the very core of his nature....

To love a Dragon of Earth....

To be bound to that person, with bonds of love and long history and his heart's most singular pain....

Kishuu-san, I wonder, if you looked at me through the circle of your hands—would you see his marks on me?

Absently Subaru swung his bag to the side, to give himself a better view of where his feet were landing. He began to take the next step, and between one footfall and the next—

—a shuddering, a downward slide that began slow and rapidly gained speed, a sense of weight and solidity coming apart in all places, the work of long years and many hands' care crumbling into dissolution. A low groan turned into a thunder of chaos echoing through his mind and heart as something *fell*—

—a cloud of dust, rising from that falling, was being taken by the wind—

—the wind—

Subaru staggered, barely catching himself on the railing. He clung there as the shadow that had come over his sight began to fade. His heart was beating its wings frantically inside his chest, a bird trying to backwing itself onto a more stable perch; his legs trembled, and his grip didn't feel at all secure. Struggling with that riot of body memory, still feeling the sensations of falling, of foundations disintegrating beneath him, he reached out after the experience anyway, trying to catch an image of what it had been—but it was already eluding him in the confusion of “waking,” and the sudden disorientation of finding himself *here*, three steps from the bottom of a stairway in the house of the Dragons of Heaven. Standing there, looking down on a patch of daylit wooden floor, he couldn't feel any echo of that eroding wind. Everything was still. Dimly he registered Arashi's voice as she murmured from behind him, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” Later, when he could sift the recollection properly, he would try to understand it. But for now...he shook his head slightly and found that he'd regained his equilibrium. Straightening up, he reassured himself of balance—

A door slammed, and he froze, listening. There was a brief quiet, as of someone taking off their shoes, then the familiar sound of a light, impatient tread approaching, quick steps half-running in the downstairs hall. Kamui whipped into view around the corner, his head down and thoughts clearly elsewhere. Grabbing the bottom of the rail, he swung up onto the steps, lifting his gaze—he paused there, catching sight of Subaru, and those wide eyes widened further with surprise and then with a burst of delight that seemed brilliant enough to illuminate every shadow of the narrow stairwell. “Subaru!”

In the next instant, he registered the bags and the coat that Subaru had never bothered to take off. That rare smile vanished as Kamui's mouth fell open with the realization that Subaru was leaving them again. He stared into Subaru's face, hunting for denials of the obvious, and their eyes locked, those violet ones gone desolate and wild.

Subaru ducked his head and began to descend the last few steps.

“*Subaru!*”

Though the cry ripped at his heart, he didn't answer it immediately. Instead he took his hand from the railing, and as he reached Kamui he caught the younger Seal by the arm. With a gentle

tug, Subaru guided Kamui back off the steps and onto the floor, where the two of them could talk on level ground rather than in the awkward, in-between space of the stairwell. He was vaguely aware of Arashi as she brushed past, slipping down to the end of the hall where she would be politely unobtrusive yet present should any need arise.

Subaru released Kamui just long enough to drop the bags, then took hold of him again, gripping him firmly by the shoulders. He could feel Kamui's resistance to that touch, anger, loss, and betrayal tightening the muscles beneath his hands. Perhaps it was fatalism too that made Kamui try to turn away from him, that was closing Kamui's face against him like a temple gate: the experience of having had one's trust profaned too many times, and the growing sense that such betrayals were all one could expect from life. He was afraid that Kamui would break away from him and run, or, worse yet, would simply break—that Kamui would lose that passionately caring heart at last, and it would be his fault.

That Kamui would know the emptiness he had felt....

Closing his eyes, he bowed his head against that grief and guilt. He pulled Kamui's tense form against himself, enfolding the other Dragon in a deliberate embrace. "Kamui," he whispered into the startled boy's ear, trying to offer along with that unusual physical closeness the truth of his love and his longing to see Kamui unhurt.

"Kamui...."

"Shirou-san. Are you ready to go?"

Sunlight poured in through the huge window, making a near-silhouette of the Dragon of Heaven. He turned to look at Subaru, his hands knotted in a waterfall of brocade curtain and the halo of pale golden rays that surrounded him obscuring his face. It had taken a while to find him here, in this distant room of the Imonoyama mansion; having found him, Subaru waited patiently for a response. A little more delay would make no difference.

"Why're you calling me that?" Kamui demanded, his voice curt and defensive. "You never used to." Subaru's eyes flicked away from the teenager; he glanced down at the floor instead, perplexed. He wasn't quite sure what he'd done wrong. His dealings with other people had grown more awkward over the years: it was a blindness that he was used to, and that he generally didn't care about. Nevertheless, he made the effort to excuse himself, and as he did he fumbled after why Kamui might be angry, and why it would matter to him if Kamui was.

Why he would be even the least bit concerned about it....

"When I first met you, I only knew the title that you'd been given in the predictions of the final days," Subaru murmured. "Now that I know it's more than just a title, to call you by that name so casually...it'd be rude."

"Why?" Kamui laughed shortly. "Everyone else does it, don't they? 'The one who represents the majesty of the gods,' 'the one who hunts the majesty of gods'—who *wouldn't* want to be called that?" The words were fierce and brittle, crackling with a sarcasm that even Subaru couldn't miss.

Lifting his gaze, he saw Kamui release the curtain with a sharp, slashing gesture. *“It’s my name,”* Kamui snarled, as if daring Subaru to make something of that. Subaru couldn’t see the younger Seal’s face, but he could picture its expression—he knew with a precision that surprised him what the savagely luminous glare that it wore would be like. Subaru bowed his head once more before that imagined look, then closed his eyes as well when Kamui added, the boy’s voice gone soft without warning, straining against the tensions that the Seal was under, those pressures that could force something fragile and unyielding finally to break: “I’m starting to hate the sound of it.”

Subaru bowed his head still further. He knew what it was like to face those expectations. Having been what he was for so many years—the thirteenth head of his family, Sumeragi Subaru of the Sumeragi clan—he understood that burden all too well. To be seen always and only through the lens of one’s name, so that the symbol and the self became the same in others’ eyes, never to be spoken to as the individual human being but always in that impersonal way....

“But,” Kamui whispered, almost inaudible now, yet Subaru’s attention was drawn back to him at once, “but...I didn’t mind it so much...when it was you.”

That was other side of naming and being named. To have one’s name called in a special way, and by a special person....

He knew what that was like as well.

Kamui turned his face away. Against the light, his slender frame was an insubstantial darkness. Outside, at the top of the window, there was a brief flutter of shadow wings as a pair of birds sought a resting place among the eaves and then grew still.

“Kamui,” Subaru said. He saw the other’s head come up a fraction; he heard, in the silence of the room, an intake of breath. Saying that name again, carefully, thoughtfully, he felt it echo just a little inside himself: a small reverberation where for so long there had been no sound at all.

“Kamui....”

Then he was walking forward across the expanse of floor, and as he reached the other Seal it was as though the light had diminished, allowing him to see Kamui’s face. It was only an illusion—the light was no different, only his position in relationship to it and to Kamui had changed—but the result, Subaru thought, was the same. He gazed into violet eyes that reflected his own seriousness back to him: eyes that were gravely anxious but also yearning, with that particular, familiar ache. Reaching out, he laid one hand on Kamui’s shoulder.

“And you,” he said, for Kamui alone, “please—

“Call me ‘Subaru.’”

Chapter 8

He could still feel Kamui's shivering, which had started the instant they'd embraced, but those tremors were beginning to subside. Breathing a sigh of relief, Subaru held Kamui close, sheltering him until he could regain his self-control. Kamui would be embarrassed, otherwise, to have his grief made visible like that, when he tried so hard to be invulnerable and strong. Though nearly all the Seals had been with him in his greatest anguish, though they'd watched over him in the extremity of his sorrow, he still didn't like to reveal any weakness. He didn't like anyone at all to see him cry.

Because of that, Subaru thought, even now he wasn't crying, only quivering with the effort of holding back those tears. Kamui's slender body was tense and upright, his hands knotted in Subaru's coat as if to pull Subaru closer or to thrust him away. His head buried in Subaru's chest, Kamui swallowed once, painfully. He took a shuddering breath, and then was still.

When it seemed that Kamui was calmer, Subaru relaxed his grasp. Pulling back, he brushed a bit of hair from Kamui's face, then took both of Kamui's hands in his own. Kamui's eyes widened at the unaccustomed gestures, and Subaru felt a stinging pang of remorse. Kamui deserved so much better than this—this little tenderness, offered so late and after so much loss and suffering—and Subaru realized with a jolt that Kamui had a certain power over him, that Kamui could in fact hold him here, if the Dragon of Heaven chose to exercise it. The desire to protect Kamui, combined with duty and a growing sense of himself as someone who belonged in this place, on the side of people who were defending such things as love and human happiness...it was just strong enough.

But for him there was still that greater need, and Kamui had others who would stand by him. For Seishirou, there was no one else.

"Kamui," Subaru murmured, "you already know, don't you? You know why I have to go." Misery crumpled Kamui's face again, and he quickly turned aside. There was a long, anguished silence.

"Would you deny me the chance to resolve this?" Subaru pressed, at last.

"No." Though choked, the word was honest. Despite the fierce, defensive stubbornness that he sometimes showed the world, this was Kamui's true nature: a generous and loving heart, a heart more than capable of sacrifice. Kamui would give him his freedom—and even as that realization winged through Subaru, a soaring flight of relief and release, he gazed into Kamui's face and discovered that, for him, the price was after all too high.

He squeezed Kamui's hands and waited for Kamui to look at him once more.

"I promise," he said then, with all the seriousness that he could muster, because he wanted to offer as much as he could back to Kamui, given the constraints of his wish, "I promise. I'll come

back to you on the final day. Whatever else happens, I will not abandon you.”

The words were said almost without thought, in a flash of instinct, and then, once they were spoken and the promise made, it was as if once-solid walls around him began to crumble away. He could see...in the stillness of balancing between those two needs, trying to give himself to both, he suddenly grasped what had been eluding him: that for him, divided as he was, this was the best hope of peace. To live between those two worlds, in that place of tension, and to find his own form of harmony there, moving with the flow and ebb...he saw in a single blinding vision what he had always been and what he had been going toward, the shape and pattern of his entire life. He saw what he could do to heal and what was *not* his to do, and then he saw the price—

But until then, the chance for so much happiness.

Could he do it? Was he strong enough to live like that, and for the promise of that end? The answer flooded him, luminous and absolute: a simple and inexorable yes. He gave himself up to that assurance, falling as he'd always fallen, but attentively this time, with the hope of that one most particular wish, and in that moment of surrender he found the answer he'd been seeking all along. That there was a place, a brief and jewellike instant that could be his, marked off by conflicting necessities, and that it could be enough—*enough*, and with that thought a sense of liberation, a feeling of such joy....

“Subaru...?”

Slowly he came back to himself, still with that conviction, that soaring sense of rightness and grace. There was sorrow too—now and always, there would be that sadness—but somehow it only sweetened the happiness that he felt and made the fact of his feeling it sharper and more dear. Glancing at Kamui, he noticed a change in the young man's expression, its somberness dimly lightened by surprise. “What is it?” Subaru asked, and Kamui jumped and flushed, looking more than a bit embarrassed.

“N-nothing,” Kamui replied, “it's just...I don't think I've ever seen you smile before. At least...not like this, anyway.”

Had he really never smiled at Kamui? Subaru thought about it, then caught Kamui's gaze once more. He smiled again wholeheartedly, this time just for Kamui, because it probably was true—and it was a sad thing, to have been unable for such a long time to give something so small and simple, and yet so healing.

“You're not alone,” Subaru said. “You have friends, people who care about you,” *who would die for you*, he almost added, but it wasn't something that would comfort Kamui, “people who will never leave. If I were different, if my past had been different, then I'd stay too...but I can't. I have to go.” Sorrow drifted down over him like the falling of soft things, the delicate weight of flower petals, or of snow. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them to gaze soberly at Kamui.

“Everything I have to give is yours, everything but this. Kamui, I can't be something other than I am—not even for you, whom I love. I'm sorry.”

Kamui ducked his head at that, his hair falling forward to hide his eyes. Subaru could see the

tightening of his mouth, though, could feel the tension of the fingers twined between his own. “What?” he coaxed, and when Kamui didn’t reply he went on, “You don’t want to tell me. Are you sad for me, thinking of what I’m going to?” Gazing down at the top of the bowed head, the dark hair as usual windblown and wild, he murmured, “Are you sad for yourself?” Kamui jerked his head up again, revealing a stricken and guilty look, and Subaru smiled at him.

“It’s okay to be sad for yourself,” he said. “You don’t have to be ashamed of it. No one in the world can even guess at what you’re going through, so nobody has the right to blame you for being sad and angry. And there’s no reason to be sad for me.” Kamui’s eyes searched his face; Subaru returned that gaze without a flinch. “Even if I knew for certain that I’d die, I’d still have to do this,” he said, “and not knowing, at least I have hope. I really do believe that I’ll come back to you, Kamui. I wouldn’t have promised it if I didn’t believe.”

“But if you’re killed...!”

“We face that risk every day, just being Seals.” Subaru shrugged. “Because of who we are, none of us can be protected. But to face even this, and still imagine that I can make a difference....” He found himself smiling once more. “I’m happy. I really couldn’t ask for more than that.” Subaru paused then, hearing those last few words and realizing how they might be taken the wrong way. “Kamui, I’m sorry. After everything that’s happened—do you think I’m being selfish?”

“No.” Kamui’s answer was stronger than he’d expected. Those violet eyes held his own now, unfaltering; there was no shadow of resentment anywhere that he could see. “That time in my dream, at the bottom of my heart—I said that you chose well, remember? So I honestly don’t blame you, if you say that you have to go.” Kamui swallowed back obvious grief. “I understand it. I understand, it’s just that—it’s just—” His shoulders slumped, and he turned away once more.

“It’s not fair,” Kamui whispered, those few words painful as a cry.

Not that Subaru had chosen to leave but the necessity of that choice, and more so, the fact that so many tragedies had happened all around Kamui, and in almost every case there had been nothing he could do. Supposedly he held the future of the earth in his hands, and yet so many things had already been decided, either by the older generation who had set these wheels in motion or by the inscrutable workings of his own fate. To be told from childhood that his survival was essential, that he was important to the future of the world, and yet despite his power to be so helpless to save the people all around him—that was the source of Kamui’s anger, and also his suffering.

Subaru slipped one hand out of Kamui’s grasp. He touched the boy’s cheek with his fingers, and Kamui turned minutely toward that touch. “No,” Subaru whispered, scarcely aware of what he was saying, his attention wholly focused on Kamui’s pain. Kamui was as unguarded and vulnerable as Subaru had ever seen him, even in the deepest recesses of his heart. “No, it isn’t fair at all, is it? Nothing in this world is fair, but that’s the way it is. And yet, we go on.” Subaru looked at Kamui’s pale face, at the eyes that, had they not been closed, would be the living, changeable

purple of sunset clouds. “We love, even knowing that love ends, and that every person we love will someday die,” he said. “We keep on looking for love and happiness, every day until our lives are over. That’s the best thing that we humans have, I think: the ability to love and hope regardless. Even though we’re powerless and afraid, it’s because of that that we can live.”

From somewhere that improbable joy had come flowing back to him, lapping at his heart, making him smile—and then he started, coming back to himself, somewhat abashed at the way he’d been going on. “My sister would say I was defeatist,” he murmured, letting go of Kamui’s hand. “She always used to say that I thought too small. Kamui, with your power maybe you can make a world where there’s no unfairness. I think...I think I’d like to see that world someday. But anyway, no matter what happens in the end, I have faith in what you’ll do.”

There was no reply, and as the silence in the hall began to drag out awkwardly Subaru cast around for a distraction. He found one in the two bags resting on the floor. “I should go,” he said awkwardly, “I need to—” He started to turn, and Kamui seized him by the arm. Startled, he glanced back at the Dragon of Heaven. Kamui raised his head, his eyes struck by light, by the brilliance of a powerful emotion.

“You *will* come back,” he declared, almost savage in his intensity. “You will, because I’ve never doubted you in anything. So if you have hope for that, then so do I.” Without warning, he smiled, a smile that was almost shockingly beautiful, although no less fierce. “And if you don’t,” he promised mock-severely, “then I’m coming after you. The hell if I won’t!” It was pure attitude that Kamui was showing off for him now, a spark of the fire that Subaru had seen only in mere glimpses—that he’d felt as a dream of itself, deep in the subaqueous terrain of Kamui’s heart. It was Kamui, whole and complete: that strange mix of courage, sadness, and loyalty combined with the perversely stubborn spirit of a prickly teenager. Kamui’s smile flared out at him, lighting the hallway like a newborn star, and Subaru found himself smiling back involuntarily.

Then Kamui flung himself onto Subaru, locking both arms around Subaru’s neck. “I believe,” he hissed into Subaru’s ear, words that were part affirmation and part demand. “You won’t die....” And as Kamui’s breath tripped on the last words, breaking into a sob just as heartfelt as his smile had been, Subaru whispered back:

“No. I don’t think I’d dare to, Kamui.”

Still smiling helplessly into Kamui’s rumpled hair, Subaru held the boy close as he cried—really cried this time, an unrestrained and forthright flood of tears. There was more than a touch of hysteria in Kamui’s weeping, but perhaps he’d needed that release. He had fought so hard against letting the other Seals into his world, as if afraid that he’d lose yet another person to his destiny. For so long he had been holding back, desperately afraid to give, or to let go.

But Kamui, after all you’re very brave. Brave enough to love, and brave enough to grieve.

You have a good heart, a very human heart.

I’m glad.

Even if you’re “the one who represents the majesty of the gods,” “the one who hunts the

majesty of gods”...“it’s a human who has to decide the fate of human beings.”

In the end, this whole thing isn’t about “power,” anyway. It isn’t “power” that will decide our human destiny.

After a while Kamui sniffled, then pulled away enough to wipe at his face. Subaru let him go. They looked into each other’s eyes for a moment before Kamui smiled again. There was nothing else that really needed saying, so Subaru simply returned that look with affection, then turned away. He picked up his bags, swinging the one onto his shoulder, and it was then that he noticed the two Seals waiting partway down the hall, just the other side of the foyer. They’d probably witnessed his entire conversation with Kamui, although they might not have heard every word. Feeling a bit foolish, Subaru walked slowly toward them, Kamui trailing behind, and as he reached them he bowed once, briefly. Leaning against the wall, Arashi looked up at him, her dark eyes unusually bright. Sorata wore strange expression as well, although he cracked into his usual grin as Subaru and Kamui approached. He was standing very near to Arashi, with one arm propped up on the wall so that the priestess stood within the crook of his elbow. Arashi didn’t seem to have noticed.

“Now, you take good care of yourself,” Sorata instructed, wagging a finger at Subaru and adding a long-suffering appeal in the general direction of heaven: “This guy’s got no sense of self-preservation...don’t forget,” the monk bounded on irrepressibly, “because if you don’t come back, you’ll miss the happy day!”

Subaru blinked at the rush of words. “The happy day?”

“Yes! The day of my marriage to—*oof!*”

“Oh,” Subaru said, as the monk doubled over from a well-placed jab. “That happy day. I see.”

Arashi turned away from Sorata, who’d crumpled to the floor, and gave Subaru a look of deeply surprised dismay. “Sumeragi-san, please don’t encourage him!” she urged, trying to ignore the monk as he writhed at their feet, moaning something about the pain of love. “You’re only going to make him worse.”

“Nope,” Sorata broke in, “s not possible. I’m already incorrigible. Besides, Miss, just looking at you’s all the encouragement I need.” Arashi twitched and glared, giving the strong impression that she’d like to hit the monk a second time. Apparently she thought the better of it, though, and opened her mouth instead to say something else.

“Oh, would you just get over yourself,” Kamui muttered, his arms folded over his chest. Subaru glanced down at the teenager in some surprise. He found the sarcasm strange, maybe because he’d seen so much of Kamui’s sorrow. “The way you two’re always going at each other, people would think you *were* married.” Bewildered by this fresh assault, Arashi looked from Kamui to the monk and back. At her obvious confusion, Subaru found himself struggling against the terrible urge to laugh. Arashi would be upset, though, if he joined in the teasing also. He turned it into a suppressed sneeze instead.

Sorata, having climbed to his knees, was gazing at the priestess with starry eyes. Noticing

him, Arashi glowered. “Not one word,” she warned him.

“Why not?” Kamui put in wickedly, a contrary smile creeping over his face. “It’s not like you’re not interested. Wasn’t that you I heard upstairs last week?” Claspings his hands together, he trilled in a startling falsetto, “Oh, Sorata!” Arashi whipped her head around to stare at him with horror.

“That absolutely was *not* me!” she insisted, her voice rising dangerously. “It was Karen-san, making jokes!”

“Sure it was,” Kamui purred.

“It was!”

“Oh, Sorata,” Kamui sang out mercilessly. “Ohhhh, Sorata!—wah!” He skipped back a step in mock terror, turned tail, and fled for the stairs as Arashi took a step toward him. For a moment it looked as if the priestess might pursue, but she was halted by Sorata’s hand on her arm.

“Miss, just think,” the monk declared with rapture, blissfully ignoring the expression on her face, “if you said it was true, you could make me the happiest man in the world—*aughh!*”

“You know,” Subaru said, gazing down at Sorata’s now-prostrate form, “maybe it’s a good thing the end of the world is coming soon. I don’t think you could survive much more happiness.”

“Whew!” Sorata sat up, and the two of them watched Arashi’s back as she stalked down the hallway and vanished upstairs. Subaru hoped that Kamui had had sense enough to make himself scarce.

“Well! That was a surprise,” Sorata went on gleefully. “Kamui’s been depressed for so long that I’d forgotten what it’s like when he’s being a badass. Although he needs to work on playing nicely with others...anyway, I just hope his temper doesn’t come back too. I don’t want to be caught in the middle again, with him and Miss both glaring at each other. Especially when she’s already mad at me!”

“Um,” Subaru replied noncommittally. “Sorata-san, why do you do that?”

“My friend, you’re just not looking at the larger picture.” There was a familiar gleam in Sorata’s eyes as the monk folded himself into a cross-legged position and placed both hands emphatically upon his knees. “It’s always like this. If you’d ever watched any anime at all, you’d know that it’s the guy the girl can’t stand at first who winds up together with her at the end. Besides,” Sorata slapped his fist into his empty palm, “the greater the difficulties, the greater the obstacles, the greater the passion in the end! Ahahahahaha!” He stopped laughing abruptly and tapped one finger thoughtfully against his cheek. “Although at the rate we’re going, I might not survive that much passion either. Hmm.” Eyes closed, Sorata nodded seriously to himself. “That’s a problem.”

Quietly, Subaru sighed.

* * * * *

Subaru closed the door behind himself. After wishing him luck once more, Sorata had gone upstairs to apologize to Arashi; as he put it, “Being teased on all sides like that, and even by Kamui...if she started to cry, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself.” Subaru thought it unlikely that Arashi would actually cry, no matter how much her feelings were hurt, and besides, she’d seemed more angry than upset—but of course he couldn’t know her heart. And he certainly wouldn’t want to see her in any pain.

It was easy to understand, though, why Sorata had done what he did—the real reason, beyond his at best semi-serious answer. They had all needed it, including Arashi herself. The distraction that Sorata offered, the release from tension through laughter or through turning their irritations upon himself, was the monk’s gift to each and every one of them. The Seals would have fallen apart long ago without it.

Subaru smiled inwardly, hoping that Arashi would forgive the monk after all. She usually seemed to, or at least to forget until the next time.

As he turned and began walking along the shoveled-out path to the front gate, Subaru blinked in the sunlight. The thought occurred to him then that it was over—the difficult explanations were done. Seichirou was at his tutoring job and wouldn’t be back before nightfall, and there was no telling when Karen would drop by next. And Yuzuriha...he wasn’t even sure where she was. She was often away from the house these days: scouting with Inuki, she said. He couldn’t help worrying about her, even so—but he didn’t have to wait, because Sorata, Arashi, and Kamui could tell the others everything they needed to know. He had met his obligations, he realized, and the immediate future was swept clear in front of him.

For a moment, at least, he had found a way to live.

The choice...it wasn’t what I’d thought at all. To choose one side or another—thinking of it like that, as something forced upon me from outside, it was a decision without any meaning. But in the end, the choice that I made was so very simple: to love, and to accept that I loved.

Snowflakes lay across the path in thin, glittering veils, having been strewn there earlier by the wind. They crunched beneath his sneakers as he walked.

Because I love, I’m a Dragon of Heaven. Because I care about other people, I can’t be any other way. Subaru laid his hand on the latch of the gate. And more than just “other people,” there’s also you.

Seishirou-san, if humanity is wiped out, then you’ll die too. And you’ll never know...you’ll never even find what it is that you’ve been looking for.

So therefore, in loving you, I have to stand against you. By making me capable of loving again—

You’ve also made me capable of leaving.

Subaru found that he’d paused, gazing at the little drifts of snow that flanked the gateway. Now he shook himself and pushed at the old gate, struggling a little with its finicky latch. Despite the clumsiness of his gloved fingers, he finally got it open and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He

latched the gate once more behind himself, then looked down the length of the narrow, empty street. Above the walls that lined it rose the second stories and roofs of houses, and beyond that just the pure, translucent blue of winter sky.

Subaru smiled once more, lifting his face to the sun's faint warmth.

But what's to come—I won't be frightened of it. Instead, I accept. That's the freedom that I never found before. In surrender, in no longer fighting, I'm free at last.

I'm not afraid. I'm happy.

And...I'm free.

Turning from the gate, he stepped out along the sidewalk, and as he did he spread his arms in a wide, impulsive sweep, as though to embrace the sky and snow and all those silent houses. He felt the pull of the duffel bag as it swung at the end of his arm, felt that soaring leap of joy within his soul—

Until the final day, I'm coming home.

I'm finally coming home.

To you.

* * * * *

The wind had risen again, and the rolling clouds of dust in the shrine's yard were subsiding more quickly. They flattened and thinned themselves out until a tumbled skeleton of beams and pillars and the rubble of walls gradually began to appear. Despite the noise that the building had made in falling, the streets remained empty of people. The city, it seemed, was holding its breath. None of the neighbors had left their homes to look upon the little disaster.

No one had come by to assess the damage, or to mourn.

On the peak of a nearby roof, though, a man was standing, balancing with perfect ease, his arms folded casually across his chest. The wind flared the hem of his black coat around himself and stirred waves of dark hair across his forehead; light glinted off the sunglasses that dangled carelessly from one hand. There was a subtle hint of a smile on his face he gazed at the newly created ruin—as he looked into the vanishing clouds of dust, seeing neither the swirling motes nor what they hid but instead the momentary vision of a faraway place...

...of a faraway person....

As those clouds dissipated, Seishirou watched the image at their heart fade into nothing. He unloosed the last threads of his farsight and let them fall. Closing his eyes, he considered the possible implications of what he had just seen, analyzing their significance.

Subaru had seemed inordinately happy. He wondered what it meant.

Distant sirens were growing closer; one of the local people must have mustered the will to call an emergency team. Seishirou's eyes snapped open, and he slipped his sunglasses back on. Turning, he sprang easily across the gap that separated him from the next house over, sweeping

an illusion of blue sky around himself. It didn't really matter whether he was seen or not—there was nothing that any of these people could do to him—but he had a certain standard to uphold.

He touched for a moment on the neighboring rooftop, then leaped again.

Seeing Subaru like that, the brief flash of a smile that had belonged to an earlier time and place, to another person—it had been a trifle unexpected. Still, there was probably no reason for concern. In fact, maybe he should find it reassuring that Subaru was returning with such happiness. Apparently Subaru's desire to move in with him was genuine, as peculiar as it seemed.

Seishirou landed on the roof of a corner store, several houses away from where he'd been. Amused, he thought about their improbable circumstances—about what it would be like to have a live-in situation with the other onmyouji, to have him always around, day and night. It would be an interesting challenge, he was sure.

But before taking up that challenge, he was going to find a cafe where he could have a cigarette and a cup of coffee, and perhaps a nice pastry too. Or maybe a doughnut. He'd pick up a paper as well and read it at his leisure. There was no particular hurry; in fact, he'd prefer to get home after Subaru had finished unpacking.

Having decided that, the rest of the afternoon promised to unfold in an agreeable way.

Seishirou glanced back over his shoulder. In the distance, he could glimpse the signs of his work. Emergency lights flashed on the walls and roofs of buildings, and he could see a break in the line of houses where a minor kekkai had stood.

One more step toward the final day, Seishirou thought.

He smiled.

* * * * *

The unpacking had gone quickly and smoothly. Seishirou must have cleared space for him in the closet and dresser; there was plenty of room. Everything was meticulously organized, and Subaru had easily found where to store his few belongings—although it was awfully strange, and a little embarrassing, to be putting his clothes in with somebody else's. To be seeing, right next to each other, his and Seishirou's—

Subaru finished what he was doing and closed the drawer firmly on that thought.

Now there was only his writing box, which for the moment he'd left sitting on the dresser, and of course the bags themselves. Folding them together, Subaru found an empty space on a shelf high in the closet. It was a bit *too* high for him, and he had to jump to push the bags into their place. Turning from the closet, he spotted Seishirou leaning up against the door frame, and he almost sprang into the air again.

He stopped himself barely in time—did nothing more than start at the unexpected presence. He tried to control the frantic racing of his heart as well, and wasn't quite as successful. He'd been so thoroughly surprised, he hadn't even heard Seishirou come in, but it was more than that. It was

as if his wits were scattering, his strength of will being stolen—like a small creature caught in the predator’s gaze, pinned down in the grass by the flash of a shadow of wings.

It had been the same before, he realized, during that one year they’d been together. He had known this feeling many, many times—had felt it, every time that they’d been close.

Seishirou pushed off from the wall and began strolling toward him. As the man approached, Subaru tried to remember to breathe, slow, even breaths against the urge to panic and bolt. It helped, but he still felt as if he were that boy, helplessly enveloped in Seishirou’s nearness. All the old wonder and apprehension swept over him, threatening to leave him incapable of thought. Acutely aware of himself and of Seishirou, he fumbled after the still place, the clarity and certainty that he’d felt earlier, and as he struggled, Seishirou came up to the dresser and leaned on it, arms resting casually along its top. He gazed at Subaru, his manner perfectly composed.

“So,” Seishirou said, “are you all unpacked, Subaru-kun?”

“Y- yes.”

Seishirou’s glance slipped past him. Subaru noticed a moment of expressionlessness, so quick as to be almost imperceptible, and he guessed at what the other must have seen: the ghostly white of his shikifuku, clearly visible in the open closet. His heart lurched. Then Seishirou was looking at him once more, smiling, warm. “No problems?” Seishirou asked.

“No....”

“That’s good.”

A small, awkward silence fell between them. It dragged on, and Subaru didn’t know what to say to break it—didn’t know what he *could* say. Still staring at Seishirou in hopeless fascination, he watched the other’s gaze wander restlessly back to the closet, return to the top of the dresser, and finally light upon the writing box. Seishirou reached out idly, almost distractedly, and ran a finger along the box’s edge. As he began to lift the lid, the pressure of confusion and discomfort, of seeing him cross that boundary as if Subaru weren’t even present, suddenly became too much. Stepping up to the dresser, Subaru slapped his hand down on top of the box.

“*Seishirou-san!*”

And Seishirou was staring at him, startled. Genuinely startled by his outburst, and for a second those mismatched eyes widened, a crack in the smiling, confident mask—

In that instant, the world stopped all over again for Subaru.

He knew what he needed to do.

Catching his breath, he watched Seishirou make the adjustment swiftly, taking his hand off the writing box and drawing the usual smile across his face, but those things weren’t important. Instead, he stared into Seishirou’s eyes as one would gaze at the smoke of incense in meditation, simply taking in what was there, what they were, the one a flat, milky color, an opal that had lost its flame, and the other, as Seishirou leaned forward again, into a slant of late afternoon light, becoming a concentration of that fire, its amber brown struck golden by the sun.

I could lose myself completely. I could immolate myself in you.

I must not.

Subaru smiled at Seishirou then, and the man's forehead creased into what was almost a frown before he caught himself. Quickly, though, he recovered his good-humored expression. "Sorry, Subaru-kun," he apologized, not really meaning it, of course, but for the moment that didn't matter at all. Instead, in that one brief instant, Subaru had seen it—the person behind the cheerful, practiced mask. That was what he needed to discover, over and over again. To give Seishirou what the man might not even know he wanted, to answer his own wish too, he would have to get beyond that mask.

He even thought that he could see a way to do it.

Subaru let go of the writing box. Feeling strangely comforted by what he'd learned, he finally was able to relax into Seishirou's presence, to put aside that momentary fear. Remembering then what else he'd been wanting to do, he unclipped his beeper and laid it on the dresser next to the box. He noticed the quick, darting glance of disfavor that Seishirou gave the device, before that look was camouflaged by yet another smile. "Well," Seishirou said musingly, "so you still carry a 'pocket bell.' I'm kind of surprised. Although the Sumeragi family have always been big fans of technology, still, all things considered...." Seishirou trailed off, and Subaru nodded in understanding.

"It's not registered under my name."

"Ah, so one of your friends on the force must have arranged it." Subaru looked up, surprised, and Seishirou grinned. "I knew she made a mistake, giving all of you police records. Yamakawa-san, wasn't it—your old friend, the detective?"

Subaru managed not to gape at how Seishirou remembered things one would've thought long forgotten, or at the lightning quickness with which he fit those pieces together. Tentatively, Subaru nodded again. "Yeah," he said, and he saw the brief gleam of pleasure in Seishirou's eyes: a small victory, the satisfaction of being right. It struck Subaru as mildly exasperating yet funny at the same time, and he suppressed a little smile.

"So, what do you want to do now?" Seishirou asked.

Knotting his fingers in the front of his turtleneck, Subaru tugged at it absently. "I was going to take a shower and change clothes," he said. It would feel good to do that; he had been in and out of the same clothes for the past few days. He absolutely wasn't expecting it when Seishirou's arms came around him from behind, enfolding him completely in their embrace.

"A shower would be a great idea!" Pressing his body to Subaru's, Seishirou murmured, his breath warm on Subaru's ear, "Would you soap my back?"

"E-eh-! Th- that-" Subaru stammered, frozen with shock. Seishirou laughed out loud. Then, with a brief squeeze, he let Subaru go. "I was only kidding," he said as Subaru spun around to stare at him. "Subaru-kun, what do you want for dinner tonight?"

"D-dinner? Um, I don't know...whatever you want to make is good."

"O.K.! Then I'll make something really special to celebrate our first night of actually living

together.” As Seishirou spoke, he’d been melting toward the other room. Now he turned—and paused, looking back over his shoulder, one hand lingering on the door frame. “Take your time in the shower,” he instructed, adding with a perfectly innocent smile: “I promise I won’t peek.” Then he vanished, humming contentedly to himself. That sound was soon joined by cupboard doors opening and closing. Subaru stared at the doorway through which Seishirou had disappeared, and then blinked.

After another moment, he blinked again.

Seishirou-san, you didn’t give me a chance to answer you. An incredulous smile crept over Subaru’s face.

Because maybe I would have said...yes?

Turning, Subaru propped his elbows on the dresser and clasped both hands over his mouth as sudden heat flamed in his face. To take a shower together—really together, not like strangers in the sento sharing a room of showers or using the same tub, but in the way that Seishirou’s voice and body had suggested it to him—

Did people *do* that?

Ducking his head, Subaru recovered from the embarrassment and crazy, wild, inexplicable delight that followed that thought. There was so much that he didn’t know, that he had never even contemplated...he was terribly naive about certain things, he realized, so much more so than a normal person. But he could learn, and maybe, sometime, he might even surprise Seishirou.

A little bit of surprise might do some good.

Subaru’s eyes travelled back to the writing box. He rested his hand on its silky, polished wood. Remembering the startled alertness in Seishirou’s gaze, that moment of unfeigned honesty when Seishirou had looked at him from across the dresser—had really looked, and had inadvertently let him see inside Seishirou as well—Subaru smiled. He had known that it wouldn’t be easy, but as he regarded the box he nevertheless was completely and unfailingly happy, feeling that hope shining steadily within his heart.

One had to begin somewhere. Another idea occurred to him then, and for an instant his smile flashed more widely.

Shortly thereafter, he fled into the shower.

* * * * *

Preparations had been made, the pots were simmering on the stove, and now Seishirou was standing in the bedroom, listening. Through the bathroom door he could hear the faint hiss and patter of the shower, and the occasional splashing sound that let him know Subaru was in there, but nothing else. Apparently, even in the shower, Subaru still didn’t sing.

Feeling restless, Seishirou wandered over to the closet and slid open the door. He touched the smooth, slightly stiff silk of Subaru’s shikifuku. Stroking those ceremonial robes, he felt their

familiar texture, something that he remembered well even after so many years. Lifting a sleeve to his face, he rubbed his cheek against it thoughtfully. The robes smelled vaguely of incense, and even more vaguely of herbs that they must have been packed in at some point. They smelled a very little like Subaru, but not much. He probably hadn't worn them often.

Seishirou let the sleeve fall. Carefully he rearranged it so that the robes hung smoothly between the other clothing; he made sure that there was no sign that they had been disturbed, and then he shut the door. As he turned, his eye landed upon the box that Subaru had left out on top of the dresser. Immediately he wondered what could be in it that Subaru hadn't wanted him to see.

Seishirou cocked his head, but the sounds from the bathroom continued unabated. He walked over to the box and studied it thoroughly. There were no magical locks or wards that he could sense, no floating threads of magic that might trigger an alarm, alerting Subaru to his intent. Seishirou touched one finger cautiously to the lid, feeling for the presence of any kind of spell.

There was nothing.

After a final pass of his hand over the box, Seishirou opened it and looked inside. He smiled. Obviously this was Subaru's writing box; there were the inks and inkstone and brushes, and a neat stack of the cards that Subaru used to make ofuda. Seishirou had his own, concealed in a drawer in the kitchen under the guise of illusion. It wasn't so surprising, then, that Subaru hadn't wanted Seishirou to be handling his tools of magic. The Sumeragi clan had always been unduly concerned with outside influences.

Considering that, Subaru-kun, you're still awfully trusting, to be leaving this out unguarded.

The writing materials were on a small tray. Seishirou lifted it out, curious to see what was underneath. He was amused to find one of Subaru's old handkerchiefs, embroidered with that cutely ridiculous "S.S." monogram. The silk had yellowed, and the folds were deeply creased; it had probably been tucked away for a long, long time.

Seishirou picked the handkerchief up, and something small and hard almost tumbled out of it. He caught the object in the cloth before it could fall and clatter on the dresser. There were two things rolled up in the handkerchief, he discovered, and after taking another moment to listen and reach out with magical senses, wary of being discovered, he shook the objects gently into his hand. Fish...they were a pair of jointed fish earrings, brilliant in red and pink. Clearly they had been Hokuto's—in fact, thinking back, Seishirou could almost remember her wearing them, or at least something very similar. He wondered why Subaru had chosen to keep these earrings out of all his sister's strange accessories—what meaning they might have had, that he would keep them as a memento of her.

It was a very minor mystery to be sure, but it entertained him to wonder.

Rewrapping the earrings, he laid them carefully aside, then peered into the box once more. There was a white folding fan, a pair of old black gloves—one of the many pairs that Subaru had

worn as a boy—and between them, a small piece of paper. No, a photograph, Seishirou decided, one that had been folded in two. At some point the photo had been ripped in half right down the fold, and then painstakingly taped back together again. Seishirou picked up the picture and opened it.

He remembered it at once.

It was a photograph of himself standing next to Hokuto, on the sidewalk outside the veterinary clinic. That was the day Hokuto had just gotten her new camera, and she had badgered Subaru into being her photographer—not that it had required much badgering, as Subaru had been more than happy to be behind the camera lens instead of in front of it. In this picture, Hokuto was leaning forward, her eyes sparkling with emotion as she addressed the photographer. Seishirou, standing behind her and a little to her right, was smiling, but the light had caught his glasses in a gleaming reflection, hiding his eyes. It had been spring, and windy: his white lab coat was blowing out to one side, his hair had been whipped around his face, and Hokuto was holding her skirt down firmly with one hand. The rip ran exactly down the middle of the picture, between the two of them.

There had been a whole album of such pictures once, which Hokuto had brought into the clinic to show him. Shortly afterward, however, the album had had a little accident. When a person was a magician, it was risky to allow one's picture to be taken. Such things could be used against one, in a spell.

He hadn't realized, though, that this one picture had survived.

Seishirou stared at the photograph. There had been a time, years ago, when he had awakened in the night, grasping after the touch of a distant gaze even as it vanished, ghostlike, from his perception. He had stayed awake until morning, listening, watching, unfurling strands of magical perception around himself as he tried to determine who could have been observing him through the elaborate barrier of his wards. In the end, though, he had discovered nothing. That fleeting touch had never come again. For a while he'd been inordinately cautious—he had covered his tracks even more assiduously than usual, and he'd stepped up his plans to get out of Japan, leaving the country only a few days after the encounter—but when a great deal of time had passed without further incidents, he'd let the event slip from his mind. He had come to believe eventually that there had been no meaning behind that touch, that it had merely been some dreamer or restless spirit passing through.

Had it really been Subaru watching him, though, so many years ago?

Had Subaru come that close to him once, without his being aware?

Disquieted, Seishirou refolded the photograph. He went to put it back and noticed something else at the bottom of the box. Moving the gloves and fan, he uncovered a tiny, square piece of paper. Picking it up, he found written on it a single word: the kanji that spelled out *hope*.

Hope? Puzzled, Seishirou turned the paper over. He read what was written on the back.

Hello, Seishirou-san.

Seishirou stared at the paper for a good, long moment before he realized that the shower's noise had ceased. Hurriedly he replaced all of the objects in the box, careful despite his haste to return them to their exact positions. Closing the lid, Seishirou retreated to the kitchenette, where he listened intently as Subaru came out of the bathroom and began to get dressed. Nothing sounded out of the ordinary in the slightest.

Stirring one of his pots, Seishirou sampled the contents. He absentmindedly added a bit more spice. All the while, though, he was considering what he had discovered, he was thinking about what those things might possibly mean...he wasn't really sure what they meant, he realized, but he did know one thing for certain.

He would have to be even more careful than he'd thought.

Chapter 9

Sitting up in bed, a pillow propped behind his back, Seishirou was reading, if indeed it could be called that. He was working his way through the last and most inanely self-important of the New Age magazines, and the only reason he was even making the attempt was that in the past he'd occasionally gleaned bits of useful information about rising spiritualist groups from between its lines of fatuous prose. Tonight, though, whether because the more serious practitioners had all gone underground for the end of the world or because he wasn't paying proper attention, he couldn't even find that much. He should probably just give up and go to sleep, but he kept on reading stubbornly.

Of course, the reading would go more smoothly if his concentration weren't divided. While a part of his mind slogged through yet another article on extraterrestrials, the rest of his attention remained fixed on the person lying so quiescently next to him. Subaru was still awake as well, although his eyes frequently drifted closed in almost-slumber. From time to time, though, those green eyes would open fully, turning up toward him, and if Seishirou happened to be gazing back at that moment Subaru would start, then smile shyly, as if the only thing on his mind was a naive diffidence at being caught looking. As if Subaru were entirely oblivious to the now-buried tensions between them....

Seishirou wondered whether anyone could really be that oblivious.

Subaru chose that moment to reach for Seishirou's hand, almost as if responding to his thoughts. Although he wasn't precisely surprised, since he remained constantly aware of Subaru's movements, neither had Seishirou quite been expecting the gesture. Controlling his instinctive reaction, he instead glanced down questioningly, then smiled with deliberate serenity as Subaru laced fingers through and around his own. He moved his fingers against Subaru's in answer; then, frowning, he tried to find his place again among the welter of ads.

It wasn't that things were going so badly. In fact, if anything they were going rather well. Indeed, Seishirou could pride himself on how solicitous he'd been, on how skillfully he'd been playing the role of attentive lover. Subaru, for his part, seemed to have forgotten the incident of the writing box completely, as though it had after all meant nothing, and he'd shown no other signs of anger or conflict. Instead, he appeared perfectly meek and passive, and more than content to remain where he was, sharing an apartment and a bed with the Sakurazukamori. It was all very harmonious and very domestic, and it made no sense to Seishirou, who was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Disengaging his fingers from Subaru's, Seishirou resettled himself to a more comfortable position. He tilted the magazine at a better angle to catch the light. This experiment of living together might have been very agreeable, too, if not for the need to remain alert at every moment. Subaru had a number of appealing traits. If he had only been an ordinary person, Seishirou would

have reckoned the “relationship” about as perfect as one might wish. Unfortunately, Subaru wasn’t ordinary at all, and Seishirou wasn’t stupid enough ever to forget that. As a result, he was beginning to have doubts about this whole affair.

Seishirou made it to the bottom of the column at last. He sighed and turned the page. Certainly they’d have problems sooner rather than later, too, if Subaru persisted in his current nightly routine. Now that his health had been restored, it seemed he was returning to a “normal” pattern, which, if the last two nights were any indication, meant sleeping like the dead for three or four hours, and then getting up to roam for a while before coming back to bed. Of course, as long as Subaru was up and about Seishirou had to remain awake as well. He’d spent the last night lying alertly in the dark, listening, following every heard and sensed motion, wondering what that onmyouji could possibly be doing in the other room. It was already becoming quite annoying, and he didn’t intend to let it continue.

Subaru rolled onto his side, inching closer to Seishirou, his hand shifting to lie against Seishirou’s leg, a timidly affectionate touch. Seishirou flicked a glance toward him, noting the dark head nestling into the pillow, the half-focused eyes, the serious, somewhat uncertain expression, as if Subaru wasn’t sure that he was allowed to be doing this, and then the faint, self-deprecating smile as he apparently decided that it was all right and snuggled even nearer. It was like having a puppy around: a quiet, well-bred puppy too polite to whine for attention, which instead contented itself by pressing as close to its chosen person as it could get. Seishirou studied Subaru for another moment, then turned back to his reading.

Anyway, staying up later like this might disrupt Subaru’s inner clock, perhaps enough to solve the problem. An alternative would be to put a spell on him, but Seishirou was reluctant to do so. Not only might Subaru begin to learn too much about his abilities, but magic was a subtle power, inclined to capricious effect, and Seishirou was disinclined to bring it into this volatile situation until he had a clearer sense of what was going on. The experience with the healing spell had made him warier than usual, and right now there were just too many uncertainties.

Perhaps another solution would present itself, too. He’d see about that.

For the time being, though, he’d lost the thread of his article, and the words he was skimming no longer made even marginal sense. He went back and reread the last paragraph. Apparently, he discovered, “gray aliens” were undermining the earth’s crust beneath key metropolitan centers, but the “Pleiadian Brotherhood” would create a psychic field to lift those cities clear of the destruction by calling upon the energies of Star Age meditators. Seishirou snorted to himself, amused by that distorted mirror of the truth. Still, he supposed it must fulfill a certain need. Considering how overt the chaos had become, so that anyone at all could sense the danger, and yet only a select few knew what it meant and what was to come...for the rest, there was just that dread of the unknown future, and so they responded with violence, or despair, or the pathetic, futile belief that “good thoughts” and prayers alone could preserve them.

And all the while the future was closing like a door upon this earth. Hope died, and little

birds, and parents before their children; stones cracked deep in the ground beneath their own weight. Surely the end of the world was approaching, the natural order of things having been forsaken—and there was an onmyouji in his bed, running a slow hand down Seishirou’s leg in a way that was arousing a certain spark of interest, despite the fact that he’d thought that interest already more than satisfied for the night. Seishirou blinked, surprised and mildly vexed.

“What, again?” he asked, glancing down at Subaru. “Subaru-kun, it’s not nice to make your lover feel old.” Although he softened the gibe with a smile, it still had the desired effect: Subaru flinched, flushed hotly, and removed the intruding hand at once. It was so easy to manipulate Subaru, to make him feel guilt and remorse, or embarrassment—and at times like these, it was very convenient too.

Right now, Seishirou decided, readjusting his pillow and settling back, he really just wasn’t in the mood.

He returned to the magazine again and—dammit, he’d lost his place. Seishirou took a deep breath, calming that irritation, then plunged into the text one more time. Pleiadians...the importance of meditating for a safe future...cities flying through the air under psychic shields...yes, that was it. Closing his mind to other distractions, he willed himself onward. There were just a few more lines to go, and—

“What are you reading?”

He was *not* going to be diverted again. Seishirou held the magazine up and let Subaru see what it was for himself. There was a profound silence, during which Seishirou recalled the really idiotic self-help ad on the magazine’s back cover. Well, anyway, who cared what Subaru might think? Seishirou lifted the magazine higher in front of his face, shutting the other out. Focusing his attention in earnest, he reached the column’s end at last, and that was the end of the article too. He congratulated himself as he turned the page—and felt a decidedly unpleasant sensation as he discovered that the next piece was an interview with some woman who claimed to channel an “Ascended Master.” He’d had plenty of encounters with such titles in the past. Staring at the woman’s smiling photograph, Seishirou heaved a deep and noiseless sigh. He wondered whether a prolonged exposure to stupidity could eventually be fatal.

Still, if he got through the rest of the issue quickly at least he’d have it out of the way forever. No more New Age magazines in the world was certainly an appealing thought. Encouraged by the prospect, Seishirou began reading the editor’s introduction—and he found himself gazing at his own two empty hands, as the magazine was snatched away and flung to the side.

Although he was alert at once, Seishirou didn’t respond. Instead he listened to the soft thwap of pages hitting the floor somewhere off to his right, to the sound of his own calm breathing, and to that of the person next to him, which was somewhat more energetic. Turning his head, he studied the Sumeragi. Subaru was sitting up, the covers swathed around his hips, and he regarded at Seishirou with the fixed, intense look that he got only on those rare occasions when he was truly angry.

Seishirou returned that look levelly, although at the same time he was conscious of a distinct quickening inside himself. So here was the conflict at last. He had known that it would come. The divisions that lay between them were deep and wide; to believe that such could simply vanish was to believe a lie. He smiled at Subaru, a smile with no affection in it.

“No,” he said, very quietly.

Subaru tensed at that word, and Seishirou watched him carefully. The teenager he had known would have been abashed long since; this was the new Subaru, changed and definitely dangerous. Whole seconds dragged by, though, and Subaru merely stared at him, taking no action. Cautiously Seishirou shifted his glance to the right. The magazine had fallen to his blind side, and he couldn't see it without turning away from Subaru. It wasn't ideal, but he supposed that it would do for a test. With a measured lack of haste, he began to get up from the bed, and as he put one foot on the floor Subaru reached for him, as he'd half-suspected would be the case. *Too predictable*, he thought, hiding a smile. Pretending not to see that outstretched grasp, Seishirou brushed it aside, curious to observe the other's reaction, and Subaru grabbed Seishirou's hand, pulled it up to his face, and bit him.

“Ow!” Seishirou exclaimed, more from surprise than pain, and he jerked his hand away. He'd been expecting a bitter words, an argument or an attitude of reproach—or a spell of some sort, if this was truly a tearing of the veil that masked their hidden enmity—but not that, even gentle as it had been. He studied Subaru more warily. Subaru faced off against him, still wordless, but quivering with electric, vibrant emotion. Never the most articulate of people, he seemed almost to have lapsed into a subverbal state. Experimentally Seishirou made as if to turn away once more; Subaru went for his hand again, and Seishirou pivoted, catching the other's arm and twisting it. Putting a hand on Subaru's shoulder, Seishirou pushed him down, holding Subaru's arm out at a painful extension. Subaru stiffened and made a thin, brittle sound. After another moment, he collapsed onto the bed.

“No,” Seishirou repeated, firmly but without heat. He kept Subaru pinned for few more seconds, then released him and sat back. Subaru crumpled into a heap, pulling his arm to his chest and clutching it, his breaths ragged and forced. Seishirou waited to see what he would do next, but Subaru only curled up further, turning his face against the covers as if to hide.

Was that the end of the matter? If so, it was a bit anticlimactic. Seishirou watched until those gasps eased and Subaru lay motionless, showing no further sign of contention. Then he shrugged and started to get up once more. For the third time Subaru came up off the bed at him, and for the third time Seishirou turned back, blocking Subaru's lunge with ease. Predictable and stubborn and no less naive than ever—Seishirou hadn't been surprised in the least.

You're determined tonight, aren't you, Subaru-kun? And you still haven't learned. One would think that you'd know by now. If you go too far, if you cross that line into being a threat to me, I'll hurt you. And I won't even care that I do. Seishirou smiled. *Just like this....*

He lashed out his hand to seize Subaru, ready to subdue him and complete this game at last—

and Subaru ducked that grab with surprising speed, hurling himself toward Seishirou. Flinging one arm around Seishirou's chest, Subaru clamped his other hand onto Seishirou's shoulder, and Seishirou felt an abrupt disruption in the flow of energy throughout his body. His entire arm went dead.

Shit— Cursing his own foolishness, his constant forgetting of the fact that Subaru had of course been trained in martial arts, Seishirou threw himself forward, taking advantage of his size and weight to bowl the other over. They fell onto the mattress and rolled across the bed. Seishirou came up on top and tried to pull away, but somehow Subaru's grip had held despite the fall and struggle. The arm that still worked had gotten tangled in the covers—it was trapped beneath Subaru now—and Subaru had twined those long legs around Seishirou before he could sit up, pinning the two of them together. He couldn't get the leverage that he needed to escape.

He wasn't done yet, though. Seishirou bared his teeth in a feral grin. If he could just move his imprisoned arm a few more inches, he'd reach Subaru's vulnerable spine. Perhaps with the same intention, Subaru's free hand was moving up toward the back of his neck. Seishirou twisted aside, but Subaru tangled that hand in his hair and dragged him down. Subaru kissed him, bit him lightly when he didn't respond, kissed him again, all most thoroughly unexpected. Seishirou bit back in instinctual response. Then he drove his mouth down onto Subaru's: an inspired, utterly abandoned kiss. He could feel Subaru respond, at first with surprise and then with slowly growing ardor—could feel the other melting under that assault, the fingers on Seishirou's shoulder slipping gradually, one by one. Life was returning to Seishirou's arm, and he began to move it: he drew a sensual caress along Subaru's leg and up Subaru's side. He traced those fingers higher, his lips and tongue still devouring Subaru's, and as he forced the kiss deeper, more consuming, more passionate than ever, as Subaru yielded fully at last, his arms sliding up around Seishirou's body and his heart racheting wildly against Seishirou's chest, Seishirou put his hand on Subaru's shoulder and expertly popped the joint out of its socket.

Subaru arched against that stab of anguish. His cry, smothered by Seishirou's mouth, made no sound.

Seishirou finished the kiss to his satisfaction. Then he jerked upright, easily breaking Subaru's grasp. In a single triumphant motion, he caught Subaru's uninjured arm, wrenched it back, and pinned it to the bed. As Subaru writhed, he drew power into his empty palm, a brilliant flame of white, eruptive force. He gathered that burning power, tensed his fingers for the final strike—

"You're not old." Subaru's voice was fragile and harsh, the words gritted out against the pain.

Pausing, Seishirou eyed his victim. Subaru had ceased to struggle and instead lay watching him, that suffering gaze oddly dark in the flickering otherlight of Seishirou's spell. Aside from the sharp lift and fall of his breathing, he was quite still, but there was no defeat in that stillness, no hint of any weakness or surrender.

"Don't take anything for granted," Subaru said very quietly. "Especially not me."

Seishirou blinked once more. He stared down at the person that he'd been about to kill, and

Subaru looked back at him with perfect calm. Those green eyes were fathomless and somehow sad. The anger that had burned in them a moment ago was gone without a trace, as if it had belonged to some other world and being irrelevant had like a ghost been sent back to its proper place.

But...why? And what had Seishirou done, or not done, to cause that change? He found that he had no idea, and if that were so, if there was a level to the workings of Subaru's mind and heart that had eluded him, one that he hadn't anticipated and taken into account—if the premises that he had been working from might be utterly incorrect—

Then what had this night's dispute even been about?

As he looked into the unruffled quiet of Subaru's gaze, Seishirou felt an odd, puzzling jolt. It was as though he'd stepped in the dark onto a surface that wasn't quite where he'd expected it to be. Disturbed, Seishirou wondered whether the two of them were even playing the same game, let alone had agreed upon the same set of rules.

Nevertheless, one thing had become very plain.

To finish Subaru now, like this, would be as pointless as striking at water—it would be like trying to wound a glimmer of light or a reflection on its changing surface. His blow would pass through Subaru without opposition, killing the onmyouji easily, but what lay deeper, hidden from sight, would elude him.

Seishirou lowered his hand. He rested it on Subaru's chest, fingers spread, and the gathered power crackled against Subaru's skin. Subaru flinched a little, but his pain-soaked gaze remained unwavering. Unthreading his spell, Seishirou let the power flow away, thin streams of energy trickling from his hand and spreading over Subaru's body in a faint spiderweb pattern before fading out into the ambient. As the ordinary lamplight reasserted itself, he gazed into Subaru's face. He thought he saw patient acceptance there, perhaps relief, and a lingering touch of sorrow, but the reasons behind those things he could not yet determine.

Staring into those green, darkly luminous eyes, Seishirou smiled slowly and deliberately, and he thought he saw uncertainty flicker there as well.

He was missing vital nuances somewhere. There were too many things about this encounter, and about Subaru himself, that he didn't understand. But to kill Subaru like this, without even knowing why he had started this whole affair, would be an awful lot like losing.

And Seishirou was determined not to lose.

He eased his grip, letting Subaru shift to a less uncomfortable position. Subaru rolled over gingerly, a hiss of breath escaping as his arm was jarred. With a word or two of soft reassurance, Seishirou helped him to lay back, then took hold of Subaru's injured arm, applying a gentle traction to it until he could guide the dislocated joint over the lip of its socket and back into its place. Subaru's entire body shuddered; glancing at his face, Seishirou noted that it was even paler than usual.

"It's all right now," Seishirou murmured. "Everything's all right, Subaru-kun." He gazed down

at Subaru in his best mimicry of compassion, an expression of concern sliding easily over his face. He stroked Subaru's hair with tender fingers, touching the sweat-streaked forehead and the lids of those now-closed eyes. Let Subaru wonder where he stood as well: let him have his own doubts about which was real, the brutality or the affectionate caress. Seishirou realized now that he'd been fooled into letting slip far more than should have been revealed. He'd have to guard himself even more carefully than before. But he'd been playing this kind of game for a long time, and if he could keep Subaru off balance and guessing also, he was certain that he could win out in the end.

To face that challenge—to uncover what Subaru was hiding deep in that mysterious, feeling heart, while keeping his own secrets safe—

It could be very interesting.

Seishirou leaned closer to the onmyouji. There was a trace of blood on Subaru's lower lip, and with infinite care he wiped the stain away with his thumb. "Don't worry," he breathed, putting his mouth against Subaru's ear, his lips forming irrepressibly into a smile again, now that Subaru couldn't see them. "Subaru-kun, I would never take you for granted." He pressed nearer, his tongue slowly beginning to follow the delicate arcs and spirals of Subaru's ear. He let his weight settle back onto Subaru gradually, his lips traveling down onto Subaru's neck, onto the line of the collarbone. Subaru made a tiny, choking sound that Seishirou pretended he hadn't heard. Instead, he continued his gentle and inexorable attentions.

It seemed he was in the mood tonight after all.

* * * * *

Seishirou yawned deeply, then gazed at the coffeemaker, watching the steady, dark stream of drops trickling into its carafe.

It had been, he thought with distaste, an untidy night.

Oh, he supposed that it had turned out all right in the end. Nothing else really objectionable had occurred. He'd gone on to take his pleasure of Subaru; and then afterward, when Subaru had collapsed from exhaustion and the effects of injury, falling as if stricken into the oblivion of sleep, he had run the risk of calling upon the sakura's power to repair the damage to Subaru's arm. It would give Subaru something to think about, and maybe he'd even get lucky with that: finding no evidence of last night's play, Subaru might wonder if it had only been a dream.

Still, he certainly wouldn't count on it.

Taking a final pull on his cigarette, Seishirou crushed it out in the ashtray. He observed its last smoke rise, twine about his fingers, and then disperse. Physically he felt fine, if perhaps a trifle tired—he hadn't been sleeping as well as usual, with Subaru by his side. He'd reworked his protections meticulously, though, so he shouldn't have to worry about backlash from the healing spell. He couldn't afford to be careless, and especially not now, when Subaru was so provokingly inclined to make things difficult.

And there it was again, that disturbing irritation, that *annoyance* lingering stubbornly at the corners of his mind. Seishirou paused and stared at the end of his cigarette, his eyes narrowing. Although he considered himself to have won their last round, the victory had been inconclusive. The frustrating fact remained that he could not see his way clearly: he hadn't the slightest idea of what Subaru was after, what Subaru might be hoping to achieve. Last night Subaru's actions had seemed purely contradictory; they hadn't unfolded in any way that he'd understood. Thinking about them now, when the heat of the moment had passed...Seishirou was beginning to wonder.

The bathroom door opened, and he heard the quiet scuff of footsteps in the other room. Instinctively, he glanced up. He caught a brief glimpse of Subaru passing across the bedroom doorway, and he eased to one side, out of the direct line of view.

And was it really even worth it to continue this game, he mused—were the fleeting thrills that Subaru posed quite enough to warrant the risk? There was only so far that he could stretch the boundaries of tolerance, and this gamble was right at the knife edge of foolishness anyway. But there was still some chance that they could return to the pretense of being a loving couple, having tested the fragile borders of their detente—and after all, it would be a shame to waste all the time and effort that he'd already put into this. So even though patience had never been his greatest virtue, he thought he might persist just a little longer.

So he'd danced a gentle kiss on Subaru's cheek this morning, as Subaru had begun to stir, had murmured sweet greetings into Subaru's ear before coming out to put on the coffee and to allow the privacy that Subaru preferred for getting dressed. He was ready to show Subaru his nicest, most affectionate personality, to be faultless in all things, so that there could be no more cause for disagreeableness between them. Although a shattered illusion usually couldn't be repaired to its full perfection, with the proper cooperation, Seishirou thought, it could be done. Whether Subaru was pursuing some hidden agenda or not, surely some part of him still craved the fantasy of love and kindness.

In that case, absolutely it was possible.

The coffee was ready, and Seishirou fished in the cupboard above his head for cups. And if it turned out that Subaru wanted to insist on being stupid and contrary, then Seishirou would know it, and he'd end the game as soon as possible and have done. But until he was certain of that, he'd continue playing—and since Subaru was probably almost finished in the bedroom, he'd better put on his happy face and be prepared. Seishirou whistled a note or two as he delved into the cupboard once more, and then into the refrigerator, hunting down sugar and cream for their coffees. He put the kettle on for hot water.

"Good morning again!" he said cheerfully when Subaru appeared in the doorway. "The coffee's ready, and breakfast will be too in a couple of minutes." He set Subaru's cup at the edge of the counter, where it could be reached from any of the stools. Then, leaning forward onto the counter himself, he smiled at Subaru. "Want anything special?" he asked.

Subaru stopped in the doorway and stared for long moments. Returning that stare, Seishirou

wondered what was going on in the other's mind. Finally Subaru shook his head and began walking toward the kitchenette, his expression unwontedly serious, even for him. It wasn't the most auspicious start to the day.

You're definitely not as yielding as you used to be, Seishirou thought. *I'll need to make a better effort to reassure you.* Something ordinary, something mundane...perhaps some small talk.

What should he talk about, though? After a couple of days, he was beginning to run out of neutral topics.

"It's clouded up again this morning," Seishirou murmured as he watched Subaru gradually drawing nearer. "I wonder if we're going to have more snow." Subaru made no reply. As Seishirou cast around for something else to say, trying to keep their one-sided conversation going, it occurred to him that Subaru wasn't aiming for his usual seat. Ignoring the silently steaming cup of coffee, Subaru walked to the corner of the counter and moved deliberately around it to join Seishirou in the tiny kitchenette. He came right up against Seishirou, so close that Seishirou took an instinctive half-step backward. "What?" Seishirou asked, looking down at Subaru in bewilderment. Subaru flicked a glance toward him and then turned away, reaching for the cupboard that held the breakfast bowls. "Subaru-kun, I can get that for you."

"Thank you, but—I've got it." The subdued voice held no inflection. Rising onto his toes, Subaru stretched after a bowl and just managed to hook one finger over its rim. Inwardly Seishirou winced, picturing more broken china, but Subaru dragged the bowl to the edge of the shelf and got it down without incident. "Excuse me," he said, his eyes downcast, as he turned and tried to step around Seishirou.

"Um...sure." Seishirou leaned forward, leaving space for Subaru to pass. There wasn't much room behind the counter for two people. They brushed against each other as Subaru went to the rear of the kitchenette and began to scoop rice out of the warmer. Seishirou gazed after him, by now quite thoroughly perplexed.

What on earth was *this* supposed to mean?

As Seishirou puzzled, the kettle began to whistle. He took it off the burner and set it down. Subaru's behavior was uncharacteristic, and all his instincts demanded that he should take this as a warning, but as he looked at the blurred reflection in the kettle's polished curve, he could see only the small, ordinary movements of bowl and ladle.

Perhaps it was nothing at all and he was simply overreacting. Or perhaps Subaru was in fact trying to goad him toward some response. In either case, however, he should probably behave as though nothing were wrong—and if that were so, then there was something that he ought be doing with this kettle of hot water. He stared at it until his mind tracked back to the matter at hand, which was breakfast. Ah yes—he'd been going to make some soup. He turned to get the miso and the other ingredients, and he almost bumped into Subaru, who was trying to squeeze back past him in the narrow space. Seishirou halted at once.

“Subaru-kun,” he said with great patience, smiling as always, “you’re in my way. Why don’t you—” He broke off as Subaru stared right back at him. There was a bright, hot flicker of emotion in Subaru’s gaze, a taut crinkling at the corners of his eyes, and then—

“Maybe you’re in *my* way,” Subaru said sharply. He set the bowl of rice down hard. Head lowered, he pushed past Seishirou and stalked away, vanishing once more into the bedroom. After a moment of staring at the empty doorway, Seishirou’s gaze slid back to the abandoned bowl of rice and the few grains that lay on the counter next to it, jounced out by Subaru’s vehemence.

Apparently, that was the end of their peaceful breakfast.

Seishirou switched off the range with a decisive snap of its knob. Although his hands weren’t actually wet, he wiped them on the dishtowel. Then he walked to the bedroom door himself and paused, folding his arms across his chest, to consider what lay before him: Subaru standing framed against the window’s glass, his back turned as he gazed down at the street. The overcast sky made the room unusually dim, and in that dimness Subaru seemed a melancholy, almost severe figure, the stark blacks and grays of his jeans and flannel shirt a shadow against the clouds. The partly bowed shoulders, the hands thrust into pockets, the dark head tipped a little to one side: every gesture declared his anger and disaffection.

He was still very attractive to look at, though, in an austere sort of way.

And gazing at the slender, brooding form of his adversary, of his would-be lover, Seishirou experienced the keen sense of nostalgia that was one of the very few emotions he was quite capable of feeling: the sensation of looking at any lovely thing that would swiftly fade. All that was beautiful died and its beauty was lost to the world; he knew that Subaru would not in the end be any different. That truth cast the situation into sudden relief. It would be graceful and quick to strike from here, and besides, it was the perfect opportunity: to finish off Subaru’s life in a single, immaculate instant and forever put to rest the troubles of dealing with him, the suspicions and the ugly, restless, and disturbing doubts...and then those last few lingering days would trail themselves out, with only a few petty pleasures and the final cataclysmic end to look forward to. Seishirou hesitated.

Maybe he could still work the matter out. Maybe the only real problem was that Subaru was depressed. Seishirou had certainly had enough experience dealing with Subaru’s despondency in the past, and generally all it took to restore happiness was sufficient attention and the enticements of being listened to and comforted. Seishirou wasn’t sure that he wanted to make the effort this time, and yet....

There was something about that figure standing motionless against the clouds.

Seishirou flicked the light on, dispelling the shadows and casting partial reflections of the room onto the window’s glass. Subaru straightened up and the vague outline of his form that was mirrored in the window straightened too, parts of it appearing and disappearing as Seishirou walked closer. Subaru didn’t turn, though, as he approached.

Seishirou came to a stop behind Subaru and gazed at him for a time. At last, he took a breath

to speak. "I'm not an object," Subaru said, before he could get the words out. "You can treat me like one if you want. But I'm not."

Seishirou shut his mouth again. Subaru lifted his head. He didn't face Seishirou but instead continued gazing outward, looking into the distance across the rooftops.

So he wanted to have it out about last night. What a nuisance.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou said, with extraordinary softness, "are you saying that I mistreat you?" He took another step toward the Sumeragi.

"No." The quietness of Subaru's own voice matched Seishirou's perfectly. "You can't do anything to me unless I let you."

That...what Subaru said made not the slightest sense at all. Seishirou peered at him, trying to understand the mind that thought such things. "I see," he replied guardedly, at last.

"Do you?" Subaru looked back over his shoulder for one brief instant, the shadows in his eyes as alive as the slowly shifting snow clouds before he turned away once more. "I wonder...why is it that you never see me unless we fight?"

Seishirou drew a practiced smile across his features, skillfully covering a flash of irritation before it could betray him. He stepped even nearer. "What do you mean?" he asked, reaching to run gentle fingers up the length of Subaru's spine and onto the back of his neck, then down once more to a spot just between the shoulder blades. He could feel Subaru shiver at the touch. "We're not fighting now," he said, "and I see you just fine." Moving without haste, he closed the final distance between them and slid his hands around Subaru's shoulders, gradually pulling him near. Subaru didn't really resist. "Just fine," Seishirou murmured, laying his cheek against Subaru's head, breathing in the onmyouji's subtle, pleasant scent, "like this—and I don't want you to slip away from me again, Subaru-kun. Don't let shadows and ghosts come between us." His lips touched the strands of Subaru's hair.

"Please, don't...." Subaru didn't move, but Seishirou could feel the drumming of his rapid heartbeat. Seishirou bent forward, letting his breath, then his kiss, stir the fine hairs on Subaru's neck. Subaru arched a little, going up onto his toes as Seishirou's fingers followed the line of his throat, as they tilted his head back and to the side, an appealingly vulnerable extension. Seishirou kissed him there, a feather-soft touch where life passed so very near the surface.

Kissed him again, at the corner of his jaw....

"Seishirou-san...."

He shifted his fingers, running a teasing outline along the curve of Subaru's mouth. *Hush*. He felt the intake of breath against his hand, an inhalation that was almost like a sob. His free hand had been gliding slowly, sensually over the flat planes of Subaru's chest; now it slipped downward to press against the hollow of the Subaru's stomach. He felt those muscles tighten as Subaru drew in another, deeper breath. "Subaru-kun," Seishirou whispered, layering all the honeyed weight of passion onto the word, his lips shifting to brush Subaru's ear, "Subaru-kun, I...."

"No! *Stop it!*" Subaru twisted, and with a sudden wrench he broke free of Seishirou's grip.

Spinning to face Seishirou, his arms raised defensively to shield his face and body, he stood silhouetted in front of the window. “Don’t,” he breathed hoarsely. After a moment, he dropped his arms and lifted a bleak, wild, angry stare to meet Seishirou’s.

Seishirou returned that regard with one that was level and cool.

“So,” Seishirou remarked, “I guess you’re right. I didn’t see you properly after all.” He let his voice take on the barest hint of wintriness; he supposed that, given the circumstances, one could expect him to be aggrieved. “I thought that’s what you wanted all this time. But I see now that I was wrong.” He quirked a little grin at Subaru. “That’s kind of a double standard, though, isn’t it?” he mused out loud. “So it’s fine for you to demand my attention—to push yourself on me, like last night—but when *I* decide that I want to make love to you, it’s suddenly not welcome. I certainly didn’t expect something like that from you.”

“I...”

Seishirou overrode that faltering whisper easily. Subaru never had been very good at expressing himself under stress. “Still, I suppose that’s how the world goes,” he said with a shrug. “Everyone’s just out for himself in the end—but for people like us to be squabbling about sex, of all things—”

“It’s not about sex!” No sooner were the words out of Subaru’s mouth than he blushed furiously. Shoving his hands into his pockets again, he turned and glared at the floor. His modesty was incongruous with that awkward, aching sullenness, the bitter disillusionment that had so transformed him from the boy he’d been before. Seishirou observed the disparity with a clinical detachment. It afforded him a certain cold amusement.

You’re really not the person that you once were, Subaru-kun. Well, how could you be? Considering that on that day I broke you, when I found that I couldn’t love even the kindest and most beautiful of people—and if I couldn’t love you then, when you were innocent and pure, then how could I now, when you have changed so much? No, if there was any real hope of feeling for me, that chance is long gone.

Now that you can look at me like this, with anger and rebuke in those transparent eyes...how could I ever feel love for a person such as you?

“Seishirou-san,” Subaru murmured, his voice even more fragile than usual. “Last night, when I wouldn’t leave you alone, I just wanted you to acknowledge that I was there. That’s all.” He sighed, a scarcely audible breath. “Is that wrong?”

“You tell me,” Seishirou said neutrally. Subaru raised his eyes at that, and they were dark and wide, but deep within them a light was kindling. Seishirou watched it closely as it grew. He wondered what it was.

“I have a right,” Subaru said, with a slow flowering of unfolding strength, “I have a right to want and need things for myself, and even though I wouldn’t ask you to change for me, Seishirou-san, I still have the right to *talk* about these things: to have those wants heard, if not answered.” Looking straight into Seishirou’s eyes, he added, “If I didn’t want things for myself, I wouldn’t be

here with you.”

Seishirou could feel a frown building, and he made certain that it stayed concealed. Subaru’s words had their logic, true, but....

Subaru-kun, what you want, what you need...it’s surely no concern of mine.

Where had that anger gone, which only a little while ago had been so all-consuming? There was still a trace of it left, like a smoke against which other thoughts and feelings threw their shadows, but the flame itself had disappeared from view. It must still be smoldering somewhere in Subaru’s heart and mind, though, and it would certainly burst forth again, given the least opportunity. That was what Seishirou considered important.

So when Subaru murmured half-aloud, “But that’s not all that that I want,” a vibrancy in those green eyes that gazed inward almost as much as they looked out at him, Seishirou didn’t take the bait. Instead, after a moment for contemplation, he began to smile more kindly, letting his expression mellow from a cold hurtfulness into chastened, apologetic regret. He could mimic rather a remarkable number of emotions, considering that he knew them only by observation and by secondhand report. He wondered whether the glimmer of incipient tears would help convey remorse.

Just a hint of brightness, maybe. He didn’t want to overdo it.

“I’ve made a mess of things, haven’t I?” he said humbly. “Subaru-kun, I haven’t treated you well at all. But even though I can’t make it up to you for my mistakes, still....” Lifting his head, Seishirou gazed at Subaru yearningly. “Subaru-kun—”

“Don’t.” Subaru’s voice was insubstantial as his sigh, yet Seishirou found himself halted at once. “Don’t say anything else. It’s enough for me that you know.” Thrown off rhythm, Seishirou simply stared at Subaru, and what he saw left him amazingly perturbed. What was it, anyway, that Subaru intended by that—what made him so serious now, when Seishirou had been about to give him what he surely wanted? Serious and grave and a little angry again, yet so full of that strange light.... If Subaru didn’t want to fight him and didn’t want to let him make things right, then what did Subaru think this was all about?

Why didn’t he just give in—why didn’t he roll over as he always had in the past, the same way he’d surrendered time after time, even to his own imminent death?

It would be a damned sight easier to deal with than trying to figure him out.

Subaru took a half step nearer, and despite himself Seishirou twitched in readiness at the move. He gazed down at the Sumeragi, realizing that his rueful smile had faded, and not really giving a damn anymore. From that dangerous proximity, Subaru looked up into his face, and this time Seishirou kept his attention focused on where the other’s hands were, on whether Subaru might be thinking to surprise him again.

“I don’t want the lie,” Subaru said with unexpected fierceness, “and I don’t want the illusion. Don’t tell me that you’re sorry or that you love me unless you really mean those things. Because I won’t lie to you either. I won’t pretend in anything anymore. If I’m angry, if I’m sad, or if I’m

happy—still, I won't lie to you." His eyes fixed on Seishirou, Subaru sucked in another sharp breath. "I want to know who you are," he burst out, "I want to know the person you are, honestly—"

Seishirou took a swift stride forward into the space between them. The advance drove Subaru back until he bumped the glass. Putting a hand under Subaru's jaw, Seishirou forced his head up, pinning him against the window.

"Are you so sure?" Seishirou murmured, his eyes laughing coldly into those startled green ones.

Subaru swallowed tautly against his grip. Far away and ghostly on the other side of the glass, gray buildings jutted up toward the sky.

As Seishirou observed Subaru closely, he saw that spark of anger dance to life again inside the other's gaze. The dark, slim brows were furrowed with emotion. Subaru raised a hand to push Seishirou's arm aside, and Seishirou let him—then caught Subaru's wrist as he began to draw away. The barest of pressures on that spot where nerves ran close beneath the skin, a sharp pulse of energy, and raw pain crackled through Subaru's hand, knotting his fingers and making the blood drain from his already fair skin, leaving him deathly pale. Subaru tried to jerk his hand free, but Seishirou held it firmly, and when he lifted the other in self-defense Seishirou seized that one as well, redoubling the assault. Subaru gasped and shuddered, then caught himself. Straightening, he stepped forward into the attack, his hands thrusting back against Seishirou's: not a counterspell but mere resistance, a refusal to give in. Seishirou raised the pain a little, and then he raised it more. He increased that agony degree by slow degree, while Subaru stood and faced him, neither fighting nor surrendering.

With the bright, remote intensity of a hunting creature, Seishirou regarded the person shivering in his grip. Subaru stared back defiantly, his arms trembling with the effort, his gaze indignant and wretched but still filled with that steadfast light....

This really wasn't getting them anywhere, Seishirou decided abruptly.

Enough.

Releasing Subaru with a shove, Seishirou stepped away again. Subaru sobbed a quick breath, drawing his hands into his body and curling them against his chest. For an instant he seemed about to collapse in on himself, his shoulders crumpling forward and his dark head bowed—but then, incredibly, he stood up straight. He looked into Seishirou's face once more, and somehow nothing had been broken or profaned within that gaze. Anger, sadness, suffering were there, and disappointment, but behind those feelings there was something more. That curious composure, that stillness and that depth...there always was that mysterious and far off something, that secret that escaped Seishirou, no matter what he did.

Well, he reflected to himself, what did it really matter? In the end—

—who cared?

Calmly Seishirou turned away from Subaru. He gazed out the window, looking toward the

rooftops and the soft snow that layered them still. As he stood there, close to the glass, his reflection was quite visible: a faint outline, almost like a shadow. Against the gray buildings and the shifting clouds, he could catch little glimpses of himself.

Beyond that mirror, a single flake of snow wafted down through the air.

"I'm going out for a while," Subaru said abruptly. He stepped around Seishirou and began to walk away. In the glass, Seishirou observed the echo of that action, and his reflection's mouth curved up into a smile.

"Do what you like."

* * * * *

Seishirou had gone out himself, a little later. He'd walked the empty side streets of the neighborhood, had watched the flurrying snowflakes begin to fall in earnest, if not with much objective, the white flecks swirling down and up and sideways without force. He'd kept on walking through the flying snow, feeling its cheerful, careless touch upon his skin. Watching its aimless dance for patterns, he'd let it lead him onward through the streets, turning left or right according to the whims of the wind that spun those flakes into his face and then away once more, until the snowfall petered out at last without accumulation. After that, he walked on further still, until the gray day deepened into twilight. Now he stood on the rooftop that faced his apartment, the last of the evening's gloaming just barely lightening the horizon where the low clouds broke. A dim light gleamed in his window, where Subaru was waiting.

Fool.

Seishirou sprang into the air.

So Subaru had come back again, and he'd come back alone. Seishirou had observed the surroundings most conscientiously before breaking cover. No other Seal or Angel was anywhere in the vicinity—probably none were closer than Shinjuku. In the end, it was just himself and the Sumeragi.

That was as it should be, after all.

Like a dark bird coming to rest, Seishirou lighted on the cornice of his building. He jumped down about a meter into the untouched snow that blanketed the building's roof. Strolling through the little drifts toward the stairwell, he listened for any sign of magic far below him. He watched for any feeling of disturbance.

There was nothing.

Opening the door to the fire stairs, Seishirou began walking down the several flights to his apartment. He took his time. There was no hurry, not when his quarry came and waited so tamely, as if expecting that there could be some resolution other than this. The long years of the hunt were over: there was no more stalk and feint, no more pursuit, no more harrying of his opponent into confusion. The only thing that remained was that final crossroads.

That final action.

Seishirou came down the last flight of steps. Opening the door to his hallway, he went inside. As he entered the corridor, he stamped his feet lightly, dislodging the snow from his shoes and pants, but despite that his soles left small, damp patches on the hallway's carpet as he moved toward his apartment.

There was always a point in the chase when the prey stopped, turning to face the hunter. At that instant, as one met the other's frightened or defiant gaze, time crested into perfect stillness, a moment poised like a hanging wave. In that suspended instant, a person became keenly aware of the weight and significance of every gesture and that the choice of what to do next belonged entirely to oneself.

To kill, or not to kill.

And then, of course, one did.

The instant before the action, followed by the sure and inevitable strike....

That was one of the little pleasures of being Sakurazukamori.

He would go and look at Subaru again, and see what waited for him. Then, he'd choose. He'd let the moment reach its culmination, the peak toward which their fates had been ascending all along, and though it might be that he'd see something appealing, something to convince him that Subaru should live for a little while longer, he didn't think it likely. Better to take the occasion that presented itself than to wait for Subaru to become a real trial.

One way or another, though, he would decide it tonight.

Seishirou paused outside his door. Everything continued to be very quiet. He wondered what Subaru was doing while waiting for his return. Surely Subaru must guess that a denouement was at hand; perhaps he was waiting silently, watching out the window as night settled down over Tokyo. Maybe he was thinking of the lost years: of the way that the cards that he'd been dealt had been scattered, spilling around him in a gentle fluttering, and the last ones slipping away from his grasp tonight to fall toward a destined, tragic ending.

Seishirou opened the door to his apartment and went inside.

He stopped.

"Hello, Seishirou-san."

The lights shone cheerfully in the living room and the kitchenette, where Subaru was standing behind the counter. He was wearing Seishirou's apron—the one with a lobster on it—the strings taken an extra half-turn around his waist. He had a wooden spoon in one hand and a simmering pot in front of him, and in his other hand he was holding a package of instant noodles. He was reading something printed on the back.

"What's this?" Seishirou asked.

"It's dinner." Subaru glanced up, those green eyes inquiring. "Do you want some?" For an instant Seishirou just looked at him, making no reply.

"No." Seishirou smiled then. "Thank you."

He took off his coat and scarf and hung them up.

Removing his shoes, Seishirou stepped up onto the floor and walked toward the kitchenette. Subaru regarded him curiously as he approached. Ignoring the Sumeragi, Seishirou went instead to the refrigerator, and—ah, yes. There indeed was one bottle of beer in there, as he had thought. A taste that was bitter and unpleasant, to suit a dramatic moment gone decidedly sour.

Taking his beer and his dignity, Seishirou retreated into the bedroom to brood.

* * * * *

“Is it all right if I turn the light on?”

Seishirou said nothing in reply. Instead he continued to gaze out the window as he reclined on his bed in the dark. Leaning back apparently at ease against the headboard, his feet put up casually on the spread, he looked through the bright reflection of the doorway as if it weren’t even there, let alone the black silhouette of a person framed within it.

There was a brief silence as that person waited for his answer. Then the light in the doorway went out. In the dark, Subaru picked his way discreetly across the room; in the dark, he went into the bathroom, and only a very thin stab of glare slipped out as the door was closing behind him. After a moment, Seishirou’s eyes adjusted again. A scant outline of illumination glowed around the bathroom door, but he chose not to look at that either. Now that the lights for the most part were off, the window had become a gray portal, pale against the surrounding darkness of the wall. The clouds had begun to break earlier, and their fragments drifted mutely in the sky. A bit of moonlight was showing through.

Seishirou sat without stirring, as he’d sat for hours. Even his gaze held firm. It never shifted even when Subaru came from the bathroom, or when he began to undress in the shadows...only once, when Subaru turned from the closet and walked toward the bed, there was a flowing flicker of whiteness, a lick of pale cloth like a wave swell or a lovely flame, and Seishirou registered that movement: the graceful billow of silk passing by, caught for an instant by the dull, soft light of the moon reflecting from cloud and snow.

Then Subaru passed out of view to his right.

He felt the covers drawn back on that side. Subaru said a few quiet words. He made a sound that the other might take as a response, and Subaru slipped into the bed beside him, pulling the sheet and blanket up. He sensed motion as Subaru turned over slightly, and then the other onmyouji grew still.

The clouds parted further; the moon became more bright.

Slowly Seishirou turned his head. He studied the landscape of Subaru’s body beneath the covers, the peak of the shoulders falling away, as Subaru lay on his side, facing away from Seishirou, to the narrowing of his body, the slim hips and the long sweep of legs. “Subaru-kun?”

“Yes?” Subaru rolled over onto his back. Seishirou reached out and laid one hand across his

face.

“Go to sleep.”

Subaru fell beneath the spell without resistance, his eyes closing and his arm tumbling out to one side as his body relaxed. He made no struggle whatsoever. Seishirou observed that yielding with dispassion, wondering distantly how it could be possible that Subaru could fall to him like that without a struggle. After everything that had happened, today and earlier....

Still, it wasn't really important.

Taking hold of magic, Seishirou wove a spell around them, a tapestry of illusion mixed with dream. He sat up within that dream, placing his fingers on Subaru's chest; he stood, and as he stood he raised the sleeping onmyouji with nothing more than the lightest, most effortless touch of his hand. The bed and the four walls of his room disappeared, and the moonlight vanished as well, leaving just the endless, unlit blackness of that “other” place. Subaru floated weightlessly against his touch, and as he stepped backward, leaving Subaru adrift in midair, dark ruby skeins snaked in from every direction. Twining about Subaru's limbs, those strands ensnared him gently, lifting him higher still above the ground. A familiar motif and one that was well-used, but this time it was different: rather than branches against Subaru's skin and the fluttering white silk of his pajamas, it was velvet. Long ribbons of claret velvet, the deep wine red of the body's blood, velvet as soft as a breath, as a sighing wind—Seishirou called that wind to him once more as those bonds enwrapped his victim. The ribbons curled about Subaru's arms and body, more and more of them; they bound his legs together, and a single band lapped around his slender throat. They held Subaru aloft at the center of a web of sorcery as a pale, silvery shadow melted out of the darkness behind him.

Sumeragi Subaru hung cruciform in the air before the leafless sakura tree.

The faint wind breathed in the delicate net of branches. It lifted the dark hair away from Subaru's dreaming face and made him sway slightly in those cradling bonds, the white pajamas rippling about his graceful form. Seishirou looked at that picture and found it very pleasant.

This was the way it should have been, since the beginning. This loveliness was far better than any challenge to his skills—it was something that could sustain him through the final days, even until the end. Although everything faded away, although what was most pure and innocent could still be stained, the beautiful memory would be with him until the day he died. No one could take it from him.

No one.

It belonged only to him.

Subaru's eyes were open, Seishirou noticed. Subaru gazed back at him now, the evergreen color of those eyes like a rain-washed stand of pine, so clear and clean. Their expression was faintly bewildered and wondering, so guilelessly uncertain of where Subaru was and what was happening to him. It was a very familiar sight, to see that look.

“Seishirou-sa....”

Seishirou held out his hand. “Hush, Subaru-kun,” he murmured. He bound Subaru’s voice to silence with a single gesture, not wanting to hear things said that might distract him from this long-awaited pleasure. He was enjoying this moment before the end of Subaru’s life immensely, and he wanted a little longer to appreciate it. His eyes ran over Subaru hungrily, consuming this perfect scene. It made him feel a sudden rightness and fulfillment, as though he’d come back to some place that he’d started from, a place where he should have been all along.

Are you going to kill me now? Subaru asked.

Seishirou stared. He’d *felt* that soft voice, not heard it: felt it in the same way that one felt an amplified music or the reverberation of a distant explosion, as a vibration within the cavity of one’s chest. Subaru hung unresisting in the air, his only motion imparted by the movement of the wind. His eyes were fixed steadily but calmly on Seishirou’s. He made no attempt to try to break the spell, he gave no sense that he might wish to fight—the only thing he faced Seishirou with was that one soft question.

Seishirou smiled back at him at last. “Yes, Subaru-kun,” he said. “I think I am.”

Subaru bowed his head against the velvet bond that wrapped his throat: not in despondency after all but with a gentle yielding. It made the ease and grace of the moment complete. Moving in close to Subaru, Seishirou reached up to caress that acquiescent face. He was grateful to Subaru in some small way, he realized, for surrendering so exquisitely. He cupped his fingers against Subaru’s cheek, and Subaru responded, turning toward that touch. He leaned his head against Seishirou’s hand, brushed his lips to Seishirou’s palm, and Seishirou took in a quiet breath of surprise and satisfaction. Seishirou let the caress continue for a long while, and then, gradually, allowed his hand to slip away. He stepped back again, wanting to look at Subaru once more, and Subaru lifted his head to follow that motion, a flower turning its face toward the sun.

“Such sad eyes, just like before,” Seishirou mused out loud. “Only this time, why are you smiling?”

Because this time, I came in with my eyes open. Knowing the truth of the matter, and knowing what the consequences might be...I have no regrets.

“None at all, Subaru-kun?”

No. For some reason, that minute, enigmatic smile deepened ever so slightly. *I haven’t failed. I love you.*

“That’s sort of a different tune, isn’t it.” Seishirou put his hands idly into his pockets. “I think you’re a bit late with it, though.” Indeed, if Subaru had shown him this face before, he might have let the game go on far longer. Now, however, there was no more possibility of retreat.

Subaru couldn’t quite move his shoulders, but he inclined his head in such a way that it gave the impression of a shrug. *I’m not perfect*, he said, and the tone of that inward voice was self-effacing. *I never have been. I get angry and afraid, just like everyone else. I wanted to be completely honest with you, so I didn’t hide whatever I was feeling. But I think I could have done better. Somehow it’s always seemed as though you could read my heart, so I waited too long to*

...speak about certain things. I said that you were taking me for granted, but in that, I took you for granted too. I'm sorry.

Seishirou looked at Subaru uncomprehendingly, and that evanescent smile returned to Subaru's face. *Didn't you know? Even when I'm angry, I still love you.*

*Love...*there was that word again, Seishirou noted. It was the second time tonight that Subaru had used it. But what did it have to do with their situation? Love had been a game he'd entertained a long time ago, a fancy that he had played at with a sweet, oblivious boy. Then, as now, it had been nothing that really moved him. It had only been a pretense, although one with interesting and amusing ramifications.

Perhaps, incredibly, Subaru still failed to understand that.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou said, smiling up at the Sumeragi, confident now that he perceived Subaru's one hope, and also the nature of its flaw, "I don't love you."

That doesn't matter.

Seishirou's smile expired despite himself. It guttered and went out just like a flame.

How could that possibly not matter?

"Subaru-kun—"

I've loved you for a long time. Subaru's voice was abrupt and yet gentle. *I loved you without realizing it, and then afterwards, I...yes. Even then. Although I tried to deny the feeling, denying it changed nothing in the end. Knowing who you are and what you do, I love you.*

Even if you kill me now, that won't change.

Seishirou was still struggling with the concept. How could something exist that would touch on him so closely and yet was utterly beyond his own control? That existed someplace definitively out of reach.... He gazed at Subaru, floating in that vivid web of bonds scarcely more than an arm's length away, and he felt again the void that spread between them, a gulf yawning open right at his feet. It was a space that stretched out infinitely outside himself, the silence of an empty, vacant world, and far away on the other side, there was something...

...something....

Seishirou stepped back sharply. "What do you want?"

Only what I've always wanted. The words were soft and simple. *To be with you.*

To be with you. It was a small thing, only four words, and easily graspable, even if the ultimate reasons behind it were not. In the darkness of his dream-spun illusion, Seishirou held onto those words. He studied them and realized that they were absolutely true.

That Subaru wanted this.

Why?

Seishirou shook his head. He didn't understand that part at all, but the wanting itself...he knew that it wasn't a lie. More to the point, why had he even imagined that it was? In all the years he'd watched and hunted Subaru, he had never known Subaru to be deceptive. Why had he been so convinced that Subaru was hiding something from him, that Subaru intended to do him harm?

Subaru-kun, he realized, after all, you were right again. I really didn't see you.

The only thing I saw, looking at you, was myself.

Nothing, in the end, but myself....

That had been his mistake. He'd thrown across his perceptions of Subaru all his own intentions, his own inclinations. He had seen, not what was there, but an elaborate construction, designed to fit the piece that was Subaru into his understanding of the world. But the construction itself had been the lie, and it was only the sharp-edged clarity of this maboroshi world, where everything was stripped down to its essence, that let him see how badly he'd misjudged the situation. Looking at Subaru's nature and actions with clear sight, he had been entirely wrong about everything.

What should he do?

You know, Seishirou-san, Subaru murmured, breaking into Seishirou's thoughts, his soundless voice an echo of the silence, *all this time, I've been rude.*

"You, Subaru-kun?" Seishirou answered somewhat breathlessly, trying to keep his tenuous grip on understanding in the face of this non-sequitur. "I find that a bit hard to believe."

Still, it's true. Subaru smiled faintly, lowering his eyes as if in embarrassment. Maybe, Seishirou thought, that was actually what it was. *When I said that I wanted to stay with you, you didn't tell me "no," but you didn't tell me "yes," either. You just let it happen without saying anything at all. I thought it meant that this was what you wanted—but thinking that, maybe I've been imposing on you since the beginning. I was afraid to find out otherwise, afraid to ask you, in case you wanted me to go. But now....* Subaru lifted his head once more, his dark hair caught by the wind, the silken flow of his pajamas a liquid river about his thin, suspended frame.

Seishirou-san, will you let me stay? Until the final day, when our last choices have to be made?

Will you let me stay?

Until the final day...it was another small thing that Subaru was asking for, a miniscule snatch of time before the end of the world. It was something almost small enough to be held in one's hand. Something of a manageable size, which could easily be given away without giving too much....

Couldn't it?

For a long time Seishirou hovered at that brink, staring at the shapes that such a decision cast. At last, almost despite himself, he shifted his shoulders, a twitch like an aimless shrug. "Stay, then," he murmured, "stay—" and he felt a tiny, unmistakable change inside himself, a flicker of sound or sensation, like the taut clink of glass touching glass or a crystalline sheet of water fractured by a single, falling drop, as if the tension of an unnatural separation had been resolved in some small way.

As if he were free to relax into something that he'd been relentlessly holding himself back from.

He glanced up at Subaru's expression and saw something very much like that release mirrored there: an odd little look of wondering and surprise, as though Subaru had been so determined not to press his own yearnings onto Seishirou that he hadn't even let himself believe this answer could be true until he heard the words. That look unfurled itself gradually, gloriously, like the petals of a flower of light, until it burst into a smile of pure radiance that seemed to shine from Subaru's ecstatic face and eyes. Subaru's whole body shivered like a lute string, and he raised his hands unexpectedly above his head. The velvet bonds loosened and began to spin themselves out from around his wrists and arms in slow, ever-widening spirals. Unwinding from his body, they opened in growing circles like incarnadine ripples spreading across dark water. Seishirou retreated a step or two, his eyes fixed warily upon Subaru. Gradually Subaru drifted down through the center of those vanishing loops of ribbon, and as his foot lighted at the level of Seishirou's, touching invisible ground, the last of his bonds disappeared. The sakura's image winked out of sight behind him, leaving just the two of them and their long, white shadows stretching out to one side.

Just that, and the soft, caressing wind....

Seishirou stared at Subaru across the space that divided them. For an instant, looking back at him, Subaru seemed grave. Then a tiny smile returned to tug at the corners of the onmyouji's mouth. He took a single, weightless step into the gap between them, a step that by itself somehow bridged all that distance, bringing him right up close before Seishirou could move. Settling against Seishirou, he raised his arms with extraordinarily slow tenderness to encircle Seishirou's neck. And Seishirou found his own arms coming around Subaru then; he crushed Subaru against himself, a forceful and extravagant embrace.

Real—something that was real in the darkness, something that would stay, at least for a while—

"Fool," he whispered harshly into Subaru's hair, "*fool*," and Subaru murmured back:

"I'd rather be a fool than a wise person. Only fools know what it is to feel joy."

The maboroshi began to disintegrate around them, vanishing piece by piece. The wind wore at its darkness, carrying its substance away like blowing sand until the last fragments finally were gone.

In the unlit bedroom, Seishirou opened his eyes. He was lying on his back on the bed. For a moment, he stared at the invisible ceiling, then rolled over swiftly, half sitting up to reach across Subaru and turn on the bedside lamp. In the narrow circle of light he remained leaning over Subaru, watching the scarcely visible flickering of Subaru's eyelids, the shadows that moved along those dark lashes. Subaru took one soft breath, and his eyes fluttered open. They gazed at Seishirou's face without surprise or fear, twin pools of perfect calm. Reaching up, he put his hand against Seishirou's cheek.

"There's dinner left over," he said quietly, his words touching on everything that had fallen between them only at that single point, like a teasing, tangential kiss. "Are you hungry?" Seishirou

gazed back at him and saw a gleam of subtly amused affection, a shy playfulness, and behind those still that inexplicable light.

There was so much yet to be learned here, Seishirou thought, so much to be explored and played with, now that he was quite, quite certain that Subaru meant no threat, and until the final day, at least, there might be freedom from that bitter, so familiar feeling.

From that ache of loneliness....

Shrugging away the memory of that sensation, Seishirou looked again at those strange, alien things in Subaru's gaze—and then, he smiled.

"I'm starving," he replied.

Chapter 10

Subaru turned another page in his book, and then sighed a little forlornly. He wondered why his grandmother couldn't have added some footnotes to go along with the ancient text. There were the original esoteric diagrams, of course; there were star charts and the brushstroked lines of magical talismans, all intended to amplify the text, to draw the reader into its mysteries. The text itself, though, was inscrutably oblique, filled with riddling plays of hidden meaning. Just when it seemed on the verge of resolution, the book might divert into a Taoist story, or else into detailed, almost chatty descriptions of everyday places and things. One could feel quite distinctly the mind of the man who'd written it: a person who far preferred stirring up questions to giving away easy answers. The book was fascinating, really, and he could lose himself for hours in its many shifts and shadings of complexity—only sometimes “losing himself” meant “becoming lost” instead, when the interpretation an obscure set of kanji escaped him and the sentence that he'd thought he'd been reading correctly dissolved at its end into nonsense. For some reason he'd always found this archaic Chinese confusing—perhaps because the characters held so many double meanings, some radically different from the ones he was used to—and so although he'd read this book before and could remember parts of it, he nonetheless found himself struggling with it again, laboring over the details of each line just as much as with the author's whole thought.

Still, he kept working his way through it patiently, and besides, he was reading the book more for comfort than anything else: for the reassurance of moving step by step through its puzzles, and in the hope that the words and images weaving its world might touch some pattern of sense in his own. He was after the shape and the feel of it, but those things kept eluding him behind a wall of tiny, printed characters. He was always running into that barrier.

This one, for instance...what was it again? It was something that he absolutely should have known. Subaru shifted position, curling his legs up underneath himself, then frowned at the text one more time. “Ground-breaking,” as in the preparations for building a shrine? No, that wasn't it at all. Perhaps something closer to “earthquake”? There was a subtle breath of disturbance in the air, as of a person moving nearby, and a shadow fell over the page.

Putting both hands on the back of the couch, one to either side of Subaru's shoulders, Seishirou leaned over him.

Earth dragon.

“What are you reading?” Seishirou inquired, his manner jovial and curious.

“Kanroku, on geomancy.” Subaru found himself glad for the break from reading, and for the presence of this one most particular person, and...just glad. He leaned his head back on the top of the couch, resting it against Seishirou's arm.

“*The Kanroku*?” Seishirou seemed impressed. “The monk who brought onmyoudo texts to the Empress Suiko in the year 602? You don't find *that* in just any bookstore.” Bending further

forward, he examined the page, one hand lifting absently to stroke Subaru's hair. "I didn't know there were any printed editions."

"During the war, my grandmother refused to believe that the Americans would keep their word and not bomb Kyoto," Subaru explained. It was hard to keep his mind on what he was saying though, when what he wanted instead was to concentrate on that touch. This was all so very new, and he wanted to impress upon himself every moment: to hold each instant as close as he could so it would become a part of himself and then he would never forget. "Even if it was to preserve the city on cultural grounds, she still didn't believe it. She already was the head of the family then, so she was able to authorize the first printed copies of the oldest texts, and she spread them out around the countryside, anywhere that she thought might be safe. She wanted to be sure that, in the end, something would last." There had been other things too that she had carefully concealed, certain ancient treasures of their clan, and she'd tried to safeguard the family as well, scattering them far and wide across the country. Everything that had mattered to the preservation of the Sumeragis she had taken care to protect, everything but herself—and in truth, only she had ever faced real danger. Subaru knew that she'd spent at least part of the war in Tokyo and had experienced the devastation at first hand. Behind her reserve and the cold, fierce strength of her will, he'd sometimes glimpsed the echoes of that time. Years ago, when she'd first begun to instruct him about the future, he had seen on the other side of her clear gaze the darkness of that shadow. Those memories of a ruinous, heartrending loss....

Of a city in flames....

Sighing, Subaru went on, "Afterwards, some of the copies were lost. People didn't always know what they were holding, so some were destroyed after all, or ended up sold to old bookstores or put in other people's libraries. Grandmother managed to keep track of most of them, though. This is one of the house copies, the ones that she kept or rediscovered later."

Seishirou chuckled. "That was your grandmother through and through, wasn't it? Always with an eye for how to use the works of the present to preserve what remained of the past. She was never one to miss any detail either, no matter how small."

"The past was important to her, at least then," Subaru replied. "Later she seemed to turn to the future for hope instead, but still I think she meant to save these things, if she could find a way." He could sense Seishirou's interest in the book and in the threads of history bound to it; twisting around in his seat, he held it up, offering it to the Dragon of Earth. "Do you want to read this?" For a moment Seishirou looked startled and Subaru wondered why. Had he imagined that Subaru would withhold the book, just because it was something belonging to the Sumeragi clan? But it was only a book, after all. It was only one single copy from an edition of books, and even if it held a knowledge which had been in the keeping of his clan for many centuries, well, what did that matter now? Although his grandmother would never have approved, it was his choice to do this or not. And all things being considered, Subaru just couldn't see the harm.

“Thank you, Subaru-kun,” Seishirou said finally, a hint of something ironic and almost self-mocking in his voice, “but maybe later. Why don’t you finish it first? Besides,” he added, straightening up and taking his hands from the couch, “I need to do a little grocery shopping this afternoon.”

“Um, I can go with you.” Immediately Subaru bit the inside of his lip, wondering if he’d made a mistake. Maybe Seishirou had wanted to go off on his own for a while, maybe he needed a little bit of time to himself; but as Subaru gazed up at Seishirou anxiously, he saw the man’s eyes lower for a instant—a hesitating, almost thoughtful look—and then the slight, wry smile of acknowledgment that followed, a smile that seemed unfeigned, as if it actually might be real.

So that was all right.

* * * * *

“Subaru-kun!”

Subaru jumped, turning toward the sound of the call. “Mm—coming!” He’d been lost in the movement of life all around him: the swirl of people coming and going in this back street market. Picking his way through the tangles of shoppers and their children, avoiding bins and tables that jutted into his path, Subaru hastened through the profusion of sights, sounds, and smells, drinking them all in delightedly as he hurried after Seishirou: the colorful riot of flowers, fruits, and vegetables; the glimmer and gleam of fish; the dry sound of rice being poured and measured out in a swift stream; voices raised, arguing, shouting, laughing; the sight of faces wearing so many different expressions, the tide of the crowd as it gestured and gave and took. He finally broke out from beneath the canvas covers that shaded the market, reaching the street beyond, and as he came into sunlight he smiled with overwhelming happiness at being there in that place and on that day, and at the sight of the tall figure waiting for him down the end of the sidewalk, a bag of groceries crooked in one arm. Shifting his own bag to the other side, Subaru strode forward to catch up—

“Subaru-saaaaan!”

Subaru jerked to a halt. Whirling to face that cry, he stared at the fairylike figure who danced toward him in a twinkling of delicate, tight-clad legs, short flip skirt, and widely outflung arms. A large dog padded silently behind her, casting no shadow. Nekoi Yuzuriha skipped up to Subaru, trailing at least a yard of brightly colored scarf in her wake, then paused, clasping both hands together as if by that gesture alone she was keeping herself from flinging both arms around his neck in pure happiness. Her eyes sparkled joyfully in a face framed by cute, fuzzy earmuffs.

“Subaru-san, I knew it was you!” she exclaimed. “Inuki and I have been trying to find you all this time! Everyone’s been so worried, even though Sora-chan and Arashi-san said it was okay....” She trailed off, her gaze drifting past Subaru’s shoulder as her attention was distracted. “Who...?”

Subaru saw the awareness begin to vanish from her eyes, a firefly light fading out as her consciousness was lifted from her. She started tilting to one side. Subaru lunged after her and barely got his arm behind her back as she began to fall. It wasn't enough; he couldn't keep his balance and still hold onto her. He staggered, dropped his bag of groceries, and fell to his knees, throwing his other arm around her as well and clasping her against himself. He stared into her startled face as sleep stole over it, closing those wide eyes and replacing her surprise with the perfect blankness of a magical unconsciousness.

Something large hurtled past them, growling with fury and power.

Subaru twisted around, still clinging to the sleeping Seal. He saw a shapeless blur hurl itself at Seishirou—saw it reflect from the curve of a magical ward. The inugami rebounded into the air and then arced onto the pavement, reforming itself instantly into a canine shape. It growled again, a deep metallic buzzing that made no real sound but that Subaru could feel instead, thrumming like a second pulse throughout his body. The inugami crouched, its pale eyes blazing, ready to throw itself upon Seishirou once more as the man lifted up his hand in a deadly spell—

Subaru unwrapped one arm from Yuzuriha and reached into his opposite sleeve. Feeling the thin, crisp edges of ofuda between his fingers, he drew them out and made one swift cast. Deftly he wove his power through the cards as they flew, a quick, practiced pattern of energy. The four cards that he'd thrown struck their marks in midair: the anchor points of a ward. He closed off the pattern, and the spell shuddered at once into manifestation: a neat box enclosing the inugami in walls of swirling, shimmeringly translucent magic. The dog spirit raged inside them, melting into a snarl of pure energy that lashed against that barrier, searching for some weakness.

But the barrier held.

Subaru turned from the caged inugami. Its frustration and singleminded purpose howled in his mind. He drew Yuzuriha closer, cradling her head against his shoulder; closing his eyes, he rested his cheek against her soft hair. There was a moment when everything was still but for the inugami worrying furiously at the corners of the ward. Then:

"Why?" Seishirou murmured remotely, almost as if speaking to himself. After another long pause, Subaru heard him turn and begin to walk closer. The faint creak and tap of Seishirou's shoes was strangely audible over the crowd noise, that background hum of voices and movements seeming vaguely muffled, like something unreal.

But didn't any of those people see? Didn't they wonder about the girl who had collapsed into a young man's arms—didn't they notice that something was out of the ordinary and wrong?

No, Subaru realized as Seishirou's steps came right up next to him and then stopped short: the people that hurried past saw nothing at all.

Illusion.

The three of them had been drawn out of the flow of people into a world that had nothing to do with everyday life. In the midst of the crowd, they made a place that was perfectly still.

They were alone.

Turning his face even further aside, Subaru hugged the girl's limp form nearer. "Please," he whispered. "Let her go. *Please.*"

"And why would I do something like that, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru's eyes snapped open. The tone of Seishirou's voice, the familiar amused sound of it...the sound of a person who owned a particular situation and had no intention of doing anything other than what he chose. Who was testing Subaru, who was *toying* with him, like a child poking at a cricket to see it jump, or a scientist watching a specimen animal struggling to find its way through a maze.

What answer could he give to Seishirou that might open some escape for them all?

"Because I'm asking," he breathed. "Because I'm *asking* you to." Appeal to any sort of pity or human feeling was meaningless where Seishirou was concerned, but Subaru had no more logical answer. How could he argue against the death of a Dragon of Heaven, when for a Dragon of Earth the appropriate action was so reasonable and so plain? There was only the complicated fact of himself between Seishirou and a tidy strategic move for the Dragons of Earth, and the truth that Yuzuriha's life rested on Seishirou's regard for him was the only answer that was truly his to give.

Please...I know that I'm selfish to remind you of this, to use your own wish against you like this, but no matter what happens I can't let her die and still remain myself.

Still remain the person who loves you.

Please.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou remarked, and there was a rising intensity of interest in his voice, a curiosity that made Subaru's heart freeze with terror into sudden, brittle ice, "what if I asked you to make a choice right now? What if you had to choose between the two of us? Who would you choose—your little inugami master?" Subaru could almost hear the predatory smile curving about those words. "Or would you choose me?"

No....

Seishirou had turned his answer back on him again, driving him up against his own reasoning. If he dared to presume so much on Seishirou's "interest" in him, then how could he choose Yuzuriha? But if he didn't care about her enough to choose her, if she wasn't that important to him after all, then why should he even ask Seishirou to spare her life? It made perfect sense to a person who saw all things as definite—as being one thing or another, with no equivocation or compromise possible.

Seal or Angel.

Love or not love.

But Subaru wasn't that person.

And what hurt the most, as he writhed on the points of the paradox that he had to live by—even though it shouldn't, even though he *knew* better—was that Seishirou was being so cavalier about this. That Seishirou was risking their incredibly delicate situation by driving him toward the

very decision that he'd struggled until now not to make, and maybe for no other reason than that Seishirou wondered what he might do.

Maybe Seishirou wanted to know if he was still the same person—still the same softhearted person that the Sakurazukamori had marked as his own all those years ago.

Maybe he wanted to see if Subaru would betray him.

Stupid, *stupid* games....

"I can't make that kind of decision," Subaru mumbled. He brought one arm up protectively around Yuzuriha's head and closed his eyes once more, clenching himself into a knot around the Dragon of Heaven. That was all he could do: just put himself like a barrier in between them, neither fighting nor stepping away. Just as he'd always done, but not in self-surrender this time—instead, because to do anything else would start the whole slow slide toward an end that he wanted to put off for as long as possible.

There was a terribly drawn-out pause, an eternity of silence and the swift reverberations of his own heart beating, a caged, frightened creature inside his chest. In the distance, the inugami rolled against the ward like thunder. Then Seishirou said, very softly, "Is that so, Subaru-kun?" and the racing of Subaru's heart broke into stabbing shards of pain, the ache of having somehow broken faith.

There was another lengthy silence.

"Well, then!" The man sounded startlingly, unexpectedly cheerful, and the breath that Subaru'd been holding escaped him in a little gasp. Glancing up, he saw Seishirou step closer and then crouch down beside them, balancing the grocery bag on his hip. Subaru's lay on its side where it had fallen; Seishirou uprighted it with his free hand and began gathering up the items that had spilled onto the sidewalk. A box of little oranges had tumbled open; methodically Seishirou picked up each of the small, luminously colorful globes and popped them one by one into the sack. Bewildered, Subaru watched the brisk, deft motions of his hand.

Then Seishirou reached out toward Yuzuriha's face, his fingers spread, and Subaru tensed once again. "Wh- what—?" he began.

"Subaru-kun, she doesn't have to remember."

And Subaru froze then, staring at Seishirou, at those black lenses glinting the bright, thin winter light from their surfaces, hiding the man's eyes. He stared at the faint smile, the outstretched hand still hovering in the air between them, a gesture that was waiting...

...waiting....

And a space opened up against the pain inside of him, a space where he could suddenly breathe free. He understood what this was, if not the why of it or of what had come before. More than merely sparing Yuzuriha's life, Seishirou was offering him a surprising gift: that nobody would ever have to know. Nobody would know where he was, or with whom, and it would be as if this meeting had never even taken place. Unbelievably, Seishirou was giving him back the still point that he'd found, the place between Heaven and Earth.

The one place where the two of them could be together.

A gift....

Subaru loosened his grip on Yuzuriha, letting her lean a little away from his shoulder. He looked into the sleeping stillness of her face. Almost the face of a child, in its unconsciousness showing nothing of the vibrancy that was the inugami master's strength. Subaru brushed her hair to one side, out of her closed eyes.

"No," he answered softly. "It's all right."

"Subaru-kun—"

"It's all right," he repeated more strongly. Turning away from her again, he looked soberly at Seishirou and added, "I don't have anything to be ashamed of."

The words stopped Seishirou as though he'd struck a ward; Subaru noticed the start, the slight smile vanishing into an uncharacteristic expression of surprise. Seishirou regarded Subaru, and Subaru stared back steadily into the sunglasses' unrevealing mirrors. He could see two little reflections of himself and Yuzuriha, but what he was really looking at was something deep inside himself: the astonishing fact that what he'd said to Seishirou was perfectly true.

He had been afraid before—he had wanted to conceal as much as he could from the Dragons of Heaven. He'd wanted to keep those two sides separated as far as possible, each in a neat little box all by itself. But it couldn't be that way, not when both sides, both of the necessities that drove him, had their meeting place inside himself. And in the face of Seishirou's inexplicable generosity, the Dragon of Earth's acknowledgment of the forces holding Subaru suspended in between them, and his incredible acceptance—how could Subaru himself do any less than that?

After the briefest of moments, Seishirou recollected himself. He chuckled, that familiar low sound, and then stood, hefting Subaru's bag along with his own. "I'll see you back at the apartment then," he said. "Take your time, Subaru-kun." Turning, he made his way through the ceaseless crowd. His tall form picked a path between the knots of people, pausing to let others pass and then moving on, until finally he disappeared from view. Subaru watched the place where Seishirou had vanished, the clusters of passersby a wash of colors and motions in his sight, as sounds of street noise and conversation rose up around him slowly, reality flooding back into the area now that the Sakurazukamori had left it.

Subaru sighed. Feeling the last of the protective illusion fading away, he glanced down at Yuzuriha. He passed one hand across her eyes, sensing that this spell was loosening also. He found the place where the unnatural sleep was ravelling and unwove it further, opening a way for Yuzuriha to return to consciousness. The spell frayed and blew away in pieces, a spider's scarcely visible threads carried off by the wind. Subaru watched Yuzuriha's face, seeing the shadows of expression passing over it as her spirit slowly moved toward waking.

There was a short, sharp bark. Abashed, Subaru cut the power of his ward with a gesture; the ofuda fluttered and slid to the ground, mere paper once more. Freed, the inugami stalked through

the crowd, flowing right through any unsuspecting person who got in its way. Stopping just out of arm's reach, it sat down abruptly, staring into Subaru's face with accusing eyes.

"I'm sorry," Subaru apologized. He shifted Yuzuriha in his arms so the dog spirit could see her more clearly. "It's all right. See, she's only sleeping now." The inugami wasn't appeased. That wolfish yellow gaze still glowered at him, and the inugami's thick fur bristled on its back and across its lean shoulders. A passing young man glanced down quizzically at Subaru and Yuzuriha, then shivered as he walked through the invisible dog spirit, rubbed at his arms, and hurried away. Subaru stretched one hand toward the inugami, smiling, trying to show that he didn't intend any harm. It really was a beautiful creature, even if it wasn't a dog at all. "Okay?" he asked coaxingly.

The inugami glared.

Disappointed, Subaru heaved another sigh. Then Yuzuriha murmured and stirred against him, reclaiming his attention. Her enormous brown eyes blinked open cloudily; she knotted her hand in the front of his coat, peering up with confusion.

Her gaze went wide.

"KYAA!"

