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SHADOWS

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JESSHA BATTO



SHINOBI

Book One

Concealed in Shadows

By

Sessha Batto

Will love be sacrificed when duty and honor rule all?

In modern day Japan, the ninja legends live on in a grim saga of political maneuverings, betrayal, sexual abuse, torture and dark homoeroticism.

The Shinobi clans lurk in the shadows, performing services that not even the hardened Yakuza will touch. Takahashi Yoshi fulfills his duty with soul-stripping resolve, each assignment driving a nail into a coffin of lost faith. After years of sexual abuse and torture in the name of clan honor, Yoshi must learn to trust, but the man who offers him hope is himself flawed. Sasaki Makoto has spent a career in torture and interrogation, exploring not only the dark secrets of his clan's enemies, but also the darkness within his own heart.

How far must Yoshi run to escape his shame and torment?

SHINOBI

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Dedication:

Although writing is a solitary process, the birthing of a story most certainly is not. I need to thank my husband and son for their infinite patience, my pre-reader Anzia, for her love, support, and unflagging belief in me and this project, and my editor Diane, for her encouragement and guidance.

THE FIRST GATE: CONCEALED IN SHADOW

Takahashi Yoshi had a secret. Okay, to be honest, he had lots of secrets. But this was a secret he tried to keep even from himself. The infamous shadow wolf of the Takahashi clan was exhausted, splattered with blood and other best left unidentified substances, and sported several nasty wounds. Right now a hot shower and a soft bed were what he really needed. Instead he was lounging aimlessly in a tacky love hotel, trying to find excuses not to go home. Coming up with no better option, he decided to stop delaying the inevitable and gathered his belongings.

Home ... it felt awkward on his tongue. Although his ancestral home in Chiba was where his loyalty lay, he found himself spending less and less time there. *Although that bitch Rin has no problem tracking me down when she needs me, no matter where I hide.* The bitch in question being the shuhan, or leader, of Kobayashi shuudan.

Still, it will be nice to go home again, he mused as he carefully pulled his usual clothes over too pale skin. He peered at his reflection with a grimace, just long enough to put in the colored contact he used to hide his right eye.

People would be amazed at how accurate some of these cheesy flicks are. Yoshi's gaze once again turned to the otherwise ridiculous movie on the television featuring black clad ninja performing amazing feats. *Although I hardly fit the profile, it's awfully hard to fade into the night when you look like this.*

The Takahashi clan had long been instrumental in maintaining the shuudan's preeminence in the shadowy underworld the shinobi clans were relegated to in this modern age. Espionage, sabotage, assassination; these were the clans' stock in trade, selling their skills to the highest bidder, be it greedy corporation, panicked individual or ruthless Yakuza kingpin. In return they eked out a marginal, secretive existence in their ancestral strongholds, melting unnoticed into the everyday hustle and bustle of the busy cities where they carried out their assignments.

Well, most of us blend in. Yoshi's eyes narrowed when he once again caught sight of his reflection. All the Takahashi were instantly recognizable by their striking snow white hair. His clan had even selectively bred for the trait, since it seemed to be linked to greater powers of ki manipulation. In Yoshi's case this genetic tinkering had been both a blessing and a curse. His clan had always appeared typically Japanese, except for the color of their hair. The last Takahashi, however, not only had white hair, his skin was the color of alabaster. His eyes were even more disconcerting, one a smokey grey, the other an eerie red. It had been his greatest curse, giving rise to the hated nickname metsuki no kagai, evil eye, that cursed him throughout his life.

The pressure of the shuudan's hatred and mistrust acted as a catalyst for the evolution of his ki reserves, intelligence and emotional control, allowing him to learn the most advanced techniques with ease. It was, therefore, no surprise that he pushed himself to begin active duty,

becoming an elite assassin before reaching his teens.

That was a long, long time ago, no one says those things anymore ... at least, not to my face. The face in question regarded him dispassionately from the mirror, and Yoshi took a moment to study it, hoping to find what others seemed to see when they looked at him. High cheekbones, long aquiline nose and plump lips under a messy fall of glittering white hair. His coldly handsome, slightly stern visage looked more like a portrait carved in glistening marble than a living breathing man.

That's one good thing about going home, he realized, mouth twisting into a rueful smirk. *I can uncover my face and no one stares.* After all, it was a secluded ninja stronghold, odd characteristics were more the norm than the exception. No one dared taunt the fearsome shinobi about his coloring, something he appreciated more and more as he aged.

He suddenly felt the weight of every one of his thirty-five years, and Yoshi idly wondered if perhaps it was time to put an end to the farce his life had become. *Not yet,* he decided after carefully considering it for a moment. *I am shinobi, my duty is to my clan and my shuudan. My own desires are unimportant. When I am no longer needed, perhaps.* Abandoning the pointless train of thought he turned back to his task, packing the last few personal items strewn around the room. After one final look, he switched off the television and departed, suddenly eager to return to what passed for normalcy in his life.

No one noticed as a pale figure passed silently overhead, running across the rooftops under the moonlight. Once safely outside the city proper, Yoshi stopped to appreciate the harvest moon hanging low in the sky. He made a series of hand motions to focus his ki, and a milling knot of wolves appeared in a puff of smoke. "Shall we run?" Yoshi broke into a smile when they began to bay their approval and gave into the urge to join them, letting out a fierce howl of his own before loping off in the direction of home, the pack spreading out to flank him.

Sasaki Makoto surveyed his afternoon's work with distaste. This captive had been disgustingly easy to break, happily revealing his company's secrets almost as soon as the interrogator began. *I hate dealing with civilians,* he decided, shaking his head at the mess. *No challenge whatsoever.* Of course, just a glimpse of the torture master was generally enough to make even a hardened warrior piss his pants. At a towering six foot four inches, the muscular nin was a mountain compared to the average Japanese. One look at the scars snaking their way across his impassive face and it became painfully clear that Kobayashi's head of covert operations was no stranger to the giving, or receiving, of pain and would not be dissuaded from his goal. Once that became obvious his captives were more than willing to blab whatever secrets they held in hopes of saving themselves. It was unfortunate that they never realized how their cooperation only made the punishment worse.

Weak, disgusting little worms, don't they know where their loyalties should lie? The scars Makoto wore so easily were a reminder of his own time in captivity. Unlike his 'guests' however, the stoic ninja had never breathed a word, even after several weeks of grueling torture. He had no idea why Iwagashi shuudan suddenly decided to release him, but he was grateful nevertheless. No one knew just how close he had been to breaking down and spilling everything he knew about his clan and its defenses.

His mind drifted back to his return home. The first few weeks were hazy, filled with painkillers and long, unpleasant medical treatments. After that what he remembered best were the shocked and disgusted looks on his former friends' faces when they laid eyes on him for the first time. "It's not so bad," a few of them ventured, but the lie was easy to read.

It was then that he chose his current occupation, studying under masters of interrogation, psychoanalysis, and torture. He had dedicated his life to guaranteeing that no one from Kobayashi shuudan would ever go through what he had. Now, twenty years later, he was tired. The reason why he continued to do his duty day after day no longer seemed as clear, and he often found himself wondering why he bothered protecting the very people who rejected him.

Now is not the time for this. The torture master headed for his office to deal with the paperwork threatening to overtake his desk.

"Boss," his aide ventured tentatively, "they caught a spy snooping around. He's prepped and waiting for you."

"You know where I'll be." Makoto shut his thoughts away and fixed his face into its usual slightly sadistic mask. He headed back the way he had come, hoping to finish with his new 'guest' quickly. *Although I don't know why I'm in such a hurry, it's not like I have anything to go home to.* With that thought reverberating in his head he opened the door to the interrogation room. He fixed the panicked man strapped into the chair with a sharp eye, sending him a smile showing way too many teeth for anyone's comfort.

"Let's get started, shall we?" he said by way of greeting, the smile never leaving his face. After a while he put his unsettled thoughts aside and relaxed into the familiar work, humming to himself even though it couldn't be heard over his victim's screams.

At least it's late enough that everyone should be gone, the shadow wolf concluded as he slipped into headquarters. He headed for the locker room, his only desire to scrub off the taint of his latest assignment. The last Takahashi warily checked the entire area, scanning for nearby ki, before quickly disrobing and getting into the shower.

None of this was unusual behavior for the reclusive shinobi, but tonight his reasons were different. He turned the water as hot as it would go, scrubbing his skin vigorously with a brush until it was red and raw. His agonized whimpers dissolved into anguished sobs barely hidden by the rushing water.

I am shinobi, I must master my emotions. The words kept running through Yoshi's brain, but tonight he couldn't seem to summon his usual control. He dropped to his knees, hot water searing his back as hot tears seared his soul.

Makoto stood and stretched, releasing the tension that built up during his last interrogation. His most recent 'guest' had taken longer than usual to break. All he wanted was to fall into bed and sleep for eight hours. *Better clean up first.* His face twisted into a rueful smirk as he glanced down at his gore streaked form. He pulled out some spare clothes and headed to the locker room to clean up, anxious to spare himself the mess at home. Once inside the interrogator stripped,

concluding after a quick appraisal that his clothes weren't worth salvaging. That decided he dropped them in the incinerator bin, grabbed a towel, and headed for the showers.

His steps slowed as he approached the door. Someone inside was screaming in agony, their ki flaring wildly in response. *Maybe I shouldn't go in.* His hands unconsciously balled into fists as the voice rose to a broken howl. He stretched out his senses, hoping to get an idea of just who he was dealing with and why they were so out of control. He was surprised to find that, even in distress, whoever it was still managed to keep their identity hidden. *Fuck it. I'm head of covert operations. I need to know if something is wrong with one of my men.*

The torture master pushed the door open, peering cautiously inside. "Takahashi-san," he yelped in surprise. He was so riveted by the hate-filled eyes that swiveled to meet his that he missed the tell-tale hand gestures Yoshi made. The white-haired shinobi simply disappeared, leaving the torture master staring at the swirl of smoke left in his wake.

Shit, shit, shit, Makoto of all people. How the hell am I supposed to hide anything from him? Yoshi reappeared in his own bathroom, still driven by the compulsion to rid himself of any evidence of his recent duties. He flipped the shower to hot and climbed inside, coating a rough sponge with antibacterial soap and scrubbing already red skin. When the hot water ran out he slumped to the shower floor, unwilling to bother moving himself any further.

"Boss, you can't just sit there," a stocky brown wolf argued from the doorway. "You're bleeding, you need to take care of it."

"It doesn't matter anymore Pi-natsu," Yoshi whispered. "He saw me, and once one person in the shuudan knows something, everyone does."

"He, who, saw you, where?" the demon replied in confusion.

"Sasaki Makoto, in the showers, at headquarters." The elite flopped onto his side and shut his eyes in an attempt to block out the world.

Pi-natsu huffed in exasperation. They weren't playing Ninja Clue, a real answer would have been helpful. He trotted out into the bedroom, tugged a pillow off the bed and into the bathroom. He nudged snowy strands until the unresponsive man shifted his head onto the pillow before dragging a blanket over his shivering form. Calling the rest of the pack he left them standing guard while he went to look for the source of the problem.

"Hey, you, Sasaki."

Makoto peered out his door in search of the person calling him, there weren't many ninja who would bang on his door and then have the balls to run away.

"Down here," the gruff voice continued. "I have a bone to pick with you."

"Indeed," the torture specialist rumbled as he eyed the glaring wolf in surprise, "and it is?"

"I need to know what you did to the boss. He's bleeding and he won't take care of it. He's just lying in the bottom of the shower staring at the wall," the demon familiar replied, worry apparent in his tone.

"Who's your boss?" Makoto asked. "I tend to have that effect on people."

"Takahashi Yoshi. Now what did you do to him?" Pi-natsu demanded with a threatening growl.

"I didn't do anything to Takahashi-san. I ran into him at headquarters, but we didn't even speak. He was already upset when I got there," Makoto defended himself. "I don't know why you're blaming me."

"He said you were the reason he wasn't getting up. I asked and he said 'Makoto, the

showers, headquarters'. You know, I don't have a lot to work with here, a little cooperation would be appreciated," the wolf groused.

"Why don't I go with you and talk to him," the interrogator suggested. "Maybe I can figure out what the problem is." Technically Yoshi was covert ops, even if he did report directly to the Kobayashi no Shuhan, and that made him Makoto's business. Nevertheless, the torture master had a feeling his attention would not be appreciated.

The demon growled something unintelligible, and they disappeared with a pop of displaced air. Makoto's stomach twisted, his natural paranoia kicking into high gear at traveling under another's power. They appeared just outside the bathroom door, the wolf carefully nosing it open to check before motioning for the interrogator to follow. "Hey, boss, I brought Sasaki-san here to straighten things out with you. Please get up."

The shadow wolf didn't even attempt to cover himself, much less move. "I'm fine Sasaki-san, I'm sorry Pi-natsu bothered you," he rasped. "Thank you for humoring him."

"He said you were bleeding," the interrogator ventured. "I can assist you now that I'm here."

"That won't be necessary," came the frosty reply. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Capable and willing are not the same thing." Makoto bent down and scooped up the startled nin. Yoshi panicked when hands brushed against his bare flesh and he struggled to push away from the contact.

"Don't touch me." He twisted himself out of the interrogator's arms, landing hard on the bathroom floor. "Please, I'll do whatever you want."

"It's alright," the torture master whispered as he scooted closer, unwilling to make the mistake of underestimating the damage Yoshi could do if he so chose. He swept an appraising eye over the huddled form, stifling a growl at the sluggishly bleeding whip marks artfully cross-hatching cracked, reddened skin. "Why didn't you go see Rin when you got back? She would have had someone treat this while you gave her your report." The interrogator paused before continuing in a barely audible whisper. "How long did they torture you before you escaped?"

"Rin has no desire to see me like this," the shadow wolf insisted. "You don't understand."

"Well then, you need to explain it, or I'll have her explain it," the interrogator threatened. "I'm not just going to leave you like this."

"I don't see why not," Yoshi retorted. "I out rank you, don't force me to make it an order."

"You may out-rank me," Makoto decided, "but as head of covert operations I'm technically your boss. Don't make me order you."

"This *was* my mission. Now do you understand?" Makoto flinched as the meaning hit home. "I'm Rin's favorite bargaining chip, just like I was Kobayashi-sama's before her." Yoshi studied the tile floor, unwilling to meet the torture master's hard, knowing, eyes.

"How long?" the interrogator demanded. "How long have they been doing this to you?"

"Since I started in covert operations," came the sullen reply.

"That's over twenty years. You were just a child."

"I was never a child." Yoshi abandoned the last vestiges of his pride and rose to his full height, heedless of his nudity. "Now if you don't mind, I believe you've snooped into my life enough."

"I mind very much," Makoto tried to protest. "You're a talented shinobi, not a common

whore.”

“That's right, I'm a loyal shinobi of Kobayashi shuudan. That means I bow to the will of the Kobayashi no Shuhan and complete the duties I am assigned to the best of my ability,” the shadow wolf whispered, as much to himself as to his unwanted guest.

“At least let me treat your back,” the interrogator said after a long silence. “Then I'll leave you in peace.”

“It will heal on its own, it always does. Right now I'd just like to be left alone. Oh, and Sasaki-san?”

“Hmm?”

“I'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. I value my privacy, for reasons I'm sure you understand. Now, if you'll excuse me.” Yoshi urged him toward the door. “I'm sure I'll see you around headquarters. Thank you for your concern, I'm sorry you were disturbed.” With that Makoto found himself standing on the stoop with the door firmly shut, locked and warded behind him.

I'm not just going to let this go Yoshi, you haven't seen the last of me. With that thought he headed home. Sleep eluded him though, his mind returning to the signs of torture littering the pale body. He finally slipped into restless dreams haunted by the shadow wolf's surprisingly attractive features in place of some of his recent 'guests'.

Yoshi rose early the next morning, the clotted wounds on his back peeling free of the sheets with a sickening sound. He staggered into the bathroom, emptying his stomach of its meager contents before stepping into the shower. As he washed he turned the events of the previous night over in his mind, unsure of what his course of action should be.

I don't want to talk to Makoto, but I don't want him going to the Shuhan either. The shadow wolf pondered his options while he waited for the kettle to boil. *Maybe he'll just let the whole thing drop.*

Yoshi drank his tea and carefully rinsed the fragile cup. Slipping on his sandals, he headed out the door on his way to the cemetery. Once there he searched the stones until he came to a familiar name, stopping and squatting as he addressed his fallen mentor. The shadow wolf wondered, as he always did, if his life would have been different had Oonishi-sama survived. Lighting some incense, he clapped his hands together three times and bowed his head before speaking. “Hello, shishou,” he murmured. “I just wanted to stop by and say hi. I know it's been a while. Nothing's changed, but Makoto saw me at headquarters last night when I got back. I know he wants an explanation, I just don't have one to give him.” He shook his head as he tried to figure out what his master would have advised. “I guess I should just go check in. See you later.” With that he shuffled off, pretending to talk on his cell phone in order to guarantee his undisturbed passage.

Halfway there a booming voice broke into his thoughts. *Oh damn, he's spotted me.* Yoshi reluctantly stopped to wait as Watanabe Jun made his way across the street. Jun was known for his unworldly speed, it was pointless to try and evade him. The reclusive Takahashi regarded his self-proclaimed friend with dismay. Jun was loud and emotional ... and far too likely to realize something was wrong. As much as it pained him to admit it, the boisterous, easy going shinobi

was the closest thing he had to a friend here in the enclave.

“My dear friend, where have you been hiding yourself? You haven't come by to train in months.” Jun clapped a heavy hand on the shadow wolf's back. “It has been far too long since we have engaged in a spar.”

“Not today, Jun.” Yoshi shut his eyes as waves of pain rippled down his spine. “I need to go report in, I'm just back from an assignment. I'll find you when I've got some free time.”

“Yosh, I look forward to it.”

The last Takahashi took a deep breath, standing up straight in hopes of preventing his shirt from sticking to the newly reopened scores on his back. He squared his shoulders and continued toward headquarters, trying his hardest to ignore the sticky trickle working its way down between his shoulder blades.

He soon found himself outside the Kobayashi no Shuhan's office, shifting from foot to foot as he waited for Rin to summon him. “She'll see you now Takahashi-san,” the Shuhan's longtime aide announced. “Sorry to make you wait.”

“That's no problem, thank you Junko-san.” The shadow wolf bowed politely before taking another deep breath and following her inside. He strode toward the giant desk inlaid with the symbol of the Kobayashi clan. It was a reminder of why the shuudan was founded. Yoshi stopped abruptly and stood at attention, carefully studying the woman lounging on the other side of the desk.

Despite the flaming color she dyed her hair, the famous kunoichi Rin was as cold as her name implied. Her power, skill, and calculating intellect had elevated her to the ranks of the legendary, something only a handful of living shinobi had achieved, yet she had squandered her talents, living a life of depravity and spending days on end in an opium stupor. Still, the clan elders had appointed her to this position after Kobayashi-sama's death for, despite her dissolute appearance, she was a shrewd and canny strategist who did not flinch at the necessity of putting her shinobi in harm's way if it benefited the shuudan.

“Ah, Takahashi, I hope your assignment ended successfully?” Rin chuckled from behind her desk. “Join me for sake?”

“No thank you, Shuhan-sama,” he replied. “I'm not much of a drinker.”

“You have something for me then?” she continued with a smirk.

“I believe this is what you sent me to retrieve.” Yoshi handed over a crumpled IOU signed by the Shuhan and a small ball of opium.

“Wonderful. I had no idea how I was going to pay that off.” Rin shifted back to recline comfortably in her chair, fixing the rigid figure in front of her with a leer. “Now, about your next assignment.”

“I need a few days to heal.” The shadow wolf tried to protest, hoping to at least delay his departure. “I can't function like this.”

“I'm sure we can take care of what ails you,” the Shuhan assured him. She stood and circled the elite slowly, reaching out with her ki to sense the wounds hidden beneath his uniform. “Hmm,” she murmured as she swept her hands down Yoshi's back. “I didn't know Ryou was so kinky.” She rummaged around on her desk, tossing him a jar of salve with a sadistic chuckle. “This should leave you good as new,” she declared. “Make sure you coat yourself inside. If you need some help I can think of a few people who'd be happy to lend you a hand.” Her hoarse laughter raised the shadow wolf's hackles, his strained smile closer to a snarl. “You really should

thank me, Takahashi, not everyone gets to be an eternal virgin.”

“Whatever,” he grumbled. “Now, what do you need me to do?”

Makoto rose early from a restless sleep, his encounter with the shadow wolf triggering memories of his own capture. He raked a hand through his tangled hair, eyes slipping shut as he pondered what he should do about Yoshi. After considering what little he knew, the torture master realized he needed to tread cautiously, opting to find the elusive shinobi and try to get him to talk, rather than approaching the Shuhan with his concerns.

The interrogator was soon striding through the village, intimidating scowl firmly in place. He detoured through the cemetery, knowing Yoshi often visited when he was home, but the clearing was deserted. Makoto paused to run a hand over his family marker, feeling a momentary closeness to the departed whose names he now traced almost absently. He sent up a silent prayer for those who had gone ahead before turning towards headquarters.

He strode into his office, summoning a black-masked operative to follow. “Bring me Takahashi Yoshi.” The figure saluted and vanished, leaving Makoto alone to contemplate what he planned on saying.

He was still deep in thought when the operative returned. “I’m sorry sir, but it appears Takahashi-san has been sent out of town on an assignment. There is no information on where he has gone or when he is expected to return. Is there something else you need?”

“No, that will be all.” Makoto’s normally impassive face twisted into a scowl. *Great, now I have to go deal with Rin.* “I’ll be in the Shuhan’s office,” he growled as he passed his aide on the way upstairs.

“We need to talk,” he declared. “Junko, get lost.” The Shuhan’s assistant quickly complied. Rin could hold her own against the torture-master, she had no desire to hang around when he was obviously pissed off.

“What are you doing to Takahashi?” he demanded the moment they were alone. “I saw him last night. Don’t bother to deny it.”

“I’m using one of *my* shinobi in the way that best suits his talents,” Rin retorted. “What business is it of yours?”

“I hardly think that being used as a whore and a whipping boy suits the talents of someone as powerful as our shadow wolf. What made you consider it?”

“I merely continued using him, I didn’t start it,” the kunoichi replied. Her eye fell on the ball of opium, so she started rooting through a drawer in search of her pipe. “What do you remember about Takahashi Ren?”