Yuzuriha bolted upright and scooted off his lap, falling onto the sidewalk with a thump. "I-I'm sorry! Um- !" For a moment Subaru wondered bewilderedly what he'd done to frighten her. Had he really been so unfriendly that all the Seals believed he was a forbidding kind of person? "I must have fainted or something," Yuzuriha was continuing, blushing furiously. "Ah, Inuki!" The inugami had padded up beside her and was curving itself around her like a cat. She hugged it energetically, burying her embarrassment in its thick ruff.

"Are you all right now?"

"Y-yeah." Yuzuriha sat up again, running her fingers through her fine, short hair. As she recollected herself, she smiled at him sunnily. "I'm fine!" She scratched the inugami behind its insubstantial ears, and the dog spirit preened. Yuzuriha's thoughts already seemed to be moving on, though, her expression changing to a questioning gaze as her thoughts skipped nimbly back over what had just happened to her.

"That person," she murmured, "that person who—" Memory and realization kindled behind her eyes; startled, she glanced into Subaru's. He felt that fear clench inside him again, even despite his resolution. She must have seen something of that because a shocked understanding started to unfold behind her gaze, spreading its shadow wings across her face.

"Dragon," she whispered starkly, "*Dragon...of Earth?*"

If he could have closed his eyes to her stunned look, he would have—if to do so wouldn't have been to deny the one most important person in his life. Instead he met her gaze evenly, hiding nothing of his heart. She stared into his eyes, stricken, and then, incredibly, an answering grief unfurled in her own, a surge of tears rising and overflowing. She wavered for an instant, her face twisted up unhappily as she tried to hold them back—and then those tears burst free as she flung herself onto Subaru, wrapping both arms around his neck and hiding her face in his chest. She

sobbed against him desperately, her thin shoulders heaving, as the inugami touched its nose to her cheek and then glanced reproachfully at Subaru.

People nearby were watching the two of them with concern. Subaru ignored the passersby, instead putting his arms around Yuzuriha and stroking her hair, and as the sobs gradually slowed, her story began coming out through them, gasped incoherently but piece by piece forming a pattern that he understood.

A friend, a dear friend, the person who could finally see Inuki, who could become a part of her world—and in the end, one of the people she was supposed to stand against: a person she was supposed to fight with mind, body, and soul, with all the power that made her an inugami master.

A Dragon of Earth.

Subaru held her more tightly, until the last of her crying had faded into sniffles and silence. Then, as she straightened, he touched fingers to her damp cheek. “It’s going to be all right,” he told her, smiling as he brushed away a trace of those tears.

“Really?”

“Yeah. At least, that’s what I believe.” Subaru leaned toward her. “Does he care about you?”

“I...I think so.” Yuzuriha blotted at her face with the end of her scarf, then smiled back shakily. “He sent me a flower this one time...and we’re going to meet again soon to go ice skating! He looks like a really tough guy, but I think it’s just because he has such a gentle heart that otherwise he couldn’t live.”

Do you love him? Subaru wondered but didn’t ask out loud. After all, he didn’t need to.

I can’t protect you from this, and even if I could, I wouldn’t have the right to. But if you love enough to love where destiny says you shouldn’t...it’ll be all right.

“Don’t be afraid,” he told her. “Whatever happens, just don’t be afraid. There’s a path, a way between the two sides. There’s a balance—”

“I understand.” Surprised, Subaru looked at her. Yuzuriha was sitting up straight as though she’d gathered herself together, unusually poised, like a dancer ready to rise and begin the dance. She gazed levelly across the little space between them, tears and a smile still sharing space in her eyes, but there was a focus there as well, one that he hadn’t seen before.

“And you, too,” she instructed him. “Don’t be so sad anymore!” Without warning, she smiled more widely. “You’ve been so lonely, haven’t you? I know, because so have I.” Bemused, Subaru watched vague melancholy flicker briefly across her face before vanishing once more. “Thinking there was no one else who could possibly understand—but now, no matter what, I can think of you and smile!” Raising one finger, she winked at him. “Having somebody special is the most wonderful thing in the world,” she went on, “but what everybody really wants is not to be alone in their life.

“If I can think of the two of you being together, then I won’t be sad at all.”

* * * * *

The elevator bell chimed dully, and the door slid open. Subaru stepped out into the hall. He'd unbuttoned his coat on the ride up, and now unwound the scarf—Seishirou's scarf—from around his neck. He looped it idly about his hand as he walked down the corridor toward the apartment door.

Home.

As far as any place had ever been home to him, this was.

"I won't tell anyone," Yuzuriha informed him as they both stood up. She patted down her skirt and readjusted her earmuffs, which had been knocked askew.

"You can, if you want to—"

"Mm-nn!" She inclined forward, her hands clasped behind her back. Her eyes gleamed impishly up at him, and for a moment Subaru thought he glimpsed feline ears and a playfully quirked tail. "It's *your* secret. Being with your friend is something that's 'only for you'—isn't that right?" Subaru could only gaze back at her in wonder, unable to reply. He was struck suddenly by something in her smile: a butterfly shift of attitude, a mischievously girlish understanding but also something else, something older and deeper. Yuzuriha rested one hand on the ruff of her inugami.

"Something that's 'only for you' has a special power," she said. "If I tried to tell—even if anyone could understand what I was saying—it would be like giving that power away when it's not even mine to give. Trying to tell a secret in the wrong way...it only causes pain. I know."

"Yuzuriha-san—"

"I'll see you," she said, and that smile flashed out at him again, luminous and filled with joy. "I'll see you before the End of the World. We'll have so much to talk about! And remember, Subaru-san—you're not supposed to feel bad anymore! That's a promise to me!"

"Come on, Inuki!"

Subaru stopped and looked at the apartment door. Lifting one hand, he touched the unresponsive wood.

A promise to her...so I'll try not to feel that sadness anymore.

It's hard, though. I don't think that it's really that simple at all.

That longing for someone special, something that's 'only for me'...do you feel that too?

If only I were able to be 'only for you'...

Squaring his shoulders, Subaru pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"Ah, Subaru-kun!" Seishirou beamed at him from behind the kitchen counter as he entered. Surprised, Subaru blinked, trying to make sense of that cheerfulness striking against his own mood, a contrast like sunlight suffusing through dark water. "Perfect timing. I'd just felt like some tea, so I went ahead and put the kettle on. You want some too, am I right?"

Awkwardly, Subaru nodded. He turned away, draping the scarf across one of the coat rack's pegs before hanging his coat up over it. He could hear the faint clatter of china from behind him as Seishirou got the tea things out. Subaru took off his shoes, then wandered hesitantly toward the counter. He slid onto one of the stools, his eyes focused on the movements of Seishirou's hands. Seishirou was peeling and sectioning the oranges, laying out their crescent-shaped pieces in neat, attractive patterns on a white plate. His fingers turned tenderly about the fruit he held, cradling it as he parted slice from slice.

"This afternoon's snack is dark chocolate biscuits and Chinese oranges," Seishirou informed him. "And you know, the oranges are especially nice today. Here, try one." Bending across the counter, Seishirou touched the smooth, curved end of one piece to Subaru's lips. They parted involuntarily, and Seishirou slid the fruit in between them, then leaned on his elbows, chin resting on both fists as he watched Subaru's reaction. Startled, Subaru bit down, tasting the astonishing sweetness as it burst across his tongue.

"Well?"

Subaru nodded distractedly. As Seishirou pushed up off the counter once more, smiling with pleased satisfaction, Subaru looked down at its polished, immaculate surface. He chewed the orange slice, swallowed it against the sudden knot tightening in his throat.

This person who's always smiling.

Even after I...after I...

Closing his eyes against the small, stinging dampness that prickled at them, Subaru lowered his head. Then Seishirou's fingers, a little sticky from orange peels, brushed against his cheek. They slid along it, moving until the heat of the man's palm was pressed to the side of his face, and Subaru jerked his head up, his eyelids flickering wildly as he tried to blink away any sign of his foolish, foolish tears.

"Always someone who's caught between two worlds," the man murmured. Each word was a deep, soft touch, a velvet breath. The man leaned one arm on the counter again as he tilted Subaru's face up toward his. The two of them so close now, and that golden light of knowing a sun half-hidden in Seishirou's seeing eye....

"As a medium, caught between the human world and that of the spirits, subject to the demands of both—and then as a person, too. Isn't that right?"

Was it gravity that had drawn him right to the edge of his stool at Seishirou's touch—the tug of a small planet passing, stealing away his fragile atmosphere, drawing upon and changing the tides of his seas? For a moment, Subaru found that he couldn't even draw a breath. Poised in such proximity, staring wide-eyed into Seishirou's gently amused and smiling face, he remembered other moments in the past, other perceptions.

Seishirou-san, how is it that you've always known these things? How is it that you've always understood?

The man's thumb traced the curve of his parted lips—and Subaru, jolted back to the present, gave a tiny gasp. He caught the man's hand as it started to pull away and pressed it to his mouth. He kissed Seishirou's startled fingers with a searchingly focused, urgent attention, rolling the ends one by one against his lips and then between—closing on them, tasting them, his eyes shut tight, the bitter tang of orange peel mixing with the so-recent taste of sweetness and the savor of Seishirou's skin as well.

In this time and in this place...I wouldn't be anywhere else.

Wouldn't be with anyone else.

Anyone but you.

The kettle had started to whistle, but neither of them moved.

Drift I

Alone in the Dark

Subaru's eyes shivered open against the fall of sunlight. He blinked, gradually focusing on the expanse of window panes that let the thin, yellow-gold light pool about him. The light formed a rectangle that lay across him, divided up into even sections by the casement's shadows. Turning his head, he glanced along his outflung arm. Those shadows made a slender, dark cross on the wrist of his shirtsleeve.

Shifting his head against the bedspread, he shut his eyes. He'd been dozing, and the relaxed tranquility of that sleep still lapped through him. His book had fallen open and was lying against his chest; he fumbled it closed, then rolled over onto his side, pushing it away. Curling up, he rested his cheek against one hand as he let himself drift off into the....

...what...?

Oh, he must have fallen back to sleep, he realized dimly. Now he was rising up from it again, ascending little by little through that shallow slumber. Everything around him seemed distant and unreal, as though sensed through a shimmer of water, but that insubstantial surface was parting around him as he woke up further. His eyelids lifted, light and vision filtering in between them.

A shadow, standing up before the glass.

Bewildered, Subaru frowned, trying to make some sense out of that. The tall figure he was fairly sure hadn't been there before shifted toward clarity as he studied it. Almost perfectly immobile except for the movements of breathing, the small, rhythmic rise and fall of the muscular chest, that person leaned one shoulder against the window's frame. Head turned to the side and chin lifted alertly, he gazed without expression through the glass. His one visible eye was almost imperceptibly narrowed. An intent, cold jewel with a fire at the heart of it, the undreaming eye of an animal that watched the world outside, it was uncanny and yet wholly suited to the lines of its owner's face: to those strong angles turned in profile to Subaru, the hair falling over the forehead, the unusually serious set of the mouth.

Seishirou-san.

Fully awake, Subaru continued to lie motionless, watching the man through half-opened eyes. So rare, the opportunity to see him like this: unguarded, not surprised from himself by the shock of the unexpected but instead simply being who and what he was. Being natural and unfeigned, as perhaps nobody ever saw him.

Nobody but the people that he....

No, Subaru thought. Even for them, the uncounted and unnamed victims, there must have been the smile, the polished grace, the hunter's face no less a mask than that of the pleasant veterinarian. If there had ever been a moment when that mask might have slipped, it would have been in the very instant of the strike. In the sheer terror of that moment, what victim's eye

wouldn't have been blinded by his or her own fear?

Subaru flinched then at the thought of all those people—so terribly many people, all so helpless and afraid. He squeezed his eyes shut against the memory of their suffering and the knowledge of what by rights he should do.

But....

His eyes drifted open once more; he drew in a deep and soundless breath. Staring at Seishirou, he tried to encompass both that horror and the unmistakable “something else” that he felt—and more than that, more even than that, the probability that nobody had ever been where he was. That nobody had ever been given the chance to know the man truly.

Against the possibility of that understanding, the burden of the need to accept and to forgive.

Against the dread of what was inhuman, such a terrible, wonderful longing.

So much danger, lying in the embrace of the Sakurazukamori.

So very brightly shining a light of hope....

And as Seishirou started turning toward him, Subaru's eyes dove shut. He trembled—oh, he hoped that Seishirou hadn't noticed—before willing himself to lie still. Why was he afraid to be caught gazing at the man—afraid yet strangely, delightedly thrilled, like a child for whom a game of hide and seek held the greatest mysteries and risks in the world? A tremor ran down the length of his spine, a river of silvery fish beneath the skin.

From behind almost-closed lids, he dared another peek out at Seishirou. The man was looking right at him, a level and considering gaze, and Subaru's heart flipped over. For a minute Seishirou simply continued to regard him, long enough that Subaru had time to relax once more and to decide that maybe Seishirou hadn't realized that he was awake, and then the man smiled. A subtle wryness quirked at the corner of his mouth, an expression that seemed almost rueful, if that could be so—Seishirou ducked his head as if in amusement at some private thought, a silent chuckle twitching at his shoulders, then straightened. His mood appeared to change abruptly, and his eyes shifted, began to prowl intensely over Subaru. Their heat stalked up Subaru's body as he tried to remain unmoving; he could feel them brushing against him like something alive and territorial. They lingered by his face for an endlessly held breath before stealthily away. A scattering of embers was left behind as they receded: a fire trail cooling in Subaru's blood, leaving him chilled, without light—

He opened his eyes.

Seishirou's glance immediately leaped back up to his, and as Subaru met that gaze he saw the swift *flick* there: a bird startled into a wing-tip change of direction or the false start of a tiger toward its prey. *Discovered*, that second of wariness said. Then it passed, and the warmly affectionate look slid back into place. That familiar look, although Subaru still could sense something else there, something darker...he watched the lie sweep across Seishirou's expression, covering everything else with its bland, even cheerfulness.

He felt a stabbing pang, as though something inestimably rare had been lost.

Seishirou pushed away from the window's frame. He opened his mouth as if to speak—and before any words could be said Subaru reached up, touching the fingers of one hand to his throat. He trailed those tentative fingertips across his own skin, drawing them from one side of his neck to the other and then downward.

Seishirou's eyes sharpened into alertness again as Subaru's fingers curled beneath his collar. And as the man's attention settled on that place almost physically, Subaru arched his head back and to the side, drawing the shirt from his skin.

* * * * *

Bemused, Seishirou stared. Such a tiny gesture, really, but also so extraordinary, considering that this was Subaru, after all.

That Subaru would even think of trying to play like this....

He watched those fingers walk down the shirt's white lapel until they reached the first fastened button. They undid it, and the shirt's collar gaped wider at Subaru's neck. Underneath, there was a black T-shirt, and Subaru traced its half-circle opening, separating the two sides of the overshirt even further. He caressed the angle of his collarbones, the slight, shadowed well at the base of his throat, then drew two fingers up with almost painfully patient slowness, painting along his neck's arch all the way to the point of his chin. His fingers lifted, brushing across the curve of his lips, which parted the merest fraction beneath that touch. An unexpected frisson of arousal flickered through Seishirou. Subaru nipped at his fingers, those verdant eyes half-lidded, then flipped his hand over and raised it in front of his face. His eyes snapping open, he looked at Seishirou through the lattice of his fingers, his expression alive with wonder and shy daring.

With desire...and just a touch of fear.

Leaning back against the window's frame once more, Seishirou smiled with deliberate eagerness. The thrill of attraction between them was like a fine, electric thread. He could break that thread if he chose, but for the moment he'd allow it—he wanted to see more of this unanticipated side of Subaru, to see how far Subaru would go. It was an interesting pleasure as well to let that chill spark grow inside him as he watched Subaru playing for him and observing his responses. How aware was Subaru of his effect on Seishirou, both the physical ache and that other inexplicable wanting? How much did Subaru understand of the interplays of sex or of his own eroticism?

Perhaps this little game was Subaru's way of discovering such matters. Considering that, Seishirou found himself intrigued and quite surprisingly turned on—and also, for some reason, disquieted. He wasn't quite sure why that was.

As he'd been reflecting, Subaru had twisted into an S-curve on the mattress, his head flung back against the pillowshams. He arched, sliding his hand up and into his hair, the slender barrier of his forearm still partially concealing his face. His other hand traveled down the front of his

shirt, toying with and then abandoning unopened each button that it passed until it reached his waist. There his fingers tangled in the white cloth and tugged it upward, his shirt forming ripples like wind-drifted snow as it came out of his jeans.

Seishirou's gaze locked to the movements of that hand, and then to the space above Subaru's belt as the shirttail appeared, its tapered points slithering out of the waistband and leaving a triangle of dark, close-fitting T-shirt across Subaru's flat stomach. Inhaling, Subaru ran his hand across that gap, then let his fingers wander upward once more. They lingered on each button, undoing them all this time, inching the white shirt aside. Alighting on the final button at last, they slid considerably around its polished small curve. Without haste Subaru undid that closure, his other hand drifting down from his face to join the first one there, and as the shirt parted over his chest he swept both hands down his sides and then outward, spreading those pale wings of cloth around himself like a butterfly fixed in that patch of sun, its flutterings stilled.

Almost without realizing it, Seishirou drew in a breath. He could feel desire knot itself inside his gut, sending insistent pulsings throughout his blood. Hunger for the willingness that was laid out in front of him, the usual sensations raised to a keen, new pitch by this improbable situation.... Subaru's eyes shone with that ethereal smile of his as he glanced toward Seishirou, an understatedly playful expression but also one that was somehow knowing. It was as though by this hint of exposure he was abandoning his defenses, laying down the shield of modesty and self-restraint—was leaving himself wide open, vulnerable to Seishirou's gaze.

To his least wish....

Seishirou blinked away inadvertent surprise, and then grinned to himself. To reply to that alluring submissiveness, to step forward and join Subaru on the bed...the urge he felt was powerful and compelling, but for the moment he didn't intend to follow it up. Instead he shifted to lean more comfortably against the window's frame. Clasp his hands behind himself, he looked intently at Subaru, his breathing calm and measured once more as he concentrated the full weight of his attention. After all, there were some interesting possibilities in this.

He wanted to explore them all properly.

Subaru had writhed around to lie flat on his back, and now he tugged the T-shirt out of his pants. His spine hollowed, arching as the shirt came free at last and his fingers skimmed across uncovered skin. Lifting one hand toward his face, Subaru played his mouth along its curve, a rapturous exploration with breath, tongue, and tiny nips of his teeth. His lips closed finally, suckling at his wrist with pliant urgency as his other hand jerked the T-shirt halfway up his front. He arched and twisted further, raking his fingers across his midriff, and Seishirou, observing his distracted air, had to wonder what excited him the most. What was in his mind—the newly discovered pleasure of touching himself?

The memories of how he had been touched?

Subaru's eyes skipped back to Seishirou's, glancing past his upraised arm. He hesitated, then caught the shirt's cuff between his teeth. He pulled and twisted at it, making a credible but

ultimately unsuccessful attempt to unbutton the sleeve, before his shoulders jerked in an unmistakable silent laugh, his green eyes sparkling—his real laugh, not the awkward, nervous stutter of the sixteen-year-old boy. His gaze held Seishirou's, shy but alight with the irresistible energy of pure desire. Seishirou discovered himself swaying forward almost imperceptibly; he made himself relax, leaned back again. His grin widening further, he nodded once.

Go on.

And as the free hand that had been gliding across Subaru's stomach came up to help undo that cuff, Seishirou's own hands curled into fists behind his back. He held himself there by the side of the window, the pale light angling past him as the sun slipped minute by minute toward the west. Thinking of Subaru thinking of him, perhaps fantasizing about his caresses; seeing Subaru aware of him watching and yet still doing these things; playing the witness for Subaru, not even touching him but nonetheless intimately connected with each shiver, each faint gasp of breath...he was finding the challenge of resisting that enticement more difficult than he'd planned. A complex and primal magic was spinning itself out between them, a magic different from but no less binding than onmyoujitsu. He could feel the spell that it was casting inside his mind. Even as he stood there savoring this novelty, enjoying Subaru's naive effort of seduction, something within him demanded that he respond. It sang to him to close that circle, to submit to its insistence, a call that grew more powerful as this game progressed.

Seishirou stared across the little space that lay between them. He watched Subaru unfasten one cuff and then the other, observed the fluid, almost esoteric lift of each arm, the white cloth fanning wide about the slender wrists. As Subaru finished and glanced once more at Seishirou, both arms twining sensuously above his head, their gazes met. Seishirou looked briefly into those luminous and inviting green depths before letting his eyes slip aside. His gaze traveled the length of Subaru's stretched-out torso, sliding across the bared skin at his waist until it struck the demarcation of his jeans, and then flicked back up. Very deliberately Seishirou drew on his smile again.

Why are you stopping there, Subaru-kun?

There was an instant of puzzled confusion on Subaru's face, and then he started in sudden understanding. As Seishirou rather pointedly returned his attention to the arousal that those jeans covered but didn't quite conceal, Subaru flushed. He looked away, embarrassed, even as his hands glided hesitantly down his sides. His hips shifted as he reached them, a slight, possibly unconscious undulation; he touched the belt buckle, and Seishirou focused on his own breathing, on resisting that urgency.

No, certainly not yet.

Not quite like this.

It would be a waste of a real opportunity.

Then Subaru's glance sprang back to his face, those eyes as always crystalline as windows. Seishirou felt a tiny jolt of surprise even through the steadiness he'd just managed to attain.

Subaru's eyes touched on his like a flash of light, their green flat and brilliant with fear, but something else was rising there, filling the clear space of Subaru's gaze.

A burst of sudden, joyful resolution.

Subaru's fingers folded around the strap of belt. As he started to unfasten the buckle Seishirou just stared, fascinated and more than a bit nonplused. Even though he'd urged this, to see Subaru going ahead gave him a strange, disjointed feeling. It was interesting but somewhat disturbing at the same time. The ends of the belt parted, and Subaru yanked them out to either side of himself, lifting his hips up off the bed, then released the belt and slowly sank back down. His body swayed against the mattress as though to the rhythm of a silent music. Fingers trembling, he undid the button and the zipper; he pushed both hands into that opening, stretching the taut cloth aside—

And as he touched himself Subaru shuddered once, powerfully, sensation warring with the last vestiges of doubt in his expression. Bending one knee, he slid that leg alongside the other like a dancer assuming a position. Those green eyes drifted shut, and when they opened there no longer was any flinching in them. He ran light hands up and down his body as it continued its slow dance against the bed. Tugging one arm out of its sleeve, he slipped that newly-freed hand beneath the T-shirt, raising the cloth to half-reveal the roseate flower around one of his nipples as he touched himself there...he paused, clad in the wild disarray of his clothing and in that play of sunlight and shadow as he looked up to meet Seishirou's tensely focused gaze. His face abruptly aflame with that radiant smile, he held out one hand, asking without words, sweetly, urgently....

Seishirou grinned again.

And shook his head.

He saw the fractured grief in Subaru's eyes, their green glass splintering and forsaken. Having regained his sense of balance at last, Seishirou simply watched. In his chest, though, there was a hollow and expectant feeling, a bubble of excitement pushing everything else aside as it grew. He understood now what it was that he'd truly wanted. To have everything of Subaru exposed to him like this, all the way to the final ecstasy.

To ravish and cage that butterfly, the laughing almost-stranger behind Subaru's eyes.

After all, Subaru-kun, I don't think I'm going to give in to your temptation just yet. Cute as you are, I'm not ready to give you that kind of power over me.

I want you too much sometimes; it's no excuse for my being foolish.

And also, in this kind of game—

Seishirou smiled.

I always win.

* * * * *

Subaru slumped down against the mattress. He hugged his arms around the ache spreading

out in his heart. How had it happened, when he'd tried so hard to give without holding back: to step forward and answer whatever Seishirou had seemed to ask, even when the thought of such things was embarrassing, was frightening?

How could it hurt so much, when all along he should have known better?

He lifted his head and looked at Seishirou, the man's outline vaguely blurred by tears he was striving not to set free. The Sakurazukamori stood with arms folded loosely, that tall shape a pillar of darkness against the light. Dark and despite that casual pose somehow rigid and unmoving....

The shadow of a person who would not change.

Subaru looked at that upright shadow for a long, still moment. Then he sat up awkwardly. He drew off the other sleeve of his shirt and let the white cloth flutter from his shoulders. Catching the bottom of his T-shirt, he peeled it up over his head, and as it cleared his eyes he saw the flash of surprise and gratification on Seishirou's face. He took the pain that those things caused him and accepted it; he cradled it inside himself as he dropped the T-shirt onto the mattress, and then let it go. Holding onto the harm that was done only made it become a part of him.

It served no purpose.

In one quick, flexing move he slid his jeans and underwear off. He stripped away his socks too as the rest of his clothing passed them, then tossed all those things aside. Drawing in a huge breath, he lay back against the mattress, acutely aware of its give and of the bedspread's texture beneath him as he centered himself in that place. Locking his gaze onto Seishirou's hot and cold, demanding and remote one, he brushed both hands down along his body, moving to touch...the shock of his fingers closing crackled all throughout his body, miniscule rivers carrying that sensation beneath his skin. He couldn't, didn't repress a fervent little quiver. He started to slide both hands up and down his flesh, still almost painfully aroused even despite the persistence of the injury done to his heart. That disappointment and grief were being joined by other things, though, as he slipped toward the center of a vast resolve. In that wide open space flares of pleasure started to grow, transient and yet recurring, relentless. They were glowing electron trails that wavered toward the sky, pleading for the lightning's strike.

He stared into Seishirou's eyes and let their power build.

He let himself be given to that pleasure.

Not just in order to please you. Not because I have no existence outside of you, or because your desires overshadow my own, or because you have the right to make me bleed like this.

Instead, just because I can.

Because I'm strong enough to remake myself, to recreate myself, to yield and still not die to what I am.

If I weren't, then all of this would be worse than useless, and I should never have made the choice that I did.

His hands traveled, their feathery touches growing deeper and more lingering, caressing the velvet heat that throbbed between his legs. Fear and shame melted like a dream into the

background, their shadows stirring behind the curtain of the body's desire, the soul's one wish.

All my life, I've let my fears rule me. But even while still being afraid, I can do so much better than that.

Seishirou-san, do you want to look at me? Then look. You don't need to twist me up inside to make me show myself. But if you do that to me anyway, I'll survive. I'll grow, and I'll learn from all the things you do.

I never knew before that I was capable of this.

He writhed beneath his own touch, beneath that watchful look, barely perceptibly at first, but then with growing urgency. The pulse of his blood and breath inflamed him, those brightly flowering sensations coming one upon the next, cold fire beneath the surface of his skin. His one hand wreathed about the column of his shaft, a rising and falling ring that lifted him higher with each movement, while the other flickered about his body, touching, teasing, setting off small fireworks as it played across the high, hard peaks of his nipples.

Yes.

Subaru gasped and shuddered.

I consent....

He reached toward still-distant release.

I put myself here. I chose this, and without that you'd have no power over me at all. I recognize the shadow that you cast on me.

But some things in a person's life are worth this little pain.

He flung his head back, a whimper unfolding in his throat, his body leaping under his own hands, his clothes rumpled beneath and around him.

Do you want me to be your mirror? I'll be everything that you're not. I'll cry tears for you, I'll be angry when you hurt me, I'll smile when you least expect it, reflecting your emptiness with the absolute truth of my love for you. All those passions that you can't feel, Seishirou-san—

—I can feel them.

He was closer and closer still to that one place, he was almost there, and yet—

Subaru hesitated for just an instant. His eyes had fallen shut. Now he urged them open again. They let in the sight of Seishirou standing there motionless, half-silhouetted against that changing play of light.

But even so, Seishirou-san, I'm not just your reflection.

He shivered, closing his eyes.

I'm here...with you. I've been in front of you all this time. All you have to do is....

Look at me.

Weightless and aflame, he bridged that gap at last; he closed the remaining distance toward completion, wrapped in that awareness of himself, and the awareness as well of the presence that was watching him steadily, the dark shadow that he loved so very much. From deep inside himself he reached out toward that other, uniquely imperfect and yet without any equal in this world. His

whole self sang with longing, and his hand tightened about the length of his shaft, enfolding it once and again—and there was a blinding flare of light from behind his closed lids—there was nothing at all but light, growing wave after wave—great shudderings of light that filled every part of him, lifting him out of himself—and then let him fall, naked, shattered, and spent, like rain dropping out of a cloud or a feather buffeted and tumbling raggedly to the earth. It let him fall back into the darkness behind his closed lids, leaving him there empty.

And alone.

Subaru trembled. This was the place that he dreaded, the abyss that he couldn't escape. After all the reaching out and praying to be heard, there was always that ebb tide to draw him back. There was always the inevitability that only he could feel what he felt, that the best any person could do in this life was to call into the dark and wait for some other voice to answer that cry. To long for the perfect connection, the sharing that might or might not ever truly come....

To be a lonely prisoner inside his own skin.

As if from far away, he could feel his breathing quake his limp body. He could hear Seishirou's breaths too in the room's perfect stillness, seeming unusually loud. He measured time passing by the patterns of those breaths, by the gradual calming of his thundering heart, and he could feel himself falling every moment of that time, trying to hold on to the now-vague sense that he'd been right no matter what, no matter whether anything ever came of his sacrifice, of his surrender.

He'd been right.

Hadn't he?

His breathing had dwindled into silence, and now he couldn't hear anything from Seishirou either. In the hush, he became fantastically aware of the softest sounds. Scarcely audible, then, the whisper of a single footstep....

Another one, a house shoe stealthing across the wooden floor....

There was a tiny creak as the mattress settled underneath him, and Subaru opened his eyes. He looked up as Seishirou stole softly over him, implacable as sleep. One hand settled onto the bed beside him, then the opposite knee close to that—and then the other hand coming ahead as Seishirou stalked over him, moving on all fours like a great dark-haired cat, those odd eyes gleaming. He took hold of Subaru's wrist and brought it up with him, pressing Subaru's arm to the pillow next to his head. Half-sitting, half-lying on top of him, Seishirou pinned Subaru to the mattress, the laughter in those eyes giving the lie to the leashed tautness of the body, to the tensed muscles in the legs and the unmistakable arousal that prodded against him.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou murmured as he folded his hand around Subaru's, running his thumb across Subaru's fingers and toying with them, "would you really let me do anything to you that I wanted?"

Subaru stared back bleakly. Exhaustion and that dark place of alienation had left him without any words. He looked into Seishirou's face, just tired now, and feeling a vague and bitter disillusionment.

Seishirou-san, even though you know me better than anyone else does...some things after all you just don't understand.

However Seishirou might have interpreted his blank look, the man's amusement didn't even falter. He drew Subaru's arm out sideways to its full length, then pressed it down gently against the bed. Leaning after it, he lowered his head, bringing his mouth down to touch at the wrist; he opened his lips against the skin, an excruciatingly lingering kiss, and Subaru felt something else unfolding there, an energy like the igniting of desire, only somehow different.

A spell.

Subaru twisted his head around. He couldn't see anything, even when Seishirou lifted up his head, but he could feel the magic's gleam. An invisible pattern had spread itself over his pulse point, flowing up onto his palm: an interlocking web enwrapping his wrist, its thin threads binding him down.

It was as though a switch clicked over inside his mind. Automatically he tensed his arm against the restraint, but when it held then he went limp, lying there unresistingly as Seishirou stretched toward his other side. He sensed his other arm being drawn out, laid down, and bound with the magical ward that Seishirou's kiss left, but he did nothing to prevent it. In place of anger or resentment, he could feel only that ceaseless falling: the opposite of weightless, soaring joy. It was as though some final shell that had enclosed him was breaking—as though he was dissolving, everything he had being given out—and all that was left to him now was to be that person who was waiting, who was listening for an answer that would never come.

Seishirou's hand slid ticklishly along his side. He flinched at that sensation. It was all that was keeping him from going all the way down, to a place that was starting to feel an awful lot like madness. Brushing over his hip and past his sex, Seishirou's fingers slid into the hollow of his thigh. They lifted, extending and straightening his leg, the man's touch careful and precise. Both hands slid together down Subaru's leg, and Subaru focused on that caress, on those strong fingers stroking his skin, until they closed about his ankle and he felt Seishirou's breath and sorcery settle on him there as well. Then Seishirou did the same thing again, on the other side. The man finally sat up and moved next to Subaru, leaning over him, gazing down into his face with a look of alert and considering interest as Subaru stared emptily back—

Seishirou's eyes brightened, and he stretched out his hand to cover Subaru's face. Subaru closed his eyes as the man's fingers traced over their lids. As that touch moved away, he opened them once more.

To blackness.

"S- Sei-" The man's fingertips pressed against his mouth, and the word died in the back of his throat. Like that time in the dream, but then he had been sure of himself, not frightened and defenseless as he was now. Instinctively he jerked against the bonds that held him, but without any effect, without even feeling the psychic threads that kept him from moving. As he squirmed and then fell back, he realized that the Sakurazukamori's presence was gone.

Seishirou-san?

In the dream he'd been able to speak to Seishirou so easily, but this was the real world. Here all he had was the physical sensation of his body against the bed and that terrible, yawning place inside his mind. He couldn't even tell if he was feeling the sun's warmth lying over himself, or if he was only imagining it. He strained to hear Seishirou's movements in the room, to hear anything at all.

Nothing.

Was he deaf too?

No, he decided finally, after an awful moment: he could hear the whispering tick of the bedside clock, and even more remotely some far off traffic noises. His hearing hadn't been taken; it just had to be that Seishirou wasn't doing anything that made a sound. Maybe Seishirou was waiting silently, studying Subaru's reactions to what had been done to him.

Maybe Seishirou had left him there alone.

Panic flared up in him, unreasoning and extreme, and he lunged heedlessly against those wards. He ripped at them magically, swept up in that spasm of fear, trying to claw apart their patterns as white terror convulsed his body and scattered his will into bright, frantic shards...and in that instant of brokenness there was a flash of recollection: the remembrance of how fright had colored his life and of how he'd stepped above it for just that little time. He forced himself to lie still then, even despite the fear. His head rocked back against the pillows as he swallowed tautly. His eyes flickered helplessly from side to side—he stopped them, he made his heart slow its batterings against the inside of his chest, and by focusing on those sensations he was able to use the discipline of years of magical working to find a stillness, a breathing place where he could hover precariously above the dark. In that stillness, as he waited for whatever might be going to happen next, he became aware of a net of tiny cracks running through his mind. It was the splitting of a chrysalis, and behind that a newborn thought was emerging as if it were a stranger's voice inside him:

How far can I be taken without losing myself?

How far can I go?

He was looking at that thought and trying to grasp it when there was a touch on him at last. Two fingers trailed up the inside of his arm, brushing almost imperceptibly against his skin. That contact grew lighter and was gone by the time it reached his wrist, vanishing as if it had been a hallucination. Subaru jerked his head in the direction of that touch, even though he had no way of seeing the source of it and reassuring himself that it was the person he thought it had to be. He listened for even the sound of a breath, his heart hammering wildly.

There was nothing.

Long moments dragged by in waiting, time stretching out weirdly under the effects of fear and adrenaline. Those fingers touched him just as he'd started to accept their absence, a maddening tickle across the bottom of his foot. He gasped without sound. Flinching against the bindings, he

yanked his leg up as far as it would go, which wasn't far at all—he twitched in expectation of the next touch, trying to guess where it might come from. Those fingers glanced unexpectedly across his mouth. He arched for them, lips parting, but they were already gone, and there was a soft sound like a chuckle in the back of somebody's throat. The answering noise that was silenced in Subaru by Seishirou's spell was inarticulate, something far beyond speech. He'd let himself go already, was falling into mindlessness, no longer fighting fear, desire, rage, violent reaction...he strained and twisted furiously in the binding's grasp. A touch upon his shoulder, a touch through his hair, another one here, one there...blind beyond the simple loss of vision, nothing for him anymore but those sensations, those hands but no more understanding of those hands, and his own heedless movements in reply—and then the weight that was coming down over him, that entered him with force, those teeth closing onto the skin of his neck; the animal exhaustion that was taking him and leaving him shaking and weak, his body moving to a rhythm no longer his own; the hot pounding of his heart and of sweat-drenched flesh on flesh and of the hard fire striking into him faster and faster becoming one thing that threw red flashes on the sightless dark—

—shattering—

—pieces falling—

—not even that—

—and out of that nothing, that darkness, that crumpled and abandoned self, one single moment: a moment of perfect stillness, of arms wrapped around him, a body frozen into a shuddering arch against and inside of him, its driving force for an instant stopped.

A moment of completion...

...of cessation....

And when everything else had stopped and there was just the darkness and that stillness, consciousness kindled into life in Subaru like a flower of brilliant flame. There was an instant of realization in that place beyond words, an instant of mind crashing back into body and knowing that these things were real. There was that emptiness outside himself and then there was also him, but there were those strong arms as well that were folded around him, the face pressed into his hair—and the realization struck him then that the two of them really were the same thing after all. No difference at all between them: that person—*Seishirou*—was an awareness like his own clothed in the separateness of flesh. A being, a sentience, no less alone than he was, and no more capable of real communication.

But they had that aloneness in common, those bright sparks of their consciousnesses, their aching and mutually unspoken wishes...he was sure of that. Here in the dark they'd touched each other, two creatures in one isolation. So little against the emptiness, against the terrible, inevitable end, and yet—

—and yet—

—and emotions and physical sensations came slamming back into him: that stillness exploded in a flood of ecstasy and pain, of joy and grief. A tremendous spiral of release engulfed him, flinging him back into life. Those bindings were unraveling, and he flung his arms about Seishirou.

He cried out, one lone and shattering cry—

* * * * *

Startled, Seishirou glanced down at the trembling onmyouji. Sweat soaked the dark hair and chilled damply on Subaru's skin. After Subaru's silence, his cry seemed to echo in midair; he shook, but his arms were fiercely, vehemently wrapped around Seishirou's body.

"It's all right," Seishirou began murmuring reassuringly, trying to raise himself up on one arm. He wondered if perhaps he hadn't played a little bit too carelessly with his admittedly rather fragile lover. "It's all right, Subaru-kun. I've got you...."

"But for how long?" Subaru's eyes lifted to stare into his, their green light lovely and wild. "How long...?" He tightened his arms abruptly, pulling Seishirou against him with surprising strength, and Seishirou felt a distinct leap inside himself then, an agitation like the kick of adrenaline speeding up his heart.

"Don't let go," Subaru whispered. His hand crept up behind Seishirou's head, drawing it down against his shoulder. "No, don't let go. Not now...."

"Not yet."

Chapter 11

Falling down, floating down, or maybe rising instead—there really was no difference—she was getting closer. She was passing through layers of density, moving toward the heavier world. Suspended like a dust mote outside her proper state of being, she struck light, skirling into ephemeral presence as she reached out toward the sleeping spirit that had drawn her all this way, one that answered to her touch, not even needing to wake in order to sense her.

Hokuto.

And the two of them folded all about each other, a contact that might be called an embrace but was actually something more: a shading of the edges between them so that the other wasn't merely felt but known, like a second self. For an instant they fitted together as they hadn't since before they were born. Not since they'd started to enter physical being, coalescing day by day into two separate and different people—and now, touching this closely, she could taste new things, changes that had come about since the last time she'd been with her brother like this. Such enfolding darkness, so many scars, layer upon layer of experience, of ordinary and extraordinary pain—and through them the light of her brother's soul shining, richer and more luminous for the shadows that enclosed it, a candle's flame seen mysteriously through a glass of deep wine. The walls that she remembered dimly had vanished like a vague, disturbing notion. The two of them spilled through each other freely, touching, recognizing, sharing the savor and grief of all that had happened during their separation. Then, as with one impulse, they pulled away. She gathered herself up into a swirl of glittering brightness.

How have you been, Subaru?

I struggle every day, her brother answered silently. *With him, with myself...it never stops.* But there was a smile giving those words shadow and substance, an understanding that he might be on the verge of getting, if he didn't have it already.

That's what life is. It's a struggle. A dance. She shrugged, a minuscule sparkle. *But are you happy?* she pressed him.

Yes.

*Yes...*and that one thought was so simple and so pure. So steady, and in her brother's complicated and divided heart, so whole. That was the greatest change in the man her brother had become, she realized with a flare of purest happiness: that in his deepest self he could be so complete. And then her fluidly changeable brother was struck with shame, as though her joy had been a stone shattering its reflection into broken flashes.

Hokuto...I'm so sorry.

For what! Being a slow learner? As a discorporate spirit she couldn't quite plant her hands on her hips and glare, but she managed something similar. *Subaru! How many times have I told you not to apologize for things that aren't your fault?* Softening, she added, *You truly didn't*

know. Her words fell like stars across the black sky of her brother's guilt. She wondered if that darkness would ever be appeased.

Anyway, she added, pain is different for the dead, and time doesn't pass in quite the same way as you'd think. Rippling nearer, she touched him, a caress like a hand coming to rest against his cheek. *I hardly even remember that time at all now, and the only thing that still hurts is that, even being inside of you, I couldn't give you any real comfort. But still, some things one person just can't do for another.* She glittered with sadness, wishing that the reality could somehow be easier, but she wasn't one of those people who believed they could live on inside illusions, and he wasn't an innocent boy to be protected anymore either. *It's over,* she told him instead, because it was the next best answer and it would just have to do for them both. *So...let it go. Let it go for yourself. Anyway, you never had to ask me to forgive you, Subaru. I've never blamed you for anything.*

In the currents of her brother's sleep, they embraced once more: light and dark twins, sundered and now briefly joined. She could feel old self-accusation melt in him like sour candy, or maybe like clouds parting before a pale haze of moon.

I'm glad, he whispered against her, the thought like a sigh, *I'm glad that I could see you again. But...why? If it's not me, then what's still holding you here? Hokuto, after all this time you should be free already. I thought...I thought I'd released the bindings on you. Why haven't you gone on to the other world?*

Idiot...because I worry about you! How could I go anywhere until I knew you'd be all right? Fiercely she held onto him, that sister-love an ache where her human heart should be. *Not everything that happens is your responsibility, you know! I decided to come back and check up on you for myself.* Regathering, she drew away and studied her brother. *Now I know,* she murmured, *I know that none of it was wasted. You're strong enough for whatever is to come. And you're happy.*

Hokuto....

There's just one more thing. She had looked deeply into him, she'd seen his hope and his one wish, and even though it wasn't any of her business now, still...translucent and shining and smiling as ghosts smile, a little bit sad even through her best happiness, she hovered before him.

There's one more thing I need before I can rest, she told him quietly. *Will you help me?*

And her brother smiled back, opening himself to her absolutely as though spreading his arms for her embrace.

Anything, he answered with perfect trust.

Anything, Hokuto....

Eyes slowly opening, Hokuto gazed straight up. Strange to see sunlight splashing across this unfamiliar ceiling.... She blinked, the sensation unaccustomed after all this time, and the darkness behind those closed lids odd and a little scary. Drawing a shaky breath, she held up one hand

where she could see it; she turned it, studying the flex of joints, the lines that patterned its palm and the faint color of veins along the wrist where the fair skin became translucent—she sat up with a gasp, clutching a flutter of sheets and blankets against herself, all at once unreasonably frightened. She stared at the knuckles clenched around those covers, pressing them to a rapidly beating heart as foreign to her now as some exotic jungle bird.

Silly, she chided herself. *It hasn't been that long!* Closing both eyes again, she waited for the fear to subside as she settled back into the idea of having a body. After a moment, she released her death grip on the covers, letting them fall away.

Turning, she looked down at the bed beside her, at the empty place where there was room for another person. Of course, *he* wasn't here. She wouldn't have come back to talk to Subaru if he had been. She gazed at the dent in the pillow where that man lay his head and thought dark thoughts.

Him...and her brother....

Still...it's not my choice. Not my decision.

Shrugging, she glanced around the room. So where was he, anyway? On the other side of her there was a nightstand, and on it, next to a clock and a small lamp, there was a single sheet of paper. She picked the paper up and looked at it.

Had errands to run. You're too cute when you're sleeping for me to wake you. If you'd meet me at 11:30 at the front of the Matsuya department store, though, we can have lunch.

The note was signed with an "S" and a little heartmark.

Almost involuntarily, the fingers holding that paper tightened. After a brief hesitation, Hokuto opened them again. Deliberately smoothing out the crumpled sheet, she stared at the premeditated casualness of Seishirou's script, and then smiled like a woman with a dangerous secret that wouldn't be told to anyone.

Sei-chan...you really never change!

So the Sakurazukamori wanted to meet at 11:30. Hokuto glanced at the clock. Ah! plenty of time to dress and then get over there. Swinging around to plant both feet on the floor, she flung back the sheet and blanket—and stopped, caught by a flash of motion in the corner as the covers' fall was reflected in a standing mirror. A figure all in white looked back at her, startlement widening the familiar and yet strangely changed green eyes.

"Subaru...."

The sound of the voice surprised her—a little rougher, a little deeper than what she had expected. She lifted one hand and watched the figure in the mirror press fingers against its lips. Haltingly she stood and then began walking closer, as aware of the body she was inhabiting now as she'd been of her own when trying out a new dance step or pose: having constantly in mind the

way that arms and legs were shifting, the altering of balance, the slide and drape of fabric over skin. She stopped in front of the glass and stood looking at her brother's reflection.

So different...if I'd lived, would I have looked like this?

Well, she probably wouldn't have cut her hair quite so short, although it did look rather nice on Subaru, if maybe a bit too severe. Her brother was always so serious: it was why she'd liked best to see him in whimsical, romantic outfits, as though happiness could somehow reach him from the outside in. On top of which, there weren't so many men in this world who could carry off that kind of look. It was a shame to waste one. As a man, Subaru would be awfully pretty with long hair, Hokuto thought wistfully, maybe tied back with a bit of colorful silk and having a fall of bangs to cover one eye. Reaching up, she touched the face, the curve of cheekbone and jaw almost delicate enough to be that of a woman. So she would have looked like this if she hadn't...well, not bad at all. Certainly it was nothing to be ashamed of. She touched lower, along the slender neck, then rested the fingertips of both hands against collarbones just visible where the overlarge pajamas fell open at the throat. *So thin...too thin.* She slid those hands down, over the flat chest and onto the gentle hollow of the stomach—and stopped, staring into the mirror, trying to imagine this body's female echo, trying to imagine what it would be like to be alive and in that body.

To be alive....

To be alive and in *this* body, and with her brother's sleeping spirit—which she could feel even now and had felt since she'd awakened, drowsing, dreaming, a candle flame in shadow—with that other self curled up inside, carried like the children that she'd never have, inside her forever.

Safe.

To be able to move among the living again, like that....

Hokuto took two steps backward and then looked at the reflection: smaller, farther away, a serious young man in a frame of wood and glass. After a moment, the reflection ducked its head and smiled slightly. Then Hokuto straightened, gazing back at her brother's image, at her *brother's* face and body, with a quiet pride. As she scrutinized the reflection a little more closely, that smile turned unexpectedly mischievous. Holding up both arms, she spun, watching the billow and fall of expansive white silk swirling with that motion.

Well, one thing's for certain. Even after all this time, my brother still makes a good picture!

Her temporary bout of sobriety finished, Hokuto tripped toward the closet. It was time to get dressed! She flung the doors wide open with a flourish, and then, faced with a row of clothing in black, white, and various shades of gray, she stopped and stared. Immediately both shoulders slumped as her exuberance was deflated.

What on earth was she going to *wear*?

* * * * *

Standing in the atrium of the department store, Hokuto was still sulking. Despite her best intentions, there was only so much one could do with a monochrome wardrobe. Her heart had leaped up when she'd discovered a richly green jacket tucked away inside the closet, but upon pulling it out it had become obvious at once from the breadth of shoulders that this jacket belonged to Seishirou. And as cute as her brother looked with his lover's pajamas dripping gorgeously off him, he'd be drowned beneath the heavier jacket. It simply wouldn't do. In the end, she'd had to settle for Subaru's best black pants and a pale sweater with a discreet little pattern on it. Her brother's clothes offended every last one of her fashionable instincts.

Classical elegance at best and casual carelessness at worst. The first is for people in museums, and the second doesn't even bear mentioning! Subaru, something's got to be done about this!

Her brother, deeply asleep inside of her, didn't answer. Hokuto fumed.

She, of course, had always kept up a distinctive appearance for them both. The inside and the outside of a person went around together, so if you discounted one pretty soon you'd start to discount the other, while if you made yourself stand out from the crowd it lifted the heart just like a ride in a giant balloon. There were too many things in the world expressly designed to make people invisible to each other and to themselves, and her brother was far too pure to be allowed to forget that he was a really special person.

Pensively, Hokuto browsed along the counters. She wondered what she could do about the situation. Turning, she caught a glimpse of bright fabric.

Hats!

Revived, she descended onto the headwear. Discarding this one and that one at once—too trendy, too boring—she paused. Maybe the one with the flowers? No, wait—she was looking on Subaru's behalf, and when she wasn't around anymore he wouldn't keep wearing something so excessive. Pity...she rather liked the shape of it. Oh, well. She'd find something brightly colored, at least. Picking up another hat, she tried it on. A conservative style but it had a good, bold red color, with a woven band of black around its crown. It looked nice against this dark winter coat and creamy scarf. Subaru might actually wear this, she thought, but it would be nicer if the coat were red too, to go along with it. She took the hat off and laid it down. Maybe that cute little emerald green hat with the gold trim instead? Or perhaps a beret? Indecisively she looked behind the counter, and in the mirror there she saw a tall, black-coated figure standing just behind her.

She didn't even have time to react. The man's hand settled onto one shoulder, his other arm came around her in a sly embrace—in public, just as shameless as always!—and as he leaned forward he pulled her lightly back against his chest.

"A little bit of shopping, Subaru-kun?"

"Sei- Sei-chan!" she gasped. "You surprised me!" The man's arm tightened, and she paused in what she'd been about to say. "What?" she asked instead, but already knowing and kicking herself mentally for having made that slip.

The man bent his head closer, his breath a little tickle beneath one ear.

“Subaru-kun,” he whispered, “never calls me ‘Sei-chan.’”

He turned her firmly around. As he held her by both arms, she looked up into those dark glasses that reflected her back to herself just like two mirrors.

“Hokuto-chan.”

He sounded the least bit surprised. Hokuto took advantage of that, sparking herself out of her paralysis. “What, Sei-chan,” she exclaimed, “no happy welcome? And you’re practically a member of the family now, too!” She gave him a bravura grin, forcing down the instincts that said to run, run away from this man, as fast as she could. “I’ve always known that you were the sort to take advantage of an opportunity!” she added cheerfully. “So when are you going to marry my brother and make an honest bride out of him at last?”

“What are you doing here?”

The man’s voice was soft, and his hands had slipped away from her, returning to his sides. He was wary but taking no action. He hadn’t yet decided what he should do about this, apparently, hence the question to buy him some more time. Hands on hips, insouciantly casual, Hokuto sniffed up at him, “Well, why shouldn’t I stop by to look after my brother? If you’re worrying that I’ll spoil your sweet honeymoon, though, don’t bother. I won’t be around for long. I just want to have a chat, that’s all: sister-in-law to brother-in-law.” Stepping up close to him, she tucked one arm into the crook of his. “So why don’t we have that lunch now? Hmm?”

There was a further hesitation, and she hoped into the silence that he wouldn’t sense the racing heartbeat that she couldn’t control, but as that pause stretched out beyond a certain length, she knew that she had him. His body’s slight stiffness slackened as he gave in, whether from curiosity or simple resignation. “Okay,” he answered, smiling down at her, his genial mask in place as though it had never been gone, “but I hope you don’t mind if I stop at a bank machine first. I was only expecting to feed Subaru-kun’s appetite.”

“Sei-chan!”

* * * * *

“You realize,” Seishirou commented, gazing at her rapidly disappearing giant double burger and french fries with a mournful expression, “that Subaru-kun will be purifying himself for weeks after this.”

“Good,” Hokuto answered serenely. “He’ll enjoy it!” She took another enormous bite of her burger and licked a drizzle of ketchup from one finger. Living people didn’t properly appreciate having a body! After being dead for a few years, it was obvious just how much pleasures like eating were taken for granted every day. Taking a sip of her soda, she eyed Seishirou, who actually wasn’t doing that badly himself at polishing off his yakitori. As they ate, they’d been playing their teasing game, in which she alternated between pressing him for romantic details of his

relationship with Subaru and bossing him unmercifully on the subject of how to take care of her brother. All the while he'd maintained a flawlessly pleasant good nature, occasionally gibing at her gently in return. They'd fallen back into their old roles as if no time had passed, as if the things that had happened had *not* happened and nothing had changed.

Hokuto gazed at the sunglasses that the man hadn't taken off. They hid all but the shadow of his eyes.

Pensively she looked away from him once more, picking up a french fry and nibbling at it. So the question was, what was she going to do next? They were stalemated—after all, he couldn't do much to her in Subaru's body, which was the main reason she'd taken the liberty of borrowing it. As a ghost she was particularly vulnerable to onmyoujitsu, but the Sakurazukamori's specialty was the binding or destroying of spirits, not their release. She didn't think he could pry her out of Subaru's body against her will—and if he did try, well, Subaru's consciousness was very near by, close enough to wake. Surely Seishirou would play nicely, if only to keep her brother oblivious.

On the other hand, she wasn't getting any closer to what she needed to know.

Deep in thought, Hokuto finished off her burger. She picked up her drink, poking her straw into the bottom of the glass where the soda was least diluted by the ice-melt. The Sakurazukamori leaned forward over his own empty plate with a smile.

"So," he remarked, resting his chin on clasped hands, "what's the significance of fish?"

"Eh?" Hokuto stared. For a moment she wondered if she'd fallen asleep somehow and woken up in the wrong conversation. Then the man chuckled and she returned to her soda, deciding that this was just Sei-chan's way of trying to string her along. He'd get to his point eventually, and much sooner if she didn't seem responsive.

"Ah, well—when Subaru-kun was unpacking, I saw a pair of your old earrings among his things," Seishirou explained at last. He held up his thumb and forefinger, a few centimeters apart. "They were little fish. At least, I assumed that they were yours. I'd been wondering if they held any special meaning for him, aside from belonging to his only sister." Playing with her straw, Hokuto eyed the man and speculated about what he might be after. Either this was some oblique and twisted way of reminding her that she was dead and he'd killed her, or the man was a maniac for trivia.

Then she thought back over what he'd said and smiled. "So Subaru kept the fish earrings," she mused out loud. "Well, well...."

"Were they a gift?"

"No." She set down her soda. "But Subaru liked them from the beginning. They were one of my first pairs, so we were young at the time. He thought they were really cute. And I always used to say that when I wore them I'd be especially close to him, since he was born under the sign of the Fish." She leaned onto the table and gazed through steeped fingers, recalling fondly and somewhat sadly the way they'd been back then. The picture of the two of them, scarcely more than

children, the earring a bright glint between them as she'd held it up for Subaru to see, wide-eyed and wondering....

"Ah—but wait a minute, Hokuto-chan, I thought you were born under the Water Jar. I don't understand much about this kind of thing, of course, but since you're twins...." Hokuto laughed, and was pleased to see the man flinch slightly. So she laughed again.

"Sei-chan, if it's about Subaru then you can remember anything!" She grinned. "Well, you're right. But we were actually born right on the cusp between two signs, and since I came first the Water Jar was the influence for me. Subaru, being the hesitant type, followed along much later, so he's really more of a Fish...although since we're cusp children, we each have a little of both signs in us. Sei-chan, you should really look into studying astrology! You can learn a lot from it, you know." Hokuto picked up her soda. "Speaking of which, didn't you have a birthday just recently? How old are you now?"

Seishirou was pure geniality as he answered, "Hokuto-chan, you know my birthday is in April." Naturally she wasn't fooled at all. *Scorpion for sure*, she thought privately, and smiled at the man angelically around her straw. Nobody had scored a solid win yet in this match, but so far she felt that she was holding her own.

And she hadn't even told him the whole story about those fish.

"Subaru, even if we're separated someday, we'll still always be close. Think back as far as you can, and even further back than that you and I were together in the same place. No matter what happens, nobody else can ever know or take away from us what that was like. Two different people but only one beginning, like two fish swimming in the same sea.

"Being twins, we'll always carry that inside."

Their own personal mythology, the story she'd used to whisper to Subaru in the night, trying to cushion his loneliness and fear as he grew away from her and toward being the head of the Sumeragi. Although of course they'd had to live as separate people, she'd hoped that thinking of the ways in which they still were close might give him some comfort. Sitting back against her seat, she studied the Sakurazukamori with a smile.

Sei-chan, I'm certainly not going to tell you all of our secrets.

"Well, anyway," Seishirou said, "it's nice to know about those earrings. I'd figured that they were yours, but just in case they weren't...who knows, maybe Subaru-kun was thinking about accessorizing." The man chuckled at his thought, but it reminded her of....

"Argh! I forgot to get that hat for him! *Sei-chan!*" She reared up and planted both hands on the table, stretching across it to glare into his face. "What are you going to do about my brother's wardrobe?"

"Me?" The man seemed startled, which might or might not be genuine. Hokuto jabbed one finger at him threateningly.

“Yes, you, Sakurazuka Seishirou-san! You’re in charge of my brother’s well-being now. Look!” She snatched open the coat that she was wearing. “It’s a disgrace! An onmyouji shouldn’t look like something out of a catalog! It’s up to you to be a good influence when I’m not around. And besides,” Hokuto smiled at the man sweetly, “isn’t the villain of the piece supposed to have a great sense of style?”

For a heartbeat they stared at each other across that very slight distance. Then Seishirou’s lips curved up into an answering expression that was a smile only by association. “For one thing,” he said, “I’m sure that Subaru-kun’s more than old enough to dress himself. And for another—if the villain’s distinguished by a sense of style, what does that make you?”

Hokuto stood open-mouthed for a moment but was spared from having to reply by Seishirou himself, who turned, beckoning toward their apprehensively hovering waitress. Dispirited, Hokuto flumped back into her seat. As Seishirou traded pleasantries with the woman, detaining her to snatch one last fry from Hokuto’s plate before it was cleared, she glared at him and wondered if he could have been even remotely serious. Could he be operating under some sort of bizarre delusion, or had he just said that to confuse her? Well, in any case *she* was sure where they stood on the scales of light and darkness, and if somebody was evil around here, it certainly wasn’t her.

She was really annoyed that he’d been able to get to her like that, though. She’d have to do a whole lot better if she wanted to rattle him.

Recovering swiftly, she smiled at the waitress as the woman handed out dessert menus. The waitress blushed a little, lowering her eyes. It reminded Hokuto that she was in fact in Subaru’s extremely attractive male body, and for an instant she was tempted to play the flirt, just to needle Seishirou. She decided against it, however. Just in case the Sakurazukamori turned out to be possessive, it was probably better not to involve innocent people. She studied her menu instead.

“What would you like?” Seishirou asked, his hidden eyes appearing to scan his menu intently. How he could read with those things on, and especially indoors, was beyond her. And with only one good eye.... She hesitated over the list of desserts. They all sounded tempting, but she’d had a big lunch, and if she knew her brother that was already more food than he was used to. Getting a little extra protein into him was one thing. Making him sick was something else.

“I don’t know,” she answered at last. “It’s so hard to decide. Maybe I’ll try just a bite or two of yours. What are you having?”

“This hot fudge brownie sundae looks good.” The man laid his menu down and pointed. Hokuto craned to see.

“Decadent, decadent!” she declared. “I approve wholeheartedly!” Seishirou smiled and gestured to the waitress.

As the poor woman fluttered away once more, having taken their order and poured coffee and been utterly disconcerted by Seishirou’s usual joke that the two of them were there on a date, Hokuto stirred sweetener into her cup reflectively. The other patrons of the coffee shop had

turned back to their own tables, deciding that the spectacle was over. She hoped they were enjoying the show. Glancing up, she saw Seishirou gazing out the window, his interest caught by something in the street, and she watched him over the rim of her cup as she took a small sip. Inscrutable behind those dark glasses, behind that camouflage of a smile....

This was the man who had killed her, sitting in front of her now without the smallest sign of concern. Suppressing a shudder, Hokuto set her cup down again.

What did she think she could do to a person like that?

“Ah, here we go!” Seishirou said cheerfully, as the waitress returned with his dessert. “Thank you very much. You know,” he added in an aside to Hokuto after the woman had gone, “the service is really very good here.”

“Then you’d better leave that waitress an extra big tip!” she retorted sharply. *Especially with all the teasing you’ve been putting her through.* The waitress had left them two spoons, and Hokuto picked hers up, digging into the sundae from one side as Seishirou mounted his assault upon the other. Mmm, chocolate brownie and fudge swirl ice cream, topped by hot fudge sauce and whipped cream...Hokuto licked her spoon in bliss.

This was the pinnacle of living existence, right here.

Seishirou was savoring his own mouthful with enthusiasm, and Hokuto watched him, her mood flickering between amusement and irritation at his perversely impenetrable good humor. “I don’t know how you do it,” she remarked, and at his questioning look she went on, “How do you keep that sweet tooth of yours happy without gaining a thousand pounds?”

“Why, it’s no problem at all.” Seishirou smiled. “I just use a bit of correspondence magic.”

“Eh?” Hokuto filched a dangling precipice of whipped cream that was leaning from the back side of the sundae.

“Of course. You know the way a magician’s spells come back to him and he has to turn those consequences aside? This is the same kind of thing. In this case, I just divert those calories to someplace more convenient—generally to the hips of unsuspecting teenaged girls.” Seishirou popped another bite of brownie into his mouth and looked beatific.

Hokuto stared in horror. “That’s...that’s....”

“Clever?” the man asked innocently.

“*MONSTROUS!*” Throwing down her spoon, Hokuto sprang out of her seat and stormed toward the coffee shop’s door. Behind her she could hear the Sakurazukamori calling her name, but she didn’t turn around. Of course, he was almost surely joking with her and he didn’t really do any such thing, but she’d had just about enough of him and his self-satisfaction. She was *mad* suddenly—and behind the mad there was a flutter of fear, the realization that she didn’t know how to get around him and get to what she needed to know. Shoving the glass door open in a jangle of bells, she stalked out onto the sidewalk.

“*Hokuto-chan.*” Caught by one wrist, she was whipped around to face him, his fingers grinding cruelly into the bone. His face was like a statue’s, not smiling at all now, his mouth set

and cold beneath the black reflections hiding his eyes. Hokuto drove one knee up, right where nice girls oughtn't to know about, and as the man doubled up, those fingers loosened. Twisting, Hokuto broke away from him.

She ran.

A few strides down the sidewalk, she threw a glance behind her. The man was straightening, turning to follow, his coat a splash of midnight amidst the passersby. He'd lost the sunglasses, and as he raised his head his eyes seared after her, narrowed and aflame.

Hokuto ran even faster.

Catching sight of a "walk" sign, she bolted across the street, then hurdled a low wall guarding a park. She hit the gravel path on the other side and sprinted down it, running almost parallel to the road. Risking another look back, she didn't see a pursuer, and there was definitely something wrong about that. Hokuto darted through the shadows of a leafless stand of trees, and then, just as she spotted the torii of the park's main entrance, she felt a warning tingle of alarm. She looked up and to one side, and through the flickering cage of branches she saw a dark figure looming on top of a building across the street. That figure gestured, and every sense screamed out *magic!* as the park began to vanish into blackness.

Closing both eyes tightly, Hokuto simply kept on running.

Luckily it was winter, so there weren't too many loitering people to get in her way. As she ran, Hokuto hoped and prayed that she was right and that a maboroshi worked the way she thought it did. Whatever the Sakurazukamori created had the effect of something real, but she didn't think that he could make unreal the rest of the world around her. She'd only had a few more meters to cross, and if she could make it before he wove together something else to ensnare her, if she'd aimed herself right so that she didn't run headlong into the torii, then—

She heard the blast of an air horn, at first very faintly, then rapidly growing in volume. The darkness frayed, as though torn by the sound. As it cleared, she saw through the cracks in it an extremely large truck rumbling down on her. Through the cab's window she could see the driver frantically turning the steering wheel, his eyes fixed on nothing in particular. The truck's wheels locked; it began to skid, jackknifing toward her.

Hokuto sprang into the air. Somehow, miraculously, she found herself on top of the truck. As it tilted underneath her, still sliding forward, she launched herself from it again. An astonishing leap, more body instinct than anything else—and while she was still in midair she heard a sickening crunch behind her as the truck heeled over onto its side and then crashed hard. There was a deafening blare of horns; she heard further collisions, a background chorus of screams—

"Sorry!" she gasped. Lighting on the roof of a sport utility vehicle, she leaped again. "Please excuse me!" She'd meant for reality to come to her rescue, but not quite like this! She hoped nobody was hurt. Glancing around herself as she bounded from car to car, she got herself oriented at last: she was right by the foot of the Azuma Bridge, where a tangle of roads came together. The lane just beside her was empty of traffic; she jumped over the concrete barrier and onto the street.

An illusion intended to stop that truck before it could reach her, another to keep the cars in this lane from coming ahead—and surely he was cloaking himself and possibly her as well. There were only so many things that one could do simultaneously. Of course he'd had to let the maboroshi around her go.

She ran up onto the incline of the bridge. Wind whipped at her, and her improvised flight crystallized into sudden inspiration. From the corner of one eye she saw movement, a black flicker high in the air, coming over the arc of suspension cable, a coat that was outspread like wings—she leaped for the waist-high rail. Subaru's boots skittered and then got traction on it as she grabbed at a slender cable. She whirled, precariously balanced, dangling by that one-handed grip above the river, the metal searingly cold against bare skin.

"Stop right there!" she screamed at the Sakurazukamori. "*Don't you come any closer!*"

The man froze motionless in the roadway, watching her, still except for the wind that caught at his hair and his coat. She could hear car horns and the sounds of raised voices, but they seemed strangely muffled and far away. Maybe that was his spell. Far below the Sumida River rolled toward the sea, frigid and turbulent with snow melt.

"One step," she challenged him, "just one. *I can have my brother back.*" She leaned backward, hanging out over the drop. Gazing at the man, she searched his face like a street sign. "What do you feel?"

The Sakurazukamori stared into the space between them. His eyes were blank, as though he was feeling his way through an unexpectedly darkened room. The wind sang in the cables high above them, and shards of ice splintered loose to fall and smash on pavement.

"Anger," the man whispered. "Anger..."

"...*fear.*"

And as Hokuto looked at him, she felt weakness creeping over her, a tide that submerged her, sucking her down and away. She wavered, then swayed forward, dragging herself back from the edge. Tottering, she half-stepped, half-fell off the railing and into the Sakurazukamori's outstretched arms.

They closed around her, and she knotted both hands into the man's coat. Head pressed against his chest, she could feel his stiffness, a shell around the beating of his heart. He held her without moving, supporting her as strength drained away and the world slowly started to fade.

At last...at last....

She knew it for certain.

"It'll be all right," she whispered. "It'll be all right. Tell my brother...tell Subaru that." It was important that she say this one thing. Then as the light began to return to her, glimmering through the shadows of this world, release and relief sparkled into joy. A last mischievous impulse took her, and she mumbled into Seishirou's broad chest, "Y'know, maybe you decided to pick on the wrong Sumeragi sibling. I would've shown you a thing or two...Sakura...zu...ka...." Before she could finish the word, though, that light had become all-consuming.

The very last tie had been broken.
And now she could rest.

* * * * *

Seishirou could feel the gust—not of wind, but of spirit—as the ghost of Subaru’s sister released its grip on this mortal world and then disappeared. Perhaps *this* time it would actually be for good. Subaru sagged against him, and he tightened his hold, supporting the other’s slight weight. Settling his cheek against the wind-stirred silk of Subaru’s hair, he glanced between the railings of the bridge. The restless, wintry river churned by far beneath them.

He’d glimpsed before the emptiness of what this world would be like if Subaru no longer existed for him. It was something of which he already was quite aware. But to experience such a keen understanding of it....

Had that really been “fear”?

Then Subaru stirred, drifting toward wakefulness, and as Seishirou turned his attention from the river, he set that moment aside. Subaru straightened up hesitantly, and Seishirou eased his grip. Opening his eyes, Subaru glanced upward in bewilderment, and Seishirou smiled down into that lovely and disoriented green gaze.

“Welcome back, Subaru-kun. Did you sleep well?”

Chapter 12

The explosion tossed them both into wakefulness at the same instant as a roaring wave of force rocked the apartment building. Seishirou rolled swiftly on top of Subaru, one arm raised warding above their heads. With the other, he held Subaru against his chest, all his senses skimming outward, searching for the instigator of the blast and finding just a vanishing gleam of power that winked into the distance like a shooting star. There was a confusion of crashes from around the apartment, one final vibration, then silence. After a pause, Seishirou pushed himself up on his elbow. “What was that?” Subaru whispered, and Seishirou frowned.

“I’m not quite sure. “

Summoning a small light into his hand, he sat up further. Subaru glanced at his face, green eyes troubled almost to black, then eeled out from beneath him and padded to the window. Disheveled and fragile-looking in rumpled white pajamas, Subaru pried open a crack in the blind and peered out anxiously, while Seishirou watched with a carefully guarded expression. In the aftermath of that precipitous awakening, he couldn’t tell which was more perturbing: the near-miss itself or the quandary of Subaru’s presence when he probably should go out and investigate it.

“I think it hit the garden apartments at the bottom of the hill...whatever ‘it’ was,” Subaru was saying. He craned his neck, then went up on his toes as well to get a better view. “I can see fire.”

“Ah.” Still a bit disconcerted, Seishirou hunted for the bedside lamp and found that it had tumbled off the nightstand. Fortunately it hadn’t broken. He picked it up, straightening its shade, and turned it on. Its warm, ordinary glow replaced his magical light with the more comfortable illusion of normalcy. Subaru turned to blink at him, then faced the window again, shading his eyes with one slim hand. Seishirou wondered what the onmyouji was trying to see out there. As far as he could tell, all the fireworks were over and the guilty party long since gone.

As Seishirou scanned the bedroom for further signs of damage, he continued to probe the mystical undercurrents of the surrounding area, searching for whatever clues might be left behind. He could feel the disruptions that the power had caused, but not any real hint as to its nature. For a shockwave of such magnitude, though, and with that particular resonance, there were really only two possibilities.

Dragon of Heaven.

Dragon of Earth.

Either one was a complication to his tryst with Subaru.

At the moment, though, he couldn’t sense any immediate threat, and the only casualty he’d found was the plant stand, which had tipped over, spilling his plants onto the floor. It was a good thing he’d left them in their original plastic pots; he’d only have to sweep up a bit of dirt. Since

there didn't seem to be any pressing danger, he decided to let the matter slide for now. In the morning he might put some effort into unraveling it, if he could manage to distract Subaru.

He was reasonably sure that no one knew where they were living and that the attack therefore had been a mere coincidence: some aerial battle passing by. But if he were wrong and it had been a deliberate attempt or perhaps a warning that they'd been discovered, then some words would be exchanged.

He didn't want Subaru getting involved in that.

"Nobody's out there." Subaru's shading gesture had shifted into the two-fingered focus of his own psychic probe. Now he dropped that hand from his forehead. Sighing, he pulled down a slat of the blind and futilely gazed out once more. "At least, I can't find anyone. What were they after? No kekkai went down."

Seishirou didn't answer, not being eager to encourage his lover's interest. After all, the success of this relationship game lay largely in avoiding the endless sparring match that presaged the destruction of the world. Far better to continue as they had been, separating themselves from even the thoughts of Seals and Angels, keeping their allegiances under cover and out of sight. Stifling a yawn, he decided to put off inspecting the rest of the apartment in favor of luring Subaru back to bed and to sleep, or perhaps to something nicer.

What a nuisance they'd had to be awakened so rudely, though. It really didn't set a proper mood.

"All those people," Subaru was murmuring. "It's so senseless. I wonder...."

And there was a fine dusting of ceiling plaster in the bed sheets, Seishirou noticed suddenly. It was probably all over himself as well. Distastefully he swiped one hand across his hair and scrutinized the white powder layering his fingers. As he glanced up again, his gaze unexpectedly met Subaru's. Subaru was watching him, those expressive eyes opening onto darkness as transparently as the crack of window visible in the blind's narrow gap. Everything that Subaru didn't say hovered at their surface, shimmering like the lamplight's reflections. Bemused, Seishirou stared at the silent onmyouji, then lowered his hand and smiled, with only the slightest of inward sighs.

"Let me pick up the plants and get dressed, Subaru-kun. Then we can go outside and have a look around."

Subaru's whole heart answered him eloquently, a wordless fire of emotion kindling in those really too irresistible green eyes. Then Subaru turned, glancing out the window again. Seishirou took advantage of that momentary distraction, since it seemed that there wouldn't be any other fun for a while, to let his gaze roam appreciatively over the view. True, those pajamas didn't reveal much at all, but still...and as he watched Subaru lingering there, unaware of his scrutiny, he couldn't resist the temptation.

"Hadn't you better get dressed too?" he asked innocently, and Subaru jumped.

"Um—right!"

* * * * *

Walking along the sidewalk toward the sirens' cacophony and the orange-yellow light of flames, Seishirou blew out another soundless sigh, his breath condensing whitely into frost. How had he let himself get seduced into this? Beside him, Subaru kept quickening pace and then slowing again, quite obviously struggling to keep from rushing forward. Calmly Seishirou maintained his own steady stride, an easy rhythm that would get them where they were going more than soon enough. After all, he reasoned, he already knew pretty much what they were going to see.

And as the muddled noises ahead resolved into the muted roar of fire, a chaos of urgent voices, and occasionally, raised over the rest, one faint human cry, Seishirou reflected idly about the pointlessness of this whole excursion and how he'd really rather be back in his bed.

Oh, well...it couldn't be helped, he supposed. Subaru was just that kind of soft-hearted person.

He did wonder, though, as they drew nearer to the source of the disturbance, what exactly Subaru was hoping to achieve.

The structures that they passed began to show signs of damage, shattered windows and facades that had been scoured away, and Subaru picked up speed again. They came around a building that had lost most of its front to the explosion, and as they stepped into the glare of firelight Subaru raised one arm instinctively before his face. They were just across the street from the line of fire trucks and the emergency workers who were frantically manning hoses, so close to the burning apartment building that Seishirou could feel the conflagration's heat prickling against his skin. Fire bloomed from a deep crater in the center of the unit and from the smaller holes where windows and sliding glass doors had been. The strike must have hit the building directly, and then the gas lines had probably gone up, Seishirou judged. The structure was obviously a total loss, and the most the firemen appeared to be striving for was to keep the rest of the complex from burning as well. To him, their efforts seemed rather in vain. Whether from the original attack or the explosion that had come after it, the earth had buckled violently, and the trees and buildings nearest to the impact had been tumbled to the ground like a child's carelessly demolished heap of toys. As far as he could tell, there wasn't very much to be saved.

Subaru made a circuit around the laboring firemen, springing over rubble and cracks in the street, and Seishirou followed. The flames swept a curtain of light and shadow over everything and reflected as a dull orange smudge onto the low cloud cover and the smoke that roiled up to meet it. Seishirou glanced upward, briefly scanning that troubled sky with senses deeper and wider than sight. He could perceive more than plainly the vanishing star-trail of power: a familiar aura, and one of extravagant purity and strength.

Interesting...perhaps this trip wasn't a complete waste of time, not when it provided him with such a tantalizing hint of mystery.

Now why would the Kamui of the Dragons of Heaven be destroying a random apartment building?

They arrived at a larger cross street where survivors were gathering, and Seishirou filed his question away for future study. People stood about in knots, clustering around the assembled ambulances or huddling together with their families. All those worried eyes—many fixed on the flames—were brilliant with that shifting, almost alien light, or perhaps with fear and grief. The air was filled with voices, unintelligible in sheer number. Subaru paused and looked around himself, dismayed.

A few stragglers still were stumbling from less-damaged apartment buildings. Not far away, an old woman tottered to the curb and sat down with a thump. She began to rock back and forth, moaning wordlessly, a low, keening wail. Blood streamed down her face from a cut on her forehead; beneath the coat that had been flung around her blue-flowered nightgown she clutched one arm to her side. Shivering in thin pajamas, a teenaged girl bent over her, plain face smudged with dirt and the tracks of tears. "Obaasan...."

And Seishirou started, one hand twitching reflexively after Subaru as the onmyouji vanished from his side. Stepping over to the sidewalk, Subaru swung off his own coat and draped it about the girl's thin shoulders, leaving himself just in sweater and jeans. The girl looked up, and Subaru murmured, scarcely audible from where Seishirou stood, "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Straightening, she brushed her short, straight hair back from her face, concern taking the place of sorrow and loss in her eyes. "But my grandmother...."

"I'll see if I can find a doctor." With a brief but lingering glance in Seishirou's direction, Subaru strode off toward the flashing ambulance lights, disappearing into the crowd. Bemused, Seishirou watched him go, considering the weight of things contained in that look. Not expectation, but rather the opposite of expectation: the simple fact of the situation and the gravity that it held for Subaru. Then, after a moment, Seishirou shrugged. He went over to the woman and with a smile knelt down beside her, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket.

"There now," he murmured, pressing the cloth carefully to the cut on her face, "don't be frightened. A doctor will be with you very shortly." He rested his other hand lightly against her wrist, and the old woman flinched. "Your arm—it's broken, isn't it. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

The woman stared pitifully at the mask of his sunglasses, blood staining her papery skin and matting the thin, white hairs beside her temple. Pain deepened the creases at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes were gummed and red with uncomprehending tears. Gazing into her features, rich with the character of a long and well-lived life, Seishirou made a deliberate effort to smile more reassuringly, even as he studied the landscape of her face with a distant, abstract interest.

Grandmother, these old eyes have seen a lot, haven't they? But they haven't seen anything at all compared to what lies ahead. Indeed, the chaos that's to come will make you wish you'd died tonight among the ruins of your home.

Are you praying for some merciful person to end everything for you swiftly and spare you so much suffering in your final days?

Well, unfortunately for you....

I'm not that person.

Subaru returned, melting back through the crowd with a pair of emergency medics in tow. Consoling Seishirou patted the woman's uninjured arm and stood up, brushing a little dirt from his knee. One of the medics had blankets, and as his partner began attending to the old woman he approached the anxiously hovering girl. "Oh!" she exclaimed, and fended him off for a moment as she struggled out from underneath Subaru's coat. She offered the coat to Seishirou, as Subaru had already retreated and was surveying the area, apparently in search of other people who needed rescuing. The girl smiled up at him, her face beneath its dirt luminous with gratitude.

"Thank you," she whispered, slipping a shy half-glance toward her grandmother.

Although a touch surprised, Seishirou returned her smile, and with a tiny bow he accepted the coat from her hands. Then, leaving her and the woman to the medics' care, he walked across the street to rejoin Subaru. Solicitously but firmly he put the coat around his lover, guiding the distracted onmyouji's arms into the sleeves, because if he simply handed it over then Subaru would probably just give it to somebody else immediately. Seeming only vaguely aware of Seishirou's presence, Subaru scanned the surrounding faces, his body knotted with tension. He stood rooted in place like a tree by the empathy that twined out from his heart, drinking in others' misery and making it a part of himself. Resignedly, Seishirou put one hand onto his shoulder to break that spell. "Subaru-kun—"

"*Momma!*" A tiny figure stumbled headlong out of the crowd, caroming into Subaru heedlessly. Staggering back a step, she—for it proved to be a pajama-clad little girl, perhaps about six years old—stared up at them, her enormous hazel eyes round and wet with tears. Then she latched onto Subaru, knotting stubby fingers into the denim of his jeans. "Where's my momma?" she sobbed, her voice rising toward a loud howl. "*I want my momma!*" And she yanked hard at Subaru, as though she could shake the missing parent out of him.

Subaru was getting that traumatized look, and Seishirou bent swiftly to pluck the child off his leg. Swinging her up into the crook of one arm, he supported her against himself as she burst into deafening wails. He stroked her hair and her frantically heaving shoulders, weaving just a shade of magic around her, a light skein lying across the surface of her mind. He dulled the bright, sharp edges of her grief and fear with the subtlest of mental sorceries, until she lay limply against his chest, still but for the very slow rhythm of her deep breathing.

Subaru stepped closer and hesitantly touched her cheek. "Where did you see your mother last?" he asked. "Did you lose her in this crowd?"

"No." The little girl's voice was flat and exhausted-sounding, affectless under the influence of Seishirou's spell. Subaru glanced up at him in some concern, and Seishirou wondered whether that look had to do with the mother's uncertain fate or with his own covert use of magic. He couldn't tell whether or not Subaru had detected the working.

"Before, then," Subaru murmured, returning to the girl, "was she with you at your home?"

"Mmm." The child moved her head in weary assent. "She went back for my brother, Yu-chan."

"Where?" Subaru asked, the one word gentle but intensely focused, and the girl disentangled an arm from Seishirou to wave in an unhelpfully vague direction. "Can you show us where?"

"I don't know." Letting her aimlessly pointing hand fall, she buried her face in Seishirou's scarf. "Nothing looks the way it's s'posed to."

Subaru stared at her, and then gathered himself, taking a short step backward. Reaching into the sleeve of his coat, he drew out a card. Holding it between two fingers, he raised it in front of his forehead. "*Shuku dou.*" He laid the card across his palm, his other hand hovering above it. "*Shou!*"

As he withdrew his covering hand, the ofuda lifted and moved as though of its own volition. Trembling into the air, it folded over and about itself, until with a white flare of magical energy it spread feathered wings and burst into the form of a shikigami. The bird gave a scintillating, almost soundless cry and lofted from Subaru's fingers. With the grace of a kite that had a steady grip controlling its string, it began to float along the street, only occasionally stroking its wings. Subaru took off after the shikigami, and Seishirou, collecting his patience, hefted his tiny burden and followed in Subaru's wake.

As they skirted the edge of the crowd, Seishirou eyed Subaru. It never ceased to amaze him how Subaru could be so open in the use of magic, especially around him. From the start he'd allowed Seishirou to witness any number of workings, even against his grandmother's wise advice. Although Seishirou had dropped hints about his own abilities, it had always been with the knowledge that he was breaking cover and a careful calculation of how much it might be prudent to reveal. These days, however, curiously, despite the fact that Subaru knew quite plainly who and what he was, he found himself not merely cautious but at times uneasy, even about the simplest of spells. He didn't want to grow too complacent, of course, to let familiarity trick him into giving away some essential secret, but it was also something more. Ever since he'd seen Subaru clasp that cute inugami master close, torn between contrary forces, he'd known how tenuous this breathing-space they dwelt in was. Any reminder of the powers that they held, the mystical prowess that made them Dragon of Heaven, Dragon of Earth, might be enough to destroy it. And having permitted himself the peculiar luxury of Subaru's presence, he found that he was reluctant to surrender it too soon.

Yet at the same time it had always been hard to resist using magic around Subaru, even so long ago when he'd been concealing his true nature. He didn't understand why that was. He'd been lucky, really, that Subaru had never seemed to question why his friend the veterinarian was

so talented at onmyoujitsu. And it was no different in the present—against his better judgment, he kept giving in to the urge to do this or that around Subaru, and then arguing with himself about the wisdom of it.

Ambivalence was not a state that he was used to, Seishirou reflected. Nor was it particularly enjoyable.

They were leaving the mob behind them, and the shikigami turned, drifting weightlessly upward through the smoky air. It wafted over the hillock of a demolished building like a large and ornate white leaf. Determinedly Subaru climbed in pursuit of it, his sneakered feet sure on blocks of concrete and roofing; Seishirou called after him softly, “Be careful.” As the little girl stirred in his arms, he touched the back of her head with one gloved finger, murmuring in an undertone, “*Sleep.*” He could feel her sag against him as the spell took effect. Considering what they were likely to find, he’d have more than enough to deal with just to comfort Subaru. He had no interest in soothing a hysterical child as well.

Settling the girl more securely against his shoulder, he began to move around the toppled structure, following in the general direction that Subaru was heading. He saw Subaru pause at the peak of the debris and then skitter down the other side. Reaching the corner, Seishirou caught sight of Subaru again: he had halted at a jagged pile of rubble that looked no different from any other. Sinking to his knees, he stared into it for a long, long time. Then he lifted both hands in the prayer gesture and began to chant, his voice clear and remote in the frosty air. Nearby, the shikigami observed the scene from its perch on a crumpled balcony rail.

Seishirou stood on the pavement of what had been a children’s ball court, watching Subaru perform the evocation. After a while, dim radiance seeped from the shattered wall. The light drew together into an unclear figure—a woman, one assumed, although the ghost lacked coherence, making it hard to identify. Subaru lifted his head to address the spirit; it replied at some length as he listened to it with grave concern. His attitude spoke of reassurance and polite authority: the confidence he’d had even as a boy, in his work if not much else.

The spirit grew more solid as Subaru said something else, presumably referring to the girl that Seishirou held in his arms. She turned to study him, her intense face framed by long, wheat-colored hair that swept like folded wings down her translucent form. Seishirou smiled back guilelessly, and then Subaru smiled as well, that luminous and compassionate expression. He held out his hand in a final gesture, part invitation, part command. Seeming almost to bow, the ghost reached out in turn, fading toward nonexistence. As their fingers touched she puffed into a shimmer of light that sparkled about Subaru briefly before dissolving away.

Subaru tilted his head back, closing his eyes. Then he sighed, one small breath, and his shoulders slumped.

As he stood and started to clamber down the pile of rubble, Seishirou moved swiftly forward to its base. Settling the child into the crook of his arm, he extended the other one to Subaru. Subaru took his hand and jumped the last short meter to the pavement, dropping to the ground

with light finality. Straightening, he gazed into the little girl's face, his expression faraway and troubled, as it frequently was after such a working.

"All right?" Seishirou murmured.

"Yeah." As tranquil even in their unrest as clouds were, Subaru's eyes lingered on the girl. Then he smiled sadly. "The baby had already gone ahead. The mother was only worried about her children, and when I told her that her daughter was safe and would be taken care of, then she was ready to go too. Really, she was brave." Slipping his hand out of Seishirou's, he brushed the girl's cheek again, pushing a lock of hair aside—and Seishirou suppressed a twitch.

*Would be taken care of...*surely Subaru didn't mean....

"And now, what about her?" Seishirou asked, a cautious feeler toward the other's intentions, and Subaru tipped his head to one side, considering. Then he sighed once more.

"I guess we should take her to the emergency workers. They'll know the proper people to look after her. Maybe she has other family who can take her in. Or if not...." Letting the words trail off, he smoothed the sleep-frown puckering the child's forehead. "In either case, she'll have to be brave too," he said finally. "It'll be hard."

Seishirou felt mild relief wash over him, and he smiled, stifling a tiny chuckle before it could escape. Of course Subaru wouldn't have thought to suggest that *they* care for the child. It would be ridiculously inconvenient, not to mention pointless, for two opposing Dragons to take in a six-year-old practically on the eve of the deciding battle. Even Subaru had to recognize that. No, he'd mistaken Subaru's compassion for deeper, more personal feelings and had jumped to the wrong conclusion...and in that odd flux-tide of release, he found himself staring at Subaru. Seemingly unaware of his regard, Subaru contemplated the child's face in turn. Fascinated, Seishirou surveyed the vista of Subaru's features, the solemn set of the mouth and the green eyes hazed with feelings as if with rain.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou said softly, the words rising almost without his willing them, "shall I make her forget?"

And he hadn't the least idea why he'd made that offer, particularly when his inclination recently had been to *hide* his abilities. Neither was he quite sure what he expected in response. Perhaps it was the same as the way Subaru's shyness triggered his teasing, the way Subaru's naive allure tempted him to play amorous, at times dangerous games, to desire to touch. Baffled, almost hesitant, he waited as his words sank in on Subaru, and then Subaru responded with surprising evenness, "No. It would take something precious away from her, a little piece of the person she is. She wouldn't remember what kind of woman her mother was, a woman who would sacrifice her own life for her children. And not remembering, she would never understand. Although she may not understand it anyway, still, to forget.... If she forgets everything, it just makes what she's suffered just a meaningless tragedy. Living means to remember it, and then to go on."

Dubiously Seishirou eyed Subaru, his vague unrest somehow not appeased by those quiet words. Then Subaru glanced up the rubble's slope toward the shikigami, which was still awaiting

its next command. He called it to him; it took off with a thin, silken rustle of wings, sliding down through the air toward him, and as it mantled above his outstretched hand, it dissolved into white light and a spent, fluttering scrap of paper. A small breeze, rising, snatched at the ofuda, and Subaru captured the card before it could escape. The air was a touch less chill than it had been, and behind its pervading smokiness it carried the weak, wet scent of rain or snow.

The promise of a change in weather....

* * * * *

They'd finally started home from the scene of destruction, and the flames' crackle had faded with the distance. The still-sleeping girl had been given to the rescue workers, who were collecting the other refugees into busses to take them to shelter. In the side street where the two of them now moved, the only reminder of what they'd seen was far-off firelight wavering on windowless brick walls and on the old snowdrifts that lined the curbs. As they walked down the center of the narrow road, empty of traffic at that hour, the wind continued freshening steadily.

Subaru put one slow foot in front of the other, his eyes on the ground.

Seishirou flicked the cigarette that he'd been smoking down a sewer grate. His pause for that put him a half-step in Subaru's wake. Looking at the other onmyouji's back, he remarked, "You feel responsible, don't you?" Subaru's pace faltered; Seishirou moved forward and put his hands onto Subaru's shoulders.

Together they came to a stop there, in the middle of the street.

"Because you're a Dragon of Heaven," Seishirou went on, speaking with deliberate, practiced calm. Subaru was silent in his grasp. "Because you're involved in the end of the world, even if it's not your doing you feel responsible for the harm that comes to other people. You think that you ought to have prevented this, that somehow you're to blame...." He rocked Subaru backward, drawing the other's familiar, unresisting weight against himself. "But you didn't destroy that apartment building. You didn't hurt and kill all those people. If you'd never been born into this world, do you think that human suffering would somehow be diminished? Even if you're a Dragon of Heaven and the head of the Sumeragi clan, nobody thinks you've failed tonight but yourself, let alone that any of this was your fault in the first place. And I'm sure the people that you helped back there would agree with me." Slipping his arms around Subaru and crossing them over the onmyouji's chest, Seishirou rested his cheek against the top of Subaru's head. "So Subaru-kun, don't blame yourself anymore. Okay?"

There was a pause that seemed to stretch out endlessly, and then:

"*Eh.*" The sound was less a word than a breath of acquiescence. After a moment, Subaru's hand stole up to close around his. The thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan settled back against his shoulder, and as though in answer Seishirou turned his face against that silky dark hair.

He had gotten it right again, he thought with a flicker of satisfaction. Yet the adrenaline thrumming through him hadn't diminished a bit.

Strange....

What was this disturbance, this continuing impression of danger, when to all appearances he'd just changed Subaru's mood for the better and everything ought to be fine?

Seishirou's eyes had closed, but now he opened them again, gazing past Subaru's head. It wasn't that he'd reminded Subaru of the future they were approaching, although that could be part of it. Subaru hadn't flinched at his magic or at his mention of the world's end, but his own irrational desire to avoid bringing attention to either one remained hard to shake. It wasn't even that he'd reminded himself. He had known from the start that this idyll, as pleasant as it might be, would soon be over.

It wasn't the certain knowledge that Subaru was a threat to him, that Subaru had duties and responsibilities that had to do with him only insofar as he was a menace to be overcome, and that one of these days Subaru would have to take notice of that. It wasn't even the pang he'd felt on the Azuma Bridge, the realization that all of this might be stolen from him in a single breath.

That something he still didn't grasp could be lost like that, snatched away without resolution....

His hands tensing almost indiscernibly on Subaru, he groped his way at last to comprehension. No, it had a little to do with all those things, but the truth was something more. Not the inevitable and doubtlessly ruinous fate that awaited them both....

It was that Subaru saw it also and yet persevered.

In the end, he hadn't wanted that child to forget, Seishirou realized. He had wanted Subaru to. Because if Subaru simply forgot, that he could understand. After all, it was only the kind of thing that he was used to seeing.

But instead, in spite of everything, for there to be this...*this*....

And as he tightened his arms abruptly around Subaru, he squashed the inexplicable urge to laugh out loud. Instead, he spun that almost explosive impulse outward, releasing it into his magic. He wrapped the two of them up inside his spell, not at all sure of his reasons, but it had something to do with a reckless urge to push this impossible moment, to challenge it and see how far it might extend. The glow of that distant fire transformed itself, filling the air with movement. Its light sealed the world away from where they stood with a shimmering, radiant curtain. Pale reddish gold and orange flickers enfolded them like rain, danced around them like snow, in constantly changing and renewing patterns.

Subaru lifted his head from Seishirou's shoulder. "*Beautiful*," he whispered, gazing at the play of illusion with something like awe. "How do you—?" Seishirou stiffened—imperceptibly, he'd thought, but Subaru broke off at once. "No. Never mind. I'm sorry." Somehow that discernment hit Seishirou hard, almost like a blow; he struggled to find his balance, caught in a bizarre

equivocation. Surely this was more than enough, it was beyond foolishness to think of actually *teaching* Subaru one of his spells, and yet....

The craft of illusion was one thing, but there was an *art* to it as well, a wholly different skill that by itself could do very little.

He couldn't help wondering how Subaru would take to it.

"It's not unlike creating a shikigami," he heard himself say, the words slow, sounding almost diffident. He clasped his hands around Subaru's, at the same time laying his touch over Subaru's mind. He could feel Subaru yielding to that caress unreservedly, falling under his will without resistance and entering a subtle trance. "The magician simply draws out what's inside." As if from somewhere outside himself, he watched his fingers thread the strands of sorcery about Subaru's. Then he folded his arms around Subaru again, supporting the onmyouji in his embrace.

"Picture it in your mind," he breathed against the curve of Subaru's ear, "the place that you'd like to see...."

There was a pause, and then Subaru twitched, drawing himself upright with a delicate gasp. The mirage of fire and shadow condensed around them, darkening into a cavernous, poorly lit space filled with solid shapes: the heavy, slanting presence of girders and a tile floor that curved outward for an interminable distance. They were standing a little way back from an immense paned window, through which Seishirou could glimpse a landscape of gray and black buildings against a colorless sky, a view that stretched out below and around them. After a moment or two, he recognized the place.

It was the second observation deck of Tokyo Tower.

This was how it had been on that morning nine years ago, when he and Subaru had been locked in the Tower overnight following that business with the young woman's ghost. Seishirou smiled at the scene, remembering it all quite clearly: remembering how he and Subaru had sat with their backs to a girder, looking out across the city and talking of nothing essential until Subaru had fallen asleep, leaning against him with that pure and perfectly oblivious innocence. How he'd drawn Subaru down to sprawl more comfortably across his lap, and so they'd remained until dawn, Seishirou running his fingers through Subaru's hair and watching the city's lights, patient for once with this waiting. There had been a certain mood up there, suspended above the earth, a feeling as though one were in a different world altogether.

Subaru had caught the spirit of the place quite well, Seishirou thought, if not the architecture.

Amused, he closed his arms infinitesimally tighter around Subaru. That time he'd had to hold himself back from taking a definite advantage; now, of course, there was no more need for restraint. Lowering his head, he nuzzled into Subaru's hair, feeling the memory of that long-ago hunger, so deliberately denied, blending with the spice of his continuing edginess and the illusion's strange, anticipatory aura to form an intriguing savor of desire. He bent to touch his lips to the back of Subaru's neck. Subaru made a tiny, breathless sound before he'd quite made contact, and Seishirou, feeling the tenor of the illusion begin to shift, lifted his eyes.

Light?

Dumbfounded, Seishirou stared as dawn poured over the city, not in its usual tired crawl but instead with sweeping suddenness and delicacy. It was as though the air itself, struck by radiance, had become a swift-moving, nearly physical presence, like the evocation of a spirit. That light dissolved the glass panes in front of them; it lanced around them almost blindingly, forcing Seishirou to half-close his eyes, and then, as its intensity ebbed so that he could see again, he discovered that the world around them had changed. The girders had been thrown into crisp relief, their red color as vividly tactile as an artist's chalks. The floor that they stood upon was washed with gold, and outside, wreathing about the Tower's base and extending widely around it, a sea of faintest rose....

The sakura trees that grew on the Tower's grounds were in flower far below, their forms as indistinct as mist. Framed by the remote, hazy shapes of buildings and an impossibly cerulean sky, they formed an otherworldly expanse, far vaster in this illusion than in reality. Where in truth there had been only a few scattered trees in the first thin days of their blooming, in this memory the sakura rolled away on all sides, extravagant and gorgeous. The Tower's deck had become indefinite when Subaru's attention shifted—there was just the hint of its existence around them and the solidity of its tiles beneath their feet. Through the empty space where the window had been, a swirl of wind licked in at them; Subaru spread out his arms, his coat billowing back against Seishirou's legs. For an instant they remained like that, hanging between earth and sky, seemingly unsupported above the blossoming city. Then the illusion faltered as Subaru confused the perspectives, and as the cloudy branches that had been *here* suddenly were *there*, shifting between far and near, Seishirou seized hold of the spell and unraveled it before it could turn vertiginous. The illusion tore apart, fraying into shadows and dull, flickering light until they were standing once more on the pavement of a narrow street. The wind continued to blow, but it was cold now, and carried with it a few presaging snowflakes that tumbled from a darkly lowering sky.

Subaru sagged back against Seishirou's chest. His heartbeat, fluttering like a quaking leaf, trembled in counterpoint to Seishirou's own strangely rapid pulse. The tension, the "fear" from before had gone, but an excitement mysteriously remained.

As though some improbable gamble had been won, despite all odds.

Then Subaru sighed, and Seishirou collected himself, asking the other quickly, "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Folding his hand around Seishirou's tenderly, Subaru lifted it to touch Seishirou's wrist against his cheek. "Thank you." And as Subaru nestled against him, Seishirou gazed down onto that silky, wind-mussed hair.

The shy ease that Subaru showed with him these days, and the illusion, with its wild yet curiously gentle and ebullient spirit....

Was that what Subaru had been talking about when he'd spoken of joy?

“Subaru-kun,” Seishirou murmured, then added with deliberate offhandedness, “let’s go home.” Cupping his palm under Subaru’s chin, he turned the onmyouji, tilting the other’s face up toward his. “Although it’s pleasant to be with you anywhere, perhaps...someplace warmer?” He grinned suggestively.

And Subaru answered with one of those scarcely perceptible smiles, a subtle, almost knowing expression. The alley’s poor light caught in his gaze like fire inside a faceted precious stone. Dimly Seishirou wondered why, of all Subaru’s features, he found those green eyes so incredibly enticing, but he was already bowing toward their exquisite flicker, capturing the warmth of Subaru’s “yes” on his lips before it could be said. Subaru responded lingeringly, then drew back with sweet slowness, his eyes meeting Seishirou’s thoughtfully. “Oh, and Seishirou-san?”

“Mm?” Somewhat distracted, Seishirou’s gaze wandered Subaru’s face as that smile widened ever so slightly.

“Yes. You are.”

Seishirou blinked.

“I’m what?” Subaru’s shoulders jerked, and he ducked his head, hiding the laugh that sparkled in his eyes. Turning, he hopped over a small mounded snow drift and up onto the sidewalk, leaving Seishirou in his wake.

“Subaru-kun...!”

Subaru broke promptly into a swift, almost merry stride, and with a start Seishirou hurried after him as the snow began to flurry in earnest.

Drift II

Flashback

Seishirou pounded up the apartment building's stairs, taking them two at a time. At the landing of his floor, he swung around the bannister's corner and tossed his head, shaking free the damp layer of snow that hadn't had time to melt since he'd come indoors.

With exuberant good humor, he grinned.

What an extraordinary thing...the snow had been falling since almost two days ago, a hard, heavy winter storm that enshrouded the city. Yet despite the immense flakes' thickness and their whirling speed, they still maintained a feathery delicateness: plumes of white filling the air, spectacular and haunting. A sustained fall like this was rare in Tokyo, and Seishirou, out to pick up the newspapers, had taken his time, enjoying the exhilaration of it. But now, having had enough of wind and wet ankles, he was ready to watch the novelty from indoors for a while. If it let up later, though, perhaps he'd coax Subaru into going for a stroll around the neighborhood.

Seishirou swept more snow from his shoulders, and taking the plastic-wrapped papers out from under his arm, he shook them off as well. Pushing open the fire door, he stepped into the hall. The thought of a walk in the snow with Subaru, of watching the other's simple delight in such a thing and the attractive picture that it would make, was deeply appealing, almost as much as the prospect of nestling inside together and finding creative ways to stay warm and cozy on this cold, grey-white day.

The rest of the afternoon stretched out vacant before them. Surely there'd be plenty of time to get in both.

His smirk widening further, Seishirou strode down the hall. Really, he was in unusually high spirits today. It was something about the snow, perhaps: that soft dance, lovely but inexorable, a hypnotic, swirling grace that hid the fatal kiss of cold. He found it both familiar and strange, like his killing storm of sakura but not a part of him at all. That almost-recognition stirred in him a mild excitement, the feeling of facing something that might offer some opposition, that might contest him intriguingly, reflecting his own abilities back at himself...although intellectually he was aware that there was no real power behind the snow, the sensation of encounter remained.

Actually, he supposed, it was rather like the way that he experienced Subaru.

Reaching his apartment at last, he gave his key a quick twist in the lock and pushed open the door. "I'm home, Subaru-kun!" he called, stepping lightly inside. He detected Subaru's presence at once, of course, somewhere out of sight in the other room. Dropping his papers onto the stand beneath the wall phone, he exchanged shoes for slippers and shrugged out of his coat and scarf. As he was hanging them up, he noticed that Subaru's emanations hadn't moved. There had been no response to his call, in fact, and all the lights in the apartment were off. Turning, he registered

the dimness more completely, the day's vague grayness scarcely reaching to where he stood in the front room. But through the bedroom doorway he glimpsed a warm, living flicker and caught the faint aromas of incense and subtly scented wax.

Ah.

His mouth curving predaciously into an appreciative smile, Seishirou stole up onto the floor. Soundless in house shoes, he stalked the open doorway, anticipating what surprise might be awaiting him there. He came up to one side of the jamb, listening to the sibillance of snow as it was whisked against the window's glass; he slid around the corner slowly, and then stopped short.

Candles on floor and dresser cast their burnished glow across the room, and a curl of fragrant smoke bloomed from thin wands of smoldering incense. The picture window opened onto cloudy nothingness outside, like a painting of a blizzard through which distant black shadows of buildings could vaguely be seen. Subaru was sitting on the foot of the bed, eyes closed and legs drawn up into the lotus posture. Back perfectly straight and head bowed slightly, he remained motionless but for the measured rise and fall of his breath. His hands, resting on his knees, were offered palm upward, forefingers touching thumbs; his face was expressionless and quite serene. Gazing at Subaru, Seishirou let his head thunk gently against the doorframe.

Damn.

Expectations thwarted, he considered his remaining options. Sitting in consummate stillness, Subaru looked prepared to contemplate the ineffable until dinner, something the onmyouji could probably do as readily as another person might watch TV. And although it was very tempting to slip up beside him and ripple those invitingly tranquil waters with a bit of amorous distraction, Subaru would be upset at having his practice disturbed. He wouldn't say a word, of course, but that distress would linger, another small weight on his existence, whereas if Seishirou restrained himself there might be a worthwhile reward for his "consideration." Contented and at ease, Subaru could be quite a charming companion, while there was frankly very little attraction in making him more melancholy than he was already inclined to be.

With a put-upon sigh, Seishirou surveyed his lover's delectable and temporarily inaccessible body. Ah, well—a trivial privation like this would be good for him, he supposed: a test of his will. Turning, he wondered how to take his mind off his frustration, and a low, soft whistle, liquid as a pearl of rain, broke the silence.

Startled, Seishirou glanced back over his shoulder. Subaru's pose was unaltered; the candle flames wavered unforthcomingly. Easing into the bedroom, Seishirou peered into the shadowy ceiling corners, an expression of mild bewilderment sliding over his face. "What was that?" he mused. "It sounded like a bird." As he glanced about the room, he darted a sharp look toward Subaru. Subaru's lashes remained lowered, but was that a barely concealed twitch of the onmyouji's lips? "Hmm." For a second Seishirou stood in front of the doorway, hands in pockets, and then he shrugged. "Very strange." He turned as if to go, and there was that faint trill again, soaring as though in pursuit of him. He halted once more.

“A bird? A little bird...well,” Seishirou murmured, “there’s only one thing to be done with birds.”

Whirling into a crouch, he pounced.

“*Wah!*”

Subaru untangled those long legs of his in a flash and rolled aside. He almost made it off the bed before Seishirou crashed down on him. Grinning, Seishirou wrestled Subaru back to the center of the mattress and pinned him there. He gnawed along one slender arm to the shoulder, making the most ridiculous growling noises, then burrowed into the ticklish spot on the side of Subaru’s neck as Subaru yelped and squirmed underneath him. Suddenly Seishirou stopped and sat upright. As Subaru blinked at him, he picked a long, white, illusory feather from between his teeth and stared at it in vast perplexity. Subaru groaned.

“Seishirou-san!”

Twisting, Subaru got both hands behind his head and yanked a pillow out from underneath the covers. He hit Seishirou across the chest with it, and then tried once more to scramble off the bed. Seishirou caught him around the waist and tumbled them both to the mattress, taking a few more hits from the pillow before getting a proper grip on it. Then it was a brief, pleasurable exertion to wrest the pillow out of Subaru’s hands and trap the other onmyouji beneath him, both wrists held firmly above Subaru’s head. Pushing himself up on his arms, he tossed the hair from his eyes and stared down the very short distance into his captive’s face, a smile slowly curving his lips. He could feel Subaru’s stomach move against his as they breathed, and as he pressed himself hard to his prey, groin to groin and thigh to thigh, electric light and heat erupted from where their bodies touched to become a fulgorant whiteness at the back of his brain. He was ready to take the game to its forgone conclusion, his body already fired to arousal, when a realization began to occur to him.

How was he going to get their clothes off—or at least open—without letting his catch escape?

As if intuiting his thought, Subaru tensed against his grasp, and then relaxed, settling once more onto the bedspread. Subaru’s eyes flickered upward to meet his with no submission at all in their depths. They sparkled at him instead, bright with an unspoken dare and almost gleefully erotic promise. Seishirou considered the challenge that lay before him, and then grinned avidly.

The afternoon, which had begun quite pleasantly, was about to become even better.

* * * * *

They lay against each other, a remnant warmth still trapped between them, and the gold light of the candles chased the younger man’s fair skin, kissing shadows at his throat, side, and thigh. Propping himself on one arm, Seishirou let his eye roam possessively over the territory that his hands and mouth had already explored. He was enjoying the vision of Subaru half-dozing against him, and the feel of it, too: the way hip fit to hip and the way Subaru’s leg was drawn up along his

with an easy, almost tender familiarity. His hand cupped the low swell of Subaru's chest, and he began to move his thumb in lazy circles over and around Subaru's nipple. Without opening his eyes, Subaru turned his head in response, arching his neck back slightly, and the terminus between light and shadow realigned itself, tracing that changing contour.

The enticements of having a young, beautiful, and compliant lover, Seishirou mused.

Although it's true you're not nearly as compliant as you used to be—and I must remember, Subaru-kun, not to underestimate you. You aren't the bemused, naive child that you once were, long ago when I first pursued you. That boy who wouldn't have grasped a game of seduction, much less have thought to begin one....

Indeed, I'm constantly surprised by how much you've changed.

But I still can glimpse him inside you at times: a mysterious light that draws me like a flame.

I wonder what it would have been like to have had you all those years ago, when there was nothing else to you but that purity.

And as the thought rooted itself in Seishirou's mind, it sent forth subtle branches and leaves, until gradually, almost unexpectedly it blossomed into inspiration. Even as the possibility was unfolding before him, he was making his decision to act. Sinking down as though relaxing into somnolence at last, he brought his lips to Subaru's forehead, and as they brushed Subaru's skin and the fine strands of hair that lay across it, he drew his intention over his lover like a blanket.

Go to sleep now, Subaru-kun.

Without haste, Seishirou raised himself again. Subaru seemed no more still than before, but the soundless rhythm of inhale and exhale had deepened, and the body pressed against his was becoming slack. One hand lay curled up on the pillow by Subaru's head, its fingers half-unfurling as they relaxed. Leaning backward, Seishirou unwound himself from the drowsing onmyouji, freeing himself with care, and as he lifted the other limp hand from his hip he sat up slowly, moving with practiced stealth despite the success of his spell. Satisfaction stirred in him at this old game of secrecy, a familiar, almost nostalgic little throb of warmth. Heedless of whatever he might be planning to do, Subaru stretched out next to him, a beautiful, spare collection of limbs on display. Subaru's thin torso angled toward him invitingly, the slender, crowned shaft between the legs fallen over to one side, like a tired flower. Seishirou toyed idly with Subaru's fingers before setting that arm down too, placing it at an attractive angle that balanced out the composition. Yes, it was exactly as it had been during that year of their bet, all those times when he'd magicked Subaru into unconsciousness, freeing himself to do as he'd liked. Subaru's body lay unknowing, like a pretty, naked doll that could be manipulated into any position that he chose, with Subaru, upon waking, none the wiser as to what had been done.

But I think we can do better than that.

Seishirou grinned. Then he began the working in earnest.

Swinging his legs off the bed, he straightened up deliberately, focusing his mind into the

space of magical concentration. As he centered and stilled himself, he reached out to caress Subaru's forehead once more, at the same time letting his touch sink down inside the onmyouji. He found the shimmering patterns of Subaru's memories with ease, their delicate structure exactly as he remembered it: an instrument of innumerable strings. He played his awareness along them, seeking generally backward in time, until he located the wound. It was a rip in the harmony, a discordance that sent reverberations throughout the web of Subaru's being, so that its sound colored everything else that followed—and there, just before that pivotal memory, Seishirou placed his seal, stopping those echoes down to silence.

Taking his hand away, Seishirou sighed, then shifted further back along the mattress, sliding toward the end of the bed. It had been easy enough, but one could never be certain about such things beforehand. Memories were intricate and imprecise creations; most people could scarcely keep their own in order, much less interpret someone else's. But he had been trained assiduously in the workings of mind and perception, the complement to his study of illusion, and Subaru's sensitive intellect, just as well-schooled, was as lucid as one might desire.

Not to mention that he was already a "presence" in Subaru's mind, their encounters over the years standing out in its darkness like lanterns along a twisting forest path.

Seishirou scrutinized the tableau that was set up before him, his head tipped consideringly to one side. There were some remnants of scattered clothing still lying by Subaru; he swept them all to the floor, where they'd be more easily obscured, before resettling himself on the edge of the bed. Gathering the threads of power yet again, he spun them around Subaru's form, creating another image out of candlelight and sorcery and his clear remembrance of what had been.

Smaller and slighter, that frail, adolescent body, the long, pale jacket falling from its shoulders to reveal a dark mock-turtleneck that followed every line of the thin arms and chest...the light-colored pants that hugged those impossibly slender hips and the endless, finely shaped legs....

The feet almost dainty in their black socks...

They could do without the boots, Seishirou decided.

The longish, perpetually windblown hair, as appealing in its disarray as a garden gone a little unkempt, with nature and chance allowed to do their part unselfconsciously, the strands fanning out around the boy's head and lying against rounded, still immature cheeks with an enviable intimacy, framing a face that in loveliness lay somewhere between masculine and feminine, between child and man....

The ridiculous hat on the bed next to him, the school satchel propped visibly against the nearby wall...

...and those ever-present gloves....

Every minutest detail was exactly as it should be, exactly as it had been on that day when Subaru had pushed open the door to a hospital bedroom and walked heedlessly into Seishirou's maboroshi—everything but the inexplicable glimmer of tears along the dark lashes' curves, which

today were dry and lowered in slumber.

He still didn't know, Seishirou mused, what tragedy had made Subaru so unhappy that time. He'd never had the opportunity to find out....

Putting such fruitless speculations aside, he instead gazed in fascination at his illusion. If he hadn't created it himself, even he might be fooled. For a moment, he was tempted to peer below its surface and assure himself that it wasn't reality. Bemused by his reaction, he chuckled, then set about the final preparations. He clothed himself in illusion—a white shirt, tie knotted loosely at the collar, plus casual slacks and house shoes—and he altered the lines of his face just slightly, removing the passage of years. His right eye he covered over with a light gauze dressing. For the window, he disguised the winter afternoon as twilight, and after reflecting briefly, he decided to leave the still-burning candles as they were. Incongruous though they might appear, they would add a certain ambiance to the scene.

Then, all was ready.

Balancing the elements of his illusion carefully, Seishirou slipped the bond of sleep from Subaru. He nudged at Subaru's consciousness subtly, coaxing the other toward waking. The gloved fingers twitched, black against the patterned bedspread; the lax face tightened marginally as the boy drew in a breath.

"Seishirou...san...."

Those wide eyes crept open gradually, in tiny, fluttering stages, like a butterfly's wings first being spread. Then, as they cleared, losing the shadows of drowsiness, they focused upon Seishirou. Growing suddenly wider, as though filling with realization, they proclaimed Subaru's embarrassment and shy alarm.

So transparent, Seishirou thought, careful to hide his amusement. *How did I ever fail to notice that you were in love with me?*

"Sei- Seishirou-san!" Subaru bolted upright as though the bed were electrified, staring about in panic. "Where—?"

"You fainted at the hospital, Subaru-kun," Seishirou smiled genially, speaking with reassuring softness. "So I brought you home. Was it because you missed lunch again? You'll be in trouble with Hokuto-chan if she finds out about it."

"No...." Subaru's glance, still nervous, went skittering around the bedroom. The golden candles flickered on his shifting eyes. "This...isn't your apartment."

"After all the uproar at the hospital, I thought it would be good to hide out for a while. It's only until the media circus quiets down." Seishirou leaned forward attentively, projecting earnest concern. "Are you feeling better?"

"Y- yeah." With a trembling smile, Subaru picked up the hat and held it like an unconscious shield in front of himself, his gloved fingers rolling the brim distractedly. A distinct flush colored his face as he lowered his eyes. "Sorry—I'm sorry for being such a problem again!"

"It's no problem at all! You know my biggest pleasure in life is to take care of you."

“Um!” Subaru’s consternation was typical and quite charming. He glanced toward the window and the false dusk outside, taking care to avoid Seishirou’s gaze. “It’s gotten late, hasn’t it...and Hokuto must be worried. Because I didn’t call....”

“Subaru-kun.” Unwittingly Subaru looked at Seishirou again, his eyes unsuspecting and guileless. “Do you love me?”

And silence followed, a stunned, hollow blankness that grew as Subaru stared back at him in pure paralysis. All of Subaru’s thoughts seemed to have stopped at those words as though sealed in ice or amber. Then, in a slow rush, like a melting fountain, they dissolved, and Subaru’s eyes let Seishirou see right down inside the boy as though through an aquarium’s glass, observing every flicker of motion and life that was meant to be hidden from view.

In one stricken, pitifully honest look, they avowed every hope and shame that he possessed.

Poor, foolish Subaru-kun...so what you said to me that day was true.

Even then, you knew that you loved me.

Seishirou’s affectionate smile was a mask for his inner one as he leaned across the little stretch of bed that separated them, touching his fingers to Subaru’s cheek. The fountain came on for real as he cradled Subaru’s face against his palm; tears trickled free with their usual ease, slipping past the dark lashes and onto his hand as though Subaru’s heart had no room to keep them all inside. Subaru seemed not to notice. Instead, he gazed at Seishirou as a child might, frightened yet perfectly trusting in the midst of that fear, and then with a choking sound he bent toward Seishirou, lifting both hands to clasp Seishirou’s wrist and press it more fervently against his tear-stained face.

Seishirou started—it was unusual for the boy-Sumeragi to respond to his advances so overtly. Then, thinking about it, he smiled again. Everything that Subaru was had been given to him in that gesture, he realized, given with all the candor of Subaru’s innocent self. It was a wordless, limitless confession, one that held nothing back. Subaru had just pledged himself absolutely to Seishirou, without understanding in the slightest to whom he had surrendered or what they were moving toward.

So easy, in the end, to have it all from him.

But then, that’s what it means to have a feeling heart.