“I know he committed suicide.”

“Ren was Yoshi’s father. He was warned there would be repercussions when he refused an assassination. Kobayashi-sama decided to use him as a bargaining chip in hopes of dispelling some of the rumors when we didn’t complete the contract. Depression over his new duties most likely influenced his decision to end his own life.” Rin paused when she located her elusive pipe, carefully filling it before snapping her fingers and kindling a small flame. She inhaled deeply, holding her breath for over a minute. When she opened her mouth the remnant smoke curled out lazily, obscuring her face in a blurry haze.

“I know from the records that his next assignment was supposed to be a father and son duo.” She stopped short at the expression on the normally stoic interrogator's face. “What?”

“That's sick. Yoshi couldn't have been more than seven or eight.”

“He was nine,” Rin noted. “But the head of the Oonishi clan took him in after his father's suicide, so Kobayashi-sama decided not to push the issue. After Oonishi-sama's death and our conflict with the Iwagashi, our shuudan was weak. Kobayashi-sama felt it was best to re-institute the practice with Ren's son. It's amazing what someone will pay for a night with the infamous shadow wolf.”

“Our existence is no longer threatened. What's your excuse?” The torture master loomed over her, hands clenching into fists.

“I have ... expenses,” she retorted. “It's not like I'm risking his life. Besides, he probably enjoys it. He's been doing it for years without any complaints.”

“I hardly think that means he wants to be on the receiving end of some pervert's advances. Do the clan heads know?”

“It's none of their business,” Rin insisted. “And if you don't back off you'll find yourself in the same boat.”

“I'd like to see you try,” the interrogator countered. “Where is Yoshi now?”

“He's gone to Kanegawa. There's a Yakuza there who has agreed to give us some of his race horses and wipe out my personal debt in exchange for a couple weeks with Takahashi.”

“Just like that. He was in no shape to go anywhere,” Makoto seethed. “I thought he'd been tortured.”

“I healed him before I let him go, obviously. No one wants to pay a premium for damaged merchandise. I'm not heartless,” the Shuhan protested when the torture master fixed her with a ferocious glare. “There are rules. He can't be killed or permanently mutilated, a shinobi medic needs to be on call to treat any serious injuries, and, of course, he can't be exposed to any infectious diseases.”

“Oh, wonderful, that way you can drag out his misery,” Makoto muttered. “He's a human being, Rin, it would be wrong to treat an animal the way you're treating him.”

“Takahashi won't appreciate you getting involved,” she pointed out. “In the end all you'll do is make a dangerous enemy.”

“I'll take that chance. This isn't over.” With that he swept out of her office, banging the door behind him. No one knew what had transpired, but judging from the look on the interrogator's face it wasn't good. Seasoned assassins fled at the sight of a grim Makoto muttering to himself as he stormed back to his desk.

As he passed through reception he motioned for several waiting shinobi to follow. Once inside his office he penned a note to the outlying sentries, requesting he be notified the moment Yoshi returned. He then wrote to the clan leaders, requesting a private meeting to discuss 'rumors of disturbing practices'. *That should tickle their interest. I don't want to take any chances on some of them deciding not to show. I need them all on my side.*

Once the black ops had sped off to deliver his requests Makoto leaned back in his chair, wondering where Yoshi was at that moment and if he was alright. *No point in worrying about it now.* He sat up and dug into the pile of paperwork in his in-box while he waited for responses to his letters to start trickling in.

Yoshi trudged into the Yakuza leader's palatial estate after three days on the road; tired, hungry, and more than ready to have this duty over with and be on his way back home. *Still, it was well worth the walk to enjoy a few extra days of freedom.* He squared his shoulders and lifted the ornate knocker, letting it fall with a resounding clang. *The shuudan needs this,* he reminded himself, plastering an overly large grin on the face behind the traditional black mask.

“Takahashi Yoshi reporting as requested.” He knelt and bowed his head.

“So you’re the mighty shadow wolf of the Kobayashi,” the Yakuza replied as he circled the kneeling man. “Why are you still dressed boy? Don’t you know how to present yourself to a new master? Do you know who I am?”

Yoshi quickly stripped, dropping his clothes in an untidy heap. “Mask too, boy,” the Yakuza barked and the shadow wolf reluctantly complied, once again cursing the ki binding spell Kobayashi-sama cast on him so many years ago. Now he was blocked from summoning his powers unless it was with his Shuhan's consent. Frustration and rage bubbled underneath his deceptively placid facade. He’d love to be able to harness his full strength and kill everyone in his path.

“Turn around, let me look at you,” the crime lord ordered, rubbing his hand over smooth opalescent skin. The shadow wolf slowly pivoted in place, steeling himself not to pull away from the pudgy, slightly sweaty hands that were currently groping him. *Would it be so horrible if just once the man I had to service was at least marginally attractive?* Yoshi studied the Yakuza through lowered lashes; short, middle aged, with a balding head and a sagging belly. *I hit the jackpot this time.* He barely suppressed a shudder when he saw the sadistic smirk gracing his new master's face.

“Very pretty, but a little on the plain side. I believe you could use some decoration.” The Yakuza roughly pushed him to his knees, grabbing a handful of his hair and towing him across the room. “Back to the wall, boy, and grasp the bar.”

Yoshi wrapped his hands around the pipe in front of him, willing himself to relax when his wrists were shackled and the bar raised until his feet just brushed the floor. His legs were spread and similarly shackled, leaving him immobilized.

“Where to start,” the crime lord mused as he circled the bound figure. “At the top, I guess.” He smirked as he grasped a pale nipple, twisting it until it hardened before slowly pushing a thick needle through the base, finally inserting a heavy stainless steel ring. He repeated the procedure on the other nipple, watching the elite ninja's face for any changes, obviously disappointed by the lack of reaction.

“That wasn’t so bad now, was it boy?” the Yakuza asked almost tenderly, actions belying his tone when he yanked hard on the newly pierced nubs. “Looks like you’re ready to step it up a notch.” With that the man sunk to his knees, squatting between Yoshi's long legs. He fondled the heavy sac, causing a shudder to run through the lean shinobi. “Like that, do you?” He gave the tender skin another soft stroke before wrapping his hand around the shadow wolf's balls and squeezing hard.

The elite's breath whooshed out of his lungs and he struggled to remain still, trying not to put more pressure on his already strained shoulders. He had a sinking feeling this was only the beginning.

Satisfied that he was finally getting a reaction the crime lord slowly ran his piercing needle through the sensitive flesh between Yoshi's balls and anus, sliding it back and forth several times before pulling it free and inserting another heavy stainless ring.

When a hand closed around his flaccid cock the shadow wolf panicked, eyes rolling in his head as he struggled to free himself. "Now, now, pet. I'll start to think you don't love me."

The Yakuza gave the twitching length a few gentle strokes before wrapping his lips around the tip and blowing softly. Yoshi gritted his teeth and willed himself to stay limp, picturing every repulsive thing he could think of in hopes of resisting. Eventually, however, he gave up, shutting his eyes and accepting the inevitable as his arousal stirred to life. The moment he was hard the crime boss snapped on a cock ring, brandishing his needle yet again to place a series of barbells up the underside of the shaft. By the time the last rod was inserted the stoic ninja had bitten a hole in his cheek in an attempt to stay silent and appear unconcerned.

The shadow wolf shuddered when deft fingers snapped a second ring just below the head and then began digging into the slit. This time when the needle rose he couldn't hold back a sharp gasp as it pierced sensitive flesh. "Like that, do you, boy?" The Yakuza smirked with satisfaction. "We'll just have to make it a double."

Yoshi almost choked when the needle once again pressed through the head of his penis. When the second ring was in place he took a long raspy breath, fighting hard to regain his composure.

"Now that that's taken care of we can move on to more pleasurable endeavors." The crime lord dropped the bar tethering Yoshi's wrists and unshackled him, wrapping a fist in colorless strands and jerking the shadow wolf's mouth to his crotch as he freed his weeping erection.

Short, fat and every bit as ugly as he is, the shinobi decided as the unappetizing length was pressed against his lips.

"Get it good and wet boy," the Yakuza laughed. "You'll be glad that you did."

Yoshi reluctantly took the twitching cock in his mouth, realizing the practicality of following directions as he fought to keep from vomiting. Thankfully his tormentor tired of his lackluster ministrations after just a few minutes and pulled himself free. "Bend over the table boy."

The shadow wolf hopped over to the table and leaned his arms on the top. "Further slut." The crime lord grabbed the back of Yoshi's neck and forced him to sprawl awkwardly on the wooden surface, legs dangling uselessly. Once the long body was positioned to his liking he roughly thrust in to the hilt, groaning his pleasure as tender tissue shredded under the onslaught, the flow of blood allowing subsequent strokes to penetrate even deeper.

Yoshi dug his fingers into the unfinished wood of the table top and held on, hoping to at least minimize the rough scrape of his newly pierced flesh against its surface. He shut his eyes and forced himself to relax, picturing his home early in the morning when people were just starting to stir. He added more and more detail as he distanced himself from his body's activities, subconsciously counting the minutes until his service in this place was complete.

After what seemed like an eternity the Yakuza finally shuddered through his completion, smacking the shadow wolf hard on the ass before pulling out and flipping the elite over. "Now clean up your mess, boy." He pressed his blood and semen coated length against Yoshi's lips.

Pale lips parted, an unenthusiastic tongue sweeping out to tentatively taste. The sensitive ninja grimaced, steeling himself for what was to come as he opened his mouth wider and took

the tip of the Yakuza's softened cock into his mouth, fighting the desire to gag as the taste and smell overwhelmed his heightened senses.

The crime lord put up with Yoshi's hesitation for a few minutes while he came down from his orgasm. Once he recovered, however, he took control, fisting his hands in snowy hair as he brutally fucked the elite's mouth.

It took a very long time for the older man to get hard after his orgasm, and even longer until he was able to come again. By the time his hips began to jerk erratically Yoshi's jaw was numb and his scalp on fire. His tormentor took perverse pleasure in stuffing his throat until he choked. He would only relent and allow the elite to breathe when mismatched eyes rolled back in his head and he began to lose consciousness.

"Now, now, none of that, pet. I have friends coming over later, you'll want to be awake for the fun." The Yakuza finally came with a groan, shooting his cum down the shadow wolf's throat before shoving him to the floor.

The crime lord reached across the table, snagging a heavy chain with a loop on one end and fastening it to the rings piercing the head of Yoshi's penis. "Hurry up, boy, we need to get you cleaned up for the party." He yanked on the chain, making the ninja scurry to keep pace.

Yoshi vaguely noted the hallways they passed through, eventually emerging in a large bathing chamber. "In you go, pet," the oily voice urged as he was dragged through the door. His embarrassment skyrocketed when another door opened and an unfamiliar ninja strolled in. The medic inspected the battered elite before applying some ointment to speed healing of the piercings and repair the torn tissues of his anus.

"He's quite attractive, isn't he?" the Yakuza remarked. "Would you like to fuck him?" The shadow wolf quailed at the offer, unsurprised to be pushed into the wall as a hard cock forced its way inside his tight passage.

"Shit, that's good." The medic let out a groan once he was buried in the elite's ass. He reached around and grasped Yoshi's purpling length, tugging on the piercings and dragging his nails across the slit, squeezing hard as he screamed his release. He panted against the broad pale back for a moment before pulling out, tucking his limp length back into his pants. Once again he massaged healing salve into abused tissues.

"Don't go far," the Yakuza called after him. "I'm sure we'll need you later."

Just when Yoshi thought it couldn't get any worse a giant of a man appeared at the crime lord's side, hard eyes studying the solemn shadow wolf. "How may I serve you, my lord?" The massive figure knelt and bowed his head.

"This needs to be cleaned and prepared for the festivities tonight." The Yakuza shoved the startled shinobi into a pair of heavily muscled arms.

"Certainly, my lord," the newcomer replied, lifting Yoshi easily and striding into the tub. The ninja began to relax as he was washed and rinsed, tensing only slightly when his genitals were cleaned. He was totally unprepared, therefore, to be plopped down on his knees as a hose was shoved deep in his ass.

Yoshi shuddered as he was filled with icy water, and was almost at his breaking point when he was finally allowed to release the fluid, emptying himself with a broken moan, only to have the cycle repeated. After the third repetition the water ran clean and he was lifted yet again. He craned his head to get his bearings as long strides carried him into an adjoining room and deposited him on a tall metal table. "Kneel," the giant rumbled as he reached into a drawer,

pulling out a small bottle and a pair of rubber gloves.

Seeing no way out of the situation, the shadow wolf positioned himself on his hands and knees. A spreader bar was pushed between his ankles and secured before he found his hands yanked forward, smashing his face into the smooth metal as his arms were stretched taut and bound.

This is embarrassing. Yoshi grimaced at the mental picture of himself with his ass forced wantonly in the air. He shivered when the snap of a rubber glove being pulled on cut through the silence.

At least he's using lube. The elite relaxed as a thick finger pushed through his pucker, to be followed almost immediately by a second. They pushed in and out slowly, twisting and stretching to loosen the muscles while skillfully avoiding his prostate. When a third finger was added it burned slightly, but Yoshi quickly adjusted, thankful he wouldn't be torn again. Realization finally dawned when a fourth finger shoved its way in and he began to pant, almost hyperventilating when the thick thumb began to prod the over-stretched flesh.

The shadow wolf shrieked when the entire fist began flexing and twisting, finally popping through the distended ring. The servant slowly began to thrust until he was buried to his wrist before pulling back to the knuckles, straining the tissue to its limits before thrusting once more. Yoshi keened when his prostate was pummeled, unable to reach release with his cock so tightly bound.

After a few more deep thrusts the fist withdrew, wringing a harsh gasp from Yoshi as overstretched tissues protested. The bottle of lube was unceremoniously shoved deep into his now gaping entrance and the contents emptied before a plug was pushed inside and secured to the ring behind the elite's scrotum.

"All ready." The giant swept Yoshi off the table and strode down the hall. He opened the door to a large dining room and deposited the shadow wolf on the floor at the head of the table. "Do you wish him bound, my lord?"

"Arms laced behind his back and the heavy lead on his cock piercing," the Yakuza replied off-handedly. "I think that should whet their appetite. Unless you have a suggestion?"

"No, my lord." Yoshi's arms were secured awkwardly behind him and the cruel leash was once again clipped to his poor abused penis. The shadow wolf settled down to wait, shifting until he was as comfortable as possible given the circumstances. *Like anything could be comfortable with a plug the size of a dinner plate in my ass.* The elite turned his mind to other things, forcing himself to relax and conserve his energy for whatever was to come.

Makoto paced the floor of the teahouse, too much could go wrong at this stage of any operation. As always, he'd feel better when he knew where everyone stood. He breathed a sigh of relief when the first of the men he'd been waiting for slipped through the door. If he'd managed to convince the head of the influential Hayashi clan, the others would surely show.

Soon the heads of most of the major clans were gathered around the small table wondering what was so urgent that the head of covert operations needed to meet with them about it in secret. At the head of the table sat Hayashi Hoshu, stern-faced leader of the clan currently in power, flanking him were the other members of the council of elders. Kobayashi Tatsuya was the

only surviving son of the previous Shuhan. Koga Aya was the matriarch of a large clan known for their tracking skills. Kikuchi Naoki's clan specialized in poisons. Narita Daichi was the head of a small clan of shape-shifters and Endo Akihiko's family specialized in tactical assessment.

Some of the clans were, unfortunately, no longer represented in council. The Takahashi clan had nearly died out and Yoshi had never shown any interest in the governing of the shuudan. The Oonishi, powerful weavers of illusion, hadn't attended in over a decade. The only one left was the eldest son Hideaki, and they had been hunting him unsuccessfully for years. The greatest absence, by far, was the Nakamura clan. Their only surviving member, a powerful shinobi named Kazuki, had once been in line to lead the shuudan. Instead, Kobayashi-sama's favorite apprentice disappeared before the announcement. Soon after, rumors began to filter in about the new Nakamura shuudan, however Kazuki himself had not been seen.

The interrogator ran a hand through his hair, unsure of how to explain the situation while still maintaining Yoshi's privacy. "Kobayashi-san," he said, turning to face Tatsuya. "I recently uncovered a practice begun by your father that is now being abused by our current Shuhan." Makoto scowled at the table. "One of our shinobi is being forced, under the guise of duty, to allow himself to be used as a whore and a whipping boy in order to satisfy Rin's debts and cover her opium expenses."

"Since he is unfailingly loyal, this man has shouldered his burden, alone I might add, for far too many years. I believe it is our duty to call a halt to activities that reflect so poorly on our village, not to mention our humanity." Makoto studied the dubious faces around the table, he had hoped for more of a reaction.

"Sasaki-san, not that I doubt your word, but I really need more information if I'm to act on this," Akihiko decided.

"You have to admit, it's a little hard to believe," Daichi added.

All eyes turned in disbelief when a tight-lipped Hoshu spoke up. "What do you want us to do?"

Makoto wondered, yet again, whether he should just stop now and cut his losses. After all, what he was about to suggest amounted to treason. He shook off his doubts and plunged ahead. "I am of the opinion that Rin should be removed from office. She was always a marginal choice."

"That is a big step, Sasaki-san," Hoshu replied. "I believe you will have to give our colleagues more information if you wish their cooperation. As for myself, I objected when I first discovered what Kobayashi-sama was up to, and I will back you up now."

"Thank you, Hayashi-san, your support is appreciated." The interrogator cast a hard eye on each clan head in turn. "I'll need your word that what I'm about to tell you will stay locked up in your head. If this gets out you will end up with a very ugly enemy. The ninja in question is certain to retaliate."

"We can keep a secret, Makoto," Aya protested. "We're not children."

"Is that everyone's opinion?" the interrogator asked, making sure he got a nod of assent from everyone gathered. "Fine. How many of you remember Takahashi Ren?"

Most of the elders around the table remembered Yoshi's father well. They had gone on assignments together for years.

"Kobayashi-sama whored Takahashi out to merchants and nobles in exchange for favors and supplies. Ren committed suicide when he was informed he needed to bring his nine year old

son along the next time.” Makoto studied the assembled faces, gratified to see nothing but shock and disgust. He didn’t know what he would do if one of the people he approached found some sick pleasure in the idea.

“Luckily for Yoshi,” the interrogator continued, “the head of the Oonishi clan had been training him. Oonishi-san moved Yoshi into his house after his father's death and Kobayashi-sama let the matter drop. After Oonishi-san's death Yoshi was forced into taking over his father's role. I don’t think it happened that often,” he hastened to add when he realized that Tatsuya looked like he was about to throw up or pass out. “I checked, Yoshi was still doing a lot of assassinations. But since Rin became Shuhan, he hasn’t been on one official assignment, yet he's nearly always out on loan. It needs to stop.”

“How did you happen to come by this knowledge?” Naoki asked, face unreadable.

“I ran into Yoshi in the showers at headquarters a few nights ago. I thought he’d been captured and tortured.” Makoto's voice dropped to a pained whisper. “But that bitch just treated him and sent him off again. She's slowly killing a good man, not to mention destroying the reputation of our shuudan, and by extension, ourselves.”

“Thank you for bringing this to our attention Sasaki-san,” Hoshu said in a frosty voice. “We will deal with our illustrious Shuhan. Do you know where Takahashi-san is now?”

“He was sent to service a Yakuza boss in Kanegawa.”

“I believe you should go retrieve our shadow wolf, he is far too valuable an asset to be languishing away in Kanegawa,” the Hayashi patriarch decided. “Take your time. We should have things in order here by the time you return.”

Makoto pulled on his coat and stood, but before he could leave an anxious hand clutched his sleeve. “Do you need help, Sasaki-san? I feel like I should do something. Yoshi and I have always been, not friends exactly, but friendly, comrades. We’ve done assignments together. How he must hate me.” Tatsuya buried his face in his hands.

“I think you’d be surprised.” Makoto laid a hand on his shoulder in a show of support. “I highly doubt you’d so much as catch a glimpse of Yoshi if he hated you. It seems to me he’d be the last person who would blame a son for his father's mistakes. Just treat him like you always have and I’m sure it will be fine.”

Dinner had been a torturous affair for the shadow wolf. Once the guests arrived he was ordered up on the table and the plug removed. The Yakuza then invited his guests to draw straws. The winner happily clambered up behind the shackled ninja and began forcing a salami into his anus, hooking a finger through the ring behind his scrotum to keep him from squirming away. Once his tormentor was satisfied with the amount pushed inside he flipped a startled Yoshi onto his back, pinning him in place while the guests hacked off portions of the protruding sausage to fill their plates.

After the sausage had been served the shadow wolf breathed a sigh of relief, at least none of the knives had slipped and severed something vital. He relaxed further when the remainder of the salami was roughly tugged out and tossed aside, only to have the four men begin filling his ass with polished stone orbs. The small spheres were not only making him uncomfortably full, they were also heavy, placing extra pressure on already abused tissue.

Just when he thought he'd burst the ninja was pulled off the table and maneuvered into a swinging seat. Yoshi suppressed a shiver as his legs were bound awkwardly to his chest while his cheeks were spread wide by the straps.

"We'll be back when we finish our meal, slut." The crime lord fisted his hand in matted strands and tugged. "I'd advise you not to let any of those balls escape before you're given permission. You wouldn't want me to have to punish you." With a hearty laugh the group headed back to the table, leaving the elite to retreat into his own memories in an attempt to escape the burning humiliation of the situation.

I never knew dinner could take so long. Yoshi fought the desire to panic. *I don't know how much longer I can keep these balls inside.* Soon the four men wandered away from the table and over to where he hung, a polished orb desperately clutched by weakened muscles as it hung halfway out of his ass. "Hmmp." The Yakuza slid a bowl under the suspended figure. "Now push those balls out so we can fuck you."

The shadow wolf relaxed and let the orbs fall, wincing at the clatter they made as they landed in the metal bowl. As more and more emerged, it became harder to force them down his abused passage. His watchers took furious delight in his sweating and straining, passions flaring at the sight of the lean body contorted in pain. Yoshi let loose a hoarse cry as the last few passed through the ring and fell with a clang.

"Very good, boy," the crime lord said. "We have a treat for you. We're going to try a little experiment. I want to see how many of us can fit inside you at the same time. If you manage to take all four of us, I'll let you come."