Isn’t that right?

“Subaru-kun,” Seishirou murmured then, his voice pitched low and gentle, and with just a hint of a break in it, as though holding back some great need, “I want to make love to you.” Subaru’s half-closed eyes snapped open; he gaped mutely at Seishirou. “Do you understand what I’m asking?” The boy nodded once against his hand, the gloved fingers tightening involuntarily. “Subaru-kun, will you let me do that with you?” Seishirou pressed, tender and quite inexorable, and he could see conflicts shifting behind Subaru’s eyes as the teenager wrestled with the question. Reluctance and the stab of guilt at feeling that reluctance, blind, youthful terror in the face of what was strange, and that force, whatever it had been, that had impelled Subaru to

succumb to him in the first place.

He could almost read the thought as it coalesced inside Subaru's mind.

If I loved someone....

I would do anything for that person.

Subaru nodded again, a single, tremulous bob of his head.

With a satisfied sigh, Seishirou stirred his fingers through the long hair next to Subaru's ear. It was illusionary hair, but no less soft to the touch than if it had been real. Subaru blanched and stared as he leaned even nearer—had he let the hunter's gleam escape into his gaze? Seishirou lowered his lashes against such possible disclosure, veiling the warmth of triumph behind a semblance of rapture, disguising kindling hunger behind a smile. He brought his hand down, catching Subaru's chin between thumb and forefinger, and as the boy twisted in that gentle grip, surely alarmed at what even he must see was coming, Seishirou opportunistically took the target that was proffered. He ran closed lips in a ghost kiss over Subaru's cheek, and then parted them to flick the merest tip of his tongue across the bitter, salt tracks of Subaru's tears.

Subaru made a stuttering sound and arched his neck—not really trying to pull away anymore but instead reacting blindly to something that had to be well beyond his experience. Lightly Seishirou continued to dot the boy's face with tongue caresses, like a mother cat massaging her kitten. He breathed along the elfin jaw line to that shiverily responsive place just under Subaru's ear, he mouthed at Subaru's throat, and as Subaru began to wilt beneath that sweetly suckling assault, he slid his other arm behind the knotted shoulders, easing Subaru back to lie against the bed.

Crouching on hands and knees above Subaru, he gazed into the teenager's flustered eyes. Subaru's head rested on the remaining pillow, his hair a dark aureole about his face. "Subaru-kun," Seishirou whispered, "if you truly don't want to...." He set the ball of his thumb against Subaru's mouth, tracing with an excruciatingly slow pressure across the fullness of Subaru's lower lip. "It's all right."

Above the curve of his hand, that velvet stare regarded him. Then Subaru squeezed his eyes shut and his mouth slackened, quivering beneath Seishirou's touch. Subaru's lips parted, a shallow breath fluttering between them, and as Seishirou tilted Subaru's head more suitably and then removed his fingers, bending to replace them with his kiss, the boy yielded with supreme complaisance. Seishirou pressed his mouth down onto Subaru's—still chastely, taking everything as slowly as if tending to the growth and shaping of a rare flowering plant. He suppressed with that kiss the laughter that flickered to life in the back of his throat. He had known all along that Subaru would never be able deny him, but in seeming to leave the way open for a refusal, he had guaranteed that the boy would choose exactly as he'd wished.

In believing itself to be free, the little bird had devised a more subtle cage than he ever could.

Drawing back finally, Seishirou took the hat that had been crushed in between them and dropped it off the edge of the bed. He looked down into Subaru's face, as still as if the boy had

been spelled back into slumber. Now it was time to get to the crux of this affair, the outcome that his dance of tender words and intimate touches had been leading them toward.

To enjoy what he had missed out on the first time around: the pleasures of possessing this innocent being utterly, this purity as yet unstained by his betrayal.

Subaru-kun, your love for me won't let you turn back now. Whether you really want to or not, whether you grasp what's happening or not, you'll give me whatever I wish.

But it won't be like that time in my maboroshi, when I shattered the perfect, simple faith that made you unique in this world. I'm not interested in replaying that old game. This time you'll know nothing but the most enjoyable sensations, the most sublime seduction that I can give.

After all, Subaru-kun, wouldn't you have preferred it this way? To have your childhood world end like this?

Intent on evoking ecstasy, he settled down onto Subaru, his mouth grazing over Subaru's amorously, his hands busy on Subaru's sleek sides and chest. Subaru was like a small, soft animal beneath him, pinned to the bed, the boy's heart palpitating with alarm and nervous urgency. Seishirou stroked his fingers across Subaru's shirt with all the gentleness that such fragility warranted; he burrowed his face into the lissome arch of Subaru's neck as his hand journeyed unhurriedly up and down the boy's thigh. As he brushed ever so lightly in the vicinity of the crotch he could feel heat spring into Subaru's face, a hot flush burning by his cheek and jaw. Fire answered fire—he was already quite aware of the warmth in his own groin, growing with quite gratifying readiness—and probing between Subaru's legs he could feel the real source of Subaru's embarrassment, the nascent arousal echoing his own. He cupped that stirring flesh, coaxing it toward a full awakening, and Subaru whimpered, a faint, almost mewling sound. He turned his face abruptly against Seishirou's hair, and as Seishirou pressed a little more firmly the boy bucked upward, arching into Seishirou's hand with instinctive need.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou purred into the curl of Subaru's ear. He let his fingers start wandering again, seeking reactions elsewhere—not to cut to the chase too soon, not with such a sensitive, finely-tuned partner for his enjoyment. Through Subaru's pants he cradled one subtly rounded buttock, lifting Subaru against him; he slid his other hand under the jacket and into the hollow of Subaru's spine, his fingers tugging the mock-turtleneck up and creeping beneath it. Their clothes began to come away with preternatural ease as if in some erotic dream, melting from their bodies like the illusions that they were. Subaru, struggling to grasp this confusion of new sensations, seemed at best tangentially aware of it. As Subaru bent backward, draped across Seishirou's arm, Seishirou's kisses traveled down the conveniently presented, now-exposed torso. In the candlelight, tiny, upright nipples appeared to float on Subaru's chest, rose flowers against that pearly satin skin. Seishirou attended to each of them, quick darts of his tongue followed by long, undulating suction, drawing upon those virginal little nubs without mercy while Subaru moaned. Satisfied at last, he set Subaru back onto the bed, rubbing the bandageless left side of his face against the unreality of adolescent, naked skin. Their shirts were both long gone, and their

pants, already opened, were sliding off without awkwardness, taking socks and underwear along. Seishirou hooked his fingers under the cuff of one glove and—

Subaru gasped.

As Subaru stiffened, Seishirou lifted his head and glanced into the boy's face, drawing on a distracted, vaguely quizzical expression. Subaru stared back, anguish and indecision plainly raging inside him.

Never to take those gloves off, even for a member of the Sumeragi family.

Never....

Sitting up, Seishirou took the boy's hand in his own much larger one, cradling it on his palm. He turned his head, his view of Subaru's face cut off as he presented his bandaged side to the Sumeragi—seemingly without premeditation, of course. The sudden gleam of focus in his good eye thus hidden, he touched his lips to the flex point of Subaru's wrist, right where the glove had been hitched up. As he pulled back just enough so that he was hovering above Subaru's arm, his breath the only contact on the skin, white light began to seep out from the glove. It intensified, shooting searing cracks through the material, weathering it swiftly away...

"...Seishirou-san...."

...and with an eruption that threw stark shadows across their unclothed bodies, that cold fire sizzled through its covering. The black glove frayed and tore, shredding away from Subaru's skin. On his other side, its partner was meeting a similar fate, pale flames bursting through the fabric. Subaru made a startled noise, and Seishirou lifted that hand toward his face as well. The power was fading as swiftly as it had come, leaving behind just a faint luminosity. As Seishirou kissed one hand and then the other, he reached through the dwindling light and sought the actual Sakurazukamori marks hidden beneath his illusion. Feeling his way inside to where they fused with Subaru's very soul, he *touched* Subaru there, at the center of the onmyouji's being, and felt the tremors of fear grow still. Glancing up, he gazed into the boy's stunned and staring eyes.

"Subaru-kun," he murmured.

I....

He hesitated. Looking down at Subaru, who was lying there unmoving, naked but for the detritus of those black gloves, aware with an unusual acuity of Subaru's inner state, he felt...not exactly disquieted but instead displaced. It was almost as if the steady stream of time and space that he moved in, the reliable world through which he hunted, had been frozen, and the fact that he continued to think and breathe had lifted him outside it. He watched the boy for another long moment, then set both hands down deliberately. He lowered himself onto Subaru with measured gentleness, one arm tangling with Subaru's to extend it across the mattress, the other sliding around Subaru's waist. His attention focused entirely on Subaru, he saw and felt the surrender, the release as the boy let go, flowing out of blankness into blind acceptance. The final resistance in Subaru appeared to melt away; he closed his eyes and let his head loll to one side, his hair a black wing against the pillow. Not knowing the real significance of those marks on his hands, he sensed

only that they connected him to Seishirou in some way, and for him that was enough. Seishirou began to move on him then—to move with him, a gradually quickening writhe of their bodies that restored their interrupted passion, heightening it to new intensity. He kissed Subaru's face, the throat, then back to the parted lips again, panting, almost urgent kisses.

"Subaru-kun."

The easy and appropriate lie remained unspoken, though, locked somewhere deep inside his chest.

Don't tell me that you're sorry or that you love me....

Because I won't lie to you either. I won't pretend in anything anymore.

I want to know the person you are, honestly....

I want to know....

Shutting his eyes, Seishirou dispelled the passing flash of memory. Instead he devoured Subaru's lips with his own, compelling them to open to him further—and then he thrust inside, plumbing Subaru's mouth to trap the startled boy's tongue with his. He pushed his hips against Subaru's, his erection hot and insistent; he pressed himself to the teenager's thighs and throbbing groin as a sexual current arced through them both, as plain to his senses as the sorcery that filled the room. Slipping one hand down between Subaru's legs again, he separated them as Subaru trembled beneath him, and he fingered all that lay there, silken hardness and softness.

"This may hurt," he breathed into Subaru's neck as he twisted aside, groping for the lubricant in the nightstand drawer, "but it will hurt less if you relax as much as possible. Do you trust me, Subaru-kun?"

"Yes," the boy whispered.

"Yes...."

* * * * *

The silvery bell jangled as Subaru burst into the clinic's office. "Hello, Seishirou-san!" Alight with enthusiasm, he for once was showing an animated energy that befitted his age.

"Ah, Subaru-kun!" Seishirou beamed at the object of his affections. "Did school let out early today? Or did you have work?"

"No, I'm just here on my lunch period," the boy replied diffidently, then perked up again. "How is the little bird? Is it better?"

Putting away a last box of heartworm tablets, Seishirou closed the cabinet door and turned to face Subaru, wearing a grave expression. "I have some sad news." Subaru stared back at him in deep dismay. "As you know, I was keeping the bird in a cage for observation. But this morning,

when the sunlight came into the room, it stirred and started to hop and flutter around. It probably just bumped its head on a plate glass window and was a little bit stunned when you found it. Since nothing appeared to be broken, and since it seemed to want to fly away so badly on such a lovely spring morning—Subaru-kun, I let it go already. I’m sorry I didn’t wait for you to come.”

“Eh—no, it’s fine! Really, that’s great news!” Transformed with childlike completeness by relief and joy, Subaru sank into a chair. He rested his arms on the office table, chin cupped in hands, and smiled dreamily. “I’m just glad the little bird’s all right.”

Walking over, Seishirou leaned against the opposite side of the table, gazing down at the boy with a strange, smiling intensity.

“Subaru-kun.”

In a dumpster behind the clinic, half-covered by a sheet of paper, a tiny, lifeless body lay twisted, sapphire wings outstretched to meet the sky.

* * * * *

“Ah!” With a sharp gasp of attainment, Seishirou entered Subaru at last, still making an effort to move with mindful, patient care. Once in, he began to rock forward and back, pressing into the heat of Subaru’s body, and that silken, sheathing pleasure swept away all other considerations, all other recollections. Slick with lube, his fingers entwined themselves with Subaru’s, bending that arm against the bedspread as he began to push more deeply, pumping into Subaru’s body with firm, steady strokes. The boy lay pliant and unresisting beneath him, only gasping once or twice and then shuddering briefly, as far as he could tell not in any real distress—harder now, and faster, letting desire build and build, staring into the closed eyes and taut, childlike face. Sensation fired through him from that intimate enclosure; he caught at the edges of his self-control. Hovering at that verge, he raised himself up on both arms, stilling briefly to gaze down on his lover, and he saw—

Subaru simply lying there, so perfectly without defenses—no challenge, no mystery after all to be unraveled, but only naked, open nothingness.

So passive, so dependent upon Seishirou for impetus—even now, in the throes of passion—that he might as well not even exist.

A lovely, ingenuous victim, a momentarily diverting plaything....

Really, nothing more than that.

And like a spark the thought fired inside Seishirou’s mind.

You...

...are not “my” Subaru-kun.

For a split second he froze, trying to grasp that jolting realization, like a stranger’s voice that spoke inside his own brain. Then, because his body’s need was long past denying, he folded onto Subaru with a groan. Gathering the slight form into his arms, he thrust toward completion as the

mounting plume of orgasm finally crested and flared. It erupted, lifting him high into shattering fire and then spilling him free again—and as he was tumbling from that molten and furious summit of ecstasy, so pleasurable and yet so strangely disappointing, he loosened all his spells from Subaru’s mind and body, stripping them away like untied blindfolds. Drained and somehow empty from that almost-fulfillment, far more so than he wanted to admit, he slumped onto Subaru, watching as his illusion began to fray. It dissolved like thinnest ice to show reality underneath it: the longer arms and legs, scant muscle over bone, the torso’s graceful taper from adult shoulders to lean, angled hips. Subaru’s eyes flew open suddenly, wild and luminous in that narrow face. He shivered as memory flooded in on him, and his hands leaped to Seishirou’s shoulders. “*What...?*” His gaze hunting Seishirou’s, he swallowed tautly, then breathed, “Was it...was it a dream?”

“No.” Smiling a touch sardonically, Seishirou slid from Subaru’s body to settle more comfortably by his side. “It was an illusion.”

Subaru’s head fell back against the pillow, his eyes staring blankly up toward the ceiling. In the half-light from those candles and a cloudy sky, Seishirou shifted position, laying his own head onto Subaru’s chest. Rather distantly he wondered what would come of this game—would Subaru be angry once it had all sunk in on him? Or would he tolerate it as he had so many other things? Sighing with peculiar heaviness, Seishirou tried to understand what had left him feeling so out of sorts. As he nuzzled into Subaru’s chest the arms that had slackened around him tightened, sliding about his back in an embrace. “Thank you, Seishirou-san.”

“Mm?”

Puzzled, he pried himself from his resting place again to peer down at Subaru. Outside the window, the storm whirled snow against the glass with a thin, scarcely audible hiss.

Was it a smile glimmering in the faraway gaze? Was it the brightness of grief? Subaru rolled his head to one side, closing his eyes. His fingers stirred like whispers, though, sure and intimate against Seishirou’s skin.

“Now I know...what it would have been like.”

Chapter 13

Hey ya ha, oh wa ya ya....

Deep in the bedroom closet, where he prowling on hands and knees, hunting for the loose change that had spilled from the pocket of one of his slacks, Seishirou raised his head in disbelief.

Not that ridiculous song on the radio *again*.

“Subaru-kun,” he started, then realized that Subaru probably couldn’t hear him from the other room. Groping for the support of the wall, he started to get to his feet, and as he bumped into Subaru’s shikifuku the white robes slithered from their hanger, pouring over his head in a flood.

With a hiss of surprise, he recoiled onto his heels, ducking out from under those silken billows as they settled to the floor around him. He gathered the voluminous fabric up into his arms, then sat back to listen again. The music gushing from the living room stereo had grown incrementally louder.

“Hmm.”

Love....

Devotion....

Feeling....

Emotion....

Rising, he restored Subaru’s fuku to its place, adjusting it meticulously on the hanger until he found the balance point. He picked up the laundry bag that he’d been filling and tugged it closed, swinging it onto the mattress as he walked past the bed. Brilliant sunlight streamed in through the window’s panes, striking out of a flawless sky and reflecting from snow-covered buildings; pure and translucently golden, it lay along the hardwood floor. He walked up to the doorway, where, inspecting the scene before him, he found his mild annoyance melting toward surprise.

Subaru was dancing.

Oh, nothing fancy, nothing formal: just a shuffle from one light foot to the other, Subaru swaying slightly with the motion, his arms lifting and crossing with aimless, artless grace. Seishirou watched as Subaru two-stepped, eyes closed, apparently unaware of his presence. Then Subaru spread his arms as the music swept into a soaring bridge, and Seishirou padded forward, inserting himself swiftly and stealthily into their inviting half-circle. Hooking his own arm around Subaru’s waist, he captured the other’s hand in his. He grinned into Subaru’s face as the green eyes popped open in shock, and without missing a beat he stepped out.

They were in trouble at once. It was patently obvious that Subaru had never danced with anyone before, and of the dances that Seishirou knew, none really fit the rhythm of the song. At the first hint of a stumble, he improvised, letting momentum wheel them around. He whipped them through one dizzying whirl after another, not giving Subaru time to hesitate and so put a foot wrong, until they came to rest in the middle of the living room floor. Slowing, he drew Subaru against himself, sliding his other arm around Subaru's body as well, and then they simply rocked in place, pressed close together. As Subaru twined both arms around his neck, settling against him with a small sigh, Seishirou smiled and nuzzled the onmyouji's hair, congratulating himself on his save.

Then Subaru's beeper went off.

"I am going to take that thing, put it on the floor, and *step* on it," Seishirou vowed as the pager's thin *pi-pi-pi!* shrilled beneath the music, "and the world will be a happier place." Subaru arched backward to look up at him, amusement crinkling the corners of the younger man's eyes. Seishirou dipped him further to steal a fleeting kiss, hardly more than a brush of willing mouths against each other, Subaru's lips parting to that teasing almost-touch even as he untangled an arm to fumble in his pocket. Sliding his own hand down to a more secure grip, Seishirou cradled the back of one lean thigh. He nibbled at the juncture of throat and jaw that was exposed as Subaru turned to scan the beeper's screen, and he could feel the immediate change as that message registered, the slender form in his arms becoming still.

"I need to get this." Distracted and grave, Subaru glanced up into his face again. "Is it all right if I...?"

"Certainly." Straightening, Seishirou loosed his hold the merest fraction, just enough to let Subaru pull away. He studied Subaru closely as the other headed for the phone. Then, satisfied by what he'd seen of Subaru's demeanor, although vaguely disappointed not to have finished their dance, he located the remote, which was unhelpfully on top of the stereo, and wandered over to it. Subaru seemed serious but not especially uneasy. Probably this was some kind of "work." Wryly Seishirou wondered how long Subaru had had to deal with that double burden: the demands made on a professional exorcist balanced against the starker duties of being a Seal.

Trust him to have spread himself much too thin, as usual.

Seishirou muted the radio as Subaru picked up and dialed the phone. Subaru turned away from him to face the wall, while Seishirou busied himself with running a finger along the stereo as if to check for dust, both of them participating in the polite fiction of creating a "phone space" where one could pretend to have a private conversation and the other could pretend not to hear it. Telephones, Seishirou mused, were at the root of all sorts of bizarre behavior, in addition to breaking down space and other barriers to magic and, of course, simply being nuisances in their own right. Meandering along the room's back wall, he fiddled with things on the shelves, watching Subaru from the corner of his eye. Subaru stood hunched in upon himself, one arm hugging his

middle while the other held the phone to his ear. Abruptly he raised his head, slouched shoulders lifting.

“This is Subaru.”

Somebody that he knew and had worked for in the past, probably frequently, Seishirou speculated, flicking another oblique glance at Subaru. The voice on the other end appeared to go on at some length, Subaru responding with soft monosyllables and apparently unconscious nods. At least he didn’t bow on the phone anymore. Seishirou’s attention migrated down the trim lines of Subaru’s body, which were far more absorbing and informative than the one-sided conversation. He noted the alert poise as Subaru focused on the situation being presented, heedless of everything else. The charcoal turtleneck Subaru was wearing clung subtly as smoke to the angled planes of his shoulders and back, vanishing at last into slim-cut, cream-colored pants. Seishirou’s eye retraced its journey, lingering on the scantily curved contours of Subaru’s seat, his hands remembering the feel of sliding down over them to pull Subaru against himself.

“Mita Station, on the Asakusa Line.” Reaching for the pen, Subaru bent to scribble something down on the phone pad, which only improved the view. “Yes. All right. Goodbye.” Straightening once more, he hung up the phone and then stared at it, a long, uninterpretable look.

“Work?” Seishirou asked, shifting his thoughts away from lecherous things with an inward sigh, and Subaru glanced at him, the other’s gaze remote and troubled as an overcast sea as he nodded.

“That was Detective Kono-san. I wonder, do you remember him? There’s a supernatural killer on the run in Minato-ku. I have to get over there as soon as possible.” Subaru exhaled, wrapping both arms around himself as though to help squeeze the air out of his lungs. “I’m supposed to call him from the station, and he’ll send somebody out to pick me up.” Minato-ku was all the way on the other side of Tokyo, a trip that meant no less than three different trains. Despite Subaru’s seeming reluctance, he was too conscientious to delay leaving for more than another moment or two at most. As Subaru began heading for the door, Seishirou watched the day’s unrealized promise glimmering away into nothing. The vacancy it left behind stirred with restive, half-sensed echoes, things coming and going just out of reach before clarifying into one lucid impulse.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Eh?” Jolted back to the present, Subaru blinked several times, finally seeming to register him fully. Seishirou grinned.

“Well, I’d been going to take some laundry to the cleaner’s, but that’s on the way to the station, and I don’t have any other plans for today. It’d be my pleasure to accompany you.” Walking forward, he appropriated Subaru’s hand, which had frozen in reaching for a coat. He gazed into Subaru’s still-dumbfounded face, noting the shadow of equivocation there. “Unless you don’t want me to, Subaru-kun.”

“No....”

“That’s good.” Smiling, he pressed the back of that hand against his cheek. “It’ll be just like old times.”

For some reason, Subaru’s eyes remained ambivalent.

* * * * *

Seishirou ground his cigarette end under the toe of his shoe and tilted his head back to gaze at the sky. It soared winter blue and flawless above him; astonishingly enough for Tokyo, the air was actually approaching crystalline. He drew in a deep and luxuriating breath of it, relishing its cold bite and the thin but determined warmth of the sun on his face. It was a perfect day. He lowered his gaze again, his eye drifting down over snow-roofed buildings, the white-edged filigree of leafless branches, and the seemingly aimless passersby before settling at last onto Subaru, who had paused on the way back from making his phone call to get coffee at a little stand outside the station.

Seishirou smiled as he watched Subaru waiting in line, the only sign of restlessness an occasional small shift from one foot to the other. His sunglasses had a way of intensifying colors, and the profusion of bright winter wear and cheerful store awnings created a setting in which Subaru stood simply, almost starkly unadorned. The black hair and graphite shirt seemed as significant as calligraphy; the long off-white coat that Seishirou had finally talked him into buying was a warmer-toned complement to the snow. Seishirou loitered on the sidewalk, hands clasped behind his back, enjoying himself rather remarkably considering that nothing very exciting was going on. Reaching the counter at last, Subaru ordered and paid, then picked his way back through the crowd, two take-out cups in hand. He arrived at Seishirou’s side and held one out. “Here,” he said. “You like yours dark and sweet, right?”

Deftly Seishirou plucked the cup from Subaru’s fingers before lifting them to his lips to taste the skin. “That’s right.”

“*Seishirou-san.*” Subaru’s fingers knotted, and he pulled his hand away. Bemused, Seishirou studied him as he turned aside. It was true that Subaru had always been shy about public displays of affection, and Seishirou had found great sport in teasing him on many occasions, both past and present: bestowing caresses or endearments and then watching with barely concealed laughter as Subaru jumped, blushed, or protested urgently. This time, though, there seemed to be something more. Even during the interminable train ride, there had been that tension; Subaru had hardly responded to his attempts at conversation, instead sitting almost rigidly immobile and silent, attention turned inward like a creature retreating into its shell. Something about the day’s work must be troubling him, Seishirou thought, something he was unwilling or unable to speak about. Seishirou gazed at the other’s profile, an inkling of what that might be stirring at the back of his mind, frustratingly just out of reach.

“Subaru-kun—”

A blue flash distracted him—a nondescript car pulled up to the curb, the police light on its roof whirling slowly. Subaru was already hurrying down the stairs to the street, and Seishirou followed, shaking his head, the steps beneath his feet wet and glistening with snowmelt. The stocky, trenchcoated detective had hauled himself out of the car and yanked the rear door open. As Subaru reached the sidewalk, the man nodded, a quiet acknowledgement at odds with his otherwise curt behavior. Then his eyes locked onto Seishirou, and the dark brows furrowed. “Hey, don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” Seishirou grinned at the man from behind the black mask of his glasses. The detective had changed very little in nine years—the broad, bulldog face had sagged somewhat, the short hair was speckled with gray and had receded from his widow’s peak, but he still carried himself with the dyspeptic air of a man who lived on stale coffee and antacids, one who had little patience for anything that got in the way of his work. Seishirou wondered whether his transfer from Nakano to this precinct was a tribute to his terse efficiency or a mark of the inability to cozen bureaucrats.

Subaru climbed into the back seat, sliding across the scarred vinyl to the other side, and Seishirou folded himself in after the onmyouji. The detective thunked the door shut, and as soon as he’d gotten into the front seat the car drew away from the curb, swiftly picking up speed. The driver and Kono exchanged a few words on how best to get where they were going as the car sped down the largely empty side street, paralleling the tracks of the JR line to the right. On the opposite side of the road, Seishirou glimpsed the electric company looming behind a row of lower buildings, its angular shape enmeshed in high-tension wires and power pylons. In the distance, Tokyo Tower rose up like a larger version of one of those pylons: an open-work spire of steel stretching toward the sky. Seishirou reached out with his magical senses and felt the knot of energies wound around that lynchpin, one of the few major kekkai that still held secure. He smiled, his awareness caressed by its near presence. *Soon*, he whispered to it. Vague memories flickered in him, impressions of shadow and growing light, the particular angles of girders, the echo of a strange, luminous peace. Frowning, he shook his head again, brushing aside the small disquiet.

Yes, soon....

“Thanks for coming out here, Subaru-kun,” Kono was saying. “I really appreciate it.”

“Tell me about the case,” Subaru responded, his voice as flat and quiet as a reflecting pool. The detective gave a grumbling sigh, slouching in his seat.

“Well, it started in one of the ‘earthquake cities’ not far from here.” The man looked into the rearview mirror, and Subaru nodded. The not-so-temporary shelters for people left homeless by Tokyo’s recent disasters were downplayed by the government, but everyone knew about them. Settling back, Seishirou opened his coffee, inhaling its rich aroma as he continued to listen. “At first, it looked like your basic serial killer. Real gruesome, though. Bodies torn open, some of the organs and flesh were missing....” The detective glanced up into the mirror again. Subaru was

staring blankly at the seat back in front of him, peeling open the tab on his coffee cup, one perforation at a time. After a moment, Kono made a thick, self-disgusted sound and slumped down further.

“Anyway, with the fourth victim we finally got a lead. Some kid saw a guy hanging around near where the body was found. We got a good description of him, and then as we were going around the shelters with it we had another break. A woman recognized him.” The driver pulled out onto a busier street and flicked on the siren to clear a lane. Kono grimaced, then continued, raising his voice above the din. “She’d been his neighbor—told us where his family used to live. It was one of those damaged apartment blocks. Nobody’s supposed to go in there, but I went over with a profiler and a couple of men anyway, just to see if there’d be any clues.

“He was there. Must’ve been living there all this time. It was cold as hell that day, but when we walked into the apartment I swear the temperature dropped another twenty degrees. Everything was frost. I didn’t see him at first—he was sitting on the floor in the corner, hunched up against the wall. But Sugihara-kun did and went around the couch at him. All of a sudden the place was full of snow.”

The car crossed a bridge and climbed a ramp to one of the expressways where it accelerated, cutting in and out of traffic. Seishirou stared out the window as the bay came into view, its calm surface glinting in the sun. He waited as the detective struggled once more with the shock of that moment, its uncanniness for an ordinary person.

“The stuff was blowing everywhere, like a blizzard,” the man muttered at last, the words almost lost beneath the siren’s wailing. “I couldn’t see a goddamned thing.” He cleared his throat abruptly, then went on. “I heard a gun go off, and there were a couple of screams. Something crashed out the apartment’s front window. I got onto the balcony and shot at the guy as he was running away, but I missed him. Moved too damn fast, the bastard. When I went back inside, Sugihara-kun and Akai-san, the profiler—they were dead. Something sharp had punched right through them. Their bodies were already frozen. Satoshi-kun, the other man, he was blinded for a while, but otherwise he was okay.” Kono snorted ruefully. “I might’ve been blinded too if I hadn’t been just inside the door when it happened.

“Anyhow, that was this morning. We’ve been chasing him ever since then. Finally got him cornered in a warehouse complex. It’s a standoff right now—he’s not coming out and we sure as hell don’t want to go in after him. There’s a cordon around the property in case he makes some kind of move, but so far he’s stayed put. I figure he’s waiting for dark.” The detective rubbed at his temples. “We can’t let this guy get away, but we’re totally unprepared to handle something like this!” he burst out, frustration and fear jerking the words from him. “We’ve already lost two men! Headquarters is talking about bringing in a strike force. I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be a disaster. I hate to get you involved, Subaru-kun, but I just can’t see any other way to deal with this...this....”

"I understand," Subaru murmured, his uninflected reply just audible beneath the siren. Seishirou shifted position, trying to arrange his legs more comfortably in the cramped back seat, and his knee brushed Subaru's. Subaru sat up straighter. "Is there a report?"

"Here." The detective passed a folder back, gratitude plain in his voice. "Not much more in it than what I've told you. There's a picture of him, though." Subaru nodded acknowledgment, and Seishirou glanced at the photograph of a good-looking, fair-haired young man. "We found it with the other things in the apartment." The traffic thinned, and the driver cut the siren's howl, though he left the blue light strobing a path for them. Kono grabbed the car's radio and called ahead for an update while Subaru paged through the report, Seishirou stealing an occasional peek over his shoulder. It was amazing, the amount of minutiae that went into a police investigation.

"*What?* Those idiots! What the *hell* were they thinking? Bringing a helicopter in that close...." Subaru's eyes flickered up, and then, as Kono listened impatiently to the voice crackling over the radio, dropped back to the papers in front of him. Seishirou could still feel tension, though, through the slight contact of their legs. "*No!* Tell them I'm bringing in a specialist. They have to give us a few hours to work. It's not a hostage situation, for crying out loud! We've got time...yes. All right, then." Banging the radio into its cradle, Kono sat back in his seat. "Lucky," he muttered, "*damn* lucky they had a good pilot." In the angle of the rearview mirror, his face looked older, tired by the strain. They rode for a minute in silence, flashing past other cars on the highway as though they moved through a separate world of their own.

"His close family all died in one of the earthquakes," Subaru murmured finally. "Is there any other family on record?" At the detective's brusque head shake, Subaru let the folder fall shut in his lap, his green eyes clouding. "And those bodies," he went on, "with pieces missing...."

"*Eaten.*" Seishirou responded softly, putting into words what Subaru had surely already thought of.

Winter, loss, and loneliness were all prime conditions for a hungry spirit.

The car left the expressway, descending a long, looping ramp that carried them into a seemingly deserted industrial park. They drove along an access lane, turned the corner of a maintenance facility, and a cluster of police cars came into view. Two were drawn across the road as a barricade. Kono waved an arm out the window, and one of the cars pulled back, leaving just enough space for them to pass. Kono's driver eased through that reluctant gap; they rumbled across a short metal bridge, its gridded surface humming beneath their tires, and then halted in a parking area before the inscrutable walls of what presumably were the warehouses in question. As the car's engine idled, Kono got out slowly and opened the door for Seishirou and Subaru. The driver, Seishirou noticed, was making no move to leave the vehicle.

Emerging from the car and stretching, Seishirou further examined his surroundings. He assumed from the bridge they'd crossed that this complex was built on an island, probably on land reclaimed from the bay to enlarge the city. It certainly made things easier for the police, who only had to guard the shoreward side. Seishirou noted helicopters prowling the vicinity, their

rotors making a dull racket as they swept high above the harbor. They were keeping a respectful distance from the complex itself, however. Obviously they'd learned their lesson.

Subaru took a distracted step forward, head cocked as though attending to a distant music. Tilting his own head back, Seishirou stared at the crisp edge where sky met snow along the rooftop of the nearest building. He held his senses open, searching for intention, for the distinctive crackle of power being raised. All seemed peaceful enough, at least for the present. Lowering his gaze, he found the detective peering at him thoughtfully. "So it is you," Kono said. "You're that guy who used to hang around with Subaru-kun. I haven't seen you for a while."

"I had to leave Tokyo," Seishirou sighed and smiled at the man, wearing an expression of genial regret. "That's the way life goes...." He'd always thought it amusing that Subaru's grandmother had never singled him out as a suspect to the police, even though she'd asked for their help during Hokuto's disappearance. Probably she'd been concerned—and quite rightly, Seishirou thought—that she'd accomplish nothing but the deaths of unfortunate policemen. Kono looked away again, shoving both hands into the pockets of his drab trenchcoat. He stared at where Subaru stood motionless, withdrawn into contemplation of the area's psychic landscape.

"He's changed," the detective muttered finally. "Between one time I saw him and the next, it was like he'd become a completely different person." Kono scowled. "I'd heard about what happened to his sister. Yet still, after all this time.... He was a good kid, a really special kid. You don't find many like that in this world." The detective looked sidelong at Seishirou. "But then, you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes," Seishirou replied, glancing at Subaru. "I knew that."

Subaru moved then, reaching into his coat to draw out a sheaf of ofuda. Holding his hands in front of himself, he spread them slowly, and a flock of birds, as pure and whitely glittering as salt, trickled from them and into the sky. The detective started, drawing in a breath, and in the distance Seishirou could hear exclamations from the policemen at the other end of the bridge. The shikigami scattered, angling out of sight in various directions as Subaru started toward an alley between two warehouses. Seishirou bowed to Kono, who was still staring in bemusement, before turning to follow. He wondered if the detective had ever actually seen Subaru use magic before.

A few long strides brought him up with Subaru, whose head turned minutely, acknowledging him. Seishirou could hear the detective yelling orders to the other policemen, a door slamming and the crunch of tires on icy pavement as the car retreated, before they were in the alley's narrow throat and all sounds but their own footsteps began to blur from the echoing acoustics. Absently he noted in himself vague scorn for the detective, who despite that show of concern seemed quite content to let Subaru go into danger alone. Then he shook his head. No, Kono had been right—the police had no protection against magical attacks, and in what was to come they would only be a distraction.

Besides which, Subaru already had somebody to look out for him.

As they walked in the shadows of the high, corrugated metal walls, he studied what he could see of the other's expression. It was true, as Kono had said, that Subaru had changed from the boy he'd once been, but he'd changed again in the past couple of weeks, shifting away from the cold, bitter young man that he'd become, and the detective hadn't been granted even a glimpse of that. To Kono, Subaru had shown only the remote face of a professional, a mask he continued to wear as they moved deeper into the complex. Was it simply a defense against the pain of the coming conflict, a habit he'd adopted to get him through his work? Or had it begun as theater for the police, like the cloud of white birds winging into the sky—a flashy spectacle for someone who'd been brought up in the belief that magic wasn't for public display, and surely meant to reassure them that this fragile-appearing sorcerer did indeed have remarkable powers. But if Subaru's facade had been for the policemen's benefit, Seishirou mused, then why hadn't Subaru set it aside already?

Unless, instead, could it have been for....

Him?

Ahead, the alley opened onto a wider avenue that seemed to run the length of the complex. Its center was clear of all but a few lingering puddles; the southward-tending winter sun fell full upon it, and icicles sparkled and dripped from the overhangs of the buildings' roofs. There were gaps where the sun's warmth had loosened that crust of snow and ice and it had fallen to add to the already substantial drifts that lined the road. Subaru walked out into the middle of the avenue, and Seishirou, putting questions aside, paced after him, treading beside the long slant of his shadow. Awareness prickled at Seishirou's mind, the sense of being in a dangerous place.

A trap.

"They're coming!" Subaru lifted his head, but Seishirou was already turning, scanning the open sky behind them. He could feel the approaching entity—could see it then, a small, wedge-shaped ripple of raw force, translucent against the air, almost invisible even to magical perceptions. It poured itself toward them like quicksilver, plummeting faster than a diving raptor. From the corner of Seishirou's eye, he saw Subaru leap forward and assume a warding stance, both hands raised. Measuring the attack's approach more by feel than by his unreliable sight, he thought that Subaru would probably get the defensive spell off just in time. Still, no point in taking chances. He sprang at Subaru, sweeping the other out of the way and into a snowdrift as the shikigami flashed by them and down the avenue. A second, hidden until that moment by the wavefront of the first, streaked barely above his back as he fell into the snow on top of Subaru. He felt the icy tingle of its near miss, and then it was gone, both attacks whipping out of range with incredible speed. For an instant, there was only the quiet thunder of his pulse, sped by adrenaline, the far off chatter of the helicopters—the clear, bright winter afternoon, and Subaru pinned beneath him, both of them still alive....

"Sei- Seishirou-san!" Subaru spluttered, squirming indignantly and spitting out a mouthful of snow. Recollecting himself, Seishirou shifted his weight back as Subaru struggled to get up.

“Sorry, Subaru-kun! Old habits die hard...they’re coming around again.” Uncoiling to his feet, he swung to track one of the shikigami, aware of Subaru rising to follow the other, the Sumeragi an incongruous presence at his back. The two spirit-attacks looped about and then dove toward them, closing in fast from opposite sides. There was no way he could stop both, and instinct urged him to melt aside and hunt out a better position. With an effort of will, he resisted, knowing that it would leave Subaru’s back uncovered. He raised his gloved hand instead, holding an icicle that he’d picked from the snowdrift, and he poured magic into it, clenching his fingers until the cracking of the ice and the power’s crackling became one and the same. Opening his hand again, he released the spell: a needle-storm of ice shards, each one charged with sorcery, that flashed toward the attacking construct. Only a few meters in front of him, they struck the shikigami, and as they pierced it he triggered the binding magics they contained. The spell halted not only the shikigami’s forward motion, but also the currents of energy that comprised it. Its supercold spirit substance congealed, losing fluidity, and the tensions of arrested motion both within and without shattered it into pieces. Tiny fragments pattered against the small shield that Seishirou spun in front of himself, flashing rainbows and a vague, almost transparent shimmer all that was visible.

Fire with fire, Seishirou thought smugly. *Ice with ice*.

He felt the quick, hot flash of Subaru’s spell, and as it diminished he glanced behind himself. Subaru was standing a pace or two away, back turned, charred scraps of paper an ashen flurry around him. Of the other shikigami, there was no sign. In the distance, Seishirou sensed a psychic shriek of fury and loss, one that echoed in the back of his brain. It reverberated away into a thin howl and then into silence. He grinned.

“Well, that’s that.” he murmured. “Let’s go, Subaru-kun!” He strode forward, already focused on tracing that cry to its source. Really, the being controlling the shikigami must be a rather stupid creature, to have let them be defeated so easily. And now, having given away its presence—

“*Seishirou-san!*” Subaru’s raised voice snapped him up short. Bewildered, he turned to face the onmyouji. Subaru stood with both arms locked over his chest, as though struggling to crush something inside himself. His tension was so plain that he was practically vibrating with it, and for a split second Seishirou wondered if he might have been injured. Then Subaru raised his eyes, and they were vivid with determination and anguish, as though the inner conflict that they’d only hinted at before had sharpened into clear resolution.

“Seishirou-san,” he said again, more calmly this time, but still with that thread of intensity behind the words, “*thank you*, but...from here I need to go on by myself.”

What?

His momentum lost, Seishirou rocked back onto his heels and stared, trying to puzzle out what Subaru was saying. The words were perfectly plain, but somehow they made no sense. Some of that incomprehension must have slipped out onto Seishirou’s face because Subaru drew in a breath and then released it, as if he’d been going to sigh but had changed his mind. Glancing away, Subaru scowled faintly.

“I should have said so from the beginning,” he muttered. “I knew it, but—” He screwed up his face for a moment, then raised his head and looked at Seishirou again. “*It’s my work,*” he said tautly, his expression torn by frustration and self-directed anger, by yearning and grief, and Seishirou suddenly grasped the divisions between what Subaru both wanted and didn’t want on the one hand and what he believed was the proper way to fulfill his duties on the other.

And the truth—that Seishirou was an unwelcome intrusion on those duties.

“Oh,” Seishirou said after a pause. “I...didn’t know you felt that way.”

Rather than seeming relieved or vindicated, Subaru set his jaw. He ducked his head and marched past Seishirou, hands clenched at his sides. “I’ll just wait here, then,” Seishirou called softly as Subaru strode away, showing no sign of having heard him. Pausing further down the avenue, Subaru cast about briefly before leaping in one bound onto the roof of a warehouse and disappearing from view.

Seishirou stared at the blank field of sky where Subaru had vanished. Then his gaze dropped back to the empty avenue, to the puddle reflecting that sky close by his feet. He could sense Subaru’s psychic presence as it receded across the warehouse complex. Feeling peculiarly at a loss, he groped in his coat pockets before locating his cigarettes in the breast pocket of his shirt. He touched the rectangular package through the cloth, then hesitated, shaking his head.

“What *am* I thinking?”

Seishirou took a step forward and then sprang toward the warehouse roof, wrapping an illusion of air and snow-reflected light around himself as he went after Subaru.

* * * * *

Poised near the top of a crane that reared high above the island’s dockside—easily the best vantage in the complex—Seishirou glanced down at his shadow. It fell across the metal crossbars beneath his feet, dulling their faint gleam. That smudge of darkness rippled as he set his will upon it, and then something condensed from it: a thickening smokiness that rose into the air, unfurling cloudy wings. As the spirit-creature gained substance, he extended his arm, and it settled down onto his wrist. He brought his arm in to his body, and the eagle shikigami hopped lightly from wrist to shoulder, just as a real bird might. Its presence was a familiar mental pressure, a subtle grip of talons, and a whisper of incorporeal feathers close by his face as he turned to observe the slight young man hastening across a rooftop as if scudded along the snow’s crust by some strong breeze. He kept his concealing illusion folded about him, although he doubted Subaru would notice him even if he didn’t. At the moment, Subaru was concentrating rather intensely on finding something else.

Watching Subaru hesitate at the corner of the building and then drop with wary ease into the paved yard below, Seishirou continued to brood over that little outburst. Of course, he should have seen the real reason for Subaru’s moodiness from the very beginning and arranged to watch

over him from afar, like this. But it had seemed the most natural thing in the world to accompany his lover—in the past he had often been entertained by the exercise of rescuing Subaru, and the habit of involving himself in the onmyouji's affairs had apparently remained while the habit of being discreet about it, he admitted wryly, had not. Yet hadn't Subaru himself seemed to waver between acceptance and denial before some pressure—his over-scrupulous work ethic? his clan's long tradition of not involving outsiders?—had driven him over the edge?

Or maybe it had been wounded pride, Seishirou mused uneasily, a need to prove something by facing danger alone, without protection. It had never occurred to him before that Subaru, no longer a child, might resent his casual interference, finding it an infringement, perhaps even an insult. The idea that Subaru, in his own mind at least, might have outgrown the old terms of their relationship stirred an unaccustomed restlessness in the pit of Seishirou's stomach, a vague tang almost like disappointment, as though something only tenuously possessed was being lost. Firmly he pushed the dim awareness aside, refocusing his attention onto Subaru. He'd have time to consider the implications of this shift later, if indeed there were any.

Subaru moved out into the open yard like a wild animal picking its way across a clearing, not frightened, but ready at any moment to react on instinct. One of his birds flew down to him, and he dismissed it almost absently, letting it flatten back into a paper talisman that fluttered toward the ground. Certainly the area's aura was tinged with enough menace that he didn't need a shikigami's help to know he was in the right vicinity. Subaru's head swiveled, scanning the yard: the blank walls with blue-shadowed snow mounded at their feet, sheltered from the sun; the neatly stacked cargo containers; the chained and padlocked sliding doors sealing the warehouses. He looked again at where the snow lay especially deep in one corner, its surface cleaner and less clumped than anywhere else. Extending his own senses, Seishirou felt a flicker of presence that Subaru must have detected as well, a muffled pulse that rose into a high, moaning howl—

The snow erupted, white lashes swelling outward in deceptively soft-looking billows. As Subaru whirled to face the source of that attack, he vanished behind a wall of blowing flakes.

With a cry, the eagle launched itself from Seishirou's shoulder and hurtled toward the yard. It carried his perceptions with it, the tumult of speed and battering crosswinds blending with the keening of psychic energy, the fierce dazzle of snow and sun. Power burst in a great flare within that contained storm's heart—warding magic, with the unique flavor of Subaru's onmyoujitsu. Banking, the eagle veered around the blizzard's periphery as Seishirou gazed through its eyes, reevaluating the threat. Densely flying snow hid Subaru from view; the forces that sustained those winds also blurred Seishirou's magical senses. Even so, he could feel the other's protective spell, a shield that burned as potently as a small star. Measuring Subaru's strength against his opponent's, Seishirou checked the eagle's flight, directing it to rise and circle once more, watching and waiting. Subaru was quite clearly the more powerful of the two. The only danger would be if he were careless—or too gentle.

A shriek of wrathful frustration rose from the storm, and its tenor shifted: an ingathering of forces for a second strike. In that lull, Seishirou sensed a complex onmyoujitsu pattern being woven; it reached its peak abruptly and then released. The spell unfolded rapidly through the space between Subaru and the snow winds' controller, a bloom of alternating ward and attack that pierced the icy gusts with ease. It struck home, and the storm surged before collapsing outward, losing cohesion as the will that held those energies was bound by the spell. The winds diminished, shedding their burdens of snow, and Subaru began to reappear, standing straight and still among the now-aimless flakes, one hand lifted in an arcane gesture. A circle of pavement around him remained perfectly clear, although the rest of the yard was rippled with drifts. In the middle of those drifts knelt his attacker, mute and trembling with fury, one of Subaru's ofuda a white, palely glowing splash upon its chest.

Seishirou faded the eagle to near-translucence and brought it to land on the long metal arm of a light fixture that jutted out above a warehouse door. He was careful not to let its shadow pass over Subaru, although he thought that Subaru was unlikely to detect it, being wrapped up in the magical working. Subaru raised his other hand, clasping it with the first before his face, and Seishirou listened through the shikigami as he began his chant.

"On sowa hamba shuda saraba taraman wa hamba shudokan."

Over and over he repeated the syllables, varying their stress and speed as he pressed at the spirit inhabiting the young man's body. He tried to coax it into evocation, tried to rouse the mind of its host against it, but for all his efforts it remained quite stubbornly ensconced. Only when he applied a gentle but intense psychic force to it was there a reaction, a drawn-out, croaking wail that stuttered from the young man's mouth. There was anguish in that cry, but also a manic glee that was almost like laughter. Subaru stopped and looked at his subject more closely.

The person who knelt there was still recognizable as the man from the photograph, but his appearance had changed dramatically. Blond hair hung lank about the once-handsome face, now gaunt, with unhealthily sallow skin drawn tight across its bones. His lips were deeply cracked and stained with what looked like old blood, and his eyes stared dully, dead but for a feverish light in their depths. He wore ragged, grimy pants and a shirt that hung open, exposing his chest and stomach, yet the cold seemed not to bother him at all. His hands were gnarled into claws, their joints swollen and stiffened. Everywhere his bones stood out as if the flesh had been scraped thin to cover them, except for his belly, which was distended like a famine victim's. Beneath the ofuda, a greenish aura pulsed, making shadows of his protruding ribs.

"Try." The sound that rose from the young man's throat was a guttural creak, but behind it there was a high-pitched, almost subliminal chittering echo, as if two voices were speaking on top of each other. "Go ahead and try! There's nothing you can do."

"It's forbidden," Subaru said quietly, "for your kind to cause suffering in this world. I have a duty to send you back to your proper place." The spirit spat a curse, and its power flared as it tried without success to break the ward. Subaru concentrated his own power through the paper

talisman, pouring it into the young man's body in an effort to drive out the possessing ghost—and the man shrieked, a suddenly human sound, his body convulsing and a gout of blood spurting from his mouth. Shaken, Subaru eased the pressure of his will, although his hold upon the ward remained secure. The young man slumped, head falling onto his chest and shoulders hunching, but after a moment he straightened again. Those flat eyes glared at Subaru in feral triumph.

"You see?" he grated, voice harsh, with that undertone that sounded like screaming. "*You see?* You thought that you could fix it. *But this is what we wanted!*" And Seishirou, looking through the eagle's eyes, saw what Subaru had to see as well: an almost perfect fusion of human soul and devouring spirit, the way the gnawing emptiness of the man's loneliness and grief had welcomed in the ghost and how its never-ending hunger had consumed him, until the two existed only as part of each other. The young man bared his teeth in a skull's humorless rictus, his lips and chin freshly crimsoned with blood.

"Whether you do your job now or not—either way, you know what'll happen," he told Subaru mockingly. "So stop us if you can!" Again that staccato laughter tore itself from a once-human throat.

Subaru lowered his hand, and for a long while he just stood there, looking at the other man. The eagle sidled along the lamp's arm and bobbed up and down, but the angle prevented it from getting a good view of Subaru's face. Sunlight glittered on the snow and on the rippling waters of the bay as in the distance a passing boat signaled, two long blasts of its air horn ringing faintly off the buildings. Then Subaru raised his hand, making a definite, two-fingered gesture. As the slip of paper detached itself from the young man's chest and fluttered toward the ground, Subaru spoke, so softly that even through the eagle's preternatural senses Seishirou could barely hear him.

"Defend yourself."

The man screamed, lashing both arms around himself. As the snow winds rose, white and stinging, Seishirou watched Subaru vanish behind them again. His hands closed loosely into fists. Through the eagle's eyes, he saw a flash of yin-yang magic within the storm, the intense, hot breath of fire—

Snow puffed into steam, a quick and chaotic swirl that soon slowed, those clouds wisping into tendrils and fading on the remaining breeze. Gradually Subaru's black hair appeared, then his coat. He stood motionless, staring at something that little by little came into view: a blackened object lying crumpled on the ground, a slight smoke still rising from it.

Subaru sank to his knees. Bending forward, he pressed one hand against the pavement; then, after a short interval, he lowered his head still further and began to chant. "*On shira battaniri un sowaka,*" he whispered, the words a breathless, broken murmur, his will opening a channel into the heart of the earth that would carry the consequences of his spell, the mystical backlash, far away from him.

"*On shira battaniri un sowaka.*"

Seishirou let the shikigami return to nothingness, careful that it depart without a cry. As he'd expected, the ghost hadn't been anything like a match for Subaru—and he'd better hurry back to where he was supposed to be waiting before Subaru finished and went to find him. He turned as if to go, but hesitated, lingering at the top of the crane to look down at that huddled figure. Subaru's pose was awkward, both arms extended stiffly, one hand locked around the other's wrist as if to drive that palm against the ground. The winter sun was slipping toward afternoon's end; the shadows of the warehouses were growing longer.

Even from this distance, he thought that he could see Subaru shaking.

Chapter 14

Passing the bedroom doorway, Seishirou glanced through it restlessly, just as he'd already done several times that morning. As before, there was no sign of motion. He paused beyond the door jamb and leaned against the wall, considering what he should do. He was on the verge of continuing on into the kitchenette and finding some other meaningless task with which to occupy himself—perhaps sorting the spice cabinet again—when abruptly he changed his mind, deciding that the situation had gone on long enough. Easing back around the doorframe, he slipped noiselessly into the bedroom.

Subaru was sitting on the floor between the bed and the wall, gazing out the wide picture window. The sill was just low enough that he could look out over it, though he probably couldn't see down to the street below. Instead, he seemed to be staring at the leaden sky, or perhaps the raindrops smearing the glass. Still but for his scarcely perceptible breathing, his arms looped around his knees, he gave no sign of having registered Seishirou's presence.

Studying Subaru, who in jeans and long-sleeved drab T-shirt seemed to have dressed to match the weather outside, Seishirou frowned. It had been almost two days since the job at the warehouse district, and for most of that time Subaru had been ill: a low-grade headache and fever that Seishirou suspected were the results of a poorly channeled magical backlash. It certainly wasn't the first time Subaru had suffered such consequences, and in this case it seemed rather likely that he'd felt some unconscious need to punish himself, considering what he'd been driven to do. Last night the fever had broken, and since then Subaru's physical health had improved, but guilt and depression were obviously still weighing him down. It was beginning to get somewhat oppressive.

"Subaru-kun, it looks like the rain's letting up." As a crowning touch, the last day and a half had been a perfect match for Subaru's low spirits, bringing a downpour that had washed away the snow, leaving the city gray and dripping. Seishirou had gone out to get the paper at one point, and by the time he'd been halfway to the newsstand he'd almost wished that he hadn't bothered. But if he and Subaru were to spend another afternoon in the apartment together without any distraction, he was sure something unpleasant would happen.

"Why don't we step out and get some air?" he went on. "We can look at the stores in Ikebukuro. And we can have lunch at that little restaurant—you know, the one with the waterfall garden that you like so much." Subaru turned his head minutely, favoring Seishirou with a bleak stare. Seishirou met that look with his most relentlessly sunny grin. One way or another, he was determined to perk Subaru up.

Getting Subaru to his feet and into coat, scarf, and gloves posed little trouble—Subaru moved as directed, only sighing faintly. On the way down in the elevator, Seishirou eyed him sidelong. Of course, karaoke was out of the question, but there had to be some form of entertainment that

would distract Subaru long enough to let that dark cloud disperse. As they crossed the building's lobby and went out through the glass front door, Seishirou noted that though the rain had thinned into a mere sprinkle, the wind had picked up significantly. It drove the fine, chill drizzle sideways and into the supposed shelter of the doorway where they stood. Well, it would be better once they got down the hill. Slipping on his sunglasses—they were ridiculous in this weather, but alarming the general public would be counterproductive—he stepped out onto the sidewalk, swung up the umbrella, and opened it. The wind promptly hit him with a deviously swirling gust, nearly flipping the umbrella inside out. Seishirou spun, turning the back of the umbrella to the draft, and the wind snagged his scarf and tried to whip it away from him. Pivoting yet again, he brought the umbrella down and then up as he found the wind's true direction at last, the turn rewinding the scarf neatly around his neck. Settling the umbrella against his shoulder, he ran a hand through his hair and glanced quizzically at Subaru. "Coming, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru gave him a long, cryptic look from the doorway's refuge. Then, with a shake of his head, he moved to Seishirou's side. Seishirou switched the umbrella to the other shoulder, where it could cover them both. As they started for the station, he put his arm around Subaru, noticing some resistance, but he reasoned that the need to shelter the two of them from the rain gave him more than enough excuse for the gesture. Measuring that small tension, he decided that he could leave his arm where it was for the present. After that—well, they'd see. The day stretched out before them; surely it would be possible to seduce Subaru into forgetting those troubling memories, perhaps even into forgetting himself.

And then, who knew? Maybe they'd actually have something like a real date.

* * * * *

Seishirou let the tip of the umbrella tap the ground as he walked; he studied the profile of the other onmyouji, who had drifted a step or two ahead. At least the wind and the rain had finally stopped. On all sides, trees rose above the brown, winter-flattened grass, leafless branches almost sculptural against the sky. A few other people were moving along the park's paved walks, most apparently in a hurry to get to someplace else. That sounded like a sensible idea to Seishirou, but, glancing at Subaru again, he hesitated to say as much.

The lunch had gone well enough, but afterward Subaru had shrunk from the crowds, the noise, and the frenetic action in the stores and on the streets—almost imperceptibly, but Seishirou had noticed it. He had meant to draw Subaru out of that morass of gloom, by dint of sheer persistence if necessary. And yet....

Behind the sunglasses, his brows drew together. Nine years ago, he would have coaxed and teased and done everything in his power to divert Subaru, confident that he'd succeed and that Subaru would be happier for it. But he was growing increasingly conscious of the gap between expectation and reality, of all those places where his presumed understanding of Subaru was

proving unreliable ground. Vaguely confounded and wary, he'd held back from pressing the issue, and instead he'd waited, trying to figure out what Subaru really wanted, what Subaru would be inclined to do if left to himself. After much patience, it had become apparent that what Subaru wanted was simply to walk. So they'd walked, and ridden the trains, and then walked some more, and when they'd come out into the park at last, the sky spacious and rain-fresh above them, he'd felt the subtle strain in Subaru start to release. The original melancholy still lingered, but the peace of the flowerless gardens and the koi ponds' flat, slate-slick sheen seemed to have dissolved some of Subaru's stress—and if that were so, then Seishirou supposed that he could put up with the chill, just shy of inclement dampness for a little longer. Perhaps the park's quiet would continue to have its effect, setting Subaru's heart even further at ease.

Although he was beginning to be concerned about the direction of Subaru's meanderings, despite their seeming lack of conscious intent.

A rattling, rushing noise drew him from his thoughts, and he glanced ahead and to the left, past Subaru. A half-grown brindle Akita, all enormous paws, curled tail, and lolling tongue, came galloping down a side path, a teenaged girl on rollerblades at the end of its leash, skating for all she was worth to keep up. Spotting Subaru, the dog made a right-angle turn and hurtled toward him, whipping the girl almost off her feet. She changed stride to save herself, slewed in an arc around the dog's trajectory, then saw Subaru and braked hard, which was all that saved them both from crashing to the ground in a heap. She still ran into him, but he was able to step backward and catch her by the arms, softening their collision.

"Oh!" the girl gasped. "Sorry—I'm really sorry about this!" She pulled back on the leash, trying to keep the puppy from wrapping it around Subaru's legs. Panting up at Subaru, the dog danced from one front foot to the other, clearly still excited and unrepentant. "Bad dog!"

"It's all right." Subaru let go of the girl as Seishirou came up to them. "I don't mind it." With a slight smile, he crouched, and the dog promptly planted both paws on his knees and began licking his face. It obviously hadn't yet acquired the dignity of an adult Akita. Surprised, Subaru fended it off, a small, breathless sound escaping him: an almost-laugh that took Seishirou unexpectedly back to the veterinary clinic, and to the memories of Subaru, sixteen and heedless, caught out of himself by the one thing that had always distracted him from the realities of who and what he was.

"Subaru-kun likes dogs," Seishirou remarked to the girl as she hauled the Akita back, clearly mortified. Slipping a hand under Subaru's elbow, he helped the other to rise, absently noting the wet, gritty pawprints decorating the white coat's front. Still smiling a little, Subaru raised one arm, wiping his cheek on his sleeve.

"That's lucky, I guess." The girl continued reeling in the dog, not an easy task while balanced on skates. She was wearing some atrocity of teenaged fashion that didn't look anywhere near warm enough for the weather. Her dark hair was pulled into childlike pigtails and intensely

silvered sunglasses covered her eyes. She barely reached Seishirou's chest, even on wheels.

"Usually he jumps on the people who don't. Anyway, thanks for being cool about it."

"Not a problem. Right, Subaru-kun?" Grinning, Seishirou took blatant advantage of the moment and wrapped his arm around Subaru. The girl gave them a second look, then smirked, one slim eyebrow arching above her glasses.

"Whatever." Subaru had stiffened, quicker on the uptake than he'd once been, but if he felt the urge to bolt, he resisted it. "Well, you guys have fun—come on, Satoru!" The dog barked as she tugged it after her, but almost immediately it was diverted and seemed to forget all about them. Girl and dog went on down the path, rapidly regaining speed, until they vanished around a stand of rhododendrons. Subaru gazed after them briefly, and then turned, escaping from Seishirou's arm as he started walking again.

"Cute dog," Seishirou commented as he matched stride with Subaru. "Cute girl, too." He slid his arm around Subaru once more. Subaru's reply was monosyllabic, the younger man barely tolerating the contact, but Seishirou had already decided that he'd been well-behaved for long enough. "Say, did you notice her earring?"

"Hm?"

"It was a yin-yang earring." Seishirou smiled privately. "Subaru-kun, what if I got you one like that? I think you'd look really stylish with your ear pierced." Walking his fingers up Subaru's neck, he teased at one earlobe; Subaru twitched his shoulders, jerking his head aside. Irrepressible, Seishirou let that hand creep down again, sneaking under Subaru's arm to tweak at his chest. "Or maybe your—"

"*Seishirou-san!*" Outraged or simply embarrassed, Subaru squirmed away. Seishirou put on his most innocently surprised expression, inwardly chuckling at the response to his perfectly ridiculous suggestion—but Subaru had frozen, staring past him as if light were being stolen from those green eyes, leaving them gazing into growing shadow.

"This place...."

Ah, Seishirou breathed to himself, but said nothing out loud, let no sign of his sudden alertness show, even though Subaru seemed almost to have forgotten his presence. He'd been wondering whether Subaru's drifting had been intentional after all, or whether Subaru had really been so lost in reflection that they might have walked right past this spot without him even noticing. Apparently, neither was exactly the case. Certainly Subaru sensed the magic that pooled not far from where they stood, but the flat, fractured shock in his eyes suggested that though he recognized its aura he hadn't been prepared to meet it on their little walk—yet that meeting it was also an inevitability in some respect: a haunting that was unlooked for but exquisitely appropriate to his currently macabre state of mind.

After all, what better symbol of death and his own failure to prevent it could he possibly imagine?

Subaru started forward, leaving the path, seemingly oblivious to the sodden ground squelching under his sneakers. Hooking the umbrella over one arm, Seishirou followed, a couple of steps behind and to the side. He removed his sunglasses, reaching beneath scarf and overcoat to slip them into his breast pocket, the better to watch Subaru as they passed among the tree trunks' irregular columns, shadowless beneath the clouded sky. They came to where the trees began to thin once more, allowing glimpses of the rolling lawn beyond. Another loop of path bracketed the grove on that side, and Seishirou spotted the bench next to an unlit streetlight where Subaru had waited on that snowy night, not so long ago. In a clear space, one tree, far larger than the rest, stretched out knurled, heavy branches without competition. Its roots clenched the small rise beneath it like fingers knotted into the soil.

Subaru stopped short, staring at the sakura tree.

Pausing, Seishirou studied the reaction: the frozen yet graceful stance, as though Subaru might leap from that paralysis at any provocation; the lost look of a person trapped between past pain and awareness of an all-too-present danger. Silently he circled Subaru, prowling in a widening arc that curved gradually closer to the tree. As he came around the back of the trunk, a metallic glint caught his eye—he spied a beer can perched in the crotch of one of the lower branches, and the corner of his mouth quirked.

Hey, maybe it's petty, but you could rouse yourself to prevent this kind of thing, he suggested wryly, feeling the tree's drowsy acknowledgment of his presence brushing about him like unseen wings. People these days—no thought at all for the spirit of a place.

Oh, well.

That's the way the world is, isn't it.

Reaching up, he seized the can in one gloved hand. Almost idly he crushed it in his fist—

—across the city, a bicyclist clutched at a twinge in his chest—he wavered, felt tires losing their grip on wet pavement, a skid—

Turning and taking a long stride from the tree, Seishirou lobbed the can at a trash basket next to the bench. It struck the rim and glanced high, spinning, throwing off a mirror-bright flash before it fell—

—and at the park's southernmost end, a scatter of pigeons tumbled from the sky, plummeting in blood and feathers onto a shrine's steps as members of a school trip, late going home, looked up and pointed, crying out—

Recollecting himself, Seishirou darted a glance at Subaru. Subaru could certainly have detected that working, brief and camouflaged though it had been, but he still gazed blankly at the sakura, his mind clearly far adrift. Slowly Seishirou moved back to the tree's side. He looked

Subaru over with intense thoroughness, somehow seeing the other whole and in all different facets at the same time, a curious conjunction of views: a pale figure that almost seemed to shed light against thickening shadows; a young man standing spellbound before forces of memory and recognition, the understanding of what this barrow meant to human beings in general and to himself in particular; an outsider there despite that knowing, unique in having disturbed the centuries-long pattern of death, foreign and yet desirable; a magician of impressive ability, a wounded heart constantly in surrender, a now-familiar warmth lying against Seishirou in the darkness, a slim hand folded into his, a rare smile....

Standing on the cherry tree barrow, the locus of the Sakurazukamori's power, with the tree's awakening stirring through his mind like a midnight wind, Seishirou looked at Subaru. It was as though everything was stopping down into perfect, motionless clarity, like a drop of water freezing on an icicle. He could see Subaru with total lucidity, a perspective that was intimate and yet far removed, Subaru as both lover and stranger, alive at the very center of his world.

He saw the white coat flushed with blood....

He could smell it, could feel the fluid, sticky warmth, the clutch of dying fingers, could see the emotions of those green eyes tinged with shock, just like every other victim's. He knew exactly what it would be like to close the circle of the moment and make that extraordinary sensation of encounter absolute. Forming his hand into a loose fist, he slid his fingers against each other. He looked again into Subaru's distracted face.

"Are you frightened, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru's eyes didn't turn, but something shifted inside them, like paper screens sliding across one another. "Yes."

"There's nothing to be afraid of." Smiling, he held out his hand, his words a low, caressing murmur of command. "*Come here.*"

Like somebody in a dream, Subaru started forward, walking over that mounded earth troubled with bones. He halted in front of Seishirou, an arm's length from the tree. Its brooding sentience swirled about them, lapping at their auras. Subaru hesitated, then reached out, resting his palm against the silvery bark.

"It's tired," he whispered.

"What?"

"The tree. It's tired, isn't it?" Surprised, Seishirou touched the tree's presence and felt its weight: the heaviness of centuries of existence, the force of all those bound and ravaged souls. Layers of magic and death draped its limbs, enfolding it like an accretion of ceremonial kimono.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "I suppose it is."

"Mm." Subaru remained as he was for another moment, and then eased forward. Running his hand along the flank of the tree, he slid his other arm around the trunk. Seishirou stared as Subaru stepped onto a knot in one of the roots and settled against the sakura. Closing his eyes, Subaru turned his face to the side, pressing his cheek to the bark.

Mine? the tree asked hopefully.

No, Seishirou collected himself enough to say, with slightly more force than necessary, *mine*.
For now, anyway.

The tree seemed to think about that.

Yours, it agreed at last, and Seishirou let out a breath, releasing surprise along with a tension he'd scarcely registered until that instant. Almost numbly, he watched Subaru lean into the tree. He felt a dim precariousness, as though even the breeze that had begun to stir his hair and the tree's thinnest branches might be dangerous, as though a thought could disturb the situation, tipping it toward something he couldn't yet see. But the feeling was obscure, and as he stood gazing at Subaru and the sakura it remained so: an unfocused wariness, a sense of something just out of view. It gave every detail of the scene an odd acuity. His eye traced Subaru's profile, the long lines of the white coat, the arm that curved gently around the sakura's trunk.

Finally Subaru swayed back from the tree again, releasing it with a small caress. He stepped down off the root. Seishirou beckoned mutely, and Subaru turned, his expression still inward and thoughtful. As they began to walk away together, matching pace in silence, without touching, the tree's voice unfurled once more. *When?* it demanded of Seishirou, a whisper that fragmented into restless echoes, rippling and snapping like a sea of banners. *When?*

Soon, Seishirou answered, and felt a flicker of the same prescience of the end that had touched him just a couple of days before, on the drive to the warehouse district. As then, disquiet shadowed it, a hairsbreadth sharper this time, a cold edge licking at the back of his mind. The tree's spirit flared, either impatient with hunger or reacting to that uneasy twinge, and he exerted his will upon it, lulling it back toward sleep.

Before much longer, it will all be over.

As the sakura's presence faded into slumber behind them, he glanced at Subaru. What was it that kept on niggling at him? The recognition of yet another lost opportunity, the unparalleled end to their love affair that he'd just let slip by? It would have been easy, and so very fitting, he mused, to have stopped Subaru's heart in the place of their first meeting, that pure sympathy having come full circle, creating perfect closure with the past. On the other hand, he'd already made his decision to wait until the final day; there was no point in second-guessing. He shrugged. Perhaps that out-of-joint feeling was simply the thwarted habit of killing, like the edginess of missing a smoke.

Or perhaps it was the fact that there weren't going to be so many more opportunities, that the time until the end had indeed grown short.

He stared at the ground before him, wet, brown grass lying thinly over the dirt.

"So am I," Subaru murmured, after they'd walked for a while, long enough to come out from under the trees and start down the curving side path. Seishirou looked at him once more, this time in question. "Tired, sometimes. As though I've seen too much."

Putting aside his own thoughts, Seishirou focused on Subaru, seeing them finally about to approach what had to lie at the heart of Subaru's somber mood. "Subaru-kun," he said quietly, hiding his intentness behind a facade of calm, "had you ever killed someone before?"

"People have died." Subaru stared into the distance, his gaze dark and haunted.
"Accidents...it's not the same."

"You did what was necessary." Seishirou shifted his shoulders, pushed the umbrella back into the crook of one elbow. He kept his voice attentive but neutral. "You were protecting other people from something that seemed human but no longer was. Who could blame you because there wasn't any better way to do that?"

"*Seishirou-san—*" The word and the breath that had carried it both choked off into silence. Subaru's face closed in misery, the green eyes squeezing shut—and somehow, watching that convulsive expression, Seishirou could almost hear the questions that hadn't been spoken.

What is it like for you?

What is it like to be someone who does this again and again?

How do you live?

Questions that Subaru knew better than to ask him—questions he didn't know how to answer in any way that could offer comfort, or even understanding. He felt once more that gulf between them—he felt it as he felt magic, an intuition striking someplace deep inside. It was a gap between vastly differing perceptions and experiences, an alienness to each other that mocked all his easy words and casual encroachments as nothing but the most superficial of encounters.

And how could anything he might say, truth or lie, help him to reach across that?

Their steps fell in slow cadence on the concrete path, and for some reason he felt each stride with peculiar distinctness, the jar of his foot against the pavement seeming to resonate with that hollow, oddly empty feeling. Subaru thrust both hands into the pockets of his coat, huddling it around himself. Seishirou hesitated, then almost tentatively reached out, easing his arm about the other's shoulders. He drew Subaru nearer, and after a beat of unresponsiveness, Subaru exhaled and swayed unexpectedly against him, yielding this time to the embrace. As Subaru turned toward him just a fraction, Seishirou lowered his head, bringing his cheek closer to that fragrant dark hair. It occurred to him, in a flash of inexplicable realization, that it was always *this* side that Subaru walked on—that no matter what Subaru was careful to place himself to the left, where he could be seen. The discovery of that minute but unfailing gesture gave Seishirou a twinge of surprise and strange pleasure, so acute as to be like a little pain. They continued on like that, mindful of every step, so that their light contact remained unbroken. Side brushed side, and Subaru's hand crept up to close around Seishirou's fingers, as if to affirm Subaru's presence there, tucked into the circle of his arm. The street lamps along the path came on as they moved in the general direction of one of the park's exits, circular pools of light that seemed pale at first but grew stronger as the grey day sank toward night. The pointed crown of a torii floated over the trees ahead of them, black against the steadily darkening sky.

As they went through that gate and started down the steps to the sidewalk, a distant jingle of music plucked at Seishirou's attention. The sound came and went above the street noise, just at the edge of hearing. In the stop-and-go of picking their way through the growing crowd, he caught a glimpse of its source: an open-fronted store ablaze with strands of colored brilliance, a confusion of gilt and glitter on the other side of the road. The lights and the cheerful tune teased a recollection to the surface of his mind; curious, he counted the passing of days and was mildly surprised by the result. As they passed other frenetic gift shops and sidewalk vendors, an appealing idea began to take shape. He held off from taking action, though, until they had crossed the street and were almost at the entrance to the train station.

"Ah!" he exclaimed then, softly, dismay coloring his tone. "Subaru-kun, I forgot!" Stopping, he turned Subaru toward himself. "There's something I have to take care of. I wonder, will you be okay going home by yourself?" He gazed into Subaru's somewhat bewildered face with an anxious expression—he'd never remembered to put his sunglasses back on, he realized—aware that it wasn't the best moment for one of these escapes and hoping that Subaru wouldn't be put off by it. Subaru stared, but then a glint of recognition and understanding caught light in those green eyes: a familiar look, forbearing and ever so slightly amused.

"Yeah."

Smiling, Subaru glanced aside as Seishirou leaned even nearer, close enough that his breath touched Subaru's forehead as he murmured, "I won't be long at all—and I'll bring something for dinner." Subaru nodded, hesitant but still not flinching from the intimacy. On all sides, people flooded in and out of the station, a torrent parting about the quiet place that the two of them made. After a moment, Subaru swayed back and turned, slanting a last look over his shoulder before making for the station stairs. Absently Seishirou watched Subaru's slender form, the dark head drifting through the oblivious crowd, until the other had vanished from view. Then he bestirred himself with a shake of his own head and a grin.

He'd better hurry about his errands if he was going to keep his word to Subaru.

* * * * *

Seishirou burst into the apartment. "I'm home!" he called. Parking his now-dry umbrella in its stand, he dumped the bag of take-out food on the raised section of floor and started getting out of his coat and scarf.

"Welcome ba—" Subaru halted in the bedroom doorway, eyes wide as he stared at Seishirou, who was juggling a large, gold-wrapped, and beribboned package in one arm while trying to shrug the other out of its heavy sleeve. Seishirou grinned at Subaru's open-mouthed astonishment. Getting himself untangled from his winter wear at last, he hung it up, kicked off his shoes, and stepped up onto the floor. He strode over to Subaru and wound his free arm about the other's

shoulders, pulling him in close for a quick but enthusiastic kiss. Then he shifted back, slipping the gift box into Subaru's hands.

"Merry Christmas," he murmured tenderly.

"Ch- Christmas—"

"Well, actually it's Christmas Eve—but why wait? I thought we could celebrate just as well tonight." Catching the still-stunned Subaru by both present-carrying arms, Seishirou drew him over to the couch and pushed him down onto it. "Go ahead," he urged. "Open it!" Coiling next to Subaru, he watched with barely controlled impatience as Subaru fumbled off the red and gold silk ribbon, then fingered the gilt paper, looking for the taped-up seam. Carefully Subaru unwrapped the present, folding the paper before laying it down on the coffee table; he lifted off the box lid, and Seishirou had to restrain the impulse to take it away so that they could get to the good part more quickly. Finally Subaru was rustling aside the white sheets of tissue paper, he was reaching between them to pull out his gift....

"It's...a sweater?"

"Try it on!" Seishirou watched avidly as Subaru's arms found their way into the sweater's sleeves and he drew it on over his head. The sweater was that rich burgundy that looked so striking against Subaru's coloring; it was made of finest cashmere, soft as eiderdown. Subaru's hands slid across it, smoothing it over his chest and stomach, and Seishirou reached to tug at one shoulder that didn't lay quite right. "Too big?" he wondered.

"No, it's perfect, it's—" Subaru's fingers closed on the silky wool. His eyes rose to meet Seishirou's, luminous with distress. "Seishirou-san, I didn't get you *anything!*"

"Hush." Leaning forward, Seishirou laid one finger against Subaru's lips. "Not another word. I won't have you unhappy on what should be a festive occasion. And besides," he added, bending nearer, smiling as he pressed Subaru back against the cushions, his weight settling onto Subaru little by little, "I'm sure you'll find some way to make it up to me." He stroked Subaru's stomach through the thin, luxurious cloud of cashmere as he lowered his head to nuzzle at the other's throat. "Eventually."

"Oh...you mean the obvious?" Subaru's murmur was tinged with amusement. He touched one cool hand to Seishirou's face, redirecting it toward his own. Gladly Seishirou let himself be diverted, and there followed a long, pleasurable interval of kissing, Subaru stretching and shifting beneath him in ardent response. At last Seishirou sat back with a small sigh, gazing into his lover's radiant, slightly flushed face.

He supposed it was really too soon to be taking the sweater off Subaru.

"I guess we'd better eat before the food gets cold," he said. "Do you want some tea?" At the other's smiling nod, he pushed himself off Subaru, somehow reluctant to let that closeness fade. As he headed for the kitchenette, he suggested, "Why don't we eat on the couch tonight?" and Subaru, making an acquiescent sound, rose to collect the abandoned bag of take-out. Seishirou

watched him begin to lay out containers on the coffee table, order and grace in every unselfconscious movement, and then smiled faintly.

For some reason, the intimacy of dinner on the couch seemed more appealing than their usual arrangement of sitting at the counter on stools.

As he finished filling the tea kettle and turned to set it on the range, he saw Subaru get up again and wander over to him. He thought Subaru was in search of utensils, but instead Subaru just leaned on the end of the counter, watching him in easy silence. Seishirou opened the cabinet to get the cups, and from the corner of his eye he saw Subaru glance downward, one hand stroking the front of the sweater, before Subaru's lips curved once more in a small, private smile.

"Subaru-kun," and those lowered eyes lifted to his, immediately and quite gratifyingly attentive, "did you really forget about Christmas?" At Subaru's abashed look, Seishirou chuckled. "Well, well. What would Hokuto-chan say? I remember what a big deal she used to make about it." Hokuto had never been one to let any kind of special occasion go to waste, and so naturally the single Christmas he'd spent with the twins had been a whirlwind of gifts, decorations, and, of course, fabulously outrageous costumes. He glanced at Subaru, touched by old habits of caution, but Subaru seemed undisturbed, only perhaps a little saddened by those memories. It was odd—Seishirou knew that he should avoid the delicate subject of Subaru's dead sister, but for some reason being able to mention her felt right, as though she was yet another link that bound them together, rather than a barrier standing between them. And indeed, the melancholy in Subaru's eyes was paired with wistful happiness, as if he could at last enjoy some memories of the good times they'd shared without being drowned in tragedy. Wanting to turn Subaru's thoughts even further from the past's dark corners, Seishirou added musingly, "I wonder, did the two of you have nice Christmases together when you were children?"

"Not while we were living with our grandmother," Subaru replied. "She didn't believe in celebrating foreign holidays. But when we were very little, before we were sent to be trained by her, we were passed from house to house among our distant relatives. I don't remember much, because I was so young, but I remember one year there was a Christmas tree. It was full of lights and things that sparkled." Closing his eyes, Subaru rocked forward on his elbows again. He hugged his arms around himself, his smile echoing the joy and wonder of the child he'd been. "It was so pretty. I never forgot it."

"Mmm." The kettle was beginning to vibrate as the water approached boiling. Seishirou scooped tea into the strainer and suspended it inside the teapot.

"Did...did you celebrate Christmas? When you were growing up?" Seishirou hesitated, looking at the glint of light on the kettle instead of meeting Subaru's tentative, questioning gaze. Then he smiled, almost despite himself.

"Mother loved beautiful things," he admitted. "She had a collection of crystal ornaments all over the house, and at Christmas she put up lights and decorations everywhere. I think she used to overdo it a bit, though. We'd find tinsel in the carpet all year long." He glanced at Subaru's

expression, which was rapt with interest. “Subaru-kun, you don’t remember your mother at all, do you?”

“No, I was just a baby when she passed away. And our father died before Hokuto and I were born.” Was it that vacancy in Subaru’s life that made him curious about Seishirou’s family, the fact that he’d known only the impersonal weight of his own clan’s honor and prestige without the counterbalance of parental affection? Or was it, as Subaru had mentioned once, simply a wish to know things that touched upon his lover? The kettle began to whistle, and Seishirou lifted it off the stove.

“My father was in the Self Defense Force,” he remarked, pouring the hot water into the teapot, “so we didn’t get to see him much. He was always being transferred all over the country, while we stayed at home. But he’d visit us whenever he got leave. I remember him as a big man—though it might have just been that I was small at the time—with dark hair, always laughing. Of course, I never got to know him well. Mother killed him when I was about six or so.”

Sei-chan, come here. I have something to show you.

He felt as much as heard the other’s breath of shock, and he brought the kettle’s spout up quickly, stopping the flow of water into the pot. What on earth had he been thinking, telling Subaru that? Disturbed, he set the kettle down, his fingers resting lightly on its handle and his mind blank for an instant, struck by the realization that there was no way to unsay those words. Sensing that Subaru was searching his face, anxiously trying to catch his gaze, he smiled finally, a rueful twitch of his lips. He couldn’t understand why he’d let such an admission escape him, but he supposed it didn’t matter as long as he could keep Subaru from dwelling on it.

“Sei- Seishirou-san!”

“Subaru-kun, don’t feel sorry about this,” he said, as gently as possible. “Truly, it was a long time ago—and as I said, I never really knew him. It wasn’t like an ordinary child losing a father.” Indeed, it was highly probable that the man he’d been told was his father was no real relation at all, just as the woman he’d called “Mother” hadn’t been his birth mother. In any case, it made not the slightest difference to him who they’d been or that they were dead, and it seemed ridiculous that something so insignificant should cast a pall over what had begun as a thoroughly enjoyable evening. He could still feel Subaru’s attention on him, though, distraught and intense. He wondered what he could do about that.

“But you know, there is something that’s bothering me,” he murmured at last. Turning, he leaned on the counter too. He looked full into Subaru’s face with a dismay that matched the other’s own.

“What are we going to do for *our* Christmas tree?”

* * * * *

The ivy wasn't quite lost in the middle of the coffee table: a splash of dark green, crinkled leaves amidst the empty take-out containers. Candlelight glinted on the gift ribbon that was twined about it and on the gold paper that mercifully swathed its decorative pot almost to the ears. Eyes half-lidded so that those motionless flames were haloed and soft, Seishirou lay draped over Subaru, his head on the slight rise of the Subaru's chest, the cashmere sweater plush against his cheek. Subaru's hand was stroking his hair, and Seishirou sighed, enjoying the culmination of a very pleasurable evening: the savor of good food, Subaru's lean warmth fitted against him, and the quite satisfactory way that everything had resolved itself, the shadows that had troubled their relationship for the past few days finally eclipsed by a glow of contentment.

"Seishirou-san," Subaru whispered, close by his ear, "are you happy?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" Subaru's fingers hesitated and then resumed their motion, as if Subaru had been going to say something but had thought the better of it. Seishirou closed his eyes, but a flicker of restlessness stirred in him, spoiling his almost drowsy repose. He'd avoided giving a direct answer to Subaru's question; he suspected that Subaru had noticed and was deliberately refraining from comment. That complicity disturbed him—he ought to find some more reassuring response, whether it was true or not. Yet he faltered, momentarily confused.

Was this "happiness"?

"Subaru-kun—" He stopped, surprised and vaguely annoyed with himself. The tone of the word was wrong, not the casual caress that it ought to be, but instead low and just a shade too taut. Subaru murmured quizzically, the sound a small vibration against the side of Seishirou's face. He should make some outrageous comment to cover his mistake, but he lay still, groping after what he'd wanted to ask about and yet couldn't quite put a shape to, even inside his own mind.

"Do you love me?" he said at last.

"Yes." Subaru's voice was quiet and supremely certain. If he wondered about the question, he gave no sign. "I love you."

"*Why?*" Twisting around, Seishirou raised himself to gaze into Subaru's eyes. Subaru blinked up at him, serenity gradually shifting toward puzzlement.

"Because...because you're *you*."

That, Seishirou thought, was a most unhelpful answer. He drew a smile across his face, a guard against letting his irritation show. "But *what* do you love about me?" he insisted, adding more flippantly, "Is it my looks? My personality? My incredible sex appeal?" He'd figured out eventually what Subaru's joke had been about, that night of the apartment building fire, and since then he'd taken every opportunity to tweak Subaru for it, albeit gently. It was astounding enough that Subaru had developed a sense of humor at all, let alone about that, that he couldn't help coming back to it again and again.

Coloring, Subaru squirmed and unwound his arms from Seishirou, drawing them in close to his chest. He lowered his gaze, studying his fingertips as they played against each other in nervous embarrassment. "Well...I don't know. I couldn't say *what* exactly." The words were a meaningless murmur, self-conscious and inarticulate, and although Seishirou realized that he shouldn't have expected anything else from the shy onmyouji, he found himself inexplicably disappointed. Glancing up once more, Subaru looked directly into Seishirou's eyes and fell silent, his expression becoming thoughtful and, oddly, almost pained. Faced with that long, searching look, Seishirou grew aware of the uncharacteristic nakedness of his own gaze. No wonder Subaru seemed disquieted. He should break the awkward mood, should look away before he let slip any more than he already had, but he was suddenly, acutely conscious of Subaru's solidity underneath him, of Subaru's lips still parted, breath caught in concentration. He was aware of a minute ache inside himself, not hunger, not lust...it was like the twinge of loneliness, but why should he be lonely in the presence of his lover? It made no sense to him at all. He'd thought that this was what he'd been looking for, and it was, but still he wanted...he wanted....

Subaru's fingers touched his cheek, and he blinked, startled out of that tangle of thoughts and instincts. He looked down into Subaru's candlelit face.

"I love...I love your smile. No, all your different smiles." The whispered words were hesitant, as if groping their way through a labyrinth, Subaru struggling to put into language the things his feeling heart simply knew. "I love the way you touch me, the way you hold me near." Subaru's other hand closed lightly onto Seishirou's, thumb sliding back and forth across his fingers almost unconsciously. "When you do that in front of other people...I feel as if I'm going to break apart. Because I want it so much that it hurts."

Subaru's gaze slipped sideways, looking past him. "And I love the way you hear me when I speak, the way you understand the things that no one else can. But it's not only that. It's that it's *you*, here: this one particular person listening, this presence that I know so well—" He broke off, his eyes shifting back to Seishirou's. After a moment, he added gravely, almost as an afterthought, "None of those things have changed."

A hush followed Subaru's rather extraordinary little speech, and Seishirou started out of his fascination to realize that he was hovering above Subaru like a hunting bird poised in the infinite, timeless instant just before the dive, so still that he wasn't even breathing. His lungs were starting to complain about the lack of air. Sighing, he relaxed, letting a smile soften his face despite the discontent that still twisted at him. None of those things had changed, true, but there were plenty of others that had since he'd revealed his real identity, and for all that Subaru might find acceptable or even attractive about him now, he'd felt unspoken judgment coloring those words. It was inevitable, he supposed, that Subaru would feel drawn to those parts of himself that recalled the kindly veterinarian Subaru had first fallen in love with, but it didn't help to disperse the cloud that had somehow fallen over his evening. He decided it was time to change the subject.

“Ah, now you’re embarrassing me with all this flattery!” he teased. “Maybe you should start listing my faults next, to bring me back down to earth.” Subaru gave him a sidelong look, and Seishirou stared at the familiar glint in those green eyes. He’d expected dismay and protests, a confusion that Subaru would be glad to be distracted from, but surely Subaru wasn’t about to—

“Well,” Subaru murmured, tilting his head to one side and appearing to give the matter deep consideration, “you’re arrogant. And...you’re vain.”

Dumbfounded, Seishirou could only blink at Subaru. “Vain?”

“Yes, you are.” For some reason, this seemed to amuse Subaru; his smile quirked the corners of his mouth and filled his eyes with that dancing, seemingly starlit shimmer. “You’re always preening.”

“Subaru-kun, I don’t think—”

“You’re patient with things just exactly as long as they please you, and when they no longer do then you’re immediately ready to set them aside.” Subaru’s voice rose just enough to override his, though its gentle tone remained unaltered. That still-smiling gaze held Seishirou’s evenly, a calm challenge in its directness.

After a few moments of surprise, Seishirou recollected himself enough to remark, with a sly grin, “You know, you forgot one.” Lowering his eyes from the quizzical look that made Subaru appear so innocent, he touched one fingertip to the point of the sweater’s crewneck collar. From there, he stroked downward over the smooth planes of Subaru’s chest until he was pressing lightly against the breastbone. “Cold-blooded assassin.”

“No. I didn’t forget.” In spite of himself, Seishirou’s gaze leaped back up to Subaru’s. The other’s eyes were deep and profoundly still. “But then, you knew that already. I thought it might be good to tell you something that you might not know.”

And as Seishirou was trying to decide whether he was being mocked or not, Subaru hesitated and then sighed. Shifting position, he ran one hand up Seishirou’s arm to the shoulder, a slow touch that made Seishirou’s hairs rise and heightened the prickle of adrenaline beneath his skin. His muscles tensed.

“That’s why it’s so hard to answer a question like this,” Subaru murmured. He looked at his own slender fingers as he spread them in a fan against Seishirou’s white shirt. “To say that I love this or that part of a person—because a person can’t be divided into pieces like that, some to keep and others to be thrown away. It’s just...it’s like saying that a person can only be one thing or the other: that an assassin can’t also be gentle, or that a someone whose work is to protect other people can’t be selfish inside his own heart.” Rolling that hand around to the back of Seishirou’s shoulder, he slid the other one up Seishirou’s side—he drew Seishirou down with a gentle persistence that Seishirou gave in to almost dazedly. There was something very wrong about the entire situation, something that he just couldn’t seem to grasp. His cheek came to rest against Subaru’s shoulder, Subaru’s fingers cupping the back of his head, twining into his hair.

"I love Seishirou-san," Subaru whispered, tightening his arms around Seishirou, as if those few words were the counter to every confusion, every conflict. Seishirou stared blankly at the corner of the rug, its gold and black patterns blurring in the candlelight.

"But Subaru-kun," he murmured, a weak place in Subaru's assurances becoming apparent to him at last, "I'm *not* gentle."

"I watch you," and those words were a breath against his hair, a faint hum where their bodies came together chest to chest, a quiet thunder of agitation rising in his pulse. "I always watch you. In the little things, the way you tend the plants, the way you wash the dishes or do the chores, I see the care that you take." Subaru exhaled, a tiny shiver of contracting muscles. It felt almost like a laugh. "You're always gentle, except when you choose not to be."

Subaru was wrong—Seishirou was certain of that. After all, "gentle" wasn't a word that ought to describe the Sakurazukamori. But then, everything Subaru had said all evening long had been exactly the same. Those structures of fragile logic seemed to hold together on the surface but cracked like the thinnest ice whenever Seishirou tried to grasp them, to fit them into his own understanding. Still, for the merest instant, he made the attempt. He let his mind rest hesitantly against the peculiar thought to see if it would support any weight.

To see if he might be...if he could *possibly* be....

*—dream of a golden sky splintering, little pieces breaking away from it like glass—
—like pain—*

His entire body jerked before he'd even realized it was going to do that. He clenched his already tensed back and shoulders against the tremor, his fingers digging into the couch cushion. For what seemed like a crawling eternity his mind went blank; then he wrenched it back to the present, forcing himself to relax into Subaru's embrace. He lay motionless for a couple of seconds, recollecting himself, before he allowed the breath that had gotten caught inside his lungs to escape him in a dry, quiet chuckle. Another deliberate pause, and he pushed himself off Subaru, feeling the other's arms loosen around him, slackening just enough to let him go.

"If you say so, Subaru-kun."

Straightening, he looked down into Subaru's face, noting concern, an unspoken question and the shy considerateness that kept Subaru from asking it, affection, and a dozen other less definable things. For himself, though, there was just the brisk, bright clarity of intense alertness, a vibrancy that remained as confusion faded, as though all his senses had been roused.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons he liked to gaze so long and deeply into Subaru's glass-green eyes, he thought, smiling. He reached out, brushing his fingertips against Subaru's cheek, and Subaru's dark lashes lowered, his head turning in answer to that caress.

Perhaps it was the tantalizing danger of having those eyes gaze back at him with full knowledge of who and what he was: the baffling, intoxicating conundrum of this person, both enemy and lover, who saw him as no other ever had.

Even if what Subaru saw was...very strange.

Seishirou hesitated, then half-shook his head. Leaning forward, he touched Subaru's forehead with his lips, putting the last echoes of disquiet out of his mind. Instead, he marveled once more at what he had let himself in for, allowing Subaru to come so close to him. It was lunacy, of that he had no doubt. Nevertheless....

"Come on," he murmured, "let's clean up and then call it a night."

* * * * *

Seishirou flicked off the bathroom light and stepped out into the already darkened bedroom. As his sight adjusted, he noticed Subaru standing transfixed in front of the picture window, an intent black silhouette. Curious, he walked over, picking his way easily around the plant stand, even in the room's deep shadows. Stopping close behind Subaru, he could feel that his presence was noticed, although the other didn't turn to look at him. "What is it?"

"Look, the clouds have broken. The weather's cleared." Resting both palms against the window's crossbars, Subaru leaned nearer to the glass. Outside, the rooftops of the neighboring apartment buildings marched down the hill, disappearing into the darkness beneath the waning moon, while in the distance the lights of Shinjuku's skyscrapers glittered, a kaleidoscope mesh of stars strung across the night. "Look," Subaru whispered again, half to himself and half to Seishirou, "look at all the lights. Sometimes...isn't this city beautiful?"

"Mm." After another pensive minute, Subaru pushed away from the window and straightened, almost brushing against Seishirou. Automatically Seishirou reached out to draw the two of them even closer, Subaru's head inclining onto his shoulder as they swayed together. They remained like that, watching the shimmering skyline as if it existed solely for them, as if the city and the moment that held them would never end. It was an illusion, Seishirou knew, part of the false peace that they had invented for themselves, but still he found it obscurely satisfying. He followed the slow, tidal rhythms of Subaru's breath, repeating and repeating against him, and he wondered about that mood of tranquility.

After a little while, he simply gave up wondering.

"Seishirou-san," Subaru murmured at last, his words hesitating into the silence, tentative as snowflakes, "that time when the woman's suit got possessed. Afterward, when we were all driving home together...do you remember?"

But I love this Tokyo, Seishirou said.

Because it's the only city on this Earth that's "enjoying" walking the road to destruction.

Smiling, Seishirou lowered his face into the midnight of Subaru's hair, feeling Subaru shift in response to him, the onmyouji warm and yielding in his embrace. "Yes. I remember." "Love" was of course inaccurate—"interest" was probably closer, a fascination with the city's excesses that was not unlike his attraction to Subaru—but he supposed that what he'd said nine years ago had been true, in its way. "And you, Subaru-kun," he returned, amused, "do you love Tokyo?"

"Yes," Subaru answered, "because...it's the place where I met you."

Surprised, Seishirou looked down onto the intricate curves of one ear, a cheek's pale, highlighted contour, all that he could really see of Subaru from behind and in near darkness. Then he laughed, sliding his hands down to Subaru's hips and turning Subaru around. "Then let's make tonight yet another reason for 'loving Tokyo,'" he murmured, adding in a teasing whisper, "Besides, isn't it time for me to unwrap *my* present?" He bent forward, his mouth and Subaru's discovering each other easily, finding their way by touch, by breath, by a shared will.

In the dark room, two shadows moved before the face of the large picture window, slowly rising and falling on the bed in shapes and rhythms of desire, while beyond them the city's lights continued to shine with unceasing steadiness, countless tiny stars adorning the night.

Chapter 15

Seishirou's eyes opened onto radiant space, a pale, golden infinity cupped above him like the dome of the sky. He was lying on his back, staring straight up into it. He blinked, then turned over and pushed himself up onto one arm, the sheet and blanket that covered him sliding down his bare chest to his waist. That lustrous, unvarying emptiness stretched away on every side. Next to him, on the mattress that seemed to be the only solid point of location, Subaru lay curled around a pillow, breathing with slow evenness. Leaning over Subaru's shoulder, Seishirou stroked one finger down the other's cheek, probing the depth of that slumber. Then he lifted his head and smiled at the bright air in front of him.

"As always, it's a pleasure to see you, Kanoe-san."

A thread of darkness split the gold, widened into a spindle shape. From its center, a long and shapely white leg emerged, followed shortly by the rest of the Angels' ally and one-time Dreamgazer, who, if nothing else, surely knew how to make an entrance. The black void that she stepped from seemed to slide along with her, adhering to her body as she left it to become a flowing, clinging, high-slit dress. She moved forward, raising one hand to brush back her hair, intricate earrings chiming as she inclined her head. The sound fell into the echoless dreaming, tiny notes of teasingly remote and flawless clarity. "Sakurazuka-san," she murmured. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Indeed." The woman glided closer, high-heeled shoes silent on the nonexistent floor, a whisper of cloth against itself and another faint ring from her jewelry the only noise of her approach. "I've been rather busy."

"I can see why." The words were a throaty purr, as though unvoiced laughter lay just behind them. Kanoe poured herself onto the mattress, drawing up one leg with deliberate languor, her dress parting around it once more to reveal a long curve of thigh. "So *this* is the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan." Bending forward, she eyed Subaru with mildly carnivorous interest. "Quite a treasure."

"Look all you like." His smile still affable but no less predatory than the woman's gaze, Seishirou draped himself about Subaru like a leopard settling itself along a comfortable branch. He left unspoken the obvious corollary: *but don't touch*.

"Hmm." Kanoe lingered, then swayed upright again. Sloe eyes slid toward Seishirou, rambled about his chest and shoulders before lowering, their sly sparkle vanishing behind those heavy, dark lashes. "I hope I'm not being too—inconvenient."

"It is a little late for a social call." Glancing down as though merely distracted, he ran his finger along Subaru's temple, just brushing the fringes of velvet-black hair as he reinforced and deepened Subaru's sleep. It wouldn't do for Subaru to wander onto this level of dream.

"But business?"

His finger stopped—his eyes flickered back up to the woman’s face as alertness seized him: a cold, focused tautness, like a spring compressed to the limits of its steel. “Business is business. Although,” he commanded another smile, affecting a continued carelessness, “I would have expected more pomp and circumstance. Unless, of course, this is something else....”

“It’s a personal matter,” Kanoe said, and the intensity within Seishirou eased, like a held breath being released. Rolling back onto one elbow, he relaxed and eyed her with a more amused appraisal.

He’d thought it was just a shade too early for the end of the world.

“So your plaything’s about to become a liability, is he?” She evaded his gaze, and he grinned. “Why don’t you ask your Kamui to take care of it for you? I think he rather enjoys making an example of such things.”

“Why use the sword when the assassin’s knife is so much more appropriate?” Kanoe parried. Her long fingers tangled in her hair, twirled it with pretended disdain. Then, as he continued to scrutinize her, she added, “I feel I can rely on your professionalism.”

“Ah.” He didn’t trouble to keep the chuckle out of his voice. Naturally Kanoe would be reluctant to set the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth after this prey, considering that the target in question was almost certain to go to ground near the one person she most wanted to keep the Kamui far away from. The leader of the Angels did tend to cut a wide swath of destruction. Seishirou sat up once more, letting the covers slide down where they would. “Then shall we discuss the specifics?” he asked. Spinning a cigarette into being with one hand, he lit it with the lighter that appeared in the other. Kanoe put two fingers to her lips, and another cigarette formed between them; she bent to the flame that he held out toward her, further displaying what was undeniably an impressive set of breasts. Glancing into the shadows between them, Seishirou admitted to himself that he might have taken a purely carnal interest in Kanoe, if she hadn’t been so gratuitous about throwing herself at him and everyone else in sight, and if he hadn’t known quite well who shared her bed on a regular basis. There was absolutely no attraction in Kigai Yuuto’s leftovers. Straightening, Kanoe leaned back and blew out a long mist of smoke from between painted lips, then began to describe the situation for him, her voice a low, even murmur.

On the mattress between them, Subaru slept on, oblivious.

* * * * *

Standing in the golden nothingness of his dreaming, Seishirou concentrated on Kanoe’s receding presence, following it until he was sure that she was gone. Although he’d claimed, as he’d risen from the mattress, drawing a semblance of clothing about himself, that he was simply being polite in escorting a lady on her way, both of them knew the truth. Kanoe wasn’t a full Dreamgazer, but nonetheless she had a certain facility, and he wasn’t about to slip deeper into sleep or up into a suggestible half-waking state with her still lurking about. Confident at last that

she'd departed, he focused his will into an intricate pattern of visualization, repairing the mental barricade that she'd picked apart. From the feel of things, it had taken her a long and laborious effort, a realization that gave him no small satisfaction. He'd always taken pride in his work.

As he finished restoring his defenses and was examining the result, a faint wind brushed by him, touching his cheek and catching at the ends of his hair. He turned to face the breeze and blinked: he was standing on a grassy knoll, steep, brilliantly green slopes falling away from him to join the park that spread out around its feet. Distant figures roamed the park's paths, appearing and disappearing beneath the trees, or ran and played across its open meadows. The far-off sound of childish shouting and laughter rose to him; the golden light of the dreamspace had become sunlit morning air, redolent with late spring. Swiftly he probed his surroundings, but there was no trace of any Dreamgazer, Seal, or Angel. The breeze blew past again, tugging at the hem of the trenchcoat he found himself wearing. He frowned very slightly.

Another dream?

Like that time....

"Hey, mister!" There was a new pull at his coat, this one a more definite yank on his sleeve, and he glanced downward. A small, dark-haired boy, perhaps seven or eight years old, stepped back from him and grinned. "Want to play a game?"

Seishirou crouched, bringing himself to the boy's level, and smiled with slow intentness. "What kind of game?"

"Hide and seek," the boy said. "I'll hide, and you'll try to find me."

"Wouldn't it be better if I hid, and you tried to find *me*?" Seishirou smiled a trifle more widely, anticipation already waking—but it would be far more entertaining to turn the tables on the child, for the supposed hunter to become the hunted. After all, there wasn't much challenge in stalking a little boy. With an impulsive slyness, he added, "I'm a magician, you know."

"No, it's my turn to hide." The boy held his ground as Seishirou straightened and stood, looming above him. The wind swirled Seishirou's coat once more and blew black bangs across the boy's forehead, obscuring his eyes from view.

There was something about that smile....

"Shut your eyes and count backward from ten," the boy instructed. "And don't cheat."

"Very well." Tolerantly Seishirou put both hands in his pockets and closed his eyes. "Ten. Nine. Eight." Aside from his own steady voice, he could hear only birdlike cries from the children playing at the bottom of the hill: no retreating footsteps, no betraying rustle of grass. Extending his perceptions, he swept the area around himself in a widening circle, searching for the dim, starlike glow of human life, but he could sense nothing. "...three. Two. One."

He opened his eyes. The pale emerald lawn spilled down from where he stood and flowed away on all sides, stretching flawless and without any hiding place for a long way before it reached the first scattered trees. For a minute or two, he continued to scan the park, and then he shrugged, smiling wryly.

Perhaps this would be a bit more challenging than he'd thought.

* * * * *

In Ebisu, faceless people were sitting and eating lunch on tidy piles of rubble, families picnicking beneath a pristine, sun-struck sky, seemingly heedless of the ruins around them.

In the Sunshine 60 aquarium, a flock of high school girls ran chattering and laughing past glass walls of ghostly, motionless fish, hurrying on their way to some after-school rendezvous.

On the Nakano subway train, everything went dark, and the car lurched, flinging its more unwary passengers against each other. Then the train rocketed out of its tunnel, and the blackness outside was replaced by deepening twilight, before the car's yellowish lights flickered back on an instant later, blanking out the view. "Oh!" said the girl who'd been thrown into Seishirou. With the support of his hand beneath her elbow, she scrambled her feet back under herself and released his trenchcoat, grabbing for a pole instead—she clutched at it, trembling and swaying with the train's rapid motion. "I'm sorry! Um, I'm really—I'm so sorry!"

"It's quite all right, especially when it's such a pretty girl." Seishirou smiled with just slightly suggestive gallantry. "I like the wings." The girl blushed and fluttered in a most charming way.

"Um," she started shyly as he began to turn from her, his gaze already shifting to sweep the car, searching for his prey. He glanced at her again, and she lowered her eyes, brushing aside a wayward streamer of long, pale golden hair. "Excuse me, but—do you know when this train is going to arrive?"

"Sorry," he replied. "I'm only here to look for someone."

"Oh." As she sighed, he examined his surroundings more closely. There was still no sign of the boy. Dull reflections appeared, vanished, and reappeared in the train's windows as it rattled through Tokyo's artificial canyons, passing in and out of the buildings' shadows. In those vague mirrors, the girl was a frail drift of white and blonde next to his coat's solidity; the other passengers were mere silhouettes. Finding nothing of any significance, he decided it was time to take his hunt somewhere else.

"I'm looking for someone too!" the girl announced then, brightly, as if struck by a flash of impulse or inspiration. "If you find him, will you tell him that for me?"

"I'll be sure to." The girl smiled up at Seishirou with innocent gratitude, and he grinned.

"My apologies for leaving you so soon," he added, letting go of the hand rail, "but this is my stop."

And he stopped.

The girl's startled face receded, dwindling in a swift rush as the train sped onward: a blur of metal and glass, upholstered seats and anonymous people hurtling past him, somehow leaving him untouched. Then he was clear, his trenchcoat whipping briefly in the wind of the train's departure as he watched its rear car retreat around a curve of track. Standing in midair, a meter

and a half above the ground, he pivoted slowly and gazed back in the other direction, down a length of empty, faintly gleaming rails. There had to be some better way to go about this search. He glanced at the sky between the train's catenary wires: dark, rolling clouds torn into a ragged fringe in the west, their edges frosted with the day's dying light.

That girl had given him a rather good idea, Seishirou realized.

He smiled again.

The trenchcoat flared as it was flung high, a flowering of deeper shadow against the dusk. Poised in mid-leap above the wires, Seishirou spread his own wings, huge raptor's pinions, storm-grey barred with black—and then he was racing upward, those broad wings muscling the air, the wind tearing its fingers through his hair, fanning his white shirt close against his body. Higher and higher he flew with easy power and speed, his gaze fixed on the sky above him, on a night that grew more complete as he soared toward it, until it had swallowed the final, liquid glow of winter sunset. He slowed then, pausing, steady wing beats holding him aloft as he stared down at a glittering tracery of lights, the city sprawling away beneath him until it vanished against the vast, dark curve of the earth. White fire ringed it, an immense circle crossed and recrossed, the mark of a five-pointed star stamped in flame across its urban heart. Something leaped in him, a jolt like an unlooked-for recognition or fulfillment: part startlement, part possession. Abruptly, inexplicably exhilarated, he laughed out loud.

He crossed his arms before his chest, and ofuda shimmered into existence between his fingers. With a practiced sweep, he cast them; the charged paper slips streaked outward in two arcs, blurring into black birds as he exerted his will. “Go!” Those birds flurried off in all directions, visible against the darkness only by their movement and the gleam of magic that invested their created forms. Seishirou angled forward, his wings lifting and furling as he tilted, then rolled over into a dive—and as the city spun beneath him, a kaleidoscope whirl seen through the multifold eyes of his shikigami, a wheel of fire and night turning as he began his stoop toward it, that sharp, sweet pressure intensified inside his chest.

Soon now, I'll find you.

Yes, very soon.

Did you really think that you could hide from me?

* * * * *

A stray wind carried smoke across Seishirou's view of the city, thin, dirty grey veils that tore as they blew past, disintegrating like moldering, once-white garments. Somewhere in the streets below, something was burning. Standing on the roof of one of Tokyo's nameless skyscrapers, he stared moodily over seemingly endless, stair-stepped blocks of similar buildings.

He simply could not find that little boy.

In the midst of his dull frustration, he sensed a presence appear behind him, as if answering that unspoken admission of defeat. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the object of his search standing on a higher roof level, a tiny, incongruous figure. “I guess I win,” the boy called down to him, slyly cheerful.

Seishirou turned to face the child, unhurried, as though indifferent. Whatever the rules of the game were supposed to be, the only rules he followed were his own. Win or lose, that boy would die just the same. “So where were you, anyway?” he asked, reassuming the hunter’s careless grin as he prepared for an imminent shift in the tenor of their play.

The wind brushed another wisp of smoke between them, hiding the boy’s face. When it reappeared, he was mirroring Seishirou’s smile.

“Inside your heart.”

“Oh,” Seishirou said as deep cracks began to splinter the roof beneath him. “Well. That explains it, then.” The building broke into large, tilting slabs, tipping him backward, and it was when he went to spread out his wings that he realized he didn’t have them anymore. As he began to fall with improbable slowness, he looked up and saw the wind lift the boy’s hair—he saw, beneath the fringe of bangs, a flash of golden brown eyes.

Mother?

Then he was plummeting amidst a soundless avalanche of huge concrete boulders, the boy’s form receding above him with truly astonishing speed—until his whole body jerked and he found himself on the familiarly yielding solidity of his mattress, the covers wrapping his own warmth close about him.

Disoriented, he stared up at the spectral play of light across the ceiling, a scarcely perceptible glimmer that filtered in through the window blinds from the street outside. At last he rolled over and pushed himself upright, summoning a marginally brighter glow between his fingers. Gazing down at his still-sleeping lover, he watched the movement of Subaru’s eyes behind closed lids, Subaru’s lips parting on a faint stutter of breath. Subaru often dreamed, while for himself such events had always been rare, fleeting, and, as far as he could recall, never so bizarrely incomprehensible.

Somewhat uneasily, he wondered if dreaming like that could possibly be contagious.

* * * * *

Fire arabesqued across the darkness around him: a field of flames bowing and rising, then licking into suddenly ornate forms as the wind caught them, curling back on themselves like the petals of lilies. He turned, arms crossed before his chest as he concentrated, searching for any least sign of presence. *There*, and he paused, his heart a flicker of astonishment within him as he sensed and then saw the figure that straightened up, rising from a crouch—that shifted to face him, black coat billowing wide against the infinitely deeper blackness and those flames.

You, he breathed, silent, in the grasp of a profound yet strangely formless understanding, *can be wounded too*.

Unable to speak it out loud or even to put solid meaning to it, he could feel that realization swelling within him: a coiled seed struggling to burst its casing. As though he were a passenger inside his own body, he felt himself begin to move forward. He was running, skating over the ground, his feet scarcely seeming to touch. He leaped high, as high as he was able to, hung arrested at the peak of that jump, his shikifuku a white swirl wreathing him, and then, with the timelessness of a flower opening its petals, he began to fall. It was a descent that gathered speed only reluctantly, as though some resistance or inertia was holding him back—there was no sound but the wind blurring past him, fluttering in his robes—and the man below was turning, head lifting to stare at him, dark hair blowing away from those unlike eyes as they widened in shock.

The white of Seishirou's blind eye and his own shikifuku swallowed everything.

With a jolt, Subaru awoke.

He lay there, heartbeat triphammering as he gazed wide-eyed into darkness, trying to reconcile night wind and fire, flight and fluid movement with the breathless, black stillness that surrounded him, pressing him down, seemingly about to crush him. After an instant's confusion, he found himself again: he was in bed, and a real weight was holding him paralyzed: Seishirou, draped half on top of him, one arm hooked around him, the man's breath damp and even against his neck. His own outflung right arm—in fact, most of his side—was pinned beneath Seishirou. His fingers had gone to sleep.

Swallowing, he stared upward until he was able to distinguish that he was looking at the ceiling, streaked with pale echoes of light that did little to illuminate anything. Then, cautiously, he shifted his arm, moving it by centimeters, trying to find a position where the pressure on it might be somewhat less. Seishirou grumbled, a faint, slumberous murmur, before settling even nearer, one leg sliding over Subaru's, lips brushing against his collarbone. Subaru paused, holding his breath, until the man grew still again, then eased his arm into the gap between Seishirou's elbow and side. Blood burst back into his hand, and he flexed it, working its fingers until the last congestion had left them and the burning, stinging sensations had mostly faded. Then he sighed and relaxed his neck, letting his head sink back into the pillow, and gazed up at the ceiling once more.

Sleep would be long in coming, if indeed it returned to him at all that night. Left to himself, he'd surrender to wakefulness and go out into the other room, where he could listen to music on the stereo's headphones, or read, or light some incense and let the scent and curling smoke become a focus to still his unquiet thoughts. But there was no way he could escape the bed without rousing Seishirou, and if that happened then he knew he would no longer have the same space in which to be alone and let the disturbance of his tenuous inner balance run its course. Even if Seishirou didn't follow him with one distraction or another, all the man's instincts would be troubled by his being there. Seishirou's attention would circle him, restless and inquisitive, a

constant presence stalking his mind and heart—and he didn't have the will for it, not when premonition was already haunting him, the cryptic whisper of what might come to pass when their dance had reached its resolution. In that dark, insomniac hour, even the thought of dealing with the man exhausted him; all he wanted to do was lie there in a state of perfect blankness and never have to take another action or hold his own against Seishirou's impositions and hungry affections. But passivity had its price: lying trapped as he was, without any diversion and far from the hope of sleep, all that remained was memory. He found himself treading over familiar ground: the labyrinth of what had been and what might have been. In the shadows of the ceiling, he saw once more the hollow eyes of that young man consumed by the possessing ghost—and then, with a clarity like that of the supernally blue winter sky, he was back there again, reliving that recognition, realization, the clench of adrenaline-tinged conflict twisting inside him. He felt the keening shock of power, the needfulness of his response—could see the swirling white-out, the howling, pitiless lash of icy cold.

The other face of softly falling snow.

Subaru blinked hard, then drew in and released a tautly controlled breath, careful not to jostle Seishirou. If only he could have...there was a part of him that yearned to have let Seishirou take control: to have retreated into being the too-gentle, ineffectual person he'd once been, allowing the active part to default to Seishirou—to let the Sakurazukamori be the one who killed, leaving him unstained. Nostalgia opened its vast, uncrossable gulf in him, a longing for that lost innocence, that freedom.

He was terrified of what he might be growing capable of.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he turned his head, letting his cheek brush Seishirou's hair. He inhaled deeply the man's spicy-sweet, animal fragrance. There was no stopping anymore. Pain was inevitable. Indeed, he sensed that it was somehow necessary. No matter how much he wanted to spare himself, or the man he loved, to do so would defeat all he hoped for. It was not enough, he knew, to live these last days blindly, sheltering in each other's presence, to shut out all that was unpleasant, trying to forget the bitter necessities that were to come. For his own part, if he were ever going to become strong enough to do what he needed to do—to become Seishirou's true equal and opposite—he had to grasp that capacity for darkness within himself.

Considering what his one wish, if granted, would inflict on Seishirou—could he do any less?

Oh, Seishirou-san, forgive me.

Because of me—

His breath caught. After a moment, he bent his captured arm, awkwardly and with great care, and slid his hand up Seishirou's side, curling his fingers around the man's shoulder. He brought his other arm across, wrapping it about Seishirou's body, turning to face the other as best he could. He was rewarded by a slight tightening of Seishirou's embrace, a somnolent, instinctive echo of his own drawing-nearer, a quiet sigh as Seishirou resettled, apparently still drifting well below the surface of sleep. He bowed his head, his eyes still closed, and touched his lips to

Seishirou's forehead. That perfect joy bloomed in him, as miraculous as always: a tenderness as translucent and luminous as some astonishing deep-sea creature, surviving even in the crush of the ocean's vast pressure. And as they lay entwined, he found the grip of dread was loosening, balanced out by love and faith, and by the simple knowledge that he was, after all, doing only what he must.

He could cower in the Sakurazukamori's shadow, paralyzed and conscience-stricken, reliving all that had already happened, every loss and grief, until the final day came and found the two of them exactly where they'd always been, or he could go forward into the uncertainties of the future, with the only sure thing being that there would be change.

He had already made his decision.

And when I'm here with you, like this, I find that I have hope.

If I can just be strong enough, and not afraid.

But even if I fail, if I fall, may I still fall gently.

And rest within these arms once more.

Seishirou-san.

Drift III

Exchange

In the shrine's inner sanctum, light fell into shadow: pale sun spilling slantwise through the open doorway and onto the tatami floor. Deeper in the room, beyond direct reach of daylight, faint reflections glimmered along the curve of a statue, burnished the muted gold of an incense holder, outlined the edge of a freestanding screen. A spark flared, yellow and blue, then faded into minute orange embers, fire caught and smoldering in compressed, aromatic herbs. Threads of smoke arose, slowly interweaving, the patterns they formed scarcely visible in the dimness.

Seishirou drew the wands of incense through the air, then placed them upright in their holder. He closed his eyes, inhaling as sandalwood began to overlay an already present sweetness, a cloying scent complicated by a metallic tang. Then, opening his eyes once more, he gazed at the burning incense, a slight, almost absent smile playing about his mouth. Beneath and around the holder lay a carefully outlined sigil, slick and impenetrably dark as if it had been painted with ink. The incense sticks were smudged with a subtle stain of the same color. He stared into the curling wisps of smoke that layered over each other like a thin wash of brush strokes, a sumi-e of sky and blowing wind. Releasing his mind into trance, he let it soar free, skimming the conjunctions of place and time. He was hunting for the fortuitous moment, the ideal location for his encounter.

For the resolution of this latest assignment....

With a whining roar and a rumble of massive wheels that made the ground tremble, the jet thundered along the runway. It lifted, suddenly imponderous as it rose and then banked, turning with implausible grace across the fume-hazed horizon, tilting above the expressway and the hotels beyond, a sleek silver artifice poised between earth and sky.

On a triangle of winter-browned grass between three crossing runways, Subaru turned from the himorogi that marked out holy ground, the last energies of his spell drunk down into the land beneath the airport, leaving him with the sense of being oddly translucent, in the moment of suspension that followed a working. He raised one hand, half to ward off the reality of deafening noise and stark, too-pallid sunlight and half to keep his coat's hood from being blown back by the thin, unpitying wind. Staring toward the city, its buildings blurred by distance and the morning's traces of smog, he wondered about the abrupt sensation inside his chest.

That faint tug, like longing.

Like a warning.

* * * * *

Subaru started and looked at the cup in his hand, half-full of cooling jasmine tea. On that

limpid green surface, his reflection was indistinct, more the outline of his head than anything else. He raised the cup toward his lips, hesitated, then lowered it again. He set the cup down on the counter, the liquid inside it shivering at the contact, disrupting that shadow image.

He just couldn't quiet his thoughts.

Getting up, he left the counter and began to pace. Seishirou wasn't home yet. He'd been a little surprised to find the apartment empty when he'd returned, considering how long it had taken him to get back from the airport, a surprise that had continued to niggle at him as the day went on and Seishirou still didn't appear. Nevertheless, Seishirou had his own life, his own things to do—and Subaru's mind flinched, skittering around the edges of what those things might be. He knew the likelihood, the almost certainty that they were some sort of transgression, driven by the imperatives of being the Sakurazukamori, the Dragon of Earth—and was it collusion, to suspect evil deeds and do nothing? He halted, shaking his head. No, he wouldn't even start down that path. For him, all that mattered, all that he would deal with was what lay before him, true and plain to be seen: not suspicions, not conjectures, not unproven fears. To do anything else would end in madness. Drawing a breath, he stared at his shadow, which stretched away to one side, cast by the late afternoon light that lanced almost horizontally through the bedroom window. From his feet, it splayed out across the living room floor until it rose up inside a diffuse gold frame on the opposite wall, next to the apartment's front door. He resumed walking, and its legs scissored, thin and strange as a wading bird's, before they took him out of that box of light and themselves out of existence.

Shadows. Shadows. He felt himself in abeyance, as though he were secluded in a tower, somewhere high above the world. He wished Seishirou would come home—he wanted the physical reality of the man, present and tangible, filling the emptiness, replacing those dim, fluttering ghosts that rustled in unquiet corners of his brain. He wanted Seishirou's touch on his body, wanted it with a flash of startling but welcome heat. Turning, he walked back and paused once more in front of the bedroom doorway. He gazed toward the window, his eyes half-lidded and unfocused against the light as he visualized how it would be: the train slowing as it pulled into the station, and Seishirou already uncoiling, swinging easily to his feet, waiting with casual impatience behind a clear pane of plastic until the cars stopped and the doors slid open, setting him free.

The walk up the hill, those long, just slightly rapid strides devouring the distance—a cloud of warm breath frosting, and in its wake an anticipatory quirk of Seishirou's lips, the wryly amused, sensual mouth that Subaru was suddenly eager to kiss. Distracted, he rubbed his fingers across the back of one hand as he drew at those threads of excitement, memory and imagination alternating in him, weaving the scene.

Then the glass door of the apartment building opening onto the lobby and Seishirou going through it like a black wave, heading for the elevator, no, for the stairs, through the fire door and up the first flight, the second, moving more swiftly, muscles in his legs tensing as he leaped steps,

pulse accelerating with the exertion—oh, it was his own heart, his own breath catching at the thought of Seishirou drawing nearer, as though some smooth, strong force of attraction were pulling them toward each other. He hugged his arm against his chest as if he could make himself more dense, increasing that gravity—slid his hand down until its heel grazed cloth-covered yet sensitive flesh, the quickening nub of one nipple, a brief, sweet flowering of sensation that kept him from implosion. Swaying back against the doorframe, he traced his other hand down his cheek, then extended it toward the window, the beams of light stabbing between his spread fingers and half-blinding him, a star alight and blazing through his hand. The rhythm of rapid footsteps beat in his blood as he pictured Seishirou coming closer, coming to him—

A key clattered in the lock, and he spun, startled out of all thought, blinking in an attempt to clear sun-dazzled eyes. The door opened, quick as the sweep of a wing, and Seishirou was coming through it, a dark blur already shrugging off his coat—the motion arrested, one arm half out of its sleeve, as his head turned to find Subaru. His one eye caught the sun and burned with it. Then the coat was off, an untidy swirl as it was tossed over the arm of the chair, and Seishirou was up from the genkan and already halfway to Subaru, sliding into clarity amid the glare spots as he advanced, so that Subaru could see on his face the intense single-focus that was like an arrow's release, the clench of a raptor's talon, its aim a fatal, foregone conclusion. Subaru froze, a white-cold paralysis in that confusion of reality and imagining, of an answered yearning and stark, mute panic. Seishirou's mouth descended onto his parted lips, hard, irrefutable, and eager. Seishirou's arms closed around him, one hand behind his shoulder as Seishirou bore him back against the doorframe, the other curling into his hair, and Subaru arched full-length into him, arched up to answer that insistent kiss, his own hands reaching to twine behind Seishirou's head, then scrambling down to knot in the man's shirt as that ice liquified, melting into a hot surge of desire, a wordless yes.

Seishirou-san.

The doorframe's edge was a dull blade down the center of his back, Seishirou's weight a tide with only one direction, pinning him, a boat swept up and crushed against a seawall. He chose the ecstasy of the embrace, the body thrust up against his, the intimate slide of Seishirou's tongue over and around his own, any discomfort vanishing in importance next to those things. He got Seishirou's shirt half untucked before Seishirou seized one of his arms and wrestled it out of the way, then leaned into that exposed side—hot breath followed by a fierce, sucking kiss low on Subaru's throat—and Subaru gasped, spun with that motion, rolling them both to his left, off the wall and into the bedroom. The sun flashed gold past Seishirou's shoulder, blinding him again. Another turn, like that time when Seishirou had caught him up and whirled him across the floor, but this a different dance, without such easy grace, both of them with the same intention but their limbs somehow at odds as they struggled, like hopelessly entangled combatants. He got some of Seishirou's buttons undone, in no real order; his own shirt was half-open, the tail of it out. Seishirou's hair, windblown and still cold, pressed his cheek as Seishirou's teeth raked his

collarbone, a caress-bite at or just past the edge of ungentleness, he wasn't sure which. Bending backward, he yielded to that uncertainty, that shivery, equivocal thrill. His foot caught on Seishirou's instep. His leg buckled—already off-balance, he clutched at Seishirou, and then in one lunge Seishirou had lifted him, arms curving beneath his seat as they spun through a last half-turn, a dizzying gyre of sun and, for him at least, heart-stopping flight.

They crashed together onto the bed. The bedframe sang with the impact, and Subaru's breath huffed out of him, partly from surprise and partly from being landed upon, although he thought fleetingly that Seishirou must have spared him the worst of that by catching most of his own weight on his arms. Rearing back, Seishirou undid the couple of buttons that were still keeping his shirt closed and whipped it off, a white flare behind his muscular body, then twisted to remove the shoes he hadn't bothered—had forgotten?—to take off in the apartment's doorway. With a start, Subaru groped at the front of his own shirt, his fingers clumsy with haste and trembling. Buttons for them both today—he was going to give up wearing shirts that buttoned, honestly—and Seishirou had him by the hips, was dragging him down the bed, his shirt riding up as he slid.

Seishirou buried his face in Subaru's bared stomach, ravenous kisses again, his tongue laving deep into Subaru's navel, his teeth a prickling scrape that raised the fine hairs on Subaru's neck and arms. Seishirou's hand was brusque yet deft at the closure of Subaru's pants, and Subaru's pulse acquired specificity: a leap, a sharp, forceful throb. He yipped, writhed, one arm stretching above his head, flailing at the nightstand drawer that was just out of reach, the shirt not important anymore. Then he jerked, gasped again, a thin, threadbare sound, as his pants and underwear were stripped off together.

He felt the air and the ache of helpless, uncompleted need only for moments before Seishirou's strong grasp covered him, far better than the inanimate bonds of clothing, but still not enough. Seishirou's fingers molded themselves to his already urgent sex, drew up and down along it with an almost cruel slowness, Seishirou's thumb rolling about the end on each upward peak—all around just below the head's flare and then back and forth across the top, teasing, swirling the foreskin about on the glans, tiny but excruciating tugs alternating with gliding strokes, shattering him into a scintillation of needle-bright, ever-changing sensations—until that hand kept moving down, down, further down, no longer satisfied to linger. It weighed his testicles before letting them sift through appraising fingers, pressed lightly into the smoothness behind that, sending a different kind of shuddery jolt through him, deeper, more all-encompassing, his heart leaping with it as if rocked by the surge of an unexpected wave swell, and then Seishirou's other hand had joined the first beneath him, kneading the two sides of his rear before spreading them, Seishirou's fingers rubbing in between, suggestive of what was to come. Tantalizing but unfulfilling touches—a preliminary, and one that did what it was meant to, sent desire singing higher, carried on frenetic wings. Still straining, Subaru's fingertips swiped at something on the dresser, sent it clattering to the floor, caught the edge of the drawer at last and yanked it open. Seishirou's hand moved to his knee and lifted—he felt breath on his inner thigh before Seishirou's mouth skimmed

there in passing, a lick of fire tracing the crease where his leg joined his body—and as Seishirou raised his head Subaru took advantage of the space, the new flex of his knee to lunge the little distance necessary. His fingers closed around smooth plastic.

He transferred the tube to Seishirou's waiting hand, then fell back, drawing his leg up again, trying not to shiver with the impatience that made pulse and breath want to come so quickly. Seishirou's gaze glanced across his, brief, acute as glass but with an inward focus, his eye dark amber now, the setting sun's light coming in from the other side. Then his attention shifted, and Subaru instead watched Seishirou's hands: the flip of the tube's cap, the glisten of lotion across Seishirou's fingers.

The touch, when it came, made him jump despite anticipation; the cream was cool, the slicked fingers sliding into him were efficient, no longer mere implication, and that was fine—what he craved was something else, something more. Panting, he squirmed and twisted as they turned within him. They brushed that one most sensitive spot, lit him with a ghost spark of that fire, and an inarticulate protest escaped him, his hands knotting in the bedspread: not yet, not like that. Seishirou made a low sound, part chuckle, part crooning growl of interest. Then Seishirou's other hand fastened around his shaft once more, slid down to form a firm ring about the base. Seishirou bent toward him—another breath, warm, humid, heralding the damp, curving sweep of a tongue—and Subaru had to close his eyes on the sight of Seishirou taking the head of his sex into an avidly rapacious mouth, Seishirou's gaze gleaming up at him through a fall of dark hair, gauging his reaction. Oh, it was too much: those intense, dissolving waves of suction, Seishirou's lips sealing just below the head's rim and then being drawn up over it with relentless deliberation, again and again. A concentration of tight heat was building in him, and he was already hard, so hard—and another shock of pleasure, rolling up over him from inside, shaking him like a seizure, as Seishirou's fingers, unerring and merciless, pressed into that inner place once more. They moved on it, giving no rest, no hint of surcease, only more and more sensation, more than he could possibly stand. He cried out. Trembling, he jerked his leg up, hooked it over Seishirou's shoulder as he arched his body, trying to lift his hips, but Seishirou's palm against his groin forced him down. He tossed, flung his arms up about his head to clutch at the pillow, a dampness starting at the corners of his eyes as he moaned, gasping, "*Please, please—*"

With a final punctuating lick, Seishirou's mouth abandoned its play, and those fingers pulled back until they rested just outside Subaru, stirring gently against him, a reminder or a promise. Subaru drew in a huge, heaving breath. The momentary pause was both reprieve and pain as he quivered in the aftermath of those touches, as he ached for their return, for release, the expectation of what had to come next rising within him like a full moon tide, liquid and inexorable. His heart thumped; he could hear the whick of Seishirou's belt end falling, the jingle of the buckle, the metallic purr of the zip.

Then Seishirou's fingers were removed, and a greater warmth bumped against him, prodding at him, as Seishirou sat up and shifted forward. Subaru's knee lost its purchase on Seishirou's

shoulder as the man moved, but Seishirou caught his leg and kept it raised, pressed to Seishirou's body, Seishirou's hair a heavily silken wave against his ankle. That stretch twinged along Subaru's muscles, a chill sweat stuck his shirt to his chest, to the small of his back, but most of his awareness was on the hot width of Seishirou's sex as it settled into place against him. He recalled himself just enough and just in time to suck in a breath, to concentrate on being as relaxed and yielding as possible—and Seishirou thrust in hard and fast, was seated in one surge, a burning invasion that seemed to explode into Subaru, that rocked him from the base of his spine all the way up to the back of his skull. Stars burst behind his still-closed eyelids, the shock of that entry mixing with a terrible, wonderful ecstasy, the ache of being so overpoweringly filled. He tilted his head back, lips parting as he managed another, deeper breath, and another—not so bad once he'd learned the way of it, the physical control that any mystic or martial artist learned turned to the purpose of mastering his body's instinctual rejection, and whatever pain was left was nothing next to such close and perfect union: one need, one heat, one rhythm pulsing between them, their bodies deeply and essentially joined.

Seishirou's arm slid under Subaru's back, his other hand cupping Subaru's seat, at the top of the thigh, and then Seishirou lifted Subaru: he was swept up, crushed to the firm swell of Seishirou's chest, still pierced by Seishirou's shaft, gravity helping to drive him down onto it even further. He choked, wrapped his free leg around Seishirou's waist in an effort to support some of his own weight, managed to twist the other enough to hook his heel behind Seishirou's neck. He felt the strain all down the back of his thighs, as though he were the string of some instrument, tuned to sound a high-pitched note, taut and transcendent. Shaking, he clasped one hand on Seishirou's shoulder, the other on the arm that curved around his back, and as Seishirou raised him he gave what help he could, heaving himself upward, his own saliva-slicked erection jammed between them as their bodies ground together. Minute rise and then fall, slithering down to meet Seishirou's hips driving upward, over and over, Seishirou's breath stertorous next to his ear, stirring the ends of his hair—he found himself whimpering, digging his fingertips into Seishirou's arms, bucking with each plunge, striving for more, more friction against his sex, more penetration, to help Seishirou push inside him, striking that pleasure place and sending brilliant strobing sensations throughout his entire body.

His eyes had opened, he realized—across the room he glimpsed in a flash the full-length mirror, and the two of them reflected in its glass. He saw his head flung back, his mouth parted with soft cries, his expression that of a stranger, transported, his limbs wrapped about Seishirou's strong, naked back and arms, enfolding the man in his embrace. Seishirou's pants, down about the hips, and his own white shirt fluttering off his shoulders made them look like two halves of a whole, as though they were merging into one convulsively moving being.

He tightened his arms and legs, arched himself into Seishirou, squeezing them even closer together as Seishirou drove up inside him, his body lowered to meet that thrust and then lifted again. Every time he came down he could feel it, himself taking in all of that pulsing, straining

shaft, right to the limit. Shivers flooded him, the stress and excessive pleasure mounting, his excitement gathering into the place between them where his sex was trapped, rubbing against the rippled muscles of Seishirou's stomach. He lost focus whenever one of those long shudders from inside rolled through him, but the awareness of building tension kept returning, stronger and clearer every time—until that intensity peaked, a hurtling rise into the heart of a fiercely burning sun, a white-hot fusion that started with his groin and sped through him, gaining power and incandescence, until it reached critical mass in his brain. Crying out more sharply, he closed his eyes, spasming against Seishirou as he was flung into cataclysm—a fire, a fire, and himself the shower of sparks thrown against a midnight sky. He was broken into a thousand searing stars, dwelling an eternity at the apogee of flight—

—and then falling—

So slowly he was falling, floating down from that unfathomable height, the dwindling aftershocks of pleasure still chasing each other along his nerves, veiling all thought. His head settled onto dreamy softness, the yielding mound of a pillow. He opened his eyes. Seishirou was laying him down—he could still feel Seishirou's hardness inside him as the man settled onto him with a low, rumbling groan. Seishirou twisted his shoulder out from under Subaru's leg, crooked that arm behind Subaru instead, and Subaru let his leg slide down to join the other around Seishirou's waist, relief thrilling through his trembling muscles. Seishirou drew back, almost all the way out of him, slid forward again to rest deep—a new rhythm of in and out, longer strokes than he'd been able to manage while holding Subaru aloft, and Subaru let that imperative guide them both, only giving back to it, languidly eager. He ran his hands down Seishirou's spine, then back up to the shoulders, pulled Seishirou closer so that he could feel the man's chest move against his, could breathe heedless words into his lover's ear, "*yes, yes.*" Seishirou appeared not to hear—was he ever truly oblivious, or was it that the words held so little importance, that "yes," "no," or inarticulate cry were all the same, irrelevant to the fulfillment of his need? No matter, no matter. It was enough to be the answer to that need, to be capable of returning blind, abandoned lust for lust, unafraid, unashamed, to read Seishirou's hunger, that restless, questing ache, in a catch of breath, a possessive curl of fingertips about his shoulder, a flicker of nearly closed eyelids, and to match it with his own longing, just as strong, the two of them giving and taking as equals. He knew he couldn't live in that shining place he'd seen, that territory where they were fused into one creature—nothing human could. But that they could meet like this, if only for a time—

Seishirou lowered his head, pressed his lips to Subaru's neck. They marked its length, a march of disorderly kisses that traveled up and then down to encamp at the hollow where Subaru's throat met his collarbone, warm breath panting onto moistened skin. Turning his head, Subaru traced his tongue along Seishirou's ear, nipped at the earlobe, moaned low, close to its whorled curve, as his body was jerked by stronger thrusts, Seishirou's movements gathering speed and force. Subaru reached up, fingers clutching into Seishirou's hair, and Seishirou raised himself a little, drove into Subaru with a few last shorter strokes, then froze, breath held, unmoving except

for a minute shuddering. His eyes were closed, his lips drawn back into something more feral than a smile, showing just a hint of teeth. Then that intensity faded, the unself-conscious animal focus that Subaru always found so enthralling, as Seishirou's face softened into an expression not as predatory but to Subaru's mind even more unforgettable, a thousand times more captivating: the almost-tenderness of release.

Seishirou let out that constricted breath, long and slow, then shifted backward. Subaru felt the wetness in and along his rear as Seishirou's shaft eased out of him, as well as a not-unexpected soreness. The twinge was small enough to be scarcely noticeable, especially in the hazy afterglow of extraordinary pleasure. In any case, he had no regrets. He unhooked his legs so that Seishirou could sink down next to him, settle at full-length against his body, stretched out and fitted to him like a great cat lying along a tree branch, some improbably amiable and contented jaguar. Seishirou's cheek made the left side of Subaru's chest its resting place, as usual, Seishirou's head lying over his heart, perhaps to enjoy the lullaby of its gradually calming rhythm, perhaps to lay claim to it and to muse upon its eventual demise.

Seishirou was Seishirou, Subaru thought, powerful and arrogant, frustrating and enchanting, and in some things just as ignorant and stubborn as a child. But sometimes he believed he was actually starting to know the man, to understand those contradictions, to grasp what was real behind the outward form.

With a smile, he turned his face against Seishirou's hair.

"I missed you too," he whispered.

Seishirou's thumb, which had been tracing lazy circles on Subaru's chest, stopped moving. It was still for a breath, then tapped once and resumed circling, more deliberately than before.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou said, the merest suggestion of a singsong whine creeping into his voice, "I'm hungry. What are we going to do about dinner?"

Subaru blinked, trying to reorient himself to the usual games. "Um, I don't know." He glanced toward the window and was surprised to see that the sky had gone to pale rosy gray and faded blue, the molten gold of the sun sunk into twilight. Still, it was winter, and the sun did set early—it wasn't *that* close to dinnertime, so he didn't need to feel guilty for not having made any plans. As he pondered their options, Seishirou's hand folded about his, playing with the fingers, distracting him. His hand was lifted, brought to Seishirou's lips; he felt their warm impress on his wrist, a lingering kiss—and then the unexpected nip of teeth. "Ow! That's not food," he told Seishirou, removing his arm. Seishirou put his chin on Subaru's chest and stared mock-piteously. Subaru sighed.

"Well, we could make something pretty quickly, even if it's only ramen," he reflected, rolling his head back to regard the ceiling. "Or we could order take-out." He hesitated, another possibility occurring to him, though not without a vague premonitory qualm. "Or...we could go out."

"Steak?" Seishirou pushed himself up on his arms with immediate exuberance. He hovered above Subaru, mismatched eyes alight. "Subaru-kun, have you ever heard of Yoshihashi? They've

gotten rave reviews for their grilled Matsuzaka beef. I've been dying to try it. What do you think?"

"M- Matsuzaka—" He'd heard of it, even though he wasn't a food connoisseur—it was famed for its melting softness and rich flavor, and for being even more expensive than the famous Kobe beef. "But—to spend that much—!" Faint recollection came to him, talk overheard among some of his more wealthy and powerful clients, and he quailed further. "And that restaurant—it's very exclusive, isn't it? You need reservations well in advance—and a suit and tie—and I don't—"

Seishirou placed his fingertip on Subaru's chin, and Subaru faltered into silence. Seishirou was smiling, his "kind," coaxing look, but Subaru could see the determination behind it. That absolutely fixed and self-assured resolve had always been there, even in the Shinjuku days, whenever Seishirou had decided upon a particular course of action, especially when it was one that was "fun" or involved food. Or, as seemed likely in this case, both.

"Don't worry, Subaru-kun," Seishirou said, gently enough, but with a disquieting note of glee. "I'll take care of everything."

"Seishirou-san...."

* * * * *

"...Seishirou-san...."

"Just a minute." Seishirou frowned at the two ends of the tie. No, broad went over narrow, and then around and up behind. It was a bit different, doing a necktie for somebody else—it was the reverse from looking at his own reflection, and his hands kept wanting to move according to habit. But now he had the wider part of the tie haggled through the loop; he pulled it to fit, snugged the knot up against the collar with tender care, then folded down the crisp yet finely woven white cotton. Running his fingertips beneath the jacket's dark lapels, he traced their paired inward slants, slowly, until he reached the topmost button. He fastened it and moved on to the second, taking the opportunity to shift in even closer, leaving nearly no space between them, his head, bent in concentration, almost touching Subaru's shoulder, his hands trailing lightly over Subaru's stomach as Subaru drew in a breath. Alas that there weren't just a few more buttons, he mused. He straightened the jacket's lie, brushed his fingers along one arm as though to remove a speck of lint, then eased back a couple of steps. He watched as Subaru half-turned, glancing at himself in the surrounding mirrors.

Off the rack though the suit might be, it fit Subaru as though painstakingly tailored to him. Fortunate, considering they didn't really have time for serious alterations. Soft yet sleekly shaped, the black Italian wool caressed his shoulders and chest, tapered in to follow his waist, then flared almost imperceptibly above slim-cut trousers; the muted silvery grey of the silk tie made a subtle contrast to the shirt. Against the fitting room's blandly neutral beige carpet, the metal and glass of mirrored walls, Subaru was a velvet darkness drawing the eye, an elegantly simple figure, all the long, lean lines of his body accentuated, with no ornament to distract from the effect. Subaru

turned back to face Seishirou, the movements of his arms graceful as he gave a minute tug to one of his cuffs; then he met Seishirou's gaze with a tentative smile, a question in his eyes as he offered himself for inspection, posed yet somehow artless.

Indeed, an ideal dress-up doll, Seishirou thought.

He smiled, nodding his approval, and stepped close once more. Standing on the raised section of floor that was used for fittings, Subaru was nearly the same height as he was, perhaps ever so slightly taller. Seishirou traced one finger along the top of Subaru's collar, then curled his hand behind Subaru's neck to draw him in for a fleeting kiss (with a brief quirk of amusement at the thought of the sales staff, who had been banished from the room at the start of things, to their bewildered dismay), a kiss that lingered as Subaru swayed against him. He ran his other hand along Subaru's arm, stroking it through the fabric. Yes, very nice.

Subaru pulled away from his mouth to whisper teasingly, "I thought you were hungry?" Seishirou was just drawing breath to reply when his stomach rumbled its own answer, faint but assertive. He sighed. Well, the dressing part had been fun, anyway, and there would be time enough for undressing later. Taking Subaru's hand, he escorted Subaru from the fitting platform, then slipped his arm around Subaru's shoulders as they walked toward the door. He opened it, and the waiting sales staff sprang to attention.

"It's perfect," he said. "We'll take it."

* * * * *

The night was pleasantly mild as they strolled up the last stretch of hill before the apartment building: windless and clear, with just enough bite in the air to remind one that it was in fact still winter, and to be a good excuse for stealing one's arm around one's companion. Not, Seishirou mused, that either of them really needed the excuse. It was late enough that the streets in this residential area were mostly deserted, and Subaru for once seemed quite oblivious to what passersby might think. He was actually humming faintly, a snatch or two of something unidentifiable, and once when he put a foot wrong and swayed against Seishirou, he caught his breath, an almost-laugh, and then stayed there, nestling even closer to Seishirou's side with a wordless murmur, his arm creeping around Seishirou's waist.

It was amazing what just a little sake could do.

Seishirou smiled. The evening had been flawless in all respects, from the obliging weather to the graciousness of the restaurant's maitre'd and waitstaff (the right names dropped had certainly smoothed the way to a table, as Seishirou had expected) to the truly exquisite food. The beef in particular—subtly seasoned and marinated and then grilled table-side on open charcoal by an immaculately white-smocked chef—had lived up to its reputation, being truly delectable, as tender as if a tiny piece of heaven had been made earthly and edible, yet with a real, satisfyingly meaty texture and full-bodied flavor, smoky and sweet. The whole meal had been five-star, but

the steak—Seishirou paused. He'd been about to reflect that the steak had been most memorable, and of the food it surely had been, but what he found lingering in his thoughts even more was the warm glow of excellence about the whole occasion. It was a confluence of many small perfections, chief among them the pleasures of observing Subaru, by turns self-conscious and serenely composed: the charming tremor of shyness on first entering the restaurant and being greeted, the reaction subdued but still perceptible, especially to one who knew him so well; Subaru's head cocked in grave consideration as he contemplated this new and subtle taste, admired that presentation; his stiff posture and fixed attention to his soup as Seishirou brought out the tired old line about their being there on a date, reproof softened by a scarcely glimpsed smile, swiftly hidden as he raised his bowl to sip from it; his gaze rapt and distracted as he watched the table chef turn their steaks in a deft flicker of implements, the grill's flames leaping, their orange light flowing over his pale skin, reflecting in eyes made dark by the room's intimate dimness, the shadows they cast wavering along Subaru's throat and the side of his face.

A light alive and dancing in those expressive eyes as they glanced toward Seishirou....

Putting aside the memory, Seishirou returned his attention to the present, and the slight form still tilted against him. "All right?" he asked. One couldn't accuse Subaru of having been intemperate, but even so the night's indulgences had probably been something of a shock to the system, considering that Subaru was the kind of person who thought packaged ramen and a glass of water made a full and satisfying meal. "We could have had the driver take us all the way."

"No, this is nice. I was falling asleep in the car." Subaru straightened, though he remained in close contact. "I feel much more awake now."

"Hmm. A long way from practicing austerities, isn't it?" Seishirou chuckled. "Like going to another world—only I'm sorry, Subaru-kun, if you end up having to do extra spiritual work because of it. After all, I know that ritual purity is a big deal for the Sumeragi clan."

"Purity," Subaru replied after a moment's pause, his voice low but distinct, "is overrated."

A snort of mingled surprise and amusement escaped Seishirou. He coughed into his hand, covering a grin. "Ah, right, and that reminds me of something I've been meaning to ask you." Leaning over, he whispered into Subaru's hair, faintly stirring its strands, "Subaru-kun, was I *really* your first?"

Beneath his arm, Subaru's shoulders twitched, tensed, the old instinct toward panic, then yielded almost at once with a scarcely audible sigh of affirmation. Seishirou's grin broadened. "Really?" he teased, relishing Subaru's minute squirm of embarrassment and tightening his embrace to keep Subaru from wriggling out of it. "What, not even a kiss? A hot date?"

"Well...there was...it wasn't a date, really...." Astonishment made Seishirou half-pause, fall subtly out of step with Subaru. Subaru pushed himself away, not upset as much as distracted, his arm slipping from around Seishirou's waist as though subconsciously he was drawing himself together, an echo of the attempt to gather his thoughts. Seishirou let him go, curious to see his expression. They had come up to the apartment building, and the yellow-white glare of its lights

fell across the sidewalk and the neat foundation plantings that lined it, pyramidal blue-green miniature spruces alternating with the slender, red-barked branches of winter-bare deciduous shrubs. Against those colors, Subaru was a shadow, a rest completing and complementing a lively music, his black coat—also new, and more suitable for their night out than the white one—drinking in the illumination. His gaze was on the pavement, but the light was unmerciful, and Seishirou could read his face clearly, even without recourse to those averted eyes. His mouth was drawn tight with a recurring grief, some old tension caught in the set of his jaw, even when he began to speak at last.

“There was this girl. It was last summer, when I went back to Kyoto.” Subaru’s hands, gloved against the cold, worked the end of his scarf out of his coat and toyed with it uneasily, but his voice was quiet, almost calm beneath the weight of memory. “I walked into the room in the Sumeragi house, and she was there, with her family—it was an omiai.” Seishirou looked at Subaru more sharply, but Subaru’s voice remained level, matter-of-fact. “Not officially, but it might as well have been. The moment I stepped into the room, I knew.

“She was so young. Only a teenager. And when she looked at me—” Subaru stopped walking, staring fixedly at the ground, lost despite himself in the recollection. Seishirou took a couple more slow steps, then paused, turning back to face him. When Subaru spoke again his voice had changed, not rising in volume but aquiver with fierce intensity, almost with violence. “I had nothing for her. *Nothing*.” His gaze slid aside, avoiding Seishirou’s more deliberately. After a moment to regain his self-control, he went on, his tone nearly even again, “I turned around and walked right out of the room.”

“Did you.”

“Yeah.” Subaru nodded, then smiled ruefully. Lifting his head, he shrugged off the remnant of tension and moved forward to rejoin Seishirou. “My grandmother and I had a terrible fight after they’d left,” he admitted, sounding abashed. “It was the worst argument I ever had with her. I was so angry. I said...some awful things.”

“Really? You, Subaru-kun? I have to say, I find that a bit hard to believe.” They were under the building’s awning then, and Seishirou reached out to open the glass door and hold it for Subaru. “I have trouble imagining you saying something so bad to anyone, let alone your grandmother. What on earth did you say?”

“Er...it was nothing. Nothing really interesting, I mean. I guess.” Subaru pulled on one end of his scarf and then the other, shuttling it back and forth around his neck. As Seishirou came up next to him after the one-person bottleneck of going through the door, he ducked Seishirou’s gaze, blushing, clearly wishing he hadn’t brought the subject up.

“That’s cruel, Subaru-kun! You can’t leave me in suspense like this. Come on, won’t you tell me?” Seishirou pushed the button to call the elevator. Beside him, Subaru hunched his chin down into the shelter of his coat. His lips moved noiselessly. “What?”

“I said that if she wanted an heir for the Sumeragi family so badly,” Subaru faltered, ducked

his head even lower, and mumbled something rushed and incomprehensible into his coat collar. Seishirou blinked.

“Pardon?” Fidgeting, Subaru repeated himself, not any more clearly, but on second hearing Seishirou was able to confirm that what he’d heard had indeed included the words “sperm bank.” He stared at Subaru for a good few seconds before the first guffaw exploded out of him. He collapsed against the wall next to the elevator, laughing helplessly.

“Seishirou-san!” His voice lifting, atremble with indignation, Subaru swatted Seishirou with the end of his scarf, a light, ineffectual blow, then shoved at Seishirou’s shoulder in frustration. “*Mou.*”

“S-sorry, Subaru-kun!” Seishirou wiped at a tearing eye. “It’s just...the thought...you....” Picturing Subaru, with that absolutely serious earnestness that came over him when he got angry, quietly suggesting to his very proper and traditional grandmother that he continue the family line by contributing to a sperm bank set Seishirou off again. He leaned his head back against the wall, his shoulders shaking with mirth.

The elevator bell chimed then, and the door slid open. Subaru marched into the elevator, spun about and put his back forcefully against the wall, his arms folded. Getting himself back under control at last, Seishirou followed Subaru, pushed the button for their floor, and then took up a position next to the onmyouji, his hands clasped meekly behind him. They waited for the door to close.

“That day was the last time I saw my grandmother,” Subaru said into the silence. His tone was quiet and level, yet held a complex sadness. “She kept leaving messages for me, asking me to visit Kyoto, but I always refused. Then I got word that she’d died.” As if to punctuate his words, the elevator door eased shut.

“And so you never got the chance to make peace with her,” Seishirou said softly. He glanced over to study Subaru’s profile, the bangs that dipped in front of Subaru’s eyes like a dark wave as Subaru lowered his head, the tremor of lashes as those eyes closed. He traced its lines with his gaze, from the rise of one high cheekbone down to the familiar, subtle curve of Subaru’s lips, pressed still in sorrow. The corner of Subaru’s mouth turned up then, a hint of an unlikely smile. Straightening, he raised his head and shifted his shoulders against the wall, as though making space for an indrawn breath.

“But as for that girl,” Subaru said, “I’m not sorry about it. Even though what I did probably hurt her, left her embarrassed and ashamed—it was better that way than for us to pretend. If we’d tried to do what our two families wanted, it would only have been that much more painful for her later, when she learned about the person I was. And that I...I couldn’t be the person she was dreaming of like that.” Opening his eyes, he turned to look at Seishirou, his head tilted, his gaze luminous with that smile—his whole being alight with the radiance Seishirou could never quite put source or reason to, as elusive and mysteriously alive as a pale flame seen through water, or through the gauzy flutter of a moth’s white wings.

“Because,” Subaru murmured, his voice soft but unfaltering, “there was only one person who was in my heart.”

Slowly Seishirou reached out, moving almost before he was fully aware of the impulse. He touched gloved fingertips to Subaru’s cheek. The actual contact was inexplicably surprising, as if some part of him had been expecting to feel—what? A cool tingle of otherworldly energy? A mirage shivering away at his touch? Subaru’s physical reality remained undeniable, if suddenly and oddly astonishing. The warmth in Subaru’s expression did not fade. Seishirou’s fingers drifted, found and followed the angle of Subaru’s jawline, so lightly he could feel only a whisper of sensation through his gloves. He ran them along the column of Subaru’s neck, following the scarf’s yielding line, pressing it aside to brush the skin. Subaru tipped his head back further, his eyes half-closing. Seishirou’s hand slipped about Subaru’s slim waist to find rest at the small of his back, drawing Subaru closer; Subaru put up his own hand, his fingers playing over the lapel of Seishirou’s coat almost absently before curling in the heavy fabric, tugging Seishirou nearer as well. Subaru’s back arched against Seishirou’s palm as Seishirou leaned forward, seeking and finding Subaru’s parted lips.

Real, indeed. He could not touch, could not taste that enigmatic quality that so fascinated him—there was only the vital, searching pressure of Subaru’s mouth moving against his own, the heat and intimacy of a shared breath, but that was very fine. Seishirou pulled Subaru right up into himself, thigh to thigh, his other hand burrowing into the nearly nonexistent space between them to grope buttons undone, to brush the coat aside and settle at last onto Subaru’s stomach, feeling through Subaru’s clothes the shiver of reaction, the lift of breath. Subaru’s mouth parted further beneath his, fully willing and amorous, an easy, active yielding, and Seishirou responded with relish, urging or perhaps being urged to greater though still tender ardor—it was hard to say which. Subaru’s hand slid up to Seishirou’s head, fingers curling into his hair, drawing him down deeper into that delicious joining.

The elevator’s bell chimed, and the door rolled open, accompanied by an unexpected gasp. Subaru’s attention shifted with a start, his hand jerking back from Seishirou’s face, and Seishirou lifted his head just enough to flick a glance toward the interruption. Mrs. Nakamura stood framed in the doorway, mah jong set tucked under her arm, apparently on her way back up to her apartment after her weekly game with her cronies. With the way her tiny, pink mouth gaped in her round face, she resembled an overly made-up fugu fish.

“Sorry!” Seishirou sang out. “*Express elevator!* No stops!” He reached over and hammered the door-close button a few times. After a moment that felt long enough for the world’s end to come and go, the door got the idea and slouched shut. Their view of Mrs. Nakamura cut off and privacy restored, they resumed their monumentally slow upward progress. Unfortunately, Subaru had gone all stiff, and not in any enjoyable way, either.

“Subaru-kun?” Seishirou attempted. Subaru’s hand crept up again, trembling, and latched onto Seishirou’s other lapel, so that his coat was being clutched in a two-handed death-grip.

Subaru's head was bowed, almost touching Seishirou; all he could see was a silken fluff of black hair. He supposed that somewhere beneath it Subaru's face was ablaze with embarrassment. Subaru's fingers tightened and his shoulders jerked so that his forehead actually brushed Seishirou's chest, as though it was a wall against which he was very, very gently beating his head. Inwardly Seishirou sighed, feeling a remarkably similar impulse, although for him frustration rather than discomfiture lay behind it. Sakura petals were too good for Mrs. Nakamura, he decided. Perhaps he'd send her the illusion that she was being sucked down into her sink's garbage disposal. Right now, though, he had to see what he could salvage of the night's formerly intimate mood. "Um, Subaru-kun—"

Subaru swayed back a step, lifting his head, and Seishirou stared. A light blush colored Subaru's cheeks, but his eyes were bright, and the corners of his mouth quirked upward. His shoulders jerked once more, rocking his whole body; he ducked his head again as a barely audible sound escaped him: a stuttery hiccup of breath.

He didn't appear to be crying. So he had to be laughing.

Seishirou blinked. Was Subaru feeling all right? Could it be he was coming down with one of his fevers and was mildly delirious, or had he just snapped from the stress of being caught kissing Seishirou in an elevator? Or perhaps the sake was having more of an effect than Seishirou'd thought. It was most likely a little of each of the latter two, he judged. Just in case, and because he could never resist hamming it up in his role as a doting lover, Seishirou slipped one hand under Subaru's bangs to feel his forehead. "Are you okay, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru pushed off from Seishirou—he tossed his head back, his green eyes sparkling. As Seishirou watched, almost mesmerized, he broke up completely with that unaccustomed but unmistakable hilarity, had to put one hand on the elevator wall to support himself, the other lifting to cover quiet gasps of laughter. The elevator dinged once more, and as the door began to roll open Subaru whirled, darting out through the still-widening gap. Seishirou started, then leaned over to put his head out of the elevator, peering after Subaru. Light-footed, Subaru scudded down the corridor at a quick-striding walk, throwing a glance back over his shoulder, a flickering look, like a stirring of leaves, barely glimpsed before they stilled. Slowly Seishirou stepped out into the hallway, the elevator closing behind him, left to go where it would. A tension like the gathering of storm clouds had begun to rise in him, electric and pleasurable, mounting like a rolling darkness seeded through with the potential for lightning—the frisson of a tender desire caught up into something more, a coiling excitement, a growing intensity of interest and hunger.

The flutter of a small bird in the shadow of the raptor's wings. The boy, beautiful prey, running before the wind on that day nine years ago, oblivious to the meshes of Seishirou's bet closing around him. With even strides, Seishirou advanced toward Subaru, who had paused in front of the apartment's door—had turned, his back to the doorframe as he watched Seishirou draw nearer, hands clasped behind himself, his eyes alert and alight with that peculiarly reckless

merriment.

Reaching Subaru, Seishirou put one hand on the wall close to Subaru's head, the crook of his arm a barrier to keep the onmyouji penned there, containing any further elusiveness. A little color still hot on otherwise pale cheeks, Subaru gazed up into Seishirou's face, that smile lingering about his lips, the intentness of his gaze suggesting that he sensed those stirring undercurrents, that they called something out in him as well. Seishirou imagined he could almost feel the tremors of Subaru's heart beating, vibrating the taut air between them like a drum. Subaru caught his breath, then spun, the door opening behind him without warning. He vanished into the blackness of the room beyond.

Seishirou started forward, then caught himself, hesitating before the threshold. His eyes narrowed. This impulse for pursuit—Subaru, he thought, was playing to it, was playing him with the lure of swift-darting flight, escaping, tempting Seishirou to reach for him. *Chase me. Catch me.* He could feel the hooks set in, steady tension deep in his gut, a catch somewhere below his breastbone as he resisted momentarily—a fiercer tug at the thought of his hands closing onto Subaru at last, the yielding of that fair, soft skin under his fingers, the taste of it in his mouth, breath and thundering pulse and the solid shape of Subaru pressed against him, the source and solace of this desire within his grasp.

No.

It's not quite...I don't think we're going to play the game that way, Subaru-kun.

Not tonight.

Seishirou pushed the door further open, reached in to flick on the light. It caught Subaru at the edge of the genkan, his second shoe about to join the first on the floor, his coat already hung up on the wall rack. He blinked, then smiled at Seishirou as he straightened, the movement and expression both slow in contrast to the deft quickness that must have brought him there. He dropped the shoe so that it landed heedlessly, at a slight angle to the other.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to use spells when you've been drinking?" Seishirou asked. At the quizzical tilt of Subaru's head, he nodded to the door as he closed it, making sure of the lock.

"You *did* give me a key." Amusement made Subaru's voice lower, more throaty, a hitch in it like a cat arching beneath a stroking touch. He held up one hand, something silver catching light between his fingers before he tossed it gently toward the coffee table. Metal clattered onto glass and slid to rest. "Besides which, I'm not drunk."

"Hmm." Seishirou turned to the wall, shrugging out of his own coat, a faint, musing smile on his face. He hung the coat next to Subaru's, exchanged shoes for house shoes, then headed for the kitchenette, deliberately not watching Subaru, only catching glimpses as Subaru shed his suit jacket, leaving it draped over the chair's arm in passing, and padded sock-footed across the living room to the stereo, his lean form a sway of controlled yet fluid grace. One hand tugged at the knot of his tie as he crouched to shuffle through CDs. Glancing away, Seishirou took off his own jacket, hanging it on the back of the wooden chair as he went into the kitchenette. He opened the

cupboard and took down two glasses. They clinked together in his hand, clash and ring of breakables being held against each other, before he set them down on the counter.

Of course Subaru hadn't used magic to unlock the door. Surely he'd have sensed such a thing. As he delved into the refrigerator to retrieve the bottle of wine that he'd been saving for an especially romantic night, Seishirou shook his head. What *had* he been thinking? It was conceivable, he supposed, that there'd been some purpose at the back of his mind—a testing of Subaru's mental state, or misdirection as to his own—but such reasoning held the queasy instability of rationalization after the fact. He didn't know. He genuinely had no idea of what had been going through his own mind, and it unsettled him, that sense of being carried by something other than his intention, as though an unseen current had lifted him from the ground while he continued to make treading motions, imagining that he was walking purposefully toward his chosen destination. He had felt something similar earlier in the day, when he'd been returning to the apartment, his augury finished—an instant of vague bewilderment, of looking at himself as though from outside and wondering why he was being swept forward, what urgency it was that quickened his steps without him even thinking about it, that rushed him up the building's stairs as though making haste for its own sake, until he'd opened his door at last and seen Subaru standing there, a darkness framed in light, a slim near-silhouette frozen in surprised recognition, one arm half-raised in invitation or warding. He'd felt the answer then like a blow, a shock of connection, a circuit completing itself in an overwhelming surge of energy: *this*. This was the unnamed motive force that had compelled him, hope and hunger for this very sight; yet even being named, it lost no increment of its power, only was translated to a new and keener intensity, the need for even greater completion. Beyond that lightning realization, there had been very little thought involved at all. There had been only the imperative to grasp and possess, to submerge himself in Subaru's eager kisses, in that lithe, straining body, in Subaru's absolute and startlingly ardent response. The memory of sex stirred like a ghost beneath his skin, an unquiet tremor at the thought of Subaru lifted up in his embrace, the two of them crushed against each other in a single vehemence, a shared ecstasy of lust—

Seishirou breathed long and deep, to the easy rhythm of wine swirling into one glass, then the other. Recorking the bottle, he put it away and took the two glasses across the living room. As he reached Subaru, Subaru rose, turning to meet him, the tray of the CD player gliding in with a faint whir. Subaru's fingers didn't brush his in taking the glass, a courteous delicacy in the gesture; Subaru's eyes found and held his instead, a far greater intimacy, their green as dark as though they'd taken in the night sky and now held it for him to gaze into, the promise of a place both enclosing and infinite, starlit by Subaru's smile. He returned that smile, a unhurried upward curve of his lips as he stepped backward into the gap between couch and coffee table. Sliding over, Seishirou sat down and set his drink on the end table, then shook his hair from his eyes with a quick flick of his head. His gaze resettled onto Subaru, like a tree's branches falling to rest after a shivering breeze. His smile had not been disturbed.

Dangerous. He had known it from the very beginning of their relationship. It was not, however, the danger he'd anticipated then, the mortal threat of combat, magical victory or loss the only choice of ways. This was the danger of the broken sky from his dream, of a slipped control that left him at the mercy of forces other than his own will. He could feel the void before him, and for the first time he knew in himself the potential to succumb to it, an inexplicable undermining of the inner structures of self-mastery. He watched Subaru as one might watch the cliff's edge, that razor-fine demarcation between the drop and the last point of firm ground underfoot, as though by pure fixity of attention he could remain unmoved between uneasiness and fascination, giving himself up to neither.

To retreat would be prudent, if unsatisfying.

To fall would still that siren pang of desire, though it might well mean his destruction.

No.

Neither option was acceptable.

Having taken a fleeting, almost distracted sip of the wine, Subaru put the glass down on the shelf beside the stereo. Bending, he cued the CD several tracks forward and pressed play. As he straightened once more, he rested one hand on either side of the top of the stereo case, bowed his head and closed his eyes, as though in contemplation.

An opening instrumental drone, and then the first thrum of strings came paired with the round, liquid resonance of hand-drums. The slow rhythm was Middle Eastern, the sound traditional—Seishirou's eyebrows lifted in spite of himself. Subaru nodded faintly, his eyes still closed, the hint of a smile touching his lips. One forefinger tapped twice against the stereo, catching part of the multithreaded beat. As the strings came in more fully, tracing a simple melody line above the percussion, Seishirou picked up his glass again, took a mouthful of wine and held it, letting its layered sweetness develop and deepen on his tongue before he swallowed. Strange but not unpleasant music—was that an oud? He had no real idea what one sounded like. He actually knew rather little about the Middle East and its traditions, just the gleanings that any reasonably educated person would acquire, especially if a practitioner—and he tensed, not quite starting, as some quirk of memory called up words he'd once read in a popular book of translated poetry, lines he'd noted with amusement and then had forgotten. Returning, they hovered in his mind like the wine's aftertaste breathing in the back of his throat, insubstantial yet mysteriously potent, the irony he'd savored before replaced by an obscure sense of threat, something lurking at the twilight edge of awareness.

The minute I heard my first love story I started looking for you, □

not knowing how blind I was. □

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere. □

They're in each other all along.

Subaru tilted his face up toward the ceiling, his shoulders shifting back, opening his chest to draw in a breath.

A single violin lifted its voice above the other instruments, a low wail of longing and enticement.

And Subaru began to dance.

It was just wrist and hand at first, a slow roll, a flaring of long, slim fingers, his other hand arching behind and above the first, then the two interweaving, apart and together, never quite touching. The shapes they made recalled to Seishirou the occult gestures of a magical working, yet they never came to rest in any pattern of power, only flowed about each other, constantly in motion, graceful as Subaru's hands always were, curving about a tea cup or a wine glass or playing over Seishirou's body, that light caress trickling along his jaw to find its way up into his hair, stroking down over his hip to settle against his thigh, or seeking him between their bodies to wake fire with each gentle, silkenly intimate touch.

Those small gestures widened into the flex and unfurl of each arm, as lyrical as the music's plaint. Subaru pivoted a little less than a quarter-turn, so his back was to Seishirou, with an unobtrusive hip-swivel that nonetheless drew Seishirou's eye. Of course, Subaru was worth looking at in any case, but this—it was rather remarkable, certainly for Subaru. Rising from the seat of those dark dress pants, Seishirou's gaze followed the immaculate white field of Subaru's shirt, from the taper of Subaru's waist up through the subtle breadth of chest and shoulders to his head, turned so that his profile remained visible to Seishirou, his eyes still closed, that tentative smile stirring at his mouth. One arm stretched out from his side, the other curving before him, as though he were some improbable Noh dancer, Subaru hesitated for a beat. He raised his head, looked back at Seishirou, and Seishirou felt a jolt of instability: a quicksilver liquid chill somewhere inside himself, a sizzle of conducted electricity, the shock of meeting that direct green gaze.

A little color touched Subaru's face. The smile that had dimmed in momentary seriousness bloomed to light again, like a candle flame finding new life after a breath of wind. He swung back to face Seishirou, sliding a step away from the stereo, his eyes closing once more as though he was raptly following some inner sensation, his arms resuming their caresses of the air, the swirl of his hips more pronounced. Their roll deepened, became an understated but sensual writhe, a slow shimmy as Subaru sank down, down, almost to his knees, his arms stretching up to twine luxuriously above his head, then rose the same way, his whole body a play of undulations, as though he was the meeting place of all the music's yearning, complex rhythms, the place where they found unity, became song.

The urge was strong, Seishirou realized, to move his own hips in echo of Subaru's, an instinctive, answering grind against the couch's leather seat—better yet, against Subaru, in the carnal dance for which this was only a promise and a tease. All the muscles of his lower body were tight, controlling it. A different tightness was in his groin, the pressure of imminent heat, and he

made sure he was breathing steadily, into the belly, keeping that tension in balance, not yet letting it overtake him. He discovered his glass still between his fingers—an annoying distraction, but after all it was something to occupy his hands. He took another long swallow of wine, and what had been honeyed on his tongue suddenly had bite, the alcohol's edge clashing on a growing inner ferment, like two swords meeting, metal on metal, keenness against keenness, its sweetness fading next to the far sweeter thought of Subaru's kisses, the shuddering and soft cries of his ravishment, the pleasure of releasing this swiftly gathering burn into his flesh. The wine slid down into Seishirou, fiery and cool at once; it seemed to raise all the contradictions he'd been feeling to a more acute pitch. He kept his face a neutral mask, intent but expressionless, as he sought equilibrium, or at least some reasonable explanation for this bizarre mood.

It was only wine. Subaru was only dancing, playing a little game of coy flirtation, of amateur if quite appealing seduction.

Then why was a casual smile, a joking quip to defuse the moment, so completely out of the question?

Why, if he felt such danger in this temptation, did he find it unthinkable to look away?

Running his thumb along the lip of the glass, Seishirou stared hard at Subaru, separated from him by the shimmering plane of the coffee table.

What was this uneasy weight inside himself, this oppressive, leaden moil of confusion?

Subaru turned full circle, then turned again, as if to display himself from every side to Seishirou's gaze, though he seemed blissfully unaware of what was smoldering behind it. The overhead light shone down on him, a warm glow drunk into the black pants, caught by the luminous white shirt, reflecting in a muted sheen of highlights on his dark hair. Revolution within revolution—the gyre of his steps, his body's lissome arch and sway, each roll of his shoulders accented by a sinuous gesture—he crossed along the far side of the table.

As he moved, he lifted the already loosened tie over his head. Putting one hand through the open loop, he tugged its noose closed about his wrist. With abrupt swiftness, he wound both hands about each other so that the silver-grey silk bound his arms, then stretched them toward Seishirou, as if in supplication. He held them there only for a couple of measures of music before drawing them back in to his chest, twined hands nestling against his cheek. His eyes springing open, he returned Seishirou's stare with one of his own, bright with barely contained vibrancy, laughter, a glimmer of provocation—and the heavy knot that had been clenching and coiling inside Seishirou tore itself apart, each strand distinct, a quivering lash of tension.

He understood, now, what he was experiencing.

Anger, that Subaru felt free to play such games with him, to use his knowledge of how to arouse Seishirou at will, so careless of the consequences—indeed, that Subaru had such knowledge in the first place.

Resistance, a stubborn reluctance to submit to desire except on his own terms.

Underlying both, the dull, chill thread of fear—that his self-command might be so

compromised that he really would forget himself; that he was feeling such an immediately compelling physical need, as though it had been months rather than mere hours since he'd had release; that fear and anger themselves had become recognizable acquaintances, turning up in him yet again—and against that denial and resentment there was an opposing tension: the ache of the storm that hadn't broken, an enlivening breath that couldn't be drawn. He wanted Subaru, wanted to close that space between them, to take all that was offered to him, no matter what the cost, and that one craving was so extravagant, so multivalent and intense, that it somehow held its own against all other impulses. Those contrary urgings locked up against each other, a flood tide running in one direction, wind and weather driving it back. Out of that turbulence there rose a glimmer of self-seeing clarity, and for an instant something in Seishirou wanted to laugh. The reaction wasn't ordinary amusement, but something more tremulous and unidentifiable.

This....

Was this what I was looking for when I made that bet?

Long practice in concealment meant that Seishirou was reasonably sure his face betrayed little of what he was thinking—but how could Subaru, looking into his eyes, not catch some sign of his inner disturbance, not sense the danger, the slow, seething potential for violence? Subaru showed no more trepidation than anyone might who was nudging up against the boundaries of his own experience and daring. There was the merest faltering at Seishirou's failure to respond, and then his shoulders lifted—an indrawn breath, a tilt of his head, that smile like sun melting through an insubstantial cloud edge. His arms lowered, reversing their spirals more slowly, the bonds loosening into lazy rings of cloth about his wrists. As he slipped one hand free, the music sped, an unexpected skitter and saw of strings, and Subaru whirled with it, sweeping his arms wide in a jolt of abandon, the gesture joyous and free. A turn, and then a second turn, the tie unfurling in Subaru's wake, a long flash of silver flying out—

With a lunge, Seishirou caught the tie's end in his fist.

Brought up short, Subaru stumbled and had to catch his balance. He glanced back, eyes wide and surprised, the tie's length running from the noose still around one wrist to Seishirou's outstretched left hand. Leaning forward from the couch, Seishirou stared at Subaru, watching for any least shiver of reaction, and as layers of thought and emotion shifted visibly behind Subaru's gaze, puzzlement becoming consideration and then a softly settling resolution, the shiver was his, as though cool fingers had stirred upward along the back of his neck. Not so unexpected, really, so then why—but after all, he thought, there'd been so much strangeness already.

He wasn't sure, even now, that Subaru would continue to do any of the things that he expected.

With careful and deliberate steps, Subaru moved toward Seishirou, around the corner of the coffee table. Wary anticipation tightened the cold steel coil inside him by another increment. Slowly he sat back against the couch, his attention never leaving Subaru as he drew in his arm, keeping the tie taut between them. If his stare made Subaru uneasy, Subaru gave no sign. Steady

and still graceful, even though he was no longer dancing, he came closer to Seishirou, until Seishirou had taken up as much of the tie as he could without acquiring a new grip. The glass was still in his right hand, he realized. Amazingly, he didn't seem to have spilled anything on the couch or on himself. He began reaching over to put the glass down on the end table, and Subaru bowed above him, touched his wrist, forestalling the gesture. Subaru's fingers rested there, light as the warmth of a subdued sunlight, as Subaru placed one knee on the couch next to Seishirou's thigh and transferred his weight to it with exquisite intention. Subaru brushed Seishirou's arm aside just enough to slip within its curve, to sink down and kneel astride Seishirou's lap. Subaru's legs closed on either side of Seishirou's, a tender clasp and slide as he positioned himself more evenly, the tie falling loosely between the two of them, a broad ribbon draping across Seishirou's body. Subaru's head was turned, his gaze averted, the bend of his neck reminiscent of a bashful swan's. Seishirou wondered if an eager, anxious pulse was drumming there, low and fast beneath the shadowy fair skin—if it echoed the rhythm that jarred inside of him, startling, destabilizing, yet invigorating.

Subaru's fingers slid over the heel of Seishirou's hand, tangled with his own fingers, and somehow came away with the glass. Lifting it, Subaru took another hummingbirdlike sip—no wine-tasting connoisseur, apparently—before leaning over to set the drink down on the table. Straightening, he gazed into Seishirou's face, his lips barely parted as though he was on the verge of speaking or catching his breath, in his eyes the hesitation, the extraordinary concern without which Subaru would not ever be Subaru. Their focus gradually shifted, dark lashes lowering to half-veil them as that acuity mellowed into something deeper, more inward: an ineluctable calm certainty, like the lapping of a nighttime tropical sea.

Subaru bent toward Seishirou, touched Seishirou's lips with his own, a grazing nuzzle so soft it hardly seemed substantial, like the savor of food from a dream, which would vanish upon waking. Yet Subaru's mouth persisted, a whole chain of evanescent, snowflake contacts, now lipping almost imperceptibly harder, now nearly drawing away, constant but from moment to moment never the same. Without rushing, Subaru explored the range of still-chaste kisses, nothing more than breath and sweet, stirring motions that coaxed Seishirou to answer, his responses equally fleeting and desultory, taking the pleasure as it came. Behind his languorous enjoyment, however, excitement began to flare as those kisses pursued each other, becoming more searching, more thorough. Subaru's mouth engaged his more fully, urging them both toward opening, melting into one another, a warm, wet, intimate slide of tongue seeking tongue—and if Subaru didn't grasp the finer points of appreciating wine, Seishirou mused distractedly, the same could not be said for him and kissing.

One hand braced on the couch back, the other brushing fingertips against Seishirou's cheek, as though needing just that tiny extra reassurance of his presence, Subaru rocked lightly on Seishirou, his body echoing the avid rhythm of those kisses. Seishirou curved his hands around Subaru's hips, felt the flex and stretch of muscle as Subaru moved. He kneaded his thumbs in

slow circles against Subaru's stomach, then dragged his hands upward—and as Subaru arched into the touch, head flung back in pure abandon, Seishirou knotted both fists in Subaru's shirt and wrenched it open. Buttons scattered, minute patterings barely audible over the music, and Subaru gasped, shivered, probably less from the air's touch than from the unexpected recklessness of the gesture.

Extravagant, indeed.

Seishirou grinned.

Pulling Subaru toward him by the shirt, Seishirou ducked his head to lap at one exposed, pale rose nipple. Already well-defined, it hardened further under the swirl of his tongue, became a pebbled nub that he took into his mouth and began to suck. Subaru made another sound, this one more of a moan. Shuddering, he swayed with the rhythmic draw of Seishirou's mouth, his legs tightening on Seishirou's, his hips reprising the roll and pitch of the dance, though seemingly with less self-consciousness, their cadence closely circumscribed and visceral, the taut pulse of need. Subaru's hand shifted to cup the back of Seishirou's head, to fan and twirl slim fingers in his hair, not guiding his motions so much as urging their continuance, their intensification. Seishirou gave him what he asked for. Panting, Subaru squirmed as Seishirou closed teeth on his nipple and twisted, tugged, careful of causing any real damage but otherwise wholly unmerciful. Releasing that vulnerable morsel at last, a moment's deceptive reprieve, Seishirou stabbed at it with his tongue, probing and raking it, then sucked long and hard, with an eager fierceness that almost surprised himself. Desire had kindled full-blown in his blood, its throb crouching tensely in the center of his body like a ravenous animal barely leashing its spring. Subaru bucked with more force, scrabbling to press as close as possible without quite crushing himself into Seishirou's face, his low-voiced whimper scaling up a ragged note, the first stirring of an erection already in evidence as it nudged Seishirou's stomach.

Enveloped in Subaru's writhing, in the fair, sleek expanse of his chest as he reared above Seishirou, in his light but heady scent, captured in the shirt's open falls, Seishirou flashed back once more onto the afternoon's encounter: that upsurge of passion, that flood tide in which drowning and rising seemed not mutually exclusive. Subaru's uninhibitedness, his own flash-fired and burgeoning heat, even their positions reminded him of that strange intensity, an extremity that was nearly like crisis. That feeling as though something was overflowing, the energy too much to contain within a single skin, and needing something *other*, needing something in Subaru, to drink him down and be replete or else to be swept away, releasing himself into *that*—

Seishirou's eyes widened as a speculation flashed to light inside his mind, became possibility and then a snap decision. The inspiration gave him focus, and its appeal was enough to take over some of his excitement, taming his agitation to a more manageable level and letting him regain his self-control. Turning his mouth from Subaru's nipple, he leaned his forehead against the other's chest, feeling the heaving movements of Subaru's body slowly ease, feeling Subaru breathe—breathing out a puff of air himself, a small, soundless chuckle striking Subaru's skin as

he thought over what he intended to do. He rocked with the last gentle remnant of Subaru's rocking—he wasn't sure quite when his body had begun to echo Subaru's motions, but it didn't really matter—then brought himself gradually to stillness. Leaning back, he ran his hand down Subaru's side, firmly enough to be not quite ticklish, let that touch trail behind Subaru's hip and over his seat to the back of his thigh. He smiled up into the loveliness of Subaru's slightly flushed, still-yearning face as he tapped two fingers against the underside of Subaru's leg.

"Up," he murmured.

He watched puzzlement creep into Subaru's expression, a wavering of hesitation, before Subaru relaxed, answered Seishirou's smile with one of his own, honey sweet with affection and a returning gleam of mischief. Subaru wriggled backward off Seishirou's lap, taking his time about it. As he stepped back onto the floor at last and straightened, Seishirou came off the couch, a fluid, lithe uncoiling right up against Subaru's body, so that he stood as near as if they were embracing, his face turned close to Subaru's hair. He traced his fingertips down Subaru's chest, just under the edge of the open shirt, and felt Subaru shiver.

"Take off your clothes."

Again, there was the merest pause before Subaru shrugged the shirt off his shoulders, let it slither down his arms. As he removed it, Seishirou obligingly took it from him, then stepped back a pace to better observe Subaru's expression. There was graveness in Subaru's face now, a concentration on something inward as he moved his hands to his belt and began to unfasten it. The shirt was soft and moon-white against Seishirou's fingers; he stroked it, then lifted it and tore the expensive fabric, one jagged rip down its length. At the sound, Subaru jerked his head up, his eyes wide. Seishirou smiled at Subaru with a tenderness that he knew belied the suggestive menace of his action.

"Do you trust me, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru blinked, the startlement going out of his eyes as he stared at Seishirou, leaving them half-lidded and dark, obscuring the thoughts beneath. Finally he gave another tiny lift of his shoulders, averting his gaze. □ "Does it matter?" he asked, and in one motion he finished undoing his pants and shoved them and his underwear together down over his hips—a stunningly abrupt vision, the pale columns of his thighs and the shadows between them, his erection flushed and rampant against the sleek black thicket of his groin, and Seishirou didn't know if the lurch inside himself was a new twinge of lust or disquiet at the slippery implications of Subaru's words. Subaru bent over, stepping out of his pants and stripping off his socks at the same time, one leg and then the other, and Seishirou watched the play of his naked body, graceful even in what should be an awkward pose.

"Well, then," Seishirou murmured.

As Subaru finished, Seishirou moved forward and motioned him back toward the chair. Stepping around the little heap of clothes for the moment, Seishirou swept Subaru's suit jacket out of the way, then gestured for him to sit. A minute or two of work involving more cloth-ripping,

and Subaru's wrists were bound to the chair's arms with the remains of the shirt—not, perhaps, an ideal material, but the bonds weren't serious restraints anyway. They were mainly to tease Subaru and to keep him from touching Seishirou at will. He didn't think Subaru could do too much harm to himself if he struggled against them. Briefly Seishirou considered securing Subaru's ankles as well, then decided against it—positioning would be challenging enough even if Subaru's legs were free. Satisfied, he stepped back and studied the picture that Subaru made, sitting very upright, the pale, curved sculpture of his slender form a stark but pleasing contrast to the chair's black and chrome geometry, like a magnolia flower sweeping upward out of a modern vase. Subaru's expression was sphinxlike, inscrutable. With an amused twitch of his lips, Seishirou scooped up Subaru's discarded clothes and made off into the bedroom.

In the other room, he dropped the clothes onto the bed, then paused, drew in a long, slow breath. Against the persisting urges of his body, he set the focus of a calming concentration—not to eradicate that desire but to find a center point, a wider one than usual, one that could encompass both physical imperative and magical will. Another breath, and he lifted his hands to unloose his tie methodically, to pick undone the buttons of his shirt. Sly satisfaction and anticipation curved his mouth into a scant, feline grin. Those feelings reflected in the quieting pool of his mind but made no ripples.

He'd never really attempted something like this before. Of course, there hadn't been much in the way of good opportunities. There were few enough practitioners with a high level of training and power and the right kind of energy; of those, fewer still were appealing enough to make him want to bother. And even if the right person had come along, there was a certain amount of opening that might conceivably take place, a glimpse of each other's true psychic essence. Being the Sakurazukamori made that a bit of a problem.

Seishirou laid his shirt and tie on the bed, then put one foot up on the mattress and began removing his socks. No, Subaru gave him an unparalleled chance to try something he'd only read about. Taoist sex magic wasn't typically part of the practice of Japanese onmyoujitsu, although he supposed it might be performed by a handful of esoteric adepts or, in bastardized form, by the occasional sexual predator with a smattering of occult knowledge. Of course, as an onmyouji one learned to regulate and balance one's own mystical energies, which naturally included the sexual, but this was more advanced. To raise and circulate such energies, as well as those of one's partner, to refine them in the crucible of inner power, and then, at the point of climax, to drink up a portion of the other's complementary essence, released by orgasm—in a way, it was a different kind of magical duel, a whole new arena in which the more powerful and skilled practitioner could claim victory and an especially sweet reward. As in any trial, there was some risk, not least that his partner might steal his energies instead, but Seishirou felt secure in the thought that Subaru had surely never done this either, and therefore would have no idea what was being attempted until it was too late. There would be no irreparable harm to Subaru—his body and soul would regenerate the lost energy in time—and if Subaru got upset, Seishirou could always pretend that it

had been an innocent magical experiment gone awry.

“After all, I only wanted to give you pleasure, Subaru-kun....”

Undoing his belt, Seishirou grinned wryly. An experiment, indeed, and one he wasn’t entirely certain would work. The Taoist manuals he’d read had specified a man and a woman; their applicability to a homosexual pairing was questionable. On the other hand, Subaru *was* rather remarkably yin for a man—yielding, passive, a dark, immersive mystery, a stillness waiting to be struck with light. And even if the ultimate aim wasn’t achieved, the experience should still be intensely pleasurable for them both.

Not to mention, Seishirou thought, an entertaining challenge for him.

Seishirou took off his pants and underwear with brisk, efficient motions and laid them out on the bed. It was more than time to get to the action. Recalling his mind to the focus from which it had somehow wandered, he breathed in deeply, drawing air all the way down to the base of his lungs, drawing energy down into the inner cauldron located at the root of his body, then letting both rise as he breathed out. He rested one hand on his groin. Between that cupping, suggestive touch and the circulation of those currents, he could feel heat ignite in him once more, a steady, controlled burn awakening in his lowest tanden. He thought of Subaru, bound like a sacrifice, an offering for a rite of pleasure, the beautiful object of his desire, and that flame uncoiled, expanded, resonating as it grew with those forces of ki and spirit that already pulsed through him, three notes creating a single harmonious chord. As he stroked his shaft, he could feel himself harden and swell, long-resisted lust finding expression at last, his throbbing pulse and that vibration of moving energy echoing and influencing each other, gaining in intensity. For a moment he closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of potency, of readiness. Then he fished the lubricant from the nightstand drawer and padded back out to the living room.

Subaru, of course, was still sitting in the chair, his back to the bedroom doorway. Silently Seishirou walked up behind him and laid the lubricant on the side table, next to the abandoned glass of wine. Subaru started but didn’t quite turn his head. Subaru’s erection had lost some of its force, Seishirou noticed, expectation quite not enough in the absence of any stimulation, but that would be readily taken care of. The music continued to play, a woman’s voice now rising over the instrumental, singing wordless notes of longing. With the remote, Seishirou turned it down until it was quieter even than a whisper, a mere suggestion of sound at the very edge of hearing. Passing behind Subaru, he crossed to the light switch and dimmed the overhead light to a muted glow. The room became filled with soft-edged shadows, everything ordinary made obscure and suffused with the unknown, the half-imagined.

Satisfied, Seishirou walked back across the room and knelt in front of Subaru. □ Subaru straightened, his chin lifting as he stared past Seishirou, his arms braced at stiff angles from his sides, wrists tensed but not fighting the bonds. Seishirou merely gazed into his face. After a moment, Subaru’s eyes shifted, found his. The two of them remained like that for several breaths, Seishirou continuing to look calmly, attentively into Subaru’s eyes, holding and strengthening

that connection. Then he smiled, winsomely warm and tender, and through the entrainment of their joined gazes he could not only see but feel the tremor deep in Subaru, the guarded facade beginning to falter—that resistance not ever wholly serious, but not entirely a game, and now Subaru was wavering, wanting to give himself up to the promise of Seishirou’s smile.

But really, Subaru-kun, for what it’s worth, it’s true.

*The perfect closeness, the physical and psychic bliss, the genuine meeting of two souls—
I’m giving it to you.*

Slowly Seishirou uncoiled, rising to his feet once more. As he leaned forward, bending close above Subaru, he watched the play of emotion in Subaru’s eyes, uncertainty gaining ascendancy as he drew nearer. Reaching out, he stirred the dark fringe of Subaru’s bangs before slipping his fingers underneath to lift them, brush them aside. He kissed Subaru’s forehead, then parted his lips to lap gently at the skin, and he felt Subaru start again at his tongue’s moist touch. Pulling back, he lifted his other hand and with a fingertip traced a character’s intricate strokes into the dampness of his own saliva. Subaru’s eyes flicked wide as he realized what Seishirou was doing—he drew in a startled breath. Completing the final stroke, Seishirou invoked the character, his voice a low, charged murmur—

“Tai.”

—and Subaru’s eyes rolled back, a flutter of lashes as they closed, as the power kindling behind them took his attention. With magical sight, Seishirou could see the unfurling of luminous spirit energy, the same soaring white beauty that infused Subaru’s shikigami, the very essence of his mind and nature shining out as his uppermost tanden was opened. The character’s brief glow vanished into that brighter radiance. Sinking down, Seishirou guided Subaru’s legs apart so that he could settle between them, their muscles relaxing into easy readiness as Subaru slipped toward the mental and physical balance of a working. Seishirou ran his hand down from Subaru’s hair, skimming Subaru’s throat, the side of his chest, until he reached the solar plexus. He breathed onto the skin there, laved it with his tongue, and marked it with a second mystical sign.

“Kan.”

The fluid force of that awakening jolted Subaru’s whole body, made him arch, toss back his head. This was the seat of vital energy, purified and empowered in Subaru by years of spiritual training that had increased his already strong innate gifts to an extraordinary level. Even contained—for while Seishirou was the one who was rousing Subaru’s tanden, Subaru remained fully conscious and volitional, and he was much too conscientious a practitioner ever to let his power slip entirely out of control—Seishirou could feel the flux of ki tingle and crackle against his skin, could taste it in the air, a tang like lightning, cloud, and seaspray. A sheeting wave of resonance shimmered and sparked along his own aura. He drew a sharp, exhilarated breath. Then, recollecting himself quickly, he moved his hand down to knead at Subaru’s belly, while his other hand curved lower to cup and fondle Subaru’s genitals. Subaru shivered, and the thrill of excitement that chased through his physical body was reflected even more visibly in his subtle

one, a ripple of energy that was echoed in Seishirou's. Seishirou bent his head, and on the smooth, taut skin between Subaru's navel and groin he placed the third sign.

"Bo."

The energy of the lowest tanden was purely sexual: a flaming pearl clutched and caressed in the dragon's claw, a bubbling, molten ore contained within the cauldron of an inner furnace. Subaru's shaft flushed with new heat against Seishirou's palm, swelling eagerly in answer to Seishirou's massaging strokes, the fire in his belly expanding to push down into its length. There was immediate reaction in Seishirou, his own erection reasserting itself, returning to the forefront of his consciousness with a fresh, feverish throbbing, an exquisite burning pulse that was partly his restless blood and partly the sear and rush of living magical current. Lifting his head, he noticed with a twitch of mild surprise that Subaru's eyes were open. They caught and held his gaze, entranced but lucid, fathomless green depths letting him sink layer by layer toward the veiled brilliance hidden at their heart. A pang ripped through him, a wrench of redoubled desire, further heightened by the sudden reminder of Subaru's physicality as Subaru leaned minutely toward him, wrists shifting against the bonds. Subaru's lips parted, his chest lifting with an in-taken breath before he murmured, his voice low and urgent, a feline stretch and moan, *"Seishirou-san...."*

Seishirou stared for a long moment. Then he blinked, ducked his head, his shoulders jerking in a silent chuckle as he set his will back to the working's purpose. Multiple emanations of energy all sought escape, according to their nature; he held them close, calmly and deliberately reaffirming his control.

As he finished regathering himself and rose to his feet, he let his hand slip from Subaru's shaft, then brush briefly across the head of his own. He glanced into Subaru's face, tilted up toward him, its beauty acute with longing and an ecstatic transport of concentration. An enigmatic half-smile seemed to hover about Subaru's lips. Seishirou imagined that his own expression was probably quite different: the kitsune's mask rather than the bodhisattva's, blandly human on the outside but with the fox laughing in the fire behind his eyes, in the taut slash of his grin.

He lifted his hand and in the center of Subaru's chest he traced one last character, the glisten of their mingled pre-cum slick on his sketching fingers, on Subaru's smooth, pale skin. Looking up from the finished sign, he found Subaru's gaze once more. Its ethereal quality had faded somewhat—Subaru held his regard more directly, matched Seishirou's smile with his own, the expression no longer vague but an intimate, knowing gleam, wise and ever so slightly wicked. Seishirou's grin sharpened in answer. Leaning close and putting his lips next to Subaru's ear, his cheek brushing Subaru's, he invoked the final sign in an exultant whisper.

"Hii."

Seishirou straightened as Subaru's heart center burst to life, sent subtle fire streaming through his body, along all its meridians. Those energy channels marked him with a tracery of

rushing light, like dragon lines carrying the power of earth over mountains, through valleys—on a much smaller scale, but proportionally no less potent. His eyes closing once more, his face stricken with bliss, Subaru arched, rolling backward as though Seishirou's hand, still on his chest, had pushed him gently, until he lay against the low, sloping back of the chair. Settling one knee on the seat, between Subaru's sprawled legs, his arm braced on the chair's back for support as he hovered over Subaru, Seishirou reached down and touched Subaru's right hand. He traced two fingers along the curve and dip of Subaru's thumb, over the fleshy heel of the hand, then up the wrist, pausing to slip them underneath the bonds and press firmly on the pulse point before continuing upward and inward, following the primary meridian that coursed along Subaru's arm to his chest. He took his time, letting Subaru feel all of that slow journey, the play of his fingers upon various pressure points, a stronger touch here, a more nuanced one there, that careful stimulation further encouraging the energy's flow, rousing it to run with even greater vigor. Subaru had begun to breathe more deeply, his stomach lifting and falling visibly as he purified and built up the power in his system, supporting Seishirou's work.

A practitioner, after all....

Seishirou followed that pulsing channel along the front of Subaru's shoulder, and as it dipped down again, finally arriving at a point just north of Subaru's heart, Subaru jerked, gasped, a shock of sensation rippling through him. □ Seishirou smiled. Brushing his fingertips idly across Subaru's nipple—a tiny sensory thrill to serve as counterpart to the extrasensory one, an additional dash of spice to make the savor even more complex—he waited for that agitation to subside, then returned to Subaru's hand. Along the underside of Subaru's middle finger and across his palm, Seishirou followed the next meridian, its course paralleling the first, until it found the heart as well. Subaru moaned, low and throaty, rolling his head against the chair back, his hips shifting as he stirred, riding that fluxing swell of energy. Then the smallest finger, its meridian running up the inside of the arm, most intimately associated with the heart of them all—Subaru shivered and writhed the whole length of that one, little panting cries escaping him toward the last, and as Seishirou touched the heart center a third time, he arched, let out a choking whimper. His legs closed on Seishirou's; he lifted one, erratically rubbing it up and down along Seishirou's thigh.

Though Seishirou was guarding himself better than before, he still could sense Subaru's inner state through its resonance with his own. Subaru's breath was carrying that heart-fire down into the lowest tanden, heating it further, a burning sexual roil, the essence of which was then borne on the meridians' circulation like smoke, giving every contact with them an intense erotic charge, even beyond the simple pleasurable tingle of moving energy. Seishirou breathed more deeply himself, relishing the undercurrent of tension, Subaru's excitement being conveyed to him and stirring his own tanden, though he was careful not to let himself get too carried away. Instead, he refocused on the attentions he was paying to Subaru, and on the prospect of pushing the onmyouji to even greater heights.

Switching to the left arm, Seishirou traced its first meridian lightly, running from Subaru's little finger over the back of his hand and up his arm to the shoulder, an activating but soothing stroke, a lull to provide some contrast before Subaru was roused anew. He kneaded a point behind Subaru's shoulder, sending warmth seeping through Subaru's back, relaxing and energizing the muscles. Subaru gave an almost inaudible sighing murmur, part pleasure, part discontent. Smirking, Seishirou skimmed his fingers back over Subaru's shoulder and down onto his chest. He flicked them across Subaru's other nipple, a feathery tickle, and Subaru squirmed, let out another inarticulate sound of complaint. Seishirou's smile broadened further. So Subaru wanted more, did he?

Reaching down, Seishirou touched Subaru's index finger, followed the fiery line along its back, over the knuckles and then up the inside of Subaru's arm. He lingered to enjoy the marvelous softness in the crook of Subaru's elbow, dabbling his fingers there as though barely swirling the surface of a pool of water. The contact was too slight to let him feel the pulse of blood, but it was more than enough to sense the strengthening current of power, fed by magically aware caresses, by desire and almost painful anticipation. From there, he pushed onward more firmly, his fingers gentle but merciless upon each pressure point, stroking and stimulating the energy relentlessly, opening every flood gate so it could run without restraint. Along Subaru's shoulder, onto the taut stretch of his throat as Subaru inclined his head back, and then, with sudden, torturous slowness, creeping up over his chin—

Seishirou's fingertips touched the curve of Subaru's lower lip at last, then slid over it to rest on the upper one. Subaru's eyes started open, his expression transfigured as that subtle fire found its culmination. He made no sound at all this time, but that silence, along with his body's rigidity and his wild, abstracted stare, cried out, as loudly as a ghost could cry to those with ears to hear it.

Intrigued and pleased by his success, Seishirou traced Subaru's mouth, intensifying the physical sensation and by connection the psychic one. He could feel the gathered energy buzzing against his fingers, a tingling, living vibrancy—how much more did Subaru feel it on the sensitive skin of his lips? Breathing harder but still showing remarkable control, Subaru hooked his leg behind Seishirou's and tugged with ineffectual insistence. He twisted against the chair, restless once more in that excitement, his lips parting under Seishirou's teasing touch as though by yielding they could entice more of it, yet more stirring of the power that was building with every deliberate breath. Fascinated, Seishirou bent nearer to Subaru. He could see the play of energy refining and transforming itself, a complex, scintillating dance beneath the skin, but more compelling by far was the utter ravishment in Subaru's face, those green eyes half-lidded in purely concentrated pleasure, Subaru's head lifting toward Seishirou in a mute plea for fulfillment—but no matter how enticing Subaru was in his ecstasies, no matter how his arousal burned higher and brighter, communicating itself to Seishirou as a dim but increasing pounding at the back of his awareness (and how high *could* Subaru go, from nothing more than this?), there was, after all, another point to the endeavor. An orgasm from Subaru now, gratifying as it might be, would spoil things.

Seishirou let his fingers slip away, with some reluctance. Subaru gasped at the loss. His tongue darted out, its tip flicking along his upper lip before vanishing. Seishirou stared at the little gleam of dampness left in its wake, the trembling, urgent promise of Subaru's mouth. As though mesmerized, he found himself lowering his head, his lips parting to taste its irresistible offer.

Contact. His mouth ignited with a lightning-strike fire, a flaring, stunning blaze that he felt all the way to the back of his skull. His scalp and shoulders crawled as though the feet of a swarm of butterflies were clutching at him; the hairs along his neck lifted. Gold light flashed across his vision as power poured from the meridian-end at his upper lip down the front of his body, through his chest, his stomach, until it hit the cauldron around his lowest tanden and overflowed, an astounding torrent flooding him with heat. *Pleasure*, yes, but strange, sense-confusing, overmastering pleasure that tried to tear him from himself—too much, too much, so that it was almost like a pain, but somehow he wanted more of it, reckless of the cost. He thrust closer to Subaru, bucking his hips half-consciously, frustrated by Subaru's position in the chair, which made it almost impossible for them to press full-length against each other while maintaining their kiss. Thwarted, he drew more fiercely on Subaru's mouth, and Subaru's lips moved against his with equal fervor, Subaru's chest lifting as the onmyouji continued to breathe deeply, even rhythmically, through their clinch. They were breathing in unison, some of the same air shared between them, passing warmed from mouth to mouth; the energies of their bodies were pulsing to the same quickening cadence, throbbing more brilliantly with every beat, growing closer to a blinding fusion—

No.

Seishirou jerked aside. Subaru started forward with another gasp and was brought up short by Seishirou's hands on his shoulders, pushing him down into the chair. Tense, yearning against Seishirou's grip, Subaru made a stuttering, strangled sound, swallowing what was probably a cry of Seishirou's name, then fell back, bereft and quivering. Peripherally, Seishirou knew that Subaru was gazing achingly up at him. For the moment, though, he avoided meeting Subaru's eyes.

Instead, he touched Subaru's hand again, finding the path of the third meridian. He could feel as well the particular energy signature of his seal on Subaru; those marks were asserting themselves under the influence of the working, rousing to pale visibility as he passed his fingers across the back of Subaru's hand. It was natural enough, now that he thought about it—he should have expected as much. In any case, he imagined it might be useful, a further aid to attuning with Subaru.

Not that he needed much more help, he noted wryly. It looked as if there wouldn't be any problems in that regard.

Wasting no more time, now that the tumult inside him had calmed somewhat, he ran his hand up the last meridian, along Subaru's arm and shoulder, a quick finishing stroke to balance the left and right sides. Then, less swiftly, he glided both hands the full length of Subaru's body, down chest and stomach, over Subaru's hips and along his legs until they arrived at Subaru's feet.

He could feel power and excitement still burning in Subaru, flickering under his hands as they traveled but growing steadier, gradually leveling out to a new equilibrium, a sustained, brilliantly shimmering peak. Kneeling on the floor, he chanced a sidelong look at Subaru. Subaru's eyes had closed once more; he lay sprawled in the chair, hips slid forward on the seat, neck arched and head rolled to one side, lips barely parted. His erection rose up against his belly, an especially strong concentration of the energies that limned his body and flowered at each tanden. The only motion was the slow writhe of his hands on the chair's arms, Seishirou's marks pulsing in a matching, measured rhythm on their backs; that and the stirring of his breath. At the sight of him, Seishirou felt a pang, a lurch almost of vertigo, as if the floor had shifted like sand. Seeing Subaru given up like this, so far in the extremity of passion now that he'd passed through urgency to the surrender beyond, so desirable, so transcendently, incomparably beautiful as he shone with magic and arousal, with spiritual purity and a carnal flame—

Enough. Shaking off his entrancement, Seishirou leaned over for the lube. When he touched himself, the shock of it seemed to run right up his spine, tightened his belly and groin, as though that alone was nearly enough to bring him to release. He concentrated on his breathing, on methodically coating every part of his erection, on closing the tube after taking a final dollop on his fingers, each act performed as attentively as if it were a ritual, keeping him balanced before that brink. There should be more, he thought almost ruefully as he smoothed the cream into Subaru, there should be some of the many playful techniques of touching, as the manuals discussed, the varied styles as artful yet evocative of the natural as ikebana. Perhaps another time—tonight he was at the edge of self-control, and it would be a shame, anyway, to waste the extraordinary sexual and magical state that Subaru had already managed to get into by letting their momentum be diverted. Even half-lying in the chair, legs sprawled wide for Seishirou, Seishirou's fingers sunk deep and moving within him, Subaru seemed self-contained, almost serene, yet it was the stillness of being overfilled, like a limpid, brimming pool that could spill its banks if disturbed by the careless touch of even a single finger.

Gently, then, Seishirou drew Subaru's hips even farther forward, bringing him right up to the end of the seat. Fortunately it was a somewhat low chair. As an afterthought, he snagged a cushion from the couch, both for the extra height and to save his knees, which were starting to complain. Fitting the head of his erection against the tender pucker of Subaru's anus, he thought fleetingly back to the books again: the nine styles of movement and posture, the six styles of penetration. His lips curled back into a grin, baring just a hint of teeth.

Perhaps not traditional, but—

In one sweep he was into Subaru, plunging deep with smooth, focused intention, and Subaru's whole body shivered, like air fanned by a tumult of wings—was transfixed in an instant, possessed before its repose could be disrupted.

The red eagle flies through the vermilion gate....

The faint ridiculousness of the image, easily as florid as any from the books, made him

chuckle inwardly, helped him keep the measure of distance that control required. Subaru was a hot, tight sheath engulfing him utterly, a living lift and fall of breath beneath his hands as they curved around Subaru's waist, a coruscation of energies burning against his senses like strong alcohol going down, sending out tendrils of searingly pleasurable fire. He held onto his center, keeping his own energies coherent and purposeful, tamed to his will. Feeling secure in that self-mastery, he drew back at last, and then began to move within Subaru: long, penetrating strokes—the inward thrust fierce as a dragon's lunge, the retreat a deliberate recoiling—followed by quicker, more shallow ones before driving himself in to the limit again. He counted out that alternation carefully, silently, the numbers important in themselves, a mystical progression, as well as being yet another aid to concentration. He breathed to that same rhythm, and was conscious of Subaru's breaths falling into synch with his; he could feel flashes of sensation surge through Subaru's body as each deep stroke stimulated the prostate, ripples of ever greater intensity bursting across Subaru's aura yet somehow never breaking into release. With each breath, Seishirou drew his own mingled energies up his spine, over the top of his head, then let them flow down his front, crown to lip to heart and on into the blast-heat of the furnace at his root, and Subaru matched him in this as well, circulating his heart-fire in perfect unison, so that power flared up through them both with each thrust of Seishirou's hips, then streamed downward between them, fire licking and curling along fire, that meeting tingling and prickling on the skin.

From Seishirou's lowest tanden, a coil of concentrated power began to rise, throbbing upward in time to those thrusts, those breaths—the same power rising in Subaru also, as if twin serpents were lifting their heads, their scales slithering flame. That power in them both touched the second tanden, merged with the vital energy that was generated there. Seishirou felt molten heat build in his stomach, pleasurable in a vaguely disquieting way; it flooded the muscles around his spine in a rush, relaxing them so that a new freeness came into his hips' movement, an effortless inevitability in their sway to meet Subaru's, in the lift of Subaru's hips to meet him. Those combined energies surged up and down between the two centers, rising and falling, repeating and repeating—and a new blaze flared to breathtaking life inside Seishirou's head as his uppermost tanden answered the others. Subaru's eyes drifted open, and as they met Seishirou's gaze, their own not quite in focus, he could see a chatoyancy in them, the flickering play of a pale light, ethereal and otherworldly, and amidst its comings and goings a subtle reflection of gold, like a candle flame mirrored in water. As he stared into them in fascination, he could feel that newly roused power inside himself start sliding downward. He could taste it in the back of his throat, sweet as honey, flowing like water, could feel it in his chest, almost cool in comparison to the heat his lower centers were throwing off, a heat that made him swelter as if it were summer, that made his skin and Subaru's sweat-slick against each other. Down and down, until it met the union of the other two in the bottommost tanden, and there all three combined, flash-fused in that conflagration, in the pumping of Seishirou's hips, faster now, counted strokes dissolving into a single imperative of in and out, in and out, deep as he could go, as if he could plunge in far enough

to reach the similar vortex of power in Subaru, to enter it and make their fires one.

Recollecting himself and his ultimate aim, he forced himself to slow once more, to rest a minute in the barely contained tensions of alchemy and desire. To his magical sight, everything around them had gone dark—nothing could be as bright as they were, mystical light running through vein and channel, pouring from their skin, radiating to form a hazy aura around them like a cloud shot through with tiny lightning trails, lazy, restless wanderings of escaping energy, cracklings of taut bliss. The circulation of their breaths continued, moving that light almost without the need for conscious intent now, stately circlings like two vast weather systems turning, touching rim to rim, where they swept against each other a silent weight of thunder gathering, a promise of rising air, the release of rain.

Seishirou began to move again, each thrust careful but emphatic. Subaru's body rocked, receiving him: a flex and ease of Subaru's stomach, a twitch of his hips, a delicious friction as his passage clasped Seishirou's shaft on every stroke. There seemed no end to the enthrallment of those sights, those sensations, the musky redolence of sex and sorcery, the yielding of the flesh that embraced him—it felt like he could possess Subaru like this forever, and yet—and yet—

He swayed forward. Clenching his teeth on a groan, he closed his eyes. Not enough, after all—not the place that he needed to get to. He was caught in those flaming coils of energy, the cycling of breath, the repeated animal motions insufficient for more than their own eventual peak and quick death—all these closed circles turning about each other, and he didn't know how to be free of them, to be free of himself. Vision flickered unexpectedly past his awareness, like the afternoon's augury but less clear, confused flashes of sight and sound and presence: the creak and groan of a tree—*the Tree?*—its crown dipping and tossing in strong winds, its roots winding deep into the earth, clutching greedily, holding fast to the soil; an endless dark ocean under night sky; a silvery mirror, cool to the touch, wondrously reflective; and through and around them all there was fire, this fire—

Let go. Sheathed to the limit in Subaru, Seishirou froze, then bent low over Subaru's body, as though that passing thought had taken with it all his strength and will to move. In that sudden and complete stillness, both physical and mental, the emptiness at the gyre's heart, he could feel his own heart beating, could feel another dim throb against his stomach: Subaru's erection, pinned there, the charge it held a faint shock as it met his own energies. Distractedly, he eased a hand between them and enfolded Subaru's shaft, rolling his fingers about it, guiding it to rub and butt against his body. Tiny bursts of ecstasy swirled through him at every touch, remote but distinct. The reactions of Subaru's energy-body, transferred to his by their proximity? Really, it seemed unimportant. For a timeless while, then, there was only that gentle, oddly engrossing exploration, Subaru's heat and pleasure encompassed in his hand.

Now. He raised his head. As Subaru's eyes opened, he met their gaze, dark once more, that dragon light drawn down into Subaru's center to join the rest of the energies simmering there. Subaru's expression was still, expectant, quiet but indescribably tender, like a hand cupped in a

warm caress against Seishirou's face. The corners of Seishirou's mouth lifted, acknowledging the smile implicit in Subaru's look, a communication more rich and intimate than any love-words. Then he straightened and began to push into Subaru again, each plunge long, confident, sliding deep without hesitation or haste, his whole being infused with perfect calm.

And amidst those firefly physical pleasures—the soar and flare of sensation as he drove into Subaru's body; the stab of intensity each time he hit the sweet spot of Subaru's prostate and felt Subaru shudder with unrestrained reaction, the resonance washing up his own spine to break like daylight inside his head, rushing out along all his limbs in a rapture of trembling; the eager pulse of Subaru's shaft beneath his hand like the pulse of his own inside Subaru, like the pulse of his stars drawn into flesh, yearning, calling—in the stillness surrounding those perceptions, he could feel the power inside himself shift, beginning to rise, rise, ascending in a single narrow column, channeled through his body slowly but with tremendous force. Hot waves pounded up his back, advancing a hand's breadth at a time; he was aware of the same waves rolling upward in Subaru, crashing to the same rhythm. *Rise. Let it rise.* Faster now as they passed the level of his heart, of their hearts, moving more smoothly, surge and surge of two tides paired in progress, each one a burning glitter like a torrent of jewels, unstoppable—terrifying on some level, but it was much too late to go back now—and he threw himself wide, letting it come, letting himself receive that power as it burst through the last gate at the back of his skull—

A sun, a white-gold sun, born of that expanding fire, unfurled through the top of his head like a ceaselessly blooming chrysanthemum, layer upon layer of petals opening. The shining took his sight, left him in a world of blinding glory, exalted, transfixed, and alone. For an instant he was lost, uncertain of where he was or what to do. With an unexpected jerk Subaru lunged upright against him, a jolt of opposite polarity as Subaru's tanden and heart came into alignment with his, a more physical collision as Subaru's face hit his nose, surprising and slightly painful. Subaru's lips fumbled across his cheek before closing on his mouth. Their soft, ardent motion gave him focus and immediacy, something to react to. Something real. Seishirou kissed back hard, eager—Subaru's mouth yielded, and as their tongues met, twining and sliding against each other, he was vaguely startled to taste not wine or sake or the staleness of a dinner that now seemed so long ago, but surpassing sweetness, a flowing liquid like nectar, faintly peach-flavored. It welled up, filling his mouth, passing between the two of them as they kissed; he swallowed some, a mingled essence so cool and light in his throat that it might have been a fantasy of drinking, the drug of some immortal spirit to make human beings have visions of another world. Subaru's tongue curled, lapping beneath his before withdrawing, and he felt the catch as Subaru gulped, quick and delicate, Subaru's body straining toward him, quivering as Subaru pushed upward against the bonds. Clarity and finality filled Seishirou, a surrender to desire and necessity, a fierce relief—a *joy*.

This was it. This was the last.

Drawing back, he thrust brusquely into Subaru, again and again, striving with each jerk of his

hips for that ultimate union. He was fighting the crystalline stillness of a rarified spiritual state as well as their awkward positioning, but the effort made each stroke a more searing accomplishment, made the pleasure all the more piercing for its price. Seishirou opened his eyes—his sight had come back, he found. Looking into Subaru's face, he watched the shudders, the tremoring of Subaru's jaw and closed eyelids, the way Subaru's head jolted with each push, each breath. The sight of those mindless, purely reactive responses excited him even through his abstracted focus, made him want to—to— His hand redoubled its motions on Subaru's shaft. Somehow—it was important—that Subaru—that Subaru *first*—and as if in answer Subaru tipped his head back, his spine straightening, stretching full length as he leaned away from Seishirou, his lips parting on a final, caught breath as he let go, as the circulation of air and fire stopped at last—

There was no preparing for such a thing. All that energy, all that pure, flowering aura, cloud and swirling water, the elusive flicker of soul, the power of a Sumeragi—and not merely any Sumeragi but *this* one, the thirteenth head of the clan, Dragon of Heaven and Seal upon the human world's fate—all that strength and strangeness and immeasurable complexity broke onto Seishirou, a flood beyond any control or encompassing. Eagerly he drew that energy and ecstasy into himself, more and more, filling himself with it as he thrust harder into Subaru, trying to drink all of it, Subaru's transcendent orgasm, his spirit, his very essence. Whether it would drown him or not didn't matter. He had to have it all. More and still more, a tide that wouldn't end, filling his groin, his belly, pushing upward through his body, throbbing with ever-increasing intensity, lifting him out of himself—he was coming too, he realized dimly, pumping his seed into Subaru in terrible spasms. *No, wait*—but he couldn't stop, he couldn't hold on, he was being taken too, himself from himself, his energy drawn out and into Subaru, even as Subaru's energy surged into him. Unbelievably, he could feel yet more power rising from his lowest tanden, pleasure expanding inside him as that center was stimulated further, as it generated more fire that burst upward through his body and was poured out into Subaru, just as that other ceaseless current was pouring into him. Power circled and grew, circled and grew—he wasn't spilling any more seed but he was still coming, relentless waves of sensation breaking through his body and brain, shattering all understanding.

He found himself staring into Subaru's eyes, those green mysteries, and somehow other eyes, unmatched white and gold, were looking back at him with faint surprise. He was being drawn in deeper; he could feel Subaru's shaft warm and damp in his hand, giving up its last hardness, Subaru's release wet and already starting to cool on his stomach, his hips still jerking with hunger, pushing him into Subaru's body, the close, so-good embrace of Subaru's flesh around him, the hot fullness that stretched him wide to accommodate its movements, the tired, languorous ache of being taken so hard for so long, the pulse of desire not yet exhausted, heart beating in synchrony with heart. Their bodies were merging into one, dissolving into the free flow of energy that wheeled through them, that was rushing faster now, without impediment, a ceaseless waterfall roar that left them deaf, blind, and still the pleasure, ah, the pleasure, growing and bursting

outward until there was nothing else, only this rising, this insane, all-engulfing flight—

Seishirou stirred. Very slowly he began to realize that he was uncomfortable in several ways: he was sweat-drenched and starting to chill, he seemed to be slumped at an awkward angle, and his knees and ankles were giving serious twinges of complaint. He pushed himself up on his elbows. He was draped over Subaru's lap—Subaru was sprawled in the living room chair, seemingly asleep or unconscious, and he was kneeling between Subaru's legs. With some effort, he uncrumpled himself, started to shake his head, and then stopped. He felt—strange, tired and oversated, warm in an inexplicable way, disquieted and at the same time far removed from that disquiet. He could remember everything that had happened, now that he thought about it, yet the essence of it was in a place he couldn't really touch. He could only recall the experience as though from a distance: extraordinary sweetness, the disturbing loss of control (frightening? yes, at couple of points it had been—he'd admit that), a release so great it was like self-annihilation, that amazing, absolutely unrivaled pleasure—

Seishirou smiled faintly, then frowned. Subaru was moving. The onmyouji turned his head, his eyes still closed, shifted one arm against its bond and flinched. Seishirou leaned over and began picking at the knots. As the cloth came loose, he saw the red, painful-looking chafe-mark on Subaru's skin. He scowled, displeased. Reaching out to the sakura—he was still near enough to trance-state that the contact came with ease—he drew a trace of power to himself, then ran one finger along Subaru's wrist. Rose-gold magic followed that track, smoothing away the soreness and leaving flawless, unblemished skin. That was better. Glancing up, Seishirou realized that Subaru's eyes were open and Subaru was watching him. Subaru smiled, and Seishirou blinked, then looked sharply aside as he undid the other bond and concentrated on touching away the small injuries there. Shaking off the last glimmer of power, Seishirou took a moment to breathe deeply and make sure that there was no other residue of their working lingering in his body or mind. All seemed clear—in fact, swept clean, as though he'd undergone some austerity or spiritual purification.

He supposed, in a way, that he had.

With a little sigh, he sagged forward onto Subaru, his head coming to rest on Subaru's stomach. It lifted and fell beneath him, the motion steady and somehow reassuring. He closed his eyes. Aside from being tired, he felt disjointed, as though he'd come back to a house where he'd lived as a child and found it smaller than he'd remembered, or having a different style of furniture, or—something. The hush between them drew out longer; he opened his mouth, hesitated and then released that breath without speaking, took another one and let it out the same way. Finally, he smiled wryly and shifted his head, his cheek nuzzling Subaru's stomach as he resettled himself almost comfortably. He curved one hand about Subaru's side, his thumb slowly stroking the skin.

“Well,” he murmured. His voice caught a little; he paused to clear his throat. “Subaru-kun.

Your grandmother certainly didn't teach you *that*."

There was silence, and he wondered abruptly if his words had upset Subaru. Considering their earlier conversation, which he'd forgotten about until that moment.... Then Subaru's stomach contracted slightly, convulsing beneath him as Subaru laughed, the sound quiet but free. After a pause, Seishirou started to chuckle as well. Then he was laughing outright, the two of them shaking with shared amusement, helpless and exhausted in each other's arms, and Seishirou gave himself up to the novelty of it, the relaxation and perfect rest.

An experiment, after all.

Chapter 16

“I’m home!”

Seishirou removed his coat, scarf, and gloves as Subaru replied, “Welcome back,” a serene counterpart to his own singsong greeting. Kicking off his shoes, Seishirou glanced at the other onmyouji, who was behind the kitchenette counter, be-aproned, slicing at something on the cutting board with methodical, slow grace, looking demure and domestic. Seishirou grinned. As he prowled up out of the genkan and around the counter’s end, he noticed that Subaru was cutting up mushrooms. Tiny bowls holding other chopped vegetables lined the cutting board’s edge, while a covered pot simmered fragrantly on the stove.

“Did you want rice noodles or—” Subaru began, looking absently around the kitchenette, and Seishirou took advantage of that distraction, swooping in for a swift peck on the cheek, then a nuzzle along Subaru’s jawline, his hands curving to rest about Subaru’s hips. “Mmm—*mmph!*” Subaru’s yielding became surprise as Seishirou swung him around, tilting his head the other way for a full-on kiss. “Seishirou-san,” he managed after a moment of not-entirely-unwilling responsiveness. He turned his face so a little huff of breath warmed Seishirou’s cheek, half almost-chuckle, half remonstrance. “I’m cooking.”

“So I see.”

“At least...let me take the pot off the stove.” Subaru’s hand was sliding up Seishirou’s body as he spoke, the words a sigh at the fait accompli. It traced across Seishirou’s stomach, that touch moving in concert with the caress Seishirou had just run down Subaru’s back, over his seat, cupping it to draw them even closer together. Seishirou spared a glance behind himself for safety’s sake as he reached to click off the range, all the concession he was willing to make to such delaying tactics. Then he rocked Subaru back the couple of steps it took to walk them both up against the refrigerator door. Bending his head, he inhaled the scent of Subaru’s hair before kissing its insubstantial featheriness, the different softness of the skin behind Subaru’s ear, the tauter length of Subaru’s neck, inclined to one side with compliant grace. His hand took a leisurely excursion up and down Subaru’s thigh, now that the appliance was doing the work of holding Subaru in place for him. He began moving against Subaru, slow and ardent, a steady, inciting rhythm to accompany his lips’ unhurried dance over Subaru’s skin, his other hand insinuating itself behind the small of Subaru’s back to tease at the apron’s strings. Subaru’s arms crept around him in answer, Subaru’s fingers twining into his hair.

“Seishirou-san,” Subaru breathed, somewhere near his ear.

“*Mmnnn.*”

“Why is your ivy in a pig pot?”

The sultry song of desire stumbled and jangled to a confused halt. Blinking, Seishirou straightened enough to meet Subaru's gaze, and he noted the sparkle in it, like stars winking and glimmering between shifting, night-darkened leaves. Subaru gestured with his chin, a tiny smile touching his lips, and Seishirou looked over to find the ceramic planter in question staring at them with huge, round eyes, its snouted face wearing an expression of perennially stupefied astonishment.

"Pig pot?" Seishirou growled, turning back toward Subaru. "I'll give you 'pig pot!'"

"Ah, no, wait, Sei—*ee!*" Subaru squealed most satisfactorily as Seishirou yanked the apron's ties apart and darted his hand beneath the cloth to strike at the ticklish spot just below Subaru's ribs. Doubling over, Subaru tried to squirm away; Seishirou wrapped an arm around him and dragged him back. He got in one more good assault, and then it was all just too enticing—Subaru's flushed face, lips parted as he gasped for breath, his body writhing helplessly against Seishirou's. Seishirou let him up, then pinned him to the refrigerator once more. As Subaru lifted his head, chest heaving, Seishirou bent to recapture his mouth, and Subaru was trying to laugh and kiss back hard at the same time, breathless and disarrayed, still alight with mischief but now with a certain urgency as well—

Pi! Pi! Pi! Pi! Pi!

"Argh!"

"Seishirou-san—no—stop—don't—" Subaru struggled, twisting aside as Seishirou went after the shrilling beeper. The apron was wadded up between them; Seishirou shoved it out of the way and tried to work his fingers into Subaru's pocket. Not easy, given the close fit of Subaru's jeans and the inconvenient angle of Subaru's hip. He pulled back to get a better hold so that he could turn Subaru around, and something smooth slipped between his fingers, polished, not plastic but—

Looking down, he saw the knife that Subaru had been using to slice vegetables, the handle of which Subaru had just pressed into his hand. Startled, he lifted his gaze. Subaru met it with a smile that was luminous, amused, and brooked not the least denial.

"Finish the mushrooms," Subaru said.

Seishirou found himself staring at Subaru's back as Subaru walked away, slipping the apron off and leaving it on the dining counter in passing. His gaze slid down along Subaru's lean form, then came to rest once more on the knife in his hand, caught by the blade's dark metal sheen. Briefly he was transfixed by the play of light on steel, by the crossed tensions of unfulfilled desire and danger, the hint of reminder in the naked blade. Then he shook his head, sighed, and moved toward the cutting board.

"You're saving the stems for soup stock, right?" Subaru, punching numbers into the phone, glanced back and nodded. Seishirou began separating mushroom parts from each other with deft, efficient slices. And perhaps if he visualized the caps as small, mushroom-shaped beepers—no, no sympathetic magic, he reminded himself. Subaru would almost certainly figure out what had

happened, and in any case he'd just get a replacement device as soon as possible. Seishirou contented himself instead with the merely psychological satisfaction of mushroom-flesh parting into perfect slivers, the quiet, rhythmic thunk of the knife blade as it met the wooden board.

"Yes, this is Subaru," Subaru was saying into the phone. Seishirou scooped up mushroom pieces, deposited them in the appropriate bowl, and picked up another cap. "Yes. Yes." Between one word and the next, Subaru's voice had dropped, becoming lower and tauter. "I understand." Looking over, Seishirou studied Subaru—still just his back, the phone clutched to his ear, his other arm wrapped around himself and his shoulders lifted minutely with tension before he breathed out, a silent, deliberate exhalation, and relaxed them. "I will. No, I will. It's all right. Yes. Goodbye." Subaru set the phone down in its cradle and stared at it.

"Not more work, Subaru-kun?" Seishirou let dismay color his voice and expression, but inwardly he'd already assumed a perfect transparency, a clarity like a cool, rising wind. *Alertness. A sense of the hunt afoot.* Subaru's green eyes glanced toward him, quick as a start, then skittered away, leaves whirled before the gale, and Seishirou wondered if Subaru suspected that he might have his own work to attend to, was thinking of potential cross-purposes, or whether it was just the normal evasiveness of a Dragon of Heaven trying to hide secrets from a Dragon of Earth. For his own part, Seishirou was quite sure from both Subaru's uneasiness and the somewhat familiar tone of his replies that the conversation had been about Seal business, and the coincidence of such a call on *this* night was too significant for there to be no connection.

Perhaps someone on the Seals' side had been practicing auguries as well.

"I have to go out," Subaru said finally. His hands stirred, empty and unquiet, then closed into helpless fists. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's too bad. Do you have to go right now?" Subaru nodded, a tight jerk of his head. "Then I'll make sure there's a nice stew waiting when you get back."

"I...might be late."

"Ah, don't worry about it—I'll hold a vigil of love for you! And if I can't keep my eyes open any longer, I'll leave dinner in the fridge. After all, it would be sad if you didn't get to taste the fruits of your own labors, right?" Subaru looked at Seishirou again, wordless, a flicker of raw emotion lighting his face, a quickly passing flame that might have been gratitude or a twinge of deep heart's pain, or perhaps some combination of both. "So anyway, Subaru-kun, don't feel guilty or think you need to hurry home just because of me." His every move casual, Seishirou leaned onto the counter, the pose of a person who wasn't going anywhere.

"Take care," he added, smiling, his gaze gentle. "Take good care of yourself. This Tokyo can be dangerous at night."

* * * * *

Standing on the unlit marquee of a boarded-up movie theater, hidden by the building's shadow but even more by the cloak of magic he'd spun around himself, Seishirou stood motionless, watching the empty train platform below. His eyes were half-lidded, a soft-focused but vigilant gaze that he could maintain indefinitely, even while his other senses ceaselessly swept his surroundings. So far there'd been no disturbance of the ether, no glimmer of magical seeking or presence—not even so much as a mundane passerby, here in this ruinous district, this fragment of the old city adrift on the fringes of a future-driven megalopolis. Despite the stillness, he was unfailing sure that this was the place, and very nearly the time, of his appointed working. He could feel it, the steady drawing-together that brought prey and hunter toward their encounter.

Having had a while to reflect, he was also reasonably certain that Subaru didn't know he had anything to do with the night's little game. If Subaru had harbored more than a nervous tremor, the habitual twitch of awareness that Seishirou was a Dragon of Earth and liable to get messily involved in such goings-on, surely he'd have set up a shikigami to keep an eye on the apartment. There had been nothing. Unless—had Subaru imagined that Seishirou might detect the spell and be alerted that Subaru was onto him? Inwardly Seishirou shrugged. He could go around in circles all night, second-guessing, but it would serve no real purpose. He was here, now, and whether Subaru suspected him of involvement or not, Subaru would have to track him down to learn the truth of it.

All along, that had been the advantage of the Dragons of Earth, Seishirou mused. They knew where and when they would strike, while the protectors of Tokyo's kekkai could only scramble to catch up with them.

After all, the best defense is a good offense.

Seishirou's lip quirked, a mere hint of a smile. His divination had indicated an auspicious fate, an inevitably successful kill, and with any luck that meant he would be finished swiftly and away, to return home while the Seals were still figuring out what had happened. He could be ready for when Subaru got back, to offer the promised late dinner, to provide sympathetic and—of course—perfectly innocent comfort.

A scarcely perceptible wavefront brushed his senses, a chill lighter than a thin cloud's shadow. His gaze flicked to the utility lines on the opposite side of the train tracks, and the pale-winged, translucent bird-form that was alighting there.

Damn.

Damn.

Somehow that frisson of spiritual presence transmuted itself inside him, become a sinking ice, cold, leaden, and slick, disquieting his stomach. He shut the sensation away. He had neither blinked nor moved; now, with immense care, he tested his concealing illusion, his mind playing across it, re-attuning it, thickening it strand by strand. The shikigami hadn't detected him, nor would it, its insentient watchfulness no match for such subtle shifts and deceptions.

But its master....

Seishirou split his perceptions, one part of his mind remaining concentrated on the train station and its surroundings, the rest of his attention expanding outward, a diffuse, swiftly widening spiral. It passed over more shikigami, left them highlighted in its wake, a pattern like the stars of a far-flung constellation, traced out upon the district's dark face. Drawing his senses back, he spun them out once more, a narrow thread flashing to seek a single, specific magical signature—his own, carved in flesh and soul, ever resonating to him—and he found Subaru then, not very near but approaching at an even clip. He could feel Subaru's pulse jump, a shiver of tension, a slight quickening of stride as though some anxiety had touched Subaru's mind. Perhaps Subaru, sensitive as he was, felt an intimation of that psychic scrutiny, or perhaps it was just a flutter of nervousness about what might lie ahead. Even at that faster pace, though, Subaru was far enough away that Seishirou should be able to complete his work without being caught in the act.

It would merely require exquisite timing.

A faint, almost subliminal stirring drew his attention, and he shifted the main part of his thought back to the train station. A tiny breeze rustled dried vines on a chain-link fence—not the motion that had alerted him, but not disassociated from it either. He concentrated his will on being imperceptible, on feeding the net of spells that would divert a glance, a magical awareness, even a passing zephyr, all so subtly that the deflection would never be perceived. Within his self-enforced stillness, he felt his blood stir, a readiness for the hunt, and he made sure to control his breathing.

After all, a wind master was never an easy opponent.

Muffled steps rang, slow and hollow, in the dark stairwell that led from the ticket machines to the platform. They quickened as they neared the top, as if anticipating the climb's end, and their owner emerged from the shadows, stepped into sickly yellow light and paused there. The young man's hair had grown out—it fell into his eyes, which lifted from the concrete at his feet to scan the platform, warily noting the dingy security cameras suspended from its roof, before turning to sweep the surrounding night. That wayward breeze stirred the hem of his long coat; one hand was in the coat's pocket, while the other hung by his side, ungloved and pale against the fabric, blunt fingers curled into a loose fist, as though clasping some unseen leash. His gaze had the quality of a thousand-yard stare, focused too wide, too far, the look of a person who knew that there was no redemption, no salvation, only the next step, and the one after that, a hard march toward an inescapable end. Any callowness there might have been about him once had been ripped away, leaving only that cruel knowledge and a bleak forward momentum. This boy who had abandoned what he'd once been sworn to guard, his relationship to his former comrades a complex tangle of betrayed and betrayer—

Or had he been the eyes of the dreaming princess all along, her spy deep in the places where her visions could no longer penetrate—and if so, had he even known it?

Caught between those two sisters, their pawn and, at least for one, their plaything, it was no wonder he wore the expression of an exile, a refugee of war. Now, though, he was going back, or trying to, and the wind that wreathed him gently seemed to indicate some personal resurgence, a renewal of the heart, despite his gloomy demeanor.

Unfortunately for you, the choices that one makes in life are not so easily left behind.

The young man glanced along the tracks, and Seishirou heard and felt the disturbance of the air: the thin, mournful warning of a train's horn, the rattling rumble of wheels. The train appeared around a corner and approached the station, scarcely slowing—an express, not making this stop. The young man's gaze dropped to the platform once more. Within his magical concealments, Seishirou gathered himself, a narrowing of attention, a scant tensing of his body. The train blasted through the station, accompanied by another howl of its horn, the wind of its passage slamming the ends of the young man's coat into an arrested, wildly fluttering flight.

Now.

With a practiced flick of his will alone, Seishirou flung a binding spell at the shikigami. The magic enfolded it, blinded it, crushed it into nonexistence. Through his seal, he felt panic leap up in Subaru, a white-cold awareness, a lurch into rapid motion. Seishirou sprang from the marquee. An arcing jump, high above the road, to light at the edge of the platform and then lunge across it, the beat of Subaru's running strides seeming almost a part of his own pulse—his target nearly turned in time, one hand lifting, a coil of wind forming around it, the young man's eyes widening as Seishirou's illusion was torn in the instant of the strike—

Seishirou's fingers drove through skin and flesh, the power that they emanated splintering the ribs between which they had passed so precisely. They plunged into the heart's muscular knot, and Seishirou felt its wet spasm, its thick warmth flowing over his wrist in the gap between coat sleeve and glove, even as its beat seized up into a sudden stillness. He saw the boy's gape-mouthed snarl of surprise fade toward blankness, the glimmer of life dying out in those staring eyes, so close that if there had been a final breath it would have touched him, standing within the half-circle of his victim's still-upraised arm, lingering to make certain of his kill.

Then he wrenched his hand free and leaped again, whipping imperceptibility back around himself. He landed on the roof of the train's last car as it hurtled by, Subaru's presence a shining flicker darting beneath him, under the elevated tracks, that light felt rather than glimpsed—then jumped once more to the top of a nearby building, where he folded himself into a chimney's shadow and went utterly still, less detectable than a hiding ghost. Only his heartbeat might have betrayed him, and he breathed in, deep and controlled, forced that rapid thunder into calmness.

"Saiki-kun!" Subaru flashed up out of the stairwell, scarcely seeming to touch the steps. "*Saiki-kun!*" The corpse had not yet begun to fall. Only as Subaru reached it did it sway backward, losing balance, and Subaru must have seen the red flower on its chest then, closer to black in the station's poor lighting. He faltered, reaching out automatically to catch that sinking form, and as it collapsed into his arms he crumpled beneath its dead weight, folding to his knees on the

concrete. He bent his head, and if he spoke the dead boy's name once more it was inaudible at this distance—if he wept, the tremors were too slight to be seen without magical farsight.