Yoshi shuddered at the implications, resigning himself to relax as much as possible to minimize the damage. *At least I know there's a medic on call.* Almost immediately he felt the Yakuza press hard against his back as he easily slid inside. An immensely fat man who smelled of body odor and bad breath smashed himself tight against the shadow wolf's chest as he joined him. The third man stepped up to the elite's right and battered his way in to rest alongside the others.

By this point the ninja was feeling painfully stretched, with one more to go. He glanced at the remaining man from under lowered eyelids. *Oh, just great, they had to save the biggest for last.* Yoshi took a deep breath and closed his eyes, willing his body to relax as stubby fingers tugged at his overextended ring. When the blunt head of the last man's cock began to force its way through the elite felt himself tear. *Surprised it took that long,* he mused as he struggled to suppress the pain.

Once all four men were seated to the hilt they began to move. Each surrendered to his own rhythm, leaving Yoshi feeling like there was a badger in his ass fighting to get out.

After what seemed like hours, his tormentors began to peak. The shadow wolf was smothered in mounds of hot, sweaty flesh as they collapsed against him before pulling out. The Yakuza and his companions moved away to clean themselves and grab glasses of wine. The shinobi was left dangling, blood and semen dripping out of his abused ass to puddle on the floor.

Yoshi pulled himself out of his daydream when the gigantic servant strode into the room and lifted him out of the swing, turning him to lie face down on a soft couch. He heard voices, and was relieved when he felt healing salve being applied, soothing and helping repair the inevitable injuries caused by the crime lord's games.

The shadow wolf slowly sat up, waiting for the surge of pain that never came. "Thank you,"

he whispered hoarsely.

“Have some water,” the giant rumbled. “They’ll expect you back soon.”

Yoshi gratefully took the offered glass, gulping down the water and wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. “Thank you again,” he said more clearly.

The giant bent and hoisted him once more, carefully maneuvering through a set of connecting doors into a room dominated by the biggest bed the elite had ever seen. “Wait here,” came the rumbled command before the door swung shut, leaving Yoshi alone with his thoughts.

Makoto shouldered his pack and set off toward the gate. *It takes three days to get to Kanegawa on foot. Yoshi only arrived today, I’m sure he’s still fine.* Having thus reassured himself the interrogator set off at a feverish pace. He was determined to halve the usual time for the trip, hoping to retrieve the shadow wolf before he suffered any further abuse.

The clan heads remained in the teahouse, arguing about the problem at hand. “If not Rin, then who?” Daichi asked. “Yoshi is the only one anywhere near her strength, and knowing what I know now I couldn’t in good conscience support him.”

“That’s a lousy thing to say, Narita,” Tatsuya shot back, lifting his head from the cradle of his arms. “You all know Yoshi is a talented, dedicated, shinobi. Why should what was done to him change anything?”

“It is unfortunate, Tatsuya,” Hoshu interjected, “but think of the repercussions if, in his capacity as Shuhan, Yoshi was forced to deal with the same men who abused him. I doubt they would take him, or this shuudan, seriously. Not to mention the fact that our shadow wolf might just choose to kill them himself, making a messy situation even messier.” He stopped and took a breath, eying the men around the table. “I propose we set a new standard. The Shuhan doesn’t necessarily need to *be* the strongest, merely command the loyalty of the strongest. Perhaps, we should be looking for a man who is respected and admired instead.”

The assembled shinobi pondered Hoshu’s words. What he suggested made sense, but it went against everything they’d been taught to believe.

“I take it you have someone in mind, Hayashi.” Naoki broke the silence. “Why don’t you just tell us who it is.”

“Sato Daisuke,” Hoshu replied. “Everyone admires him. He’s always cheery, has trained most of the younger nin in weaponry, and it only takes one trip to that karaoke bar by the armory on a Friday night to see how he manages to keep everyone in line.” The elder trailed off uneasily, unsure of what the others were thinking.

“I have no problem with Daisuke, at least in theory, although he is a bit young,” Akihiko ventured. “But won’t the other shuudan jump at the opportunity to take advantage of our Shuhan’s weakness?”

“How on earth would they know how weak or strong he is? It’s not like the Shuhan engage in a wrestling match when they meet. Most of the duties are administrative; I’m sure our day to day affairs will run much more smoothly under Daisuke’s care. As for the question of age, he’s twenty-eight, hardly a child, and he’s been on active duty for fifteen years.” Hoshu watched as realization dawned on the faces of Aya and Daichi.

“Well, someone should go get him then,” Naoki suggested.

"I'll go." Tatsuya was eager to volunteer. "I could use some fresh air." He rose and left the teahouse, heading for the training center in hopes of finding Daisuke. He slid through the doors behind a group arriving for a workout and took a place at the end of a long queue of children. As he waited he took a good look at the man he would soon be serving under. Medium height, slight of build, with a long fall of sable hair and twinkling chocolate eyes, the cheery expression on his face seemed its natural state as he joked and chatted with his comrades.

"Tatsuya-san." Daisuke was surprised to see the clan leader at the training center, normally the elite trained privately. "I didn't know you were assigned to help out tonight."

"I'm not exactly here to help. Some of the clan leaders would like to speak with you. Would you mind coming with me when you finish here?"

"Is this going to take long?" Daisuke fretted as he stuffed his belongings into a satchel.

"Don't think so." Tatsuya smiled and slung an arm around the instructor's shoulders, steering him out into the night.

When they reached the teahouse, Daisuke slowed to a halt. "Am I in some kind of trouble? I just want to be prepared."

"It's nothing bad, Sato-san, I promise," the elite replied with a wide smile. "You can trust me, I wouldn't lead you into a trap."

"Of course I trust you, you're a shinobi of Kobayashi shuudan. I trust you with my life."

"Ah, Daisuke," Hoshu exclaimed with a welcoming smile as soon as the pair stepped inside. "Come and join us please. We have a favor we'd like to ask of you."

"Of course, I will be glad to assist you in any way I can." The younger man bowed politely to the assembled elders. "What is it I can do for you?"

"We have decided to remove Rin from her position as Shuhan. It has come to our attention that she has been misusing her power and encouraging the abuse of one of her men. We will no longer allow her to sully the name of Kobayashi shuudan," Aya explained.

"When Rin came to power circumstances were different. We had just found out that Nakamura shuudan was trying to incite the other clans to move against us," Daichi continued.

"What they are trying to say is we would be honored if you would accept the mantle of Shuhan, Daisuke." Hoshu smiled at the stunned look he received.

"Me?" the young man said. "I'm just a weapons instructor. Why in Kami's name would you want me to be Shuhan?"

"Everyone likes you, Daisuke. All the shinobi know you and respect you. You are one of the most capable people we have when it comes to organization and administration, and that's a lot of what a Shuhan does. If you need help you'll have the clan heads to lean on," Daichi explained. "Just say yes already, there's no good reason not to. If you don't I'm not sure we'll be able to come up with another candidate we feel comfortable with."

"I need to understand why you're doing this," Daisuke said. "It sounds a lot like treason to me. No offense to anyone here, but I am loyal to the shuudan."

"No offense taken," Hoshu replied. "It seems that Rin has ongoing expenses for her opium habit. Add to that her outstanding debts and she found herself in dire financial straits. She decided that the best way to meet those obligations was to force one of her high-ranking elite to act as a sex slave for hire."

"Oh, Kami," Daisuke managed, covering his face with his hand in dismay. A shudder ran down his spine as he wondered how he would react to being given such an assignment. "Who is

it?”

“Takahashi Yoshi,” Tatsuya blurted out. “I feel so guilty, Daisuke. My own father started this whole horrible mess, he used Yoshi's father as well. I can't stop thinking about how much he must hate this place and everyone who lives here.”

“It's alright,” the instructor assured him, wrapping an arm around broad shoulders and drawing him down to sit. “I'm sure that Takahashi-san loves this shuudan and its people very much. If anyone could have survived without our protection it's him, yet despite what he's been ordered to do he's remained loyal. And didn't I see you two at the barbecue stand last week? I've seen how well he dodges Jun-san. There's no way he'd eat with you if he didn't want to.”

“And that is a good demonstration of why we want you to be Shuhan,” Naoki remarked. “I think the people of Kobayashi shuudan deserve a leader who cares about their well-being.”

“I guess I accept,” Daisuke replied in a daze.

“We'll all help you get sorted out and settled in. First though, we have a little housecleaning to do.” Aya slammed her balled fist into her hand. At that the clan heads rose as one, bowed to him and headed off, leaving Daisuke to wonder if perhaps he'd hit his head at some point and this was all a bizarre hallucination.

With that thought pounding through his brain the instructor slowly headed home, shoveling some cold rice into his mouth before tumbling into bed. *I hope all this makes some kind of sense in the morning*, he thought as his eyes slipped shut and he passed into sleep.

Yoshi tensed when the door opened, the Yakuza and his friends laughing and joking as they entered. “Are you ready for your reward, boy?”

“Yes, Master, whatever you desire,” the shadow wolf acceded. “Where do you wish me?”

“Right there on the bed is perfect.” The crime lord stroked sticky fingers over the elite's silky flesh. “You are going to get to try out those new piercings of yours. We want to see how well you can fuck, boy. We expect you to give us a good show.”

The door opened again and the giant strode in, dropping a boy of twelve or thirteen onto the mattress. “Have at him,” the Yakuza urged. “You earned it.”

“I will not,” the shadow wolf retorted. “He's a child for god's sake.”

“You will do as you're told, boy,” the crime boss insisted.

“I will not,” Yoshi declared icily, turning his back as he quickly calculated his odds if it came to a fight. *Damn ki block. Still, I can definitely take these four, it's the big guy I've got to worry about.* He was unsurprised when the Yakuza grabbed his shoulder, whipping him around so they were face to face.

“Are you saying no to me, slut?” he growled.

“I'm saying hell no,” the elite snapped back. “No children. I'll even go so far as to warn you. If any of you touch that boy I'll have no qualms about killing you. Let him leave and you can go back to torturing me, I'll not fight you.”

“You don't order me, boy,” the Yakuza declared. “I'll do whatever I choose.”

“Not this time.” Yoshi grasped a pudgy wrist in long fingers and twisted it, dropping the man to his knees. “Let him go.”

The crime lord sullenly gestured for one of the men to open the door. The moment he did,

the boy leapt from the bed and bolted down the hall. As soon as the door shut Yoshi dropped his hold and returned to his submissive posture. “Your funeral, boy,” the Yakuza muttered as he stormed to the door and yelled down the hall.

“Jubo,” he began when the servant's looming bulk appeared at the door. “This boy refused his reward. I believe he needs a lesson in how to fuck.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Jubo strode toward the kneeling shinobi, sweeping him up and tossing him back on the bed. He settled himself on the edge and pulled a startled shadow wolf into his lap. Yoshi struggled when he found himself hoisted onto muscular thighs.

“Relax,” the giant rumbled as he stroked surprisingly gentle fingers across his chest. “This doesn't have to hurt.”

A large hand grasped the shadow wolf's chin, turning his head so his lips could be captured in a deep kiss. The elite tried to pull back, only to have the fingers tighten cruelly. “I said relax. You'll regret it if you don't.”

I can't, I don't want to enjoy this. Yoshi began to struggle in earnest, drawing jeers and catcalls from the group of observers. Jubo, however, continued inexorably towards his goal, gently pinching and rolling a pale nipple before tugging on the ring piercing it, causing the elite to let out an involuntary mewl.

The giant smiled at the reaction and repeated his action on the other side, using the distraction to reposition them. The shadow wolf stiffened when he found himself stretched out on his back with Jubo hovering over him, but the large man merely smiled. He continued to toy with the nub even as his head dipped and he took the ninja's other nipple into his mouth.

The elite let out a throaty groan when the hot mouth slid lower and Jubo's tongue tickled the slit of his erection, arching and crying out when the giant swallowed him to the root. Yoshi thrashed his head from side to side, fighting his body's reaction.

The shadow wolf was startled out of his thoughts when his legs were folded up to his chest, bound in place by a strong arm. Jubo's mouth slid to tease and suckle his swollen balls, teeth tugging on the ring positioned there, sending ripples of sensation up Yoshi's spine.

“No, stop, please,” he cried when a hot tongue began to tickle his entrance. He trailed off into a startled shriek when Jubo pressed his lips firmly against the puckered muscle and growled, shooting burning tendrils of pleasure up the elite's spine. *Gods help me I'm so sick.* Yoshi involuntarily pressed closer to the source of the pleasure, wailing when the tip of that wicked tongue finally slipped inside.

The elite finally abandoned all restraint in the face of the rising tide of pleasure, writhing and moaning wantonly as he tried to deepen the stimulation. “Hold your knees.” Jubo slid a hand under each buttock, easily lifting the lithe ninja and repositioning them so he was once again seated on the edge of the bed with Yoshi hovering over his erection.

Ever so slowly Jubo began to lower him, and they both gasped when the bulbous head of his penis finally breached the tight ring. An eternity later he was seated to the hilt, drawing a warbling moan from Yoshi as his prostate was firmly stroked. The shadow wolf collapsed back against the large body, head lolling on a strong shoulder as a tongue tickled the delicate shell of his ear. “That's it, feel me, enjoy what I'm doing to your body.” The giant slowly began to withdraw, smirking wickedly at the echoing shriek he garnered when he snapped his hips up.

“Let's get rid of this, shall we?” Jubo grasped the purpling length and gave it a firm stroke before thumbing off the constricting ring under the head.

“Aahh aaaahhhhhhhhh,” Yoshi moaned as blood rushed through the sensitive tissue.

“Feels good, doesn’t it,” Jubo husked. “Just like you feel good around me, so hot and tight.”

“No ... please stop...” the shadow wolf whimpered as each thrust struck his prostate head on. He felt like his mind was melting, unable to accept the pleasure streaking through his body in light of the hatred he had for the entire situation. He managed to cope with his duties by refusing to allow himself any pleasure from the acts he engaged in. In fact, he never willingly engaged in any sex act, no longer even allowing himself the solitary pleasure of masturbation.

The elite began to writhe frantically, desperate to get away. Jubo merely chuckled and sped up his thrusts, adding a twisting stroke along Yoshi's shaft that sent a lightning bolt of ecstasy shooting through the piercings adorning his length.

“Kami, help me.” The shadow wolf's legs jerked spastically as he struggled to find a means to escape the tide of pleasure engulfing him.

“The only god who'll be helping you is me.” Jubo forced his mouth over Yoshi's. He swept his tongue inside, easily dominating the panicked shinobi and reveling in the frantic fluttering of his tight ring as he fought to escape. “You’re going to come with me, beautiful,” he growled as he finally removed the cock ring at the base of the elite's shaft. The giant tugged the rings trembling in the swollen head and Yoshi let out a husky scream as he shot ropes of creamy seed across his chest. Jubo gave one more mighty thrust, burying himself balls deep in the quivering passage.

Yoshi only vaguely registered when his position changed, gentle hands lifting him off the giant's softening shaft and laying him on the bed. While his exterior was placid, inside it was quite a different matter. *Dirty, filthy, disgusting, nasty*, every epithet he could think of roared through his overwhelmed mind. *Just admit it, you liked it, you sick fuck. This really is all you're good for.*

The shadow wolf stayed limp, locked in his own mental hell and oblivious to the fact that Jubo continued to rain kisses across his face. “So, so, sweet,” the giant rumbled. “It's been so long since I've had such a beautiful boy to play with. Look, I'm already hard again for you.” He lifted pale legs onto his shoulders and buried himself in one smooth stroke. The giant immediately set a punishing pace, his hot hand caressing the underside of the elite's shaft. The body beneath him shuddering as the barbells twisted the tender flesh.

At some point the giant dropped one of the shinobi's legs, wrapping it around his waist as he twisted Yoshi to lay on his side, massive hands kneading silky cheeks as he spread them wide so he could penetrate deeper. The shadow wolf remained eerily silent, staring blankly into space, even as his body reacted to the intense stimulation.

When he felt his balls tightening Jubo began twisting the rings through the tip of the elite's penis, nails dipping into the slit as creamy seed spurted over his hand. The giant pulled almost completely out of Yoshi's body, slamming back through the clenching passage, every muscle in his massive body drawn tight as he filled the submissive body with his hot cum.

The giant pulled out, admiring the way his seed leaked out of the quivering ring in little spurts. “Very nice, Jubo,” the crime lord decided. “But my boy doesn't seem to be enjoying himself. Perhaps he'll react better to your whip than your dick.”

“Sorry, beautiful,” the giant rumbled, easily hoisting the limp figure over his shoulder as he rose to move the rack into position. Well practiced hands soon had the shadow wolf firmly secured and Jubo stepped back, unfurling the whip on his belt and cracking it a few times to

loosen his swing. The pale body jumped when the lash made contact, a red furrow immediately blooming on the alabaster skin, but Yoshi remained silent, staring at nothing as the strokes rained down.

The Yakuza finally called a halt when no unbroken flesh remained. From shoulders to knees the long back was nothing but a devastated landscape of raw flesh. "Leave it," he barked when Jubo reached to unshackle the elite. "I will get my money's worth out of it one way or another."

"Yes, my lord," the giant rumbled, coiling his whip and returning to his position outside the chamber.

"Have at it men," the crime boss offered, gesturing toward where Yoshi hung. "First one to get a reaction picks the next game." His guests were anxious to comply, eagerly lining up even as they argued amongst themselves as to who would go first.

Makoto finally paused just outside the border with Kanegawa, taking a few minutes to gulp down some food and drink some water before starting off again. *Only a few more hours.* He willed the shadow wolf to hang on just a little longer.

The thought got him up and running, determined not to rest until Yoshi was safe.

A mere thirteen hours after leaving Kobayashi shuudan, Sasaki Makoto barged into the Yakuza's estate, feeling out with his ki to locate his quarry. He slunk through a maze of connecting passages, trying to travel in the most direct line. He turned down yet another passage, spotting a set of double doors at the end guarded by a man even larger than the interrogator himself.

There, not long now. The interrogator hurried down the passage, sacrificing stealth for speed as he rushed the guard. "You cannot pass," Jubo rumbled as he moved to block the entrance.

"Like you could stop me," the torture master chuckled darkly. "You can still save yourself. I have no quarrel with you."

"My lord is currently occupied," the giant insisted. "I'm afraid I'll have to restrain you."

"You will not keep me from what's mine." Makoto pulled a kunai as he dropped to sweep the massive man's legs. Jubo toppled, wrapping a hand around the interrogator's leg as he fell and slamming him to the floor.

"He's far too pretty for the likes of you," Jubo rumbled. "Too bad you're so possessive, otherwise I might be willing to share."

"How dare you," the torture master growled. They scabbled across the floor, each seeking to subdue the other, until Makoto finally managed to pin a hard forearm across the giant's throat. "Did you touch him?" The interrogator increased the pressure, completely cutting off Jubo's air. "I said, did you touch him?"

"His skin feels like silk," the servant taunted, "and he makes the most wonderful noises when he comes."

Makoto saw red, snapping the giant's thick neck before throwing the double doors wide and striding inside. *Oh god, I'm too late.* He froze at the sight of a bleeding and battered Yoshi, a large metallic object protruding from his ass. The elite hung, limp and unresisting, while a man knelt in front of him, intent on sliding something into the slit of his penis.

The torture master gazed in horror at the mutilated mass shackled in front of him before positioning himself protectively in front of the limp figure.

“He will be leaving with me,” Makoto proclaimed. “Rin is no longer Shuhan of Kobayashi shuudan. Any debts you may be owed should be addressed to her personally.”

“I think not, *boy*,” the Yakuza sneered. “Although you’re more than welcome to join him. I’m sure Jubo will take just as much delight in fucking you as he did your friend.”

“If Jubo was the big guy outside, he’s already paid for his crimes.” The interrogator gave a sadistic chuckle. “Obviously we’ve never met, allow me to introduce myself. Sasaki Makoto, head of covert operations for Kobayashi shuudan, and I’m nobody’s boy. I’ll be more than happy to give you a taste of your own medicine and prove it if you don’t move.”

The crime lord reluctantly stepped back, watching through angry, heavy-lidded eyes as the torture master unclasped the shackles pinning the elite in place and stretched him out on the floor. The interrogator carefully removed the bronze bust from Yoshi’s anus before beginning to treat his injuries, slowly binding his back to stem the worst of the bleeding. *That will get us clear of this snake pit at least*, he decided, unwilling to risk spending any more time in the Yakuza’s territory than was necessary. Looking up Makoto demanded a blanket, wrapping the shadow wolf in the soft material and cradling him in his arms as he moved toward the door.

“Just so you know,” the interrogator remarked as he threw open the doors, “you haven’t seen the last of me.” With that he strode confidently out of the estate, breaking into a run as soon as they passed the walls. He maintained the breakneck pace until they were outside the boundaries of the Yakuza’s territory.

Once he felt they were clear of watchful eyes Makoto found a secluded glade. He pulled some soft sweat pants and a t-shirt out of his pack and slipped them on the shell-shocked elite. “That’s a little better, isn’t it? You don’t have to worry anymore, Takahashi-san. Rin has been tossed out of office. No one will be forcing you to do anything you don’t want.”

The torture master shuddered when he thought about the piercings littering the shadow wolf’s body, and he wondered if perhaps he should remove them. *No, the last thing I need is for Yoshi to come to his senses and find me handling his cock. I doubt I’d survive long enough to explain. If he wants them out it will just have to wait until he can do it himself.*

“Come on, Takahashi-san, have some water.” The interrogator slipped a strong arm around the silent figure’s shoulders and lifted him to a sitting position. “There you go.” Makoto pressed a canteen to pale lips, gratified when the unresponsive elite swallowed.

“Jubo, don’t make me go back, please.” The shadow wolf turned pleading eyes on his savior, even as he wound strong arms around Makoto’s neck. “I’ll make it worth your while.” Yoshi leaned in and sealed his mouth over the interrogator’s in a deep erotic kiss.

The scarred man stiffened, eyes going wide. No one had kissed him since he was a child. He was used to people going out of their way to avoid even catching his eye. Makoto tried to pull back, but Yoshi anticipated his reaction, wrapping a strong hand around the back of his head to keep him in place.

“Please. I ... liked what you did, we can do that again. I’ll do anything you want, just don’t make me go back.” Yoshi once more sealed his lips over Makoto’s. This time the interrogator couldn’t resist, bringing a hand up to caress a pale cheek as he dominated the kiss.

When the torture master came to his senses Yoshi was stretched out under him, their erections grinding together as he nipped and sucked a pallid nipple. *Shit, shit, shit, what the hell’s*

the matter with me? He pulled back, mesmerized by the desire apparent in hazy mismatched eyes.