Seishirou didn't bother to call up that closer vision. Instead, he watched the small, pale huddle that was the onmyouji, the black sprawl of the corpse. The chimney pressed against his back, its metal unyielding and vaguely chill even through his coat. No fire was lit below, apparently. The blood had already begun to congeal on his hand; he could feel it cooling where it touched his skin. Subaru might conceivably attempt to track him by that trace, at least until he removed it or escaped into a full maboroshi, but at the moment Subaru seemed not inclined even to try.

Abruptly Seishirou turned and slipped away across the rooftops. There was nothing more in that place that he wanted to see.

* * * * *

It was very late, and Subaru hadn't yet come home. Seishirou had cleaned the blood from himself and his clothes, and after that he'd waited up for what seemed a more than reasonable amount of time before finally going to bed, having left a solicitous note on the light switch directing Subaru to the refrigerator and dinner. Still awake, he lay on one side, his back to the bedroom doorway as he watched the play of light through the window's blinds.

He was not entirely satisfied with the night's events.

Oh, his work had been carried out, of course—inexorable death, as was expected of him, swift and sure and quite professional, if somewhat rushed. And he had achieved his secondary, more personal goal of not allowing himself to be caught in the act by Subaru. But instead of accomplishment he felt a tense discontent, an unquiet restlessness. It had been, he thought morosely, a rather graceless kill. Oddly enough, it had been *too* quick, *too* stealthy. The Sakurazukamori was supposed to be the unknown assassin, striking without warning and then melting mysteriously into the night, an elusive, shadowy figure of dark magic and terror. What he was not supposed to be was furtive.

One might even say—*sneaky*.

Seishirou shifted underneath the covers. It did nothing to relieve this peculiar discomfort.

And why had he been so consumed by the need to cover up his presence? It wasn't as though Subaru was unaware of the kinds of things he did. After all, hadn't Subaru said it once himself, deep within Seishirou's maboroshi?

"Knowing who you are and what you do, I love you...."

Something cold and unpalatable twisted inside Seishirou, as though he'd swallowed ice, or a tiny globe of metal. Of course Subaru must suspect, if not outright know, that he'd been involved. The spell that had bound the shikigami. The mystical blow struck through the heart—even if he wasn't the only practitioner who killed in that way, Subaru had seen him do so on at least two

occasions. Presented with such evidence, even a more innocent Subaru might have blinked, although it was meager enough that he certainly would have found some naive excuse, some reason why this death couldn't possibly have had anything to do with Seishirou. As he was now, Subaru was not naive and did not make such excuses. Seishirou would be the very first person to cross his mind.

The thought that things would be all right somehow as long as Subaru hadn't actually observed him at the kill now seemed ridiculous. It was like a child covering up his eyes and insisting that he couldn't be seen. And if Subaru did confront him about it, if the usual weaving of lies didn't suffice, what then? The prospect that had consoled him in the past, the anticipation of their ultimate fight, rang hollow, a resolution that, just then, gave little satisfaction.

It's coming for us one day, Subaru-kun. It's destiny, and anyway it's the proper ending for this story of ours—onmyouji against onmyouji at the end of all things. That's the way it should be, the only way it can be for a Dragon of Heaven and a Dragon of Earth. You know it too, I'm sure.

But to have it come about because of something as senseless as this....

Really, it's pretty stupid. I'd laugh, if it weren't so anticlimactic.

Seriously, though, if I'd had any real idea—

A key turned in the apartment's front door. Seishirou stiffened, then let that tension flow out of himself, slumping a little more onto his front as he relaxed into the limpness of feigned sleep. Beneath the sheet and blanket, further concealed from view by his body, he spun a mere filament of magic into being around his fingers, a ghostly wisp that was scarcely detectable next to his own aura, a kindling that could be whirled into sudden flame, ready to strike. Eyes nearly closed, he watched as a faint glow fell across the wall and window, a trace of illumination from the hallway, let in through the opening door.

Subaru didn't turn on the lights. Senses tuned to a high alertness, Seishirou heard the whisper of paper—presumably Subaru unsticking his note from the switch—a pause, and then a stronger rustle of crumpling and the sound of something falling into the waste basket. Seishirou wondered if he should read any comment into that. Subaru's coat thumped indistinctly against the wall as it went onto the coatrack; the light waned, then winked out as Subaru closed the door. In the darkness, Seishirou shut his eyes, listening to the soft thud of one shoe followed by another, and afterward an almost noiseless scuff of sock-clad feet moving toward him.

He could feel Subaru's presence as the other drew nearer and at last stood above him, close to the bed. He could read with a hunter's instinct the weight of attention as Subaru gazed at him, was aware of the subtle energies of a living heart, the quality of indrawn breath, the personal force of a practitioner, a collection of impressions that told him precisely where Subaru was. He could picture with acute vividness the look in Subaru's eyes, their dark, serious regard, but he turned his mind from the image and concentrated instead on holding himself perfectly relaxed yet ready, poised to answer any action, any decision.

Do you know, Subaru? Or do you merely suspect? And if you know, what will you do?

Like a bird flicking itself into unpredictable flight, a explosion of wings seemingly out of nowhere, a memory came to him, and he kept control of his heartrate only with difficulty. Another bed, sunlight falling through white hospital curtains, and Hokuto's voice, calm and much quieter than usual—

Though it's well hidden, you smell of blood....

After what felt like a particularly drawn-out hour, Subaru moved, slowly, and not toward him. That unlooked-for reprieve almost made Seishirou twitch, but he managed to remain motionless. He listened to Subaru walk past the end of the bed, to the whisper of fabric drawn across skin, the jingle of the button on Subaru's jeans and the low burr of the zip. A drawer slid open, and he thought of the Sumeragis' ritual knife, tucked in among Subaru's T-shirts—but why would Subaru be getting undressed to kill him? For despite his incredulity, the evidence of his senses seemed clear; he could discern the heavy fall of denim dropping into a heap on the floor, the susurrations of thin silk being shaken out and fumbled on.

The drawer closed, and Subaru approached the bed once more. Behind Seishirou, the covers lifted; he felt a draft, a dipping of the mattress as Subaru slipped in next to him, an icy foot that brushed his calf before being withdrawn. The covers tugged minutely as Subaru drew them over himself, and then he sighed and became still, stretched out along the opposite edge of the bed with his back to Seishirou, like a reflection. Moments passed, and somewhere in that mute gap between them, Seishirou's wariness began to dissolve. It was replaced by a gradually expanding perplexity.

Slowly, as though he were drowsing, he rolled half over and looked at Subaru. In the light that seeped through the blinds, he could make out the topography of Subaru's body, lying stiffly on one side: the rolling slope from feet to torso to the deep shadow of Subaru's hair. Subaru shivered, the movement both visible and felt—shivered again and then curled in on himself, the covers tightening as he drew them closer. With some caution, Seishirou turned over the rest of the way, letting the misty thread of his spell evaporate. He reached one arm out, hesitated, and finally laid that hand on Subaru's shoulder. Subaru shuddered at the touch—Seishirou couldn't tell if it was a flinch or another of those tremors, stronger than the previous ones. Curling his fingers around Subaru's arm, he tugged lightly, felt clenched resistance, and then, improbably, a crumbling release.

Subaru shifted, turning toward him, and Seishirou pulled Subaru into his arms and the nest of heat he'd generated underneath the covers. Subaru's body against his was a shock of cold; Subaru's muscles jerked in helpless reaction. He pressed his face into Seishirou's chest, and Seishirou felt some warmth there, at least: a silent stutter of breath, and then, after a minute, a different warmth, damp, falling drop by drop to splash and spread against his skin. As he held

Subaru through that shaking, the mixed throes of thawing and grief, he stared at the far wall, just perceptible at the edge of the light.

How do you do it, Subaru-kun? How do you not break into a thousand pieces?

He stroked Subaru's hair, and Subaru's trembling eventually ceased, becoming in the end the quiet of an exhausted sleep.

* * * * *

Seishirou woke to movement, the awareness of something slipping out of his grasp—and then a lance of pain that stabbed through his temple as he opened his eyes onto a blinding brightness. Hastily he squeezed his eyes shut again, which proved not to help all that much. The bed heaved like a restless ocean, and Seishirou buried his face in his pillow with an inarticulate grumble of protest as his wits flailed, trying to achieve coherency. Subaru. Getting out of bed. Morning. A truly horrendous headache—if somebody was going to drive a pointed stick through his head, Seishirou thought, it was manifestly unfair that they should *twist* it as well. He breathed deeply of the pillow's warmth and faint fragrance, and then with an effort he found that knot of tension and coaxed it to release, soothing the clenched misery of nerves and blood vessels in his head until he could at least think.

It had to be some kind of backlash from the previous night's working, he realized. He couldn't imagine what else it might be—he hadn't felt even a hint of approaching illness the day before. But he *had* taken all the proper precautions against a magical return.

Then why...?

Subaru, he remembered, and pried his head off the pillow, cracking his eyes open to take a wary look around. The room proved not to be floodlit after all, now that his sakanagi hangover had been eased, merely filled with the diffuse light of an ordinary sunny winter morning. Seishirou frowned. Turning his head, he caught sight of Subaru, a shimmer of white just past the end of the bed, as though Subaru had paused on the way to the closet, or perhaps the bathroom. Subaru's attention was being held by something—not Seishirou, but some object just out of view.

Seishirou pushed himself up on one elbow, a dull twist of nausea uncoiling in his stomach as he moved. Subaru was staring at the plant stand, his expression transfixed. The sun coming in through the blinds marked his pajamas with a pattern of pale golden stripes. Subaru took a step forward, then another, reached out and touched a fingertip to one of the ferns, and every frond fell off the plant at once, scattering to the floor in an almost inaudible chorus of tiny, dry whispers.

With a groan, Seishirou collapsed back onto the pillow.

He regathered himself quickly, however, aware that he couldn't afford such vulnerability. He had to be ready to deal with any reaction that might come from Subaru. Turning onto his back, he took a few more deep breaths, his gaze fixed on the ceiling as he smoothed out the roils in his

body's energy system. He heard a soft rustle, a barely perceptible thump from Subaru's vicinity, but nothing more. The pain in his head diminished to a mere twinge, the nausea to an uncertain queasiness. That would have to do, at least until he could spend time and magic on a full recovery. As he sat up gingerly, he almost started—Subaru seemed to have vanished—before he looked lower and spotted Subaru kneeling on the floor. Subaru's head was bowed, the white pajamas draping him in graceful, downward-flowing lines, like snow lading the branches of a weeping pine. He was picking up the fern fronds; two were already clasped in his fingers as he reached to gather several more.

"Leave that, Subaru-kun." Seishirou hitched himself forward until he could slide his legs off the bed and put his feet down on the floor, under the trailing end of the covers. He noticed that the broad leaves of the dieffenbachia in the corner had turned yellow, that the inumaki had shed a shower of needles into its saucer and onto the shriveled foliage of the other fern below it. He wondered if the ivy in the kitchenette had been far enough away to have escaped the carnage. "I'll take care of it later."

Subaru's outstretched hand wavered, then lowered to rest on his knee. His fingers pinched tightly the stems of the two fronds that he held; their tips wavered, as though in some minute current of air. "Why?" he breathed.

"Because he was a fool who changed mistresses once too often." The vehemence in his own answer surprised Seishirou. Subaru stared at the angle where the floor met the wall, his gaze flat, endless, and opaque, the sun falling onto his hair and highlighting it with an iridescent sheen. Seishirou hesitated, then added more quietly, "Because it was just another job. It could have been any target, but he was the work that I took on."

"Because you saw no reason not to."

Subaru's stark gaze wavered—he closed his eyes, a trembling of lashes along his cheek as he tilted his head back, his profile tightening with some inexpressible suffering. For what seemed like a long time, though it was surely no more than a minute, Seishirou had no words as well. It was as though the truth in Subaru's statement hung and resonated in the air between them, and he was frozen waiting for it to resolve itself—for a rising note to shatter this glass interval, for a dying away that he could do nothing about, and all the while this stretched-taut sensation, as if he himself were the plucked string quivering—

"Subaru-kun," he said sharply, "*come here.*" And he truly didn't know if Subaru would comply, or if Subaru would just turn those darkly lustrous, accusatory eyes upon him, eyes that would tell of hatred, of a final, inescapable decision made, or simply of burnt-out indifference, an end to caring. His heart thudded dully in his chest. It leaped when Subaru moved, letting the fronds fall and then pivoting, still on his knees—it beat faster, a rush of heat, a quickening inside himself as Subaru began crawling toward the bed. Head lowered, Subaru slid his right hand out in front of the left, his shoulders rolling unevenly with the motion, dragged his knee along the floor as he reached forward. He lifted one hand and then the other, tangling his fingers in the

bedspread as he drew himself up to press his chest to Seishirou's knees, to bury his face against Seishirou's thigh.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.

Then Seishirou laughed once, an abrupt release of breath. He shifted his hand to stroke the back of Subaru's neck. He could feel tension in it, this surrender like the scant yielding of a heavy-gauge steel spring, like the muted crackle of a spell sealed beneath a ward.

A surrender, nevertheless.

"You amaze me, Subaru-kun," he murmured. "Honestly, you do. If someone were to betray me like that—" His hand had closed on Subaru's hair, and he opened it, smoothed through the rumpled strands. "I think I would have to kill that person."

"I'm not you." Subaru's voice was muffled. He ground his face against Seishirou's leg, his fists twisting into the covers. "*I'm not you.*"

Raising his eyes, Seishirou gazed across the room, peripherally noting the little heap of clothing left on the floor by the dresser—a fleeting impression. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"No," he replied at length, slowly, and wondered at his own disquiet, this sense of undercurrents, of implications not quite grasped. "No. You're not."

Drift IV

Dissolve

Music whispered in Subaru's ears, cupped against him by cushioned headphones. There was poignancy in its low discordance, an edgy aliveness that might be called beautiful, if what was raw and vital and tigerish could be beauty. His right hand drew the coiling headphone cord taut; the other traced that stretched-out spiral, one finger running slowly along its repeating curves. He lay on his back on the couch, staring up toward the ceiling, eyes half-lidded, his attention turned inward.

Seishirou leaned over the back of the couch and into view. Subaru's gaze snapped to instant focus.

"Ah, Subaru-kun." He could read that from the man's lips clearly enough, though the sound was muffled, obscured. Subaru shifted one side of the headphones away from his ear. Seishirou had on a belted white cotton robe, gaping a little open at the throat. Elbows on the couch back, forearms crossed carelessly, he hung over Subaru, his hair a black tumble across his forehead, as though gravity had stroked careless fingers through it. "I was just going to take a shower. Do you need the bathroom?"

"No."

Seishirou smiled, seemed about to say something else, then smiled more broadly and pushed himself up off the couch with the emphatic air of somebody going about his business. As he wandered out of sight, dull, heavy fingers scraped the inside of Subaru's chest, closing measure by measure into a basalt fist, a stone lodged between his ribs with no way for him to remove it, a suffocating, deadening weight. If it had only been that despair—but something fought the familiar bleak immobility, churning as though to scour it away, rising despite the burdens of sorrow, failure, and regret.

How dare he.

Subaru's fingers knotted in the loops of black cord. At least—at the very least, he told himself—Seishirou was refraining from trying to cheer him up, from jollying him toward what Seishirou regarded as "normalcy." Seishirou clearly knew that things were amiss, and just as clearly knew why—certainly, he'd *better*. But that Seishirou didn't really *understand* what Subaru was suffering, that he remained so densely oblivious to his own wrong, only concerned insofar as it jeopardized the peace between them—that Saiki Daisuke was dead, dead, and he, Subaru, had had to be the one to bring the young man's body to the Dragons of Heaven, to be a mute witness to their grief (especially Seichirou's, when the man had already lost so much), and after that to slink back to the killer's side, agonized but compelled, knowing that to do otherwise would be to throw away all that he'd already given, to crush the last wish that sustained him. He found himself

wondering, in the exhaustion of self-betrayal, in the bitterness of anger, if it was worth it after all. He was just so *tired*. He felt ready to close his eyes, to fall, to let go of the whole thing and just...just....

The singer's voice crooned in his ear of surrender, of dying.

Of killing.

Subaru clawed the headphones off and sat up quickly. Swinging his legs around, he put his feet down on the floor. He let the headphones fall onto his lap and bent forward over them, burying his face in his hands, scrubbing his fingers up into his hair before the restless motion stilled and he just sat there, hiding his eyes, breathing slow, constricted breaths. At last he sighed and slumped with the sense of a crisis passed, though its danger lingered, uncomfortably near. It was so fragile, this state of balance, his presence by Seishirou's side and the mental and emotional tightrope-walk that let it happen.

The flicker of hesitation. The words not spoken. Seishirou was aware of it too, Subaru thought with dim hope. Though Seishirou wouldn't speak of it and persisted in going on about his day, smiling and seemingly careless, there was uncertainty in the way he was behaving. Seishirou didn't know how to "fix" what he'd done; behind the easy surface, he was waiting. For what? For a better opportunity to charm Subaru out of this mood? For Subaru himself to take some action? Perhaps Seishirou didn't even know for sure; perhaps indecision was part of that tentativeness. In any case, it was unusual—Seishirou tended to be much more aggressive, always asserting his control over a situation whether he really knew what was best or not.

Distracted, Subaru pushed himself up from his huddled position. As he moved, his gaze fell on the chair to his right—he stopped and stared at it, his eyes narrowing. It was the chair where he'd waited that time, watching Seishirou while the man slept, weighing his own ability to forgive or to destroy; it was also the chair where he and Seishirou had done...some pretty incredible things. Memory put a flutter of excitement in his stomach, a flush of heat in his face. It also set anger burning in him again, low but distinct. The immediacy of his reaction was a reminder of the power Seishirou had over him, and of his susceptibility to it even when he should know better, when responsibility or simple self-preservation should take precedence. Sometimes he couldn't say if he was proud of or appalled at himself for yielding so completely, letting himself be taken to such extremities by Seishirou's games. It was terrifying to put himself into Seishirou's conscienceless hands, to let Seishirou's magic work upon his mind and soul, to let Seishirou drive his body to formerly unknown ecstasies, knowing all the while that he was a toy that could so easily be broken, and yet it felt so good, not just those physical, sexual pleasures but the freedom of letting go like that, beyond anything he'd ever dared, or imagined daring. He shouldn't want it so much, but he did. He craved it even through the dread and vague despair at the thought of being made a plaything yet again, subject to Seishirou's whims, just as for all those dark years he had loved Seishirou helplessly, even through the hate.

But that wanting didn't excuse anything Seishirou had done. It only put a sick, conflicted ache

into him, a wearying tangle of love, desire, and precariously leashed fury.

Seishirou-san. It's not that I trusted you and was betrayed. I should have known better. I did know better. It's just—I thought that I'd be able to— Subaru blew out a breath, closed his eyes as he leaned against the couch back. That blame was his, and the anguish of it struck him to the core again, making him shudder. He hadn't been quick enough, alert enough, to save the windmaster. But his was not the only failure. *It's that you won't even make the effort for my sake. No, for our sake. You want me by your side, but you can't be troubled to think about what you do, what it means.*

It's always about whatever you can get away with.

Still, it's just a game, isn't it.

Letting his eyes drift open, Subaru gazed at the far wall. In the distance, he could hear the faint shush of running water.

After a minute, he rose from the couch, setting the headphones aside. Bending, he touched a button on the remote, switching off the stereo. As he crossed the room, picking his way between the chair and end table, he felt as if he was walking on a trembling ocean, an endless distance to the horizon, an endless depth beneath his feet. If he drowned, he knew that he'd be drowning in himself, sucked down into the dark, crushing pressures below the surface, the contradictory needs that made his heart beat painfully, straining for release.

He came up to the side of the bedroom doorway. Leaning his shoulder against the wall, he could see part of the precisely made rectangle of the bed, bathed in a golden sunlight that seemed to deny the very existence of death, of ambivalent sex, of anything that had to do with consequences. Tilting his head to rest against the wall as well, he stared into that brightness. Through the shower's ceaseless murmur, louder now that he was nearer, he could hear brief snatches of humming interspersed with an occasional burst of song, the words blurred by the closed bathroom door.

Subaru lifted his hand and pressed it flat to the wall in front of his face. He glanced across his tensed, splayed fingers, then let his eyes unfocus, concentrated instead on the solidity under his palm, the tremoring of muscles as he pushed harder, harder, curling his fingers into claws, into a fist, the clench in his stomach, the ache in his locked jaw, the smothering tightness that wouldn't let him draw breath. He hit the wall, gently, because to do more would be to crumble the dikes and start the flood that maybe nothing would stop. It wasn't enough. That sunlit room floated before his eyes like another world, as though it denied his existence too, and he yearned with a fierce, ravaged misery to be exorcised, to be sent on to some other place, if he couldn't be the person who belonged to this one. He understood now why ghosts felt the need to throw things, trapped as they were in the equivocal space between realities. *Unfair. It was so unfair.* This rage, this violent longing, this vertigo as if he were on the verge of losing everything solid, becoming more and more a stranger to everything he'd been and known....

And Seishirou hadn't changed, would never change at all....

No.

A tiny lift, a glimmer like a bubble of air flashing up out of the black deep, and Subaru found that he could breathe after all. Twisted up against the wall, motionless but for the slight rise and fall of his chest, he gazed into space, replaying the scene one more time. A moment's faltering, in which he could have been tested or coaxed and wasn't. And earlier, that quiet admission of limit, of difference, perhaps of incomprehension: *No. You're not.* There were other threads as well, gossamer, maybe imaginary in whole or in part, but if he could trust to their pattern, that Seishirou for once was unsure—

Subaru eased back a step, swaying from the wall. He left just his right hand in contact with it, fingers trailing as he drifted toward the doorway. On the threshold he paused and looked at the bathroom door for a long time, listened to the splash of water, Seishirou's voice silent, at least for now.

You....

The thought of the man drew him on then as the new moon draws the sea, a tide creeping forward with inexorable, cat-quiet steps, lapping up and up onto the strand, prowling nearer to a high-water mark. Another crush of emotions was gathering: pain and anger, doubt and coalescing intention, night-dark ice and a strange, growing eagerness barely held in balance. Touching the bathroom door at last, he traced the white-painted wood with his fingertips, his other hand curving half-consciously into a loose fist at his side.

Seishirou-san. I wonder.

The doorknob was cool as his fingers settled around it, as it nestled against his palm.

What would you do now, if I was the one who....

* * * * *

Seishirou ran his fingers through his hair a couple of times, making sure all the excess conditioner was rinsed out of it, then slicked them over the top of his head. Hands clasped behind his neck, he stretched, arching slightly, enjoying the water's hot, pummeling massage against his back. A good soak in a bath was delightful too, of course, but there was something relaxing yet invigorating about a shower. Japanese or not, he almost thought he might prefer it. Letting his hands slide over his shoulders and down the planes of his chest, he turned to let the water play across his front once more, his head tilted back out of the spray, his eyes closed in contentment. Yes, just a little longer....

The click was soft enough that it could have been anything or nothing—perhaps just imagination, his ears playing tricks on him, a random sound born out of the rushing rhythms of the water. It caught his attention, though, and as he listened more closely he heard an answering thunk, scarcely louder. Together those two sounds confirmed each other, making definite what he'd thought he'd heard.

It had been the bathroom door opening, and then closing.

Seishirou frowned. There was only one person it could reasonably be, but—"Subaru-kun?" he wondered out loud. There was no reply, and his vague disquiet became a more distinct unease. Subaru's mood had been dark since the fiasco with Seishirou's last job, and although that brooding withdrawal was nothing especially new, Seishirou found himself unsettled. Having Subaru moping about the apartment, racked with sadness and guilt over the young windmaster's death, was unpleasant but not insurmountable, given enough time and careful affection; however in this case Subaru also had real reasons to be upset with Seishirou, and for all his apparent quiescence that core of anger surely had to remain. It made for an uncomfortable state of affairs, to say the least. Inwardly Seishirou cursed that boy for alerting the Seals to his plan to return to them—how else would they have known to call in Subaru?—and Kanoe too for coming around with that supposedly simple and troublefree job. Instead it had become a huge complication. Now he was stuck with the aftermath: a Subaru who probably hated him all over again, who blamed Seishirou even more than he blamed himself.

But was Subaru really angry enough, tormented enough to attack him in the shower?

Subaru's presence was unmistakable, lurking somewhere to one side of the shower stall. There was no intimation of magic. Leaning over, Seishirou slid the frosted glass door open just enough to look out. Subaru was propping up the wall next to the shower, hands tucked behind his back. He turned his head ever so slightly, inclining his body forward as he gave Seishirou a sidelong glance. His expression was unforthcoming, his gaze opaque. It took Seishirou a beat to process the sight, and then he smiled, a faint upward twitch of his lips. He wasn't quite sure how he should be responding. Normally Subaru was painfully shy about sharing the bathroom—Subaru's mood *was* strange. Should he be coming across as solicitous? Hopeful? Just a little suggestive? Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to convey all three.

"Ah. Did you need something—"

Pivoting toward Seishirou, Subaru slid away from the wall. He extended one arm, his hand coming to rest on Seishirou's shoulder, shifting Seishirou backward as he eased in through the door's narrow gap. The shower's spray, needling past Seishirou, began to spot Subaru's beige long-sleeved T-shirt, a rapidly thickening pointillism of dots creeping over his arms, his shoulders and sides; it stippled along the legs of his jeans as well, their hems catching splashback from the shower floor and turning dark against the tops of his pale, graceful bare feet.

Reaching behind himself, Subaru slid the glass door shut. Seishirou looked down onto Subaru's bowed head and felt a surge of contradictory impulses—incredulity, wariness, the fascination and keen interest of being faced with the truly unusual—but primary seemed to be lasciviousness. Subaru's incongruous presence in the shower made his groin tighten, his stomach tense, a darting flutter like a kite looping about in an unpredictable wind. Perhaps the strangeness and the lingering potential for danger added spice to that desire; certainly the urge was immediate and compelling. Briefly he wondered if it might be skewing his judgment—could he

really be sure that this wasn't some ruse, the implication of seduction meant to catch him off-guard and vulnerable? Yet it seemed unlikely. Subaru had never cared for pretense, and he'd made that mistake before, attributing his own inclinations to Subaru. If Subaru hadn't tried to kill him outright by now, or at least declared them mortal enemies again, he probably was safe from retribution. In any case, as long as he remained cautious, aware of the risks...Seishirou drew in a relishing breath. "Well," he murmured, his voice husky with intimacy, "Subaru-kun—"

Subaru's head came up, and Seishirou was struck silent by the unexpected intensity of his gaze. The veiled flatness of moments before was gone; those green eyes were hot and concentrated, as if a fire had consumed their deadness until all that was left was this gemlike burning. There was strain in the tautness of Subaru's mouth, firmed into a severe line, in the arch of his throat, his head tipped back to look up at Seishirou, a steely tension in his body that belied the lightness of his touch. Stray water drops spangled his hair as he stared into Seishirou's eyes. That gaze was breathtaking—there was no other word for the shock of it, like some intangible yet stunning blow. Then Seishirou found his breath taken in a quite different manner as Subaru swayed forward, one hand curling behind Seishirou's head to drag him down for a kiss.

No ethereal play of mouth on mouth, this—it was forceful, insistent, demanding. Subaru's lips parted on Seishirou's, impelling his to open as well, Subaru's tongue taking advantage to delve deeply, stroking and possessing. Surprised, Seishirou nevertheless responded with passion, matching thrust with riposte—and was doubly surprised when Subaru disengaged and then *bit* him, quick and sharp, not a savaging but not a teasing lip-nibble either. Instinctively Seishirou jerked against Subaru's hand; it remained cupped behind his head, holding him firmly, though not so much so that he couldn't break free if he made a real effort. Just as quickly, Subaru was kissing him again, that brief violence past but the warning in it plain. Subaru's mouth drew on his more calmly though still with an unwonted authority, an air of focused resolve. Subaru went up onto his toes, his body arching against Seishirou as his lips moved on Seishirou's mouth, a tingling crush of pleasure, a twinge of discomfort where he'd bitten down before.

At last he released Seishirou. Sinking down and back a half-step, he regarded Seishirou with an unwavering, assessing look. Seishirou returned it guardedly. Arriving at some point of satisfaction or decision, Subaru raised one hand, placed it on Seishirou's sternum, the motion deliberate and smooth, and gave a carefully measured push. Seishirou stepped backward and felt the shower's main force striking him at shoulder-level, the water flowing around his neck to trail in broad rivulets over his front and along his arms, spattering like intermittent rain against his scalp. Subaru studied him another moment, those eyes lowering to survey his body almost gravely. The merest hint of color touched Subaru's face. Then Subaru once more closed the gap between them. He set his fingertips on Seishirou's shoulder, each contact delicate and distinct, as if searching out notes on a flute. Stretching upward, he leaned into Seishirou, and Seishirou felt Subaru's tongue lap along the base of his throat before Subaru's mouth closed there, suckling as if to drink him like the water that coursed between and over them both, that riffled about Subaru's

lips and across the skin they played over, its flow becoming part of that kiss.

Seishirou stared at the white-tiled wall beyond Subaru's head. It was a dance, he realized, every move of Subaru's choreographed precisely to communicate what he should do or not do to fulfill his part. That little push, for instance—he hadn't needed to rock back with it, its force had been negligible and even if it hadn't been he could have resisted, but to yield was what had been called for in the moment. It was that or break the pattern, refuse to follow or else turn it back onto Subaru—which last he frankly was finding rather tempting. The situation disturbed him, made him restless, but at the same time he was immensely curious about Subaru's intentions. As well, he had the sense that Subaru was close to some dangerous inner edge; perhaps this was Subaru's way of working out an arcane emotional equation, a calculus of anger, desire, and love that, resolved, would keep him from falling. Perhaps Seishirou's own responses would tell heavily in the result. How could he know? And it was already his doing, the stupid choice that had brought them to this pass in the first place....

Seishirou's stomach contracted, and not just with the desire being stirred by Subaru's prolonged, methodically devouring kiss. Teeth pinching his skin, then a relentless suction—that was going to leave a mark. Subaru rocked up into him, rubbing full-length against Seishirou as he continued that ardent yet controlled assault. Turning his head, Seishirou arched his neck, spray dampening the side of his face—then flinched, hissed through his teeth, Subaru's increasingly wet jeans in less than enjoyable contact with a certain portion of his anatomy. "*Subaru-kun—*"

Subaru shifted back, an immediate relief, followed by new, more pleasing sensation as he began alternating slow kisses and languid, curving licks across Seishirou's chest. Subaru's hand glided the length of Seishirou's arm, obscurely ticklish as it skimmed the inside of elbow and forearm. Catching Seishirou's wrist, Subaru lifted his hand and with gentle firmness placed it on the shower door's rail. Almost absently Seishirou closed his fingers around it. Bending, Subaru kissed down that now-exposed side, more of those thorough, lingering kisses, his other hand tracing a parallel descent, caressing Seishirou's opposite side. Subaru's fingers and thumb played over the curve of his pectorals, stroked along his waist to his hip. They cupped there as Subaru nipped lightly on the other side—a shock of teeth close to the bone, followed by the absolute, melting tenderness of yet another kiss—then traveled upward once more, never losing contact with his skin.

Those fingertips trailed upstream through the shallow-running water that poured over Seishirou. They followed his throat, leaving those rivulets behind momentarily as they explored the lines of his jaw and chin, then slipped back under his ear, brushing its lobe in passing, to settle behind his neck, in the heart of the shower's spray. Subaru had straightened partway—his mouth closed onto one of Seishirou's nipples, a startling tug and scrape of teeth followed by a warm, all-enfolding suckling, and a thin bolt of white-cold pleasure flickered through Seishirou, mildly surprising him. It wasn't usually one of his more erogenous areas. Perhaps the oddness of all this had something to do with it: his uncertainty paired with the experience of Subaru's mouth and

hands journeying at will over his body, erotic and at the same time disquieting, raising every sense to a keener pitch. A corner of his mind still groped after answers, but it had faded into the background, no more than a distant note of warning and alertness. Somehow it was better to wait and see, to let Subaru's lovemaking play on that unknowing as upon his body, awakening this discomfiting mix of pleasure and doubt, making him *want* without understanding what exactly he wanted.

Subaru's fingers were strumming through the fine hairs on his neck, a light rake of short nails, over and over. As Subaru's mouth kept up its seemingly insatiable nursing, Subaru's other hand found its way between their bodies until it cupped Seishirou's groin at last, and his half-awakened interest finally coalesced into full arousal. Distantly Seishirou noticed that his murky, vaguely agitated state of mind didn't seem to be inconveniencing that part of himself. Correct or not, it apparently had its priorities in order.

Drawing in a heavy breath of sweltery, steamy air, he glanced at the top of Subaru's head, the black hair stuck down in spikes, mostly wet now. As he watched, almost entranced, Subaru sank lower, relinquishing his nipple, Subaru's fingers slipping from behind his neck. Reaching the level of Seishirou's navel, Subaru ran his tongue around its circumference, spiraling inward until he was licking into its shallow depths, his hand meanwhile continuing to work steadily on Seishirou's shaft. The second hand joined the first, one fist wrapping around the head and sliding down toward the base, the other following right after, a ceaseless succession of strokes as though he was being drawn deeper and deeper, an endless penetration, with occasionally a gently corkscrewing twist for variety. Sensation pulsed and throbbed through him: the beat of his blood, a straining peak each time his head was driven through the ring of Subaru's fingers, a delicious glide as they moved along his shaft, barely clearing the way for the next sweet height. Seishirou's hips rocked ever so slightly, riding that rhythm, the same as the rhythm of Subaru's tongue flicking in and out of his navel; he was just conscious of his own motion and kept it restrained, enough to admit appreciation without disturbing Subaru or inspiring further corrections. He certainly didn't want Subaru to stop.

Subaru's hands slowed eventually and did halt, one remaining closed about the base of Seishirou's shaft, drawing the skin tight. Before Seishirou really had time to register his disappointment, let alone decide what to do about it, Subaru had settled all the way to his knees on the shower floor, was bringing his mouth close to Seishirou's penis—a flutter of lips about the head, stirring and tugging the foreskin delicately, then Subaru's tongue playing around its rim, and Seishirou exhaled sharply, his mind and body fireworking with those new, subtly varied sensations. Subaru's free hand toyed with his balls, drawing on them lightly, rolling them up against the underside of his shaft. Despite that pleasurable distraction, Seishirou was immediately and intensely aware of the parting, the yielding, as Subaru's mouth opened wider against him, began to take in his erection, letting it slide over Subaru's tongue, wet on wet. The warmth of Subaru's breath, the squirm of his tongue along the underside of Seishirou's shaft, the cadence of

Subaru's mouth sliding down on him, then up once more, slow at first and then more insistent, compelling—no teeth now, at least, though there was still something unrelenting in Subaru's attentions, something focused and uncompromising. The inexplicableness of what Subaru was doing struck Seishirou again, a remote glimmer of bewilderment, but that Subaru's actions didn't follow, made no earthly sense at all, didn't diminish the physical ecstasies they roused in him. That hot, living engulfment, moving on him, sucking on him—a low sound escaped him, a murmuring groan of encouragement. He canted his hips, shifted his hand from the door rail to the top of the shower stall, bracing himself more firmly, the shower pounding away at his back like a summer downpour, the air increasingly humid and breathless.

Subaru's free hand had shifted back, behind his scrotum, was stroking there as Subaru's mouth continued to work on him. Light fingers grazed his anus, circled over its pucker, a gentle, stirring massage. One fingertip probed the opening—Seishirou tensed, then made a snap decision through the haze of lust and doubt that was threatening to cloud his brain and deliberately relaxed. That finger eased into him carefully, little by little: in, and out, and then in again, just a fraction deeper each time. Even without lubricant, that one finger, slender as Subaru's were, was all right. More than all right. Seishirou tried to concentrate both on its searching, stroking penetration and on Subaru's attentions to his penis, which were back to licking and tongue-teasing now, and even so the jolt when Subaru found and focused on the prostate took him by surprise. Not the first time for him, of course, but—*oh*. He felt it all down his legs, in the back of his knees, a wave of tenseness and trembling, and all up his spine and over his scalp, this thin sheet lightning of pleasure. Quickly lifting his other hand, he pressed it flat against the tiles, held on hard to the shower stall's top, his balance momentarily uncertain.

Subaru began to knead that spot with a tender mercilessness and at the same time took Seishirou fully into his mouth once more, began a steadily cascading rhythm, a gathering rush toward climactic intensity. Seishirou could feel it growing inside him, fed by ever-rising waves of sensation as Subaru stimulated his prostate, drew him deeper into the enclosure of Subaru's mouth, these storm swells surging, battering toward release, as ceaseless as the water rushing over their bodies. He already was feeling a certain almost lightheaded relief—it seemed, after all, that his pleasure was the end, and not some disturbing reversal—but still those questions persisted. Wasn't Subaru...angry with him? *Shouldn't* Subaru be? He was almost to the brink, so fast—he could feel his scrotum tighten, his orgasm gathering like a shout—and as yet another pulse of ecstasy burst through his entire being, stirred by the motions of Subaru's finger, a tide that took him even more utterly than before, as though it might pitch him right out of himself, he felt his body convulse, an inward flash of brilliance like sunlight on endless rippling water.

Subaru-kun...what is this game?

And then that sun itself, a white-hot star, exploded into life, its flares racing outward, fanning upward, erupting full-force into his brain. All thought vanished behind a roaring static of *pleasure, pleasure, pleasure*. He jerked with it, stiffening as that release spasmed through him,

dimly aware of his seed pumping out into Subaru's mouth and being swallowed down, a final exquisite completion.

As that thunderous crack of bliss began to ease, fading into diminishing reverberations, Seishirou let out a thin, gusty breath. He found that he was staring at the joining of wall and ceiling, half-veiled by the thickening cloud of steam that filled the air. The skin all over his body felt hypersensitized, as though the shower's constant caresses had awakened nerve endings he hadn't known he had. Subaru's mouth still moved slowly on his shaft, a continuing afterplay almost too intense to bear in this state of overstimulation, but it felt so good, too good to stop, a perfect decrescendo.

Yet somewhere inside of him, in a place untouched by satisfaction, a tiny hollowness remained.

A void of not understanding.

Of knowing that he didn't.

The dim intuition of what, for another person, might or ought to be....

Closing his eyes, Seishirou leaned back, tilting his head into the shower's stream. The water coursed across his eyelids, poured down his cheeks, a hot, incessant flood over his face.

* * * * *

Seishirou-san....

He wasn't sure when or how he had released his lover's sex. The heat and the weight of the sodden air dazed him, the ceaseless drumming pulse of the shower, the throb of his own pulse in his throat, in his groin, the breathless ache of pressures compounded rather than released. He felt scoured, stripped down to raw translucency, as if he'd just finished a waterfall purification, but not cleansed.

Why?

His one hand still curved around the back of Seishirou's leg; he stared at the other, splayed against the tile floor as he leaned on it, tiny droplets springing up about its fingers like sparks, water hitting water. He could feel his hair dripping as it hung about his face, could feel large patches of his T-shirt and jeans clinging with wetness, even though he'd been blocked from most of the shower's direct stream by Seishirou's body.

Seishirou. The fog that filled the shower seemed to fill his head as well, but through it there were glimpses, confused memories of daring, of transgression—to touch like this, to kiss like that, his heart pounding so that it was a wonder he could even breathe, let alone keep his hands steady and seemingly assured. There were flickers of more, images laden with hungers that made the tightness between his legs twinge even more piercingly: the thought of Seishirou turned to face the wall, hands on the tile, while his own slid slowly down the man's back to the hips, water slicking them both as he pressed near, skin to skin—

Even in imagination, he faltered there. The door closed, the mist condensed further, and he could not get past whatever it was in him that shrank from that crossing. He could not fathom what such a world would be like, or how the Subaru who lived there would be. His throat tightening, he bowed beneath the water, beneath Seishirou's presence, still towering above him as he knelt there on the shower floor, a promise of consequences yet to be faced, and more than that beneath his own absolute futility, a too-fragile flower crumpled by a summer storm.

After all, what had he even been trying to achieve?

He sensed the shift of weight as Seishirou began to move, to kneel down also, and he closed his eyes. Whatever he'd hoped to do or become, he'd failed; now the response was coming, and he could already guess what it would be like. The consummate player of games, Seishirou would turn all his efforts back upon him, like a Go master who let his opponent take a broad swathe of territory only to reclaim it with a single skillfully placed stone, deployed with cruel, implacable grace. Whether Seishirou was amused or displeased, there was a statement to be made—the return would be taken out of Subaru's body, heart, and soul, and at the thought his pulse beat faster again, partly in dread, and partly with a strange, sinking thrill of expectation. Seishirou's strong hands—that terrible, gentle strength—closed about his shoulders, and he was pulled in, gathered to the man's chest, Seishirou's arms sliding about him. Subaru ducked his head. He trembled once, uncontrollably, then let himself go limp, unresisting, wholly enfolded within the compass of Seishirou's embrace. Seishirou's lips settled onto his hair, a light, unmoving contact, like a sleeper's kiss.

He was a little surprised, then, when after only moments Seishirou rose once more, drawing him to his feet as well. Vertigo made his head whirl and his legs seem far away, disconnected from the rest of him; he had to open his eyes, but he kept his gaze lowered, focused on the sinuous lines where Seishirou's arm and chest brushed against each other, unwilling to look up into the man's face. Such stabbing shame—why, he wondered dully, when surely, however Seishirou chose to take it, what he'd done hadn't been *that* shocking, at least not more so than any other part of sex, once one got used to the idea. He didn't even think he'd done it badly—certainly Seishirou had seemed to respond. Then why this self-revulsion, beyond the sense of failure, of insufficiency?

Without releasing him, Seishirou reached back and switched off the shower. The quiet was like being snatched into the nothingness of a maboroshi, like the numbness that followed an earthquake, all shaking stopped but nothing safe, nothing ever really the same.

Not the sex, but the uses of sex.

Catching the hem of Subaru's T-shirt, Seishirou drew it upward. Subaru raised his arms with the motion, swaying a little as the fabric peeled from his body. He closed his eyes once more. He shivered again at the first breath of air on that exposed skin, a shivering that didn't stop this time.

Not what he had actually done with Seishirou, but the why of it—the anger, the furious need to break down every defense, to compel where he couldn't have freely what he most wanted, and in the end what he had wanted, what he had yearned for so achingly, had eluded him. After all

that, what was he left with?

Only this hollow nothingness.

This emptiness....

Seishirou's hands were at the fastening of his jeans, spreading them open with slow intimacy, though not actually touching him yet. He rocked and twisted minutely as pants and underwear were worked over his hips, down his legs, a coarse, unpleasant scraping along his thighs before they puddled at last in a damp heap about his ankles. He concentrated on those sensations, then on keeping his balance with eyes still closed as he lifted each foot in turn at Seishirou's silent prompting, freeing them from the clothing. His desire, released and revealed, throbbed with unchecked intensity, a steady, burning beat striking across the faint tremors that racked him. Seishirou's arms came about him, pulling him close once more—though the air's warmth was stifling, it couldn't seem to touch the chill that had possessed him, but Seishirou was a solid heat pressed full-length to his body, an unwavering sun blazing out of a fog, a stone radiating the comfort of that sun through a long, bitter night. Subaru bit his lip, suppressing a moan along with the urge to rub up against Seishirou, to seek his own relief.

To make use of Seishirou, for his own satisfaction....

The present blurred—somehow Seishirou had walked them both out of the shower. He was being enfolded in softness, one of the enormous white towels that Seishirou favored. Then he was lifted, he was being carried out through the bathroom door into a shock of cooler air, and he buried his face in Seishirou's neck, in the thin trickles of water seeping from the ends of Seishirou's hair. Somehow, though, his shivering had eased.

Carefully, so very carefully, Seishirou laid him down on the bed. He sank back as if falling in slow motion. As if it were a dream, or the spiritual otherworld where different laws applied than those of earthly nature—and when would it unravel, when would the piercing light of day break through, an inescapable, unforgiving reality? He felt his body settle into full contact with the mattress, the deep pile of the towel plush against his skin as his arm shifted to a place that was less damp, his head rolling to one side, the coverlet smooth against his cheek, sun-warmed.

Soon. Soon. He didn't think his heart could beat any faster, any more wildly, fear, anticipation, and need winding about it like wires, constraining it in the increasing tension of its own urgency, a small animal kicking against a tightening snare. This tenderness, this care—it couldn't last, was only a prelude, and he knew what was going to happen next. The gentleness, that smile, and then the breaking, not necessarily of flesh and bone anymore but of the ties that bound his self together, that made of him the person that he was. *This person—*

Yes. Seishirou-san. Do it now—hurry, hurry.

Before I...

...I....

Seishirou lay down half-covering him, a familiar weight and presence arranging itself without any haste, the water still on Seishirou's skin making slick their moving together. He remembered

the taste of that water and that skin, the taste of drowning in the shower's flood, in Seishirou's overpowering nearness. Seishirou's fingers brushed the side of his jaw, began stroking his hair, slow, even caresses, and he waited for them to grow still, for the sound of his name in that low, laughing, sensual voice, the annihilating murmur that would make him nothing yet again, nothing in Seishirou's eyes but a blank canvas to take whatever might be painted there.

Seishirou's lips touched his throat, a nuzzling kiss, and then another, silent, without demand or danger.

Why?

This is....

It was part of the game. It had to be. To make him think that somehow everything was all right, before the reversal struck him, its shock all the more devastating for that deception—but did Seishirou really believe that he was still that naive? That he would be surprised by anything Seishirou did or didn't do? Or maybe the entire game was this—to refuse to meet him, to give back to his intensity only that mask of bland affection, the lie from long ago, to prove that no matter what he did he could not get through. Quite possibly Seishirou knew exactly what he ached for and was exulting even now in the power to deny it.

Cruel....

Seishirou's leg had settled in between his own; as Seishirou shifted, it nudged up against that heat, waking its low, burning throb into a flare of fiercest urgency. Subaru bit down on a cry of pure sensation, wrestled his frantic leap of reaction down to silence, to stillness. But Seishirou was moving, moving upon him, patient and inexorable as the sun creeping minute by minute across the room, a broad river of golden honey, currents of wordless breath and touch and warmth flowing across his skin, soft as the wings of birds, as a summer-bedazzled sea, and he found himself rocking up to meet that brightness, the flashing rhythms of pleasure, of flesh against flesh. He pushed himself into that welcoming solidity, that blissful friction, faster, faster—his breath caught, stuttering, and he realized that he had lost control just as the last shreds of it flickered from his grasp, butterfly wings catching light, a light that took him too quickly, before he could think or stop. Spilling free, release without relief—his body jerked with the recoil of startling, too-swift ecstasy, with tearing loss, with a sudden blaze of fury. *Not like this—not like this!* Subaru's arms snapped up, his forearm striking Seishirou's shoulder, his fists clenching behind Seishirou's head, nails digging into his own palms. He twisted, straining in a helpless spasm against Seishirou's embrace. Seishirou remained an unshiftable weight, not answering Subaru's struggle but not yielding either, his only reaction a low exhalation and then a whisper close to Subaru's ear: "Subaru-kun. Shh. *Shh.*"

No! Subaru twitched again, his breathing ragged, sharp-edged. His eyes stung with tears trying to escape from behind still-closed lids. *Why, why—it's unfair, it's so unfair!*

That I'll lose everything to you, give up everything for you, and you won't give me what I want!

What I—

Slowly, then, he opened his eyes. As he blinked back the dampness that had gathered along his lashes, the world swam in and out of focus, or what he could see of the world: part of Seishirou's arm and side, the edge of the bed, the lines of a narrow stretch of hardwood floor, the sun shining on the bedroom wall. His heart hurt as if it had been ripped wide open, his body still trembled as if possessed, but his mind had broken free into an instant of tenuous clarity.

What I want is....

What do I want?

To hurt? Or to be hurt? He found that didn't know. His head spun, dizzy with the effort to trace the labyrinth of his own feelings, and he let go, let his thoughts drift back again—back to Seishirou, ever at the center. To that uncertainty, that tentativeness, the consciousness of forces barely contained, like a water drop held together by a thin skin of surface tension.

Not only himself, for once.

So if it might be true that Seishirou felt such things, could this, for what it was, be *real*?

Then why couldn't he accept it? Why was he still waiting for violence—waiting with a desperate eagerness, when comfort, as true and honest as Seishirou was capable of providing, was being given to him?

Had he wanted to be punished so very badly?

Not a game, he understood at last, the realization a chill dawn breaking. Not for him, and not for Seishirou either. He could feel a crack far down in the deepest places of himself, shuddering wider and wider. Himself and his one true wish, both on the verge of being lost—*forgotten*—and yet Seishirou, Seishirou was—and even amidst the wreckage of desire and self-destruction, this firefly glow, this need, this ever-swelling pain—

“Seishirou-san.”

* * * * *

What else, Seishirou wondered with a thin pang of unease—what *now*, when he'd thought that Subaru might be starting to relax at last? That rigidity had seemed to be draining from Subaru, all his muscles unclenching, his hands sinking down to cradle weakly behind Seishirou's head. Trembling just a little, Subaru lay limp, seemingly exhausted, as if he'd used up the dregs of both strength and anger in that final, startling burst of vehemence.

Well, maybe not. At the prospect of having to deal with something else unknown and probably mysterious, Seishirou realized that he genuinely didn't feel up to it. He was indefinably tired, not just with the languor that came after sex but with something less physical, an unfamiliar mental or psychic fatigue. It was a poverty of personal resources that he found very foreign; perhaps he was still suffering from the effects of the sakanagi.

But to feel so very keenly that he might fail, that he could do nothing other than fail....

Why?

And what else did Subaru expect from him? What more should he do to redress the upset balance between them? What more *could* he do? He had no idea. Nevertheless, he waited, listening, head bowed against Subaru's shoulder, for once strangely glad that he couldn't see Subaru's eyes.

This feeling...

Why am I...

...afraid?

Subaru's fingers touched his hair, still sleek and wet from the shower. For some reason he found himself holding his breath.

"I love you so much," Subaru whispered. His voice broke on the words. "*So much.*"

Chapter 17

The teenaged boy knelt beneath the span of the flowering sakura tree. His back was perfectly straight, his head bowed slightly. His eyes were closed; a faint smile touched his lips. His high school uniform was immaculate, as crisp as though it were new. Around him, petals fell slowly, sporadically, no more than one or two at a time trailing down, an intimation of the fall yet to come.

As he sat there, hands resting easily on his thighs, his attention was focused inward. Memories shimmered, floating before his mind's gaze as lightly as dust motes, golden shards that never touched the ground. He sifted through them, picking out one here and there to examine more closely before setting it carefully into place among the rest. A bright pattern was being created against that inner darkness: a mosaic being pieced together, taking form.

Snow was falling, big flakes floating down just like flower petals. The sidewalk had been trampled to a brownish gray by people walking on it, but there was a clean, fluffy white layer on the sill of a large window. The little boy pushed his hand along the sill, watching the snow heap up higher and higher in front of his mitten until some of it started to spill over onto the ground.

Movement caught his eye. He stopped and glanced up. On the other side of the window, people were sitting at tables, eating, laughing, and talking, though he could only hear them a little through the glass. The light inside was golden; he could see candle flames wavering and jumping on the nearest tables. They put sparkles into the water glasses and the crystal drops hanging from the candle holders. The place on the other side of the window looked nice, all warm and glowing. The boy rested his hand against the glass. It was flat, smooth, and cold even through his mitten.

Not warm, after all.

Her laughing voice called to him. It danced like a snowflake falling all by itself, swirling about on the wind. Looking over, he saw that she'd turned from the woman she'd been talking to and was holding out one hand to him. Snowflakes had caught in her red scarf and her long, lion-colored braid of hair. She looked pretty, smiling a wide, happy smile, her eyes alight. The boy smiled too, exactly the same smile as hers, and hurried toward her until he could reach out and take hold of her hand. Her fingers closed onto his, gently but firmly.

They stood together, mother and son.

"Sei-chan, come here. I have something to show you."

The basement door was a crack into darkness. He pulled it open wider, and stairs appeared. They were only dark at the top, and not so much now that the door was open. There was light down at the bottom. Wood creaked under his house shoes; each careful step was a stretch for his

legs, one foot and then the other reaching, his arm raised to hold onto the hand rail, just above the level of his head.

As he went down, the wall opened on one side, a space one step high, then two steps, then three, and the light came in there, yellow and dusty-looking. Through the gap, he could see part of the basement's hard gray floor. There was a big, dark smear on it, like someone'd made a spill and hadn't cleaned it up, and in the middle of the smear there was something pale, just at the edge of where he could see. He crouched to get a better look, and the bare light bulb on the basement ceiling hurt his eyes before he glanced past it. Bright spots and shadows made it hard to see at first, but he blinked and there it was again. That was a hand in the dark red smudge, and that was an arm in soldier green, and that was—

“Come, Sei-chan.”

He started down again, still crouching at first. When he reached the post at the corner, where the steps turned, he could see everything without bending, and he stood up for the rest of the way. One step at a time, not dawdling, but not hurrying either. It gave him lots of time to look.

The man was lying on his back on the floor. His arm was stretched out toward the stairs, and his body was twisted as if he'd been squirming, but he wasn't moving now. There was a big red hole in his chest and stomach, shiny-wet in the light, and inside it there were...things. As he reached the bottom of the steps, he looked at the man's face. It didn't look like a real person's face—it looked rubbery, waxy, like a plastic toy.

He wondered if he was still supposed to call the man “Father.”

“Over here.”

She was sitting on the old futon mattress, against the far wall, in a corner where the light was dim. There were pipes hanging from the ceiling, and their shadows made darker bars across her. Her thick braid lay over her shoulder, its end just brushing her lap. It moved a little as she breathed. She held out one hand, and it was red, like the mess around the man's body. As she leaned back against the wall, tilting her head, her face slipped out of one of the lines of shadow. He could see her smile then. Her eyes were bright, watching him.

He walked around the man, careful not to step in any of the mess. It was blood, more than he'd ever seen before. The basement smelled funny, a smell that was thick and sharp and sweet, all at the same time. He looked at the wet, lumpy stuff in the hole in the man's body and wondered what it would feel like if he touched it. But he went to her without stopping.

Her smile and that brightness in her eyes told him. The way she had called to him and the way the man lay just so in the middle of the floor told him too. She might tease him later and say that it was just a game, but he knew better.

Talking and laughing and being with other people was the game. Nothing was really important, as long as you didn't let anyone find out that you were playing; when you were done you could usually forget about most of what had happened. This was like a game, but it was serious—it didn't stop when the time came to go home or do other things, but instead went on and

on, deep beneath the surface. It came up again at times whether you were ready for it or not, and seeing and remembering everything really mattered, because if you missed something or got it wrong you could lose. Sometimes she called it what it really was: a test.

The game had rules. The test had rules too.

He was good at both.

As he stepped onto the mattress, she bent her arm into a little curve. This was where he had to kneel down next to her and settle against her side. Her breast was soft as he leaned his head on it. It lifted and fell with each slow breath, just like her braid. Her shirt, open at the neck, was spotted with more blood. Her arm folded around him, and her fingers walked up into his hair, curling into it, playing with it. He could feel them making it damp.

“Do you see him?” she asked.

The answer was too easy. Maybe he *should* have touched the man, to make sure that he was really there. He narrowed his eyes and looked hard, but he didn’t see any of the threads that made up an illusion. “Yes,” he decided at last.

Probably he’d been right, because there was a click in her voice, like a chuckle stuck at the back of her throat. “Do you understand?”

He thought about it. “He’s dead,” he answered. He knew what “dead” was, even if he hadn’t known that it meant people coming open and showing their insides like that.

“Yes. That’s right.” Her hand moved, and two fingers stroked his cheek. “He won’t be coming back anymore.” Her voice was a quiet music, like a small bird singing a lullaby on its nest.

Those strong hands wouldn’t pick him up anymore. There wouldn’t be big boots clumping in the genkan and a deep laugh rolling through the house, telling them it was time for another visit. It was a strange thought, and he felt a tiny swoop in his stomach, like being swung up through the air to ride on one of those wide shoulders. But he didn’t think too much about it. Right now, he had to pay attention.

Her fingers were stroking his neck. They brushed up over his chin, then stopped in front of his face. “Taste,” she said, her voice even lower, her head bending closer to his. He could feel her warm breath on his hair. When he touched her fingers with his tongue, it tasted kind of like a spoon when all the cake dough had been licked off it; it made his nose prickle. He didn’t like it especially. Still, maybe it was good for him.

“Ah.” She sounded satisfied. She shifted so he was pressed more against her front, and both arms came around him, holding him against her. Her fingers began playing on his other cheek, painting lines up and down. “Don’t forget.” Her voice was soft and dreamy, as if she was telling a story. “This is what’s inside every person. Blood and bone. Meat and offal. Everyone is all the same in the end.” She was rocking them both from side to side, just a little. “Everybody. Just like this.”

“Even you?”

Her hand closed onto his neck—a hard grip, a dig of fingernails, and he knew he’d made a bad mistake. His chest hurt, his neck throbbed as though his heart was beating right under her hand. He felt cold and strange, a sharp, watery-weak feeling. Then, very slowly, her fingers loosened. Slowly they began moving on his neck again.

“Yes.” Her voice was thick and scratchy underneath. It sounded like somebody else’s. “Even me.” Her fingers crept down and tangled in his T-shirt. They started to pull it up over his stomach, to touch the skin. “Even you.” Her voice was full of threads being pulled apart, like a maboroshi showing the real underneath, but he couldn’t see exactly what it was: just a darkness, and black things squirming, brushing past him, blind and angry and hungry. “*Even you.*”

Her hands tugged at him—this was where he had to relax his whole body, to let those hands move him any way they wanted, just like moving the arms, legs, and head of a doll. He was safest like that, being just something that could be moved; it made him almost invisible. If those black things inside of her saw him, he knew he would die. She drew him down across her knees, bent low above him, and he felt her tongue scrape his cheek, where she’d drawn on him with the blood. She made a sound deep in her throat, like a sob, and whispered something, but she wasn’t really talking to him anymore.

The way his head was turned, he was looking the dead man’s body. It lay motionless, staring up toward the ceiling with those half-open eyes, eyes that couldn’t see anything now. For the first time he really thought about it—about how the man had never seen anything beyond the pretend games that they’d played, had never known about the real things underneath the surface.

It probably wouldn’t be so different, not having a father.

He came rattling down the stairs, his house shoes thumping on the steps, his school bag slung over his shoulder. The breakfast smells from the kitchen were already making his mouth water, even before he was halfway there. “Good morning!” he called out as he swung around the door frame, dropping his satchel in the corner.

“Good morning!” she replied. Laughter sparkled in her voice and in her eyes as she glanced back briefly over her shoulder. She was standing in front of the stove, wearing a pretty, frilly white apron over her dress to protect it from splatters. Ah—that *had* been bacon he’d smelled. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah!” Pulling out his chair, he sat down and clasped his hands on the table, trying not to fidget with impatience.

She looked back at him again, a longer look, a little smile curving her mouth. “Haven’t you forgotten something?”

He stared at her. What could he possibly have forgotten? He’d made his bed, right? He’d washed his face and neck and even behind his ears, as well as his hands. He’d brushed his teeth and combed his hair neatly. His school uniform was in order. And he’d done all his homework the night before; she’d even helped him. Was there a field trip he hadn’t remembered? Or maybe

today was actually a school holiday, and they'd go out somewhere instead! She was watching him, and as he went through the possibilities and his silence dragged on her eyes grew darker, though she kept on smiling.

"What's your name?" she said at last.

His...? Realization dawned on him slowly: a strange emptiness, an absence when he tried to reach for that thought. He ought to—why didn't he have a— He looked up at her, and saw her smile fade out, her expression going flat, like a closing door. She reached out and switched off the stove, moved the skillet to another burner, and then turned and came over to the table. Sitting down across from him, she leaned forward on her elbows and folded her hands under her chin, her gaze resting steadily upon his face.

Another test, then. The brightly colored kitchen seemed to thin and retreat, becoming insubstantial as a paper screen. Subtle pressures stirred through it like shadows, a familiar need and danger, like the whispering of restless dark wings. He sat up straighter, breathed in deeply, and focused his mind, turning his attention inward. Closing his eyes, he began to feel his way among the threads of thought and memory, looking for the thing he didn't know.

There was a white, domed thing on the kitchen table. He put down his toy truck and went to look at it. Round and white, with two holes for eyes, another for a nose, and a bare, grinning row of teeth. It looked almost like a face, almost like a person.

Except not.

He got up onto a chair, knelt on the seat, and stared at the thing. After a moment, he put out his hand. He touched its curve—sort of smooth, hard, not quite like wood or plastic or stone. He touched the smudge of invisible shadow around it, and felt a tiny tug inside, a flash—

—a familiar room-filling presence, laughter, an easy solidity—

—the clasp of a small but strong hand, those beautiful golden eyes—

—a jolt, the world spinning, pain, pain, confusion, pain, a sinking downward, but still, still that smile—

—fear—

It was thin and far away, like a voice calling from such a distance that there were no words, only a shirring like a cricket, a sound like the wind scraping in the park's trees. It was only an echo; there was really nobody there at all.

"Get rid of it."

He glanced over. She was sitting on the stool in the corner of the kitchen, staring out the narrow window. Faint smoke rose from the cigarette in her hand. She lifted it to her lips, drew on it, and then slowly blew out a long, wispy ribbon. The daylight in the room got stronger for a moment, as if the sun was struggling out from behind a cloud. Her face was hard and unmoving, without expression, like a dead person except for her eyes. They weren't blind or empty but were filled instead with something cold and dark, and something else hot underneath it, like a spiritual

force sealed behind a ward. Her being there didn't surprise him—somehow he had already felt her presence. He could feel her now, too, watching him without using her eyes, her gaze fixed on the world outside.

"The rest as well. In the basement." Her voice was low. It sounded bored. "Don't let anybody see you."

A real game. An interesting one. He could feel the threat of consequences. He'd have to do it all really well. Tucking the skull into the crook of one arm, he climbed down off the chair. He glanced briefly into its round, hollowed-out eye holes as he held it cradled against his chest, then turned and padded out of the room.

He already had some ideas.

She stood in the doorway. The light from the hall streamed past her, framing her shadow as it stretched across the room toward the boy who lay sprawled on the bed. His hair was a dark tumble against the pillow, a few wisps straying over his closed eyes; his chest lifted and fell beneath the tangled covers. The woman's fingers stirred, restlessly stroking the side of the door frame.

"I could." Her voice was low, taut, harshly vibrant. "I could do it. I could kill him. Any day. Today. *Now*. He's just a child, still. They needn't ever know how it happened. And then—we could go on. You and I. *Together*." Her breath caught, a thin, thready flutter—her whole body trembled with it. She pressed herself against the door frame.

"The Final Day—it's not so long now. You wouldn't be too old.

"It *could* be you.

"*Setsuka*."

Clutching at the door frame, she stared at the child in the bed. Her head bobbed, like a cat measuring the distance of a jump. She leaned forward, hesitated, then drew back. Lifting her hand to her mouth, she bit at her fingers, her eyes wild and conflicted. They narrowed, and she made a soft, guttural growl deep in her throat—but she moved backward, one step, and another, until finally she turned aside and shut the door.

In the darkness, the boy's eyes drifted open. He gazed up toward the ceiling.

Pretty. So pretty. He could almost reach it, standing on the footstool and stretching all the way up on his toes. His fingertips touched one of the little glass animals; he felt it rock. He tried to reach further, to close his hand around it—

He slipped. His fingers bumped the animal, and it tipped and rolled off the dresser.

It fell onto the floor with a smash.

A glass kitten, its head and one lifted paw broken off. While he was staring at it, something moved in the doorway. She was there, looking down at the broken kitten too. Her eyes lifted from

it, moving up and up till they reached his face. He didn't know what to do but stand there, still hanging onto the dresser.

With light steps, she crossed the room and knelt in front of him. Her long skirt swished on the floor. She picked something else from the dresser top—a glass bird—and held it up between two fingers. Its wings flashed red and green in the sun. She barely moved her head to look at it, then flicked her eyes back to him. There was a gold shine in them. She was smiling, and his chest felt squeezed inside. Should he smile too? She turned the bird, opened her fingers and let it fall—

Crash.

Pretty shiny pieces on the floor. She picked up another one, a flower this time. His heart beat faster. Still smiling, she let it go—

Crash.

Reaching out, she took his arm between her hands. Her fingertips were soft and warm against his skin—

Snap.

What a brave boy, the nurses said later. *He never even cried at all.*

“S-ss—” Even speech seemed to be slipping away from him, escaping as memories shifted like a slide of loose sand. Shuddering, he found his center and tried again. “S-sei—” The word gleamed at him like a jewel, half-buried, winking in and out of concealment. He would *not* lose it again. Between the glimmerings of thought and experience, the shadows of ordinary forgetfulness, he reached down and dragged what he sought up through the black shards of the seal he'd found and broken. Up into the bright sphere of consciousness with a final effort, shaking and triumphant. “*Seishirou.*”

The sunlight had shifted, he found when he opened his eyes, its angle steeper, lighting only the corner nearest the window. She was leaning back in her chair, arms crossed beneath her breasts. A cigarette smoldered lazily in one hand. He could smell its smoke, acrid against the oily smells of cooling eggs and bacon. His stomach gurgled audibly; he winced, then glanced at her face. Her eyes probed him, a measuring gaze that gave nothing back. The pause made him uncertain, and after that uneasy. The clock on the wall ticked faintly in the silence.

Her mouth tightened.

“Too slow,” she judged. Leaning forward, she touched his forehead with two fingers. He felt that hard-won knowing waver and melt away, vanishing even as he fumbled after it. A weak, sinking feeling came over him, and somewhere in the center of it a hot core of resentment, but there was nothing he could do. She sat back in the chair and tilted her head, watching him without even a cold smile.

“Again.”

Squaring his shoulders, he closed his eyes and started over from the beginning.

He blocked the first two strikes, but the third ofuda tore through his shield. It hit him, and the magical energies jolted through his body, throwing him backward, a blast of pain like a ball of black fire erupting inside his chest, thin, crackling flares searing out along his arms and legs, and then the hard crack of slamming into the floor. He gasped for breath and tried to uncurl, to get his hands up at least—*shield, shield*. Another ofuda struck him and knocked him further back, sent him skidding on his side across the tiles in a fresh burst of fiery agony. His throat locked tight. *No screams*. He could feel the next talisman already being charged, then thrown, flashing toward him as he struggled to make his arms and legs answer. As if in a bad dream, he couldn't seem to do anything. There was an instant's shock of relief when he realized that the ofuda wasn't actually going to hit him—it struck the floor instead, and he felt it discharge, a ripping surge of energy. The floor cracked, shuddered, began to break apart. There was suddenly nothing solid and whole beneath him, only tilting pieces, and he did yelp then, grabbing instinctively, as if he might find something to hold onto. A huge creaking roar, a stomach-turning drop, blackness and a snapping crash—

Darkness. Not just nothingness. *Where...?* His eyes were closed, he realized. Slowly he understood that he was lying on something hard, not flat, lumpy and full of jagged edges. They were digging into his stomach, scraping his legs and arm and cheek. His palms throbbed in time with his heart. He hurt, he *hurt*, a dull, all-over tingle on the skin, fading now, replaced by the stabbing ache of muscle and bone—arm, shoulder, hip, chest. Everything. He stirred, tried to move that so he wasn't being poked quite so hard in the stomach, drew in a shaky breath—it tasted of dust, and he coughed, his whole body jerking until those spasms finished and he lay trembling, waiting for that new intensity of pain to fade.

“Get up.”

He opened his eyes, turned his head. He had fallen through into the ground floor of the abandoned building where they'd been training. No light came in through the boarded-up windows. Above him, though, a ragged hole let weak sun stream down from the large, open upstairs area.

She stood at the edge of the hole. A veil of dust motes filled the air between them.

“*Get up!* Or I'll kill you.”

He began pushing himself up onto his hands and knees, trying to move quickly enough to keep her from doing anything, but slowly enough to give himself a little extra time to recover. He breathed more deeply, controlled the cough. Some new strength had come from somewhere, a fire that surrounded the pain, that let him lock it away in the same place where he'd shut up that unvoiced scream, and others before it. Screaming and crying wouldn't save him. Using pain as an excuse wouldn't protect him. There was no mercy in her for weakness; only by being strong and completing the test could he survive. He heaved himself to his feet, careful, feeling for solid footing in the pile of debris. Glancing upward, he saw her lift one hand, fanning two ofuda between her fingers. That fire in him intensified, became a burning core.

He wasn't going to die.

Not for her.

He drew power up out of himself, reaching deeper than he ever had before. That inner fire fed the magic, or maybe both were the same thing, pouring into each other to create a greater whole. He wove the shield point to point before himself, had time to brace before the first strike came—those two ofuda hit, and another pair, and more, their magical energies flaring and dying against his protection. He could smell the spells' sizzling tang, could feel the jolts of collision through his shield, but their painful force didn't touch him. His own magic streamed like an invisible current across his skin, burned inside his head, but he kept his concentration, he clung to the power and made it do what he wanted, and his defenses held, held—

A strange clearness filled his mind, like a pure, otherworldly light. He felt different, more alive somehow, more aware of everything: the pain in his body, though it seemed far away now, the shape of the space around them, the crumbled building materials underfoot, the qualities of their spells' energies. Her attacks and his resistance seemed to melt into one, a rhythm surging and subsiding between them, as if the magical battle was something that had its own life. Lifting his eyes, he met her gaze and felt a surprising pang. That they were connected by this, like two slender branches with a spider's web strung between them, the whole thing resonating to every breath of wind, every passing insect's touch—the inside of his chest ached, as though he'd taken a too-deep breath. This was *right*, a rightness that he'd never known before. It burst like a star inside him, too bright and sharp to grasp all at once. The moment, the place, everything seemed to shine, and especially *her*, as if she was a different person too, not just that constant presence of motherly care and danger, but somebody particular in herself.

His opposite. His opponent. In delight and sudden anticipation he grinned at her, filled with excitement, though he wasn't quite sure for what. She smiled too, her real smile, the one she showed only to him: a flash of bared teeth, her eyes aflame in the sun's thin light. Leaping high, she seemed almost to hang suspended for a moment before she fell lightly toward him through the still-swirling haze of dust, her hands wreathed in the fire of sorcery, her braid a long whip snaking behind her.

Look, look, there's Sakurazuka-sempai! Wah, isn't he cool?

I wonder, does he have a girlfriend?

Those eager voices dissolved into giggles and whispers. As he turned into the library, the corners of his mouth tugged up into a half-smile. His thoughts, though, were mostly elsewhere.

That winter when he was nine—he had forgotten it. No, it had been forgotten. The memory had been lost within him, buried deep, like other things:

That dim room, bars on all the windows. Skin like snow, hair as black as dreamless sleep. The smell of blood.

Moonlight and shadows, teeth sharp against the skin. The near-silent slither of a thick braid as it slid over one shoulder, falling onto him.

The slow shocks of someone much larger and heavier bearing down a little at a time, moving, touching—

Now that he was beginning to remember, piece by piece...some things that he had never even thought to wonder about before made perfect sense.

"It could be you."

But instead, it's me.

Isn't it....

He could feel tiny dragonflies of attention hovering and darting about him, those girls peeking at him from around the shelves. Unhurried, he strolled between the stacks, into the broad, hazy bar of sunlight from the window at the far end, running his fingertips along the books' spines, their dust jackets crinkling. They smelled like old rooms, like places long left unvisited. In that hush, he had a premonition of doors about to open, and a strange pressure began gathering inside his chest, growing, urgent for release.

Patience. Patience. The day was coming—not yet, but soon. He was sure of it. Until then, he'd go on just as he had. He'd be careful, and he'd continue to survive, getting stronger all the time. That was fine with him.

It was the life that he knew, after all.

He glanced back down the aisle, and a girl squeaked and jumped out of view. Unseen, his smile flickered wider, speculative and amused.

You're pretty cute, aren't you? I'd bring you home to play.

But I don't think you'd like "Mother."

One of the men in suits held the car door for him. He climbed in, and the man shut the door, then got into the front with the driver. Gazing out the window as the car began to move, he could feel her presence across the seat, could smell musty traces of cigarette smoke. He could tell from the quality of her attention that she was looking out her window too, but that every sense other than sight was fixed upon him.

"Well?" she asked at last. There was tension under the surface of that low, seemingly careless murmur, a kind of straining hunger. He watched the walls next to the road slide past. Old snow lay along their tops, dull white on this gray, cloudy day, a serene, somber harmony with the dark wood and stone.

"Beautiful. She was very beautiful, just like always." It was easy to keep his own voice light. It was harder to keep the laughter out of it. He could feel her raging on her side of the car like a contained fire, wanting more, a need almost as desperate as the need for air. *Did she look well? Did she look happy? What was she wearing? Did she speak of me?* Lifting his chin, he watched the passing rooftops, the swoop of power lines against the moody sky, and he smiled, an

expression that was joyful, wondering, to all outward appearances utterly innocent. “It’s funny. She looks so much younger than you do. *‘Mother.’*”

Frustrated cold fury blazed from the other side of the seat. She would do nothing with the men in suits around, though, these men who seemed to know something of the hidden game, but not all, not the truths behind their masks of tender mother and quiet son. He’d have to be careful for a while after the men were gone. But not for long.

Sakurazukamori. The word opened a world before him. A world where he had a power that was only for him, a secret that nobody living would share. He turned his head still further toward the window, his breath leaving a faint mist on the glass.

When he smiled, the smile was his own.

A couple of weeks and a “careless” revelation or two later, he was taken away by the men in suits for “more suitable care and training.”

He made sure to glance back as he left, to catch the look in her eyes.

The boy stirred, shifting his shoulders, and opened his eyes. With calm satisfaction he drew in a long, deep, settling breath. Around him that desultory trickle of sakura petals continued without change. Every memory, every thought was in place in his mind, exactly as it should be, each piece interwoven with will, self-identity, and power until they all formed a luminous, perfectly integrated whole.

He smiled a little more widely.

It was time.

The woman picked her way over the humped-up tree roots, hidden beneath a thin layer of hard-packed snow. She moved like a hunting cat, testing each footfall, stopping every step or two to stare and listen—and more, to search her surroundings with other, inward senses. Every movement was taut, controlled, and graceful. Wait, and move, and wait again. No breath of wind stirred the bare branches above her, or moved the low ceiling of gray clouds; everything in the world seemed still. Certainly, it had to be a trap. Yet she came forward.

A sudden breeze brought life to the air. It lifted and spun stray snowflakes that glittered from some sourceless light. She whirled.

The little boy standing beside the tree raised his head. The wind tossed dark bangs above his wide, distressed eyes. They held a look that was lost, frightened, disconsolate.

“Mother!”

She hesitated for only a split second. Then power flared between her hands. In a heartbeat it had gathered and burst into the form of an orange-gold, fiery bird-form, a flowering of wings and tail and crested head. She sent the shikigami blazing toward the child, aiming for the aura within

or behind him, the living being hidden at the illusion's heart. With a shrilling cry, the shikigami tore into its target and erupted with a blast of lethal energy.

Behind her, Seishirou hurtled down from the tree's branches.

She whipped around to face him, but not quickly enough. Before she could block or call up another spell, his hand was slamming into her chest. Blood sprayed out her back, a thin spatter of drops falling across the snow. She jerked with a last frantic effort at breath, her eyes darkening, the gold vibrancy going out of them, leaving them a flat, dulling brown. Drawing his hand back a little, he curled his fingers inside her body, and gently pulled her closer to him. They were nearly the same height—he was perhaps a little taller, but she was sagging, sinking down as life continued to leave her, growing steadily heavier on his arm. He bent toward her, slowly leaning closer, and closer still. His lips were almost touching hers when he stopped.

“Goodbye,” he murmured. His smile curved a hairsbreadth wider. “Mother.”

Straightening, he let her body slide off the end of his arm. It toppled backward and thudded on the ground in an ungainly sprawl. The snow was already rippling and heaving—slender roots burst out from beneath it, groping their way toward her, wrapping about her limbs, cutting deep into the flesh. They tore at the still-twitching corpse while he worked the binding magic, caging her wailing, wrathful soul and sealing it to the tree.

You can join your special person now.

If you can find her.

His working done, he closed his mind to the chorus of howling, gibbering voices. The roots had done their part, dragging her remains down under the earth, drinking up every drop of spilled blood, leaving the snow's surface disturbed but clean. The sakura tree shone for him, a soft white light, the breath of spring filling its branches, born from that uncountable multitude of pale pink, fragrant blossoms. He was comfortably warm just in his school uniform, without a coat. This was the power of the sakura tree: an eternal spring, an endless blooming. A constant flowering and fall that would never cease.

Beautiful.

Stepping closer to the tree, he rested his palms against the bark. He watched it absorb the blood from his hand and arm. Even the dark, cooling stains soaking his jacket and shirt sleeve were sucked out and into the tree, until not so much as a fleck was left. Very convenient, he thought. He could feel the tree's curious, restless attention like a brooding fog around him, a presence that felt oddly familiar, although he couldn't quite place how. Pleased and amused, he stroked the tree's awareness with his mind, letting it sense him. It acknowledged him already, of course, after the rite of succession that had made him the Sakurazukamori, but still they needed to become more accustomed to each other. With all of his necessary business completed, they had plenty of time to take care of that.

He glanced at the torn and twisted corpse of the German shepherd puppy that he'd tied up next to the tree, its life force the vital spark hidden inside his illusion, the key that had allowed his

distraction to work. It had been a good idea, he reflected, letting the dog stand in for him. He'd have to remember it; maybe it would come in handy again someday. At last, somewhat reluctantly, he stepped back from the sakura, letting his hands slip away from its bark. He listened to it mentally for a minute or two, until it had whispered itself back into slumber. Then he turned, preparing to leave the maboroshi realm that held the tree's true existence.

A man was standing a few meters away, in the circle of the sakura tree's aura.

He started. He hadn't sensed anyone coming up behind him—and how had the man wandered into the maboroshi? Perhaps he was a psychic of some kind. Seishirou wondered what, if anything, the man had seen. Then he shrugged. It really didn't matter. Anyone who saw the Sakurazukamori at work had to be killed, and if he was erred on the side of killing people unnecessarily, well, who'd care? The tree certainly would be happy, to be fed so well. Smiling, Seishirou turned further toward the man, drawing on the mask of an ordinary, inoffensive high school boy as he watched for his new prey's reaction. Would the man be lured in closer, unsuspecting? Or had he seen enough to be cautious, or to try to flee?

The man lifted his head a little. He was pale, slender, not much taller than Seishirou, dressed in a long white coat over dark jeans and turtleneck. He had short black hair wisping over his forehead and deep green eyes—*beautiful, extraordinary green eyes*. Seishirou felt a inward jerk, a strange, abrupt pang in his chest. The man's attractive face held an expression of quiet sorrow. Surely, then, he knew something about the kill, or perhaps he had some intimation of his fate. Still smiling, pulse quickening with an unusual excitement, Seishirou stepped closer. His first real prey, outside the rite of succession. He was very, *very* glad his victim was so beautiful. Maybe he'd kiss the man, too, after he was dead, just as he'd kissed his real mother, Setsuka.

The man watched Seishirou's approach with that unwavering look of almost tender sadness. A breeze blew a swirl of sakura petals past him, stirred his coat and the fringes of his dark hair as he murmured: "Seishirou-san...."

He sees me!

He knows my name!

He knows who I am!

The reaction was instinctive, senseless, out of all proportion. Seishirou jerked with it, a flinch as reflexive as leaping back from mortal danger, but wilder, a white blankness sweeping his mind, a loss of control that was disquieting. No—*terrifying*. Disoriented, he tried to stumble backward, but his legs were being restrained. He was lying on his back. He didn't know why. Something was holding him, shaking him, pressing him against a clutching softness. He couldn't see, and he twisted, struggled for breath—his eyes snapped open as he arched upward, and he saw that face just above him, green eyes wide and anxious. "*Seishirou-san!*"

His response was immediate—grabbing the other by the shoulders, he heaved and flipped them both over. That easily he was on top, the slender form pinned beneath him with a startled gasp, their bodies tangled together in a tight cocoon of cloth, the whole thing as quick as his

jolting heartbeat. He could feel another pulse, almost as rapid as his, trembling against one hand, the fragile ridge of a collar bone under the other, the shallow, jostling movements of two people breathing fast, in slightly different rhythms. He stared blankly down. *Anyone who sees the Sakurazukamori*. He should—this was—Subaru gazed up at him, bewildered and distressed, and at that recognition, the recollection of his lover's name, a flash of self-possession returned. Swiftly, as if he was falling, like a shooting star yielding to irresistible gravity, he brought his mouth down onto Subaru's in a rush of passion, of need, a kiss that was devouring, seemingly almost desperate. After a moment's surprise, Subaru answered, giving back with equal fervency. Subaru's eyes flickered closed, and Seishirou took the opportunity to roll his own aside, darting a hasty glance around the room. The bedside lamp's intimate glow; the rucked-up covers drawn back from the flat plain of the mattress; the angles of floor, walls, and ceiling meeting at the shadowy near corner; the doorway opening onto the living room's darkness—all was familiar and exactly as it should be.

Somehow he found that no less disconcerting.

Dragging his attention back to Subaru, he made himself relax, let their kiss soften to become more melting, less frenetic. Subaru's fingertips touched his bare arm, rested there, then trailed upward to his shoulder. Trying to work his other arm around and beneath Subaru, he was balked by the twisted covers; a little slow writhing failed to loosen those bonds, and he ran his hand up to caress Subaru's hair instead. All was perfectly gentle, sensual, two people settling into the comfort and fulfillment of each other's presence. Drawing their kiss out to a lingering closure, Seishirou lifted his head and gazed down at Subaru once more, a faintly yearning smile tugging at his mouth.

"Subaru-kun," he murmured, "do you know what I want right now, more than anything else?" Subaru's own smile brightened subtly, an evanescent moongleam of dreamy bliss. Seishirou paused for effect.

"Ice cream!" he announced, and that gleam winked out into the vacuum of outer space as Subaru just stared at him. "You know, I'm having a real craving. Do we have any more of the good kind, the one with the little chocolate fish in it?"

"No...I don't think so."

"Oh. Oh, that's too bad." With a sigh, Seishirou sagged. Rolling a little to one side, he propped himself on an elbow and gazed with thoughtful longing toward the other room. "What to do, what to do. Grapes aren't quite the thing. There's hot chocolate, but I was thinking of something more substantial—ah! There's that doughnut left over from yesterday. Though it might be a little stale by now...."

"I'll go out."

"Really?" Seishirou blinked at Subaru with a surprise that was only partially feigned. "Are you sure? It's late, and after all it's really not that important. I can certainly make do with—"

Cool fingers came to rest on his lips, silencing him. Bemused, he gazed at Subaru. Subaru's smile had returned, a little different now—an edge of irony to it, amusement, a resigned tolerance, and through and about the rest that patient, enigmatic, oddly knowing love.

"It's fine," Subaru said.

"Oh. Okay." Subaru wriggled his legs experimentally, and Seishirou shifted over, tugging at the sheet and blanket to help loosen them. Once Subaru had scrambled free of the bed, Seishirou busied himself with rearranging the covers and himself, catching the occasional worthwhile glimpse as Subaru shed his pajamas and pulled on sweat pants and a shirt: a flash of long, pale legs, the stretch and flex of a slender torso. By the time Subaru was dressed, Seishirou had draped himself across the mattress, the covers slid down into an artful rumple about his waist, his arms cradling the pillow on which his head rested as he soulfully watched his savior. "Thank you, Subaru-kun," he murmured. He was rewarded with an acknowledging glance, a headshake and another fleeting glint of that smile as Subaru headed for the doorway. Subaru vanished into the living room's dimness; a few moments later, the apartment door opened and then closed. Seishirou lay still for a while longer, listening to the silence, following with his other senses the retreat of Subaru's presence until it faded at last from his immediate perceptions.

It hadn't been his intention to get Subaru out of the apartment—just to confuse him, knock him off balance, give him something to think about other than Seishirou's somewhat peculiar reactions.

Still...maybe it had been for the best.

Seishirou rolled over. He slid himself up until he sat with his back to the headboard, took a moment to breathe deeply, then glanced to one side and noted his cigarettes and lighter on the night table, in their usual place next to the clock. Leaning across the bed, he reached for them, and unanticipated movement caught his peripheral vision, froze him into wary alertness. His eye found the motion's source, though by then it had gone still—his own reflection in the standing mirror on the far side of the room. Slowly he finished collecting his cigarettes and sat up again, watching himself as he moved, a figure that seemed far away, a room that was like another world, closely bounded by the dark wooden frame. As he straightened enough for his face to come into view, he studied it as though it was someone else's: handsome, expressionless at the moment, a mask with shuttered, watchful eyes, one a warm brown struck with just that merest hint of gold, the other an alien, empty white. The lost eye was a shock of otherness, breaking any illusion of similarity, dispelling the ghost of memory.

The image of that person.

He smiled, and his smile was echoed by that mask in the mirror. Though he remained uneasy, he felt in control of himself once more, as though he'd found the turning point that would lead him back to normalcy, or, at any rate, back to what was normal for him. Flipping open the pack, he shook out a cigarette and put it between his still-quirked lips.

How strange, he mused, striking flame from the lighter, that such memories would come back into his thoughts now. Not, of course, that he had really forgotten them. They were part of what made him himself, after all, everything he had experienced and overcome; repossessing them, knowing himself clearly and entirely for the first time had been a tremendous freedom, the penultimate attainment of his coming into power as the Sakurazukamori. Certainly she had tried to do things to his mind, to dominate or cripple the person that she couldn't destroy outright—not even with conscious design, he thought, not with any plan for eventual victory but with the senseless, selfish malice of a frustrated small child. In the end, he had survived it, he had reclaimed those scattered pieces and built from them the edifice of will and self-identity, and from there all had gone just as it should. He was here, alive and strong, and she was not. He looked back on her exactly as he looked back on all the rest of his life: she was another part of that succession of obstacles and triumphs, of small, bright pleasures to be enjoyed and the occasional unpleasantness that had to be dealt with, and none of it any more special than anything else.

He imagined that it would have infuriated her to know the truth.

“Mother.”

I never hated you.

He found himself obscurely amused. He touched the tiny, dancing flame to the cigarette's end and watched it catch, a delicate orange tracery devouring paper and leaf, bite by infinitesimal bite. Snapping the lighter shut once more, he laid it and the pack on the bed. The cigarette smoldered, a familiar acrid scent, the accustomed taste of burning in his mouth. Its smoke rose up in languid, seemingly random curves.

Not his birth mother, in the end, but the woman who had raised him, trained him, played games with him at will for the first years of his life. Perhaps she had been some cousin of Setsuka's, or of whoever his father was—there had been enough resemblance between them that no one had ever questioned their relationship. He neither knew nor cared. He had feared her, naturally; he had resented her power over him as he grew old enough to recognize it, just as any human being would resent a capricious, apparently omnipotent god. He could remember an oppressive sullenness, even the occasional sharp stab of anger, but nothing that he would call “hatred.”

Nothing like the way you hated me.

He drew in a lungful of smoke, then tilted his head back and blew it out, an unhurried stream. His shoulders shifted in wry acknowledgment, almost a silent chuckle.

But then, how could I have hated you? For as long as I can remember, I've never felt things the way ordinary people do—but even so, it's not just that.

In fact, it never even occurred to me that I should hate you.

You were my reality. As a child, you were the defining fact of my existence. My whole world consisted of you. Can somebody who's been blind from birth ever truly hate that darkness? Never having seen anything, never knowing what it's like?

A fleeting thought glimmered across his mind then, its significance subtle and elusive, yet as unsettling as a chill draft fingering the skin.

But...if that person had been given a taste of what it meant to see?

His reflection stared back at him, eyes narrowed. After a moment, he glanced aside. Leaning over again, he collected the ashtray from the bedside table and tapped into it a growing tail of gray ash. It occurred to him that perhaps he should take a hint from this dream and revisit his inner landscape to make sure that everything was in order. Who knew what disruptions his recent sakanagi might have caused—or it might even be the other way around, that some crack in his sense of self had helped open the way for that backlash. And there was the fact of the dreaming itself, so uncharacteristic for him, and the undercurrents that had been plaguing him even before that, since the death of the young windmaster, a jitteriness that was almost like anxiety...there had been strangeness in him of late, things he didn't fully grasp or understand, and now of all times he could not afford such flaws.

He could not forget who he was.

Seishirou sat up straight once more, drawing one leg up to his chest and resting his arm on his bent knee. Concentrating on the cigarette clasped between his fingers, he set to work on focusing and clearing his mind as he waited for Subaru to return with the ice cream.

Chapter 18

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to sit here with me, Subaru-kun?”

Subaru slanted a look at Seishirou. With precisely staged, elegant casualness, the man lounged on the low seat built into the elevator’s curving back wall, his legs stretched out long before him, his arms extended to either side along the seat’s back. One hand fingered the plush wine-red fabric in a caressing invitation; tiny gold-toned lights from the miniature chandelier overhead reflected in dark glasses as he tilted his head with a smile.

Subaru could feel his eyebrows threatening to twitch. Controlling his frown into something more like a neutral expression, he shook his head. Getting caught once in a compromising position in an elevator—that he could live with. It had been their—Seishirou’s—apartment building, and anyway he could excuse it with the alcohol if Seishirou ever tried to make jokes about it. (So far, thankfully, it had never come up in front of other people.) This place, on the other hand, was extremely expensive and upscale. Even before they’d gotten into the elevator, the luxurious decor of the lobby and the subdued yet attentive presence of security had made it obvious what sort of people lived here. In fact, it was exactly the kind of building where some of his wealthiest and best-connected clients might live. And although the chance of meeting any of them was small, although he’d been out of circulation for the last half-year anyway, caught up in the struggle for the end of the world, in surroundings like these he felt himself once more the head of the Sumeragi clan, moving in such circles by right of an ancient reputation, his presence an odd blend of breeding and uncanny power, of service and privilege. There had been a time when he would have been painfully self-conscious, stricken at the thought of any wrong step; it came more easily to him now, as he had so much less of himself invested in it, but he remained acutely aware of what was appropriate and what wasn’t. He was *not* about to let himself be groped.

Not even if that glimpse of Seishirou leaning back against the seat, all predatory ease and sensuality, had shivered him to the quick with a tremor of something far removed from annoyance.

Turning from Seishirou, Subaru regarded his own reflection in the burnished gold metal of the elevator doors. He still wasn’t sure why they were in such a place, let alone in a private elevator on its way to the penthouse apartment. Seishirou had been slyly evasive, with the undertone of glee that meant it was supposed to be a “fun” surprise of some kind. He couldn’t imagine what, but considering that it was one of *Seishirou’s* surprises...certainly that was why he was so uneasy, why he felt a growing pressure of foreboding, a subtle yet distinct weight as though he were already under the measuring gaze of strangers—

Subaru snapped a glance up at one of the rear ceiling corners, met his own sharp stare in the mirrored paneling. Surely it couldn’t be *her*...but of course in a building like this they would have

security personnel monitoring the elevators. Perhaps it was only some guard's passing attention that he'd felt, exaggerated by his nervousness. Still, he didn't like the thought of being caught on camera.

"We're almost there." In a single fluid motion, Seishirou abandoned his sprawl and rose to stand close to Subaru—too close to be at all innocent. One hand settled onto Subaru's shoulder, the man's arm curving against Subaru's back as they both faced the doors, as if to enclose him, to claim him as a possession, maybe to prevent flight, and he could sense steel underlying that ostensibly careless gesture, a sudden concentration of will and alertness that made him feel both safer and even more wary. His thoughts darted futilely, like the rapid pulse aflutter in his throat; swallowing, he had time for one deep, centering breath as the elevator glided to a halt.

The doors rolled open. He had a split-second perception of expansive, multi-leveled space, a sfumato of neutral-colored furniture in subdued illumination, with here and there a pool of brighter, crisper accent lighting, and on two sides of the room floor-to-ceiling windows opening out onto a jewel-starred panorama of night-time skyline—only that, before motion caught and focused his gaze. The woman who was unhurriedly advancing toward them—tall and sinuous in a close-fitting dark red dress and bolero jacket, ornate gold earrings glittering against her long black hair—was unfamiliar to him; the same couldn't be said for the teenaged girl sitting on a high stool at the bar, watching their entrance impassively from behind heavy glasses, or the blond man who had paused in the act of pouring sake, his expression ingenuous and surprised.

Dragons of Earth. A chill rippled through Subaru, an icy wash of shock, recognition, an instinct-deep awareness of danger that made all the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, and on its heels a sinking pang of realization, a familiar gray dawning of dismay.

"Ah, Sakurazuka-san," the woman was saying, her voice husky, musical, and amused. "I'm so glad that you were able to make it after all."

* * * * *

"The pleasure's all mine," Seishirou said brightly. He kept his arm around Subaru as he bowed, compelling the other into a bow as well and forestalling anything more than that hairsbreadth automatic twitch toward the ofuda that Subaru certainly had concealed somewhere about his person. Subaru was stiff with alarm and possibly outrage, but aside from that he didn't resist; nor did Seishirou give him time to recollect himself and begin to struggle. Straightening and slackening his grip so that it was a little less of an outright embrace, he beamed at Kanoe. "So good of you to extend the invitation."

Kanoe preened, playing her role as hostess just as thoroughly as he was playing the role of guest, and if they hadn't both had years of covering up their true selves with a polished facade of normalcy he thought they might possibly have fallen down laughing on the spot. Instead, with truly admirable poise, Kanoe glided to one side of the genkan and slid a dark mirror aside to

reveal a closet, her lacquered nails clicking faintly against the glass. “Please, let me have your coats.”

“Your coat, Subaru-kun,” Seishirou prompted helpfully, since he was quite sure that Subaru wouldn’t get into the act on his own, “and then we can go and join the party.”

If Subaru had been just the tiniest bit less well-bred—or perhaps the word should be “well-trained,” considering his grandmother—he would have indignantly mouthed the word *party*? He managed to restrain himself, but Seishirou could still read the expostulation in his flatly incredulous stare. Smiling and inexorable, Seishirou took hold of the collar of Subaru’s coat, and at his gentle tug Subaru began to shrug out of it, perhaps automatically, perhaps out of a desire to prevent Seishirou from taking a more active hand in undressing him. Subaru had always worried a little too much about what other people thought; what had been a self-effacing wish to please or at least not to offend as a boy had taken on a note of pride as an adult, Seishirou had noticed. It added tension to the game of stirring up reactions, making things that much more interesting. “Thank you, Subaru-kun. Why don’t you go and make yourself comfortable? Maybe Yuuto-kun will fix us something to drink.”

“Sure,” Yuuto said, all easy-going amiability. “Is sake good? We also have beer.”

“Sake, I think,” Seishirou responded on Subaru’s behalf as he handed Subaru’s coat off to Kanoe and then removed his own. Subaru had been distracted—as he’d taken his first cautious steps into the room, the bioroid Natakku had appeared from somewhere to watch him, wide-eyed and expressionless. The two stared at each other, then circled like strange cats meeting, Subaru skirting around Natakku at a safe distance while the bioroid pivoted in place to watch him go by. Subaru sank down with exquisitely wary grace onto one of the long beige sofas, and Seishirou, as soon as he could disengage himself from Kanoe and the coat closet, went to join him. Standing behind Subaru, he leaned forward over the low sofa back, poised with a casual possessiveness that he was quite sure most of the other Dragons of Earth could read. The bioroid, however, could be a problem, inexperienced as it was with anything other than combat. Fortunately, it still seemed stuck at the level of trying to grasp the situation.

“Why is the Dragon of Heaven here?” it asked at last.

“I wonder,” Subaru murmured under his breath, faintly sarcastic, his voice so soft that Seishirou was probably the only one to hear him. Seishirou suppressed a grin.

“He’s Sakurazuka-san’s guest,” Yuuto replied, sliding around the critical issue with slick ingenuousness. Truly, he was wasted in the civil service; his gifts belonged at the top level of the country’s bureaucracy, in politics. The bioroid, to its credit, appeared dubious, though probably that was less a matter of intelligence and more due to the fact that its entire existence revolved around the end of the world, rendering it less likely to be diverted.

“But....”

“Only rude people fight at parties,” Yuuto said firmly. “Natakku-kun, how are you liking the sake?”

“It tastes...strange.”

Kanoe tittered with a little too much force and volume before sweeping the bewildered bioroid ahead of her as she headed toward the bar. “I think Nataka would do better with soda,” she said, shooting Yuuto a deadly look. The man grinned back at her, unrepentant. “I’m not so sure *it* should be here,” she muttered to him as they passed.

“Our Kamui is otherwise occupied tonight, right? So it won’t be a problem. And tomorrow is for tomorrow to worry about.” Behind his facade of idleness, Seishirou’s ears pricked up, but no further information seemed to be forthcoming. When he and Kanoe had last spoken, after the completion of that job he’d taken on for her, and Kanoe had invited him to this little soiree, she had made a point of mentioning, with slightly too-obvious carelessness, that the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth would not be present. It had certainly been a factor in his decision to attend—or at any rate, to attend like this. He wouldn’t have brought Subaru so freely into the reach of someone that powerful and unpredictable. He wondered, though, what the Kamui could be occupied with.

“Here you go.” Yuuto had paused in front of them and was holding out a cup of sake to Subaru. Subaru tilted his head, a barely perceptible motion, inclined a glance up toward Seishirou. Seishirou nodded, equally deliberate, and as Subaru accepted the drink with immaculate grace and a murmured formal courtesy a flicker of heat stirred within him, an uncoiling exultation, the tension of a nearly feral pleasure. With a mild effort of will, he tightened his fingers on the couch back, resisted the impulse to rest his hand on Subaru’s head, to stroke Subaru’s hair.

Ah, Subaru-kun.

You play this game so well.

Yuuto’s eyes were bright and speculative as he offered the other cup he held to Seishirou—a fool, but an observant one. Though it was likely that everyone in the room had noted that exchange, all senses being on alert at the presence of this *other* among them, and each person was weighing its significance, trying to figure out why the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan was here and what it might mean.

And of course, that was the entire point of attending Kanoe’s get-together, when otherwise he would have dismissed it as uninteresting—to make them wonder about just what bound the Dragon of Heaven to him, the force and extent of a compulsion that would bring Subaru so quiescently into the midst of enemies. Kanoe had already known about their involvement, from her visit in his dream that time—she had even included Subaru in her invitation, with a teasing slyness that had suggested she didn’t really expect Seishirou to take her up on it. He knew that gossip certainly wasn’t beyond her, so it was all too probable that Yuuto and Satsuki, her closest associates, also had some idea of what was going on. When he’d thought about it, it had become clear that the cloak of secrecy around their affair was already compromised, so what better response than to emerge from those concealing shadows and turn it all into a performance, a

challenge, flaunting his dangerous catch in front of his fellow Angels and daring them to make something of it?

After all, one never achieved a victory, however trifling, by doing what was expected.

Satisfaction smoldered in him, a low golden burn that complemented the excellent sake's fire. He'd been restless these last few days, out of sorts, as though constrained by the weight of unseen shackles. How good it was to shake off that oppressive feeling and stretch once more, to push the boundaries, to be the Sakurazukamori moving according to his own rules, accountable to no one else. The possibility that some reckless person might actually try to lift a hand against his lover had added a fine edge of risk. Indeed, *let* someone try. But he'd doubted from the beginning that it would come to that, and now he judged that the critical moment was over—everyone had committed themselves to the fiction that this was a normal party, and the only dueling that might take place would be conversational. That was just fine with him; in fact, all was going as ideally as he could wish. Even Subaru was fulfilling his role to perfection, neither making an outraged scene nor succumbing to panic and trying to fight or flee, but instead carrying himself with quiet dignity, his manner aloof and carefully controlled yet with just a hint of submission as he looked to Seishirou, and only Seishirou, for his cues.

And there was the crux of that most intense pleasure, the keynote of his enjoyment of this evening, Seishirou realized—that he had brought Subaru into this den of Angels, all unsuspecting, that Subaru was completely in his hands now, following his lead in this dance, reliant upon him as guide and protector. His prey. His possession.

Although....

For all that Subaru was playing along, he was probably furious behind that composed exterior—angry and betrayed at having been set up like this, trapped and manipulated into a position that had to be less than comfortable, and all for the sake of a game that he cared nothing about. It occurred to Seishirou that he hadn't really considered the implications of this emotional jolt, its ripples across the wider field of their involvement with each other, and he felt a dim stirring of unease.

Had this, after all, been a mistake?

No matter, he decided. Mistake or not, it was done, and there was no way to undo it. He'd find a way to fix things with Subaru later, and all would be fine. In the meantime, he'd continue to enjoy himself. Shrugging off the vague disquiet that had been threatening to put a chill in his gratification, he refocused on the party, which seemed to have arrived at one of those awkward lulls where no one had quite hit upon what to say next. He thought of the Western superstition about such silences—*an angel is passing*—and grinned to himself. Slipping off his sunglasses, he tucked them into his breast pocket and glanced toward Satsuki, who was watching him with cool fixity, her chin cradled on one hand as she leaned on the bar.

"Sakurazuka Seishirou," she said, her tone as expressionless as her gaze. She swung one leg idly, her heel kicking against the leg of her stool. "Born April 1, 1965, in Tokyo."

“That’s right.” Seishirou smiled back at her with ingenuous good humor. Of course, his “official” information wasn’t hard to find, but he somehow found himself wondering if she’d uncovered the romantic compatibility horoscope that he’d had done for himself and Subaru, and if so what she might make of it.

Satsuki fished a maraschino cherry out of her drink. “How strange that there aren’t any hospital records,” she mused, and bit the cherry off its stem with efficient precision.

“Well, it was a home birth. A traditional family, you know.” That much was actually true, he reflected. And if Satsuki *had* come across the horoscope, she was clearly missing the point of it, or else had a peculiar idea of how to goad people into reaction. Perhaps after nine years that data was no longer available—the computer was surely trash by now, and it was quite possible that it had never been on any network. He wondered what had happened to the print-out. Taking another sip of his sake, he waited for Satsuki to let the other shoe drop.

Behind the girl’s glasses, her eyes gleamed, though her voice remained detached. “So. Care to tell me the name of the midwife?” Seishirou stared back at her, drawing a look of wide-eyed surprise across his face.

“Why—are you pregnant? Should I be saying ‘congratulations?’” Yuuto burst out with a laugh before he got himself under control, and Satsuki, improbably enough, colored faintly. She sat up straight and turned away, radiating stiff disdain. Seishirou was no more impressed by her feigned indifference than by her attempt at predatory interrogation, or, for that matter, her usual attitude of total ennui.

If it’s about “cool,” it looks like you still need a few lessons, doesn’t it....

“Sakurazuka-san, you’re terrible. Stop teasing our cute Satsuki like that,” Kanoe put in. In Seishirou’s opinion, the child was about as cute as a naked mole rat, but tastes differed. Kanoe seemed about to add something else but was interrupted by a low trilling. Reaching under the bar, she brought out a phone; with a tilt of her head, she let her hair swing aside as she lifted it to her ear. “Yes? Oh?” Kanoe’s voice dropped on the sound, drawing it out long and low. “Really...yes, it’s fine. Let them come on up.” As Kanoe replaced the phone, she smiled with a vulpine edge that seemed, somewhat disconcertingly, to be aimed at him and Subaru. “Well, well. It looks as though we have some more guests arriving.”

* * * * *

Subaru stared at the fine white ceramic cup in his hand, letting the banter wash past somewhere over his head. A fraction of his awareness remained alert to anything that might require his attention, whether it be an active threat or simply someone addressing him; a larger portion hovered about Seishirou, trying to read the man’s intentions, to divine any signals that he might be sending, either deliberate or incidental. All else was consumed by blankness, a solid white-out as hard and featureless as a blizzard, a numb, angry static.

So they were back to this.

In the last day or two, Seishirou had been almost subdued. Clearly that had been too good—or strange—to be true. He had thought that maybe, maybe, even if Seishirou was acting unlike himself, even if Seishirou was struggling with something, in some kind of inner distress, at least it might mean that they were *getting* somewhere. He felt keenly guilty for looking at the discomfiture of the man he loved as a positive thing, but it was the truth, however cold it might seem. He had never believed that it would be easy, either for himself or for Seishirou. Seishirou appeared to want all the benefits of their closeness without paying any personal price for it, but that wasn't how it worked. There was always a price hidden somewhere, like the sakanagi, the inevitable return that came with any spell.

As a magician, Subaru had known for a very long time about the give and take of energy, about how the power behind a magical working had to come from somewhere—was taken out of the practitioner's own body, if nothing else—and how the emptiness left behind by whatever was sent out helped to draw those ripples of return swiftly toward it, filling itself once more. He had known all of that, as far as the working went, but he'd had trouble applying it to himself on levels other than the strictly technical. He had poured himself out constantly, unceasingly, for the people he was protecting, for his grandmother's expectations, and he had never understood that those resources were not endless, that a day might come when he had nothing left.

Hokuto had known. He grasped now things that she had been trying to tell him all along, and he had to wonder at the boy he'd been, how he could have been so close to his twin and yet sometimes it had been as though she was speaking another language.

But could he, being the person he was, have done any differently? Before he had come face-to-face with death itself and learned the real limit of his ability to make a difference?

It had never been the cigarettes that had increased his power after all, but that he had learned to hoard himself, to save himself for only one thing, for only one person, so much so that the little toll smoking had taken from him had been more than made up for.

But now, to be asked to give and give and give, and to know that, however much he wanted to, if he let himself become utterly empty for that person it would all become meaningless....

Subaru turned the cup, its surface a polished smoothness against his fingers. It would serve Seishirou right if he threw the cup down on the soullessly neutral carpet, stood up, and marched right out of this so-called party.

Did he owe it to Seishirou to stay instead, to let himself be put on display as the man's trophy?

Half-heard words filtered in on him, highlighted by a general ripple of attention shifting toward the elevator, by Seishirou straightening, a subtle tension in the movement. Blinking, Subaru pulled himself out of the morass of his thoughts. More "guests"? If it was true, as that man had said, that the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth wouldn't be here, then who else was left? He was just starting to count off Angels when the elevator door rolled open. Cautiously he turned his head enough to glance in that direction, over the low back of the couch.

The man who moved into the room was very tall and broadly built—powerful-looking, with a face that was what Subaru supposed people meant by “ruggedly handsome.” If he was in fact an Angel—and there was an aura of quiet power about him, not bearing the signature of any familiar type of practitioner but something less structured and defined, more elemental—he was one that Subaru had never encountered personally. Despite his formidable appearance, he seemed wary, ill at ease. The woman had glided forward to meet him; she paused and surprise flickered across her face. There was movement on the man’s other side, a small figure stepping into view—a familiar figure, seeming even more delicate than usual as she emerged from her companion’s eclipse. Clasping her hands together, she dipped into an abrupt bow, short hair swinging forward about her face.

“G- good evening!”

“Yuzuriha!” He’d spun about, legs coiling beneath him as if he might hope to launch himself over the couch and do something meaningful, her name startled out of him before he thought. She jerked back upright, her head whipping around to spot him.

“Subaru-san!” She stared at him for a blank, stunned instant. Then, for some reason, she blushed.

With an effort, Subaru remained in his seat. Nothing had happened, nobody was making any threatening moves; there was no reason to tip the situation over into open conflict for so little as this. And from the way Yuzuriha was reacting, she hadn’t been startled by the Dragons of Earth, at least two of whom he was fairly sure she had to recognize, but instead by *him*—which meant that she hadn’t been duped into being here but had come with some foreknowledge of what she was getting into. More than he’d had, anyway...but obviously she didn’t know everything. *A person that she loved, a Dragon of Earth*—what *had* the man told her exactly? How had he convinced her that this was anything remotely like a good idea? And was there an underlying plan of some kind, to have the two of them meet each other here, unawares? Glancing over, he caught the Angel’s gaze and discovered there only confusion and a shock that didn’t seem feigned. Their hostess had seemed surprised as well, he recalled.

Could it possibly be coincidence? The idea seemed faintly absurd.

And even aside from all of that, if Yuzuriha and her escort were supposed to be friends, or perhaps something more than that, what reason could the man have for bringing her to a place like this, in the midst of what were, after all, her enemies? A cruelty and confidence like Seishirou’s? A declaration of rebellion, or some more labyrinthine message, intended for the other Angels? The genuine belief that this was just a party, and that bringing a Dragon of Heaven for a date was completely unremarkable? There were entirely too many questions.

“Interesting,” Seishirou murmured, a dark and speculative purr, serene echo to Subaru’s own chaotic wonderings, and he fought down the urge to really panic, to leap up, snatch Yuzuriha away, and run.

He could foresee disaster, if Seishirou decided it was time to extend his game-playing to toy with these tangled threads.

On the other hand, it seemed that Seishirou might not have been expecting this either....

“Good evening, and welcome,” the woman was saying, with the same dramatic and vaguely disturbing intensity with which she’d greeted Subaru and Seishirou. She eyed Yuzuriha, her stare and smile intent.

“Um, I’m Nekoi Yuzuriha. Nice to meet you!” Yuzuriha grinned up at the woman, nervous, showing a little too much teeth, and for an instant he could see the mark of the inugami in her, unconcealed by the usual kittenish mask. “And everyone else, too!” Darting aside, her gaze skimmed the room, faltering only when it snagged briefly on Subaru and then on Seishirou, before her Angel companion, who’d been restlessly shifting his weight, rocked a half-step forward, and she cast a distracted glance back over her shoulder, acknowledgement and question as the man loomed above her.

The woman’s eyes flicked up at that movement. Apparently she didn’t share enigmatic jokes with this Dragon of Earth as she did with Seishirou; at any rate, she made no further comment and stopped regarding Yuzuriha as though the girl was a dessert. More airily and to the room at large, she said, “My goodness, how rude—I’ve been neglecting my introductions. I’m Kanoe. Just ‘Kanoe’ is fine.” She named off everyone around the room, ending, with a note of sly insinuation, “And of course, you already know Subaru-kun.”

“Um, yeah.” Yuzuriha gave him a shy smile, still uncertain, but he could already see traces of her irrepressible bubblyness starting to resurface. She didn’t quite jump as Kanoe swept past her, pausing next to the man to give him an arch glance.

“Shiyuu-san, don’t be a lump. Take a lady’s coat.” The man—Shiyuu Kusanagi—started, then awkwardly began trying to help Yuzuriha out of her coat while she, just as awkwardly, hurried to disentangle herself from it and from her long scarf. There was mutual interference and muttered apologies. Both of them were blushing this time. The transfer finally accomplished, Kanoe hauled the man off toward the coat closet, calling back to Yuzuriha as they went, “Make yourself comfortable, please!” Looking somewhat dazed, Yuzuriha stared around the large, shadowy room. Her gaze settled onto Subaru again, and she moved toward him, hesitantly at first, then with increasing certainty. As she slid onto the couch, smoothing out her skirt beneath her, Seishirou gave Subaru’s shoulder a single weighty pat and then withdrew, moving off toward Kanoe and Shiyuu. Subaru wondered if he was going to compare notes with the other Dragon of Earth.

“He actually came,” the girl Yatouji was murmuring, barely audible. “He *never* comes.”

“Well, neither does Sakurazuka-san,” the blond man, Kigai, replied. He chuckled faintly. “It must be the booze.” More loudly, he added, “Miss, do you want a soda?”

Yuzuriha touched a thoughtful finger to her lips. “Would it be rude to ask for sake instead?” she mused out loud. Noticing Subaru’s stare, she jumped and fluttered, backpedaling quickly. “Of course, a soda would be fine!”

At fourteen, Yuzuriha should not be having alcohol in the midst of these Dragons of Earth. In fact, strictly speaking, neither should he—as companionable as everyone was being, they were not among friends, and he knew that he had relatively little tolerance. He'd have to be very careful if he didn't want to cloud his wits.

But did he have any right, really, to be telling Yuzuriha what she should or shouldn't do? When she was old enough to sacrifice herself in the fight to save the human world from its destruction, to carry secrets in the privacy of her own heart, to be no less alone in this than he was, than any of them were?

"Have whatever you want," he murmured. "It doesn't matter to me."

"Maybe later," she responded, just as quietly. The words had twisted on him somehow, coming out colder than he intended, more indifferent, when indifference was the opposite of what he felt, but she smiled at him, unconcerned now, serene as summer. He had a moment's intimation of what she might be like someday, the woman she'd grow into in the future, if she survived. Then—"Ah! Thank you very much!" She bounced to her feet to accept a glass from Kigai, all her usual effervescence back in full force. Kigai blinked as if startled—not all that uncommon a reaction to Yuzuriha's enthusiasm, Subaru had noticed. Then he grinned.

"The other side definitely has all the advantage when it comes to youth and energy," he said. "Satsuki-chan, you're going to have to take up the slack for our team. We old folks will be counting on you."

"Ha." Yatouji looked mildly amused, but not at all inclined to be energetic. "Good thing you're not really that old, then. Anyway, Nataka is the youngest, so isn't that who you should be bothering?"

"For what? I don't understand." Looking at the clone's pale, serious face, Subaru tried to picture it competing with Yuzuriha or Sorata in a display of high-spiritedness, and failed. He couldn't even begin to imagine such a thing. If only the world's fate was something that could be decided so simply and light-heartedly...but he'd probably be a handicap for his side in that case. The skitter of his thoughts brought him unexpectedly around to his sister, to what she might have had to say on the subject—and he smiled inwardly, finding once more the private peace at the heart of his loss, that improbable, paradoxical balance point.

As Yuzuriha sat down next to him again and Kigai began trying to explain "genki" to Nataka, Subaru took advantage of the moment, the two of them alone in the still trough between the Angels' conversations, seemingly ignored. Leaning his head close to Yuzuriha's, he murmured, "Why did you come here? This isn't safe."

"I made him bring me," she answered, her voice equally soft but resolute. "Kusanagi-san told me about the party, how the Dragons of Earth were all going to get together. It was a joke, because he wasn't going to come, but I said I wanted to go, and I kept at it and kept at it until he said yes finally. He really didn't want me to be here." Her rueful smile almost hid the traces of anxiousness about her eyes. "We had an argument about it, and I thought, 'Oh, now we're going to have a real

fight,’ and I was so scared that, that he—well, but anyway, it’s okay now!” That instant of sparkle had a feverish, too-bright quality, as if it hid a strain not yet healed. Subaru ached along with her, knowing what it felt like to see the threads of a relationship stretched thin and fragile, and yet to be compelled to hold one’s ground. Her bravery astounded him. Scarcely pausing, she went on in a quiet rush, “Though I want to do something special for him later, to make up for it. He’s not very happy about the whole thing. But still, I just had to come....”

“Why?”

Yuzuriha stared at him, his question spreading silence like ripples in the air between them. Then she turned away. She looked down into the bubble and fizz of her soda, her hair tipping forward about her face.

“They’re human, aren’t they?” she said at last. “The people who are fighting for the end of the human world. I never could understand it...so I wanted to see what kind of people they were, who would fight for something like that. Kusanagi-san...I can understand, I think. Even if we’re on opposite sides, I know that it’s important to him, that it means something, so I can’t regret it...well, not too much. If he didn’t feel that way, then he’d be a totally different person, right? And I know that it isn’t easy for him. The others, though—are they happy? Are they sad? Are they scared? I just think, if I could find out what they’re like, as people, then maybe everything about this would make more sense. And maybe...maybe they should know what we’re like, as people, too. Before the final day.”

“Yuzuriha,” he murmured. Again and again she surprised him, the youngest of the Dragons of Heaven, and yet wiser in many ways than adults twice her age. It must have shown in his voice; Yuzuriha glanced up at him, seemingly startled, then blushed and sat up straight once more, laughing, flapping one hand as if to fan away his regard.

“Don’t worry, Subaru-san! It’s not really so unsafe—Kusanagi-san said he’d protect me if something bad happens, and I can protect myself too, with Inuki! And now you’re here as well, so we can team up if anything goes wrong! It’ll be fine! Right?”