“Jubo, please don’t stop.”

“Takahashi-san.” Makoto shook off his lingering desire and once again focused on the task at hand. “We need to get home.”

“You’ll take me home with you?” the shadow wolf asked. “To *your* house, not back to the estate?”

“Yes, I’ll take you to my house,” the interrogator agreed, anything to get them moving before he did something he’d regret. *What have I gotten myself into.* He shook his head to clear it before extending a hand to the last Takahashi.

Rin jerked awake at the sound of angry voices, lifting her head from the cradle of her arms and wiping the drool off her face. She quickly shoved her pipe under a pile of reports just as the door flew open.

“What is the meaning of this,” she demanded. “You can’t just barge in here.”

“Rin, the council and clan-elders have found you guilty of treason. Your actions have disgraced not only yourself, but also the Kobayashi name, and by implication all of us who live here,” Hoshu said. The other elders spread out to surround the kunoichi. “You have been stripped of the mantle of Shuhan and are to be taken into custody to be tried and punished for your crimes.”

She just laughed. “You don’t seriously think I’m going to let you get away with this?”

“I don’t see that you have a choice,” Tatsuya growled. “I should kill you for what you’ve done.”

“What has your panties in a bunch?” she asked in confusion. “What is it that I’ve supposedly done, anyway?”

“You used Yoshi as a whore, you bitch,” he retorted.

“Oh, that,” she said. “Your father is the one that turned him into a whore, you know. All I did was keep him busy. What?” she whined at the disgusted expression on everyone’s face. “You know he liked it. He’s the biggest slut I’ve ever met.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Aya retorted. “Takahashi’s no bitch. You used his loyalty against him, and that’s the worst crime of all. How can we expect our shinobi to pledge themselves to the shuudan if they’re going to be abused as a result?”

“Get over yourselves,” Rin retorted. “Are you telling me you’d rather be sent on a suicide mission?”

“Yes,” Tatsuya replied. “Personally, I’d rather kill myself. I don’t know how Yoshi’s dealt with it for so long. I would have gone insane.”

“Do you even pay him, Rin?” Naoki asked.

“Not exactly, it’s usually more of a barter situation. They’re not actually paying me,” she replied, unsure of where this was going.

“According to the records,” Daichi said, “Yoshi hasn’t been on an official assignment for three years now. What do you think he lives on?”

“That’s not my problem,” Rin shot back. “I didn’t start this, and I still don’t see how it

concerns any of you. I don't see Takahashi complaining."

"Probably because you sent him on another assignment. Makoto will have him back here soon," Akihiko added.

"But I promised him to the Yakuza for two weeks." Rin tried to come up with a rationale for the status quo. "We had an agreement."

"Then I guess you will have to take his place," Hoshu said. "Takahashi is far too sensitive an asset to allow him to languish in Kanegawa if he doesn't need to. I'm sure we can find much better uses for his skills."

"You seem to be doing most of the talking, Hayashi-san. I assume you've convinced these fools to back you for my position."

"No," Hoshu replied with satisfaction, "I have no interest in the job. We have, however, chosen your successor. It is our hope that he can return honor to this office, something that has apparently been lacking for a very long time."

"That's all very interesting," Rin retorted. "However, I'm still waiting for you to explain how you plan to get rid of me."

"That won't be a problem." Daichi spoke up from just behind her.

Rin tried to raise her hands to summon her powers, only to find them bound at her sides. "Cute," she hissed as Tatsuya stepped forward and fastened ki draining cuffs around her wrists.

The minute he fastened the clasps Aya stepped forward, slapping a meaty hand on Rin's back and pushing her toward the door. "I'm sure we can find a nice, dank cell for you to wait in until Makoto gets back. Hope you weren't counting on getting a tan."

Once Rin was gone they left the office and headed toward the council chamber, intent on getting Daisuke installed as the new Shuhan. The last thing they needed was a leaderless shuudan.

The shadow wolf struggled on gamely, but only a few hours after leaving the estate it was already apparent he was in no shape for a forced march. "Let's set up camp here for tonight," Makoto suggested. "I'll go gather some firewood."

"Don't leave me," Yoshi pleaded, latching on to the interrogator's arm with an iron grip. "You promised to take me home with you."

"I'm not leaving you," Makoto assured him. "I'll be right over there, but I need to make a fire so I can fix you something to eat."

"I don't want to eat. I just want you."

"Just wait here, Takahashi-san. I give you my word I'll be right back." Yoshi leaned back against a fallen tree, still regarding the interrogator with suspicion. Makoto was unwilling to stray outside that keen gaze, so he gathered some fallen branches from the fringe of the clearing.

"See, all done." Makoto built a fire, seating himself next to its warmth and motioning for Yoshi to join him. He was not expecting to find himself with a lap full of wriggling elite, eagerly pressing against him as hot tempting kisses rained across his face.

"You didn't leave me," Yoshi purred as he snuggled closer, rubbing his face against the interrogator's chest.

"I promised I wouldn't," the torture master replied stiffly as he tried to extricate himself

from the clinging grip.

“Everyone always leaves me,” the shadow wolf whispered as his eyes finally slipped shut and he fell into an exhausted sleep in his rescuer's arms.

“I won't leave you, Yoshi,” the interrogator whispered. “Not until you want me to.” He gave in and stroked a tentative hand through cobweb soft strands, knowing that as soon as the elite ninja realized who he was cuddling with he would pull away. *Hell, I'll be lucky if he doesn't kill me*, Makoto thought with a shudder. *Still, it's what he needs now*. Unwilling to admit how much he, too, appreciated the illusion of closeness after so many years alone.

Inside Nakamura shuudan's underground headquarters, the feared master of spells and illusion idly reviewed his decades-long plan to destroy his former home. Although Kazuki was now in his late fifties he appeared no older than his early twenties, with a pretty, almost fey, face set with piercing blue eyes and framed by a thick fall of inky black hair. He twisted a random lock between long fingers as he waited for his apprentice to return with the latest update

“I have news from Chiba, my lord,” his apprentice, Kenta, said as he knelt at his master's feet. “Rin has been removed from office and imprisoned and Sasaki's retrieving Takahashi from our Yakuza friend.”

“Now, now, pet,” Kazuki soothed. “You need to learn patience. Takahashi will be yours soon enough.”

“And how do you expect that to happen without Rin in charge?” the apprentice asked.

“You need to learn to trust me,” Kazuki replied coldly. “Or are you thinking of changing your allegiance?”

“No, my lord.” Kenta prostrated himself at his master's feet. “I live to serve only you.”

“Very good, precious, very good.” The powerful shinobi ran an absent-minded hand through walnut-colored strands before suddenly wrenching Kenta's head around to meet his gaze. “Make sure it stays that way,” he commanded, releasing his hold and sending the startled man tumbling to the ground.

Kazuki paused when he reached the doorway, turning to address his underling. “What you fail to realize is how motivated my old friend is. She'll move heaven and earth for what I've promised. I have no doubt she'll be joining us soon with your prize.”

“Thank you my lord,” the apprentice replied, bowing low as his master swept out of the hall.

Daisuke woke before dawn to a thunderous pounding on his door. ““suke, wha's that?” his longtime lover Fukazawa Souta slurred disjointedly. The compact, leanly muscled shinobi muttered grumpily as he stretched his limbs, snuggling into the pillow in an attempt to recapture the blissful slumber he'd just been jarred from. His main business was, after all, assassination. That meant a lot of late nights and missed sleep.

“Just the door,” the instructor replied, planting a kiss on his lover's head as he slipped into a robe and went to answer it.

“Daisuke, it's time,” Tatsuya announced, grabbing his arm and yanking the startled man onto the stoop.

“At least let me get dressed.” Daisuke pulled his arm back and retreated into his apartment. “I'll start some coffee.”

“We don't have time for that. Rin's in custody, nobody's in charge.”

“And five minutes more or less won't make any difference,” he retorted. “Believe me, coffee will help get me there a lot quicker.”

“Fine, I'll make the damn coffee. You just go get dressed.”

“Who's't'Dai?” Souta mumbled into the pillow, hoping against hope that whatever was going on didn't require him to be upright.

“Kobayashi Tatsuya,” the instructor replied. “I never had a chance to tell you about my day yesterday.”

“Okay,” his boyfriend sighed, “I'm up.” He dragged himself upright and fixed Daisuke with his best glare. “Why is Tatsuya here before dawn? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No, the opposite of trouble. At least, I hope it is. I had a meeting with the clan leaders after I got off work last night. Rin is no longer in charge,” Daisuke explained, lips thinning in anger as he thought about the reason for her removal. “And, surprise, they asked me to be the next Shuhan.” He gave a weak chuckle, watching Souta's face for his reaction.

“Ha, ha, good one, Dai,” the elite assassin said with a grin. “Never mind, I'll go ask Tatsuya.” He pulled on some boxers and wandered toward the kitchen, scratching his ass absently. “Morning, 'suya. Why the hell are you here so early?”

“Didn't Daisuke tell you?” the clan head answered, trying to hide his surprise at finding Souta there at such an early hour and in such an obvious state of undress, “He's been chosen as the next Shuhan. He needs to be sworn in.”

“I thought he was kidding.” The assassin fell heavily against the counter. “Shit, I can't sleep with the Shuhan, it'd be a sacrilege or something.”

“Of course you can,” Daisuke said with a chuckle as he came up behind his lover and kissed him on the cheek. “I may even assign it to you as a punishment. You can be my night guard.”

“Very funny,” Souta replied.

“It's a real position,” Tatsuya jumped in, “and you'd actually be a good choice. It's obvious Daisuke's comfortable with having you around.”

“Although I don't know why,” the instructor remarked wryly as he pulled the milk out of the fridge, only to find the carton was empty.

“Oops,” the assassin exclaimed. “I meant to buy another one. Sorry, Dai.”

“It's okay, Sou. But shouldn't you hurry up and get dressed? You're holding everything up. After all, I wouldn't want my boyfriend to miss such a big event in my life.”

“Uh, right.” The elite wandered back into the bedroom to find some clothes.

“Is this going to be a problem?” Daisuke asked, indicating himself and his departed lover.

“No ... no,” Tatsuya assured him, waving his hands in front of his face. “I was just a bit surprised. I thought you guys didn't like each other. You're always chewing Souta out for something whenever I see you.”

“That's how I know he loves me,” the assassin chuckled as he sidled up behind his lover and wrapped strong arms around his waist. “Right, Dai?”

“Are you finally ready?” the instructor replied. “Let's go if we're going to do this.”

Makoto woke with a start. *Must have fallen asleep*, he decided, noting that the fire had burned down to flickering embers. He glanced down at the lanky form still curled up against his chest. *What's going on inside that head of yours, Takahashi?* He ran his fingers across the exposed flesh of the shadow wolf's arm, noting the difference in texture between the satiny cream colored ribbons of scar tissue and the silky alabaster flesh.

I just hope you recognize me soon, it's getting harder and harder to say no to you. The shadow wolf mumbled in his sleep, nuzzling his face into the crook of the torture master's neck. Hot breath gusted over the sensitive flesh and sent a shiver through the interrogator's frame.