“Um, yeah.” He couldn’t help wondering what Seishirou would do, if he, Yuzuriha, and Shiyuu had to face off against the other Angels. He *thought* that Seishirou would most likely take their side, if only to keep anyone else from laying a finger on the Sakurazukamori’s prey, but trying to second-guess the man was difficult and often risky. Something else occurred to him, and he glanced around the room, noticing the lack of a certain spiritual presence. “Where is Inuki?”

“Oh.” Yuzuriha looked vaguely guilty. “I made him wait outside. I thought if the Dragons of Earth saw him, they’d think it was going to be trouble—you know, it’d be like somebody bringing a gun or a sword to the party. And he might get nervous and bite somebody, if he thought they were threatening me.” Perking up again, she smiled, adding, “It’s okay, though—he’s just outside, and if I need him he can be here with me in an instant!” She snapped her fingers. “Just like that!”

* * * * *

“There,” Kamui said, pointing upward. “I told you I saw Inuki.”

Arashi followed his gesture, and at last she spotted the inugami, a barely discernable shadow drifting near the top of a tall building, higher even than their rooftop vantage point. “You’re right. I wonder what he’s doing there, and where Yuzuriha-san is.”

“Maybe she left him there to watch something,” Sorata speculated. “Hang on—I’ll check it out!” Springing up and out, he hit the side of the building across the way and launched himself again. Like a ping-pong ball, he bounded back and forth across the street, highrise to highrise, until with a last leap he reached where Inuki was floating and caught hold of part of the building’s structure, bracing his feet against the wall. Twisting around, he bent toward the inugami. As Arashi peered across the distance, she thought that he might be ruffling its fur.

Carefully, then, Sorata leaned over and looked around the edge of a large window. Moving much more rapidly, he jerked back, pressing himself flat to the wall. After a moment, he peeked and then retreated again, and Arashi swallowed her impatience at his theatrics. If he imagined he was being some kind of super spy, he was definitely overacting the part. And what could he *possibly* be looking at?

He’d better not have stumbled across some poor woman undressing....

Sorata finally left the window and jumped back down toward where they were waiting, descending even more precipitately than he’d gone up. As he got within a couple of buildings of them, Arashi noticed that he looked somewhat alarmed, though again he might be doing that purely for effect. He arrived on their rooftop, and Arashi arched an eyebrow at him. “Well?” she asked.

“Well, I’ve got some good news and some bad news.” Sorata ran a hand through his hair, as if gathering himself to deal with some awkwardness, and Arashi had an all-too-familiar sense of foreboding. “The good news is, not only is Yuzu-chan up there, but Subaru-san is too.”

“Subaru!” Kamui burst out in startled delight, before Arashi could say anything, and she let her own exclamation go unvoiced, an inner, silent echo. She watched Sorata’s grin instead, noted the strain of worry hidden within it, and felt that flicker of lightness inside her heart fade.

“What’s the bad news?” she asked.

“The bad news is,” Sorata hesitated for what seemed like a very long time, “there’s also a whole bunch of Dragons of Earth. Now wait, wait, wait!” He grabbed the back of Kamui’s jacket before Kamui had bolted more than a step or two. Kamui whirled on him, eyes blazing and urgent.

“Let go of me!”

“Not so fast! Let’s not go rushing up there like crazy people! Those two are just fine at the moment.”

“Just fine?” Kamui jerked against Sorata’s grip, not yet to the point of blasting the monk away from him, though the air wavered faintly with repressed psychic force. “Are *you* crazy? How the heck can they be fine, surrounded by the Dragons of Earth?”

“They’re all just sitting there right now. Everything’s real quiet. But if we go charging on in, the whole thing could blow up. It’s like a hostage situation, you know? We gotta handle it delicately.” Arashi wasn’t sure what she found more upsetting, the thought of their two fellow Seals in such an inexplicable and perilous situation, or the fact that Sorata was suggesting discretion while she was inclined to side with Kamui and go rushing off at once to the rescue. Setting her first impulse aside, however, she decided that Sorata’s approach might actually have some merit.

“What are you suggesting?” she asked cautiously.

Sorata’s expression suddenly took on a manic edge. “Don’t worry, Miss! I’ve got a plan! A cunning plan! Ahahaha!” He smacked his fist into his other palm, and Arashi’s feeling of unease intensified.

Somehow, whenever he told her not to worry about something in that particular tone of voice, it always had the opposite effect.

* * * * *

Nobody had killed anyone yet. Nobody had even behaved particularly badly. Subaru supposed that sooner or later he would have to start taking that for granted, or else wear himself out from the strain of constant high-tension readiness. Yuzuriha had been trying to “get to know” the Dragons of Earth, with mixed success, but it nevertheless involved a great deal of playful conversation and laughter. Though he worried for her sake, he was glad enough to remain in the background, letting the perky teenager be the center of attention while he lurked on his couch and brooded.

Presence folded about him, familiar, close, and warm—Seishirou leaning on the couch back again, bending down this time to bring his head right next to Subaru’s, his breath a zephyr stirring against Subaru’s neck. “How are you doing, Subaru-kun? Are you enjoying the party?”

Should he even dignify that with a response? Seishirou knew him well enough. And indeed, after a moment the man chuckled, clearly reading his silence.

“You just need to loosen up a little.” Seishirou’s hand squeezed his shoulder, a slyly subtle intimacy, Seishirou’s arm curving around behind him in one of those not-quite embraces. “Didn’t your sister say it once? ‘Be more natural!’”

“Is that so?” He could hear the flat note in his own voice, quiet enough that only he and Seishirou could hear it, a discordance amidst the others’ deliberate harmony. Bitterness twisted in him, the sour-sweetness of memories mixed with loss, Seishirou’s unrelenting sense of humor, his

own exhaustion with himself as a person. If only, just for once...but he had never known how to be easy, or free, or anything but the heir of the Sumeragi clan.

Except, sometimes, when he was alone with Seishirou.

Sometimes... Subaru gazed into the little sake lingering in his cup. Was there truth in wine, he wondered. He'd felt its effects before, the way it made reality shift, the world taking on a hazy, unfocused glow like that of a place suffused with benevolent spirits. He'd never gotten really drunk, just enough to be aware of that sideways step leading to a different state of consciousness—and if he were to do so, would it make any real difference? Would it let him forget himself, and not regret? Did he even dare to think of it, in a situation such as this? Finishing what the cup held, he turned the taste of it on his tongue, still undecided, testing himself against that edge.

Yuzuriha had insisted that she could take care of herself.

Could he in good conscience put her in a position where she might think that she had to take care of *him*?

At the bar, Yatouji started, a brief expression of surprise crossing her face. “What?” she murmured, as if to herself. Pulling out a vibrating cell phone, she flipped it open and stared at it. Its color screen reflected in her glasses, twin mirror images too small and far away from him to be more than indefinable blobs. Wisps of spiritual power coiled about her wrist and fingers, shimmering pulses of translucent rainbow energy feeding in and out of the phone, and Subaru sat up out of his slouch, carefully gathering himself as he watched that play of energy with close attention. “What the—oh, now *this* is just getting ridiculous.” Yatouji watched the screen with cool intensity, as if intrigued despite her scorn, then gave a derisive snort. “Well, *duh*. That trick’s ancient. So, now what, hmm?” She pushed a button on her phone, and the screen-images on her glasses flickered and changed. “Heh, good one, and now you’re stuck there, aren’t you? Here, I’ll help you with that....”

“You kids and your toys,” Kanoe said indulgently. “Care to share with us, Satsuki?”

“Mm-nn.” Yatouji smirked, as if holding back improbable laughter. “You’ll see in a minute or two anyway. Stay in stand-by mode, Beast. That’s all.” Pushing a few more buttons, Yatouji looked at the screen one last time, then snapped the phone shut with a satisfied air. “Well. This might actually be interesting. Incoming in ten, nine, eight....”

As she continued to tick off numbers, Subaru blinked, trying to unravel what had just happened. Who or what was incoming? Closing his eyes, he stilled his mind and reached out, trying to catch some trace, if there was a spiritual aura...he thought he felt a presence of shadows, shifting and translucent, like something meant to deceive the mind’s eye, and among them the briefest flash of a familiar power, a star among wind-moved leaves, revealed only for an instant.

A cool fire, so very like the one that he’d seen and felt once before, deep in a dark, inner sea....

Impossible. He had to be imagining things.

“...three, two, one.” Yatouji finished. She glanced toward the elevator, so he followed her gaze in time to watch the door slide open. After a moment’s pause, someone poked their head partway around the edge of the doorway—Subaru glimpsed a staring grey eye, unruly dark hair—then jerked it back out of view. In the silence, a low mutter was clearly audible.

“Aw, crap. Who the heck has an elevator open right into their living room?”

“Can I help you, young man?” Kanoe asked loudly as she advanced a few steps toward the elevator. Subaru’s heart had already begun to sink in unhappy realization; as a gangling, all-too-recognizable figure scuffled through the opening and into the room, it seemed to condense as well, becoming a tight, heavy lump somewhere around his stomach.

“Ahaha.” Sorata rubbed at the back of his head, further mussing his hair. His other arm was taken up with a low stack of flat, white cardboard boxes. “Sorry to disturb you, ma’am. I guess I came to the wrong place. Unless you ordered the three large pies?” Suddenly wide-eyed, Sorata blinked at her with complete ingenuousness. There was a distinct aroma of cheese and sauce, Subaru noticed, and Sorata was wearing an oversized red jacket with a PIZZA-LA T-shirt on underneath it.

Subaru wondered if he could possibly be drunk already, on just one cup of sake.

Kanoe grinned. “I’m afraid not. But I’d be more than willing to take them off your hands for you. We *are* having a party, after all.”

“Uh, that’d be great! Just fine! Since I’m here intruding on you ‘n’ stuff...I can always make a second trip for the other guy, right?”

“Next time you might not want to get on the *private* elevator,” Yatouji murmured, and Sorata laughed a little too frantically, avoiding everyone’s gaze.

Subaru kept his expression blank, but inwardly he frowned. Clearly Sorata hadn’t expected to be dropped right into the middle of the Dragons of Earth; now that he had been, he was continuing his pretense with an edge of desperate intensity, even though he had to know that Kigai, for one, could call him on it at any time. And yet Kigai said nothing. Everyone was just going along with the game, despite the fact that no ordinary pizza boy would have gotten past the security station downstairs unannounced. Of course they all had to know or at least suspect, and they were probably entertaining themselves by watching a Dragon of Heaven scramble. How long did Sorata think he could keep this up? What was he intending—what had he even meant to do in the first place? Not one bit of his presence made any sense, or seemed remotely like a good idea.

Movement caught Subaru’s eye, at the back of the elevator. His angle of view took in the left rear corner, and in those mirrored panels near the ceiling he saw color, a brief stirring that looked like ripple of fabric, a subtle shift of weight. There was definitely something to either side of the door that wasn’t gold-toned metal and glass. He caught his breath, alarmed all over again.

What he’d felt before....

“Oh, but I’m afraid I don’t have any cash on me,” Kanoe was saying. She glided close to Sorata, practically right up against him, sweeping her long hair back over one shoulder. Sorata’s

gaze meandered downward, paused, then snapped back up to her face. His grin had taken on a panicked, frozen rigidity. “I wonder if there’s some other way I can pay you.”

“Ah, eh—personal check?” Sorata’s voice squeaked high on the last word. Kanoe inclined toward him; he leaned backward, bobbed the stack of pizza boxes, and after flailing briefly somehow managed to save them from falling.

“I was thinking more, hmm....” Kanoe’s hand trailed down the side of his face, not quite touching the skin, her crimson nails glinting as they caught the light. There was a muffled snort from one of the other couches; Subaru glanced over and saw Shiyuu, head lowered, fist pressed against his mouth, his shoulders twitching. Yuzuriha, kneeling on the seat next to him, was watching the proceedings with her head cocked to one side, her expression quizzical, partly dubious and partly amused.

“Sorata-san,” she said, “*why* are you a pizza-boy?” He shot her a vaguely abashed, almost guilty look.

“Um, moonlighting?” That motion inside the elevator again, more emphatic this time, and a shadow glided around the edge of the doorway, a swirl of long skirt, of straight dark hair.

“That’s enough already.” Arashi stepped up next to Sorata. After a pointed stare at Kanoe, who in surprise or caution had already drawn back slightly, she looked sidelong at Sorata, frowning. “Give up. Everyone here can see right through your so-called disguise.”

“Hey—but it was a good strategy, right?” Sorata protested. Arashi rolled her eyes. “Uh, until it wasn’t anymore....”

Shiyuu chuckled and sat up. “Just for reconnaissance in the building, it wasn’t a terrible plan,” he said. Leaning back, he clasped his hands behind his head with a wry grin. “But you know what they say: no plan survives contact with the enemy.”

“But for tonight, nobody’s the enemy! Isn’t that right?” Shiyuu glanced at Yuzuriha, startled by her sudden urgency. The silence that followed seemed to ring with the echo of that declaration, and with all the possibilities of what could be said or done in answer. Everyone looked around at each other, watching for reactions, but at the same time Subaru knew that they were looking inward, measuring their own impulses and also the currents of psychic atmosphere in the room, trying to read the situation’s delicate balance and to sense which way it might slip. Behind Subaru, Seishirou straightened up, and Subaru tensed.

“I vote for pizza,” Seishirou said.

There was movement yet again, this time from the other side of the elevator doorway. One last, slight figure stepped slowly into the opening and paused there, half silhouetted within that frame of sharper light, his stance tautly poised yet almost diffident. That wary tension sang with a subliminal note of power, bright and argent as the ring of windchimes, as a far-off star—and the room’s ambiance, which had started easing toward relaxation at Seishirou’s words, rippled as if caught by a sudden wind, threatened to waver back the other way. Subaru almost shivered with

that shifting current, and even more so with the shock of his two worlds meeting. The person to whom he'd given himself so utterly, and the person beside whom he had sworn to stand....

Kamui.

"Pizza it is!" Kigai said, and if his casual cheerfulness was deliberate, which Subaru thought it surely had to be, it was just about impossible to tell. He came forward to relieve Sorata of the pizza boxes. "So, what'd you bring us?"

"Uh, lessee...one Italian Basil, one Pescatore, an' one Baccarat."

"Ooh, snow crab! Good choices." Kigai beamed at Sorata, who chuckled and rubbed at the back of his neck in embarrassed modesty. Taking the pizzas, Kigai headed for the coffee table near where everyone else was sitting, and Sorata, with a briefly lingering backward glance at Kamui, drifted more slowly in his wake.

"So what are we all celebrating?" Sorata asked.

"It's a bounenkai," Kigai replied. "Miss, if you could just move your drink...ah, thanks."

"A party to forget the year, eh?" Sorata plopped down on the floor at the end of the table.

"Well, I figure that's something we can all get behind! Ha ha ha! Right, Miss?" He grinned over his shoulder at Arashi before turning back toward the pizza. The shrine maiden stood motionless in front of the elevator as if frozen there, her eyes wide, dark, and troubled.

"So," Kigai said genially, "what does everybody want?"

"Mmm, yay! Potato and crab sauce, please!"

"Hrrmmm...."

"The Italian Basil is pretty classic. What do you think, Subaru-kun?"

"Ah—careful with the pizza, please." Kanoe moved swiftly across the room to hover behind Kigai, an anxious hostess still trying hard to be gracious. "Or I'll have to get the carpet cleaned before my boss comes back. Satsuki, are there any napkins over there...?"

As the focus of attention settled firmly about the food, Kamui, all but ignored now, took a hesitant step forward. The elevator door slid shut at last behind him, cutting off that light. His eyes sought out Subaru's, distressed, questioning—no, *pleading*—and Subaru felt that need and his own fear like claws finding a grip, a clutching, cold shock, the promise of a tearing agony. He could *not* respond to that yearning—not here and now, not with Seishirou a shadow and a heat just behind him, watchful for his reactions. Not with his conflicting loyalties still unresolved, as they had to be until the final day. Only that delicately balanced tension let him remain in flight, a bird caught up between rising thermals and the downward press of gravity, and for a moment he was very nearly angry at Kamui, a senseless, hot throb of resentment that shamed him even as he felt it. None of this was Kamui's fault. But still, wasn't it enough—if not what he'd already done and given, then his promise to come back, to take his place by Kamui's side, to fight and, if necessary, to die as a Dragon of Heaven?

If Kamui only knew the pain that fulfilling such a promise was going to cause him....

But Kamui would never know. Resolution solidified in Subaru, hard and crystalline and bright. To make Kamui feel guilty would be unreasonable and cruel—it would only hurt Kamui, who already blamed himself for so much, while Subaru’s own suffering wouldn’t be eased at all.

So he’d surrender himself to that destiny, to that promise, and never speak a word of its cost. There was no escaping it anyway—it was necessary for his own purposes as well, the inevitable final move in a game that had run for so long yet seemed now to have lasted nowhere near long enough. The crisis point was breathlessly close, the desperate hope of his one wish.

Therefore, for tonight....

He’d been gazing at Kamui all the while, with what he hoped was a thoughtful or at least neutral expression. Now he made certain of it, letting his face become that long-accustomed mask, dispassionate and remote, and he saw Kamui start slightly. He hoped Kamui would take it as a warning of the need to be restrained, on guard, but that was secondary; he wore the mask for himself, to become the actor in this difficult role he had to play. For Kamui’s sake, for his own, for Seishirou’s, nothing must shift. He set himself to be a still point, pulled in no direction. Lowering his eyes, he once more contemplated the empty cup in his hand, moon-white, so extraordinarily simple.

“Hey, Kamui, Miss—c’mon! You’re gonna miss out on the food. And it’s really good, too! Say, Miss, I’m guessing you don’t get deliveries out at Ise...?”

A hand settled onto his shoulder. “Subaru-kun?” The man’s voice was low, intimate without being insinuating, as if concerned about him, the curve and gentle pressure of those strong fingers so familiar, so warm even through his shirt. Almost, the ice of Subaru’s intention melted, ran slick with water like the slow sweat of desire.

Almost.

Inclining his head, Subaru glanced up at Seishirou. Mask faced mask—was that a flicker of reaction in Seishirou’s one good eye? Holding the man’s gaze, Subaru lifted the cup, turned it almost imperceptibly, the gesture as subtly and precisely choreographed as a presentation in a tea ceremony.

“Another, please.”

And that *was* a reaction, though he caught just the flash of its passing, a shifting of light and shadow, a quick breeze scarcely rippling a field of autumn grasses, before it was gone and Seishirou’s expression had settled into the usual good-natured smile. “Of course,” Seishirou murmured. He took the cup from Subaru’s hand. “But Subaru-kun, better be sure you eat something, all right?”

“Mmmflgood!” Yuzuriha managed through a mouthful of pizza, then squeaked as half her toppings threatened to slide off the slice.

“Yes.” But Subaru closed his eyes first, aware even so of the presence and movements of the others around him, Kamui and Arashi hesitantly approaching the rest of the party, Seishirou

circling away, heading toward the bar. He took a long, slow breath and tried to put out of his mind that momentary contact, Seishirou's fingers brushing over his.

* * * * *

Arashi frowned at her hand of cards. Ostensibly it was because she was trying to decide which ones to discard—which was certainly a dilemma, although not really a frown-worthy one—but in truth it was because of the way this whole situation had continued to spin out wider and stranger and more disquieting, to the point where the annoyance of somehow being unable to master this game was almost lost, a tiny leaf swirled away on a vast, turbulent sea.

How, in the name of all the kami, had she ended up sitting on the floor of a luxury penthouse apartment, playing poker with the Dragons of Earth?

Strip poker, to be more precise.

In all fairness, the stripping wasn't going to be total. If that *had* been the ultimate end of the game, she absolutely would not have let herself get involved. *First team to all be showing underwear loses*, Yuuto had said, which honestly was mortifying enough, now that she was thinking about it again, and *why* had she even said yes on those terms?

Karen and Yuuto had started it. The soapgirl had turned up a little way into the party, accompanied by Seiichirou—and Arashi still wanted to know how the Sakurazukamori had gotten Karen's phone number to invite them. Yuuto had teasingly challenged Karen, she had accepted, and then somehow the game had mutated like one of those monsters in the shows that Sorata and Yuzuriha liked to watch, expanding into a sprawling, multiplayer affair. Arashi didn't think Karen had been entirely serious about recruiting her, but it was hard to tell with Karen, and she'd found herself oddly confused. Perhaps it had been because of that second cup of sake...or had that been the third? It was mysteriously hard to keep track. Then Sorata had been so dismissive of her poker-playing abilities, which—well, it was true that she'd never played before, but he hadn't needed to be so, so...*breezy* and casual about it. Pride had gotten her into this, she realized, and pride was keeping her from folding her hand and walking away, and she was probably going to have to do extra meditation practice and purifications for this in the morning.

It would be ever so slightly less awful if Sorata hadn't been right. She was terrible at this. And because the rule was that all the hands on a side were taken together, and every player on the team with the lowest total had to take something off, it meant that her allies were also suffering for her bad luck or bad judgment.

Karen was already down to lingerie, though as usual it didn't seem to discomfit her in the least. Satsuki was in bra and leggings, and though her attitude remained aloof and unconcerned she kept directing coldly irritated stares at Arashi. Of the women, Arashi had started out wearing the most, so she still had her skirt and blouse, but one more losing round would mean the end for her team, as well as for her own dignity. She definitely wouldn't be writing to Kaede about this.

And the men, curse them, had only lost one hand of cards and with it their jackets. It would take two more wins by the women even to get them to undershirts, which was *not* the same thing as a bra. On top of which, Natakū wasn't even male, not to mention that it seemed to have no real understanding of the embarrassment that was supposed to be involved.

This game was utterly full of unfairness.

In the background, the karaoke was still going on, although it seemed to be winding down now that several of the participants had defected to the card game. The Sakurazukamori was crooning something about love being better than ice cream, singing with honeyed insincerity and a wicked gleam in his eye, and she wondered how poor Subaru could bear to sit there and listen to his notorious enemy performing. She didn't know all the history between them, but if it was as serious as the whispered gossip of all the occult and mystery orders suggested....

Come to think of it, she still didn't understand why Subaru was here in the first place. If he was hunting the Sakurazukamori, then maybe it would make sense...but then shouldn't they be confronting each other?

"Hey!" Startled, Arashi jerked her attention back to the game. Satsuki was glaring at her with impatience and icy disdain. "Are you discarding anything or what?"

Hastily Arashi found her place among the cards. "Um, one, please." It was Natakū's turn to deal, and with a subtle prompt from Yuuto it slid the replacement card across the carpet toward her. Even the bioroid played better than she did. Unfair, unfair. Picking up the new card, Arashi studied her hand.

Oh. This was almost good, she thought. The high cards she'd been going for hadn't worked out, but now she had three fours (inauspicious, a random corner of her mind was musing, the number of death, unless the encompassing three of the triple made up for it?) and perhaps a chance to hold off doom for another round. And with that, maybe she'd find some opportunity to escape the game entirely. Maybe everyone would get bored finally, or she'd come up with a really good excuse to leave, or maybe a meteor would hit Tokyo or a kekkai would start to break....

Your love is better than chocolate, the Sakurazukamori was singing grandly,

Better than anything else that I've tried.

Oh, love is better than chocolate.

Everyone here knows how to cry....

Arashi rather doubted that.

She glanced sidelong at her teammates. Satsuki wasn't even looking at her cards; she held them folded together in one hand, the fingers of the other tapping incessantly on her crossed legs, a restlessness that seemed at odds with her flat, brooding gaze as she watched Yuuto take his one new draw. Beyond her, Karen sat gracefully coiled, smiling with sly confidence, the faces of her cards hidden as she pressed them to her décolletage. On the opposing side, Yuuto was smirking back at her, while next to him the bioroid examined its hand, its pale face almost haunting in its

complete lack of expression, like the melancholy of a long-forgotten doll or an abandoned child bereft of any joy or hope. And Sorata....

Arashi glowered over her cards at the monk, who was rearranging his hand with an intense absorption that had to be feigned, at least in part. She was sure that behind that facade he was enjoying this immensely; it must be like a fantasy come true for him. She could just picture him picturing her in a sexy pose, her blouse opened and slipping down off her shoulders, and...she realized that he was staring back at her with a perplexed look. She snatched her gaze back down to her hand, her cheeks blazing. If she had any luck at all (although this game seemed to be proving that she did not, or if she did then it was all bad), Sorata would assume that her flush was a result of the alcohol.

It *had* been only two drinks. But it was entirely possible that someone had been refilling her cup when she wasn't paying attention. The Dragons of Earth were not to be trusted.

"Okay—show 'em," Yuuto said. "Let's see who takes this round." Off to the side, there was a scatter of quiet applause as the Sakurazukamori's song finished and then a murmur of conversation. The karaoke seemed to be over, and someone put on background music, the volume fading up in what appeared to be mid-song, a wailing woman's voice chanting amidst the drone of strange instruments and what sounded like a synthesized beat. It was nothing that Arashi recognized and she quickly tuned it out, concentrating again on the game. Hands were called clockwise from the dealer, which meant that....

"Ahahaha!...I got nothin'." Lowering his hand, Sorata held it out, faces up, proving that for all his keenly focused attention his cards did indeed add up to nothing. Arashi's heart gave a tiny lurch, anxiety jolting into startled relief.

"Boo!" Yuuto scoffed. "Sorata-kun, you're an embarrassment to the male gender." Sorata's mortified grin grew wider and more pained; he laughed that jittery laugh again but didn't try to defend himself. Tossing down his cards, he leaned back against the wall, fingers laced behind his head, to watch the rest of the proceedings.

So now it was Arashi's turn. Carefully she laid her cards out on the floor. "Three...three fours."

"All right! *Finally*." Satsuki spread her own hand out in front of her, a quick, arcing sweep. "Pair of aces." Everyone looked at Karen.

"So sorry." The soapgirl's lashes swept down, veiling her gaze. Still smiling, she set her cards down with serenely languid grace. "Fortune must be favoring someone else tonight."

"She's jealous of your charms, of course," Yuuto returned gallantly, while Arashi stared at Karen in slowly dawning horror as she realized what Karen's words implied. A glance down at the cards confirmed her fears. She'd been sure from Karen's attitude that it had been an excellent hand—there was something *wrong* about bluffing one's own partners. Next to Arashi, Satsuki made an exasperated chuffing sound, apparently thinking something similar. Yuuto grinned and laid out his cards, with little pauses for dramatic emphasis. "Two threes," he announced, "and two jacks."

Did three of a kind beat two pair? Arashi bit her lip. She found that her hand had stolen up, as if of its own volition, to clutch at the neckline of her blouse. When Nataka put down a pair of sixes and everyone's tension dissolved into triumph on the ladies' side, defeat and mock-serious aggravation on the men's, Arashi almost wilted at the reprieve. She'd managed to survive the round after all. Grumbling, Yuuto shifted position, pulling up his pants leg to get at his socks while Karen baited him playfully.

"I don't understand," Nataka interrupted. It turned to look at Sorata, frowning slightly. "I thought the goal of this game was to have a high-scoring hand."

Sorata froze, one sock half off, and stared at the bioroid, his brow furrowed. "Huh? Well, yeah...."

"Then why did you discard those two cards? Your hand would have been much better if you'd kept them."

"What?" In an instant Sorata was all scandalized indignation. "Hey, who said you could look at my cards! Keep your eyes to yourself, buster!" With a start of recollection he grabbed for the cards that he'd abandoned on the floor, but Yuuto was already moving, lunging past Nataka to grapple Sorata one-handed while with the other he deftly flipped over the two discards. Everyone leaned forward to stare at what was revealed: Sorata's final hand, the ace of hearts, two and four of spades, and jack and ten of hearts, and the two cards he'd let go, the king and queen of hearts.

"Royal flush," Yuuto murmured with something like awe, before his tone shifted to stunned disbelief. "You're playing to *lose*."

"Ehehe...." Sweating a little, Sorata raised his hands, as he might somehow be able to deflect everyone's attention away from himself. At the sight of his strained, awkward, ridiculously sheepish grin, the hollowness that had been opening gradually but inexorably inside Arashi began to constrict, to turn, becoming the emptiness at the core of a churning vortex, a terrible nothing, resonant with potential force, and rising through it a white flame, a blinding sun—she let it lift her, was on her feet, scarcely aware of how, that familiar burning swiftly finding focus, a kindling of power, a fierce ache in the palm of her hand. Yuuto yelped and jerked backward, dragging a startled Nataka with him, and Sorata scrabbled up against the wall as the godsword of Ise drove point-down into the floor in front of him.

Arashi lifted her head and glared at Sorata over the sword's hilt.

How dare he.

How dare he...for her sake....

Her head spun, a sudden fuzziness overtaking the edges of her vision, tinged with shadow. She sank down onto one knee, vaguely aware of Satsuki wrapped in a writhing mesh of black wires called up out of the floor, of Yuzuriha's squeak of alarm somewhere in the distance as Nataka's white silk cloth whipped across the room like a dragon, flashing to its hand, of Karen speaking to those Dragons of Earth, her voice light and calm, her words defusing the tension. Perhaps...it hadn't been wise...she was still looking into Sorata's face, Arashi realized, and his eyes

meeting hers were guileless in their concern, in a yearning as open and unfathomable as the sky. Confused, she glanced down, letting her gaze be caught and held instead by the liquid-silver brightness of her blade.

She had struck right through Sorata's cards, she discovered. The sword's tip had pierced the king of hearts precisely.

An inexplicable pang twinged in Arashi's chest; she released the sword, letting it dissolve back into her body. Her balance faltered as she lost the blade's support, and she had to brace herself with one hand against the floor. Her cheeks were burning once more, and the room still seemed to be out of focus, unsolid, as if anything she wasn't actively holding onto might wisp away into cloud. The music on the stereo was incongruous, overloud—a new song was starting, it seemed, with a man's voice chanting, no more comprehensible than the woman's had been, before another began to sing in what Arashi tentatively identified as English.

The Sakurazukamori groaned, breaking the stark hush that had fallen over the room's conversations.

"Subaru-kun—not this song again!"

"It's not my CD!" Raised in protest, Subaru's voice sounded odd, a trifle too high-pitched. Grateful for any distraction, Arashi glanced over, and after a moment she located him leaning on the bar, having apparently claimed Satsuki's vacated seat sometime during the karaoke. The flush on his face matched the lingering heat that she could feel in her own; his expression wavered between annoyance and some other emotion she couldn't quite identify—his lips twitched, then straightened, but in that instant she'd glimpsed the smile that he was struggling to conceal, an unaccustomed brightness in his face and eyes. Her heart stung her again, startlement, a jolt like stepping around the turning of a garden path and into a vista of absolute, piercing beauty, something too numinous to be grasped without a lifetime's worth of meditation, and she didn't understand why the mere glimmer of a smile should seize her so, unless it was the strangeness of it, associated with someone like Subaru, who in her thoughts was always so serious, so grave, or else its fleetingness, like some elusive mythical beast likely to vanish almost before it had been truly seen.

Yuzuriha popped up in front of Subaru, seemingly out of nowhere, and as he started back that feeling of confused wonder and dismay dissipated, at least a little. "Waiiii, Subaru-san! Does this mean you like this song?"

"Um...." Even as he stumbled to answer her, Yuzuriha was already grabbing him by both hands and tugging him off his stool, was pulling him with her around the end of the bar.

"Then you have to dance with me!" she announced blithely. "Come on!"

"Wha—? Wait—" Subaru tried to plant his feet, his blush intensifying, and the Sakurazukamori laughed. But Yuzuriha, smiling and seemingly oblivious, had begun dancing herself, swaying from foot to foot, swinging their joined hands enthusiastically in time to the music, and at last Subaru gave in, began to echo her movements more tentatively, a diffident two-

step. After a while his own smile crept out once more, as if in spite of himself, an unthinking tenderness in it that surprised Arashi all over again, and perhaps that was the source of such unquiet feelings, she thought—that she was being witness to something meant to be secret, a side of Subaru that had nothing to do with the person he'd shown them all as a Dragon of Heaven, one that even now he might have preferred to keep to himself. She felt as if she must be treading on private ground, like that time when she'd walked into his room and found him gathering himself to leave them, to follow his own inner calling...that one time when he had smiled at her, speaking of the future, and set her heart aflutter with uncertainties, just like this...and she didn't know if she would be welcome there or not.

If in that hidden world there was any place for her.

Such foolish, foolish thoughts....

Yuzuriha released one of Subaru's hands to try for a twirl; caught off guard, he didn't raise his arm quickly enough or high enough. They got tangled, and as they tried to sort themselves out Yuzuriha stumbled and half-fell against him, giggling, while Subaru stammeringly tried to apologize.

"Hey," the big soldier rumbled from his seat on one of the couches, though the amusement in his tone belied any threat, "that's *my* date."

"Yay!" Quick as a hummingbird, Yuzuriha was in front of him, eyes sparkling and hands clasped in delight. "Kusanagi-san, does that mean *you'll* dance with me?"

"Uh, hold on just a moment—" Ignoring his look of mild panic, Yuzuriha grabbed one of his arms and pulled with all her might. It didn't seem likely to have much effect.

"A gentleman should dance when a lady asks him," Kanoe called from somewhere across the room.

"Shouldn't a gentleman be the one to do the asking in the first place?" Yuuto added. "Step it up a little, Shiyuu-san—you're giving the rest of us a bad name."

Yuzuriha had somehow gotten the man to his feet. He was muttering something under his breath, apparently still trying to beg off, but he took Yuzuriha's hands as the two of them tried to sort out how to move to the music and with each other. Both of them were blushing, Arashi noticed. At some point, Subaru had made a strategic retreat back to the safety of the bar, leaving the floor entirely to them.

"What are they doing?" Nataka asked.

"It's called 'dancing,'" Yuuto supplied. "It's something that people do for fun, to relieve physical or emotional tensions."

"Fun?" The bioroid stared perplexedly at the couple, who were getting over a little of their first awkwardness. "But...I don't have any emotions."

"That doesn't mean you can't dance." Uncoiling smoothly, Yuuto rose to his feet. He held one hand out to Satsuki, who had released most of her protective shield of cables, leaving only a few strands twined almost affectionately about one arm. "What do you say we give a demonstration?"

Satsuki stared up at him for a long moment. Surprise made her usually shuttered face seem to open, to soften, becoming something that might actually be alive and human. “Why not,” she said at last with a faint shrug, and the mask clicked back into place. Letting go of the remnant of the cables, which wriggled briefly before sinking back into the floor, she reached up and caught Yuuto’s hand. He pulled her up quickly so that she stood very close to him, swaying almost imperceptibly as she found her balance, not quite touching his chest. Head bowed, she said, low, “It’s a stupid song, though. And it totally sucks to dance to.”

“Nevertheless,” Yuuto returned, equally quiet. Turning his head, he added more cheerily, “Nataku-kun, you too! Get on your feet!”

A pair of hands caught Arashi about the waist, and she squeaked, startled. Karen giggled, close to her ear, the woman’s perfume a dizzying waft of roses, that floral sweetness edged by an undertone of cinnamon, smoldering and restive. “Don’t think *you’re* getting off, either!” Karen said, a sparkle of laughter taking the severity from her words.

“What? But I...”

“It helps.” Karen’s voice was muted now, less bright, as if meant for her alone to hear. “*It does.*” Arashi glanced up; their eyes met, the soapgirl’s gaze briefly solemn before she winked and with a grin snatched Arashi to her feet, jerking from her another yip of surprise and incoherent protest. Heedless, Karen spun them both around, and the room seemed to whirl on multiple levels, both outer and inner, all tenuously connected about her own unexpectedly moving body: the disorientation of that motion, the familiar floating sensation that followed the release of the god’s power, the utter surreality of the entire situation, the things that she could feel her thoughts skittering from like kittens yet couldn’t bring herself to focus upon, the mysterious haziness that made understanding and her feet seem equally far away. It was as if she was being unwound like a bolt of silk, falling into long, artless loops and sweeps of cloth, with parts of her left trailing behind, a wake lingering across different worlds.

Bemused, Arashi tried to follow what was most immediate, her own stumbling as Karen’s hands and the turning and swaying of Karen’s body directed her. The warmth that she felt had to be from the sudden exertion, because surely she’d run out of blushes by now. Even Satsuki’s face showed a trace of color as she and Yuuto danced together, her eyes slightly averted from him as if she were absorbed in perfectly matching each beat of the music, every gesture of her arms cleanly precise, a cool grace—his echoing moves almost idle in contrast, a practiced yet careless ease, a firefly smile playing about his lips, his attention drawn occasionally to one side as he offered encouragement to the bioroid, who seemed to have not quite grasped the concept of rhythm yet.

She was doing better than that. After all, this was easier than she might have expected, now that she’d gotten past the initial awkwardness and was settling into the requirements of music and movement—not so very different from the gliding steps and measured poses of the ritual dances performed deep within the shrine, only more fluid, more inchoate, without the stillnesses between notes that let the rustle of silk sleeves and hakama become audible, and there was no fan

or sacred implement in her hand, giving direction and focus to the energy. Instead it swirled about them all in complex currents, the spiraling yin of clouds in a Taoist painting, a confused but inexorable magnetic tide, and unloosed as she was she felt it lift her, draw her out, a banner catching light, unfurling on the wind. On the count—so—and all other considerations were released to fade into obscurity.

Karen had been right.

As she found her ease with the dance, no longer needing to concentrate solely on the placing of her feet or what to do with her arms, she was able to catch glimpses of the others, all about the room: Kusanagi and Yuzuriha managing the twirl with more grace than she and Subaru had been able to, the man smiling slightly while her whole face and body seemed to shine with laughing delight; Kamui a solitary figure standing far off to one side of the large room, leaning up against one of the floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows, arms crossed over his chest as he stared out at the starry city landscape; Sorata still where he'd been sitting for the game, back to the wall, his arms laced around his knees as he watched the dancers, as he watched her.... She was vaguely surprised that *he* wasn't up and dancing, hamming the whole thing up as he always did, making himself the center of attention. Instead he just sat there, following her with those thoughtful eyes—a jumble of discomfort and indefinite guilt threatened to come together in a keenly stabbing pang, and she swept it all aside. Bah. *Let* him sit, then. Raising one hand high, she spun slowly beneath that pivot point, her head tilted back, her eyes half-closing, feeling the occasional sweep of her hair against her back, the swirl of her skirt about her legs, letting herself be lost in the pure world of that motion, that measured, centered whirling.

She came to a smooth stop as the music ended, held her pose as the woman singer's voice murmured a few last words into the silence—that ritual training again. Oh—but it had been a false ending, apparently, as the music started up again, an abrupt, shimmering swell of sound. It took her a moment to find her place once more; her thoughts, surprised out of their stillness, didn't seem to want to go back there. They flickered and jumped like crickets, glossy and quick in the sun. Karen during the pause had evidently been trying to coax Seiichirou to join them; the man was demurring with mild panic and a flustered smile. Karen hesitated a moment, then shrugged playfully and went to dance with Natakku, who was improving but still could do with some guidance.

These men. If *she* was going to make a spectacle of herself, there was no reason at all for them to get cold feet. She turned about, deliberately not looking toward Sorata. There were Yuuto and Satsuki, gold head close to dark. Beyond them, Kamui, still alone by the window—no, for Kanoe was standing by his shoulder, leaning near, her hair spilling down over her breast. Her lips moved, words inaudible through the music and at this distance; Kamui ducked his head, his jaw visibly setting, his arms tightening around himself. Compunction twinged at Arashi. No—this was wrong, that Kamui should be standing alone while the rest of them were festive together, that he

should be left to the possible devices of the Dragons of Earth without anyone to keep him company, to watch over him.

And it was strange, wasn't it, that Subaru, who in that quiet way was so careful of Kamui's well-being, was nowhere around him. Had not been near him at all, Arashi realized with dawning surprise. She flicked a quick look around the room but didn't spot the onmyouji. Glancing back, she was just in time to see Kamui's eyes go wide—he stared out across the city, rigid and almost trembling, as Kanoe straightened and unhurriedly retreated. The woman wore an expression of dark satisfaction, and Arashi's stomach lurched with real unease. Not good. Confused, she looked again for Subaru, who should *be* here, somewhere, and she found him then, backed up against the bar, half concealed by the tall, broad-shouldered form of the Sakurazukamori, who stood close—too close, his hand resting lightly on the bar as well as he leaned toward Subaru. For all the seeming casualness of the gesture his arm read to Arashi as a barrier, as though it were meant to keep Subaru from slipping away or to ward off anyone else's approach. It was hard to tell from her angle, but Subaru seemed to be slumped toward the man's chest, one hand fisted in the sleeve of that outstretched arm, and for a heart-stopping instant Arashi thought the Sakurazukamori had killed Subaru right there in front of everyone, coldly and stealthily murdered him amidst the sake and the music and the heedless dancers. Then Subaru raised his head, she caught a glimpse of his face, and his eyes...they burned. It was almost like the first time she had ever seen him, when he had nearly run her and Sorata over in his headlong rush to Nakano Sun Plaza, to face his enemy among the ruins there—that same fixed, searing intensity, utterly heedless of anything but the object of his intent, as if the rest of the world barely even existed—and yet it was different. There was no anger, she thought, unless it ran buried deep at the root those upwelling currents of emotion, that fiery, rippling tumult of...of....

Exultation. A terrible, holy joy. The flame of something all-consuming and transcendent. Subaru was smiling, a subtle tugging at the corners of his mouth that nonetheless had the force of sunlight caught in a mirror, focused and absolute and blinding, and her heart seized again, tightening in an inarticulate distress. Subaru the pure white shining of a god's jewel, and the Sakurazukamori like dark wings cupped about his light—

She had stumbled to a halt outside the little cluster of dancers. The singing had stopped anyway, the music was wandering through one of its indefinite passages, as if it couldn't quite decide whether to fade out or transition into something new, and in the distance Karen was saying, "No, sweetie, that's the end of the song. You can stop now, if you want."

"The next one's even worse for dancing," Satsuki remarked, adding as an aside, presumably to Yuuto, "Come on, I want to get something to drink."

Subaru reached up with his other hand, his fingertips settling with dreamlike lightness along the Sakurazukamori's throat and jaw. He swayed nearer, stretching upward as if lifted on an indrawn breath, his lashes lowering, his veiled gaze softening, turning more abstracted as the Sakurazukamori bent very slightly toward him, as their lips touched—as he kissed the

Sakurazukamori with unexpected ease, with an assurance that was at the same time both fierce and oddly gentle, his eyes closing fully, the conflagration of those passions reaching apotheosis: incandescence, completion, and stillness.

Arashi jerked her own gaze aside. Her pulse was a thunder of chaos, like a flock of pigeons clattering toward the sky, and her thoughts—the music was shifting, becoming something darker, more taut, stretched thin between conflicting tensions, and she groped desperately after some distraction. She was standing near a side table; someone had left a cup on it, half-full. Reckless of whose it might be, she picked it up, drank swiftly—the liquid burned her throat, stronger than she'd expected, and she coughed, choked, doubling over and leaning on the table, mortified that she was drawing attention to herself like this. Not the sake that she'd been drinking—then what—?

"Oh, dear," Kanoe said, far off, a note of laughter in her voice. "I'm afraid that might have been mine."

"Miss?" That was Sorata's voice at her side, Sorata's hand beneath her elbow, providing support, and gratitude clashed with the dismay of being seen to need such help. Embarrassing, for the hidden priestess of the shrine of Ise, and here, too, in front of.... Straightening a little, though still leaning on Sorata's arm, she blinked, trying to clear her streaming eyes. Subaru had pulled back from the Sakurazukamori, his own eyes gone wide, his face stricken with self-recollection, with realization. He turned his head and stared, not at her—and in that instant a frenzied whirl of tiny wind-razors seemed to be shredding through her insides, nonsensical indignation and resentment, offended anger, relief—but across the room.

At Kamui, who stared back at him with a matching look of shock and inexorably rising horror.

And that quickly the jumble of Arashi's emotions quieted, became the still point of understanding, for Kamui's sake. For if she was feeling this agitation, this unfathomable sense of loss, something dangerously near to betrayal, how much more so must *Kamui* feel those things, who had put such utter faith and trust in Subaru, although he had never said as much. Who had shared some special bond with the onmyouji, from that time when Subaru had gone into his heart, at such terrible personal risk. Who had loved Subaru, no more able to conceal it than the sun could conceal its own shining or the heavens could conceal the fates of mortal beings from those with eyes and knowledge to read them.

Oh.

Had she too, therefore...?

No matter. Not now or ever. For whatever she had felt, whatever she might have felt, was as nothing next to Kamui's pain, was dissolving like salt into the sea, lost in a faint bewilderment, in a cloudy sympathetic ache, in the growing incomprehensibility of her surroundings, which for some reason had started to become nebulous, distant, almost unreal.

Nobody spoke, though in the background the music played on, the singer's voice a whisper cutting through their silence.

Don't play games with the ones who love you.

For I hear a voice that says:

I love you...I'll kill you.

"Well," the Sakurazukamori said at last. "Not to say that it hasn't been fun, but it's getting late." He half turned, letting go of the bar but leaving his arm curved in front of Subaru's body, his other hand resting lightly on Subaru's hip. A tiny wind had arisen, even indoors; it stirred at his hair and Subaru's, carrying a wisp of pink past them, then another, first breath of an improbable flutter of sakura petals. He was smiling, dark, sly, and ironic. "Thank you so much, Kanoe-san, but it's time we should be going."

"*Subaru.*" Kamui had swayed forward from the window, only the spread fingers of one hand remaining on the glass, his voice as attenuated and fragile as that contact. "*Subaru!*"

Subaru had already looked away from Kamui—was staring blankly at the floor as the sakura storm began in earnest, as if dumbfounded by his own circumstances. He glanced up then, meeting Kamui's wild-eyed gaze with one just as anguished and stark. "I'll be there," he said, his voice taut, urgent. "I—" The wind and the whirl of petals, gaining force, stole the rest of his words away. And then they were disappearing together, the Sakurazukamori and the Sumeragi, breaking up into a flurry of air and illusion that slowly, slowly settled, fading into nothingness.

"Well, well," Kanoe said as the last of the sakura trailed toward the floor, her words breaking the stunned quiet. "I'll say this for Sakurazuka-san: he always knows how to make an exit."

Crack—the splintering of glass, the white sizzle of power at the fringes of perception, like the near-miss of a lightning stroke. Kamui spun away from them all, flung himself through the shattered and falling pane, a slight shadow briefly visible against the glittering night before he dropped out of view. "*Kamui!*" several people shouted, Yuzuriha's voice rising high and frantic among them, adding, "*Inuki!* Go with him!"

Kamui was...they should...she could feel Sorata quiver with the leashed impulse to pursue, to try to help. "What happened?" he was saying tensely to Seichirou, who had come up to them. "I didn't see—" Because he'd been sitting out the dance, because she had—and then he'd been distracted, making sure she was all right, and even now, when he should be doing something for Kamui, when *somebody* should— She tried to jerk away from him, and his hands tightened on her. "Whoa, Miss—"

"I'm fine!" *Go*, she tried to tell him, but the word stuck in her throat. The room was unexpectedly whirling around her, and even as she pushed back from Sorata she found that she couldn't let loose her grip on him, the one motionless point in a world that had somehow come off its foundations. Her clenched hands were a puzzle she couldn't seem to resolve, like a Chinese finger trap; she rocked forward into Sorata again and came to rest with a bump, her head against his shoulder. "Oh...." *Still*, he was, and *safe*, and she tried to remember why she should be making

some kind of strenuous objections to this. At least her fingers were working again. She wiggled them experimentally.

“It’s all right,” Seichirou said, his voice quiet and kind as always, though surely he had to be worried too. “We’ll go after him.” Arashi turned her head, saw Karen poised at the edge of the broken window—somehow dressed again, the cold draft from outside blowing her skirt around her legs, her gaze sober and a touch sad. Worried...about Kamui...and with a start Arashi found her place in the situation once more, wondered vaguely how she had managed to lose track of it.

“Okay,” Sorata was saying, “and I’ll get Miss home.” Get her home...again she was taking up his attention, when she shouldn’t be. Not worth it, not for her sake, and yet she felt a guilty relief, a warmth she didn’t want to be separated from, even as far-off voices in her head and heart raged, mourned, argued passionately that all of this was wrong, so wrong.

“But...but Kamui....” she protested weakly.

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it,” Sorata said, and even muddled as she was she knew that his cheer was false, a flash of brightness to distract her from the darker reality. “Seichirou-san and Karen-san—oh, and Inuki, too—are taking care of things. So Kamui will be just fine.”

But Kamui would not be fine, and she couldn’t find the words to explain what she knew to Sorata: the ache of hopes fractured before they could even be born, the suffering of realizing what might have been in the instant of discovering it forever out of reach, something that would never be, that had in fact always been impossible. As the others sketched brief courtesies to the Dragons of Earth, polite closure to the evening’s unlikely truce, her gaze drifted uselessly around the room. The stark grief and sympathy in Yuzuriha’s tear-bright eyes echoed too closely what she herself was feeling; she looked down, letting her hair swing forward to hide her face. The room seemed to waver, sliding in and out of reality on the pulse of the music, the singer’s voice a tender, pitiless murmur.

I love you...I’ll kill you.

But I’ll love you forever....

* * * * *

Withdrawing his hand from before Subaru’s eyes, Seishirou watched as the haze of enchantment faded from them, to be replaced gradually with awareness. Perhaps it hadn’t truly been necessary to bespell Subaru, but it had been a somewhat delicate matter, folding someone else into that particular illusion, and Subaru had been in an erratic and potentially unpredictable emotional state. It would have been only too easy for him to bolt out of the maboroshi, ruining the effect of their disappearance. With Subaru entranced, it had been simple enough to slip them both away, up the stairs to the rooftop garden, while everyone else had been distracted—and the

Kamui's little display had just confirmed the wisdom of Seishirou's decision. Subaru would not have reacted well to that at all.

It was only now, back down at street level and a couple of blocks away from the building, with no trace of other Seals or Angels anywhere in their vicinity, that Seishirou felt it was reasonably safe to release the spell on Subaru. Even so, he watched carefully as recognition and memory returned to Subaru's gaze. They stood in the shadowy twilight between two streetlights; Subaru's eyes were very dark, their pupils dilated. They widened for a moment, then seemed to dull, like a night sky suffused with clouds, somewhere far away from urban lights. Subaru lowered his head; he stood close enough to Seishirou that doing so concealed his face. After another moment, his shoulders twitched. A faint catch of breath escaped him, sounding disconcertingly like laughter.

Seishirou frowned slightly, though he let only a gentle solicitude show in his voice as he asked, "Are you all right, Subaru-kun?"

"I'm fine." Subaru's response was thin, with a shaky, febrile brightness to it. He rocked forward against Seishirou's chest, one hand rising to clutch at the lapel of Seishirou's coat with surprising strength, an intensity at odds with the airy lightness of his voice. "Thank you."

Somewhat cautiously, Seishirou slid his arm around Subaru. Subaru let himself be turned willingly enough, and they began to walk together, slowly, side by side, but Seishirou remained wary, despite Subaru's seeming complaisance. Subaru leaned a trifle harder on Seishirou than truly necessary, and from time to time he trembled—not with cold, Seishirou thought, for the night was reasonably mild considering the time of year, though still chill enough that he was glad he'd ducked back inside to get their coats. It might be the tremor of a near edge of hysteria, held at bay for now, perhaps blurred into confusion by a little bit too much to drink. Subaru hadn't been past the bounds of discretion, but alcohol did set him afloat rather easily, and he hadn't balanced it with nearly enough food, as Seishirou had known he wouldn't. Surely he would never have let himself be drawn out to dance with that cute inugami master, however shyly and awkwardly, without the influence of the sake. And being drunk would certainly explain that kiss.

That kiss...the extraordinary intimacy of it warmed Seishirou again, even in memory, sent those fiery rivulets of pleasure and astonishment, possession and pride licking through him. For Subaru, who shunned any kind of public display, to succumb to that passion, to that desire for *him*—even in front of the other Dragons of Heaven, even in front of their Kamui, who one way or another was bound to take exception—

Kamui had been really bothered by it, too—on a personal level, not just the dismay of seeing one of his comrades-in-arms fraternizing with the enemy. Everything in his reaction had spoken of shock and naked anguish, a deep wound of betrayal cutting straight into the heart. There had been something going on there, Seishirou was increasingly sure, perhaps unspoken, perhaps unrealized, but nonetheless true, and hints of it had been in Subaru's reactions as well, that guilt so stark it had nearly been pain, that straining attempt to promise—what?

Subaru murmured something under his breath, too low to catch, then shivered with another of those near-silent, might-be laughs. Seishirou waited for that ripple of exhalation to fade, being careful meanwhile that his arm around Subaru's shoulders remained comfortably relaxed, that the stirrings of his faint unquiet didn't manifest themselves in any noticeable tension.

"It was an interesting party," he said at last.

"Yes." Subaru's voice, though still soft, was pitched oddly high, and Seishirou found himself thinking of Subaru at sixteen, alight over some new and unusual patient at the clinic, his words tumbling over themselves like eager puppies. But for all its effervescence there was a tight thread running through that gaiety, barely perceptible, the glint of the thinnest wire catching light, with the potential for a shrill note in its vibration, should it be plucked. "It was...it was...." His voice dropped, becoming throaty, complex with layers of implication, things unuttered, perhaps even unrecognized. *"Interesting."*

He slipped out from Seishirou's arm then, stepping quickly forward, though he reached back to twine his fingers with Seishirou's in passing, maintaining a tenuous contact. At the full reach of both their arms, he slowed, swung their hands gently, humming a snatch of what might have been that ridiculous song, though those notes were too few and wandered too much for it to be definite. They trailed off into silence, and Subaru tilted his head back, breathed in, deep and sharp, as if startled by the clarity of the winter night, or by himself.

Seishirou smiled. With sudden swiftness, he transferred his grip to Subaru's wrist and yanked Subaru back, spinning the other about to face him. Subaru gasped as he stumbled against Seishirou, then swayed upright again, lifting his eyes. He met Seishirou's gaze above their gloved hands, his expression half-teasing, half-bemused.

"Subaru-kun," Seishirou murmured, "you're not really that drunk. Are you?"

And as he studied Subaru intently, from such a near distance, the stillness of comprehension was more than evident. For all the tenderness of his tone, he hadn't bothered to mask the searching watchfulness of his gaze, the hunter's keen awareness, and before that acuity Subaru went very quiet, the uncharacteristic breeziness dispersing, like the life of a forest going into hiding at an intruder's footstep. The hush that was left in its wake hinted at loss, sorrow and shame, perhaps even fear—and as Seishirou stared deep into Subaru's eyes, trying to follow all those traces to their hidden meaning, he saw something else start to kindle there, electric and hot, almost wild. The corners of Subaru's mouth tugged up once more. Slowly he leaned in toward Seishirou, going up onto his toes, his lashes lowering suggestively, his lips barely parted in that unexpected, slightly feral smile, and Seishirou was drawn in despite himself, caught once more by the memory of their recent kiss, by Subaru's inexplicable yet endlessly compelling ardor. As if mesmerized, he bent his head, his gaze never leaving Subaru's face as Subaru whispered:

"Catch me."

Twisting his wrist, Subaru snapped it sideways against Seishirou's fingers, breaking free of his slackened grasp. Subaru whirled, ducked, and bolted away, and Seishirou's fingertips just brushed the back of Subaru's coat as he flung out his arm in half-distracted instinct and missed the grab.

Idiot. What *had* he been thinking?

But...Subaru was....

Subaru's laugh floated back to him, thin and thready, like the cry of a far-off bird. Subaru was *fast*—as Seishirou finally shook off his surprise, Subaru had already crossed the road and was vaulting a parked car to disappear around the corner beyond. Seishirou took a couple of quick steps forward and then sprang, streetlight to cornice—he began the chase in earnest, coursing after his prey in long, loping bounds across the multi-tiered artificial landscape of the rooftops. Reaching out, he found the beacon of his twin marks upon Subaru's hands and let that orient him to the other's flight, firmly putting aside the uneasiness that wanted some more tangible fix, sight or scent or sound, as well as the vague, disquieting sense that something was askew in his own reactions and had been throughout the evening.

Later. For now, only the hunt was of any real importance. He took the shortest line, straight across the buildings, the unseen light of his stars a sure enough guide, never letting him lose track of where Subaru was—*of course*—until at last he found himself poised at the corner of a roof, safely ahead of his target. Dropping catlike back down to street level, into the deep shadows of an alley, he paused there, recovering his wind, and waited.

Footsteps presaged Subaru's appearance, and low pantings of breath. No laughter, now. Glancing out of the alley, Seishirou saw him approaching, a lone figure pelting down the center of the empty sidewalk. As he drew near, Seishirou stepped forward, melting from those shadows into the twilight beneath the dim streetlights, using just the least tinge of illusion to make it seem as if he had condensed out of the darkness, was suddenly there in Subaru's path.

Subaru-kun.

You can't escape....

Subaru never slowed. He ran full-tilt into Seishirou, and the shock of their collision was like a sudden fall, the flicker of alarm at losing one's balance paired with the jarring impact of hitting the ground. Trying to blunt that crash, Seishirou let the force of Subaru's momentum spin them both around, his arms locked tightly about Subaru, his grip never slackening, until they came at last to a staggering halt. They stood together like that, Subaru unresisting, motionless in Seishirou's grasp but for heaving, uneven breaths that gradually quieted into a subtle trembling and finally became stillness.

"I *am* a fool," Subaru said then, low, almost affectless, as if he had gone past even resignation, was falling and falling into the dark void of the inevitable. He sounded tired and quite sober.

Seishirou lowered his face to Subaru's hair, breathed in its sweet, clean fragrance. His hands were cupped now around Subaru's arms, his fingers curled into the cloth of Subaru's coat. He could feel Subaru's heartbeat and his own, still slowing toward normalcy, dull flutters ready to

startle back into flight at any disturbance, at any perceived threat. Such a fragile, skittish organ, he mused, to be the repository of life....

“Seishirou-san,” and for all that Subaru’s voice was a near-toneless whisper, there was pleading in it, “let’s go home.”

At what point exactly, Seishirou wondered, had the place where he lived become “home” to them both? A personal world, a place in which to seek refuge?

He wasn’t really distracted, of course. The riddle of Subaru’s behavior at the party remained with him, despite the interruption of the chase—indeed, it had been highlighted all the more for him by Subaru’s reaction even to the tangential approach of the real questions. Subaru knew only too well what would draw the hunter’s gaze, what would trigger instinct and make the impulse of possession momentarily replace thought. But for all the showiness of the mask painted across its wings, the butterfly remained a butterfly, to those with eyes to see.

And yet...Subaru was warm and solid in his arms. *Real* and *safe* were the words that bobbed randomly to the surface of Seishirou’s mind—almost nonsensically, as if something atavistic and preverbal were throwing fragments of speech at his consciousness, approximating meaning in only the most general way—and the prospect of having what he had right now in the comfort and seclusion of their own bedroom was immensely better than standing around out on the street. Especially if it meant not letting go.... Deliberately he pushed those mental wanderings aside, filing away the questions of what Subaru was hiding, what Subaru and the Kamui of the Dragons of Heaven had been trying to communicate to each other, and surely that strange, clutching sting inside his chest was the tension of wariness, an inner resistance warning him of the need to remain alert. He acknowledged it, but there would be other opportunities, later, to follow up on those uncertainties.

Instead, just for now....

“Yes,” he murmured, although he lingered nevertheless, his cheek to the softness of Subaru’s hair. “It’s getting late.”

* * * * *

Arashi clung to the stair rail with both hands as she eyed the rest of the descent warily. She was reasonably sure that the steps down into most train stations did *not* tilt sideways. However, she was more than capable of dealing with this peculiarity. She only needed a moment to adjust.

Perhaps another moment....

A couple of steps below her, Sorata was holding out one hand cautiously. “C’mon, Miss. Lemme give you a hand, okay?”

Hadn’t they been over this? Releasing half of her grip on the railing, she swatted at his outstretched arm, once, and then again, this time back-handed, when the first swing failed to connect. “Don’t—don’t—” The second swing managed only a glancing touch. Somehow this

indignity was all his fault. “No helping!” she instructed sternly, trying to sound as much like one of her old teachers at Ise as possible. She glared, too, or attempted to glare, although she couldn’t quite tell if her face was doing what she meant it to. And then, because she was already in motion, more or less, she took a deep breath, stood up straight, and stepped out boldly—

—onto a step that wasn’t there—

—and she was falling, a brief, dizzying swoop that ended suddenly in a tangle of more arms than she alone possessed, in a thump against something solid and upright and warm, and all this before she’d had time to do more than yip in surprise. She was leaning into Sorata, she discovered, inclined against him like a windfallen tree, her face buried in his chest, while both of his arms were wrapped around her. How completely embarrassing. But at least the world had stopped swinging around. Pushing herself back, slowly, she peered up at him, and he met her gaze, his eyes and grin both a little wide, a little strained, as frank concern for her warred with sneaking delight and the absolutely sure knowledge that she was about to paste him a good one.

So she kissed him instead.

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

* * * * *

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Seiichirou asked for about the third time since they’d left the party.

“Oh, I’m just fine!” Karen smiled at him, unable to resist a bubble of merriment. She supposed that having someone around who was so constantly solicitous might get annoying eventually, but for now she was eating it up with a spoon. She couldn’t imagine that she’d ever get tired of it. “You know, I never feel the cold.”

“Oh, that’s right.” He smiled back at her, distracted, utterly delightful, and her heart gave a little stuttering fillip, in spite of herself. Glancing away again, he looked out over the city, shivering almost imperceptibly—not immune to the chill himself, for all his ability to control the air’s movements. What a pity they hadn’t taken the time to pick up their coats before leaving. And she’d really liked hers, too—but probably best to write it off as a loss. Going back for it now that the party had broken up would just be asking for trouble with the Dragons of Earth. Not that there wasn’t going to *be* trouble, of course, sooner or later.... Karen hesitated, then stepped up next to Seiichirou and rested one hand on his arm, letting her warmth expand to flow around him. He looked down at her in brief surprise before his gaze softened into understanding. He patted her hand in gratitude and also reassurance.

“We’ll find him,” he said.

“Yes.” Karen stared out over the seemingly endless expanse of starlike lights and darkness, and for all the calm certainty she’d spoken with she couldn’t help but think how very large this

city was, and how very small and hard to find one teenaged boy could be. “Are you getting anything?” she asked cautiously.

“Not yet.” Seiichirou closed his eyes, the better to seek on some spiritual level. Knowing that the odds were with him, that there was almost no chance she’d catch a glimpse of their quarry fleeing across the rooftops, not with the lead Kamui had and the multitude of refugees he could have already found, she watched Seiichirou’s face instead, the little furrow between his drawn brows, the curve of lashes lying along his cheek, behind the protection of his glasses, the perfect stillness of his expression belying whatever inner effort he might be making. Truth be told, she was a little envious. He had been *trained*, after all, in ways that she could only imagine, passed down through his family’s lineage. She could tell if a kekkai went up or was destroyed, she could sense things that were near her, especially if they were as powerful as a Dragon of Heaven or Earth, but to be able to reach out and search like that.... She wondered if it was something that she could learn. If there would be any opportunity for that learning, somewhere in their uncertain futures.

Seiichirou sighed at last, his shoulders slumping as he released his concentration. “Nothing,” he murmured. Lifting his head, he stared up toward the sky, gazing at some point between the horizon and midheaven—looking for what, Karen couldn’t tell, but since he was still being heedless of her she took advantage of the fact to study his profile, his expression more intent yet also more remote as he focused on the distance, a look that was almost yearning in its far-off intensity, his hair spilling over his forehead as if to invite stroking fingers to play through it, to break that trance gently, very gently, and turn his attention somewhere else. No, no—bad Karen. It occurred to her then that maybe he was reading the air, like a dog searching for a scent; picturing him with puppy ears and a tail, she suppressed a giggle and waited more light-humoredly for him to finish.

“I can’t feel him anywhere nearby,” Seiichirou said finally. He sounded worried and somewhat downcast but not yet defeated. “I’ll try a spell.” With a last absent-minded pat on her fingers, he disengaged from her and jumped down from the cistern where they’d both been standing. He moved forward a few steps, into the most open part of the rooftop, and paused there, raising his hand and holding it palm-up before his face. Bowing his head slightly and closing his eyes, he began speaking quietly, almost inaudibly.

Karen lowered herself to sit on the edge of the cistern. The wind picked up a little, fluttering her dress, and she tucked the end of her skirt under her legs. She couldn’t *see* the wind, of course, but she had the sense that it was gathering about the space over Seiichirou’s hand, invisible currents streaming in from every direction, winding themselves around that still, empty center. Gathering and gathering, a subtle but steadily increasing pressure, an *intentness*, almost as if a multitude of unseen presences were listening to Seiichirou’s whispered words—and then, as he flung his arm out, his hand turning over and closing into an abrupt fist, those flows reversed themselves, flaring outward once more. That draft was surprisingly gentle as it puffed past her,

touching her face, brushing back her hair, as if all that accumulated force was diffusing, spreading itself out wide across the city, insinuating itself everywhere that it could reach.

And really, how better to track their lost Kamui than by the air itself?

Although she was of two minds about their search. A part of her sympathized with Kamui's need to get out, to go off alone somewhere to lick his heart's wounds by himself; she didn't necessarily want to share all of her personal griefs with the world at large either. At the same time, there was healing solitude, and then there was a brooding, toxic isolation, where festering thoughts could turn very dark, very ugly, and Kamui had suffered a lot in the last year. At the very least they had to check up on him, to let him know, however much he might resent their interference just at that moment, that they nevertheless were willing to be there for him, to do whatever they could for him, little as that might be.

Taken or gay. Or, as it happened, both.

Poor Kamui.

Or, on the other hand, not so taken. Not anymore. Studying Seiichirou again—his eyes still closed, his hand outstretched as if clasping the ends of those thousand gossamer threads of air, a slight wind whipping at his jacket and tie, flattening his shirt against his body and blowing his hair up away from his face—Karen caught her lip thoughtfully between her teeth. Too soon. Absolutely it was too soon, the pain still too fresh, the presences of those people who were gone still coloring his world, like stained glass tinting the sun's light. She couldn't compete with the perfection of Shimako's memory, so recently enshrined; she couldn't insert herself into the midst of his grief for his lost daughter and nephew. Maybe she never could.

Having thought that, though, it was strange, wasn't it....

"Ah!" Seiichirou said brightly. Turning his head, he gazed toward the southwest. "There's a direction, at least." He moved toward that corner of the building, lowering his hand but still seeming to hold onto that net of wind as he concentrated. "He's pretty far off...but not *too* far. I think. It's hard to tell precisely."

"Oh, that's good, though." With a little laugh, Karen vaulted down from the cistern to land lightly on the rooftop. "I'm glad we came together—I'd be reduced to asking people on street corners, 'Did you see a teenaged boy run by here, about this tall...?'" Drawing nearer to Seiichirou, she hesitated, then said more softly, "Although, I was wondering...." He half-turned his head, acknowledging but not quite looking at her, still seemingly focused on the distance. She gathered her courage. "Why did you even come to the party in the first place?"

"Well, it was a good idea to be there as chaperones for the kids." He gave a low, rueful chuckle. "Even if maybe we didn't do the best job of it."

His voice was too gentle. She was suddenly aware of her heartbeat, like a bird drumming at a closed window, strange and inconceivable barrier. "Even so," she murmured, glancing uneasily aside, and the silence she left between them thrummed with the real question, not quite asked, not yet answered.

He had gone to that place, and he had smiled and bowed like a gentleman and good-naturedly sung karaoke with those very people who might have helped to kill his family—who might have ordered the killing of his family—who almost certainly had to have *known* that those killings were imminent and had done nothing whatsoever about it. And nobody's face or manner had shown the least remorse—among the Angels, anyway, except possibly for the JSDF soldier, who had looked uneasy. (The other Seals had been on eggshells when Seiichirou had first arrived, distressed on his behalf although not quite daring to say anything, and in particular Subaru, who had taken Daisuke's death as a very personal tragedy.) None of them had seemed sorry for what had been done—none of them had seemed to care that he might be suffering, that he might be justifiably, perhaps even dangerously angry.

And at the same time, to all outward appearances, he *hadn't* been.

How? How could he be so—

"It's all right." Startled, Karen glanced up at him again. Though those words were still quiet, there was strength behind them, an unshakable calm serenity, only a little sad. "I don't blame them."

His attitude shocked her; she couldn't honestly believe that anyone would be so forbearing. No, not even him. "But—!" she started to protest, but his next words forestalled her.

"After all, we're not really all that different. They don't hold the same things important that we do, of course, but aside from that, when the time comes...." There was a shift in the set of Seiichirou's shoulders, as if tension were being consciously released, a relaxation into something surprisingly like lightness, though still laced with that faint, musing regret. "What we're being called to do...I wonder," he murmured, almost as if to himself, gazing out across the city, "if those kids truly do understand what it means to fight. The way something like this—a war, really—demands of us. Even Kamui doesn't, I think. Even now."

"What are you saying?" Karen asked warily. Because if she was following him....

His voice came back more strongly, clear as a cloudless dawn, nearly a challenge. "What does it mean, 'to protect someone'? Someone, or something, that's more important to you than anything else?" He looked at her then, and smiled, so very gently, so very tenderly, but there was an unyielding hard edge beneath that sorrowful understanding, well concealed yet unmistakable, and she found herself remembering with a jolt that wind razors could cut like steel.

"Karen-san, the problem with dying for the sake of the person you love...is that you can only do it once."

After a moment he turned from her again. As he moved, light from the streets below briefly glinted along his glasses, a gleaming arc tracing their near curve, like a crescent moon. "Let's go," he said, not unkindly. "Before we lose Kamui again." He sprang from the roof's edge toward the nearest telephone pole, and Karen hesitated an instant before following, watching him, trying to reconcile what she'd just glimpsed with all that she had known of him from before.

Not forbearance, after all....

“Interesting,” she murmured then, her lips curving up into a little smile, disquieted but nonetheless intrigued. She leaped after Seiichirou, that edgy mix of excitement and concern flickering within her—the dark, glittering thrill of the unexpected, the trace of anxiousness like a shadow, and at the heart of it all a secret flame of amusement dancing, irrepressible.

Well, well...so it was true after all.

It *was* the ones who were always smiling that you had to watch out for.

* * * * *

She cried hard into her dog’s ruff as it whined and tried to twist its head about to lick her face. Her fingers were knotted into its fur as if it were real fur, as if she could by her clenched grip hold this creature of spirit force and magic to her, let alone keep it from moving. Of course, for her it *was*, and she *could*.

Kusanagi stood above her, feeling helpless. His fingers twiddled at the bottle of water he’d gotten for her. She hadn’t been exaggerating in her stories about drinking with her grandma—she was handling what she’d had tonight pretty well, for someone so small. It was defeat and grief that in the end had made her dissolve.

“W-why?” she sobbed brokenly. “Why...K-Kamui...he....”

“It’s his decision.” His chest hurt—the hope that those words sounded gentle as he meant them to be, not cold. Though truth *was* cold, more often than not. “He’ll be all right. He’s strong.” Strong enough to compel the inugami not to follow him any further, even though it was hers beyond any ordinary definition of possession—hers as breath and laughter and the determined sparkle of those brown eyes were hers. Hers like her own life. To have that kind of power, to command reality the way that Kamui did, without even realizing it....

Yuzuriha had straightened up a little, her hands still twined in Inuki’s fur, though more loosely. The dog sat, quiet now, watching her with alert golden eyes. “It’s not enough.” Her voice was whispery and stark, falling off somewhere past the ragged tail-edge of her distress. He looked down at his own hand, wrapped around the half-full plastic bottle. Useless, for this. For anything that really mattered.

“Yeah.”

And wasn’t that why he’d accepted his part in this whole thing, as a Dragon of Earth? Because it had seemed that there was no other possible way to make a difference, one man aching with the world’s cries of anguish against the crushingly vast, indifferent mass of humanity. He could build, he could fight, he could work all day under the sun on the latest Self-Defense Force project, he could blast down encroaching housing developments with a barrage of hadouken, and no matter what he did, nothing, really, would change. The march of so-called progress was just too big, it had too much weight and momentum behind it, and whether he went along with it or refused to

take any part, either way that action was just one tiny, tiny grain of dust in the avalanche. Its presence or absence wouldn't even be noticed.

So he'd turned to the one thing he *could* do: help take down the keystones, the secret support of the whole dull, monstrous edifice. Bring it all down, wipe the slate clean, and hope for the promise of a new beginning, a better future. It was extreme, of course, but was there any real choice? He hadn't thought so. And he'd told himself that they deserved it, all these people who couldn't bring themselves to care more about the suffering of uncounted trees and animals and flowers than about their own status and lazy comfort. He'd told himself that after all he was probably just the hand of karma, paying them back for all the pain they'd caused, endorsed, or simply ignored, on those luminous festival nights when he'd walk through the city on leave, through crowds of gaiety and riot, when he'd pass by a cluster of pretty, flirting girls in kimono or a proud young father showing his baby son fireworks for the first time and had to tell himself *something*. He'd told himself all those things, over and over, sitting in sunlit parks and watching the children at play, children who would most likely grow up to take their parents' place at despoiling the world, he figured. And he'd told himself that it was actually all okay, and that he wouldn't go completely out of his mind, pouring concrete to turn a once-green riverbank into a straight, sterile channel while his sweating fellow soldiers laughed and joked above the growl of machinery, because it was only one damn grain of dust and sooner or later all of this would be swept away and it *didn't matter*.

But looking at Yuzuriha now, kneeling on the cold sidewalk, he could only think of her laughing and chattering vibrantly with her friends, those Dragons of Heaven, of her dancing with that young man with the shy smile, then dashing over to take *his* hands, her fingers light and warm as the brush of a little bird's wings, her eyes bright. The knowledge that the keystones' fall would crush all of that put numbing ice into his veins, a sour, raw ache in the back of his throat. All those people who'd made her happy, everyone she loved and longed to save, and sooner or later even Yuzuriha herself (because she'd fight for what she wanted to protect, she was a brave child, she wouldn't give up easily)....

He wondered if there was anything he could tell himself then that wouldn't turn to ashes, shriveled and dirty on the tongue and in the soul.

Yuzuriha's breath caught—her own thoughts, whatever those might be. Probably they weren't any easier than his were. Lifting her head, she jerked about to face him, her eyes wide, damp with the remnant of tears, but unblurred.

"Kusanagi-san!" she cried, and he could see her already gathering herself, determination and a wild, desperate resolve. His own eyes widened briefly; then he ducked his head on a silent, half-ironic chuckle as he let that bitter tension go, packed it all up and buried it, someplace deep and far away.

"Yeah."

Because when it came down to it he knew that he had no ability to deny her anything, and if she had some intention, maybe even a plan...hell, that was better than what he'd managed, wasn't it?

And maybe she could take him to a place that he couldn't imagine, where he could find something pure to fight for, after all.

* * * * *

Strange.

The bioroid turned the word over in its mind, testing it. It seemed the appropriate choice.

Eating. Drinking. Dancing. Laughing. That...whatever it was that Dragon of Heaven had done with the Sakurazukamori. And then leaving, in such a way as to cause the most possible excitement and upheaval....

Was that what people did?

The air was cold, up on the rooftop garden. Nataku reached out and touched the greenery of one of the delicate weeping bushes. It jerked back at the sudden prick of discomfort and peered closely at the tip of one finger. A tiny seed of blood swelled there, nearly black in the diffuse light.

Strange. Not merely *anomalous*, although that word did describe the night's utter difference from anything else in Nataku's experience. It was a word the scientists had used, a blip in the data, an irregularity that had not been explained, that might or might not be significant. It did not capture the disorientation, the feeling of being lost, the little shiver that was like being cold, but on the inside.

Strange.

Kanoe, Yuuto, and Satsuki were still downstairs, cleaning up from the party. All the others had left, two and two, except for Kamui, who had gone off by himself. And soon those three would probably leave too, to go back to the Government Building, all together....

Nataku thought of its Kamui, somewhere out there in the surrounding city. It threw the trailing end of its cloth over its shoulder. "I'm going back," it said abruptly into the garden's silence, its words a puff of white mist against the darkness, melting almost at once into nothing.

One leap, to the parapet railing. Another, out into the open air. And as Nataku dropped toward the lower buildings, the wind of its fall whipping at its clothes and hair, images of the party still flickered across its mind—

That smile. Now Nataku remembered. From the photograph it had looked at briefly, when they had gone to that place. That man, who hadn't been there at the time, and the woman, and the very little girl who had sprung forward with such surprising fierceness—

Don't hurt Mommy!

Nataku landed on a sloped glass roof, a penthouse atrium. One foot missed the metal crossbars, and as light as that landing was, the glass still cracked, a thin tracery like a spider's

web. *Insignificant*. Natakū leaped again, its white cloth snapping softly in its wake as it began to traverse the city—back to the cool dimness of the Government Building, like the basement where it had been born, as if it could somehow leave behind the unquiet, the unfamiliar, the twinge like a strained muscle in the chest.

Only its purpose was important.

Only being by Kamui's side.

Only that.

* * * * *

"Well, that's it!" Kanoe glanced over and saw Yuuto tying off the garbage bag. Not an undue amount of trash, really, for a party of thirteen people. Using real cups rather than plastic or paper had certainly helped. She nodded acknowledgment, then turned away once more to gaze out through the broken window. The city pooled before her, spreading as far as the eye could see, a vast undulation of darkness and tiny jewel-lights.

"Natakū just left," Satsuki's voice cut in, clear and remote, somewhere behind her.

"That's fine. It can go where it likes." Amusement colored Kanoe's words as she added, "It's not a child." Child it was, and child it was not, as they all were who were bound to this struggle—some nearer and some farther, but all close in some way to their childhood, to what it was to *be* a child.

The destiny of the human race....

Only her own sister, for all that the tiny form resembled a young girl, had lost that connection, somewhere far back in forgotten time. And perhaps she, herself...she found that she could hardly remember innocence, the feeling of all the world being new, of infinite possibility. What she remembered instead was *remembering*, was awakening over and over to those memories and feelings that were ancient and yet fresh each time.

So much hunger, so much longing...so much *pride*.

No.

No, she *was* still that child, after all.

"It's too bad about the window." Yuuto's voice was quiet at her shoulder, gentle and light even in its concern. She shifted, a not-quite start at his closeness. She hadn't noticed him come up. "Will you really get in trouble for it? Maybe you can get it repaired before your boss comes back."

Ah, Yuuto. Guardian of her dreaming, pale moonlight painting the world in shades of peace and unreality, a molten white glimmer on the surface of the water, soothing and impenetrable sheen. "It doesn't matter," she murmured. "I made a fuss before, but actually it's okay because he won't be back anytime soon." Not before the time of decision, so near them now. So very near. A rich and foolish man, a cowardly politician, taking himself safely out of the city during this time of terrible earthquakes, leaving his constituents behind with excuses and thin promises. But he had

been good to her, in his bumbling way. She wrapped her arms about herself, against the chilly air that licked in through the space left by the shattered glass.

“Oh, so it’s all right then. Anyway, I guess it could be argued that Kamui is a force of nature, right? An act of God, you could say.” Notes of amusement and deep, serious quiet came and went in Yuuto’s words, as always, and it was a trick to figure out which mood was only for play. This time, she thought it was the gravity. “By the way, what *were* you two talking about during the party, before Kamui got all upset and ran off crying?”

“Oh, that? It was nothing important.” Kanoe focused her gaze on the far distance, as if it could trace wherever the Kamui of the Dragons of Heaven had fled. Her lips drew up into a smile, even though Yuuto, standing a little behind her, probably couldn’t see it. The wind kissed her face, gentle and cold, like necessity. “I just reminded him of something that he had forgotten.”

* * * * *

Kamui stumbled to a halt on the sidewalk, half doubled over. He grabbed the nearest thing, a tall wrought-iron fence, for support. He’d run and run, but the memories just wouldn’t leave him.

It was so unfair.

Those words again. Hadn’t Subaru said it, on the day he’d moved out of the house? That all of life was unfair, and yet somehow people kept going, buoyed up by the possibility of love and by hope.

But if love and hope were broken....

Believe in me. Have faith in me. I won’t betray you. Maybe those weren’t the exact words, but that had been Subaru’s message, as he’d understood it.

I promise. I’ll come back to you on the final day.

I’ll be there. For the final battle, that had meant....

Only for that?

Water blurred the street, the gray, shuttered faces of buildings, and Kamui knuckled fiercely at his eyes. *Damn it.* He felt dizzy, off balance, even though he hadn’t had any of the sake that the others had been drinking. He *would* have—even Yuzuriha had been drinking, for crying out loud—but the look Subaru had given him when he’d arrived had been so cold, so emotionless and hard. It had shocked him, and he’d taken it as a warning, he’d made sure to stay on his guard, and all the more so as the others, even *Arashi*, gradually got sucked into the partying. *Somebody* had to watch over them. *Somebody* had to protect them if the Dragons of Earth did anything. At least he could do that. He and Subaru....

But then there had been the dancing, and Subaru giving in to Yuzuriha’s silliness, and he didn’t know what to think about that. It had been weird. And soon after that everyone had been weird, and it had been generally stupid, and in the middle of it all the Sakurazukamori had come over and had a low exchange of words with Subaru, standing much too close, while Kamui had

watched them secretly in the window's reflection, tense and ready to act if Subaru had seemed to need it.

How could he have ever imagined that Subaru...that Subaru would....

The image of that, that *kiss* was seared right through his retinas and burned onto his brain—he wasn't still seeing it as much as *feeling* it, a crawling flame of horror, a piercing, desperate need to deny what he'd just witnessed. The pain was like being crucified all over again, those jagged spears of glass and metal stabbing through his limbs but all the anguish concentrating itself in his heart.

Had Subaru known? Even then? On the day he'd left them, and they'd all thought he was nobly and tragically going off to hunt his old enemy down and resolve their conflict at last, had he had something entirely different in mind?

Damn it, Subaru....

You could hate someone for deceiving you like that, with careful, gentle words that were never actually lies. You could hate them with a towering fury, a single-minded, animal savagery. The problem was—he couldn't. He *couldn't*, it was still Subaru after all, no matter what Subaru had done, and besides he knew only too well how those conflicted feelings could trip you up, could make you stumbling and bewildered and strange even to yourself. He didn't know what crazy thing *he* might have done if Fuuma had happened to show up at the party. It had been bad enough with Fuuma not even there: the twisting knot of relief and disappointment deep in the pit of his stomach, the tiny but constant thread of anxiety, thinking that at any moment that person might walk in, and then...and then...all the possibilities dissolved back into that cloud of not-knowing.

Or not wanting to know, maybe....

But now it was obvious that Subaru and the Sakurazukamori were...*something*...but still Subaru was saying that he was a Dragon of Heaven, that he'd be there on the final day...and...and....

It was wrong.

Oh gods, it was wrong that Subaru had to go through that. That Subaru should have to tear himself in half like that, to betray one beloved person or another. And Yuzuriha, too, with her friend....

And he and Fuuma, also....

It was wrong. So wrong, and it was all because of this battle and this stupid destiny and himself at the very heart of it—the decision he'd had to make, to fight for or against the human race. It had been *his* choice, everyone had told him so, and if he'd never even existed maybe it wouldn't have had to be made, and Fuuma wouldn't have had to become a Dragon of Earth and do *that* to Kotori, and maybe Subaru could have found happiness somehow—

To represent or hunt the *stupid* majesty of the *stupid* fucking *gods*—

A dry sob had escaped him; he tightened his throat and clenched his teeth against any others. He'd hit the brick base of the fence, and his hand throbbed dully. But the pain didn't blur that other aching, deep inside, the burning wish that he were someone else, anyone but "Kamui"—

Ah, it doesn't look as though you're enjoying yourself.

The words of the Dreamgazer of the Dragons of Earth came back to him, a fresh twist of the knife, a blinding flash of remembrance. His eyes widened; it was as if he were back there again, leaning up against the glass, staring out across the night-time city as he listened against his will to that low, laughing voice.

Is it because you're stuck here in the middle of all these Dragons of Earth?

Don't judge us. Her voice had shifted, becoming suddenly serious, cold, and stern, although no less quiet. *It's not your place to judge anything. Only to choose, and then to fight for what you choose, at any cost. Isn't that right?*

Do you think you're the hero of this story?

The laughter had returned then as she'd leaned close to him, whisper of silky clothes and hair, a breath of strong, dark perfume. *Well, in the end you're exactly the same as our Kamui. You have blood all over your hands, too.*

The people who were in that building—do you think they could tell the difference?

Hmm?

He couldn't forget it. How had she known—but of course she'd known. It had been a dream, after all. He had known it was a dream, though one so clear and vivid that it could have easily been mistaken for life. He'd been chasing a cloaked figure across the endless ruins of a city; they'd been hurling blasts of power at each other, carving gouges into the already demolished landscape, but he hadn't been able to see the other's face. Until at last the other had paused, standing on a heap of rubble slightly below him, had turned to look up at him, and the wind had rippled the hood of the cloak back, letting it fall away—

It was his own face, smiling back at him. A pretty face, people had said of him often enough, and he guessed it had to be true, but that smile was radiant with malice, so pure and cold, so utterly cruel.

So evil.

What are you waiting for? the other Kamui called up to him. That voice was mocking and careless. *Aren't you going to try to finish me off?*

He called power to his hands then, without thought, without hesitation, because this person, this monster he could definitely kill. He summoned that raw, white-hot destructive force, more and more, rising through him as quickly as lightning, so intense that he could feel the dream straining and warping around him, but he held onto that reality by the strength of his own will. This was his chance. His double shifted to a defensive stance, looking wary, and a fierce elation filled him.

You don't know what I can do!

And as he swept his arm out, his whole body wreathed in that gathered power, the dream-image changed. Another figure was becoming visible, fading into view through the other Kamui, even as his double became translucent, only a shadow and then gone, replaced—

—by Fuuma, staring up at him in question and surprise.

Fuuma!

He couldn't stop. Didn't want to stop. That strike, a wild ecstasy of rage and release—even if it was Fuuma, it was only a dream.

Too late anyway—he was—

The blast tore through the image of Fuuma, already wisping away into nothingness as the dream frayed, reality bleeding through in widening ribbons as the spell was broken. It smashed home, and something *exploded*—the shock had made him stagger backward. He'd realized suddenly that he was standing, awake, cold in pajamas and bare feet, the red light of flames flickering around him. Lowering the arm he'd raised involuntarily to ward his face, he'd stared down in horror at the burning apartment building below him, its walls buckling around the great hole ripped into it, beginning to crumble and fall, the roar of fire and destruction almost drowning out the tiny, far-off sound of screams.

No.

For endless moments, he'd only been able to look, hands clasped over his mouth, in case he might start screaming himself. Then he'd fled, racing across the rooftops, shivering, teeth chattering, a blind, panicked, mindless flight. He couldn't do anything for those people. He couldn't protect anyone, he couldn't save anyone, he could only make more and more people die because of him, like Kotori, like her parents, like his aunt Tokiko, like Daisuke and Seiichirou's family—

He hadn't told anyone. He'd snuck back into the house and hadn't said anything. If he could have, if there had been a chance to, he might have wanted to talk to Subaru about it, but—

His back against the iron fence, Kamui pressed his clenched fists to either side of his head, a low moan catching in his throat. It felt like his skull was about to crack open from the pressure of terrible memories, of demands that he couldn't answer, of blame and self-disgust and anguish. Maybe he was going crazy. Maybe he had always been crazy.

I'll kill anyone who gets in my way!

I don't care about what happens to other people!

He'd said things like that when he'd first come back to Tokyo, trying desperately to clear a space around himself, to be alone with his unhappiness. Whether he'd really meant them or not, it didn't seem to matter. It had been like a prophecy, and he was still living it out, seemingly unable to do anything else.

Useless. He couldn't even make a kekkai. All he could do was....

Kill people. Or get them killed.

No. No more.

A bleak clarity slammed down over him, sudden and absolute. It was like the eye of a storm, breathless, deathly still, stunning in its contrast to the chaos that had come before.

Get it over with. Now.

It was the one thing he could do. Tonight, before anything else could happen, before the others shook off the distraction of the party and found him, putting themselves at risk again.

He could do that.

It would just be Fuuma and himself, with no one else involved.

And then....

With abrupt determination, Kamui pushed off from the fence. He leaped to the top of a streetlight, then to a rooftop on the other side of the street—he lit out across the city, not wildly now but with focused intent and a singular destination, moving, had he only been able to see it, like a hunting cat, arrow-fleet, flying more often than not: a rush like a gale, a whirlwind angel.

A Dragon.

* * * * *

As Kamui dwindled in the distance, Kakyō drew back the point of view of his dream-vision, letting the buildings become smaller, farther away—darker, as the streetlamps' radiance was left behind on the gray pavement, deep down in those artificial canyons, until there was only blackness and tiny, brilliant spangles of lights, too far away to illuminate anything. Stars amidst the wasteland. He let that view spill wider, slowly flowing full circle around him, a false heaven reflecting in the pool that surrounded where he lay, reclining on the darkness as if on a chaise, propped up on that soft nothingness. Everything was still, without currents or sounds, without visible signs of life.

The Kamui of the Dragons of Earth leaned over him, chest brushing his shoulder, breath warm against his cheek. "Well?"

"You already know," Kakyō murmured, his tone a shade too dull to be reproof. The Kamui's fingers stroked his hair back, away from the column of his throat, their touch tender and without mercy; he waited for that grip to seize him about the neck as if he were a child's toy, but apparently the reminder was enough. The memory, the mere possibility of it—in this place, the line between actual and might-be was cloudy, and ultimately not to be relied upon. Silenced, if not physically, Kakyō finished the thought in the refuge of his own mind. *You always know everything, don't you.*

"I know what you wish for." That presence withdrew. The Kamui's voice sounded compassionate; perhaps he really intended compassion, insofar as his purpose allowed it. "You only have to fulfill your part."

"I understand." *Leave me alone*, he wanted to say. *I've done my part up to now. I'll do what I have to do. Whether it's by your command or not.*

You always know everything.

But not this.

Not the unlikely alliance, or the slow, drawn-out game they'd played to set this goad to the Kamui of the Dragons of Heaven, or the secret that they'd let slip to him, if only he'd grasp its meaning in time....

With abrupt grace, the Kamui vaulted off that raised spot. He landed in front of Kakyō with a splash, calf-deep in the dreaming pool, shattering the image of the city into wavering chaos. Startled, Kakyō struggled up onto one elbow, caught at the loose throat of his kimono with his other hand.

The Kamui smiled at him. Dressed again in that long, black coat, he was night against night, unfathomable. The coat's hem skimmed the surface of the pool as he shifted, stirring wavelets with each motion, ripples that spread in every direction, crossing and recrossing without end.

"You're a very pretty distraction," the Kamui said. Kakyō drew in a breath, barely kept from recoiling. Reaching out, the Kamui clenched his fingers in the dreaming's airy substance as that amused grin became something darker, something inhuman and unconcerned. "Well, anyway," he went on, "it doesn't really matter.

"Dreamgazer—it's time to wake up."

* * * * *

Arashi opened her eyes. She was lying on her back, someplace dark, or mostly so. A dim light seeped in through slatted blinds, not quite enough to strike sparks of pain from the heaviness of what she thought must be an incipient headache. The yielding surface that she lay on suggested "bed"; the feel of the space, of the air, the subliminal ring of magical wards told her that it was home, her own room. There was something damp on her forehead—a washcloth, skin-warmed and tepid. As she noticed its scant weight, as she thought of the person who must have put it there, she sensed that presence nearby, apparently seated on the floor a little way from her bedside, even before he stirred, shifting slightly in the stillness.

"Miss. You doing better?"

She reached up, touched the washcloth with her fingertips. "I'm sorry." Her voice scratched wretchedly, and she could still taste nausea at the back of her throat.

She thanked the goddess and all the kami that she'd kissed Sorata *before* she'd thrown up in the subway.

He chuckled softly, and she wanted to hit him just on principle for finding any of this funny, but there was a catch in his voice like irony, a tiny hook of pain and longing, and she understood that she was hearing something more than the usual cheerful energy. "No, don't apologize," he said. "It's not every day I get a chance to take care of you. I gotta say—I kinda think I'm honored. That you'd let me, I mean."

She could remember his hands, so gentle, holding her hair back out of her face. He had only waited, saying not a word, and her chest hurt at the memory.

At that inexhaustible patience, this night and always....

"There's water on the night table," he added as she began to move, pushing tentatively at the covers that had been drawn up over her. "And some aspirin, if you need it."

She sat up, very slowly, sliding back until she was leaning up against the wall. The washcloth fell off, and she caught it, then stared dumbly at it, as if it were something that she needed to comprehend. "Sorata-san." She rubbed her fingertips hesitantly over the cloth's nubby texture. "Do you ever think about...about things that might be?"

"Huh? Well, yeah, sometimes. That I knew my parents, f'r instance. That I got to grow up like a normal kid, and there was never going to be any of this final battle nonsense." His voice dropped, becoming barely audible. "That I'd get to live." It lifted again, quick but still not loud, considerate of her possible delicacy. "But you can't keep on holding onto those things. So many things that might be—they'll just crowd out what's really yours. And then in the end you won't have anything. Only regrets. Only suffering."

Noble truths. She knew enough to recognize the echo of the teaching. But in her tradition, the way was to believe in wishes, and in the improbable mercy of the gods. To pursue the things that one desired but didn't have, while not always wise, was perfectly acceptable.

But not for her.

"If I could," she said, and the disturbed flutter of her pulse made her queasy all over again, "if I could, I—"

"Miss. It's okay. Really."

"It's not!" She twisted the wash cloth, wringing it in misery and resentment. *In the end you won't have anything*—but what *did* they have? Any of them?

At least *Subaru* was....

"I understand," Sorata said, relentlessly gentle, unusually serious and calm. "Because as the hidden shrine maiden, you're the vessel of the god's power of Ise...." And she knew that he knew the unspoken corollary that followed, as most practitioners knew the general outlines of each other's rules.

The first and most important requirement of the god's vessel was that it be unbreached.

Drawing her legs up, she wrapped her arms around them and buried her face against her knees.

"I'm sorry," Sorata said, low, after a long, strained moment of silence. "I can't say anything to help you. Except that it totally doesn't seem fair, does it, 'cause I don't have the same restriction on my side. It's just, you know, supposed to be a good idea. It's a rule, not a magical law, or something." He laughed again, the sound stumbling to an awkward halt. "Um, I'm just making this worse by talking about it, aren't I? Okay, shutting up now...."

Tilting her head, she slanted a tentative glance toward him. She could just make him out, a shadowy outline on the far side of her small room. “Sorata-san?” She wet her lips, nervous, no, more than nervous, feeling herself skirting the edge of something almost inconceivable, something perilous even to speak of. “Would you...would you want to? If I said...‘yes’?”

“Miss....”

“I’m serious!” That reverent awe and surprise in his voice was just too much. She’d kill him if he was playing with her. Her face burned like a flame in the dark—fortunately a lightless one, secret and unseen. After what seemed like forever, she heard him release a held breath, the faintest tremor of sound, and her own breath caught in answer, even before he spoke.

“Yes.”

Hearing that response, she still couldn’t quite fathom it. “Really?”

“Oh, Miss,” and the yearning was back in his voice, along with that ghost of laughter, “do you actually have to ask me something like that?”

Is it better that I live? Does my life or death matter? How else could she believe, without asking? And sometimes, not even then. Suddenly urgent, as if that ‘yes’ were a tide that might sweep out again at any instant, leaving her adrift and alone, she said in a rush, almost stammering, “So if you wanted to—if you want to—I mean—” She couldn’t get out the words. She wanted to weep in frustration and dismay.

Sorata groaned with excessive theatricality, jolting her from the midst of that confusion. “Miss, please—don’t tempt me, ‘kay? I’m a monk, not a saint. (And a perfectly healthy teenager, to boot!)” Quieter once more, he added, “Maybe it’s presumptuous of me, but I’d like to think I know you better than that. Could you really be satisfied with yourself if you made that choice, after everything?”

“Because in the end, the one thing I *don’t* want is for you to regret me.”

Kishuu-san. Don’t just wait. She pushed the memory down, the truth of it that made her heart start up like a butterfly, brilliant and frenetic and unconstrained. Because what Sorata had said was truth as well. Because the person that he’d chosen would never be so reckless, would never throw away everything for a moment’s comfort in the dark. If the god left her, she would have nothing for the battle to come. Sorata would be reduced to protecting her or, if she left his side, to worrying about her safety. And there was no more certain way to ensure that that cruel destiny of his would come to pass.

“Yes,” she murmured. “I...thank you.” Silence wrapped them softly, a brief shared warmth, before Sorata pushed himself to his feet, stretching long and deliberately.

“Drink some of the water, okay? It’s supposed to help. And then try to get some sleep. It’s been a long night.”

“Sorata-san.” She’d released her knees, let her feet slide down and her legs straighten. Smoothing her skirt across her lap, she turned her head aside, stared blankly at the bare wooden window sill. “You’re not allowed to die.”

“Huh?”

“I mean it.” Perhaps she was still a little drunk. In the dark, her mouth quivered, somewhere between laughter and crying. “I’m forbidding it. If you disappoint me...I’ll never forgive you.”

There was a pause. “Well—all righty, then!” And that boundless enthusiasm was back in Sorata’s voice, irrepressible, inexhaustible, so that one could almost believe there was no black chasm of fate gaping beneath its energetic tightrope dance. “If it’s you saying it, Miss, then that’s how it’s gonna be. Absolutely! For the promise of your sweet loving someday....” She could picture his face in her mind, the ridiculously demented grin, the cheesy wink. She closed her eyes in order to see it better, to never forget. Then the light, quick sound of footsteps, and he was bending above her, one hand on the mattress next to her and the other braced against the window frame—a heartbeat to feel his arms on either side of her, close enough that she could sense his warmth but not quite touching her, before his lips brushed the crown of her head. They lingered there, soft, tender and breathing against her hair, and her heart was breaking, breaking: for that gentleness, for the glass hope of an uncertain future, the promises that might never be fulfilled.

“Sleep now,” Sorata whispered.

If he asked her to eat, she would eat. If he asked her to sleep, she would sleep. As he withdrew, slowly, she waited for him to step back from the bed, then turned to fumble carefully for the glass of water. Through the dim, unquiet shadows of her mood, it took a moment for her to realize that he had stopped moving; she glanced after him and saw him standing in the middle of the room, staring toward the window with a suddenly fixed attention. “What is it?” she asked, alerted.

“Uhh, nothing,” he said distractedly, but by then she could sense it too, a discordant note resonating at the back of her mind, thin and far-off, almost imperceptible. Uneasily she looked toward the window herself, not at the bars of shadow and yellowish-gray light themselves but at the beyond, into the unseen. That jangle of wrongness became more acute, and her disquiet deepened.

“Something...is not right.”

* * * * *

Pi! Pi! Pi! Pi!

“Subaru-kun,” Seishirou grumbled, his thoughts groping sluggishly and somewhat resentfully toward full wakefulness, much like his outflung hand, which was pawing half-consciously at the general vicinity of where his bed partner ought to be. He got only a handful of covers as Subaru slipped out from underneath them. “I thought you turned that damned thing off.”

“Sorry. I’ll be right back.” Light footsteps retreated toward the other room. After a moment to realize that, yes, he *was* awake, and that he should certainly stay awake until he found out who was contacting Subaru, Seishirou let out a low, aggravated huff of breath. Wriggling sideways, he

reached out to turn on the bedside lamp; blinking in the sudden light, he rolled over onto his back and arranged himself more comfortably, propped up against the headboard, amidst the pillows. Glancing at the clock, he frowned. They'd barely slept at all, and who would possibly be calling for Subaru so late? Or, more accurately, so early?

It had to be Seal business. Perhaps someone was demanding explanations of Subaru's behavior at the party. Or they could be having some problem with their Kamui. But still, couldn't they have waited to trouble Subaru with it until some reasonable hour of the morning?

Seishirou rubbed at his eyes, still frowning slightly. He had been dreaming again, he thought. That might explain the persistent disorientation, the way he was feeling rather out of sorts. He couldn't remember what it had been about, though. There had been something involving a very intense, somehow threatening ringing, as if a giant bell had been sounding in the distance, sending out a dangerous vibration....

He cocked his head, his attention shifting abruptly to Subaru's voice, out in the other room. "Yes," Subaru was saying. There was a longish pause. "I understand." He sounded very calm, although there was the faintest quaver, quickly suppressed, as he added, "Yes. As soon as I can. Goodbye." The phone was hung up quietly, without haste, and all was still for long seconds, as if Subaru were pausing to think, or to compose himself. Then the tiny reading lamp on the table next to the phone went out. Subaru appeared gradually out of the darkness, drifting into the light that spilled out through the bedroom door, luminous in his white pajamas, like a spirit manifesting itself. He looked sad and distracted and a little blank, as if he'd gone partially numb, or as if he were trying to hide his feelings with only limited success.

"Is everything all right, Subaru-kun?"

Without answering, Subaru came up to the edge of the bed. He settled himself there in a rustle of silk, one leg curled gracefully beneath himself, his eyes downcast. He didn't seem to be in any great rush to go anywhere. Perhaps it wasn't such an immediate crisis, after all. Lifting his gaze, he looked into Seishirou's face...such a long, long, searching look, with the flatness of his expression coming to life, little by little, growing verdant with inexplicable yearning, with an almost painful need.

"Seishirou-san." Reaching out, Subaru ran his fingertips through Seishirou's hair, brushing it aside from his forehead. Then, somewhat hesitantly, he leaned forward. "I love you," he whispered. His lips came to rest where his fingers had passed over; they lingered there while his hand cupped Seishirou's head, his thumb tracing the line of Seishirou's cheek, and Seishirou wondered vaguely at the gesture. Strange kiss, like a benediction. Subaru pulled back with a tiny catch of breath, and Seishirou waited patiently to discover what would come next, whether it be explanation or tears or simply a silence that might have to be soothed with gentle reassurances.

There was only a single word.

"Sleep."

* * * * *

And as Seishirou sank down very slowly, slumping a little to one side, half-lidded eyes dulling and then closing entirely, Subaru's hands parted about him, as if releasing a bird into flight. They hovered, still, anxious birds themselves, one on either side of Seishirou, until the man had settled more deeply amongst the pillows, as though there were some chance that he might fall. Only when he was at rest, safe, did they rise, trembling, to press against Subaru's lips, half in protection, half in prayer.

Seishirou-san.

He stared hard at Seishirou's face, his gaze flickering and wild, mere instants for a study that he could have taken a lifetime over. Even though it was already in his memory, in every detail—still, to see it like this, relaxed and unguarded, yet also somehow unquiet.... Another heartbeat, and another, and he knew that however many there were it could never, ever be enough—he snatched himself from the bed then, because the spell would not hold, not for long, not against Seishirou, who in using it time and again had been the very one to teach it to him.

He went swiftly around the foot of the mattress, already tearing at the buttons of his pajama top as he moved. He threw on his shikifuku, hasty and fumbling, most of his attention on that figure on the bed, watching for any motion other than breathing, staying alert for any loosening of the spell. He grabbed his pack of ofuda and the ceremonial dagger from the dresser, and still Seishirou did not move—one look, one final look, which burned him so that he almost wished he might go blind from it, to have that all-consuming pain and sweetness forever joined with the last thing he would ever see. Then he was fleeing through a gathering blur of tears, bolting toward the genkan and the apartment door: that door onto the remnant of the night, and the day that was to come.

Chapter 19

“There!” Sorata jabbed one finger toward the horizon—unnecessarily, Arashi thought. The keening of awakened power clearly came from that direction, having grown ever stronger and more unmistakable as they drew closer to it, and the slender, upthrust spire of Tokyo Tower could not be missed, even with its lights dimmed for the night. The kekkai was their obvious destination. She decided to save her breath, though, and not comment. “Miss, let’s go!”

Arashi nodded, and together they leaped from the roof of the train, leaving it to curve gradually off toward the bay while they took the most direct route toward the Tower. Building to building they sprang, while the train’s clattering rush faded into the distance, to be replaced by an odd quiet. Even for the late hour, the city’s hush was strange, its traffic and nightlife nearly nonexistent, as if even its most ordinary, unaware inhabitants somehow sensed the gathering tension, the reverberating note of discordance. Perhaps they did. It was so intense now that it seemed an almost physical pressure, the promise of danger looming like some vast, inevitable storm—and then a sudden shift, a release of energy like a slender, far-off lightning strike, a faint shuddering of the city underneath them. Sorata swore softly as they came to rest on top of a billboard, both of them feeling psychically after that brief disturbance, waiting to see if there would be anything more. Uneasily Sorata glanced westward, toward the tremor’s epicenter, as if half-tempted to turn aside.

“There’s nothing we can do about that,” Arashi warned. The kekkai had already broken—a minor one, it seemed, which was fortunate. The Dragon of Earth who was responsible would not be lingering there. Besides, they had a more immediate concern. “*Look.*” She pointed toward the Tower. They were near enough now to make out threadlike tendrils of power coiling about it, licking across its ironwork structure like stray electricity, flickering and restless, and at the highest observation deck there was a gathering incandescence, a ripple of white flame. Sorata gave a low, dismayed whistle.

“Oh, that’s so not good. Let’s hurry.”

They had already been hurrying, but she understood his urgency. Their race across Tokyo had been like one of those archetypal bad dreams—though they’d traveled far faster than normal people, their progress had felt glacial, as if they were merely crawling across the endless city landscape. It was almost worse now that they could see the Tower. It seemed so near, as if they should be able to cross that distance in a single stride, yet remained frustratingly out of reach. They were still about a half-kilometer away when, without warning, the power at its crown erupted—

—a howling flare of raw force, an immense bolt of energy rearing up toward the sky, a crested, writhing serpent—

—a shrill ringing peal, sweet as birdsong, loud as armageddon, the Shinken’s song of grief and longing—

—a shout that reached them not as sound but as a wave of anguish, of challenge and desperate need —

FUUMA!

“*Shit!*” They had skittered to a halt on a rooftop, Sorata’s arm around her shoulders, turning her toward him in an instinctive attempt to shelter and protect. She clutched at him, absently noting that there’d been a time when she would have objected, but for the moment she was simply and unashamedly glad of that support. Even at this distance, she could taste ozone; her mind rang with echoes, and she felt stripped of skin, scoured right down to hammering heart and too-fragile bone. She blinked hard, swallowed, and was trying to think of something meaningful to say when the building beneath them jolted. The city shuddered again, there was a deep, roaring boom, and for a panic-stricken instant she thought that Kamui, *their Kamui*, had broken the Tower’s kekkai—but no. The sounds of destruction were off to one side, probably in the vicinity of Ginza. As those shocks began to fade, Sorata managed a dry, shaken laugh. “When dragons roar,” he muttered—then his breath caught, his hands reflexively tightened on her, and though they were looking in different directions, she knew that he was witnessing the same thing that she was.

On all sides, stretching as far away as they could see, the multitudinous lights of Tokyo flickered, dimmed, and went out.

For long moments they just stood together, on the roof of their anonymous building, while before them that great column of fire burned against the darkness, a ceaseless, raging beacon. In the distance, a stray car horn sounded, thin and complaining, arguing right-of-way in the sudden absence of traffic signals.

“The Dragons of Earth are really moving,” Sorata said at last, low. “But I don’t know...we....” He faltered, hesitating.

“Kamui?” she offered, because she had no idea how to direct this battle either, and seeing him so at a loss hurt her.

“Yeah.” He nodded slowly. “Yeah, we have to. Let’s go.” He had to release her as they started off again—they couldn’t spare the concentration that it would take to keep in contact as they traversed that irregular path of rooftop peaks and street lamps, signs and wires. She thought fleetingly that it was something she’d like to try someday, holding hands along the city’s high road, making a game of it, just to see if it was possible, and she felt a stinging, bittersweet pang, that she was thinking of games and of this person. Pushing the distraction aside, she focused on getting to where they needed to be. If she looked straight at the Tower, the light blinded her, so she kept her eyes on the way just ahead, or on the buildings to either side, lit up by its glare. That was how she spotted the swift-moving figure traveling in the opposite direction, a flash of pale robes against the night sky.

“Subaru-san!” She swung aside, leaping across the street to intercept his path, Sorata trailing a little behind, caught off-guard but quickly catching up. If Subaru was leaving the Tower, then he must know...but why, if he’d heard her call—and he had stopped short, so he must have—did he not come to meet them? He stood poised on a rooftop railing, a little above the dead neon sign where she had come to light, with Sorata at her side an instant later—stood like a statue, unresponsive, with his face turned away and his hands closed into fists. Unease stalked her, clutching at that briefly unfurled hope. *“Subaru-san...what...”*

“I’ll keep Seishirou-san out of it.” She almost wasn’t sure that she was really hearing him, with the soundless roaring static of Kamui’s flame splintering the edges of her perceptions. His voice was low and strained. *“There’s nothing else I can do here.”* Without waiting for a reply, he launched himself again, vanishing past the edge of the roof, then briefly visible once more, a flicker between buildings before they cut off all view of him, while Arashi stood there with her mouth still open, a thousand questions unasked, the loss of those answers an empty void within her, like the prelude to mourning.

Sorata put his hand on her arm. *“Miss....”*

“I know,” she said, numb now, feeling an obscure sense of doom in all these little fractures, these things not as they should be. But there was nothing to do but to go forward. In silence, then, they turned and raced on.

As they reached the Tower at last, that peak of power began to ebb, the fire-dragon sinking down and dwindling into nonexistence, although the Tower itself continued to burn. The Tokyo Prince Hotel was the nearest and best vantage; as they went tree to tree across the park toward it, she spotted a waving figure on the roof, silhouetted against the light. Another shadow moved up to join it.

“Sorata-kun! Arashi-san!” It was Seiichirou who was calling to them, with Karen at his side. With a feeling of dim relief, Arashi followed Sorata to a landing in front of the other Seals. At least it wasn’t just the two of them anymore. *“Where is—”* Seiichirou broke off with an apologetic grimace, and continued in a more normal tone, *“Sorry. Where’s Yuzuriha-san? Have either of you seen her?”*

“No. I don’t think she ever went back to the house.” She could understand his impulse to shout, with that conflagration of power so nearby. She felt it constantly on her skin like the bloom of sunburn, a ceaseless, searing prickle, an blaze of white noise in the brain—and how on earth was Kamui sustaining this level of energy for so long, she wondered. Was it the Shinken? Some effect of the Tower? Or just the sheer power of being Kamui?

“We passed Subaru-san,” Sorata was saying, and Seiichirou and Karen looked both anxious and grave.

“He was up on the Tower talking to Kamui,” Karen explained. *“But then he came down again, just as Kamui....”* She waved one hand expressively toward the Tower. *“We don’t know what they said to each other, though. Kamui won’t let us get near him.”*

“So it’s just us, then,” Seiichirou said, entirely too somber, and the four of them gazed toward the Tower as if it might hold some answer to the question that they all seemed to be thinking: *What do we do now?* In the distance, there was another low booming, not quite an earthquake, perhaps the fall of weakened buildings, and Arashi bit at her lip.

“You know,” Sorata said at last, slowly, “while Kamui’s going at this with maybe a bit too much of the crazy...he might actually have the right idea.” They all stared at him. “If you think about it, there’s no way we can guess where the Dragons of Earth will strike. We could run all over the city and just keep missing them. The only thing we can really do is take the most important kekkai and hold ‘em, no matter what. Even if they bring down everything else, if we can keep just those from falling, then we’ve won.”

“Yes. I see.” Seiichirou straightened his glasses thoughtfully. “And the biggest kekkai that are left are....”

“That’d be Shinjuku. And the Yamanote Line. Since Kamui’s got the Tower.” Turning from the spectacle of that flame-wreathed landmark, Sorata grinned at Arashi. “So, Miss, how do you feel about a hot date at Shinjuku?” Her breath caught, despite herself—the ambivalent promise of action at last. She nodded tautly.

“Then we’ll take the Yamanote Line,” Karen said.

“We’ll probably need to split up, to cover the whole thing,” Seiichirou murmured. Karen glanced at him, then inclined her head in acknowledgment, a faint smile touching her lips.

“Okay! It’s a plan! Then let’s go!”

Like a flight of arrows, they took off, one outward-darting motion but with different aims as Seiichirou angled left, Karen right, and Sorata and Arashi together cut straight up the middle, toward the shadows of Shinjuku’s towers that bulked dimly against the star-flecked sky. The roofs before them were bleached pale by moonlight from the wide, waning crescent overhead, a half-ring about the staring pupil of an eye, lighting their way. They went in haste, but Arashi glanced back once, toward the fiercest concentration of force at the Tower’s peak and the lone figure there, unseen but sensed: the emanation of a tense, defiant will, the Shinken’s plangent cry rising once more, softer now but still yearning.

We are not abandoning you, she would have said to him, her heart a ringing ache within her, as hollow and echoing as a temple bell. *Wherever we go to meet this fight—still, we will be with you. Always, always—and Subaru-san, too....*

As much as anyone can go to meet their destiny and not, in the end, be alone.

Of necessity, then, she turned her attention back to the way beneath her feet, those widely spaced stepping stones across the city’s highest places, to the destination that loomed ahead in the distance, and to the unfaltering presence tracing his own comet’s path by her side.

* * * * *

For all the lateness of the moon's phase, its light was strong and pure. In the absence of the usual electric glare, that light lay over the city like the aftermath of a blizzard, forming a landscape of dreamlike, disorienting whiteness and deepest charcoal shadows. It was a world both stark and diffuse, hauntingly familiar and deceptively foreign, where even the everyday sight of the Metropolitan Police Department building, normally more reminiscent of an air-traffic control tower, could take on an aura of enigmatic fantasy. Subaru glimpsed it from the corner of one eye, a brooding alien landmark, as he flashed past it, leaving the deathly still ministries of Kasumigaseki behind at last. His body carried him northeastward across the city as if by some homing instinct while his awareness flickered back and forth between his surroundings and the battering inner whirl of thoughts and emotions.

He had known. Lying awake in the dark, with Seishirou a slumbering warmth beside him, he had known—even before his pager had gone off, even before he had stood barefoot next to the genkan, in the dim circle of light by the phone, and heard the voice of the secretary of the CLAMP School's chairman, tense and controlled, saying against his ear, *Kamui has taken up the Holy Sword....*

He had known. He had felt the tension growing, slow as the grinding of great gears, and as inexorable. He had sensed the distance narrowing, the resonance of the Shinken intensifying, rising in pitch as Kamui had drawn nearer to it, even bound and dreaming as it was, until it had awakened, singing out beneath the touch of Kamui's hand, a clarion peal of release, a glasslike shattering of the chains that had constrained its power. And then an uneasy hush, as if the sword had ceased to cry—or, perhaps, had been crying for someone else to hear.

But knowing had meant nothing. It had been not the least bit of comfort, lying there, to watch the end of everything approaching, with the full and sinking awareness that there was no hope now of stopping it or turning it aside.

That he had, in all likelihood, been the trigger that had precipitated it.

Kamui....

The Imperial Palace moat lay dark and still beneath him as he sprang across the bridge to the Sakurada Gate. A glance to the left might have caught the steep peak of the Diet Building, a distant smudge at the end of its broad avenue, but he kept his gaze fixed firmly ahead. Over the low gate building, and he was in the Kokyo Gaien, the gravel of the plaza a blur under his feet, scarcely crunching as he crossed it in a ground-skimming, leaping run. To his right, the park rolled off toward Marunouchi, its forest of painstakingly shaped pine trees like black calligraphy scrawled across pallid sand, kanji overwritten upon each other and impossible to read in this haste; on the left, the two bridges of the Nijubashi were lost in shadow while the white guard tower beyond glimmered against the night, an image of poignant, ghostly defiance.

Somewhere behind him, already far off, a column of flame was still burning toward the heavens. He could sense it, dimly.

He would not look back.

After leaving Seishirou's apartment, he had taken off in full flight across the city. Kamui hadn't been hard to locate, the pulse of raw power and intention as spiritually loud as the raising of a kekkai, and once the direction had been established it had been easy enough to guess Kamui's goal. They had closed in on Tokyo Tower from different sides, Kamui seemingly arriving only a little before him. He had gone up to meet Kamui then, springing girder to girder—cautiously, at the end, picking his way through currents of trembling, steadily intensifying force that made the cables on all sides sing dangerously, like the music of unkind spirits. *What kind of spell*— he'd wondered, before he had come up over the edge of the upper observation deck's roof, to see Kamui facing away from him, staring out across the city, clutching the Shinken's hilt.

Kamui....

And he had been greeted, as Kamui had turned so very slowly toward him, by a stare of violet ice and flame.

What are you doing here?

Well, of course he was there. Where else would he be? Hadn't he said it, after all...but as he'd met that guarded, burning gaze, as he'd registered the harsh edge of tension in Kamui's voice, he'd understood that for Kamui his promise had never truly been real. Concerned, vaguely anxious, he'd tried again.

Kamui, I....

Go away! The sudden shout had rung off the girders around them, licked a high-pitched whining note from the Shinken's blade, seemed to shatter the night into glass shards, spinning and falling all about them, a bewildering dance of shock and broken expectations. *I don't want you here!* Kamui's teeth had been bared, wolflike; he'd struggled visibly, as if to hold in some overpowering fury of emotion, before he'd looked sharply at Subaru once more and the words had ripped out of him, stark and savage:

Go back to him!

Silence, then, as they'd gazed at each other, Kamui quivering with scarcely leashed intensity, with short, constricted breaths. At last, wordless, Subaru had turned away. Like a passenger inside his own body, as if he were looking out through the eyes of a shikigami, he had watched himself set one foot precisely at the roof's edge, white tabi against white-painted steel, and then leap, giving himself to the air, a long, long arc outward and down, the wind snapping at his robes, whipping through his hair. Behind him, he'd felt that aura of power surge and heave, surge and heave, like choked sobs, until finally it gathered itself and blasted upward, a blazing flood of pure energy channeled straight up into the sky, an inarticulate cry of rage and desolation. He'd felt it in the space around his heart like thunder, in his mind and spirit like the blinding glare of lightning—the psychic force of it might have stunned him into unconsciousness if he had been any less threadbare, less translucently empty. Instead, he'd only closed his eyes against the wind that blurred his sight, pulling from him the tears that shock and grief, too new, too raw, too limitless for anything so intimate and mortal as weeping, had left unshed.

He was up to the plaza's overlook already—another bridge, another gate. From there, he leaped to the top of the East Garden's wall and raced along it, following the inside edge of the moat, those massive, mortarless stones impassively solid underneath him, undisturbed by the earthquakes.

As if they might actually be eternal....

He'd had nothing to say to Seiichirou and Karen, when they had met him at the ground, nor to Sorata and Arashi, who had stopped him as he was leaving the Tower. Only that one thing...that one defining intention which was all that was left to him.

He would face Seishirou. He would make sure that the Sakurazukamori's attention was occupied for the duration of the fight.

It was the one way that he could still help Kamui.

And not merely for Kamui's sake....

To be honest, maybe it wasn't for Kamui's sake at all.

Guilt had ridden him most of the night, a gleefully cruel possessing ghost; with that thought, he felt its claws afresh, curved daggers hooking into him. He was dully amazed that there were still new levels of pain to be felt, but it might just be that he was catching up with himself at last, no longer trailing, numb and mute, in the wake of events. His response to Kamui's rebuff had been automatic, and it was only now, kilometers away from the Tower already, that the self-doubting part of him was beginning to wonder, to second-guess those instincts. Had he made the wrong decision? Should he have talked to Kamui, tried to explain, refused to go? Would Kamui even have listened to him, or did those feelings of hurt and betrayal burn too fiercely?

In the end, could he have made any other decision? Could he have mustered the strength of will and rationality to stand by Kamui's side anyway, in defiance of his own heart? Or had his choice been made hours ago, up against a bar in a penthouse apartment, and everything else had simply followed from that?

The taste of Seishirou's mouth on his, the taste of sake....

Fool. Fool. Fool.

The wall and moat began their gradual curve to the west. He gathered himself for the leap—a high, floating arc over that night-dark, murky water, suspended with only the painful beating of his heart, until he lighted at last on the pale blue girders that framed the Metro Tozai Line, where the elevated tracks overhung the moat's edge. The catenary line was dead, of course, without even the subliminal buzz of electricity. The Palace grounds left behind, there was just the endless, blocky landscape of buildings jutting up ahead of him, on the far side of the expressway, and after an instant's pause he took off again, overpass to rooftop to rooftop, falling back into the rhythm of it, and back as well, inevitably, into the pitiless unfolding of remembrance.

He had been standing with his back to the bar, bracing himself on its safe solidity as he watched the chaos of people dancing, or attempting to dance. The memory of his own transition from clumsy, embarrassed awkwardness to a kind of release, a quiet, senseless happiness, had

still been vividly alive in him: the uplift of breath and pulse; the recollection of Yuzuriha's hands, warm and light in his, and of her easy laughter; the impulse of the body, once moving, to remain in motion. And then Seishirou had been there, sliding around the corner of the bar, moving lightly but with a tigerish, prowling intensity. *Subaru-kun*. One hand on the bar's chrome edge, Seishirou's outstretched arm had curved beside him like the warding cord of a himorogi, marking a liminal space between holy and profane. His voice had been low, an intimate purr. *Will you dance with me?*

Don't! Despite that frantic, whispered rejection, or maybe as part of it, he'd found himself leaning into Seishirou, head lowered, fist clenching in the sleeve of that extended arm. It might have been an effort to touch first and thus forestall other, less manageable touching, to be the one to define their physical contact and therefore have some faint hope of controlling it. Because he'd been too close, still, to that freedom of dancing with Yuzuriha, no one caring about how ridiculous they'd looked, not even, in the end, himself—because others had been giving themselves over to the music too, Dragons of Heaven and Earth alike and together, crossing sides heedlessly in this moment set outside a year of desperate battles, and it had been far too easy to imagine himself being swept up, yielding despite his protests to Seishirou's strength and playful determination, to feel the room whirling as they spun, Seishirou's body pressing close to his and the sake filling his head with fire and air and glittering night—

It's all right. Seishirou's words, though no less quiet than before, had cut right through his trembling. He'd caught his breath...he'd closed his eyes, just for an instant, savoring the astonishment, the confused relief, the pure and naked wonder of the tenderness that he'd thought he'd heard in Seishirou's murmur. That he could almost, in the midst of this evening's strangeness, believe might be real.

When it's so important for me not to...when I might have let myself be lost....

You hold back.

Thank you.

And as he'd soared on that exquisite joy, ineffable, unhoped-for, he'd lifted his head again. He'd looked into Seishirou's eyes. If there had been mockery or manipulation there, he hadn't seen it. Amusement, yes, in that warm glint of amber, tolerant forbearance in the face of his near-panic, possession that was content simply in itself, nearly serene. Seishirou, just Seishirou, without cruelty. And that gift....

He'd scarcely been aware of his hand rising toward Seishirou's face, although he'd felt the brush of skin against skin with preternatural acuity, a prickle like electricity in the first breath of contact, followed by the awareness of warmth, of subtle give and resistance, of Seishirou's pulse beneath his fingertips. Seishirou had looked vaguely surprised. Then Seishirou had bent toward him, lashes lowering to veil a heating and distracted gaze—but he hadn't seen those eyes drift shut, he'd closed his own eyes first, tipping his head back, surrendering all at once to a flood of ecstatic connection and the desire for more, more, without limit, to his mouth on Seishirou's, an

offering, to the sweet longing to give absolutely everything of himself in return, to become the vessel of this uncontainable and transfiguring *yes*—

He snapped back to the present—and to the bizzarely angular shape of the Sofitel Hotel, corpse-white in the moonlight, looming up right in front of him, at the end of the arc of a long, heedless leap. He jerked in a startled breath. He had just enough presence of mind to hit the wall with his feet and run, momentum carrying him diagonally up across one of the building's pagoda-like levels until he caught a railing at the top and vaulted over it, to land catlike on a terrace. For a moment he just crouched there, waiting for shock-reaction to fade and wondering, with a kind of light-headedness, if there were any hotel guests in the adjoining room, if they had been awakened by the night's disturbances, or if they slept on, oblivious, at peace.

No faces appeared at the curtained glass door, and at last he straightened and moved, with a dreamlike slowness, to the side of the terrace facing Ueno Park. The railing was cold as his hand came to rest on it once more, not icy but possessed of a dull chill. Below, Shinobazu Pond glimmered silver, a rising breeze stirring up wavelets that in their brilliant, breaking reflections echoed the moon thousands of times over, while the Benten shrine at the pond's center stood dark and tranquil, its paler, verdigrised roof seeming almost snow-capped. Beyond the shrine, the hill on the far side of the pond rose up in a confusion of leafless trees, a spidery play of shadow and light.

How could you? a forlorn voice within him wanted to say to the Subaru of the party. *How could you abandon yourself like that, past all sense of reason and propriety, appall your fellow Seals and cut Kamui to the very soul—Kamui, who relied on you?*

But...how could he not?

From this vantage point, now, it seemed clear—he should have known, already, what he was capable of. In fact, he found that he could no longer muster an embarrassed heat, or anything more than a ghostly, lambent flicker of shame.

Never for Kamui's sake, although he *would* have spared the boy if he could, if he weren't driven by something inescapable, as necessary and essential to him as breathing.

Could there ever be such a thing as an unselfish wish?

Enough. Nothing of what he had done, or its consequences, could be taken back. There was no telling what future lay ahead either, or whether there would be any chance for him to make amends. There was only the present, and although it had been done in fury, grief, and pain, Kamui had nonetheless released him. He had to let go too, to put those questions of right or wrong behind him and concentrate everything he had on this next meeting, this all-deciding conflict.

This one last night. He had to make it matter.

Subaru went over the railing again, dropping like a feather toward the street below. It wasn't far now—just one final, focused rush, that place drawing him toward it like gravity. He cut around the north side of the pond, past fields of winter-dead lotuses that caught the breeze and rustled

serely, their withered flowers bent toward the water. Ice rimmed the shallows along the pond's edge, though its center was unfrozen. The weather was turning again; the air carried the rumor of mildness and thaw, perhaps rain. Over the gate to the Ueno Park Zoo, and then past the empty exhibits, the flamingo pen colorless and silent, all the creatures taken inside. A pall of unease lay heavily in the air, as if within the zoo's buildings there was restlessness, fear, an awareness of earthquakes yet to come. Somewhere a great cat roared, the sound carrying thinly across the distance. Up onto the monorail's track, then tree to tree over the hill, past Tōshōguū and the five-storied pagoda—onward, leaving the zoo behind, through the forest until it opened up at last, until he crested the low, grassy rise and he was *there*, the slope falling away before him to a paved walk, lined with trees, and back a little way from it, in the midst of the grove...*the Sakura*.

All was still beneath the equivocal light of the moon—no familiar sense of presence, no sign of human life.

Seishirou wasn't there.

He would come.

But if he didn't—

He would come. Subaru bent forward, hands on his knees, and breathed deeply, settling himself after that long run, grounding the energy that had sustained him. Forcing away a fluttering storm of fears—that Seishirou in a fit of pique would refuse to face him, that Seishirou might have been deceiving him all along and was even now off somewhere destroying kekkaï, that after all he wasn't worth killing—he stared down at the tree. He could feel its awareness even at this distance, a brooding vigilance that seemed more alert and specific than usual, as if it knew that he was nearby. He had better not get any closer to it. Only as a last resort, if Seishirou didn't—

He found that he'd straightened, his hands lifting almost without volition—he stopped himself, fingertips hesitating over the back of one hand, not yet touching the mark hidden beneath the skin.

Seishirou-san.

He felt lost suddenly, having reached the end of his running here and there, the constant, urgent movement that had at least made it seem as though he was accomplishing something. Now that he'd arrived, nothing was left but the prospect of waiting, while elsewhere across Tokyo the struggle for the world's future ground on toward its fated ending, leaving him adrift on its fringes, alone. This feeling of breathless suspension, of helplessness, unable to do anything but wonder....

Seishirou-san, what will you do?

What will you decide?

Because that, in the end, was what all of this had come down to—the precious and too-short time that they had spent together, the tentative dance of one reaching out and the other responding, the slow, sometimes sweet, sometimes painful lessons they'd taught one another by

words and silences, by looks, by all the multivalent shadings of touch, by simply being near. All of it had been laying a path toward this moment.

Toward this final test of what was between them.

Because I've betrayed you....

His heart clenched, an old, long-accustomed pain. He knew the injury that he had inflicted upon Seishirou—he knew it with all the intimacy of nine years spent living with his own wound, dreaming about it every night, carving it deeper with every day spent dwelling upon it. But could Seishirou feel it in anything like the way he did? And how would Seishirou respond?

Seishirou-san...if I'm being honest, you'll probably try to kill me. If not for this, then because you've always meant to, and it's time. It really is too much to hope for that you'll understand, that you'll have some kind of realization and your feelings will come alive suddenly, that we'll find each other here on the edge of this world's destruction and somehow everything will be all right.

But still—can't I hope for it?

Even something that's so utterly impossible?

All about him the park stretched away into the distance, still and silent, seeming empty of life but for the winter-dormant trees. It gave him no reply. But then, he'd already known the answer.

No. In acknowledgment and acquiescence he bowed his head, the ghost of a rueful smile flickering across his lips. *Well, anyway, it doesn't matter. My real hope is for something else.*

After all, my one wish has always been the same.

I wish.... He hesitated over the thought, gazing off toward the horizon, in the direction from which that person would probably come. *I wish....*

That for once...you would just see me. Really see me, for who I am—not as a glass cup to be broken, a stone to be kicked aside, not as your plaything, your possession, your enemy, your lover, your opposite as the head of the Sumeragi clan, but instead just as myself.

That you would see me as I see you.

Seishirou-san.

Moonlight and shadows blurred around him—he blinked hard, swallowed down the growing ache, controlling grief and yearning as assiduously as if those feelings were the threads of spells or spirits to be commanded by naked strength of will. Tears had won him nothing nine years ago beneath the sakura tree. They would win him nothing now.

You only see me truly when I surprise you.

Therefore, I....

Closing his eyes, Subaru bent his head once more, brushing his lips over the sign that marked him. Then, with a faint sigh, he sank down to kneel on the grass, his shikifuku spilling around him. Raising both hands, he clasped them before his face in the mitsu-in, that focusing gesture meant to gather mystical strength and to ward away distractions. He let his mind and heart settle gradually into quiet readiness, into the calm center of knowing what he must and would do.

* * * * *

The moon gleamed between reaching, creeping fingers of cloud. Its faint light spilled in through the window to lie in oblique rectangles across the bedcovers, separated by the black shadows of the window's crossbars. At the head of the bed, where that pale glow failed to reach, the end of a cigarette flared orange for the length of a slow intake of breath. Its brief, dull light barely illuminated the profile of the man sitting there, leaning up against the wall.

Lowering the cigarette, Seishirou turned his head. He stared out through the window at the gray-on-gray landscape of the city, his eyes narrowed. Somewhere in the distance, Tokyo Tower burned with a divine flame. Somewhere in the web of the city's infrastructure, the hand of a Dragon of Earth shifted the flow of its electrical life-current to suit herself. And somewhere out there, the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan was doing...something.

Seishirou drew once more on his cigarette. Then, leaving it to smolder in the ashtray, he unfolded himself from the bed. With unhurried purpose, he crossed the room, moving toward the closet.

Except for the whisper of his pajamas and his bare feet on the floor, the silence was absolute.

Chapter 20

From the shadow-realm of his maboroshi, Seishirou observed the chosen field of battle. The trees, the path, the low hill, all were intimately familiar. Of course, Subaru had undoubtedly studied the area with great care himself, during his long hunt for his sister's killer, the betrayer of his youthful innocence.

Not even a kekkai to protect? If you're fighting as a Dragon of Heaven, Subaru-kun, you're going about it very strangely.

It frankly made no sense whatsoever, in terms of the battle for the world's future. To be helping the other Seals, Subaru should be at their side, or else guarding one of the remaining cornerstones of the city. Facing Seishirou here made a clear statement that this was a personal matter, unrelated to Subaru's other allegiances, except perhaps in the most superficial way. And if that were the case, then Seishirou's reading of the situation had just been turned entirely on its head.

It had been disappointing enough—although not all that surprising, he supposed—to believe that Subaru had in the end put duty before whatever he claimed to feel for Seishirou. But to think that, for all those protestations of love, Subaru had still cared more about revenge—

Well, if it's personal, that's quite fine with me.

He couldn't really be sure of Subaru's tangled motivations. Ultimately, though, it didn't matter. Whether Subaru had deceived him and left him for the sake of the Dragons of Heaven or because of some private, obsessive hunger, his response would be no different. He could feel within himself a powerful current of...*annoyance*, he supposed, bitter, tense, almost jittery, a disquiet in his stomach, a clenching in his chest, a scattering of thought and reflection before the restless, simmering urge to act.

Subaru-kun.

I really am going to kill you now.

Subaru unfolded from that kneeling position, rising with unhurried grace, as if he knew that his enemy might be nearby, unseen, and was alert but not disquieted. Well, Seishirou mused, it would have been a little too anticlimactic to able to sneak up on Subaru and assassinate him while he was meditating, although it might have been amusingly ironic. The breeze caught at Subaru's sleeves and hakama, just enough to ripple them out to one side of his body, and everything dimmed as a trailing edge of cloud passed across the moon. The misting drizzle of the last few minutes intensified into a brief, chill spatter of rain. Then the cloud shifted and light returned, even as that subtle gust of wind began to subside. Seen clearly once more, Subaru's face was closed and remote, expressionless. In the moonlight, his eyes appeared black.

It's time.

Seishirou let the maboroshi disperse. He knew that Subaru was seeing him waver into view, as if a veil of invisible smoke were gradually thinning between them. Subaru had taken the peak of the hill, so Seishirou had placed himself about twenty meters to Subaru's left along its crest, only a little lower than that high ground, not enough to make any real difference. As he made his appearance, Subaru turned slowly to face him. One hand resting idly in the pocket of his coat, Seishirou smiled at his opponent. He had left his sunglasses behind in the apartment; there was no need for them here.

"Hello, Subaru-kun."

Subaru made no reply. His silence and that continuing lack of emotion only intensified Seishirou's irritation. At the very least, confronting the man he supposedly loved, Subaru should seem distressed. Seishirou thought then of Subaru at the party, lifting his sake cup to request a refill, his face a mask of untouchable reserve, those usually vibrant green eyes giving nothing back, and the memory stung with unexpected sharpness, like the bite of acid.

Didn't you say it, Subaru-kun? That you wouldn't hide what you were feeling from me anymore?

How much of what you've said all along has been a lie?

Despite his displeasure, Seishirou's smile never faltered. The drizzle had faded again, leaving tiny round drops like beads of crystal on the shoulders and sleeves of his coat. He drew his hand from his pocket, turning a 100-yen coin slowly between his fingers, rubbing his thumb across the sakura flowers embossed on its back. At the fringes of his awareness, he could feel the barrow tree stirring, its already awakened attention gathering force and focus, a soundless hiss of expectation, a mutter of unquiet souls.

Still, it doesn't really matter now.

Raising his arm, he extended it toward Subaru, his hand in a loose fist, palm down.

This is where it ends.

The image and sound of the seed-syllable, both held firmly in his mind, sufficed for the spell. From between his curled fingers, thin ribbons of silvery metal lashed out, widening and stiffening into slender, lethal blades as they flashed toward Subaru.

Subaru's lips moved, a nearly inaudible invocation. He made a swirling gesture with one arm, and all about him a shimmering field of water droplets rose from the ground to hover in mid-air, glittering like a haze of fairy lights. At another gesture, that watery veil whipped forward like a second, sideways rain. As those droplets touched the metal, they ate away at it, a dizzyingly rapid corrosion, the last blade dissolving into nothingness just a meter or so short of Subaru's face. His expression had scarcely changed, becoming a little more focused, a little more grave, as if he was very gently disappointed, but that was all.

Water, Subaru-kun? That's...an interesting choice. Although the spell had certainly been effective enough, fire would have seemed to make more sense. Seishirou frowned for a second before his smile slipped back into place, a smirk of dark amusement. *Well, if you want to go*

around the gogyo that way.... He didn't even need a physical symbol this time—reaching out with his will and the power of the next seed-syllable, he called to the trees at the back of the hill. The ground began to ripple as though rivers of serpents were slithering just beneath its surface, all converging upon the hilltop where Subaru stood. Suddenly those serpents burst free: thick, writhing roots, new runners swelling and uncoiling from them even as they continued to surge forward, trunks and branches sprouting upward frantically as they came clear of the earth, the whole tangle thrashing and clawing its way toward Subaru.

After all, you're playing to one of my strengths.

Subaru leaped aside, dodging those twining, crushing limbs. Reaching into one of his sleeves, he drew out some small object. As he swept his arm out toward the thicket, Seishirou spotted the flash of metal, the wink of a tiny flame—a lighter, and he wasn't surprised when the roots and branches ignited into conflagration, fire bursting out from within the wood and consuming it greedily. The flames licked high in their fierce frenzy, briefly hiding Subaru from view, and as Seishirou waited patiently for them to ebb, for those still-twitching limbs to collapse into a smoldering heap, he took the opportunity to palm a small stone from the ground at his feet. Because of course, next after fire came...he glanced down in surprise, alerted by a subtle tremoring. That vibration abruptly intensified, and he vaulted to one side just as a pillar of earth punched upward right where he'd been standing. All at once the ground was roiling, thrusting up on all sides like massive, jutting fingers only to curl over, crumble, and fall—for a few moments his entire attention was taken up with ducking and jumping and the effort to keep from losing either his orientation or his footing amidst the ceaseless tumult of destruction. He found a clear space at last and leaped, lighting for an instant on the tip of a lifting spire before jumping again, a long spring to the edge of the woods. Poised in a high fork of branches, he caught his breath, glancing back toward that slowly subsiding upheaval.

Subaru-kun, that was rude of you.

It was my turn.

As the ground settled, he glimpsed the white flash of Subaru's shikifuku through the lingering haze of smoke. Snapping a twig from one of the branches near him, he pointed it with an emphatic flourish, sending a renewed wave of roots and branches scrabbling after Subaru. Subaru couldn't very well use earth against them and was forced to go back to fire. While Subaru was dealing with that, Seishirou reached out with his will, drawing upon the smoke in the air, already magically charged by the collision of sorcerous elements, gathering it together, condensing it into a form of shadows and vapor.

Subaru took a step backward, appearing in a gap between his victorious and now dwindling flames. He looked up, and his eyes widened at the sight of the eagle shikigami hanging suspended between himself and Seishirou, floating on motionless wings.

It's been fun. But I'm not playing with you anymore.

Subaru whipped out three ofuda and began to chant, swiftly but with perfect control, never stumbling. The eagle cried, crystalline and brittle, and swept its wings downward, sending itself soaring up in a single rush to achieve diving height.

Oh, Subaru-kun...do you really think your shikigami, cute as they are, can do anything against this attack?

"Hikuu!" As the eagle tipped and began its stoop, Subaru released his shikigami, three birds shining with a pale, pure light, even through the grey stain of smoke-filled air. In a tight V-formation, they hurtled up to meet the eagle, and as they rose they drew even closer, touching each other, merging with a luminescent flare until there was only one bird, plumed and crested, a little smaller than the eagle, its voice a piercingly sweet, singing note.

The eagle and the white bird crashed together. One of the white bird's feet caught the eagle's right talon; the left one buried itself in the white bird's thigh. The white bird cried out again, a high keen, like some inhuman grieving. The eagle's hooked beak snapped shut onto the back of the white bird's neck. Chest to chest, the two shikigami strained against each other, wings battering the air, their masters pouring power into and through them.

Seishirou leaned harder into his shikigami, driving the crushing power of its beak, pushing it to sever the white bird's life. In the white bird's quivering, he could read the tremor of Subaru's hands, held up in a desperate projective gesture as Subaru struggled to resist, could feel the catch in Subaru's breath. Without warning that resistance gave way, became something fluid and yielding. Seishirou saw the white bird's wings spread wider, its form distorting, losing cohesion as that singular force reverted to a trinity. Those wings wrapped around the eagle from either side and *pulled*, even as the eagle ripped deep into the white bird's body—and the shikigami tore each other apart, scattering into threads of darkness and smoke, into motes of light and blowing shreds of paper.

Seishirou caught his balance, careful in the tenuous footing of his treetop vantage, then slowly lowered the hand that he'd raised in half-conscious support of his shikigami. He stared down at Subaru, who stood panting, feet braced in a wide stance, still resonating with the energies of that struggle. Somewhere far off to the west, he was dimly aware of the crack and boom of destruction, and then the distinctive vibration of a kekkai being raised, but right now such things were meaningless distractions. He put them out of mind without a further thought.

Drawing in a last deep breath, Subaru straightened and lifted his head. He looked up at Seishirou, his gaze unwavering, dark, and intent—a outward-focused concentration that for some reason made Seishirou's pulse beat faster, as if Subaru were no longer that impassive, unresponsive cipher, as if they'd engaged each other and now...now.... Moving with the measured care and presence of a ritual act, Subaru reached into his sleeve once more. Drawing forth a sheaf of ofuda, he spread them slowly before himself, the cards held out parallel to the ground like a dancer's white fan.

A smile crept back onto Seishirou's face. Taking out his own ofuda, he opened his arms and made the cards leap from one hand to the other, a casual, graceful arc, before letting them flow around himself in a warding spiral, equally ready for protection or attack. The sakura's stirring intensified, a low, shuddering howl in the psyche and in the blood, the trembling of uncountable deathly flowers, that restiveness rising like the wind before a storm—like his own unlooked-for excitement, the resurgence of a long-anticipated but nearly forgotten eagerness.

After all, this fight was only just beginning.

* * * * *

At least the rain had been brief, Karen thought. Not that it would have interfered with her powers at all, but going into one's big, dramatic battle looking and feeling like a drowned cat wouldn't have been much fun. Instead, it had left her barely dampened (and already dried by her own heat) and had put just the faintest gleam on the city's metal railings and nonfunctioning streetlights, now that the moon was coming out once more. It hadn't even been enough to make the streets shine.

Just ahead, the long shape of Tokyo Station's west-side building stretched out across her path, distinctly Old-World European in its horizontal, peak-roofed silhouette. So she'd arrived at last. Angling to one side, she sprang lightly upward until she reached a construction crane on the roof of one of the taller buildings across the street from the station plaza, where she paused to survey the cat's cradle of tracks laid out below. The trouble, as Seiichirou had pointed out, was that the Yamanote Line covered such a large area; there was no guarantee that a Dragon of Earth was even at this station. But at least it gave her somewhere to start, a place from which she could keep watch over her half of the loop. From here, she ought to be able to make it in time to the site of any attack.

She turned to sweep her gaze across the city, sharply alert for signs of destruction, but something near at hand caught at her awareness instead, a flicker of subtle power, of presence. Glancing back and down again, she spotted the figure at once, standing within the railing that crowned one of the station's octagonal end-towers: pale coat, pale hair, both faintly luminous in the moonlight—or was that shifting, eye-tricking glow really a magical aura of some kind, a visible manifestation of the spiritual energy that had attracted her attention?

"Well," Karen murmured to herself. "You're not exactly hiding, are you?"

With quick, wary fluidity, she leaped down again, crane to rooftop to lower building, then skipped lamp post to lamp post across the plaza. The putative Dragon of Earth—well, really, who else would be sightseeing from the top of Tokyo Station at something past two in the morning?—gave no sign of having noticed her. Neither did there seem to be any kekkai-destroying in progress. Maybe she was actually going to get lucky. She jumped to the lower part of the station's roof, then up to balance on the railing on the far side of the tower from the Angel, where she

paused with a catch of breath, half-expecting to be greeted with a surprise assault, or at the very least some sly banter, since this person was certainly waiting for something, with a deliberateness that suggested a trap. But the Dragon of Earth just stood there, facing away from her, gazing off down the tracks as if lost in thought. He seemed to possess an air of profound reserve, a quiet deadened by ennui and melancholy. It looked as though she was going to have to be the one to do all the bantering. What a pity—it would've been much more entertaining to be paired off against someone like Yuuto.

Nevertheless....

"There's something romantic about a train station, isn't there?" Stepping off the railing, Karen dropped easily to the surface of the roof, then took a second step forward, smiling, brushing her fingers almost idly through her hair. "All the possibilities of the journey, maybe." Now, which one would this be? If not any of the ones from the party, then that left....

The Dragon of Earth turned slowly. Long, wisping bangs and some trick of the shadows hid his eyes. He gestured languidly in her direction, and she tensed, suddenly feeling that there was something not quite right, not quite *real* about him, a strange insubstantiality, even as the world dissolved about them, the moonlit city swept away like leaves carried on a gale, like sand castles crumbling in a swiftly out-rushing wave, sucked away from her before she could react.

An illusion?

She scarcely had time for the thought. The wake of that wave was a second wave, a surge of absolute darkness. Vertigo made her lightheaded, a swooping, soaring sensation, like floating half out of one's body, on the verge of slipping off into sleep or hallucination, and for an instant it was as if she could feel the darkness touching her, rippling across her skin...no, flowing off her like water. She abruptly realized that what she was feeling was her clothes melting and running away from her body. The slight weight of her earrings vanished as they disintegrated—she caught at her throat and touched skin, even the delicate gold crucifix that she had been wearing gone, as if it had never been with her.

The wave passed, and she straightened cautiously, seeking her bearings in a world of featureless black. Or nearly featureless—a scattering of white feathers drifted here and there, carried on air currents she couldn't herself feel. Her opponent still stood across from her, plainly visible despite the lack of any light. He lifted his head, and his eyes were golden, cat-pupiled, showing no human emotion or mercy.

The dreamgazer of the Dragons of Earth. It could be no one else, and Karen's heart quailed just a little in recrimination and self-doubt. Stupid, *stupid*—she hadn't even managed to raise her kekkai before he'd caught her like a thoughtless child, trapping her outside ordinary reality. She wasn't beaten yet, of course, but what could she do now?

Was it even possible for her to burn a dream?

* * * * *

Nataku threw itself behind a rooftop billboard; pressing its back against a steel support beam, it took advantage of the momentary reprieve to try to work out a new course of action. This was not going well at all. It had been calmly and methodically striking at the heart of the kekkai in Shibuya, following its instructions, when the windmaster Dragon of Heaven had shown up and forced it back—

A lash of wind ripped around the end of the billboard—if Nataku hadn't wedged itself in the lee of the beam, it would have been struck and probably severely injured. It had seen the scores those thin ribbons of air could leave on metal, although so far it had only a couple of burning grazes, the marks of near misses. Even huddled in the protection of its scant shelter, it could feel the pull of fast-moving air, eddies swirling wildly in the gust's wake, flurrying its clothes and hair. The wind-howl, which had briefly quieted to a low moan, abruptly increased in volume, becoming a mind-numbing roar. The billboard rocked as it was battered hard, began to shake and creak disturbingly—it *tilted*, having been wrenched loose from the roof on one side, and as it buckled Nataku leaped for the edge of the building, its cloth a mad whirl between it and the source of that gale, shielding it from any stray wind currents or flying debris.

Somewhat shaken but still untouched, it dropped to the top of one of the Shibuya crossing's dead and dark video screens, out of the wind's direct path for the moment, then sprang down to the wide, empty pavement where several streets came together. Spinning to face its opponent, it gathered its cloth up, shaping it into a defensive configuration. It could block those wind attacks, but they were so many and so relentless, they came in from multiple directions and it couldn't really *see* them, only sense their force and vector of attack—the Dragon of Heaven came toward Nataku, over the tops of the buildings, and with a start of dismay Nataku realized that it had put itself in a very bad place, out in the open square where there was no cover, where the wind could gather speed and strength down the long, straight streets. Before it could shift to better ground, the wind struck, screaming along those glass and steel canyons, and there was no time to plan, only to block and block and block, ducking, leaping, backpedaling as well as it could with no more than fleeting glimpses behind it. If it could just get past this one wide, curve-fronted building, there was a narrower side street where it might be able to take refuge once more. A wind-razor licked through its defenses in that instant of split attention, slashed through jacket and shirt to the skin. It parried harder on that side and lost an inch from its cloth on the other, the trailing end shredded, fragments of fabric snatched away.

Focus. It had to survive, to defeat this enemy, to complete its task. The Kamui of the Dragons of Earth had asked this of it. Nothing else mattered; no other outcome was acceptable.

But for the merest breath it felt a thin, indefinable ache.

If only....

If only it weren't alone in this....

It thrust that odd pain away, forced aside the faltering quiver of uncertainty before it could be distracted any further. It had almost reached the corner of the building. The Dragon of Heaven—the man from the party, from the photograph—jumped down onto the giant video screen, then leaped to balance on a lamp post in front of the building's glass face, intent and watchful, clearly intending to pursue.

A chance.

Nataku threw itself forward, whipping its cloth in an arc before it, diverting the winds' force to either side. Thin swirls of air got through over and around the cloth—razor cuts along one cheek, the back of one hand, upper arm and outer thigh, white-hot burnings, ruby scatters of blood, but the damage was insignificant. Leaping, it struck, a wavelike lash with the cloth. The man flung himself aside, and the discharge of Nataku's power shattered the glass of the building's second floor, smashed the cafe inside, splintering and sweeping away the chairs and tables. Still in mid-leap, Nataku let the follow-through whirl it around, the tail-end of its cloth flicking back in the opposite direction, a second strike, less powerful but quick as lightning. The Dragon of Heaven had gotten his hand up, was gathering a shield of winds, nearly in time, but not quite. The blow caught him in midair, sent him spinning out and down into the middle of the square, ending in a short, skidding slide across the pavement. Nataku lighted on the lamp post where the man had been standing, hesitated a split second, then spun and jumped again, upward across the face of the building, aiming back the way it had originally come, casting a wary glance over one shoulder at its opponent.

Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe it should have killed the man first, following up on that opportunity rather than putting distance between them again. The windmaster's power had greater range than the force that Nataku could generate with its cloth and ki. But the round tower of the 109 Building rose up at the end of the street, the structure that embodied this cornerstone...the Dragon of Heaven hadn't put up his protective kekkai yet, and if it could just get there....

The Dragon of Heaven straightened, though not all the way, one hand pressed to his side. A stain was visible between his fingers, spreading out from under his jacket, darkening his pale shirt. The man raised his head, a flicker of moonlight catching on the frame of his glasses as he looked up—

An abrupt hush, as though the wind had fallen. *Pain*, then, not terrible but bewildering, strange and sourceless, a ringing throb in Nataku's ears, a dull ache gathering in its joints and muscles, a greying of its vision as it struggled to breathe an air grown incomprehensibly thin. A muffled, cracking boom, a glittering flash at the edge of sight—despite its confusion and the increasing numbness that dragged at it, Nataku somehow managed to raise an arm, to turn its face aside as the glass front of the building next to it exploded outward. It was dully aware of that blast wave hitting its body, of the impact of jagged spikes of glass, but far more urgently than that, as the world began to darken around it, it felt a sense of piercing, desperate lostness.

Of fear.

Daddy...it hurts.

In a rain of glass shards and a tangle of blood-stained white cloth, Nataka plummeted toward the street.

* * * * *

“Do it, Miss! Quickly!” Lightning arced about Sorata, crackling hand to hand, bleeding a thin web of electricity into the air about him as he leaped high, high, the long, curving trajectory of a catapult shot, aimed to fall toward the rumble and crash of destruction ahead of them. *“Hey, you! Wait up a minute! No fair starting without us!”*

Annoyed, Arashi skidded to a stop on the pavement of the fountain plaza, the triple-peaked mass of the Shinjuku Park Tower looming high above her, a darkness heavier than that of the night sky. If he told her one more time to hurry up about something...and what did he think he was doing, charging forward so recklessly without her? But the need was real and desperate, and she could not deny it. Holding her hands before her, she shut out the receding whoop of Sorata’s voice, the sizzle of occult power, the far-off grinding roar that was swallowing up those fainter sounds, a thundering, heart-stopping howl of metal-stress, of avalanche. She reached inward instead, to the breathless hush of a perfect and absolute desire.

To the will to protect....

And that stillness unfolded from her heart, from the shelter of her hands, expanding upward and outward. Her kekkai rose swiftly, surely, and with it grew that zone of stasis, where the reality of the physical world was suspended. Another crash, another lingering scream of some structure giving way, but this time none of it had any meaning. The shadow of true destruction, it would not become real until and unless she were defeated.

It would never become real, she vowed, and the barrier was sealed and complete.

Arashi rocked back, catching her breath and inner balance as her senses swept the boundaries of her kekkai, testing them, feeling out the space that they contained. She should have been closer to the center of the high-rise district; she thought that she might have missed the northernmost buildings, but nevertheless she should have enough to protect the cornerstone. The Government Building was under her kekkai, at least, as were the buildings that had actually been under attack. Her gaze darted across the dust- and moonlight-hazed skyline, searching for the center of that disruption, for any glimpse of a small, leaping figure amidst those towering buildings, even as she extended her arm to one side, preparing to call forth the god-sword.

She caught only a flicker of motion—the jolt was her first clear realization, her arm wrenched down and back, and then the pain, sudden as being plunged into ice water, a white-cold, burning spike, a flare of raw sensation. Barely managing not to fall over backward, she stumbled and landed on one hip instead, clutching at her wrist as if that could ease the anguish. A slender blade

on a red, whiplike cord stood upright from the center of her palm, its edged crossguard bracketing her hand; its tip was wedged deep between the paving stones, pinning her to the ground. With fractured urgency, she groped after its hilt. The metal was slick beneath her fingers, ungraspable, resisting all efforts to pull it free—some will was working in and through the blade, she realized, and despite her injury she reached desperately for the god-sword, for its power, to try to force it out past that obstruction—

A second blade was laid against her throat, a cool, deceptively gentle touch that froze her into stillness.

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that my hand beats yours,” murmured Kigai Yuuto.

Stunned, she flicked her eyes up and sideways, seeking his face. He was smiling as he crouched next to her, his expression as tender and yet unyielding as the deadly edge resting at her neck. “This is not a game,” she said through clenched teeth. Anger, pain, and fear blurred her thoughts. She was scarcely aware of what she was saying. “Don’t toy with me.”

“Well, if that’s what you’d prefer.” He seemed faintly regretful; she supposed that she was disappointing him somehow, but whatever he was about had no meaning for her. All that she could seem to focus on was rage and shame and the irrepressible butterfly flickerings of pitiable, lunatic hopes. Maybe...there might still be a chance...he straightened, the cord of his weapon falling in loose coils behind him as he drew that free blade back for a strike, and it seemed that she could suddenly feel the thinness of flesh and bone that lay as a shield above her rapidly beating heart.

Movement caught her eye; her face must have shown something. Yuuto whirled, bringing the blade around—metal clashed on metal, power flared against power, gold and blue-white, as Sorata was there without warning, an open-pronged vajra clenched in his fist, a weapon wreathed in lightning. Yuuto’s blade had caught between the prongs as he’d blocked Sorata’s blow; she could see him and Sorata both quivering as they strove against each other. That white light blazed up, crackling, its intensity throwing everything into stark relief, as Sorata poured more force through the vajra. Yuuto grimaced with evident strain. With a snap of the cord, he snaked the other blade away, and somehow Arashi managed to hold off lightheadedness as a gout of blood poured from her palm—was able to scramble aside, out of immediate danger, even as she struggled to heal the worst of the damage. Enough that she could call the god-sword forth.... She half-saw as Yuuto whipped the cord at Sorata and Sorata leaped high to avoid it. There was a sonorous clang, like a bell, and she looked up again to see the vajra rolling on the pavement and Yuuto springing back, his weapon a tornado-whorl around him. Sorata stood solidly braced before her, hands incandescent with electric flame. “Miss, are you okay?”

“Yes!” He could use his lightnings now that she was out of the way. Muscles and tendons finished knitting together—she glanced up once more to gauge the situation, and her heart seized with shock. “*Look out—!*”

Sorata snapped his gaze back to Yuuto, now poised on the roof of the arcade across the plaza. But the threat was from a different direction. The pavement that had been heaving and buckling upward erupted with full violence, releasing a snaking mass of cables and conduits. Surging up out of the ground, it slammed into Sorata even as he was turning to face it, ramming him back to crash against one of the columns of the near-side arcade.

“Sorata-san!” Somehow she was at his side, with no memory of crossing the intervening distance. She caught at his arm—he was still on his feet, slumped forward over the bunched cables that pinned him to the column, and for an instant some mad voice of optimism cried out that he was all right, only stunned and winded from the impact, before she looked down to see the spreading dark stain, the blood soaking his clothes and falling in a thick, slow spatter to the pavement before him, before she realized that the massive fist of metal and wires had driven its way up and *into* his body. Her own stomach lurched with shock and denial. *“Sorata-san!”*

He twitched, and that senseless hope refused to settle its wings and be still; it twittered inside her head until she could scarcely put two thoughts together. Maybe he could be saved—if she could just cut him free, and then—what? Sorata jerked again—he spasmed upright, as if some invisible force had wrenched him back against the pillar. His eyes were closed, his jaw fixed and rigid with strain. His other arm moved, a small, convulsive gesture, strangely aimless, a fitful stutter of electrical threads flickering about it, and she felt something peculiar, a pulse and shift beneath her fingers, under his jacket’s sleeve, before a sharp, warning tingle made her jerk her hands away.

What....

“Miss...no, Arashi...I need...I need you to....” Breathless, forced out through gritted teeth, the words hardly sounded like Sorata. Then he made a low sound, a catch at the back of the throat, an almost-chuckle, and there was no mistaking him. She wanted desperately to weep. *“Sorry...I am so sorry.”* His body bucked and arched again, without volition, like a clumsy and grotesque marionette, and as she stared down at his arm she saw the flesh at his wrist and the back of his hand furrowing up into slender trails as if thin, sinuous worms were crawling underneath the skin.

Or something worse.

She flung out her hand. The accustomed ripping, stretching sensation of summoning the god-sword made her vaguely nauseous, dizzy with both sympathetic anguish and release. *“No time,”* Sorata choked out as she raised the sword, hesitating over where best to strike. His head had been twisted to one side, but he’d opened his eyes and she saw the pale flash as the nearer one rolled about, seeking her. *“Miss...hurry...hurry....”* With a jolt, she noticed one of those squirming ridges crawling up from under his collar, then another, and more—faster now, expanding like a network of tree roots, flowing up the line of his throat, along his jaw, ever upward, toward the brain.

“Miss!”

The blade of the god-sword flashed.

Everything seemed to become impossibly slow. It might as well have been an eternity before she heard the soft, dull thunk of Sorata's head dropping onto the pavement. Each gasp of breath that dragged in and out of her lungs was like the birth and extinguishing of a universe, imprisoned in a cycle without end. She couldn't seem to move as that mass of cables coiled languidly backward, shaking off the body—*his body*—with an almost delicate flick, a fine scatter of blood flung up before her staring eyes like a spray of black glitter in the moonlight. Dreamlike, the body fell, its limbs asprawl, gangling and limp. Lifeless. The god-sword's blade rasped as it slid along the concrete pillar, its weight dragging her unresisting arms downward—she found herself staring at the dark lump of Sorata's head, so small, so apparently inconsequential. She was only abstractly aware of the machine-agglomeration gathering itself up to loom at the end of the plaza, of the faint, trickling music of water, the plaza's fountain coming to life, slender jets arcing and rising into the air like curious serpents, as if to watch her.

His cap had fallen off, and it lay a little aside from his head. Two shadows, like stones in a zen garden.

Could it really be that she'd just...?

Impossible.

But he had asked it of her....

Hadn't he?

Gradually she grew conscious of her own pulse, one heartbeat followed by another, of the quivering of her body, of the hushed stasis within the field of her kekkai. Moment by moment time was starting to creep forward once more, relentless, the past slipping away along with the future that might have existed, and in their place there was nothing but emptiness—emptiness forever, where that person had been. *His joking voice...his smile....* A tension was growing within her: the void's howl, the pressure of grief, of words that had been left unsaid, of feelings unrealized, a swelling, crushing flood, a voiceless scream—

And the vessel cracked.

* * * * *

It was the light that made Yuzuriha turn—sudden blaze against the dark horizon, a searing white brilliance spilling out through the pyramid shape of that far-off kekkai as if it were a glass lamp. With a gasp, she sprang to the side of the bridge, clenching both hands on the railing. The cold wind off the water touched her face and riffled at her hair. She could feel the resonances even from here, a massively deep, shuddering, tolling note with something like roaring in it, and sobbing—there was fire and water, the flash of metal or mirrors or scales, an unimaginably vast serpent-slither, the sudden, solid-noise shock of thunder, a startling, overpowering sense of otherness. She caught her lip between her teeth in wonder and dismay.

Was this, then, the true god's power of Ise?

“Arashi-san....”

South and west of her, much nearer than Shinjuku, Tokyo Tower’s light had dimmed to a pale aura, like a ghost’s candle underneath the crescent moon. She couldn’t sense anyone else’s *kekkaï*, although power was moving all around the city, unquiet and dangerous, like disturbed animals ready to savage anything that crossed their path. There was fighting already, she thought, and not just at the heart of that maelstrom of divine force. If she reached for it, those others would be out there, somewhere: Seiichirou’s strength a still place amidst the ribbon-dance of winds, Karen’s warmth like the hidden glow of a secret, Subaru’s sad eyes and quiet smile.

But...Sorata....

They should keep going. She could feel her companion waiting a few strides further down the pedestrian walk—she didn’t need to look, didn’t want to look, because she knew that if she did she’d see on his face that kind and pitying gentleness, the faint, rueful smile of someone who was convinced that what they were doing was futile but was going along with it anyway, for her sake.

Maybe...he was right.

But it had seemed like the best thing to do at the time. Given the impossible, heartbreaking choice of having to fight against the man she loved and probably watch him die (or else make him watch *her* die, and she honestly didn’t know which would be worse), and the equally unthinkable option of turning against her friends and maybe even becoming a Dragon of Earth, saying no to both had seemed to make perfect sense. The two of them just *wouldn’t*, and somehow she’d thought that it might actually be enough to break the prophecy. Seven Dragons of Heaven and seven Dragons of Earth, and if one of each stood aside...?

But it looked like it was no use after all. The war was still going on, even with them out on the fringes, and now she had no idea what to do. Did she dare to wait and see if, at the very end, their absence *did* change something, like a missing ingredient of a spell? (And would it be a good change, she wondered nervously, or something gone dangerously askew, a work of magic misfiring to become a curse?) Should she and Kusanagi hold their strength in reserve and try to pick up whatever pieces were left after the last battle? Or should they go back now? And if so, for what purpose?

Her chest ached so with grief and confusion that it took her a minute or two to notice the feeling of distance. She looked back along the bridge and was puzzled to see her *inugami* sitting on the sidewalk, several meters away, rather than at her side. “Inuki?” Gold eyes watched her, calm, steadfast, and unwavering, yet also inscrutable—and she felt the sudden jolt of realization, although of what she wasn’t yet sure. Letting go of the railing, she turned and walked slowly back toward the dog spirit.

“Miss?”

“Yes—just a minute.” She was a little bit proud of herself; her voice didn’t quaver or crack. She crouched down in front of Inuki. Usually this was his invitation to rise and pad toward her, to put his cool nose against her cheek, to lean into her and let her bury her hands and face in his fur,

drawing comfort, touching the intangible warmth of surety. This time he didn't move, merely watched her with that enigmatic intentness. Her scalp prickled, the strange but not unfamiliar sense of being near the edge of a mystery. "What is it, Inuki?"

Somehow she wasn't at all surprised when he spoke, even though he'd never done so before. His voice was a low rumble, harsh but not unpleasant, the growl of rock against rock, the soughing of winds across the blade-like edges of the mountain. He sounded a little bit like her grandmother, too, which for some reason made absolutely perfect sense, despite the fact that Inuki was a boy. Someday she'd have to think about that and try hard to figure it out.

But not now.

Choose, Inuki had said.

Stricken, she stared at him, instantly aware of what he'd meant. "I can't!" she whispered. It came out as a frantic, strangled squeak. The inugami's gaze never faltered—not cruel, not as the wheels of fate or careless human beings could be cruel, but not yielding either. There was no pity or apology in it, only the simple necessity of what was.

You must.

And as she knelt there, face to face with that pure certainty, it seemed that time had stopped, caught up into a frozen moment. If things could only stay that way forever, unchanging, never asking her to...but she already knew, she had known all along, that in the end she'd have to do *something*, and she could not, now or ever, unknow those things that were true. Maybe that was part of why it had hurt so much when people had accused her of telling stories about Inuki. As an inugami master, as someone with a real power, there was no pretending.

"I...yes. I know. I have to...to...." In admission and surrender, she bowed her head, grieving the decision even as she made it. The gray pavement before her blurred as slow tears began to trickle down her face.

Inuki came forward then; he nuzzled tenderly at one damp cheek as she knuckled with dull urgency at her eyes, choking her sobs down into silence, so that Kusanagi wouldn't be worried. *Good*. The low huff of approval lifted her heart a little, even as the relief of it made her want to cry harder, to throw herself onto Inuki in a wailing, desperate hug. There was no time, and she had to be strong just now, but maybe...only a little...? Inuki stepped back again, gently but deliberately, slipping away from her half-raised arm.

Now, Inuki said, *choose*.

"But—I just *did*!" Even if it was Inuki, she was a bit upset. He made a sound like a chuckle, amused though not unkind, and her outrage muddled itself up into confusion.

Choice breeds choice. Those golden eyes had always been filled with love, the same untrammelled, guileless, perfect love that filled them now, as endless as a sunlit summer sky—but oh, when had they become filled with such wisdom also? A sadness, a deep acceptance, deeper than she could truly understand—but she could feel how she'd been moving ever closer to that

verge, how she was balancing at the point of crossing over, halfway between two worlds, and with a shock she knew the question that was coming, even before it could be spoken.

Choose him, the inugami said.

Or...choose me.

* * * * *

The darkness beneath the Diet Building was broken only by twin candles, burning flickerless within spherical glass lamps. They stood to either side of a low futon; outside that zone of light, the room seemed endless and empty, stretching on and on as though the whole vast universe of the gods' creation had been destroyed, and all that was left was this one fragment of a world, floating timeless and adrift.

At the edge of shadow, Kanoe bent forward in her chair, leaning closer to the bed. As she moved, her foot shifted, bumping a small, heavy object. She glanced down with a combination of satisfaction and distaste at the angular shape of the gun. Crude, ugly, and out of place amidst the unworldly otherness of this sanctuary—but in its brutal efficiency, quite effective. With her heel, she nudged the thing further under the chair, out of sight. Then, free of distractions, she turned her gaze back to the tiny figure at the center of the futon, huddled motionless beneath the covers and the shimmering, fanned-out veil of long, white hair, so deep in dreams that only a powerful magical working could awaken her from that slumber. Kanoe could sense the brooding, swirling weight of visions—she reached out, caressing the air just above her sister's childlike face, and she could half-see those all-too-familiar scenes, glimmering at the borders of perception: fire and falling ruin, a desert littered with uncountable dead, Kamui facing off against Kamui. The images were as acute and discomfiting as knives—almost real, now. But not as richly vivid to her as the ones that lived inside her own mind.

Two girls, light and dark, laughing as they walked beneath a hot blue sky.

A man, his arms outstretched, his body racked with pain, tears running ceaselessly down his face.

A golden cup, born in blood and suffering.

The cataclysm of an innocent world.

Kanoe's mouth twisted up into a faint smile, anticipation tempered by long waiting, by memories, by the fear that wavered even through her resolution. She inched her chair further forward, almost right up against the bed.

Sister, it's time.

It's time for you to return what you took from me so long ago.

Time for you to give up that burden....

In the dimness at the edge of the candlelight, Hinoto's two attendants lay motionless, one fallen across the other in a splatter of blood, their wide eyes staring outward into nothingness.

* * * * *

Power flared and faded, black shikigami birds ripping into white ones, to their mutual destruction. Eyes narrowed, Seishirou stepped back, a new hand of ofuda already fanning out between his fingers. He cast them, and Subaru spun away from the sudden tumult of wings, letting it stream past, a couple of stray white birds sacrificing themselves to the outliers that might have grazed him. The dark flock looped back, a swift, tight arc, and Subaru stood, stood—then threw himself aside once more, hands lifting, held out before him as he whipped about to face the attack. Thin threads of incandescence blazed between them, lines crossing and recrossing to become the shield of a five-pointed star. Subaru backpedaled quickly but without any apparent panic, moving with a focused urgency that seemed almost deliberate, the first wavefront of shikigami breaking and burning away into nothingness as they hit the protection of his ward. The core of the flock caught up with him then, pressing him harder—he held them off for long moments, the subtle strain of it evident in the set of his jaw, the faint tremor of his hands. Then, with an abrupt shout, he turned the force of his shield outward, blasting away the foremost rank of birds. In that brief clear space, he sprang backward, over the still-smoldering remnants of roots and branches, and as the shikigami surged toward him again he gestured emphatically and spoke another invocation, half lost beneath the clatter of wings. A wall of thin flames jetted up out of the embers, blue-white and intense beyond any normal fire, and in that searing heat the rest of the shikigami were vaporized instantly.

Damn it. This was becoming almost aggravating. Although Seishirou had been pleased at first to see Subaru put entirely on the defensive, scrambling to hold off the onslaughts of his shikigami, something about the situation had become less than satisfying. Subaru should be doing more than this, Seishirou thought—it was as though the promise of their initial clash had dwindled into something tentative and inconclusive. Deflect and dodge, ward and dodge again, with all of Subaru's efforts turned toward dealing with Seishirou's spirit creatures. Scarcely more than one or two white birds had come Seishirou's way at all.

You're fighting me, Subaru-kun. Not them.

He'd have to find some other approach, Seishirou decided, something to take their fight to a new and more engaging level. Exactly what, he hadn't yet determined. Glancing at Subaru, who had called forth another scattering of white birds to hover protectively about himself and who stood now with his head bowed and his hands shaped into another mitsu-in, his lips moving on inaudible words, Seishirou almost negligently flicked another double-handful of ofuda in his direction. Ensorcelled paper sprouted feathered wings and cruelly sharp beaks, and as those attacking birds rushed toward their target, Seishirou, in a flicker of inspiration, divided the flock back into two parts, one arcing to the left and one to the right so as to come at Subaru from either side.

Let's see how you handle that, Subaru-kun. It would at least keep the onmyouji occupied while Seishirou pondered more interesting tactics.

Subaru lifted his head, and his eyes widened slightly. Then, ducking low, he threw himself to his left, directly into one of the oncoming streams of birds.

Seishirou tensed, surprised, and feeling as well a jangle of discordance, of something not as it should be. Madness on Subaru's part, or more likely just a mistake—but Subaru had moved not on impulse but with a clear and decisive intention. Half-crouching, his few shikigami a fragile net already disintegrating about him, a pair of ofuda held up in one hand to split the lethal torrent, Subaru plunged through the swarm of black birds and emerged on the other side, blood oozing from a shallow gash along that upraised arm. Behind him, Seishirou's two flocks tangled together, some of the shikigami destroying each other in confusion, and Subaru, spinning back to face them, found the crack in the spell that such chaos afforded him, set his will there and thrust it further apart, unraveling the sorcery. Seishirou's shikigami transformed back into ink and paper, tumbling like storm-torn leaves toward the ground.

Had that been Subaru's plan after all? But there had been much better directions to dodge than right into the attack...and Seishirou could not escape the thought that Subaru had gone that way because he *had* to.

Because he had no other choice.

Subaru already knew where he was going to move. His steps were dictated in advance, not with any regard to Seishirou's assaults but constrained toward some other end.

A spell?

Seishirou flung more shikigami at Subaru, an instinctive effort to disrupt his opponent's focus and delay or break the working, realizing even as he did so that he was going to need something more effective than that, as it clearly hadn't been doing very much so far. Wielding those two tattered ofuda like a fan, Subaru dropped into a low lunge and somehow deflected the onslaught upward, over his head. With an inward curse, Seishirou uncoupled his shikigami from each other, so that they were no longer a unified flock-entity but a frenetic mob of individual birds wheeling back and diving in to harry his target from all sides. It was harder to put real force into that incoherent jumble of attacks, especially as a part of his mind was occupied with trying to trace the pattern of Subaru's movements, to read their meaning—he had hoped to confuse and dizzy Subaru, but although the onmyouji was surrounded and hard-pressed, the clarity of his concentration never faltered. One by one, those single birds fell easily at the touch of Subaru's charged ofuda as he whirled and leaped, ducked and sidestepped in the midst of that stormcloud of black wings, drawing new cards as each pair burned away. Every move was both evasion and dance, every placement of Subaru's feet was utterly deliberate and precise, and now that Seishirou was attending to such things the general shape that they'd been tracing gradually began to emerge out of his memory of the last few minutes of battle, of the way that they had circled each other.

No. The way that Subaru had circled *him*.

Shit!

Subaru spun away from the last disintegrating shikigami in a sweeping flare of white sleeves and hakama, the silk slashed here and there and spotted with blood. A thin line of red welled along one cheek, unheeded, as he took a last, decisive step. His ceremonial dagger was in his hand—he was whipping off the scabbard, raising the blade in a two-handed grip above his head, his lips moving on a chant of power.

Where was the edge of the spell?

“—*namaku samanda basara nankan! On!*” And with the seed syllable, Subaru drove the dagger downward, dropping to his knees to plunge it with all his strength into the earth.

Seishirou leaped for the sky. The ground went to white fury beneath him, an instant of seething, blinding light before pure force blasted upward. The eruption caught him in midair, still rising—he tucked, letting it lift and tumble him like a bit of shell in the violent churning of a breaking wave, raw power ripping across the shield of his will, his only protection. *Fire on the skin, a dragon’s roar, deafening, mind-numbing, never-ceasing, waterfall and avalanche and storm.* Its raging reverberated right down to his bones, as though ward and flesh alike were nothing. Then there was unexpected silence, and the coolness of free air on his face—the flutter of wind, the strangely languid release of falling. *A dragon-line*, he realized, and wondered at the dazed quality of the thought. Half glare-blinded, he saw the ground coming up with surprising speed, and he put out his hand—

Crack.

Glitter of crystal in the sunlight. The feral curve of a woman’s smile. Stabbing pain, the delayed shock of impact, and the awareness of imminent danger combined to snap the world back into focus. That flicker of the past retreated, becoming just a glimmer of disquiet. Pushing himself up one-handed, Seishirou rapidly scanned the area. The air was filled with vapor and smoke, almost like fog—he couldn’t see Subaru. Reaching for the border between maboroshi and reality, Seishirou swept invisibility about himself like a curtain.

Although he wasn’t entirely in the darkness of that other space, he could sense it all around himself, like the promise of night gathered and waiting in the shadows of twilight—and with it the presence of the sakura tree, surging in upon him with fresh and almost startling intensity, a ravening fury of demand and hunger, rage and pain. *Wait*, Seishirou snapped at it, still unsettled by his abrupt reversal. He forced its frenzied clutching down with part of his will, as with the rest he reached out for its core of healing power.

Dark branches against a winter sky, blackened bark and leafless twig. Smudge of ashes carried past upon a bitter wind. He could smell blood, not his or Subaru’s but old blood, old death, century after century. Thrusting past all of that, past the turbulence of the tree’s disturbed mind, he touched the crimson and gold fire at last, drew it toward himself. So slow, so agonizingly slow to move at first, like congealed honey, but he breathed through and mastered his frustration, the flash of—*not fear, no*—he compelled that power with unrelenting insistence and need, and all

at once it came, flooding every part of him, a disorienting rush of heat that made him shudder and sweat. The tree howled, and nameless, numberless spirits scrabbled at the borders of his senses, as if with intangible bone fingers. *Quiet*, he told the tree, more calmly now, and its outrage subsided into a low but persistent background wailing.

His jaw set, his heart pounding, Seishirou focused that vital flame into his wrist, feeling the broken places shift and knit, although the burning stream of healing magic drowned out most of the pain. *Carefully, carefully...* he flexed the joint, making sure that its motion wasn't impeded. Too easy, working at speed, to fuse the bones together—but it was good enough, and he released the energy, letting it flow back into the tree, into the earth beneath him. In its wake, he felt both hypersensitized and empty, ajitter with a directionless, centerless urgency. Blowing out a quick breath to help settle himself, he turned his attention back to other things.

From the shelter of this interstice he could see out into the real world. The haze from Subaru's spell was dissipating, revealing a landscape gouged and torn by that release of raw elemental power. Subaru appeared gradually out of those thinning mists, picking his way step by step across the broken ground. Within the veil of invisibility, Seishirou tensed, coiling in upon himself like a cat as Subaru drifted nearer. Subaru's arms were crossed over his chest, palms lying against his shoulders. On the backs of both hands, Seishirou's stars were visible, burning with a pale blue flame. Seishirou felt a strange pang then, a subtle twinge as though a thread were very carefully being pulled taut.

Subaru turned his head and looked directly toward Seishirou.

Seishirou hurled himself forward. Rising from his knees in that charge, stride and flying stride as he rushed his opponent, his right arm drawing back, fingers held rigid—no thought, just the imperative to strike, the instinctive summoning of lethal force into his hand. The illusion must have torn as he moved, or else Subaru had already begun to penetrate it; Subaru's gaze met his, and Subaru's eyes widened. Teeth bared, Seishirou drove his arm in for the kill—

Time seemed to slow, the flow of moments becoming attenuated, disconnected, like a loosened string of beads, each one sliding out of contact with the next. A deceptively gentle touch on his forearm—Subaru's hands slim and pale against the blackness of his coat sleeve, coming to rest there almost tenderly. A push-block diverting the killing blow—just enough, as Subaru shifted to one side and pivoted, for it to miss him cleanly. Seishirou was already turning to keep Subaru from sliding out of his field of vision, his lost eye a definite handicap at such a near distance. Their gazes crossed again—the shock of meeting Subaru's green eyes, scarcely an arm's length away, an instant's sense of those depths, night-dark and still, focused in utter concentration, staring into him as he was staring into them. Seishirou found himself all-consumingly aware of the sharp lift of Subaru's chest as the other breathed, of the precise contours of their proximity, the whisper of moving fabric, the fragrance of sweat, blood, and skin. The cut on Subaru's cheek had dried into a thin black line, and for an instant there flickered through Seishirou's mind *his lips brushing that*

wound, scarcely touching it, then over the exquisite softness of unmarked skin, to the hollow of Subaru's throat, the steady beat of the pulse—

Subaru thrust away from him, driving Seishirou's arm downward as he pushed off from it and sprang back. With that jolt, time jerked back to its normal speed. Whirling, Seishirou brought his left hand across, raw power flaring about his fingertips. Still in mid-air, Subaru caught that blast on the shield of his crossed arms, warding himself against the attack even as he rode the force of it, letting it hurl him further back out of Seishirou's reach. As he landed, Seishirou struck out immediately with a follow-up lash of sorcery, and Subaru leaped again, a high, arching back-flip, already tracking on Seishirou as his head came around, ready to deflect the next snaking attack, and the next.

Subaru's feet touched ground once more—he landed in a light crouch, high up on the ravaged slope of the hill. Seishirou caught his breath. Adrenaline sang in him, silvery and incandescent—the world about him felt oddly fluid, as if it might slide out of his grasp like mercury, and yet at the same time hyperreal, every detail exquisitely, almost painfully sharp. He knew that he should plan, should act, yet somehow he found himself merely watching as Subaru straightened and stood, folds of silk shifting and settling. Inexplicably, the sight seized at Seishirou, as if threatening to steal back from him that indrawn breath. This brief stillness, the crux of all the conflict that had led up to it, and that slight yet utterly compelling figure against the night sky—

Yes. He didn't know where the affirmation arose from, or quite what it meant, only that this...this....

Perfection—even in its imperfections, the frustrations and set-backs of their battle a necessary resistance, all part of the danger, the challenge of this surprisingly close contest of power and skill, the most sublime test that he had ever faced. It came over him all at once, then: body-memory, deeper even than the occult world of dreams, the recollection of every faculty extended to the utmost, of *her* poised high above him, a looming shadow against the sunlight, of that stark and razor-edged feeling of being alive. Yet even that defining instant was swept aside by *this*—

It could be nobody else. Nobody but the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi clan, the Dragon of Heaven, the boy who had been broken beneath the sakura tree and had returned to Seishirou's world as a man, as lover and enemy, the shining other face of the coin.

Nobody but Subaru could meet him here...and thinking of that, of the road that had led them to this place, to this moment, a chain of events that seemed so inevitable on the one hand, and so fragile and tenuous on the other, Seishirou found himself amazed and also, somehow....

Was this....

Gladness?

Subaru-kun.

You....

The moon's pale light trembled—more clouds, a breath of dampness on the skin. Subaru lifted his head, tilting it slightly, and although the distance was once more too great for Seishirou to

make out the true color of Subaru's eyes, he *knew* it nevertheless, knew exactly how light and shadow would shift in them with that motion, with the subtle play of Subaru's feelings. And as Subaru returned his gaze, the corner of Subaru's mouth lifted—that reserve breaking at last, *recognition*, understanding, the pang of that old, familiar anguish and through it a brilliant kindling of something like joy, luminous and sweet, far outshining the tremulous moonlight. Seishirou's own smile bloomed in answer, fierce, exultant, and soaring. A strange heat burned within him, almost painful yet welcome, while at the same time he felt immersed in an illimitable calm. It was as if they stood somewhere outside the world, like a kekkai or a maboroshi, yet even more removed and intimate. Someplace that had entirely slipped beyond the bounds of time and consequences.

Someplace that was only for the two of them.

Yes.

That this moment should never end....

To face each other here, like this.

As equals....

So focused was his attention, he noticed at once the subtle flex of Subaru's knees, the almost imperceptible shift of weight as Subaru gathered himself. As Subaru sprang into motion, Seishirou was already drawing another ofuda out of his sleeve. Reflexive action—yet he paused, the slip of paper between his fingers, watching Subaru close the distance between them with long, almost floating strides. Halfway down the slope, Subaru leaped high, his shikifuku whipping about him with the abrupt change of direction, and Seishirou lifted the ofuda at last, touched it to his lips, then cast it with a light flick of his wrist, as if throwing a single flower to his lover: an acknowledgment both tender and ironic, saluting Subaru's part in their extraordinary pas de deux. The card began dissolving into a seething confetti of sorcery, a shooting star trailing sparks of midnight fire as it flew, and Seishirou stepped back, catching at the edge of his coat, ready to flare it about himself as the magical focus of his next working. The first intimations of wind and darkness were already rising about him, to greet Subaru as soon as he'd finished dealing with the distraction of that little spell—

The ofuda punched through the center of Subaru's chest.

Even though Seishirou had never taken his eyes from Subaru, for an instant it was as though he hadn't really seen it happen—there was a blank space, a flash of blindness where for some reason memory would not take hold, and he found himself nonsensically wanting to replay the moment, to try to grasp the swift, stunning simplicity of what had just occurred. Subaru's eyes were closed. From the height of his arrested leap, he began to fall, tipping forward with disconcerting slowness, then tumbling, loose-limbed yet somehow still graceful, everything silent but for the snap and flutter of white silk.

Seishirou found himself running, with the inexorability of one of those bizarre dreams. He got beneath Subaru, arms out—the force of even Subaru's slight weight, plummeting from above,

staggered him, drove him to his knees. Subaru still struck the ground, although not as hard as he might have. With a sharp intake of breath, Seishirou pulled Subaru over onto his back, hiding the red flowering of blood that had sprayed from the exit wound—more crimson at the front, soaked into the torn shikifuku, but not pouring forth. Subaru’s heart had surely stopped beating almost at once.

Subaru’s head lolled to one side, turned away from Seishirou. His lashes were a still line of shadow along his cheek. With the awareness honed by years of occult work, Seishirou could feel the soundless sigh as the spirit, seeping out from within that dying flesh, gathered itself to depart.

No.

Still half-supporting Subaru, Seishirou drew an ofuda one-handed, shaking it out of his sleeve and into his grasp. Pressing the talisman to the ruin of Subaru’s chest, he snapped out the briefest of spells, binding that vital essence back into the body.

Subaru convulsed violently against him. Blood surged up in Subaru’s wound, began to trickle in dark rivulets from between his lips. Subaru’s eyes jerked open; they stared blankly, wide and dilated, their irises ringed entirely in white.

“It’s okay, Subaru-kun.” The calm in his voice belying the moment’s urgency, Seishirou reached out with his will, thrusting back the psychic gropings of the sakura tree, which had already begun seeking after its long-promised prey. “It’ll be fine. Just...” Thwarted, the tree ripped at his mind’s defenses, a shattering screech of fury and frustration, like steel sliding along steel, its hunger crowding in on him, scrabbling for supremacy. He forced it down once more, compelled it with all his strength to obey—was vaguely surprised by how much strength it took, by how much strength he *found*, pushed to this extremity, but there was no time to dwell on that. At that instant, only one thing was important.

Driving back the maelstrom of wrath and bloodlust, he seized the flame of power at its heart. Its burning was more like the bite of acid than the usual painful-sweet, sensual fire, but he took it into himself nevertheless, clenching his teeth against its searing turbulence and the unexpected rise of a dull nausea. Quickly he shifted his attention back to Subaru’s body, still arching and spasming against his arms, one hand clawing jerkily at the air. He focused upon his own hand, upon the fingers that held the ofuda to Subaru’s chest, letting that contact become the channel between them.

“Everything will be all right, Subaru-kun. I promise.” It was like talking to one of his patients, back in the days of the veterinary clinic, where what he had said had meant nothing. All that had mattered was that he spoke, murmuring a low and constant reassurance. He wasn’t sure if Subaru could even hear his voice. Perhaps he was merely speaking for his own benefit. Still holding the tree at bay, he fought to contain the surges of that healing fire, to keep it from blasting full-force into Subaru’s body and likely causing even more damage. Pale flame-colored light licked slowly through them both, suffusing them, the surrounding air growing hazed and wavering with that intangible heat. Gently, carefully, but *quickly*—now, what first? The heart and one if not both of

the lungs—fragments of broken ribs, those would have to be moved at least, out of the vital organs—and had the brain suffered already, from lack of oxygen? How long had it been since—

“I promise, Subaru-kun. I’ll take care of you.”

That pulped and torn heart throbbed, one limping beat, blood bubbling more fiercely around it as Seishirou urged life back into Subaru’s body. Subaru heaved with a wheezing, strangled breath. Seishirou could feel dampness beginning to seep from Subaru’s back, soaking into his pants, faintly warm—no, he needed to stop that, or else Subaru might bleed out before he could finish the delicate internal work. “I won’t...I won’t let you....” He lost the heartbeat, fumbled after it, losing track of what he was saying as well, the tree’s insistence gnawing at his mind as he tried to concentrate, to keep track of all that needed to be done—too many threads to hold onto, all fraying, all failing at once. He’d never done such a complicated healing, let alone under such circumstances, but there had to be a way. He would not give up—he would *not* surrender Subaru, *his* Subaru, not to anything in this world or the next. “You’re mine, Subaru-kun. Always. *I won’t let you die.*”

And yet the chill, sinking thought would not release him: too much.

Too much. Damn it, if only Subaru would respond to his words, to his touch, would reach out for him and *help* somehow.... His gaze flicked up to Subaru’s face, searching those eyes that gave nothing back—that showed no recognition of him at all, only mute incomprehension, only such terrible pain.

Such....

Time seemed to slow, almost to stop, as though in the midst of the tree’s frenzy and his own driving imperative a crack of stillness had opened up, one just wide enough to hold them both, himself and the helpless, shuddering form in his arms. Seishirou stared down into that wordless anguish. Endless seconds, as another forced breath wracked Subaru’s body, and somehow he could not look away....

“Subaru-kun. I...”

Slowly, the pressure of his fingers against Subaru’s chest lessened. The ofuda, blood-soaked, might not have shifted on its own, but as Seishirou’s hand slipped sideways, the paper talisman followed it, tumbling heavily to the ground. The binding was released, unraveling into slender, vanishing filaments of sorcery.

“I...no...*Subaru-kun.*

“It’s all right now.

“*You’re free.*”

Even as those words left his mouth, the spirit was already flying from the body, was flying from him, flashing out of the sakura’s grasp without even a cry, although the silence seemed to ring like a bell from the suddenness of that passing. Gone, without any last word or glance.... Subaru’s body sagged once more, his head sinking back against Seishirou’s arm, his eyelids half-closing, shuttering those dimmed eyes. He looked merely exhausted now.

And, of course, dead.

But...how had it *happened*? Seishirou found himself at a loss. Everything had gone by so quickly in those final moments that he could scarcely follow it, let alone understand. Certainly he'd always meant to kill Subaru, he had waited for it for years, so then why was he so...so...*surprised*...but he could see, now, how of late he'd been putting aside the thought of their final confrontation, glossing over it, refusing to dwell on its consequences. He had wanted it to come someday, of course, but not...what it would bring. Somehow, somewhere, his desire had changed.

Stupid, not to have realized it before this.

And yet....

Even with that knowledge, however late in coming, why let Subaru go? Why surrender his lover, his victim, when no prey of the Sakurazukamori had ever been permitted to escape?

No prey but this one....

He'd undo it, if he could. The thought was tense and sudden, almost fierce. If there were any way to call that winged soul back—but remembering those blank, pain-filled eyes, he felt a startling inner lurch, like the attack of some strange, queasy illness.

Such beautiful eyes, always—but this memory was not beautiful. Not beautiful in the least. A broken doll, faintly luminous with the magic that compelled it to live and the desperate, fluttering light of the soul sealed within it...once he might have found it a poignant and arresting image. Now it only caused him that mysterious sick feeling.

It wasn't *Subaru*, after all. Not really. Not the Subaru that he...

...that he....

"Subaru-kun...why?"

Subaru's eyes had been closed, almost tranquil, before he had intervened. Had they been closed even before that last ofuda had struck? Seishirou found that he couldn't remember.

Such an astonishing display of grace and strength and sheer occult brilliance during their duel...only to end up like this?

How could Subaru have smiled at him like that, poised upon the slope of the hill, and then gone down so swiftly, so irrevocably, to a single fatal blow? Couldn't Subaru have done something to counter it, to save himself?

Had Subaru...*known*?

"*Why*?" Seishirou slammed his fist down onto Subaru's chest. Subaru's body bucked with the force of it. He hit the corpse again, and a third time, the sound of those blows hollow, that dead flesh rebounding dully, with none of the vital tension and elasticity of the living.

Just a glass cup. A little stone by the side of the road....

He jerked to a stop, still quivering with reaction, although he couldn't really say why. There was blood on Subaru's lips and chin, he noticed distractedly, left over from those spasming, involuntary breaths. As he moved to wipe it away, he realized that there was blood on his fingers

as well, that he'd only be making more of a mess, and he used the backs of his knuckles instead. Easier, that way, to control the faint, inexplicable tremoring. With slow, meticulous care, he traced the curve of Subaru's lower lip, letting his attention be wholly consumed by that subtle contour. Once, and then again...that dark stain removed, for the most part, he leaned down, as if drawn by the gravitational habit of attraction, and then hesitated, pulling up short.

Did he really want the last kiss that he would ever have from Subaru to be like this? Something waxen and unresponsive?

Like a blow to his own chest, then, so that he hunched reflexively against it, the memory all those other times—of Subaru's mouth vibrant and alive against his, in a timid, butterfly flutter, in the heat and hunger of absolute, wanton abandonment, in the most exquisitely patient and compassionate tenderness. And then, too, at the very end, before Subaru had left him, had left him to come to this—

Seishirou-san.

I love you.

Still hesitating, almost tentative, Seishirou bent forward once more. He rested his lips against Subaru's forehead, trying to match the gentleness of that last remembered touch. Subaru's skin had already cooled.

Nothing.

Nothing.

The tree moaned in Seishirou's head, deranged and bereft. He had forgotten about it, he realized dully, had forgotten that he still held its healing power, although most of it had bled away from him when he'd released his hold upon Subaru. He thought of Subaru torn apart by those reaching roots, bound eternally within the bark, and another shudder convulsed him. His shoulders shook as a low chuckle rippled out of him.

"Hey, it's okay. Right, Subaru-kun?" He ran the back of his hand along Subaru's cheek, stroked it lightly against Subaru's hair. If one touched only the hair, one might scarcely even tell...if one were not a spiritual practitioner, and moreover a practitioner who dealt in death. "Everything's just fine now. You're free. You're free...." After all, it didn't really matter if he sat there babbling out loud to the dead shell of a person. There was nobody around to hear him. The words meant nothing anyway. They were just noises.

Meaningless, with no one to hear....

He caressed Subaru's cheek again, lingering over that contact in spite of himself, still vaguely conscious of the liquid, simmering heat of that remnant healing fire. Closer, less comprehensible, a burning prickle in the back of his eyes, a growing feeling of constriction in his throat. Subaru's face swam before him, threatening to blur into unintelligibility. The tree's howl gained in volume once more, all those voices of the tortured, suffering, imprisoned dead, and in a surge of wild revulsion, elation, a mad, inexplicable impulse, Seishirou flung that flame of power away from

himself, back into the ashen heart of those roots and branches—hurled it with all the force of will that he was capable of.

“You’re free—!”

And with that shout, that jolt, a crack in the centuries-old bindings, like the first hairline fracture in a dam. There was an instant in which the full weight of all that long-contained spiritual energy pressed against the weak point and its edges frayed and crumbled but still held—

Seishirou was already turning away. Bending low over Subaru, he gathered that motionless form into his arms, cradling it in the shelter of his body. He lowered his head, his cheek coming to a familiar, almost comforting rest against the silky dark hair.

With a tearing like some unfathomably vast curtain, with the deafening shriek of failing steel, the heart of the Sakurazuka clan’s sorcery splintered. The night’s darkness went to crackling gold, as if it had been transformed into a world of lightning. Huddling above Subaru’s body, Seishirou had just time to tighten his grip, to duck his head even further and close his inexplicably watering eyes—but even through closed eyelids he still could see the white-hot eruption of light as the sakura tree cracked in two and then shattered, as a galewind of souls screamed forth—

* * * * *

“Nnngh!” Kusanagi staggered, had to grab hold of the railing of the bridge to keep from falling—he barely registered its cold rigidity, overcome by a sudden torrent of sensation: *lashing winds, branchsnap and trunksplit, battering confusion, destruction and danger*—the green world’s mute terror passed root-tip to root-tip, transmitted in the stirrings of the air. All across Tokyo, all the trees, but in particular those—

Hunching forward, he pressed his free hand, fist clenched, to his temple, wincing at the assault even as it retreated, leaving behind a shocked peace, like the aftermath of some violent but purifying storm. “What the hell was that?” he muttered, more to himself than anything else. Frowning, he straightened up and stared northward across the narrowing river, toward where a brief flare of not-really-light was already fading above the city’s dark bulk. “The cherry trees...?”

“Kusanagi-san.” He glanced quickly at Yuzuriha. The translucent, cracked calm of her voice sat uneasily with his own misgivings. Pushing herself upright, she swayed to her feet, her dog crouching golden-eyed a pace or two beyond her, quiet and watchful. She stared blankly into some middle distance, and he wondered what she saw or felt, whether that disturbance had touched her at all.

“I know what I have to do,” she half-whispered. “But...but I can’t do it by myself! I need you.” Her voice quavered, liquid and unsteady, rising and then settling once again. “I need...your strength.

“Will you help me, Kusanagi-san?”

He started despite himself, strangely uneasy, not even knowing what she was asking for.
 “Missy—”

She closed her eyes. Tilted her head, and he could see the silvery glint of tears along her cheeks. Putting two fingers to her lips, she whistled once: a long, high note, piercing and tremulous.

* * * * *

White feathers, drifting like snow. At least, Karen thought, he hadn’t made it *cold*—or if he had, it was affecting her no more than any ordinary chill. She didn’t really know much about the capabilities of a dreamgazer, how much control he might exert within this dreamworld, whether he could bend the rules of reality to his whim.

On the other hand, she was pretty sure she knew why he had stripped her naked.

Pursing her lips, Karen blew into her cupped palm. A tiny flame licked to life, dragon-slender—it coiled and flared, swiftly growing to fill her hand. Its presence warmed her, not merely a physical heat but the deeper glow of relief and renewed self-assurance. Even here, it seemed.... Lowering her hand, she held it cradled before her, the golden, flickering radiance that it cast bringing to that unrelieved blackness both light and shadows, shifting and playing like live things across the pale canvas of her skin. Illuminated, the dreamgazer’s eyes glittered, flat and inscrutable; he held himself unmoving, his face still expressionless, although she thought she glimpsed the set of his jaw tighten minutely, as if he’d just been thwarted. No prurience whatsoever—and Karen figured she’d been right. Not for his own sake, then, but to get at her. Meeting his gaze, she smiled back at him, challenging that impassivity with her own calm amusement.

“Well. Now what?”

Right on the heels of her words, there was a low hiss and whoosh: the familiar sounds of ignition. Another little flame burst to life high above her. Then another and another—two by two they winked into existence, more and more of them, spiraling downward like winding chains of spirit lights. And as their gathered brightness grew, there was a small figure twirling in their midst, face upturned in delight, arms outstretched—

Oh. Oh, this....

“Paul! Isn’t it beautiful?”

The hush of the empty church was all around her, the timeless smells of wax and incense, the faint mustiness, the citrus-and-oil scent of wood polish on the dark, burnished pews. In the stillness, those flames spun through haloes of dust motes that surrounded them with a peaceful, soft shimmer. Prettier even than blinking Christmas lights—and much better than fireworks, because they weren’t noisy, and they never died away.

“See? I can do it without using a match.”

Because of course she should never play with matches. Matches were dangerous. Mama said so.

“It’s so beautiful...Mama will be pleased.”

Like a flying procession of candles, unhurried yet dancing with a sober, luminous, grown-up joy, the flames waltzed past the peaked, mullioned windows, glided one by one through bars of color falling from the great rose window above the western door: ruby, cobalt, amber. Their reflections flowed along the massive golden cross above the altar, and Karen had the sudden urge to cringe back, to cover herself, as she hadn’t before her opponent’s remote, coldly measuring gaze, although she couldn’t say whether it was to hide herself from the eyes of God or from those of the little girl, heedless and innocent in her play.

No.

God knew who she was.

A bang shattered the quiet, the falling back of a door latch, and Karen whirled, her heart racing with renewed guilt and fear. The little girl only laughed, turning toward the woman who stood framed in the doorway, her shadow stretching long and black before her.

“Mama! Look! Isn’t it beautiful?”

The woman sucked in a breath, hands rising to her face in horror, then flung herself forward. Karen found herself frozen as the woman strode down the aisle, fists clenched—the woman passed her, only inches away yet blindly oblivious, the long rosary about her neck swinging wildly. She reached the child, and Karen turned her face away, but she still heard the loud, echoing slap, the muffled thump of a small body falling, still shuddered with the lingering, remembered jolt of pain, and, far worse, the inner stab of terrified anguish, of shame.

“Demon!”

Sounds of scuffling, the little girl being dragged to her feet, a strangled whine of fear escaping her. Another blow, and another. The lines of flames flickered, dimmed, then began to wink out, swift and relentless as dominoes falling. It might have been some trick of memory, or her imagination, or the dream, but the sunlight seemed to lose strength as well; the building grew darker, more cavernous. The woman, moaning under her breath, began to drag the child down the aisle, and the little girl wailed suddenly, reaching back for her stuffed bear, left behind on one of the pews.

“Out!” The girl’s crying stuttered and choked as she was shaken hard and then thrust ahead of the woman, driven forward with yet another slap. “Outside! You little monster!”

“Paul! Paaaaaul!”

“That’s enough.” Karen forced the low words out past the ice that seemed to lock up her heart, her breath. The walls of the church had nearly disappeared into that gloom, but she could somehow feel them growing impossibly heavier, an intangible weight pressing inward all about her, could feel them growing taller as if to reach up to a scornful heaven, threatening despite their massiveness to teeter, crumble, and fall, burying her alive. The only light remaining was the sullen

multihued ember of the rose window, and beneath it the blinding rectangle of late afternoon sun from the open door, with those two retreating figures silhouetted against it, the child sobbing and stumbling, the woman jerking her cruelly along. Opposite from them, the gold cross caught that light and seemed to loom up at the edge of her vision, cold and oily. The deepening shadows made it seem to move, to twist, and as if echoing that half-glimpsed motion a hissing river of whispers was rising, pouring over each other, steadily getting louder—Karen put her hands up reflexively, but there was no real sound, nothing that she could block out—

Demon...after all, she was born bad...what could you expect...just a sinner...never any good—

“That’s enough!” Dropping her hands, Karen opened her fist, and the fragment of fire still cupped within it raged to incandescence. She let it grow to encase her, a blazing mandorla, her hair flying in the sudden updraft. Her light threw the darkness back to pool in the farthest corners of the building as with a surge her flames leaped high, licking at the vaulted ceiling, rolled about her feet and the wooden legs of the pews like lava—

“Do you actually think that you can set this place on fire?” The dreamgazer’s voice made her start—it was the first time he had spoken. She turned her head and glared at where he stood, still half in shadow, leaning against a column underneath the choir loft. “There’s nothing to burn.” Raising his hand, he pointed upward languidly, and she jerked her gaze up, gasped as the ribs of the vaults high above them suddenly snapped like pencils in the hands of careless schoolchildren. The vast weight of wood and stone and mortar that had seemed to be pressing down toward her crumbled, and huge, crushing chunks of it began to slide free, plummeting toward her like an avalanche.

With a scream of defiance, she flung an arc of flame about herself—whipped it up over her head, a holocaust blast, hoping against hope that it would be intense enough to vaporize the falling masonry, because fire by itself had no force to deflect anything, and there was nowhere for her to run. Strangely, she heard the grinding thunder of destruction begin to fade—not slowing and stopping, but growing steadily softer, as if it were receding from her, until it vanished beneath the roar of her own power. Through the gaps in her shield of flame, she saw the stones slowing improbably, growing cloudy and translucent even as they fell, until with a hissing sigh, like sand sliding against itself, the collapsing church dissolved into another slowly whirling cloud of feathers. Sparks from her flames danced among those weightless white plumes, but not a single one of them was singed.

“The only things that are real here are you...and I,” the dreamgazer murmured from the midst of that flying veil of feathers. “Well,” he added, and the flatness of his voice mocked her as he echoed her words. “Now what?”

Her heart racing, Karen gathered her flame back into her hands, seeking reassurance in that gesture of control. After all, she’d been right—her power to affect this dreamworld appeared to be limited at best. She thought, though, that maybe if she could find the right note of fiery energy—if

she could find a way to tune her flames to the spiritual “reality” of this dream—there had to be some way to do that, if she could only figure out how. And failing that—hadn’t he said it himself?

That *he* at least was real....

No. Think. *Think*—because he did not *expect* her to think. He had gone straight for her emotions, for raw, instinctual reactions, from the very first instant when he’d stripped her clothes away from her. Surely he could have crushed her with that collapsing church, if he’d wanted to—she had no doubt that, as in a maboroshi, a fatal injury in the dreamworld would fool the mind and shock the real-world body into dying as well. But instead he had concentrated on trying to goad her, terrify her, provoke her. He had to be after something less straightforward than her immediate death.

Passive-aggressive and manipulative—she knew the type all too well. The more directly you went after them, the more subtle and slippery they were likely to be. She’d bet almost anything that he was expecting her to come for him now, considering that little hint he’d just dropped, and if she did she’d undoubtedly be playing right into his game, whatever that might be. At the very least, he’d probably amuse himself by making her look like a fool, here in this place where every little thing was under his control. At worst, she might fall into some devious trap and end up taking herself out, saving him the effort. And really, how embarrassing would that be?

Fortunately, she had plenty of experience in dealing with this kind of silliness.

“My, my—very impressive!” she said lightly, her lashes lowering over a deliberately amused gaze. “I wish I could indulge you with a proper display of hysterics, but I’m afraid I just can’t do that.” She clasped her hands idly behind her back, glad that she had long ago learned to put aside any body modesty. “Anyway, not to be rude or unappreciative or anything, but don’t you think this is all just a bit out of step? After all, the point of this whole final battle thing is the future. If I hadn’t already come to terms with the past,” and she smiled then, a warmth that nevertheless had something of the conflagration’s fierceness at its heart, “I wouldn’t be here.”

Although once again she somehow couldn’t see the dreamgazer’s eyes, she could feel him staring at her. “You’re...not what I expected,” he murmured at last. She wondered whether she should be flattered or insulted by that.

“We all have masks that we wear,” she replied instead, with a little shrug. “But then, you already know that. Don’t you?”

That slight tightening of his mouth again—a different tension this time, she thought, a grimace not of aggravation but of unhappiness. Then, with another of those unsettling dissolves, his appearance changed.

Oh, my. Despite herself, she drew in a breath. The Western-style clothes that he’d been wearing had become a white kimono—his hair blew free, strands of some pale, indeterminate color spilling down around his shoulders, past the long, slender line of his bared throat. His eyes remained golden, but they had lost that alien, catlike quality, becoming softer and darker, more veiled and yet more vulnerable, framed with startlingly light lashes like a vanishing rime of frost.

The heavy traditional garment seemed to accentuate his slowness, like a burden of snow highlighting the thin lines of branches against the sky, and that face, drawn tight with melancholy as if with a physical pain and yet—

Too beautiful to be a woman. She'd always thought it was a rather idiotic turn of phrase. Looking at him, though, she could sort of understand it. A little too delicate for her taste, really—like a doll to be kept safe on some high shelf, never played with for fear of spoiling it, and she found herself for some reason thinking of Paul, of the rough, reassuring thicket of his fur, the glint of his solid glass eyes.

"Well," she murmured, and then couldn't think of anything else to say.

He lifted his gaze to hers—naked in his own way, she supposed, and yet defiant in turn, matching her insouciance with the stillness of a deep, dark water. "Kasumi Karen," he said, the words low and strained, though in the perfect hush of the dreamworld she could hear each one clearly, "I want you to kill me."

She stared at him for a long, stupid moment. "...what?" Oh, for God's sake—was this going to be another of those mind games? He let out an unexpected little huff, not even close to a laugh, although from the edge of near-hysterical irony it might have been meant as one.

"I thought it was going to be easy," he muttered, as if to himself. "I thought—"

"That a soapgirl would be easy to fool?" She chuckled, ruthlessly putting down the familiar twinge of anger and hurt. "Oh, hon...you really need to get out more."

His eyes hardened again, though they remained human. "Listen. I'm serious. *They won't let me die.*" For all the quietness of his voice, that sudden intensity gripped her like claws. In the silence of her shock, he went on, "If I defeat you, if this cornerstone falls, the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth has promised to grant my wish. He's promised that he'll kill me." His mouth twisted with a fleeting bitterness. "But if I refuse, or if I fail...that wish may never be granted. *Ever.*"

"You don't trust him," Karen said slowly. "Even if you succeed...."

"What binds the one who hunts the majesty of the Gods?" the dreamgazer shot back. "No. I don't trust him. I'm useful to him, just as I've always been useful to someone. I'm tired of it. I'm done with being useful." His hands closed into fists, tense and ineffectual at his sides, and he bowed his head. "For once, I want to do something for my own sake, just for myself. And what I want—the only thing that I want—is to put an end to this. To be free...."

"You want me...to be the implement of your suicide." The horror in her voice must have been obvious. As he looked up at her again, his expression grew gentler, more pleading, but there was also poorly concealed urgency behind it, a threadbare strain of desperation.

"It's not like that. To be honest...I've never even been alive. Not really. This," he gestured vaguely at the feather-shot darkness around them, "this isn't life."

"But you *could* live. If you came out of here...or wherever you are," Karen faltered with that uncertainty, then plunged on, "if you got away to someplace else, where nobody from the past

could find you, then you could start over, right? You probably don't even know it, but life, real life, is beautiful—hard sometimes, yes, but even so, it's beautiful." She closed her eyes, only for an instant, but in that instant the dead black void around her was eclipsed by a blaze of memories, so sudden and vibrant that her heart leaped in spite of herself: the city in all its kaleidoscopic overload, color and light, taste and scent and unending movement, the delight of every sense, the loneliness amidst all those unseeing millions, the sweet joy of finally connecting with someone, however fleetingly. Swallowing hard, she looked at the dreamgazer again, her pulse still aquiver with the unexpected shock of yearning. Never to have seen the black-on-crimson of the Shinjuku skyline at sunset, first lights coming out against the gathering darkness, or the crowds outside the station shifting like a restless sea beneath the lightning flicker of the video screens, never to have heard the sharp, merry laughter of the girls at work, or to have touched another person's hand.... "Could you really throw it all away without even seeing it? That whole world outside—"

"I'm sorry," the dreamgazer murmured. "I know that to you that sounds like freedom. But for me...once is enough. I can't face the chance that I might escape from this only to be dragged back into it yet again. You're right that I don't know life, but I do know something that I think must be worse than death. And there are too many people who'd give anything, do anything, to have even the briefest glimpse of the future." He shrugged in apathy or self-deprecation. "Maybe I know too much about people to believe in their goodness, after seeing the things they dream of, but I'd always be waiting for the cage door to close on me again. I'd always be wondering who would be the one to give in to that temptation and sell me out. There was only ever one person who—and even if I don't see her on the other side, even if she's moved on, or if we end up in different places—" He broke off abruptly, then after a moment's pause went on, the words low and rapid and forlorn, "That's why I didn't just ask you. If you didn't know...if it's just a fight, it isn't really suicide, is it?"

"I can't do this." She shook her head. "Now that I *do* know, I can't just pretend that it's all right—"

"But for the sake of the human race?" He paused, eyes half-lidded, head cocked as if he were listening. "There's a dream loose in the dreaming," he said then, very softly. "The future...is not yet decided. I'm not only a seer for the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth. I'm his door into the world of dreams. And a door goes two ways." Those gold eyes flicked to her, cryptic yet intent. "Kill me, and in that moment he becomes vulnerable on this level. It may not be much, but even so...."

It took Karen a couple of seconds to replay those words and really register what he was saying. When the realization kicked in, so did adrenalin, making her nerves sing with a sharp, anxious tension. A chance to strike some meaningful blow against the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth, whom otherwise she'd never even be able to touch...a chance, maybe, to make her own Kamui's terrible trial a little lighter, a little easier, to speed the end of this whole bitter war and help keep safe the people that she cared about. Something like that...it was better than she could ever have hoped for. Yet she stared at the dreamgazer, stricken.

She could only do it by killing him as he stood there.

By killing him in cold blood.

Fighting against an enemy, both of them throwing all their skill and power into the clash...it was different somehow. Though she might regret the necessity, though she might wish that she didn't have to hurt her opponent, at least they were both putting themselves on the line, and if the other's defenses slipped and she took advantage of it, well, that was how such things went, it could have been her instead, just as easily, and that seemed...not *fair*, perhaps, but *right*. It was always over so quickly anyway, with never any time to think or to question. But to just stand there and *watch* someone.... She tensed, overcome with a different, less pleasant memory: *the man screaming and flailing, wreathed in leaping flames, her fist clenched in the coarse wool of her school uniform skirt, pressing it down against her thighs, shadows sliding on brick walls, that fierce heart of brightness blurring even though her eyes were wide open and staring, sudden silence then except for the crackling sounds, skin blackening and peeling back—*

It had been the first time fire had come to her since that afternoon in the church.

"Fire," she murmured somewhat hoarsely, as though she had been the one whose throat and lungs had been seared into mute anguish, "is not a pretty way to die."

"I don't care."

"You say that *now*," she retorted, her voice scaling upward, and she fought down the edge of incredulous, faintly hysterical laughter. "But—"

"Kasumi-san," and his words, for all their quietness, quivered with a sudden, stark intensity. "*Please.*"

She looked at him again, that drooping figure swathed in white silk, pale and sad, like a drowned soul—pathetic, yet the bleak light of pleading in his eyes made her heart catch. For a long moment, she couldn't speak.

"What's your name?" she said at last.

His gaze slid away from hers, as though he would have preferred not to be asked that, as though he expected refusal to follow in the wake of the question, but he answered her nevertheless. "Kuzuki Kakyō."

"Kakyō-san, then?" She stepped forward and found herself standing right in front of him, more suddenly than she'd expected. A quirk of the dreamspace, she supposed. He flinched, but she caught his hands as they moved and held them lightly, her thumbs tracing slow lines across their backs. She could feel the subtle ridges of bones beneath the flesh. "It's okay," she murmured, and he shivered, his breath catching with something like hope—and fear too, she thought, now that the moment he'd sought for so long was finally here. "I can make it quick. There won't be any pain."

He whispered the words this time, fierce and low, closing his eyes as if to seal himself against any wavering: "*I don't care.*"

But she *did* care. She was flooded with that unexpected emotion as if with sunlight, golden and drenchingly sweet: an overflowing pity and love for this poor child—for all of them, really, caught up in the struggles of their strange, complicated lives and of this war, but most especially for him, here and immediate for her now, as if his suffering was an archetype for the rest and yet remained keenly his own. Moving closer, she reached up and drew him down slightly, brushed her lips against his cheek. He started, then froze outright as she put her arms around him. “What—”

“It’s okay,” she repeated. Leaning against him, she buried her face in his thin shoulder. She could feel his heart beating rapidly where her chest pressed against his, could feel the trace of body warmth even through the kimono. A most subtle flicker of power, a threadlike lick of fire through the web that bound energy into matter, and the silk turned into ash, sifted away on the sourceless breeze that carried those slowly swirling, ghostly feathers, leaving behind only pale gray smudges on even paler skin. Skin against skin, heat against heat, life against life. Real enough, even in this place.

“K-Kasumi-san—!”

She suppressed a giggle. Too funny—and not enough time really to enjoy it—but that was all right too. She’d made her choice, and the flame was already gathering, swiftly building, condensed within the vessel of her body. Fiercer and hotter, intensifying without release—she shuddered, bit her lip, focusing all her will on keeping it contained for as long as she could. Oh, it *hurt*—even her, who had never felt what it was like to burn. But for the little time that it would take, she could bear it.

Besides, it was the only way to keep that promise.

To be that quick, and that complete....

Aoki-san, I’m sorry. The thought was the merest fleeting regret, a glimmer of wry amusement. *I guess you’re probably right.*

But maybe sometimes...once is enough.

She’d shut her eyes, but even through their lids she could see the light as it began to stream out of her, as if her skin was becoming translucent. The inferno within her was a silent, devouring roar, white heat shading into blue, like a superheated star, and she tightened her grip convulsively. Faintly, as if at a great distance, she felt Kakyō gasp. Then his arms shifted, lifting and closing about her with a slow, hesitant awkwardness, the least hint of relaxation coming into his body as he bent his head toward her, his hair spilling down past her cheek, and even as she rippled at the edge of immolation her heart sang out like a carillon of bells, the pure and perfect joy of knowing that she was doing the right thing.

How lonely his life had been....

He would not go into death alone.

* * * * *

A bright flash at the edge of attention, two souls flaring out of this world, and whether it was some fleeting ache of memory left behind from its former vessel or holy fire acknowledging due kinship, the being that was the true form of the god's power of Ise paused, briefly bowing its sun-maned head.

Sister....

That momentary light had already winked out, quick even as mortals measured things. *Now*—it turned back to the task at hand. Unfurling, it rose up in all its incandescent glory—it blazed upward into the sky, out of the too-small space that sought to contain it. Those walls of energy fell outward, like the limp petals of a battered flower, before fraying and dissolving into nothingness.

A streak of divine light, it shot straight up and then rolled, coiling above the sprawl of little human habitations. It stared down into that dark place upon the dark earth. The tiny glimmers of all those lives, scarcely to be seen—but there, directly beneath it, a brighter glow, a web of power woven throughout the cornerstone, and there, at its heart, there—

The god fell, plunging out of the heavens like retribution, like a shard of the sun, like lightning—and the thought hurt strangely, for no real reason. It knew that a human's gaze was upon it, saw the ripple of reaction, saw power drawing back toward the center, desperate to protect. A peculiar beast roared defiance at it, quick-reacting and yet dull, spiritless, a spitting crackle of energy, a shell of metal for a carapace.

So *this*...was what humans could make.

The god tore through the slender cords that were rising to meet it and struck the tall building at their heart. The structure cracked in two, the earth beneath it was ripped asunder, and the god released its fury into the wound, like a vast storm breaking.

* * * * *

Panting a little, Seiichirou kept the heel of his palm pressed tightly against his side. He thought that the bleeding had mostly stopped, with the layers of shirt and jacket beneath his hand serving as a makeshift bandage. He was pretty sure they were also stuck to the wound, which was going to be unpleasant when the time came to remove them and take care of it, but things could certainly be a lot worse. And maybe it was a little too optimistic to be thinking of *afterward* already—of still being alive to have his injuries treated, and of anyone else being around to help. But even so....

He stared at the figure lying motionless on the sidewalk. Thin cracks crazed one lens of his glasses, vaguely distracting but not really interfering with his sight.

Was it truly unconscious and out of the fight?

Or...had he actually finished it?

At that instant, the northern skyline flared, a near-blinding golden-white burst. The air shook as if the whole city were being rocked by thunder, and he would have thought *a bomb!* if that

shockwave hadn't tasted of a fierce, strange, otherworldly purity. He flinched from it nevertheless, raising his free hand to shield his eyes. The still form of his opponent seemed to stir, and even though it might have been nothing more than a trick of the glare or the breeze catching in those fallen loops of pale cloth, his heart plummeted.

No. Don't get up, he prayed.

Don't get up.

That white-out faded from the horizon, and the flash of instinctual panic faded as well, leaving in its wake the more muted feelings of anxiety and an all-too-familiar heartache. That had been Shinjuku, of course.... The bioroid *was* moving, one hand sliding slowly along the glass-strewn pavement, then bracing to push itself upright. As it levered itself up on that arm, its whole body quivering with the effort, Seiichirou sighed faintly, then collected his focus once more, relaxing and reaching out at the same time, letting the first seeking winds find him. He could feel those currents twining about his fingers, but he didn't yet gather them to strike.

It still might not rise. It might be too injured; it might give up.

And he wondered, with a pang of complex sorrow: if any of his family had still been alive, would he be waiting? Or would he have already struck to finish off his opponent, regretting the need but unwilling to take that risk? To protect the people who were most important to you, when you were no longer an irrepressible, seemingly immortal teenager, when you knew all too well the fragility of what you were trying to save and the limits of your own power....

He might have, he supposed ruefully. But he found that he couldn't bring himself to do it now. Anger wasn't enough; loss and suffering weren't enough. Though there were still people that he'd like to protect, it wasn't the same—it would never be the same. Duty and compassion might get him through this fight, but that absolute, unflinching determination, that will to do whatever needed to be done...it had been left behind somewhere, lost in that fading place and time when the center and light of his life had still existed.

He should put up his kekkai, he thought dully, while his enemy was struggling to stand.

He hadn't raised a kekkai since before Daisuke had....

The bioroid made it to one knee but couldn't seem to get to its feet. It held the white cloth up before itself anyway, stretched taut between trembling fists. Its face was tight and strained, and its eyes glittered—he was close enough to see that pooling gleam spill over, running in a thin rivulet down one cheek. Blinking hard, it shifted its gaze from him long enough for a hasty swipe at its face, then stared blankly at the cuff of its sleeve.

It was crying, and it didn't understand what the tears were.

Seiichirou slumped, feeling anew the throbbing ache of his wound, his tiredness—not just the exhaustion of a battle at the end of an already long night, but a deeper, seemingly endless weariness. He wanted to go home. He wanted to *have* a home to go to—a real home, not just a hide-out. He wanted the Tokyo of a year ago to reappear, as if all of this had been nothing more than a terrible dream. And the Dragons of Earth threw this bewildered, uncomprehending

creature at the cornerstone, and he was supposed to hurt it badly enough to take it out of the action at least, if not kill it outright, and even if he did, none of the things that he so desperately longed for would return to him.

Enough.

The thought was softer than a whisper, like a shift of air pressure miles and miles away, quiet herald of a change in weather.

Enough, already....

A kind of peace came over him then. He couldn't explain it. There was nothing to explain, only a still, wide-open clarity. As he looked at the Dragon of Earth, he found himself aware of choices, of the possibilities that could be born or die from something as small as a butterfly's flutter or the cracking of a single heart.

Could he, though? Could he make that kind of choice—could he change course like that, as simply as that, without betraying the memories of the people that he had loved?

Daisuke...probably wouldn't have understood it, Seiichirou thought wistfully, or at least not without a fierce inner struggle. Compromise had never come easily to him. And Yuka-chan...even though she had been sweet tempered and kind, little children had a surprisingly well-developed sense of retribution. And she must have been...so scared. So very scared.

Ah. He felt like a paper cup, suddenly crushed in upon his own emptiness, with nothing left to hold, to give him shape. *I can't....*

But this child...probably it was scared too.

Shimako-san....

Ducking his head, he blew out a short breath, somewhere between a laugh and a sob. Then he glanced at the bioroid again. It hadn't moved. Its expression was as blank as a doll's, just like always, but he thought that there was something pitiable in it, as though it would be looking rather desperate, if it only knew how.

Slowly, letting the wind slip away through his fingers, he held out his hand.

"Hey, there," he said quietly, just loud enough to carry. "It's okay. I'm just guessing, but...it looks to me as if you don't really want to do this anymore. Am I right?" The bioroid tensed, and with an effort he kept from stiffening in response. Smiling somehow, he went on, as calmly as possible, "I don't know your reasons for fighting as a Dragon of Earth. Actually, I don't know much at all about who you are and where you come from. So I probably shouldn't assume anything. But you were just 'born' not so long ago, right? So this must all still be very new to you." The bioroid appeared to be listening, at least; it was watching him, motionless except for shallow, constricted breaths, as if its chest hurt. It didn't seem to be thinking of leaping right back to the attack. Seiichirou decided that this was a promising start.

"Maybe you're doing this because somebody important asked you to," he said, half-musingly. "Maybe they told you that it was necessary, that there were good reasons for destroying the

kekkaï. Or maybe you have reasons of your own. Either way, if you really do want to keep going, that's all right. I guess I'll manage." He chuckled; it came out a bit weaker than he'd meant it to.

More seriously, he went on, "But if you're starting to feel as if you don't want to, then you should stop and think about that. Because only you can decide how much is 'enough.' Whether it's worth it to keep on fighting, no matter what. Even if you're hurt. Even if you're alone, and maybe...maybe a little afraid." Something unreadable flickered in its eyes—acknowledgment? derision? confusion? "I hope you don't think I'm being patronizing," he added gently. "I just thought that maybe nobody had thought to tell you those things yet.

"And that person—well, if there is a 'that person'—if you're as important to them as they are to you, then I'm sure they wouldn't blame you. Whatever you decide, in the end they'll understand. They wouldn't want you to suffer." Although thinking about it, he actually wasn't so sure, considering what he knew of the Dragons of Earth. And really, it was a shame.... He found himself threatening to mist up on the bioroid's behalf, and he told himself sternly not to be so sentimental. It was still a Dragon of Earth itself, after all, and he had to remain on guard. He wanted to end this without anyone getting killed—including himself.

"To...suffer?" With a lurch, the bioroid thrust itself to its feet, and Seiichirou's heart contracted in sharp, startled dismay. It stood unsteadily, listing a little, its gaze fixed on the pavement by its feet as if it were still dazed, still trying to gather its resources. But it was standing, that deadly white cloth trailing in its hands. "Why...why should that...matter?"

For an endless, nightmarish moment, Seiichirou was at a loss. How did one *explain*...how would one explain to a child, because it *was* a child after all, he realized, an impossibly young child. It knew nothing about being human, had no frame of reference for even the most basic, seemingly obvious things. And of course, if it didn't even know what tears were, then it might not be able to name its own pain or fear, let alone see that it should have the choice to avoid them. Seiichirou started to despair of being able to talk it down, but that was only part of the reason for the sudden queasiness that overtook him.

That nobody had ever *told* it that they were sorry to see it hurt or in danger....

"People...don't like to see other people suffer. Especially if the person who's suffering is someone special. It's just...it's too sad." He swallowed hard. "I can't stand aside and let this city be destroyed, and the human world with it—not at the cost of so many lives. To me, that's important enough that it has to come first, before anything that I might want just for myself. But I...I honestly have to say that I'd really rather not fight you anymore. I don't want to keep hurting you like this." He'd been willing to fight, even to kill if necessary, but this was too cruel to be necessity—it was purest tragedy. All along, the bioroid—no, *Nataku*—all along, it had been used like a weapon, like a *thing*, and it had no way to understand how wrong that was. "Please." Extending his hand once more, he tried to smile, although his face ached with the strain, and he thought that he must be doing a rather bad job of it. Nataku had raised its head and was staring back at him, its angel's face pale, its eyes wide and strangely glazed. "For your own sake, I wish—"

It moved then, a tottering step his only warning before the staggering forward rush, its hands lifting, reaching out toward him.

Oh, sh—!

An instant of frozen, panicked indecision before he registered the absence of ki force, the loose slide of silk escaping from opened fingers, and realized that he'd been right to do nothing. Nataka's legs crumpled mid-stride, and Seiichirou, his arms half-raised in automatic self-defense, caught that slender form as it fell against him. Its arms closed about him in turn, one scraping heedlessly across the gash in his side, and brief stars of pain dazzled him. Gasping, he blinked until they slowly faded and the world stopped threatening to gray out around him. His pulse was still racing furiously, though, as if his body refused to believe that maybe this struggle was over at last, that the person leaning against him might no longer be a threat. Shifting his weight, he braced himself to better support its slight weight. Nataka shivered, its forehead pressed against his chest. He was barely able to make out its low, fractured murmur.

"Daddy...."

He honestly hadn't thought that his heart could break any further. Slowly he shifted his arm, rested one hand on the bioroid's shoulder. Carried along in its rush, the white cloth had been caught between them, and a length of it lay draped over one of Nataka's arms. He touched the silk, vaguely amazed at how soft it was, considering its lethal uses.

As soft as the scrap of white clutched in the hand of a desperately brave, brutally murdered little girl.

"I...," he whispered, and he had to clear his throat against the surge of sudden bitterness, pity, a tender and almost unendurable grief. "I'm not your 'daddy.'"

It didn't reply, only settled against him, sighed soundlessly, and then went still. Tilting his head back, Seiichirou gazed up at the flat expanse of sky beyond the scarred and shattered buildings, setting his jaw against that tightness in his throat, the blurring heat at the back of his eyes. A trail of fine sparks blew past high above them, carried on the wind—somewhere, something was burning. It seemed to echo his own sense of loss, of being left scattered and adrift.

Karen-san....

I've made the right choice, haven't I?

* * * * *

Kazuki....

It remembered the man's voice, calling out that name over and over. It remembered his face—the strange expression on it, like pain—and the gentleness of the large hand that had closed about the girl's much smaller one.

They wouldn't want you to suffer.

Its chest hurt with each breath, a faint echo of that memory. It knew that this situation wasn't the same as the one in its dream. Yet it thought that it understood, now, why that man had looked so strange, so distressed and lost.

That man, Kazuki's father, had wanted to take away her suffering.

He hadn't wanted her to die.

Why?

The Dragon of Heaven's hand rested on Nataka's shoulder, a gentleness that was slightly awkward but otherwise seemed almost familiar. He wasn't that man, of course. But when Nataka thought about the eyes of the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth, and when it thought about the look on the wind master's face...it found itself confused.

People...don't like to see other people suffer. Especially if the person who's suffering is someone special. It's just...it's too sad.

Sadness....

The stings and aches of its many wounds seemed to sharpen and at the same time to grow more distant. If it died, would the wind master be sad? Would anyone? It thought that the wind master might be, and that was a very peculiar sensation indeed. So strange, this unsettledness, this slowly gathering yet not quite unpleasant tension, as if something inside it was collecting itself to leap for the sky.

I...

I want to live.

* * * * *

...Subaru...Subaru...

Within the silent prison of his thoughts, Kamui repeated the name like a mantra. There was no reply. He had felt, somewhere across the city, the convulsion of unbelievably ancient power, then something like a breath of wind, a whisper of fleeting presence, and he had known—

Now, there was nothing. Arashi's kekkai had fallen; no one else's had gone up. He was terrified to reach out for the others and find no one there, but even without trying he could feel holes spreading invisibly through the psychic fabric of the city, places where people he knew should have been and weren't.

He'd been wrong. He had tried, and he had messed it up again.

Fuuma...the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth...hadn't come for him.

And because he didn't help the others...maybe everyone was going to die.

Clenching his teeth even tighter on the scream of loss and misery that clawed at his throat, trying to escape, he buried his face in his knees, his tensed shoulders quivering. The Shinken, wedged in the crook of his arm, was a cold, awkward weight, yet somehow not as icy as the girder at his back. The power that he'd run through the Tower's superstructure had faded to a dull,

nearly invisible aura—he didn’t have the strength nor the will for it anymore. If the Dragons of Earth would just hurry up—hurry up and get it over with—or did he dare to leave the Tower, try to find Yuzuriha, or anyone, and see if he could still save them?

Subaru...I’m so sorry...

A low sound, metal resounding to some contact. He jerked his head up, startled. Across the observation deck’s roof, framed by the slanting girders—Fuuma at last, all in black, long black coat with the glint of buckles, the blade of the other Shinken resting almost negligently against his shoulder as he loomed before the night sky, balancing with casual ease on the railing. Kamui choked on an indrawn breath—it felt as if his heart was trying to turn itself inside out. He stared desperately into Fuuma’s face, searching for any pity or mercy, for any trace of the kind and gentle boy he had once known. But there was only the Dragon of Earth smiling back at him, carelessly cruel, his eyes a dark and unreflective mirror, without compassion.

“Sorry about that,” the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth said. “Did I keep you waiting?”

Chapter 21

Subaru lay as if sleeping on the scarred ground, not stiffly but with a kind of artless yet elegant grace: his head tilted a little to one side, his right arm outflung slightly, the other drawn up to lie across his body, his hand curled into a loose fist. Like that, the shikifuku's wide sleeve concealed the bloody ruin of his chest. Seishirou leaned forward to adjust its lie once more, smoothed down the hem. Sitting back on his heels again, he gazed down, taking in the flawless picture that Subaru made—a picture that would never come to life, now, never open those eyes and return his gaze. He had to look away, exhaling sharply. He let his own eyes rove instead across the empty, battered landscape, the broken trees, the splintered remnant hulk of the barrow tree, his attention fractured and restless. Almost reflexively, his hands tightened on his knees.

He had no idea how he'd survived the shattering of the barrow tree. Surely if the backlash of centuries of magic hadn't killed him, the freed dead ought to have...but they had poured over him and past him, shaking the air and ripping at the already ravaged earth, a thundering, mind-numbing flood, like a tsunami of soul fire, and then they had been gone, howling off to some spiritual elsewhere. And although the shock of it still burned, both physically and psychically—the raw emptiness of having that looming, constant presence, that ever-present magical support and wellspring, suddenly ripped away—it seemed oddly remote, as if those nerves had already been flayed to the point of losing sensation.

In any case, somehow, here he was.

Alive.

Now what?

He'd never thought this whole thing out very clearly, Seishirou realized, rather grumpily. It had been all very well to look forward to some hypothetical grand conflict, a culmination of one's whole existence, but what did one do afterward? Sit around and wait for the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth to finish his business? And then? He supposed that he'd thought the post-human world would be...interesting. Novel. Assuming that they didn't all simply vanish in some cataclysmic apocalypse.

Honestly, in the past it didn't matter to me what happened afterward.

No more Tokyo, no more Japan, no more human race—no more purpose to being the Sakurazukamori. And without that, everything was all the same, one way or the other.

Where—when—did things start to get more complicated than that?

Subaru-ku—

He froze, the thought snapping up short, unfinished. His heart was suddenly beating far faster than it should be. He wasn't sure why.

Did it really make any difference if he continued to hold those one-sided inner conversations? It wasn't as though Subaru had ever been able to hear him, or to respond.

Not even when Subaru had been alive....

That abyss yawned beneath him again, the nameless ache, the crawling, brittle feeling of dissolution. Jerking his gaze up, he stared hard at the sky, as if its dull black endlessness could balance this other void, could hold it at an equal distance—a counterspell, a sympathetic magic. A few faint, tired stars, the curve of the waning moon as sharp as a blade, unveiled, now that the haze of smoke and the last thin clouds had frayed into nothing....

White. That pale light painting the devastation of Ueno Park with its otherworldly, deathly peace, like the purity of white silk....

He couldn't get away from it. The moon was threatening to melt into a foggy smear, and he closed his eyes, his shoulders slumping a little with fatigue as he forced back the hollowness, the hot, liquid sting. Crying, he'd decided, now that he'd had a chance to actually experience it, had nothing to recommend it at all. The closest he'd ever come before had been during the year of the bet—that had probably been the pinnacle of his entire performance, eking out a genuine tear or two. He'd heard that most actors managed to do it by bringing up memories of something sad.

He'd thought about onions....

A poor, wretched veterinarian wouldn't be an appropriate match for someone with as bright a future as Subaru-kun....

Seishirou lowered his head again, the ghost of a strangely bleak smile fading from his lips. The threat of leaking suppressed, at least for the moment, he let his eyes drift open, let his gaze settle on Subaru's body once more. The pang was becoming almost familiar, if no less uncomfortable.

He couldn't remain like this forever, could he? Holding vigil beside the body of his lover...it would make for an affecting melodrama, but he couldn't quite work up the enthusiasm for it. Maybe he'd seen too many corpses to find any real interest in the idea of clinging to one and refusing to let go.

Or maybe he was just too aware of all that was missing.

The heat of the skin. The vibrancy of breath. The expressiveness of face and body—the constant flickerings of thoughts and emotions, the sometimes contrary tension, the ever-exquisite responsiveness.

The gentleness of that touch.

The look in those eyes, lingering, intent upon his face....

Moment by moment, all of that was receding further into the realm of memory. Trying to hold on to this physical remnant wouldn't stop that retreat.

And he, too—if he were to live, then moving forward, away from this, would be inevitable.

But to what future?

Inclining his head, Seishirou concentrated, opening up those inner senses, almost welcoming the twinge of pain and the glaring afterimages left behind by the barrow's fall as a distraction, something that could be pushed through and overcome. He had yet to determine what was left to him—various strands of his onmyoujitsu trailed off into frayed edges or black, silent voids—but he could still perceive. Not that it was all that hard to make out the howl of a Shinken—of two Shinken: a discordant clash of wailing tones, the blinding, searing edge of vast powers meeting. One side seemed to be struggling, falling back, and Seishirou was fairly sure it was the Kamui of the Dragons of Heaven, which really wasn't all that surprising.

Perhaps he wouldn't have to concern himself about the future for too much longer....

He couldn't sense the distinctive, focused thrumming of a Seal's kekkai—that was a bit more unexpected. Had the other cornerstones fallen already? If so, then all the more reason for Kamui to be faltering. He shifted levels, trying to filter out some of the noise of the battle at Tokyo Tower, and reached out. No, Yamanote still appeared to be intact. Had a Dragon of Heaven won there, or was it just that nobody had gotten to it yet? Groping about like this, his range was too limited, he decided; bringing his awareness back to his body, he reached into his sleeve, drew forth a single ofuda. The inside of his chest clenched sharply—his hand tensed, and he forced it to relax before his fingers crumpled the talisman. He had to clear his throat before he could murmur the word of the spell.

“Hikyuu....”

Wavering into existence, a black shikigami lifted from his hand, then began to flap upward. Soon it had disappeared against the night sky, but Seishirou didn't need to watch it to track its progress. Higher and higher, rising in a sharp angle above the park, too steep and swift for any mortal bird, until the city lay spread out below like a diorama and Seishirou could survey it through the shikigami's eyes.

Ginza, down. Tokyo Tower wreathed with vapor and trails of fierce incandescence, lit up by a sudden flare, a crossing of swords—but he already knew what was going on there. Surprisingly little damage elsewhere as he shifted his attention to the west—

Ah.

Shinjuku.

Those towering skyscrapers had crumbled—were still crumbling, the tilted remnants collapsing piece by piece into the streets below like massive ice chunks splitting from a glacier's edge to crash into the sea, the buildings' superstructures inexorably giving way before stresses they had never been designed to endure. The zone of destruction radiated outward, starlike, from an unfathomably deep black gouge where the Government Building had been.

It seemed as though nobody had triumphed, there.

But the Dragon of Earth hadn't lost, either....

And it shouldn't have particularly mattered—but he found himself thinking of driving those echoing canyons late in the evening, glancing up into the rearview mirror to study the profile of

his distracted passenger. Of walking back from the little bakery around the corner from the veterinary clinic, beneath the rattling shade of the elevated train line. Of the shape of an uncountable number of everyday moments, one following the next like links in a delicate chain, part of a year that had been a long time ago, and yet seemed oddly close and clear. And clearer still, the silent glitter of those far-off lights, framed behind a window's glass, the solid warmth of another's body yielding in his embrace, the low exchange of murmurs:

And you, Subaru-kun...do you love Tokyo?

Yes.

Because it's the place where I met you.

A heartbeat of stillness, and Seishirou pushed himself to his feet, his jaw set with a new and wholly unlooked-for resolve.

Something was going to survive.

* * * * *

Blade keened against blade, sliding until the guards caught. For a measureless instant, the combatants leaned into each other, separated only by a handsbreadth of space and those two crossed lengths of metal. Shivering with the strain, Kamui stared past the bright edge of his sword, looking up at Fuuma, at the tight trace of a smile, feral and mirthless, at the flat, remorseless eyes returning his gaze. He could feel the almost negligent pressure of Fuuma's power balanced against his own desperate, unsteady striving, the focused crackle of raw force fed through the channel of otherworldly steel, the great storm-cloud of his twin star's aura looming, all too familiar, just like the way Fuuma towered over him physically, and all he could think of suddenly was what that strength *felt* like—what it had felt like once, in what seemed now like an entirely different life, a tearing, anguished ache for his friend's arm curving around him and pulling him near, for that solid, unshakable presence, always there to support and to protect.

If someone is making you cry, Kamui....

I'll protect you from him.

A spike and flare of power, although neither of them had moved—a fist of lightning slammed from Fuuma's hands and the crossguard of his Shinken into Kamui's, hurling him backward. Free air and flying and trying to get reoriented and get his feet underneath him again before—

Jolt.

A ringing blackness—

The world wavered back into existence, its edges splintering off into daggers of white glare and fractured rainbow haze. Pain hit him like a brick to the back of the skull, followed by a wash of nausea—he was leaning against a slanted steel strut, the same one he must have been flung headlong into, and it took everything he had to lock his knees so that he didn't crumple to the roof beneath him. Frantic, fighting down that queasy weakness, he looked for Fuuma—found him, then struggled to bring the double-vision image into better focus. Fuuma had paused and was staring into the distance, eyes narrowed. Kamui's head was starting to clear, but he couldn't quite make out what had caught Fuuma's attention. Perhaps there was a hint of some far-off energy shifting, gathering, something subtle and indistinct, but it hardly seemed important. Nothing could change the way the two of them were bound to this moment, to this fight: each other's destiny, and he'd never wanted to believe in destiny, but it held them nevertheless, had held them maybe from the first time they'd met, and it seemed as if nothing else mattered except for that—

Abruptly Fuuma snorted, then glanced at Kamui again, smiling, and for an instant his expression was so tender that Kamui felt as if he were falling. "It's too bad I can't play with you longer." Fuuma almost sounded genuinely regretful. "I'd hoped—but it looks like somebody has gotten impatient." His gaze sharpened and darkened, layers of complexity veiling his thoughts as he looked at Kamui. "One last time, then," Fuuma murmured. He swept the Shinken out to one side, holding it in an easy, one-handed grip, its tip angled down toward the metal-plated floor. His smile faded to a masklike impassivity as he added, low and intent, "*Can you?*"

Kamui stared at him dumbly, one painful pulse throb after another, and then Fuuma was moving forward, not actually waiting for a reply, his advance seemingly unhurried but for all its ease deceptively swift. The Shinken rose in a wide arc, Fuuma's other hand joining the first on its hilt as the great blade lifted—and Kamui realized, as the distance between them closed with nightmarish inexorability, as he struggled to haul his own sword around into a guard position, that there was no way he'd be able to brace himself to block that crushing blow in time.

Without warning the world shook: a mind-numbing discordance, a jangling, ripping tremor both like and unlike a kekkai being raised.

With a desperate cry, Kamui wrenched the Shinken up—

* * * * *

A jolt of nothingness—like having one's strings cut, Seishirou thought dimly, if one happened to be a marionette, or like a circuit breaker flipping and shutting off the flow of current, this feeling of sudden emptiness, of power poured forth beyond the limits of spirit and body to sustain it. He scarcely realized that he had begun to fall until his knees hit the ground. He had time, as that slow topple continued, for a glimpse of Subaru's ritual blade burning whitely among the remaining wooden spars of what had been the barrow sakura, the hub of a net of magical power woven across the city, branch to branch and root to root, a pale spiderweb, a veil of gossamer-thin

and ghostly threads of flame. He could see in his mind's eye the ring of fire that encompassed the whole, the seal that it had taken his last effort to create. Other hands, gentle, unexpected, yet somehow inevitable, touched the spell with a tentative delicacy, then took it up, even as his awareness of it, and of them, began to fade.

His body collided with the ragged dirt, a strangely distant, barely perceptible sensation. Lying asprawl, he craned his neck slightly and could just see the pale drift of Subaru's body, like a lingering remnant of snow. Subaru's outstretched arm almost seemed to reach for him, as if offering to take his hand; Subaru's face was turned toward him, tranquil and supremely still, and Seishirou remembered, with a faint twinge of satisfaction mixed with pain, what it had felt like to caress those eyelids closed, as if bespelling Subaru's distracted gaze into a final and forever sleep. With a sigh he let go then, reaching weakly out into the space between them even as the last of that strength and purpose seeped away from him.

Subaru-kun....

His own eyes, closing, brought no darkness—everything was fading into white, reality slipping aside like a slow tide, leaving in its wake an expanding space that felt somehow like a dream, vaguely yet indisputably familiar. And as he sank down into it, he sensed a presence skimming at the very edges of his thoughts: a flutter of feathers, the flare of white wings.

A shikigami?

No.

Memory flickered, and he smiled, even as he felt, through that growing lassitude, an arrowing of distant attention: the awareness of the Kamui of the Dragons of Earth cutting sharply across the city, searching for him.

Ah, that's right....

Still falling, he reached out, back along the way that he'd come.

Hey.

Hey, "Kamui."

Somebody's looking for you.

* * * * *

The train pulls into the station at last—a rattling thunk of shifting, settling tracks and then the low hiss as the doors slide open. The girl flits out onto the platform the instant the way is clear before her, leaving the scattering of other passengers still sitting dull and motionless in her wake. Across the dark red tile floor, through the turnstile, and then up the narrow stairs, her footsteps a rapid, sprightly patter as she wheels around the corner of the landing and dashes up the next flight, and then the next—she has run up these stairs before, she thinks, or something very much like them, seeking the roof, the sky, anticipation and hope spreading their wings wide, pushing against the strain that locks up the inside her chest. But this time there is no ache—only the purest

joy. The open doorway is just above her now, the light blazing through it, pure white, brighter than any single star, and as she springs up the last few steps and leaps over the threshold she opens her arms to it, cries out:

Oniichan! I'm sorry you had to wait so long! But it's okay now, right?

Oniichan...don't be sad anymore.

The future isn't yet decided.

And...I love you.

* * * * *

The sudden stillness was somehow an even greater shock than the clash of blows. Quivering with reaction, Kamui struggled to catch his breath, to confirm the startling truth that he was still alive. His senses were blurring, as if he were slipping back into the haze of concussion; he started to fight it, then froze, trying to open himself to it instead, reaching desperately after a fading hint of presence, like the translucency of a bright spring day, like the gentleness and fragility of very new creatures.

“Kotori...?”

Gone, as if it had left him along with that involuntary whisper. Maybe he'd just imagined it after all. With that pang of disappointment and the renewed awareness of loss, his head began to clear once more, and he realized with a start that both he and Fuuma were standing motionless, not even an arms' length apart. Kamui jerked his head up, stared wildly at Fuuma's profile, the distant and almost bewildered expression—he realized that his own hands were still wrapped around the Shinken's hilt, and the blade—

Was angled upward, through Fuuma's chest.

Delayed memory: a resistance readily giving way, the meaty slide, the grate of metal against bone—Fuuma slowing, sword still drawn back as Kamui stumbled forward—the impact as Kamui's shoulder collided with Fuuma's body—the straining, off-balance effort to get the tip of the blade up in time—pieces all out of order, flashing and senseless. The smell of blood, warmth running down past the guard, dripping over his hands. He couldn't put any of it together. Only...only....

This.

“Fuuma!”

The other Shinken slid out of Fuuma's hands and clattered to the rooftop, its clangor nothing but metal on metal now—both swords terrifyingly silent. The very night seemed to be holding its breath. Fuuma's knees buckled, he started to slump forward, and suddenly both his weight and the Shinken's were coming down onto Kamui. Kamui let go of the Shinken in order to grab Fuuma about the shoulders, trying to slow his collapse, and they both crumpled to the ground awkwardly, landing hard on their knees. The sword shifted between them, jarred by the motion—Fuuma

jerked, gave a wet, gagging cough, and Kamui knew that it was blood, *oh Kami-sama, the blood...*
 “Fuuma!”

“Heh.” Fuuma’s chest lifted, a stuttering breath...a laugh? “Heh.... Kamui?” His voice was a hoarse, barely audible murmur. “Did I...did I...win?”

“Huh?” Kamui shifted back just enough to be able to see Fuuma’s face, wondering, even through his numb and panicked horror, at the almost wistful tone in the other’s voice. Fuuma’s eyes were unfocused—they were soft, oh, with that gentleness, no lying mask now but real, even as they closed, a trace of a smile tugging at Fuuma’s mouth as he bowed his head above Kamui’s shoulder.

“Did I make you hate me,” Fuuma whispered, “...enough...to kill me?”

His lips stilled; his head bent further, the tension going out of his body as it abruptly slackened and his weight seemed to redouble, and Kamui knew then, knew and didn’t want to know, feeling the blood already cooling on the backs of his fingers, the settle and sigh of a last exhalation, held close within his embrace. He stared past Fuuma’s dark head at the sky, and that should have been dark as well, but instead it was a singing white light, or maybe that was just inside his own head: adrenaline and starkest denial and a spell like pale fire scrabbling to burn something and the dead, and the dead, and the dead—dead weight, and what was gone so weightless, impossible to hold. Never—he was shaking, not just from the physical strain and exhaustion but from something roiling upward from far below the surface, a molten, shattering pressure—not once had he been able to *do* anything, to save anyone. And Fuuma...and Fuuma had done all of that...everything...to make him fight, when his whole heart had cried out in its refusal? To save his conscience, to ease the inescapable guilt?

Because one of them had had to die.

Had *had to*....

“Fuuma,” he panted, his voice blurred and splintery, cracking helplessly on the name.

“Fuuma....

“NO!”

And with that howl, out of the deepest places of himself—from blood and will, occult power, the force of a single, pure desire—he blazed forth with all his strength: a blinding flare, a shaft of incandescent starfire stretching from earth to sky as he reached out and caught hold of fate—

* * * * *

“The symbol is changing,” Kanoe murmured, close to her sister’s ear. Strands of moth-white hair trembled faintly at the touch of her breath. “The new cycle is about to begin.” She closed her fingers over the sleeper’s tiny, childlike hand. Curled up like a cat around her sister’s body, she leaned nearer still, inhaling Hinoto’s fragrance: scent of plum blossoms and silk, layers of incense

and the subtle paperiness of extreme age. She could feel the bonds loosening—could see, now, the dark pool, the dark mirror deep in her sister's soul, the long-clawed double screaming silently.

Yes. Come to me.

Two thousand years of being born and dying, sometimes remembering and sometimes not. Of searching, life after life, whether or not she knew the reason for it or even what she was searching for. Of seeing her sister suffer, again and again, alone with that terrible power.

No more.

Bending her head, touching her lips to the oblique angle of throat and shoulder, Kanoe swiftly drank up that liquid shadow, drew it in a surging flood out of the vessel of her sister's body and into her own. And as it poured into her, vision struck with the force of a blow, momentarily disorienting, a rush, a whirl of too much knowledge, of fierce imperatives that she forced down with all her strength—*that battle is long done*. Power swirled, then stabilized, found an equilibrium, although every cell still vibrated with it, a wild song of ecstasy, of merciless, devouring strength, of completeness. And she could see—

Not like her sister's dreams, crystalline visions of far-distant moments, caught outside time and existence. And even less like the poor echo of dreamseeing that had been her limit, a ghost haunting the margins of her sister's knowing. *Her* vision, *her* knowledge was the future as it grew out of the perfect and illimitable *now*, heartbeat following heartbeat, the path of inevitable necessity, the vital and intimate connection of all things.

Jerking back, she drew in a sharp gasp of breath. She could feel the city reverberating around and above her, the complex interplay of old spells and new ones, the flashing-out of power and the weird, discordant resonances as Kamui bent the world about the heaven-reaching spire of Tokyo Tower. The flux was intense, but despite the breaks in the city's wholeness there was an underlying layer of stability. Intention held, and hope and labor from both past and present, and the stubborn persistence of what was. Although wounded, Tokyo would not fall.

Quick as sensation along a trail of nerves, backlash threaded across the city, sharp recoil as magic was invoked and a destiny was altered. The Diet Building shuddered; even in the basement's depths, the walls quaked and dust sifted down, pale in the golden glow of the candlelight. Lifting her head, Kanoe stared up at the ceiling above the futon, tracing the lines of stress, both physical and metaphysical, the weak point in an abruptly shifting fault.

And as that ceiling buckled and began to give way beneath the tons upon tons of steel and masonry from the collapsing building above, she smiled at it as if it were a lover.

Sister.

Now you'll be free....

* * * * *

The spellfire that ringed the city blazed high, as if answering the column of light that had once more blasted skyward from Tokyo Tower, a torrent of power even brighter and fiercer than the first one, which Yuzuriha wouldn't have believed was possible. There was scarcely time to register that reaction and then brace herself before the wavefront hit, surging outward from the tower, and Rainbow Bridge swayed, all its cables singing out, a multivoiced, shivering, groaning howl. The sword, held hilt-up before her, resonated to that strain, the blade between her hands moaning, quivering just as she quivered, pouring all her strength into and through it. A breathless instant of realization was her only warning, the stillness of a limit reached and surpassed, the pause before a sudden drop—and that length of otherworldly steel shattered into bright-edged slivers, slashing across her palms as they began to fall.

Without hesitation she flung her arms wide, made herself the anchor point of the spell instead, the pain almost welcome, jolting her with each throb of her heart, something to hold onto as the flood of raw energy streamed about her. The metal shards slowed to hang weightlessly in midair, then puffed into feathery clouds of brightness, like plumes of airborne dust, if dust could be made up of translucent light and magic. They swirled about her, touched her skin and passed through it—the scent of fur, an immaterial yet tangible warmth, a presence that she could scarcely describe because it had always been so *close*, and her eyes stung with grieving, even though she knew that, truly, she was losing nothing.

I loved you, she whispered silently, for no one but herself to hear.

Closer, now, than ever....

And she could never have imagined it, let alone like this, with the world trembling on the knife point of transformation and that vast yet tenuous kekkai burning at her back—but she held the seal, held it while her soul rewove itself, while the city shook and Kamui's lightning seared the sky. Large hands cupped her shoulders, powerful yet supremely gentle—*hold me up*, she prayed, leaning back into that unfalteringly solid strength, and through them she could feel his concern for her, his patient and unquestioning support, and more, an endless depth of stillness, a feeling like massive roots twining down into the earth and the earth rising up to meet them, lifting them both amidst the flood.

She drew in a sharp breath—the wolf was in her now, and with the wolf the forest and the night stars, the rock and the grass and the long hunt with life and death at the end of it, the dampness of rain and the promise of a gray dawn to come. And yet she was herself, as human as anyone else in this city, part of the same sprawling confusion of a modern world; and also a Dragon of Heaven, with the power of a Dragon of Earth coiling about and through her, sustaining her, connecting her to the source of all wildness, closing the circle.

Out of that clarity and shared strength, she breathed in once more, deeply, then stretched out her arms, diverting power back across the enclosed space of the seal to be caught by other hands and reflected in turn, crossing and recrossing the city, point to point, tracing out the star of a pentagram.

Alive! Other people are alive....

The tears came then, and she closed her eyes, even as she continued to weave the spell without ceasing, steady and sure, while the hot blood welled up, dripping from her hands.

She was no longer a child.

* * * * *

Torn and bloodied, the white cloth spun slowly: a star in a circle, held aloft by will and by the curving, involuted embrace of gentle winds. Nataka leaned back against the windmaster's shoulder. Although they were both injured, somehow the pain seemed farther away, and the energy working, which should have been an impossible strain, was endurable. It thought of the windmaster's murmured words of encouragement, as steady and sustaining as the lift of those winds, as the enfolding touch of another's power, a strangeness that was growing more familiar.

It's easier, when two people help each other....

White fire streamed across the sky, to be reflected back from the ki-charged cloth and also outward on a new line, toward unknown hands. Nataka wondered vaguely whose they were. It was finding that it had an uncountable number of new questions, but also a peculiar lack of urgency about answering them.

After all, it thought, there would be time....

* * * * *

From her perch high above Tokyo Station, Karen regarded the crisscrossing lines of spellwork with amusement, paired with a glow of quiet satisfaction. A fluttering disturbance, the whisper of feathers—she started slightly as the white bird swept up behind her and backwinged to alight delicately upon her shoulder, his clawed grip as gentle as snowfall, the tips of his unfurled wings just brushing her bare arms. Long-necked and golden-eyed, crested and plume-tailed, he resembled nothing so much as a phoenix, but one as luminously pale as the moon. Bending his head, he rested his cheek very briefly against hers.

“Ah. So you won't be staying, then?”

No, he wouldn't. What had needed to be done was done, and now—the endless reaches were calling, the dissolution into light, the promise and delight of a perfect freedom. He shifted restlessly, already eager to fly, and Karen nodded her understanding, aware as well of that piercingly sweet, bell-toned song from the other side, the constant tide of subtle tension, like a painless heartache.

And her?

“I think I'll hold down the fort here, until this is done.” Her gaze roved across the city, caught irresistibly by a different pull, one that was no less intimate, no less insistent. “And

afterward...maybe I'll stay around for a while?" The words, tentatively spoken, left no disharmony in their wake; she smiled with slowly dawning wonder. "It looks like that won't be a problem." More than that—a rightness, the sudden sense of a task to be fulfilled, a place that would fit her just like stepping into her own skin, and she laughed quietly, in surprise and relief. "I'm glad...."

In a rush, the white bird launched itself, the feather-flick of his wings a last farewell. "Go with God," she murmured. Turning, she followed the path of his outward flight until the light swallowed him—stared a long time into that shining herself, a wordless communion. At last she shook herself slightly and turned back to the interstice between worlds, not without a faint twinge of loss. She touched once more the anchor point that she held, one corner of the spell that would birth a new network of kekkai, giving the world back over to humanity.

As long as there were people, they would need someone to listen and bear witness, to purify their sins and sorrows, to share their joy.

Smiling once more, Karen held out her hands to the city of Tokyo and spread her own fiery wings.

* * * * *

He pushed and strained against the chunk of fallen concrete, even knowing it was futile—no way to get any leverage, pinned as he was, and not enough strength left even if he could. Panting, he fell back onto his side at last, coughed briefly from the combination of dust-choked air and exertion. The convulsive movements sent a new shock of pain ripping through him, graying his sight, and he tried to breathe slowly and evenly, riding the surface of it rather than letting it drag him under. Somewhat lightheadedly, he pondered his options. If the fountain hadn't been destroyed—but right now he probably wasn't in any condition to manage the effort of controlling water. His pulse throbbed in his abraded hands, in the searing white heat that had swallowed up his legs somewhere below the knees, a rapid, thready beat; *bleeding*, he thought distantly, almost giddily, and wondered if watermastery would get him anywhere with that. But considering that at the moment water itself seemed like an insurmountable challenge, that kind of innovation was almost certainly beyond him, too.

As the dizziness ebbed ever so slightly, he rolled his head to gaze up at the sky, wide open now above the tops of the rubble heaps, in the absence of the once-looming skyscrapers. It was lit by a pale flickering glow, something auroralike, obscuring whatever dusting of stars might have been visible—unless that was just a hallucination on his part. Whatever, it was suitably apocalyptic.

So this was how things had turned out. It had been a good ride, he thought. He'd never really concerned himself much with how it might end. Just take the days as they came, see what they brought and react to it however seemed best—like the trick of walking easily down a busy street, finding and threading through the gaps in the crowd, being diverted by the pretty, eye-catching distractions and putting up with the occasional obstacle until it could be dodged. But now that

he'd actually gotten to this destination, it was turning out to be...not much fun. Kind of ugly and inconvenient, to be honest. Not to mention...he searched for a word that would wrap up and dismiss the whole miasma of pain, isolation, helpless entrapment, the first bleak and inescapable stirrings of fear.

Unpleasant. Now there was an understatement for you.

With a low, breathless chuckle, he lowered his gaze to scan the immediate area yet again, on the off chance that he'd suddenly spot his blade-whip within reach, so that maybe he could hurry things up a little, because he was beginning to picture this lasting an uncomfortably long time otherwise—and he started, catching a glimpse of movement, a shadowy figure amidst the rubble. It paused, then came toward him, step by step, picking a slow, erratic path forward into the shifting light: ragged swish of a dark, ripped skirt, the slide of long hair about slumped shoulders, ghost-pale face and black eyes like empty, staring wells.

The sword-wielding girl from Ise. How providential. It looked as though he could stop worrying about whether or not this was going to drag out.

And at the hands of a pretty girl, too...assuming that he could manage to get a rise out of her.

"Well...you did it," he remarked, making an attempt at cheerfulness, as she paused a few meters away and regarded him with blank impassivity. "You won. Con...congratulations!" The effort of speaking threatened to bring on more coughing; he held his breath, trying to suppress the spasm. It passed, and Yuuto grinned up at her, as blithely as he could, given the circumstances.

"You've saved the world for humanity, Kishuu-san. So...what're you going to do next?"

* * * * *

Arashi stared down at the Dragon of Earth pinned beneath the ruin, at the glint of his eyes in the half-light, the insouciant, slightly strained curve of his smirk.

Tokyo Disneyland, she thought nonsensically, and her heart clenched, pain breaking into the void of numbness like a shooting star lancing across the sky.

The person she had loved had been just such a star, blazing and brilliant, someone to make wishes upon, radiant with joy-in-life.

Yuuto could play games all he liked. He was still not even the palest reflection.

"Kigai-san," she said softly, very precisely. Her voice, amazingly enough, did not tremble at all. "Are you a fool?"

Surprise flickered across his face; she didn't wait for his wits to catch up with it. Moving forward, she crouched and put her back to the large, ragged-edged chunk of concrete, curling her hands underneath it. "You'd better be able to drag yourself clear," she told him. "I can't lift this *and* pull you." Yuuto made a low sound, like a catch in the back of his throat—startled

acknowledgement at least, if not necessarily agreement. She drew a deep breath, making sure that her feet were braced securely and that her knees weren't about to give way, then heaved upward—

—he screamed. Setting her teeth, she concentrated on the raw strain pulling at every muscle, the harshness of the concrete's edge against her hands, the twinge of the mostly healed scar across her palm like the ache of emptiness inside her where power had once slept and dreamed of itself as a sword, the bitterness, the all-too-familiar feeling of being bereft and cast adrift.

But not quite the same....

She was no longer the little girl who had once wondered if it was worthwhile to go on scavenging garbage in order to live—she carried within herself now memories of warmth and closeness that didn't fill the hole of this new loss but that framed it, gave it shape and limit.

And she imagined that she could almost feel that remembered presence, exuberant and cheerful, noisily intrusive, compassionate and wise and incessantly supportive: a welter of associations, confusingly complicated but ultimately sweet, like honey amidst the tears.

Miss....

He would want her to live.

Her strength gave out abruptly, and she let the rubble fall. It crashed to the ground, and she fell with it, sitting down hard, her legs shaking. After a moment, she got her wind back and hitched herself over to the end of the slab. Yuuto had managed to haul himself clear after all. He lay curled up on his side, his face deathly pale and his fair hair ashy with dust and the uncertain light. It seemed as though he'd lost consciousness. A short trail of gore ran from his blood-drenched legs to disappear beneath the heap of rubble. Wincing, Arashi crawled across the broken, gritty pavement to kneel by his side. She rested her hands lightly on top of the sodden fabric of his slacks; he never flinched, but she felt life in him and knew that he still breathed.

Tilting her head back, she gazed up toward the heavens. She could feel the otherworldly hush all about her, the city waiting beneath that spell-lit sky as if it too were a wounded live thing, vast, mute, and gravely patient. The magical working that threaded across it seemed to be waiting as well, flickering like arrested electricity but otherwise almost breathlessly still, expectant, like the pause between a question and its answer.

With a sigh, Arashi closed her eyes and let the healing begin.

* * * * *

The magic flared, purest white. For an instant, all of the sakura trees were aflame, as if every twig was a bolt of lightning seeking the ground. Then, with the circuit of the seal closed and the working discharged, that five-pointed star dissolved into flecks of radiance that drifted downward, swirling and dancing, falling and fading until they touched the earth and melted away.

On the roof of the second observation deck of Tokyo Tower, a young man watched those motes glimmering among the buildings, a shower of light that filled the circle of the dwindling

ring of fire. The wind whipped unruly black hair across his somber, dark brown gaze. Slowly he turned his head, his glance sweeping the city from horizon to horizon, as if searching for something.

His other eye was the color of violets.

* * * * *

And high above where two girls stood on a predawn hillside, a pair of dragons soared, red and blue twining against the paling sky.

“Sister, let’s hurry! Come on—I’ll race you!”

And smiling, the younger of the two followed more slowly as her fair-haired sister ran laughing down the long slope ahead of her: toward the river, into the light.

http://www.photokichi.com/architecture/index_gendai1.html - photos of tokyo architecture, including hotel sofitel

<http://www.golem.demon.co.uk/article-t5e.html> - chinese five element cycle

http://rubens.anu.edu.au/raid4/japan0703/tokyo/architecture/shinjuku/shinjuku_park_tower/index1.html

Chapter 22

A feeling of drowsy lassitude returned to him first—and he thought it was odd, but he couldn't quite place why. Was it because he didn't ordinarily awaken so slowly? Or.... The comfort of the mattress beneath him was no less pleasant and no less disorienting. Vague memories shimmered and glinted at him, impressions like falling coins below the surface of a pool of water, bright but wavering flashes: fire and ofuda and the scent of rain, a confusion of feathered wings, the tasseled hilt of a dagger burning whitely, a muddled sense of wonder and unease.

Subaru-kun...I just had the strangest dream.

He opened his eyes. The ceiling soared above him, high and wide and unfamiliar. He stared at it for a beat, then slowly rolled his head to one side, although he already knew what he would see.

The extravagantly large bed stretched away next to him, empty.

"He's awake." He almost missed that low murmur. "Could you let Takamura-san know?" Without swiveling his head back, he opened all his senses, ignoring a brief, dizzying twinge of strain. A buzzing hum, subtle but persistent, muffled all but the dullest hints of presence.

A ward.

Unhurriedly he pushed himself up to a sitting position, taking his time, testing the response of his body to each motion. There was no use pretending that he was still asleep. He felt lethargic, stiff, and raw, not merely physically but also psychically, but not so much as he might have expected, given the memories that were beginning to press in upon him. He closed them off, focusing instead on the present. The ward ran the not-inconsiderable width of the room, dividing the larger section with the bed in it from the door; invisible planes of energy followed the walls, floor, and ceiling to enclose the area completely, apparently extending to include as well a small side room that was almost certainly a bathroom.

You could keep a person for a long time in a space like this.

The resonance of that magical barrier was exceedingly familiar. Shifting over, Seishirou swung his legs off the bed and set his feet down on the floor. As he moved, he lifted his head and looked for the first time directly through the ward's invisible psychic shimmer.

From where she stood, next to the slightly open door, the hidden priestess of Ise stared back at him.

She seemed more or less uninjured, although a number of scrapes and small cuts marked her legs and arms, the latter visible where the sleeves of her sweater had been pushed up. Exhaustion or some other extremity had left dark smudges about her eyes. But her gaze, holding his, was level and unfaltering, outwardly composed yet in its fixity suggesting an intentness that was almost feral.

Seishirou's mouth curved into a smile that had nothing to do with pleasantness. Rising from the bed, he folded his hands into a mitsu-in. His voice rasped on the first syllables of the invocation but quickly cleared, strengthening as he spoke.

"On makayakisha bazara sataba jakuunban kohara beisha un."

The girl's face tightened—leaving the door, she took two steps forward, stiff legged like a cat, and flung up her hands in a warding gesture. *"On chirichi iba rotaya sowaka."* Her murmured words lanced under and through his own. The ward blazed with unseen light—he could feel the force of it, a fierce, steady surge of repulsion holding him at bay. He leaned into it, leaned his will against it, meaning to break through by sheer power and determination, because just then he had no interest in facing subtlety with subtlety. His weakness, the rapidity with which he touched his limit, would be disquieting if he let himself dwell on it; it was certainly frustrating, but the girl was struggling as well, and far more visibly, her arms already quivering with effort. In the aftermath of the final battle, her resources had to be as depleted as his, if not more so. Heedless of the strain, he held himself firmly upright, drawing on all the currents of sorcery at his disposal.

"On asanmagini unhatta on—"

A skidding clatter of footsteps beyond the door, and it was suddenly thrust further open, letting in a glare of brighter light from what appeared to be a hallway outside. "Ah! Kishuu-san!" The windmaster of the Dragons of Heaven galloped into the room, panting slightly, hair in disarray and eyes wide and anxious behind cracked glasses. He paused for a breath beside the girl, made a swift gathering gesture, then touched her shoulder briefly before sweeping his arm out toward Seishirou's prison. A wall of wind blasted into existence along the line of the ward, adding its resistance to that of the spell. Behind the two Seals, a slight figure appeared in the doorway, paused for a moment to stare and then shuffled slowly forward—the artificial humanoid of the Dragons of Earth, pretty but otherwise unremarkable in an ordinary-looking sweatshirt and jeans, so that it took a split second for Seishirou to identify it, especially in this company. It seemed uncertain, and Seishirou put it out of mind for the present.

Baring his teeth in a dark grin, he collected himself and took a step forward against that resistance, then another. He could feel the outlying gusts of the windwall fluttering his clothes, his hair, and the windmaster frowned in concentration, raised his hand to focus those winds even more intensely. The air was an unyielding barrier before Seishirou, but he reached out anyway, and the shrine maiden gasped in alarm. *"Look out—!"*

A warning, but not for him—

—as he turned those winds minutely, found their edges, and thrust his arm forward—

Blood sprayed, red as rubies, misty as a gentle rain. The windmaster swore mildly under his breath, and the priestess set her teeth, already bracing herself. The pain was utterly insignificant against the incandescent burning of adrenaline and arcane power and the satisfaction of seeing their dismayed expressions. As he savored the heat and distinctive acrid tang of blood magic, Seishirou curled his lip in silent disdain.

Do you think you're the only one who can manipulate the wind?

Red stained his slashed white shirt sleeve, still welling up from the several places where his arm had been cut. Catching some of that blood on his fingertips, he sketched a circle of power in midair, framing both winds and ward. The bioroid stepped forward, also reading the danger now, and began shaping energy into a shield—a second line of defense, unconnected to the first one, and unlikely to make any real difference anyway. Ignoring it, Seishirou drew his hand across the face of the circle in short, swift strokes, alternating horizontal and vertical: nine cuts to subdue and to attain mastery, while the Dragons of Heaven wrestled furiously to keep their grip and the disturbed air howled and whipped about them all, charged with those conflicting forces—while he poured the living energy of blood and breath into the working, feeling the steady burn as it left him, reckless of the cost.

“Rin Pyo To Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zai Zen!”

His hand upon the ward then, an acidic lash of feedback, stinging to the bone—
—as he smiled—

—and without warning somebody seized that whole maelstrom in an overpowering grip, wrenching it into a stillness that still resonated with suppressed violence. That unexpected arrest was like smashing head-on into a wall: a stunning shock, a crumpling of extrasensory awareness. Seishirou lurched, and the windmaster grabbed for the shrine maiden, both of them nearly falling over. His senses still ringing, Seishirou looked sharply toward the door of the room and the slim form that moved forward slowly out of that silhouetting light. His face gradually became visible—familiar, and yet not. Unmatched eyes, one lambent and one dark, met Seishirou's, a long, deeply probing stare, as if to read all that lay below the surface, thoughts and impulses scarcely realized let alone put into words, while that terrible, crushing strength loomed like a storm: a soundless roar, a flaring aura of shadow and brightness like twin pairs of tremendous wings, a promise of annihilation.

Yes.

The young man's mouth tightened. With a gesture of dismissal, he broke those locked-up workings, dispelling them in a dizzying rush of release until all that remained was the faint, almost subliminal thrumming of the original ward.

Seishirou swayed backward, away from the barrier, but somehow kept his feet despite the abrupt dispersal of energies, the yawning void of negated power, of refusal and surging fatigue. The last stirrings of air and magic settled, a fading coolness on the skin, a dying ember in the back of the mind, but the undeniable reality of the situation remained.

This, he could not fight.

Not now, at any rate....

Deliberately, then, he shifted back further, withdrawing step by step to the edge of the bed. Turning from the Dragons of Heaven, he sat down, setting his back to the headboard and stretching his legs casually out along the mattress. The cuts on his arm throbbed dully. Briefly it

occurred to him to create a maboroshi, to make it appear as though he had vanished in a storm of darkness and sakura petals, more for pride than out of any real expectation of escape, but he dismissed the idea at once.

Not a single person present would be fooled.

The Kamui stared at him for another moment, then, still without speaking, turned and stalked out of the room. With his departure the atmosphere lightened, as if a thunderhead had blown past, although it remained uneasy. The Dragons of Heaven began withdrawing toward the door as well, not quite in haste but certainly in retreat, and Seishirou thought that they might be nearly as disquieted by the Kamui's intervention as by the need for it. Isolated by the ward and by distance, he caught only a low murmur as they exchanged some tense words, broken by a still-unsettled laugh from the windmaster.

"Sorry, I didn't have a chance to tell anyone before I felt all the uproar and came running back. Kazuki-chan, you too—come on." The bioroid regarded Seishirou with impassive, animal curiosity for an instant more, then turned to join the other two out in the hallway.

Lowering his head slightly, a trace of a smile still lingering about his lips, Seishirou ignored them all, biding his time until the next opportunity presented itself—as indeed it surely would.

After all, there was more than one way to skin a cat.

* * * * *

"Hellooo, Sakurazuka-san!"

Blinking, Seishirou glanced up at the spritely figure that had just shouldered her way into the room, smiling perhaps a trifle too brightly. She held a tray balanced carefully on her fingertips and the heels of her palms; light bandages swathed both of her hands. A looming form filled the doorway behind her briefly before settling to lean against the doorframe—the soldier shot Seishirou a dark, guarded look before his gaze slid uneasily aside, his whole body language proclaiming restless tension, from the hands jammed into his pockets to the rigid set of his shoulders. Seishirou registered him in a mere flicker of awareness before returning the focus of his attention to the girl.

"Ah, Yuzuriha!" Carefully weighing just how much cheerfulness might be appropriate, he beamed faintly back at her. "Well, it's nice to see that you made it through in one piece."

"Mm, pretty much!" Her smile went ever so slightly crooked and rueful, more so than her apparently minor injuries ought to account for, and he wondered what he was missing. "You seem a lot better. I mean, than when we found you...um!" Brief panic darted across her face, anxiety and frantic evasiveness as she looked for some way to dance back from what she clearly thought was a sensitive subject, or all too likely to lead to one. He deliberately did not picture the scene. That fleeting tension softened at last into a subdued, rather melancholy regret. "I'm really sorry

about all of this.” The slight lift of her shoulders encompassed the ward, the room, the isolation of his own private prison.

“Not at all! I think it’s perfectly understandable not to let a suspicious character like me go wandering about Imonoyama-san’s house at will.” He couldn’t resist a somewhat pointed glance at the other erstwhile Dragon of Earth, but the man was steadfastly ignoring him, and the girl, distracted, seemed oblivious.

“How did you—oh, well, that’s true, it’s not like there’re so many possible mansions that we could be staying in!” She giggled and abruptly seemed to relax. “Speaking of, one of Imonoyama-san’s friends made lunch for us all, so we’ve brought some up for you. It’s really delicious!”

“Ah, that’s great!” Rising from the bed, Seishirou stretched, working out the kinks in his arms and back before slowly starting forward. His gaze scanned the ward as he drew nearer to it, and he allowed a look of puzzlement to creep over his face. “But...”

“Oh, that’s not a problem—the tray will go through just fine! Watch this!” Moving briskly to a sideboard that ran from her side of the ward to his, she set the tray down and slid it along the polished wood. It passed through the barrier without even a flicker of disturbance. “See?”

“Hmm!” As Seishirou came up to the sideboard, he smiled, an expression of almost fond admiration. “Kishuu-san is very clever, isn’t she?” he murmured.

Yuzuriha glowed as if she’d just been complimented herself. “Yup!”

Actually, he had already known about that property of the ward. A little judicious experimentation, carefully disguised, had swiftly shown that the barrier was keyed specifically to him. Objects would go through it without resistance.

Seishirou began examining the contents of the tray, and as he removed the lid of the soup bowl to inhale its fragrance—it did in fact smell extremely good—he somehow managed to knock against the chopsticks. They didn’t actually fall off the tray, but it looked as if they might, and as he grabbed awkwardly for them, he fumbled. The smooth lacquered lengths deflected off his fingertips to fall, spinning, and clatter onto the floor, one of them bouncing back through the ward. “Oops! How clumsy of me.”

“It’s fine! I’ve got it.” With the quickness of instinct, Yuzuriha crouched to pounce helpfully upon the dropped implement. By the door, the soldier stirred, a dawning of alarm.

“Missy, watch it—”

Of course, she was safely on her side of the barrier. And as she turned her head, giving the man a bewildered look, Seishirou lunged—

It’s one thing if I’m actually trying to get out of the ward. But for this, I don’t need to break through. All I need—

—is to push it, just a bit.

He struck on a sharp downward angle, fingers extended and pressed tightly together. Like the cut of a sword, charged with magic or mastery, keen enough to divert the wind.... Startled, Yuzuriha turned back, her wide eyes meeting his own suddenly intent and predatory gaze, the

bared teeth of his smile, as that protective wall rippled and bowed outward in one spot, just the length of a single chopstick.

As his hand closed around hers....

He yanked her effortlessly across the line of the ward. She cried out in pain or fright—he was already slinging her around, tossing her through the air to land on the bed, her slender limbs asprawl. “No!” There was stark anguish in the soldier’s roar as he started forward, raw energy igniting around his fists. Even as he moved, Seishirou was astride the girl, one hand wrenching her shoulder down against the mattress, the other one drawn back, gathering force for the fatal strike. “Bastard—*get off!*” Seishirou grinned blackly. As close as he was to the Dragon of Heaven, there was no way for the other man to use his hadouken or to cross that distance in time.

And after I’m done....

You can do what you like.

He pulled his hand back further, the movement reflected in the dark pupils of her eyes as she stared wildly up at him, her face twisted in terror—

—a cat—

—a lucky three-colored cat—

—blood against the snow-white fur—

He heard the almost-silent catch of breath, the soldier’s indrawn gasp of helplessness and horror. Then stillness, as if everything in the room had frozen. Only the ward buzzed, just beyond the edge of physical hearing. His hand had wavered, lowering just a little—he raised it and drew it back once more. His heart was beating rapidly again, his pulse throbbing in the cuts that his exertions had apparently reopened.

Why....

He stared down at the girl. He could feel the exquisite fragility of this moment and the tableau that the three of them made, of her body as it trembled underneath him, of the threads of life, so easily and simply severed.

—the flick of a single ofuda, hurled toward the sky—

There was nothing out of the ordinary about any of it. After all, there was no reason for him not to take the girl’s life. That he would put out the bright candle of that vivacious personality, that the people who knew her would be hurt and feel grief...really, she was exactly the same as anybody else.

Then why this oppressive, deadening weight, this ache that swallowed all intention, a resistance without reason, heavy and senseless?

It doesn’t matter.

For a third time, he went to collect himself for the killing blow. His arm quivered slightly but did not rise. Somehow, he realized numbly, he had already known that it would not. And as he yielded to that inevitability, strengthlessly lowering his hand the rest of the way, like a sleepwalker, the girl's gaze, still fixed on his face, softened. That fright shaded toward something like astonishment, like wonder touched with a kindling glimmer of sadness, of sympathy, and he quickly closed his eyes.

Nothing...

—mute suffering fading swiftly in a dimming green gaze—

—only emptiness, deathly and pure, and that vicious pain—

—this is the end of the world—

...matters.

It seemed like a little eternity, measured out in the gradually slowing dull thud of heartbeats, before the girl stirred. "K-Kusanagi-san...." Her voice quavered just a bit, then steadied. "Um...if you could go down to the kitchen and get another pair of chopsticks...since these ones fell on the floor...."

"*What!*" the soldier exploded, as if suddenly finding vent for the tension of the last few moments. Seishirou felt him jerk forward a step. "You gotta be *kidding* me—"

"Please!" There was no beseeching in the word, only an insistent urgency. It brought the man up short, like a dog on a chain, and Seishirou might have found that amusing if he were not, somewhere far beneath this strange hollow feeling, starting to be vaguely appalled by the whole situation. At last, with a wordless growl of frustration, the man retreated, backing step by step toward the door, as if unwilling to take his gaze from them. As he moved, Yuzuriha shifted, hitching backward and then drawing her legs very carefully out from under Seishirou. Instinctively Seishirou half-opened his eyes, but he kept them averted, catching only peripheral hints of motion as she sat up slowly and smoothed down her skirt. Across the room, the man hesitated, a long, exceedingly reluctant pause before he finally stepped outside, pulling the door nearly to behind himself—relief, then, of a strain that Seishirou had scarcely realized was gripping him. Relief, but not complete. Because the Dragon of Heaven was still watching him, silent and thoughtful, too close, and even if she hadn't been, to unclench that grasp upon himself, to give in and let those thoughts and memories come....

"You loved him," she said at last. Her voice was low and incisive.

Impossible.

"And...you never got to tell him that."

Ducking his head, Seishirou gritted his teeth. How could this...worse than any failure in his life, because failure, disappointment, brief and temporary reversal, none of them had ever brought such....

Yuzuriha leaned toward him, going up onto her knees. Very gently she slid her arms about his tensed shoulders.

“Even not knowing for sure, he was happy,” she whispered, close to his ear. “Because you saw what was special in him.”

I wonder, Seishirou-san....

Why is it that you never see me unless we fight?

“...you’re wrong,” Seishirou breathed. Shaking her head, she made a soft sound of denial; he could hear the hint of a smile in it, sorrowful and tender. The clasp of her embrace tightened subtly.

“He was only ever happy because of you.” She caught her breath, and he felt a tiny dampness like a raindrop on his skin, a slow, warm trickle down his neck. Her voice broke then, just a little. “He was...lucky.”

Lucky?

Seishirou’s shoulders jerked, in spite of himself, a hitch in his own breathing, a burning ache that had become stupidly familiar, a tightness that choked off all words. He shuddered again—he couldn’t stop that erratic, convulsive shaking.

The...irony....

And, as well, a bubble of clarity, startling, piercingly bright.

Of course, Subaru had always been a special person. Anyone who had ever crossed his path had known as much.

But that...wasn’t it, was it?

The kind of specialness that other people *don’t* see....

There were sounds out in the hallway, the priestess’s voice rising, sharp and anxious and questioning, and the soldier’s low, uneasy rumble in reply. The exchange continued on, but retreating now, leaving that instant, that fragile space unbreached—an argument, insignificant, he could ignore it—

Exhaling sharply, Seishirou bowed his head further and shut his eyes once more.

Subaru-kun.

It...hurts.

* * * * *

Eyes narrowed, Seishirou stared at the door, his fingers idly checking the fastening of the buttons on one cuff. Recognizing the procrastination for what it was, he dropped his arms. Moving decisively, then, if without any particular haste, he walked forward.

Across the line where the ward had been.

Frowning slightly, he approached the door and rested his hand lightly upon its knob, reading the current emptiness of the hallway outside. It was one of those odd situations where normalcy was stranger than any of its alternatives. It certainly didn't make any sense for the Dragons of Heaven and their allies to give someone like him free run of the mansion.

Although...could he truly say that he was still the Sakurazukamori?

And did Dragon of Heaven or Dragon of Earth really matter anymore?

The questions only intensified his feeling of unease. He thrust them to the back of his mind, concentrating instead on more concrete matters. After his...well, he didn't really want to think about that either, although he supposed that, as embarrassing as it might be in hindsight, the consequences of his little breakdown had at least been positive. At any rate, after he'd more or less recovered and Yuzuriha had left him to himself at last, he'd had an admittedly excellent lunch (once the replacement chopsticks were finally brought) and then, surprisingly exhausted, a short cat-nap. During that time there had apparently been some intense discussion elsewhere in the building, because afterward the shrine maiden had appeared in the company of one of the Imonoyama's associates. Tight lipped, she had unraveled the intricate spell that comprised the barrier and then retreated to lean against the wall next to the door, glowering, arms folded defensively, while the man had cleaned and bandaged the cuts on Seishirou's arm with cheerful, scrupulous care. Fresh clothes in his size had arrived from somewhere; he'd showered and changed (although it had taken him a moment or two to let go of the pants, slightly stiffened with dried bloodstains that the dark fabric hid so well...and what *had* become of his coat?); and now, apparently, he was being left to his own devices.

Which were...?

He probably ought to just take himself off somewhere. Leave this place and find a refuge where he could evaluate his situation, and then move forward with his life...but he wasn't quite sure what that life entailed at the moment, and the very existence of that uncertainty was like a leaden weight dragging at him. The world was suddenly full of unknowns that had to be filled in, studied, and dealt with—and in the absence of any clear and pressing direction, he supposed that he might as well start by investigating his immediate surroundings.

And the empty hallway wasn't going to get any emptier, no matter how long he stood there. With a snort of self-annoyance, he opened the door and stepped through. Of course, the corridor was no less palatial than his room had been: wide and high-ceilinged, with elaborate moldings, two even rows of formally framed paintings spaced out between the doorways, and a highly polished parquet floor guarded by an exquisitely tasteful carpet runner. It was a bit too ornately European for Seishirou's taste, but he had to admit that it was well put-together, somehow managing to radiate an air of exuberant, over-the-top wealth without sliding across the line into tackiness. The sound of voices pricked his attention, coming from a half-open door slightly down the hall, and after a moment's pause he began moving toward them, a slow drift that wasn't quite a prowl.

As he approached the doorway, those low murmurs resolved into intelligibility. “It’s nothing.” That male voice sounded tense and alert, rather at odds with the reassurance. “But I have to get back to work.” There was a sound of wood on wood, as of a chair abruptly sliding on the floor. “If you need anything, you know to call the staff line. Someone will come.”

“I’m all good!” Seishirou hadn’t recognized the first voice, but *that* one was entirely familiar: Kigai Yuuto. So yet another Dragon of Earth had survived. “Suoh-kun, it was great that you stopped by. Don’t be a stranger, all right?”

“Ah.” Footsteps followed immediately upon that monosyllabic reply, briskly approaching the door. And as the other man came through it, he turned his head—had already known that Seishirou was there, his gaze flicking to meet Seishirou’s directly, without a flinch of hesitation or surprise, an unwavering topaz glare that didn’t even try to mask its sudden hunter’s flame: *touch what I protect and die*.

Seishirou returned that look levelly, his mouth curving in a small, tight smile of acknowledgment and faint scorn.

As if there’s anything here that I care about...

The exchange took no more than a heartbeat, a not-quite pause before the man turned his back on Seishirou and strode purposefully off down the hallway. Seishirou watched the other go, noting the awareness that remained keenly alert to his presence despite that seeming shift of focus, the physical poise like a perfectly balanced weapon. So it *was* that Takamura family...Seishirou couldn’t say that he was surprised. Of course a member of the Imonoyama family would have protections. It would have been an interesting challenge, Seishirou thought idly, if he had ever been contracted against this particular target. A ninja could be quite formidable.

“Ah—Sakurazuka-san?” Yuuto’s voice, raised in surprise and question, carried from somewhere inside the room. Glancing in that direction, Seishirou saw him sitting up on the bed, leaning far over to get an angle of view out through the door. “So you’re up and about. That’s great!”

“Mm.” He supposed he should probably talk to Yuuto. Wandering into the room, he scanned it briefly. It was essentially a match for the one he’d just left, although done in shades of blue rather than the buff and gold of his own room. Winter sunlight spilled in through the tall windows, pale and translucent. A TV played on one wall—a soccer match, turned down to near inaudibility. On the nightstand next to the bed stood a tea set, a small pile of books, a vase holding a cheerful small bunch of flowers (which Seishirou rather doubted the ninja had brought), the TV remote, and a phone, so Yuuto appeared quite well situated. Fortunately it was a large nightstand. Seishirou wondered if they might add a TV and phone to his room as well, now that the ward had been taken down.

That assumed that he was staying, of course....

Yuuto had straightened up and was beaming at him in the slightly awkward silence. “So...this is all kind of unexpected, isn’t it,” the man said at last.

“Indeed it is,” Seishirou replied, smoothly and with just a touch of dryness. Yuuto was wearing a robe over a pair of rather loose pajamas that nevertheless didn’t quite hide the splints on both legs. Seishirou eyed them speculatively. “Do you expect to be down for long?”

“Well, Kishuu-san did her best, so it’s definitely a lot better than it could be. The splints are just until the healed breaks get a bit stronger. As for the rest...we’ll see. They say I should be able to walk again, though.” Eyes bright with a searching curiosity, and perhaps a glimmer of wariness, Yuuto watched as Seishirou gave up hovering by the bedside and slid into the chair that Takamura must have vacated. “Looks like you came through in pretty good shape,” the man remarked. “At least somebody managed not to get kicked around by the other side. Ha ha ha!”

“Heh.” Yuuto’s aggressive cheeriness was threatening to give Seishirou a headache. But the implication that the shrine maiden had some sort of healing ability was potentially useful information. As for himself...he knew that he’d been perilously close to the verge of death, not from any physical injuries but from the raw strain of magical overuse and backlash, not even to mention...all the rest of it. However he had managed to come back from that, any scars that might remain were not marks someone like Yuuto would ever be able to see. “What about the others?” he asked.

“Ah, right. So I know that you’ve already seen Nataku—I mean, Kazuki-chan. She was in here for a little chat after all the fuss this morning, you see.” The man’s explanation was tinged with self-satisfaction at his own knowledge, limited though it might be, coupled with an inquisitiveness that clearly hoped for more details. Feeling disinclined to share at that moment, Seishirou said nothing, and Yuuto went on at last, “She’s a bit banged up but mostly okay. And Shiyuu-san bailed before things even got started, so *he’s* fine. I guess he was the most cunning of all of us, ahahaha! But you can’t really blame him, can you. A cute girl like that...”

It rather galled Seishirou that he was reduced to prying gossip out of Yuuto. Folding his arms across his chest, he smiled tautly as he waited for the man to get around to telling him something about the people that he didn’t already know about.

“Satsuki-chan...pretty much for sure she didn’t make it. Ground zero of divine wrath, after all. Heh.” For an instant the man’s mouth twisted, his smile going wry. “The edge of that is what caught me, y’see. They tell me...that there’s really nothing left there.

“We don’t really know about Kanoe,” he went on more rapidly, “but the Diet Building fell too, so the Dreaming Princess must be gone, and if Kanoe wasn’t at the Government Building then she likely would’ve been there, so either way it’s the same. Kasumi-san, and Kakyuu-san too, and that boy from Osaka, all gone....” Hesitating in his ticking off of the dead, he looked sidelong at Seishirou. “And you’ve seen Kamui....”

Seishirou made another short sound of affirmation. Now there was a mystery that could do with some light. He had been reflecting upon it off and on, turning the memory of that brief

encounter over in his mind, and although he had his suspicions he still wasn't entirely sure if that young man had been one Kamui or the other...or, in some bizarre mystical fusion, *both*. He would have welcomed other insights, even idle speculations, but Yuuto seemed to have lost interest in the subject already and was instead gazing off into space, his expression distracted and vaguely unquiet.

"Karma is a funny thing, isn't it," Yuuto murmured. "Or should I really call it fate...why one person lives and another doesn't. I always thought that human beings would never know the answer to questions like that, that it would never make sense to us anyway, so why worry about it?" Ducking his head, he shrugged, smiling faintly. "I guess I'm too small-minded, because I still can't get my head around it. But anyway, somehow or other I managed to skate by. Not that I'm complaining!" Yuuto laughed again, waving with airy carelessness, as if to brush aside any lingering traces of mortality. "I'm happy enough to be alive. But I suppose in the end it doesn't really matter what kind of person you are, or how you live your life." Leaning forward, he propped his chin on his hand and regarded Seishirou with an air of quizzical attentiveness. "So, how was it out where you were?"

Seishirou regarded the other Dragon of Earth. "Well," he said at last, "part of it went something like this." Leaning forward, he reached out, and Yuuto's eyes went wide.

Somehow his scream wasn't nearly as satisfying as Seishirou had hoped it would be.

* * * * *

"Sakurazuka-san," Arashi said, with what she considered to be truly remarkable patience and calm restraint, "*why* did you break Kigai-san's arm?"

The man blinked down at her, falsely ingenuous and infuriating. "It seemed like a good idea at the time?" he offered. He slid the book he was holding back into its place on the shelf. Behind him dust motes shimmered in the narrow ribbon of sunlight that fell in a steep angle between the half-open curtains of the library's windows.

With an effort, Arashi bit back an inarticulate *ooh!* of irritation. Instead she replied stiffly, "Well, in the future I wish you wouldn't. It's already been a lot of work to put him back together, even without you mangling him."

"So sorry." The man's tone held not the slightest hint of any such regret. As she glowered at him, his smile sharpened and intensified, that bland, genial mask fraying to reveal a more accustomed darkness—an unsettling echo of the smile with which he'd faced them from the far side of her magical barrier, the frightening inhumanity as he'd turned the taint of blood magic against their spells, seemingly oblivious to any pain or personal danger. "But then, since you seem to have made it your mission to salvage Dragons of Earth, you took on that work for yourself." His voice dropped, not exactly threatening but with a chill of subtle menace in its disinterest as he added, "It's got nothing to do with me."

Arashi bristled. It was hardly a mission—more like the gathering of flotsam as they'd all washed up together, confused, injured, heartsick, and trying desperately to figure out what had happened and who among the missing might still be alive. She'd had no more to do with it than anyone else, although of course she'd done her part. And never mind the fact that they had salvaged *him* too, which Arashi was increasingly convinced had been a terrible idea. She'd had a bad feeling from the very first instant of spotting him, unconscious and seemingly fading fast, on the rain-wet ground in Ueno Park; his behavior ever since then had only confirmed her dread, and if it had been up to her they certainly wouldn't have let him out to wander the mansion at will. She had surprisingly little difficulty dealing with the rest of the surviving Dragons of Earth—they at least seemed to appreciate the existence of this raw, awkward, delicate truce and to be making good-faith efforts not to disturb the peace. The Sakurazukamori, though....

To him it all seemed to be a joke at best, a cruel and labyrinthine game at worst. Those smiles, and behind them the sly, black heartlessness of a killer that might emerge and commit atrocities at any moment...it was like walking around inside a horror movie, knowing beyond any doubt that the fatal shock was coming but not exactly when. She was afraid, and she hated that fear, hated as well powerlessness from which it grew, not merely the loss of the god's strength, which might have protected herself and the people around her, but the fact that nothing *touched* him, that he could not be made to feel gratitude or compunction or even simple respect for the suffering of others.

He had no *right* to be so unaffected. And he certainly had no right to be free. Even the other Dragons of Earth had been uneasy at the prospect. It was her own allies who had insisted on giving him the benefit of the doubt, to her appalled dismay.

You can't keep him locked up as if he's a monster! Yuzuriha had cried. *Even if he is a monster...it's not that simple.*

And their host had only spread his hands in helpless futility. *Even if we could hold him here, Kishuu-san—for how long? And ultimately, what would we do with him? Turn him over to the regular police? To the judicial system? I'm sure you can imagine how that would turn out. Vigilante justice?* Those blue eyes had held hers, level and direct, their gaze abruptly, starkly sober. *I think the moment for that has passed. For who he is, for what he's done, there's really only one true authority. And the only ones who could judge him properly are—*

The Sumeragi clan, who from time immemorial had been tasked with governing the practice of onmyoujitsu.

The pain was like the wrench of desperate hunger, like the dizzying gush of blood from an unexpectedly deep wound—it made her knees go weak and her heart cramp up as if compressed by brutal steel fingers. Jerking her gaze aside, she stared down at the inlaid wood floor, masking her flinch behind a tight frown. She would not let the Sakurazukamori see how profoundly he had hurt her—had hurt them all—with that particular act of murder.

But neither would she let him get away without at least calling him out for it. Resolve found sudden focus within her, the calm certainty of action, pure and fragile amidst that fear.

“There wasn’t any body.” Her voice held steady as she spoke, each word low and precise.

“What?”

“We know that Subaru-san went to face you.” Did he dare try to pretend innocence or even ignorance of Subaru’s fate? Furious, she raised her eyes back to meet his, her tenuous control already slipping in the heat of indignation. “Do you think that we don’t realize—”

She broke off. The Sakurazukamori wasn’t even looking at her. Instead he stared off to one side as if focusing on some indeterminate distance, his gaze abstracted, blank, almost bewildered.

“Subaru-kun was—his body was there. I’m certain of it,” he murmured. “How—” His eyes flicked back to her—an instant’s pause, and then that smile swept back across his face, a taut slash of a grin this time, predatory and intense.

“What exactly are you trying to say, Kishuu-san? Is there something that you want to blame me for?” His voice had gone silken soft, belying the sudden deadly intentness of his expression. “I’ll save you the effort of dancing around the subject, shall I? *I killed Subaru-kun.*” Each word seemed to shake the air, an explosion of darkness that dimmed the sun, and even though she had already known it, his confirmation was like feeling that vicious shock afresh. Leaning against the bookshelf, he nodded shortly, folding his arms over his chest. “There—I think that was simple enough. So now what, Kishuu-san? Now that you have my confession, do you plan to punish me for it?” Uncrossing his arms once more, he pushed off and took a step toward her, and then another, a steady, remorseless advance. “Are you here to challenge me...for his sake?”

And it occurred to her, tilting her head back to stare up at him as he drew nearer, that it was a very stupid position to have put herself in, alone with the Sakurazukamori, whose greater size and physical strength all by themselves were enough to make him a mortal danger to her. But it was the fleeting glint of a thought, acknowledged with a tremor of anxiety and then let go. Not the all-too-deliberate threat that was important, but the undercurrents behind it—like reading the will and focus of an opponent in a sword match, the minute faltering followed by an immediate aggressive attack, and her mind flashed back to before—

He’s strong, she had whispered, hugging her arms about herself as she slumped against a wall in the hallway’s safe refuge, a brief shiver of reaction in the wake of that short, violent struggle. And Seiichirou, his face grave and disquieted, had murmured in reply:

It’s a dangerous kind of strength...the strength of a man who doesn’t care whether he lives or dies. His hand had clasped her shoulder, a light pressure, both reassurance and warning. *Be careful, Kishuu-san.*

Her attention snapped back to the Sakurazukamori’s face, and her mouth firmed in understanding and obstinate determination. “No,” she said. “I won’t be a party to your death wish.” He started, only the merest bit, but that smile faded into a look of surprise. The fact that

she might, after all, have scored a hit gave her no satisfaction. Turning from him once more, she added bitterly, “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. I don’t have that kind of power anymore.”

He drew in a breath. Then his hand closed about her chin, dragging her back around and tipping her face upward. Startled, she tried to pull away, but those unrelenting fingers held her fast, their grip bruisingly tight. His other hand caught *her* hand—the brush of his thumb across the flat, nearly healed scar that crossed her palm, the jolt of psychic contact as his eyes bored into hers, probing, searching for the hint of otherworldly energy. Setting her jaw, she glared back at him, ignoring the pounding of her heart, the sting of recollected loss, the shame and fear—but she had no reason for shame, or none that he would be able to see. She refused to flinch from this violation, from his unnerving, too-sudden closeness—no yielding and no retreat.

And if he killed her...*I*se would judge him then.

She would have won that much, at least.

Slowly he let out that held breath. His fingers slackened, and she jerked away from them, took a sharp step backward as he straightened. Outrage boiled within her, but before she could find any words for it he glanced away, his face expressionless now except for a faint frown.

“I wonder,” he murmured, “whether there’s anyplace around here where someone can go out for coffee.”

* * * * *

Arashi regarded the Sakurazukamori from behind her tea cup, lashes half lowered, veiling her gaze. The Duklyon Cafe was extremely quiet, with most of the students at home for winter break, but as far as she was concerned that was all to the good—there was less chance of collateral damage that way. She wasn’t sure why she was even there herself, or whether she *should* be there, and the Sakurazukamori quite possibly wasn’t sure either, but at any rate he hadn’t objected. To her obvious bafflement as he’d begun accosting the mansion staff in search of a coat, he had explained, rather gently despite the note of irony in his voice, that going out for coffee meant *going out*, and as she had continued to drift somewhat irresolutely in his wake he had only hesitated, a thoughtful look briefly passing across his face, as though he might be thinking of saying something, and then he had shrugged and more or less ignored her. So she had accompanied him, as if that had been her intention all along.

This could just be an excuse and he might actually be planning to leave the campus, in which case she’d see him off to make certain that he *did* leave. And if he meant to cause trouble instead...well, she wasn’t utterly defenseless. Even without the god’s power, she had a few tricks, and she could at least try to protect people or summon help.

At the moment, though, he didn’t seem to be planning anything at all. Arashi set her cup down at last, a scarcely audible clink of china. They did make a very good milk tea here, even if it wasn’t a patch on Ijyuuin Akira’s. Camouflage dropped, she studied the Sakurazukamori more

directly. She had to admit that he *was* a good-looking man, despite—or perhaps because of—his current rather inscrutable lack of expression. Without animation, his strong, even features were like some sculptor's template, attractive yet utterly neutral, capable of becoming anything that the artist might imagine, of receiving any projection that the viewer wanted to see. The potential for cruelty was certainly there; perhaps its opposite was as well. His profile was turned to her as he stared out the window at the empty patio, a barely touched cup of coffee sitting before him, but she was quite sure that he was aware of her close scrutiny. A cigarette smoldered between his fingers; he raised it to his lips, took a long draw upon it, then, with a faint, wry smile, murmured upon the exhale, "Death wish, hmm?"

"Is it?" she asked quietly.

He had closed his eyes; he opened them again, stared narrowly out through the glass. "I don't know."

Sakurazuka and Sumeragi. What *was* one without the other? Even if nothing else.... She felt a twinge of unease, a direction that something in her was reluctant to pursue, but she controlled it and went on, just a bit tentatively, "He was...important to you."

"Well, people keep saying things like that, so I guess it must be true." He looked at her for the first time since they'd arrived, smiled brightly, almost sweetly. The smile was entirely false, and yet...there had been that instant's faltering, it had *bothered* him that something might have happened to Subaru's body, when nothing else had been able to penetrate that wall of hard, sardonic, uncaring malice, and she thought that he wouldn't be smiling like this if there wasn't something to cover, the slick sheen of a pearl to smooth the uncomfortable grit.

"Do you hate him?" That hadn't been what she had meant to say. She didn't know what she had meant to say. Her tongue suddenly seemed frozen to the roof of her mouth; with an effort she unstuck it enough to get out, "Because he died?"

The Sakurazukamori was staring at her, his eyes a little wide, surprised, before they veiled themselves again—an inward-focused, almost speculative look. Leaving the cigarette in the ashtray, he leaned both elbows on the table, clasped his hands and bent his head, his mouth coming to rest against his interlocked fingers. His brows drew together, a nearly imperceptible frown as he gazed down at the table.

"Hate," he said at last, very softly, the words half muffled by his hands. "Yes. Perhaps this is hate. As well as...." He blew out a breath, a faint tremor that might have been a laugh.

Love? Was it even possible? And what did it mean, to love and to...to.... Her eyes burned, and her throat had somehow closed up, so that when she forced herself to speak the word broke from her abruptly, high and sharp and querulous, almost a cry. "How...?"

The Sakurazukamori lifted his head; he regarded her, first with the lingering trace of that surprise and reflection, before his expression shifted, softening into something that she could scarcely credit as gentleness.

"Kishuu-san...am I really the one you can't forgive?"

She stared at him—only a heartbeat before the tears came, blinding her, a hot, sudden flood surging up and pouring unchecked down her face. Raising her hands to cover her eyes, she hunched in upon herself, her shoulders tensing. All was silence—he said nothing to her grief, and she suppressed the sobs ruthlessly, strangled them into nothing more than harsh, mute breaths. After a minute or two, she got some measure of control over herself and sat up brusquely.

“Sorata-san...I killed him. I killed him myself.” She dragged the side of her hand across one eye, then the other, scraping that wetness away, then inhaled against the resistance in her chest, a tight, choking shudder. She turned to stare blankly out the window herself, avoiding the Sakurazukamori’s gaze. “I have no right to judge you,” she whispered.

“Oh, you’re wrong, Kishuu-san. People make judgments all the time, even if it’s for no good reason. ‘I’d prefer it if things turned out like this.’ ‘Oh, that person must be a bad person.’” She glanced sidelong at him in spite of herself, and he grinned, a touch sly. “‘This brand of chocolate is definitely the best.’ Maybe they’re right and maybe they’re wrong, but that’s how people live, making judgments and choices, even based on the smallest, most subjective differences.” He hesitated, a fleeting shadow crossing his expression. “Nothing...is the same as anything else.

“Anyhow,” he went on after a moment, “your circumstances and mine are almost certainly very different, but in any case it’s only natural that you would judge me. Whether you have a right to or not has nothing to do with it; that’s just the way things are.” Leaning back in his seat, he smiled at her, an amused and knowing expression, with only the least flicker of a dangerous edge. “And after all, haven’t you already judged yourself?”

Ridiculous to seek validation or forgiveness from the Sakurazukamori, yet she found herself saying, in an almost embarrassingly tremulous voice, “D-do you think that it makes any difference...if it was what he wanted?”

“Was it?” His reply was low, his voice gone suddenly neutral and inflectionless, and her heart quailed in spite of herself.

“I don’t know! I thought so then, but,” what if she had mistaken what he was trying to say, what if, in the flash of panic and anguish and instinct, she had killed him only so that he would die by her hand and not Satsuki’s, “what if I was wrong?”

“Then you did the best that you knew at the time.” His shoulders lifted in a slight yet eloquent shrug. “There’s no reason to blame yourself for that.”

He did compassion rather well, for a monster. And whether it was all lies or not, she somehow found that clenched knot inside herself loosening—an abrupt lightening, a cleanness that expanded outward like the unloosing of a magic circle, the work completed, the purification of time and space being breathed out into the ordinary world and ever so subtly infusing it. She closed her eyes for an instant, just to feel that release. Then, looking soberly at the man, she tentatively proffered her next question, like an offering.

“And Subaru-san...?”

He blinked, started to glance out the window again—stopped himself and reached for his coffee cup instead, half lifted it, and then paused, staring for a long time into the cooling dark liquid. Slowly he replaced the cup on its saucer. When he broke the silence at last, his voice remained quiet, but there was a hint of tension to it, for all that he spoke with apparently breezy matter of factness.

“What you need to understand, Kishuu-san, is that Subaru-kun and I never really spoke the same language. For all that one or the other of us always thought that we were communicating, it was never truly so. *Love. Hate. Betrayal. Loss.* Concepts that simply don’t translate.” He hesitated, then went on, almost as if reluctant, “I said ‘never,’ but I think that after a long time and a great deal of struggle and pain, Subaru did in fact come to learn my language—or perhaps merely the limitations of it. Enough, in the end, to figure out how to teach me a little of his. To be the bridge between two worlds...as a medium, and as a person too, that...was always his gift.” His face tightened, a furrowing between drawn brows, a barely perceptible compression of his lips—he did look away then, into the world outside the glass, with a remote, half-lidded gaze that suggested he wasn’t really seeing it.

“He knew...from very early on, I think...that it would end this way.” The words were measured and toneless. “And he accepted that ending—no, he embraced it, and used it, regardless of the cost to himself, and ultimately he transformed it.” He let out a long, low breath, as if exhaling a nonexistent smoke. “Isn’t it remarkable to think that somebody would persevere like that,” he added very softly. “And for what?”

Of course, I’ve picked you.

But we’ve just met, and we haven’t spoken much at all, and how can you....

Who am I, that you should die for me?

And as the familiar pang of that thought began to ease, but before she had found any words for it, any way to frame that aching hollowness or the silvery-sweetness that she’d unexpectedly found hidden at its heart, Sakurazuka remarked, almost casually, with the air of someone changing the subject, “You knew that he was gone and not just missing. Even though there wasn’t any body.”

“Kamui did,” she murmured, distracted.

“Ah. That one.” Shifting his seat, the man stretched, catlike, and then went on conversationally, “So the battle for the world is over. Kishuu-san, does that mean you’ll be going back to Ise?”

“No.” He tilted his head, as if quizzical. She hadn’t even considered the matter before he’d asked, but as she spoke she felt the deep-rootedness of that conviction, instinctive and unshakable. She groped for a way to articulate it. “I...I’m not that person anymore. It’s not that they wouldn’t welcome me, even without the god’s power. But I would feel its absence there, more

than anywhere else. I would feel...the loss of that identity. Of that self.” And a kind of loneliness, too, in being so far from the place where she had finally, truly felt that there might be real meaning to her existence, not just for the sake of her mother or for her role in the final battle but for herself. Where she had been special to someone just because...she was. “I’ve been a priestess for most of my life, so I don’t know yet what I’m doing to do.” It was her turn to gaze musingly out the window, into the wintry blue sky, pale and remote above the fairy-tale rooflines of the CLAMP school’s somewhat whimsical shopping district. “But...I’ve decided.”

“Decided?”

“I hate death.” And she smiled then, because in truth it wasn’t about death at all but death’s opposite: that pure and blazingly brilliant moment of resolution, of surging impulse, of having real reasons to fight to survive. “So somehow...I’m going to live.”

* * * * *

Death....

Frowning slightly, Seishirou rested his ungloved hand upon the gray bark of the sakura tree.

Had he actually been trying to die? Or, more accurately, trying to get himself killed?

He would have said it was inconceivable, a kind of surrender or failing that somebody like him would never succumb to. Other people did such foolish, pointless, despairing things, and he had never really understood why. He couldn’t say that he understood it even now, but neither could he deny the trend that his actions had taken, the edgy restlessness, the acute relief in the face of conflict and risk, the disappointment when the moment had passed and the status quo returned. *Death wish*, the priestess had named it, and now that it had been labeled so precisely he could not pretend that there had been any other justification for his behavior.

Even if Yuuto *had* been rather provokingly annoying....

But still, would he have found the other Dragon of Earth quite so irritating if he himself hadn’t been off kilter? In hindsight, his lapse in self-control and rational judgment was embarrassingly obvious. It was nothing short of ludicrous that he had gone out of his way to antagonize, well, *everyone*, when playing a more sympathetic role and earning their trust would have been a surer, smoother route to freedom.

And it bothered him, not only that he’d been acting so recklessly on such a senseless, self-destructive impulse, but that he hadn’t even realized it until it was pointed out to him. He was accustomed to using people’s perceptions of him as mirrors, as a way to check and adjust the mask of pleasant, smiling normalcy. He was not used to having them reflect his real self, and particularly not aspects of that self that he wasn’t aware of.

Only Subaru had ever....

His mouth tightening, he looked up, into the patternless crossing and recrossing of bare twigs, dark against the pale gray, shifting clouds. The branches stirred, disturbed by one of the occasional gusts of wind, and he watched them fixedly until stillness returned.

Surely this was the place.

Then why....

“With the spell, Tokyo’s protection is tied into the sakura trees.” Firelight played across the soldier’s features, a stark contrast of warm orange glow and deep shadow. “So I guess it means that as long as there’s any cherry tree left in Tokyo, the kekkai of the city will never fall.” Leaning forward, he stirred at the fire; a brief shower of sparks sprang up, and as they subsided he laid another log in the grate, then sat back once more. “I think it’s better that way,” he went on reflectively. “It’s not just a set of structures that human beings have imposed on top of nature, something totally manmade and artificial. It’s something that has its own life, its own connection to the world, where there’s the possibility of an exchange or a relationship. Maybe...you could even say a partnership, someday.” Turning, he looked up at Seishirou, his expression still guarded and far from trusting, but more relaxed now, possibly resigned. With a shrug and the glint of an ironic grin, he added, “And if people are dumb enough to mess things up so badly that all the cherry trees die off, they’ll have brought the end upon themselves. So ultimately their fate lies in their own hands. I think that’s about as fair as one can ask for.”

“Ah.” Seishirou glanced at the cheerfully burning fire and raised his eyebrows. “So in that case, is this okay?”

Yuzuriha bounced up from wherever she’d briefly taken herself off to; planting both hands on Kusanagi’s shoulder, she leaned forward over him, kicking one heel up with a superabundance of youthful energy. “They’re special logs made from recycled coffee grounds,” she announced brightly. “They release fourteen percent less CO₂ and a lot less particulates!”

“They’re not perfect,” Kusanagi said. “But they’re a start.” Reaching up, he closed his hand very gently over one of Yuzuriha’s. She slid her other arm around his neck, the gesture equally tender, bent closer to him until her chin rested on top of his head. The man started a little, then settled with awkward, somewhat self-conscious pleasure into that embrace, and Seishirou had to admit that they made a cute if unlikely couple. “People aren’t perfect either,” the man murmured. “But somehow...maybe the human race will find another way.”

“A secret battle where hardly anybody knows what’s going on or what’s at stake, and people never get any chance to make things right?” Yuzuriha’s tone was faintly indignant, but she was smiling, her eyes dancing with happiness as much as with the leaping flicker of the flames. “We can definitely do a lot better than that!”

Blinking, Seishirou refocused on the broad trunk before him. This was the place where the spell had been cast, where he had pieced together fragmented remnants of power into an

improbable sympathetic magic. He could scarcely remember what he had done, let alone credit that it had worked, but apparently it had indeed succeeded, beyond any reasonable expectation. He was sure that he couldn't be mistaken about the location, as familiar to him as any place that he had ever called home, in Tokyo or elsewhere—he recognized the angle of the hillside's slope, the curve of the winding path at its foot, the silhouette of the grove against the sky, but....

Why was the ground unbroken, when he clearly recalled how it had been scarred and torn, the earth itself upheaved by their conflict? The flattened, winter-dead grasses lay undisturbed; there was no sign of the charred tangles of tree roots and branches. And the barrow tree itself....

Seishirou's gaze roved from the spreading, upswept branches to the gnarled roots that dug deep into the soil. He remembered every curve and fissure of the sakura's trunk, every distinctive crook of its limbs—as he had to, having recreated it so often in illusion. And he remembered just as well the jagged ruin of a stump, the splintered bole and broken, scattered boughs.

Yet the sakura stood before him, entirely undamaged.

And it registered no more to his magical awareness than any other tree.

No....

No, there *was* something there, but he couldn't grasp it, couldn't define it. Like trying to touch the moon in a pool of water, only to discover that the pool itself was a mirage and did not exist....

Did the ritual knife of the Sumeragi clan remain at the tree's core, where he had set it during that working, its presence an echo of foreign sorcery sealed within the wood?

Or....

Seishirou swallowed reflexively, his throat tight, his mouth oddly and unexpectedly dry. The wind picked up, rattling the branches, whipping suddenly at his hair and the hem of his coat. "Subaru-kun—" His voice sounded strangely lost and out of place, vanishing amidst the other, nonhuman sounds of the grove; he hesitated, then went on, silently this time.

Subaru-kun...are you here?

The branches danced, purposeless and erratic. He watched them nevertheless, as intently as he had ever watched the least movements of an enemy or a target, scarcely noticing the air's chill against his exposed skin. The wind dropped eventually, fading to insignificance, the grove grew still once more, and neither the movement nor the stillness held any meaning whatsoever.

Seishirou leaned forward abruptly, pressing his palm harder against the bark, as if it might be possible to push into it, to reach through it and touch whatever it concealed.

"Subaru-kun—"

He broke off again. Stepping back once more, he stared blankly at the tree. Another moment of emptiness, of that all-too-persistent nothing, before he recognized within himself the surge of inner heat, the recoil of a bitter, burning tension that had once been an extraordinary novelty and had lately become almost commonplace.

Do you hate him? Arashi had asked, and Seishirou tilted his head back, closed his eyes and clenched his hands into fists, awash in a fierce confusion, a storm of churning, contradictory impulses.

Hate. And love. And thus, despair. He could trace the outlines of the two opposites and the place where they met, now—whether it was exactly like what other people experienced or not, it was close enough for him to understand it. To understand, but not to free himself from the grip of that unyielding paradox, and he found himself wondering, almost plaintively, *Subaru-kun...is this your revenge?*

No. No, not revenge, although it might have been a kind of return, like the unbreakable law of sakanagi that governed every magical action. Perhaps, after all, his bet had been a kind of spell, and everything that had come afterward, from that very first moment when he had bound himself and Subaru together, had been a means of working out the intricate mechanics of its reflection, of balancing that complex, far-ranging equation of encounter and desire and need.

Be careful...what you ask for.

The spasm passed, sooner than he might have expected; in its wake, he felt a deep, inexplicable weariness, and yet, at the same time, there was a new sense of calm that was almost like release: a remote, faintly rueful tranquility. He opened his eyes, his gaze half focused; brown and gray, wind-swept and raw in the aftermath of rain, the park stretched away on all sides, blurring into vagueness at the limits of his perception. Purified, and no longer his...whatever the sakura might be now, its heart was closed to him—that much was more than obvious. And although the future had been transformed and fate and destiny had rewritten themselves, certain facts of reality remained implacable.

People still did not come back, either from the other world or from the cherry tree barrow.

Aaah...death and change are pitiless, aren't they.

His mouth curving up into a slight smile, Seishirou uncurled his stiffened, icy fingers, then slipped his bare hand into the pocket of his coat. As warmth slowly returned to it, he contemplated once more the extent of what he had lost. Love—that before everything, as piece by piece he continued to discover a whole world of missing Subaru and all that Subaru had been—and legacy as well, the familiar, arcane, death-charged presence of the sakura tree, the traditions and work of being the Sakurazukamori. There was nothing to stop him from continuing on as an assassin, of course, but without all the rest would it have any meaning, or would it be just a hollow imitation of the past, like a ghost mindlessly repeating what it had known in life? And yet, if not that...then who was he? It was rather daunting to look ahead and see only a vast unknown, where once there had been the steady assurance of deep-rooted power and an unshakable self-identity, and that, too, was a loss, one that seemed to take the last of the ground out from under his feet, so that despite his somewhat dreamlike detachment he wondered fleetingly how it could even be possible to go on.

But then, those girls....

Arashi had also lost somebody important to her, and the power of a kami on top of that; and Yuzuriha, too—realizing it later, he could have kicked himself for not even noticing, that first morning, the absence of her spirit companion.

And if they could somehow find a way to move forward with their lives, then *he* certainly wasn't about to lie down and just give up.

Seishirou let out a long, low breath, its warmth forming a subtle mist that swiftly faded. Drawing his hand out of his pocket, he slowly pulled on his glove, idly watching the stretch and give of the black leather as his fingers flexed.

Probably the area's restoration was a side effect of the seal-spell, something to do with the way it had been anchored into the trees. Probably anything otherworldly that he might be sensing was connected to that healing, and maybe also to the spell itself.

Probably.

Straightening, Seishirou lifted his head and gazed up at the sakura once more. After a minute or so, his lips quirked—another smile, only a trifle wry.

"Well," he murmured at last. "Later, then."

Turning, he moved off, walking with deliberate purpose toward the path that would lead him out of the park, back toward the subway station and the train that would eventually return him to the campus of the CLAMP School. He was going to have to give some thought to his future living arrangements, he realized; the Imonoyama mansion made a luxurious vacation get-away, but there was a limit as to how long he could reasonably impose upon that hospitality. Besides which, no matter how entertaining it might be to aggravate the Imonoyama's ninja, he really needed to concentrate on getting his own affairs in order.

Before anything else, though, there was still a loose end or two that he ought to follow up on.

* * * * *

"It really is the best view, isn't it?" With that comment to announce his presence, Seishirou vaulted from the last of the crossing girders up onto the highest point of the television broadcasting array that crowned Tokyo Tower's second observation deck. His coat flared about him as he moved, a note of visual drama that also served to disguise a subtle magical gesture, one meant to divert the greatest part of wind's force around the spot where he'd be standing, because spectacular view or not, the exposure at this height was exceedingly cold. Sitting hunched up on a railing, his arms locked about one bent knee, the Kamui turned his head minutely to glower at Seishirou, a blackly forbidding look that made Seishirou suspect he'd been wise not to try any kind of surprise approach. Threat weighed the air like a storm, and with it a distinctive aura of power, a double shadow looming against the sky, further darkening the already deepening winter twilight that surrounded them both. Seishirou grinned with deliberate cheerfulness, refusing to be put off. "Say, I like the wings. Another pair, and you could be a seraph."

The Kamui regarded him for another moment, almost as if incredulous, then, with a low snort of annoyance, turned to scowl out over the city. “What do you want?”

“Honestly, I’m curious,” Seishirou admitted. He had his suspicions, but both that psychic emanation and the physical appearance were just different enough that he couldn’t be absolutely certain. Nobody else appeared to be questioning this—they all seemed to have jumped to the same conclusion, and while in essence they were probably right, he had a feeling the truth wasn’t quite so simple as they assumed. He’d decided to come right out and ask. “Which one are you?”

There was a moment’s pause, as if his directness had been a shock, possibly an affront, before the other spoke, his voice a dull, unforthcoming murmur. “I’m Kamui.” Seeming to realize that there was still some potential for confusion, he hesitated, then added, bowing his head on the scarcely audible words, “...I’m not Fuuma.”

“Ah.” Seishirou nodded thoughtfully to himself, pieces clicking into place with that confirmation of what he’d already suspected. “Because your mother was a member of the Magami family, you had that power too, to take another person’s fate upon yourself. Am I right?”

“How does *everyone* know about my mother’s family?” The querulous mutter was purely Kamui, and Seishirou laughed, earning himself another sidelong look.

“And then, with the fate of two Kamuis in the same person,” Seishirou went on, “it’s not quite the same thing as a kage-nie and his or her patron, is it? Since your powers and your destinies were both equally matched...”

“One of us had to win,” Kamui broke in, low and abrupt, “and one of us had to die. Which one...I don’t know if that was decided or not. But I...I think maybe I was meant to survive. The way things happened...” He trailed off, and when he spoke again the words were soft, almost lost in the wind as he huddled further in upon himself, hugging that bent knee more tightly to his chest. “I couldn’t do anything about it.”

“So you died *and* lived.” And that without any of the special techniques of a professional kage-nie, so far as Seishirou could tell. The raw power and driving imperative such a feat would have required was faintly staggering...but then, this *was* Kamui. Ducking his head on a wry smile, Seishirou shrugged. “Well, at least you’re taller.”

Kamui twitched. Before he could regain his balance and decide that this conversation wasn’t worth continuing, Seishirou added smoothly, “And the other one...?”

Kamui hesitated for a long moment. Then, very slowly, as if reluctant and yet compelled in spite of himself, he unclasped one arm and pointed outward across the city. A sudden jolt of displaced perception, a disorienting visual rush as some inexorable force seized Seishirou’s other sight and dragged it along, snatching it right out of himself—a dizzying flight that narrowed in on a distant location with hurtling speed, a flash of tall buildings passing, the steadily diminishing expanses of a ward, a neighborhood, a single street. Like a compass needle flicking to rest, the circle of vision settled about a lone figure walking uphill, past the front steps of a line of small, neat houses. He carried a plastic shopping bag of some sort slung behind one shoulder, like a

student idly carrying a school satchel. Although the height and overall appearance hadn't changed, his manner was so uncharacteristic of the Kamui of the Dragon of Earth that Seishirou could readily have taken him for some entirely different person. He moved heavily, as if distracted by some intangible weight far greater than the insubstantial burden that he was carrying; his expression was closed and introverted, and yet as he lifted his gaze, pausing for just an instant to look up, perhaps at his destination, or perhaps just at the darkening sky beyond the top of the hill, something glimmered from below that surface: a bewilderment, a pang of mute lostness.

"He doesn't remember." An edge of cold wind flurried Seishirou's hair, licked at the hem of his coat—he blinked hard at the orange-painted metal railing before him and at the spangled carpet of city lights rumbled up beyond and below it, swiftly reorienting himself. Along the western horizon, the last visible curve of the sun burned, a slender, dwindling line of red that looked nothing at all like blood. Kamui added, "It's better that way," with an effort at bleak finality that nonetheless rang a trifle plaintive.

"Hmm." It had been rather discomfiting to have his senses abruptly taken over like that. Seishirou made a mental note to work out some form of defense, and also to try to figure out how he might be able to accomplish something like it himself. Although he could probably achieve a similar dramatic effect just by using illusion....

"Do you have any regrets?" That was a new intensity in Kamui's voice. Seishirou looked up and met the other's gaze, direct now, keenly focused and challenging. The Tower's lights had come on in the minute or so when Seishirou had been distracted by that far-seeing; their harsh glare caught and highlighted the right side of Kamui's face, made that one vividly purple eye gleam, as hard and brilliant as glass, and left all the rest in shadow. The Tower's spire resonated with an almost subliminal force, like silent thunder or an earthquake just beneath the level of human perception, and Seishirou was reminded that it had been Kamui out of all the Seals who had known what had happened to Subaru, who had in some manner sensed that passing. Given that, and the all-too-evident feelings that Kamui had had for Subaru, the only real surprise was that he had waited so long to take Seishirou to task for it. But there seemed to be something more subtle and complex than mere anger behind this particular tension...and Seishirou was starting to have a pretty good idea of what it was.

"That I got involved with Subaru-kun?" he murmured at last. "No. Never for that. And as for the rest...I have to live with my mistakes. Just like anyone else." Kamui started—perhaps it wasn't the answer to the question he'd thought he'd been asking, or perhaps he hadn't realized he was being quite so obvious, but it was the answer to his real question, nevertheless. Seishirou grinned, a wolfish baring of teeth. "Kamui-kun, I'm the last person you should go to for advice. Because if it were me in your place, I'd absolutely be meddling."

"It's not...I don't...!" Kamui paused to master himself, but when he went on it was in a small, strained voice—the same verbal flailing, only more subdued. "I just...don't know." His mouth

tightened convulsively, a tense downward curl of misery. “Kotori...didn’t come back for me. Only for his sake. If all I ever brought them was unhappiness and suffering, then maybe....”

Seishirou let out his breath, a short huff of annoyance, then sprang outward, over the railing. A brief drop, the updraft a brisk, invigorating lash of chill air, as clarifying as a waterfall purification, before he alighted on one of the antennas jutting from the Tower’s side. Far below, the Tower’s well-lit walkways and parking lot were a pool of muddy gray, the roofs of cars like polished riverstones; beyond, the city lay dark and deceptively still, a peaceful glitter of lights with only empty night between them. Gazing out across that field of nameless and ephemeral stars, Seishirou drew in a long, slow breath, then glanced back up over his shoulder. Kamui had risen to his feet and stood balanced on the edge of the broadcasting array, a slender, attenuated shadow against the Tower’s spire, fists lightly clenched at his sides.

“You wanted my advice?” Seishirou called back to him, voice raised just enough to carry over the wind and the distance. “All right, then. Come down off this tower. Go back to school. Get a job, someday. Live.” *And stop whining*, he added silently, although he’d been more than half tempted to say it aloud. At least *Kamui* had a second chance...forcing aside the habitual pang, he added, “Life is where the two of you can meet and have a chance at finding happiness again. If you bring all of this into it,” with a sweep of his arm, he encompassed the Tower, the kekkai, both old and new, the foreboding occult aura, the echoes of a battleground of heartbreak and bitter destiny, “then things are definitely going to end badly.” He smiled, hard and mirthless and just a touch feral. “Take it from a professional stalker.”

For a moment, Kamui just stared at him. Then the other’s gaze shifted—Seishirou felt the lift of that sharp-focused pressure, a weight like the heavy steel blade of the Shinken being removed from him. Kamui stared off across the city, in the direction of that far-seeing, then closed his eyes—a slow relaxation like surrender, as deliberate as the transition from deep levels of trance into waking. That stormcloud of presence faded, a dissolution like a maboroshi being released, melting into the sunshine of a true reality, until there was just an ordinary-seeming teenager, improbably poised on a narrow lip of steel between the night sky and that stark fall, the wind whipping his hair into untidiness. As his expression eased, a gentleness came into it, something that could perhaps even be taken for a smile.

Never entirely ordinary, Seishirou thought, because as the Kamui of both Heaven and Earth that war was contained within him now, held to an uneasy armistice by nothing but the force of his own will. The godlike potential for destruction and for preservation....

Probably the best thing for him, and for the world in general, was not to take himself too seriously.

“Oh, and speaking as something of an expert on dead sisters,” Seishirou added offhandedly, “just because she didn’t come back for you, it doesn’t mean that she’s not a supporter. She probably came back because her brother was being particularly dense.” Seishirou favored Kamui with a sly smirk. “I bet she’s over there on the other side, calling out, ‘Go for it!’” Kamui choked

and sputtered, as if denial were still remotely possible, and Seishirou turned away, waving a casual farewell as he stepped out to the end of the antenna. “Well, good luck...”

“He loved you.”

Kamui’s words, sudden and harsh, stopped Seishirou as if he’d run into a wall. He stared down at the gradually shallowing curve of the Tower’s leg far below him, wondering at the force of that jolt. It wasn’t as though other people hadn’t been saying essentially the same thing. “He loved you more than anything,” Kamui went on, his voice taut with bitterness and still-raw grief. “That doesn’t *excuse* anything. But that’s why....” He trailed off. Despite himself, Seishirou looked back—their gazes met, a long, unwavering stare, Kamui’s eyes cold, narrowed, and unforgiving.

“For his sake,” Kamui said at last, and with his voice dropped down into its lower register he sounded almost uncannily like his opposite star. “Because he wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

The corner of Seishirou’s mouth curved up, a faint trace of a smile. “Fair enough.” He bowed his head slightly, acknowledging that forbearance. Then, turning, he leaped from the antenna into the open air, his heart beating a trifle more rapidly than normal—not from the vertiginous drop, to which he was certainly quite accustomed, but instead from that near miss: a reprieve from danger that left all the future wide open and unexpectedly full of promise, despite the lingering, bittersweet ache of loss.

Apparently, his death wish had been cured.

Epilogue

Meticulously Seishirou finished folding the shirt, then laid it on top of the others. Frowning, he stared down at the small, neatly rectangular pile. A handful of ties were rolled up next to it; slacks and jackets had already been sorted through and a select few packed.

But had it really been worth it to come back just for this—some pieces of favored clothing, a couple of odds and ends that he certainly could have replaced without much trouble?

His gaze swept the bedroom restlessly. He found himself unable to settle on what bothered him the most. One moment everything was too perfectly, jarringly ordinary, the cheerful sunshine spilling through the window onto the tidily made bed, the empty plant stand still waiting for new pots to fill it, the familiar and unchanged proportions of walls, angles, and open spaces, and in the next he'd be struck by wrongness like a surprise assault out of the dark, the wrenching awareness that nothing was as it should be.

Muttering wordlessly under his breath, a low grumble of aggravation, Seishirou turned abruptly toward the dresser. He'd been entirely right in his decision not to return to living in this apartment—far better to make a new start, someplace without any associations, where he wouldn't constantly find himself waiting for a slim, graceful figure to step out of the bathroom, pajama-clad and smiling shyly, where he wouldn't keep straining after half-heard, probably imaginary sounds, wondering if that could possibly be a footstep, a whisper of cloth, the quiet opening or closing of a cabinet door. If he had been *more* cunning, he would have simply hired someone to come and clean the place out for him, or abandoned it all and bought new things—he was running on sheer stubbornness, and had been since he'd left the Clamp School campus, pushing himself forward through a constant, dragging resistance of unease, only because he refused to let such an inchoate force control his actions. Just through the next turnstile, just one more flight of steps, just around another corner and through that door...just a few more items now, and then he *would* leave all the rest and arrange for someone else to dispose of it. If there was anything for him to prove here, he'd surely already done so. Brusquely he pulled open the dresser's middle drawer.

Red....

The color stilled him, as immediate as the quiet shock of glimpsing some extraordinary beauty. Wine red, heart's red, rich, dark, and vibrant...and he knew, he *knew* that he should not touch it, even as his hand stole slowly forward, as his fingertips brushed the cashmere, both knowledge and volition helpless to prevent the gesture. So soft...he remembered touching that softness in the store, running his fingers over it, gauging its perfection, its sublime fittingness, and then touching it again, later, this time with warmth and the rhythmic movement of breath beneath it, the solid reality of a body, of muscle and bone.

Snap and rip and tear, the flesh so fragile beneath the fragile skin....

Distracted by memories, he had lifted the sweater out of the drawer—it spilled easily, almost fluidly out of its folds, lay near weightlessly across his arms as he held it up. His fingers tightened on it, but gently. After a moment of hesitation, of mere looking, he brought it toward his face, compelled by the irresistible impulse to brush his cheek against it, as he had once before, what seemed like a small eternity ago. He bowed his head over the delicate wool, touched his lips to it, and the scent—

—oh—

—like a physical blow, so that he bent abruptly forward over the dresser, his hands knotted into fists in the cashmere and his face buried in them as he struggled to catch his breath. Subtle notes of sandalwood and cinnamon incense, of a traditional adzuki soap, of skin warmed by close contact and desire—sudden shock of involuntary memory, of the shifting of another’s body against his, of tracing the long, arching lines of throat and chest and thigh, an overwhelming barrage of instants, of intimacies, of sexual fire, strain, and release. And so sweet, so painful that it stood out even among all the rest, among all those flashes of Subaru in ecstasy and in the most ordinary of everyday moments—of Subaru meditating in candlelight, of Subaru laughing in his arms, apron-clad, up against the refrigerator door, of Subaru sitting motionless in the hush of a profound sorrow or lying innocently curled up in the sun, pretending to sleep—there was the memory of those tender hands cradling his face, of those green eyes smiling back at him, night-dark yet luminous with passion.

I love Seishirou-san.

Ah—

Someone knocked at the apartment’s front door, a light, fluttery tapping, and Seishirou actually jumped. Somewhat dazed, he looked around. It couldn’t be...no, it *couldn’t*. A dull, unfocused anger followed swiftly upon that flicker of senseless disappointment, and he decided that he’d pretend no one was home. Nobody should be looking for him here anyway. The mysterious intruder knocked once more as Seishirou stared blankly about the bedroom, trying to figure out where he was in what he was doing—and then again, as a female voice called out, its stridency muffled somewhat by the closed door, as well as by a hint of uncertainty, “Sakurazuka-san? I’m sorry if this is a bad time. But....”

He did *not* want to talk to Mrs. Nakamura. In fact, there wasn’t enough “no” in all of Tokyo to properly express his distaste for the idea. But apparently she had some mystical knowledge of his presence and wasn’t about to leave him in peace. He’d better get this over with. Leaving the sweater on top of the dresser, he prowled out into the living room. As he reached the door, habit made him check himself, made him set aside his irritation and reach for the mask of smiling normalcy—and realize, with a small jolt of disquiet, that it didn’t feel nearly as secure as he might wish. His face felt stiff, the smile awkward and slightly off; his eyes burned faintly with the

suppression of that persistently recurring ache of loss. He hesitated for an instant, then dug his emergency glasses out of the drawer of the telephone table and put them on before opening the door. “Yes?”

“Ah! Oh! Sakurazuka-san! Nadeshiko-san said that Kumiko-san said that she’d seen you come in.”

The fabled seers of Japan’s past must surely quail before the power of Nakamura-san’s local gossip network. “Yes, but I’m going to be going out again very soon,” he said, as briskly as he could without being actually offensive. “I’m afraid I’m a little bit busy at the moment...”

“Well, of course, but I just had to stop by and say hello, since nobody had even seen you for more than a week! And right after that awful earthquake that destroyed Ginza and Shinjuku and did so much damage in Shibuya, too! I was terribly worried, you know, not having heard anything from you.”

“Ah, that’s very kind....”

Nakamura-san half-bowed; in her fleecy white sweater and green sweatpants, she rather resembled a dandelion gone to seed and bobbing up and down in a gentle breeze. As she straightened, she craned her neck slightly, her gaze flickering past him to dart about the visible area of the apartment. “And your friend? Is he all right too?”

Friend? World and conversation both seemed to grind to a halt as Seishirou stood there, one hand on the half-open door. Staring down at Mrs. Nakamura, he tried to stretch her words to fit his relationship with Subaru, the fatal battle of Seals and Angels, the unfathomable complexity of love and loss, and failed utterly.

All right?

“No,” he murmured at last, his voice very gentle but deathly flat. “No, I’m afraid he...isn’t.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” Nakamura-san’s mouth gaped open in shock, then pursed up in a pink bow of exaggerated but unfeigned distress. Tears suddenly glittered in her eyes. “I’m so sorry. Everyone will be...I mean, that’s so sad.”

Apparently he and Subaru had become a public item in Nakamura-san’s circle. Subaru probably would have been mortified. And now Seishirou would never get to see if he might someday have become inured to it...if it might eventually have made him smile.

“Sorry,” he said, controlling his voice assiduously, keeping it neutral and perhaps just a trifle numb, as might be expected of someone still in shock and grieving. “Not to be rude, but I do have to....” He lifted his shoulders, an inarticulate, aimless shrug, letting her fill in whatever she thought one ought to be doing in his circumstances.

“Of course! Of course! Sakurazuka-san, I just wanted you to know—while you were gone, I had the superintendent let me into your apartment to water your plants. Though I only found the one in the kitchen—I thought you had more? But anyway, I took good care of it, for when you got back.”

He couldn't quite work up the energy to be appalled by this invasion. Murmuring some appropriate noises of gratitude, he managed to close the door at last on her wide-eyed expression of earnest, well-meaning sympathy. Leaning briefly against the door frame, listening instinctively despite his distraction in order to follow the muffled sounds as the woman finally retreated, he wondered if he had looked as wrung out as he felt. The absurdity of the situation struck him then; shaking his head, a bemused half smile tugging at his lips, he stepped up out of the genkan. As he crossed the room, heading back to finish his desultory packing, he glanced into the kitchenette, reminded by Nakamura-san's fussing. In the narrow window, the ivy's lush greenery cascaded down around the big-eyed, cartoonish planter. He stopped short and stared at it.

Seishirou-san....

Why is your ivy in a pig pot?

He laughed suddenly, surprising himself, a low chuckle breaking from him, scattering that feeling of dull emptiness like a breath of moving air bringing life to a sealed-up room. Turning away, he walked more briskly toward the bedroom door, energy and purpose renewed—and he jerked to a halt in the doorway, his eye caught by a flash of color.

A dark-red puddle spreading across the wooden floor....

He must have left the sweater lying halfway off the dresser, he realized after a moment, and the slight weight of the fabric had been enough to bring it slithering it down onto the floor. The shock of the sight still hurt, though. Because for an instant he'd truly mistaken it for blood and hadn't known where it had come from? Because it had reminded him, yet again, of that stain flowering on the white shikifuku, the stabbing sensation of what in hindsight had been panic, the pain of already realizing, on some level, that he was too late to save anything? Because one of the very few physical reminders of Subaru and what they had shared lay crumpled in a heap at the foot of the dresser like something discarded, something meaningless?

Slowly Seishirou moved around the edge of the door frame. Leaning his back against the wall, he curled his hands into his pockets as he stared broodingly at the sweater. Such unpredictable shifts—it was so different from before, when his inner world had been a bland, sure equilibrium, occasionally spiked by interest and intensity, the focused energy of the hunt, the kill. These swift changes in his mood were nearly as difficult to deal with as their unfamiliar and uncomfortable content: apathy, distress, quiet melancholy tinged with a bleak, vaguely forlorn nostalgia. Would all of this fade as time went by and the immediacy of that loss receded, smoothed out like a wind-rippled pool? Perhaps. Would he ultimately be the same as he'd once been?

And did he *want* to be? Seishirou's eyes narrowed, disquieted and thoughtful.

I don't know....

If he could have all of this to do over, knowing what he now knew, he'd certainly want to make different choices. But...he wouldn't be *capable* of that knowing, not even remotely so, without having already gone down that path. A paradox.

Would it be better to have Subaru alive, and himself ignorant, certain to make the same blind and stupid mistakes, unable to appreciate the true significance of what he had?

It was a complicated gift that Subaru had given him, he realized, with ramifications that he knew he didn't yet perceive, let alone grasp: a tangled web of threads that led to mysterious, equivocal places, to dark and sudden drops, unexpected snares, a whirling confusion like the killing storm of sakura petals—but also to flashes of refuge, to memories of profound quiet and piercing, exquisite beauty, all the richer, all the keener for the contrast. He certainly couldn't say that it was entirely pleasant...but it had brought surprising new shades of color and value to the formerly monotone world of his life.

And he was discovering that, for all its pain and tumult, it was inexplicably precious.

Because it was the last gift that he would ever have from Subaru.

His mouth curved in the merest hint of a smile, neither predatory nor ironic. Slowly he pushed off from the wall and walked across the room. Reaching down, he curled his fingers into the heap of cashmere, picked up the fallen sweater, and then turned to resume his interrupted packing.

Whatever the future might bring, whatever choices he would make....

Nothing, after all, would ever be the same.

Standing in the genkan, Seishirou set his suitcase down out in the hallway. Taking the ivy from the phone table, he tucked the pot securely into the crook of his arm, and then glanced back one last time. Through the bedroom doorway, he could just glimpse the red sweater laid out flat atop the bed, a swath of flame burning in the brilliant slant of sun.

Pulling out his sunglasses, he put them on and briefly swept the whole apartment with his gaze, the place now dim and shadowed, like an illusion or some empty corner of the other world. At last he turned and stepped across the threshold, closing the door firmly behind himself.

Notes

Prologue

The flashback sequences are taken from Rika Takahashi's translation of the Subaru character file CD.

Chapter 1

On batarei ya sowaka is a chant that Subaru used during the opening credit sequence of the first OAV. It seemed to be sort of a lead-in to his actual summoning of a ghost, so I'm using it as a power-building chant here.

On nama samanta, etc. I borrowed from a poem by Gary Snyder. The poem is called "Spel against Demons" <sic>, and in context the line reads:

He who saves tortured intelligent demons and filth-eating
hungry ghosts, his spel is
NAMAHA SAMANTAH VAJRANAM CHANDA MAHAROSHANA
SPHATAYA HUM TRAKA HAM MAM

As you can see, I adapted it a little to match Subaru's other spells.

I think mitsu-in translates as something like "esoteric gesture"; it's something like a mudra or meditative/power gesture. The "seed-syllable" or "Om" (rendered "on" in Japanese), is the primal sound, the word that signals the beginning of creation. Ofuda are the cards that Subaru and Seishirou use in their spells and to create the spirit constructs known as shikigami.

Seishirou, by the way, is drinking plum wine in this chapter. (I don't have a clue what music he's listening to, though.)

Chapter 3

The first song that Seishirou listens to is Enigma's "Return to Innocence"; see also Kristin Huntsman's fanfic of the same name. The second one ought to be obvious enough to X-fen, but it's "Forever," the end theme of the X movie. And an enka is a melancholy genre of Japanese song, supposedly listened to usually by older people. From what I've heard, it's apparently their cultural equivalent of the country-western "my wife left me, the dog died, and now I'm crying in my beer" kind of song.

Mrs. Nakamura's name and general cluelessness (although nothing else about the character) were borrowed from Mimi Zhou's fanfic "The Strange Case of Dr. Seishirou/Sakurazukamori."

Chapter 4

The genkan is the step down in the entryway of a Japanese home where people take off and leave their shoes.

Chapter 5

“Nukume dori” is a Japanese painting subject for the month of December. It shows a falcon holding a small bird in its claws. However, the falcon doesn’t intend to eat the bird—merely to use it as a foot warmer so that its talons don’t get cold. When the next morning comes, the falcon lets the bird go, and as a reward doesn’t hunt in the direction that the bird has taken until a day has passed. (Seishirou is therefore being a little creative with his interpretation.)

Chapter 6

The following quote from Subaru’s flashbacks:

For today, sleep. Because I’m with you.
Even if somebody comes....
I’ll chase them away.

is from *Tokyo Babylon* 4, the story in which Subaru evokes the ghost of a little girl, wanting to offer her mother comfort, and is forced to lie to the woman when the child has no comforting words to give. Subaru stops by Seishirou’s place afterward, and Seishirou, seeing that Subaru’s upset, gives him hot tea (or something) and puts him to bed. The quote is excerpted from Seishirou’s words to Subaru, from the translation by C. Sue Shambaugh.

Chapter 7

The idea of Arashi being romantically inclined toward Subaru probably came from reading Kristin Huntsman’s fic “Lyric: I Heard It Through the Grapevine,” which was derived from an observation by Yin Lai on a peculiarity of the Chinese translation of the *X* manga.

Chapter 8

Detective Yamakawa is from the first *Tokyo Babylon* OAV. (I’m taking it for granted that Seishirou was telling the truth when he said the detective was going to be all right.)

Chapter 10

Regarding Subaru's reading matter at the beginning of the chapter: although Chinese kanji would ordinarily have the same meanings as Japanese ones (the latter being derived from the former), apparently ancient Chinese is quite different from modern Chinese. Also, Taoist texts like this one seem to have made great use of doubled and obscured meanings. So I've taken the liberty of imagining that there could be some way of writing "earth dragon" that Subaru might not be so familiar with. Special thanks to Sunsun and Monica for their advice!

Chapter 12

If you didn't get Subaru's little joke at the end, try rereading the end of *Tokyo Babylon* vol. 1: "Babel." For those of you who don't have it:

"Subaru-kun..."

"Seishirou-san?"

"...Am I sexy?"

And it only took Subaru nine years to answer.

Special thanks for this chapter go to Shanti for her advice on ogling.

Chapter 13

The geography of this section is actually more or less accurate, although the descriptions of specific areas and buildings are invented. Thank you, Baedeker and Lonely Planet!

Detective Kono is the policeman from the second OAV.

The song, once again, is "Return to Innocence" by Enigma. Remember these lyrics; there'll be a quiz later.

The possessing spirit that Subaru fights in this chapter was invented. It bears some relationship to the Japanese "hungry ghosts" and some to the North American Wendigo.

On sowa hamba shuda saraba taraman wa hamba shudokan: This is one of the chants from the first OAV; I believe it's the one Subaru uses to deactivate the curse ofuda planted at the construction site.

On shira battaniri un sowaka: I found this chant in a book, but I was foolish and didn't write down which book it was. These chants actually do have meanings, although they're mystical meanings unrelated to any linguistic meanings that the syllables themselves may have. This one signifies: "When this spell is chanted, the faith in me reaches everywhere, and by the true power of the Buddhist precepts, evil and misfortune will be abolished and luck and wisdom attained, suffering removed and comfort achieved, and pain transmuted into delight." All that in five little words! Subaru is using this spell to divert the sakanagi or magical backlash that is the inevitable result of using spells to do harm. The idea of grounding energy in the

earth after a spell probably owes more to Western magic than to onmyoujitsu, but it seemed to work well enough for the purposes of this story.

Chapter 14

The girl on rollerblades is a cameo by Kamimura Shirushi and appears courtesy of her author, Jessica L.

The quote “But I love this Tokyo...” is from the first book of *Tokyo Babylon*. The translation, as usual, is by C. Sue Shambaugh.

Drift III: Exchange

Sumi-e is a brush technique in Japanese painting.

Matsuzaka beef can run to about US\$144 for a grilled steak. Yes, that’s *one* steak. The restaurant Yoshihashi does in fact exist in Tokyo, although I think it’s not quite as exclusive as portrayed in this fic. I also don’t think they grill the food on open flames, but hey: artistic license. I think the fic would be much poorer without Subaru-in-firelight, don’t you?

An omiai is a first meeting between a prospective bride and groom, something that you usually don’t spring on someone as a surprise.

“Mou” is just a little frustrated noise. Though I try not to do the fangirl Japanese anymore, I just couldn’t come up with anything in English that was exactly appropriate for Subaru, so I stayed with this. Also, in my head Seishirou actually says “Express elevator!” in English, but I didn’t want to get into cumbersome spelling contortions to try to get that across, so I let it slide. But now you know.

The song that Subaru dances to is “Marco Polo” by Loreena McKennitt.

The poem quote (“The minute I heard my first love story...”) is from “Music Master” by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks in *The Essential Rumi*. Yes, I’m probably stretching reality by having Seishirou quote Rumi. I blame the poem quote for being just too perfect.

Although I did do a fair bit of research for this scene, I’m sure I’ve taken quite a few liberties with the Taoist sex, so please don’t take this for an authentic description of what Taoists practice (or, gods forbid, a how-to manual!). My main reference was *Tao: The Chinese Philosophy of Time and Change* by Philip Rawson and Laszlo Legeza, which among other things describes both the role and nature of sex in Taoism as well as the process of Taoist inner alchemy. Essentially, I munged the two together, taking a meditation on the circulation of energies and adding sex to it. The book also includes a diagram linking the various energy centers (tanden, or tan-t’ien in Chinese, meaning “elixir field”) to hexagrams of the *I Ching*, which is where I got the four-word invocation that Seishirou uses to awaken Subaru—I found the Chinese character for each hexagram, looked it up in my kanji dictionary, and converted it into a Japanese reading. (Yes, this is way too much research for a sex scene!) Ki is spiritual energy, meridians are energy channels in the body, and dragon lines are tracks of energy running through the land. (Note that “Hii” should really have been “Hi,” but that just read wrong to an English speaker.)

Drift IV: Dissolve

The song that I was listening to while writing this was “#1 Crush” by Garbage. Whether this is actually the song that Subaru was listening to must remain mysterious.

Chapter 18

A bounenkai is, in fact, “a party to forget the year.” Pizza-La’s Pescatore was some kind of Italian seafood pizza, and the Baccarat was divided into four sections: tomatoes, raw ham, and basil; potatoes and crab sauce; seafood and basil sauce; snow crab and shrimp.

The thoroughly inappropriate song that the characters dance to is, of course, Enigma’s “Return to Innocence,” followed immediately by the next song on the album, “I Love You, I’ll Kill You.” Seishirou is singing Sarah McLachlan’s “Ice Cream,” or, more likely, a Japanese near-equivalent, which I’m sure must exist.

Chapter 20

Gogyou is the Japanese term for the Chinese five elements. There are two ways to go around the circle of elements: metal-water-wood-fire-earth, which is the “mutually arising” or creative cycle; or metal-fire-water-earth-wood, which is the conquering cycle. Subaru chose a less-aggressive and somewhat unconventional direction (at least to Seishirou’s mind).

Chapter 21

The two quotes in Seishirou’s first section are from the first volume of *Tokyo Babylon* (translation by C. Sue Shambaugh); the quote in Kamui’s first section is from volume 6 of *X* (translation by Fuu Hououji).

Chapter 22

“*Rin Pyo To Sha Kai Jin Retsu Zai Zen!*”: Seishirou is using a technique called *kuji-kiri*, or nine syllable cuts, in an attempt to wrest control of the ward from Arashi. Previous to that, Arashi’s chant, *On chirichi iba rotaya sowaka*, is accompanied by a mudra known as “seal of the ring of the sun.”