Yoshi suddenly turned, propping himself up on one elbow as he studied a nervous Makoto with sharp, unreadable eyes. "Just checking," he muttered before laying back down and instantly dropping back to sleep, leaving the interrogator awake to dwell on all the ways the man currently using him as a pillow could kill him, should he decide to do so. Makoto finally drifted back to sleep as he passed five hundred, his last thought that, while moving was probably smart, he was warm and comfortable and there were worse ways to die.

The last Takahashi shivered in his sleep as he remembered all the times he'd been left behind. His mother had gone when he was only four, lost on an assignment. He couldn't even remember what she'd looked like, just the press of her soft, sweet smelling cheek against his as she headed out.

His father's passing he remembered all too well, haunted by guilt that it was somehow his fault. He'd watched the strong warrior slip further and further away, and it hadn't helped that he'd consciously pulled back himself, unwilling to be tainted by whatever was making the older Takahashi's life a misery.

The shadow wolf whimpered in his sleep, tossing his head as a vision of the once mighty shinobi lying in a pool of his own blood assaulted his mind. He'd tried so hard to stop the bleeding, too young and traumatized to realize it was already far too late. "I'm sorry 'tousan, I didn't mean it," he heard his child-self sob. "Please don't leave me."

His squad was next. Gone long before Yoshi realized how much such a loss would hurt, and etching the first age lines into his face. The signs of wear were a constant reminder of just how dangerous it was for him to get close to anyone.

And then came Oonishi-sama, the master who had cared for him after Ren's suicide. That was the hardest loss of all. More of a father than even his own, his shishou had opened his home and his family to the young apprentice after his father's suicide. The death of his beloved master was hard enough. The fact that he died saving the shadow wolf, falling to an attack intended for the young elite, convinced the already reclusive nin that he was a curse to anyone who got too close.

After Oonishi-sama's death the Shuhan had cast him in his new role, guaranteeing he'd never again allow anyone close.

The shadow wolf curled up tighter, clinging to Makoto's chest like a lifeline as he recalled

those hectic days. Newly appointed to black ops, he stuffed his sorrow behind the black mask and reported for duty. He readily acquiesced to the ki binding Kobayashi-sama placed on him, duty outweighing his sense that something was very wrong.

The hard price of genius meant Yoshi never interacted with children his own age. He always found their pursuits too babyish, while those at his skill level refused to associate with someone so much younger. Thus he reached the age of fifteen without any real understanding of intimate relations, and never even considered that such things were possible between two men.

“What do you know of the needs of men, Yoshi?” Kobayashi-sama had asked. He’d never forget the old man’s response when he’d admitted his ignorance. “Well then, we’ll just have to show you,” the Shuhan had muttered before ordering him to strip.

When the shadow wolf finally stood naked and mortified before his leader he instantly obeyed the voice of authority telling him to kneel, never expecting the hard hands that buried themselves in his hair as an even harder cock was forced down his throat. By the time he was shoved to his knees the teenager was in a state of shock, unable to process the conflicting feelings rocketing through him. When the old man buried himself in his virgin entrance Yoshi shut down, concentrating on the familiar feeling of pain to anchor him in this unnerving situation.

He shivered harder as flashes of that initiation came back to haunt him, wondering, as always, what it was about him that caused such a reaction. When Kobayashi-sama had finally finished with him the Shuhan brusquely ordered him to dress and sent him on his first assignment, two weeks as a ‘special diplomatic envoy’ to the Mochizuki shuudan’s leader.

Makoto stirred as the elite’s movements became more frantic. The shadow wolf’s time with the Mochizuki leader had been particularly distressing, forever wedding the concepts of pain and pleasure in the mind of the last Takahashi. He’d had his first whipping there, hard on the heels of the utter embarrassment of being offered to the Shuhan’s guests as a plaything.

There had been a young medic, the elite had a vague memory of a teen with hair a shade or two darker than tree bark and kind eyes. He had sworn he’d rescue Yoshi, but his promises were for naught. By the time his two weeks were through the shadow wolf swore never to believe anyone’s promises again, it wasn’t worth the pain of disappointment.

“It’s alright, Takahashi-san.” The torture master gently stroked matted strands from his face. “You’re safe. I’m here and I won’t leave you.” The restless elite quieted at the sound of his voice, fingers clutching Makoto’s coat in a death grip.

Yoshi’s mind continued to torment him by replaying the worst moments of those years. Bloody assassinations bled into painful assignments, and neither extreme gave him any assurance of his humanity.

The young shadow wolf had been the lynch-pin cementing fragile alliances, spending time with the leaders of all the rival shuudan. If Mochizuki taught him pain, Iwagashi taught him extremes, taking two cocks, a fist, being bathed in piss. Patience was the gift that remained. His mind shied away from his time in the barren hall of the Kai, the Kai no Shuhan’s tastes were . . . specialized. There Yoshi found himself tightly bound and penetrated with a variety of toys and devices. He let out a low pained cry as he relived the first time something had been inserted into the slit of his penis, tears squeezing from the corners of his eyes as the remembered pain and fear coursed through him.

“Sshhhhhh,” Makoto crooned. “I’ve got you, Yoshi. You’re safe, no one will hurt you. I

swear to you.”

Some part of the slumbering elite's mind latched on to that voice, taut muscles relaxing minutely.

“It's just a dream,” the deep rumble continued. “You’re safe here with me.”

That's right, Jubo has me. A smile sketched its way across the shadow wolf's face. *He'll keep me safe.* His brief moment of happiness quickly slipped away. *If you knew everything I've done, would you still call me beautiful?*

So much time had just slipped by. On three or four occasions each year Yoshi would pass silently out of the enclave, only to return haggard and drawn several weeks later. When Kobayashi-sama died a part of him rejoiced, even as he damned himself for his disloyalty.

If I'd only known. The thought resonated through the elite's mind. His frown deepened as he recalled the heady freedom of those few brief days. *Until she came.* Rin, the current Kobayashi no Shuhan, and the bane of his existence. She had declared him an outmoded relic, too blood-thirsty and unpredictable for the field. Instead, she pressed him into duty full time, using the shadow wolf's body to settle her debts and finance her lifestyle.

He twitched and growled, fists tightening as he thought of the kunoichi. Yoshi finally jerked awake to find himself cradled gently against a broad chest as a massive hand stroked his hair. “You’re safe. I won’t let you go.” The comforting growl had him peering intently at the shadowed form, recognition simmering in the corners of his mind.

“Wait a second,” Daisuke said, pulling to a halt outside the doors to the Shuhan's office. “Souta, are you okay with this?”

“Huh?” the assassin responded eloquently.

“There are too many ways for a shinobi to lose someone that he can’t control. I won’t willingly choose to lose you.”

“You won’t lose me, Dai, I promise,” his lover assured him, giving the instructor's hand a squeeze of support. “Now stop stalling.”

Surprisingly, the swearing in took only a few minutes. The new Shuhan's head was still reeling from the enormity of his responsibilities and he stumbled over to the massive desk, plopping himself down in the comfortable chair. Daisuke looked around the spacious office, heart falling further at the sight of the jumbled piles of paperwork stacked on every flat surface. “I don’t think a single piece of paper has left this office since Rin took over,” he said in a voice halfway between wonder and despair. “It’ll take me months to get this straightened out.”

“I’m afraid you don’t have months, Shuhan-sama. We’ll take turns. Two of us will be here to help you each day until we can figure out where we stand,” Hoshu assured him as the other clan heads nodded their agreement. “Right now, we need to make the announcement. If you will please follow me.”

The group moved to the balcony. A sizable crowd was already assembled below, having gathered when the flag indicating the appointment of a new Shuhan was raised. “Brothers and sisters of Kobayashi shuudan,” Hoshu announced. “Rin has been removed from office and is being held for trial on charges of treason.” He paused to let the news sink in before continuing. “I am very pleased to announce the appointment of a new Shuhan, a man I’m sure you will all be

happy to pledge your loyalty to. Sato Daisuke, the new Kobayashi no Shuhan.”

The crowd exploded, cheers and applause rising to the startled young man's ears. He had not expected his appointment to be met with such approval. “Say something, Daisuke,” Tatsuya whispered, nudging him with his elbow.

“Oh, right,” Daisuke mumbled before stepping to the front and gesturing for silence. “My fellow shinobi, I am honored to be chosen for this office. I pledge my undying loyalty to every one of you, and I promise to do my best to right the wrongs that took place under the previous leadership. Thank you all so much for your trust and support. I give you my word they will not be misplaced.” His eyes hardened as he recalled, yet again, the reasons behind his appointment.

With that he stepped back into the office and began to sort through the paperwork on his desk, intent on finding any information relating to Yoshi. “Hoshu,” the Shuhan ordered, “you start over there. Tatsuya, you can take the pile by the couch. Sou-chan,” he whispered sultrily to his lover. “Look through these.” He dropped a heavy stack of files in the unsuspecting assassin's lap. “Anything about Takahashi give it to me. Don't read it.”

Four hours later Daisuke was nearly ready to abandon his quest and go question Rin. “This one's labeled Takahashi,” Souta announced, shoving a manila folder into the new Shuhan's hands. “Now can we go home?”

Daisuke was already pouring over the contents, eyes hardening as he read the details of Yoshi's service. “It's worse than we thought. Not a single paid assignment in three years. He sold his family house two years ago. Since then he's been living in the smallest apartment in the bachelor quarters. He's two months in arrears and about to be kicked out.”

“I'll go talk to the landlord,” Tatsuya offered.

“And I'll go find out what happened with his house,” Hoshu added through pursed lips.

After they left, Souta wrapped his arms around his lover. “So, just what *is* going on with Takahashi?”

“Yes Daisuke, do tell, what's happening with Yoshi?” a deep voice broke in from the doorway. “While you're at it, perhaps you'd care to explain why you are traipsing around in Rin's office?”

The new Shuhan turned his head to see a tall, muscular man with a long thick mane of white hair. His clothes were wrinkled and dusty, and tiredness was etched in the lines of his face. The traveler stepped further into the room and dropped his heavy pack with a relieved grunt.

“Oh, Genki-sama.” The startled Shuhan pushed away from his boyfriend as he turned to face the Wolf Mountain Sage. “I wasn't expecting to see you.”

“Obviously. Now, what is going on here?”

“Rin has been charged with treason because of this.” Daisuke slapped a file into the startled man's hands. “Read it. Then I'll be willing to talk with you.”

The sage leaned against the door frame and began quickly skimming through the folder, slowing to a stunned halt as he neared the end. “Is this for real?”

“Daisuke doesn't have any reason to lie to you,” Souta countered, pulling out a poisoned senbon and flicking it deftly from finger to finger as he waited for a reason to use it.

“What the hell was the princess thinking?” Genki muttered as he sank back against the wall for support. “Where is she?”

“She's in the holding cells downstairs until Makoto gets back,” the Shuhan explained. “He went to retrieve Takahashi-san.”

“Can I see her?” the sage asked. “I need to hear her say it.”

“Yes, but you’ll have to submit to whatever security the clan heads have set up. She won’t be escaping on my watch.”

Kenta slumped on his bed deep inside Nakamura shuudan's hidden complex. He couldn't believe it. It was so frustrating to be so close to his heart's desire, only to have it once again snatched away. He laid back and shut his eyes, mind going back to the first time he'd seen the shadow wolf.

His hand went to his already stirring arousal as he pictured the things he had seen during his apprenticeship in Mochizuki shuudan. Kenta imagined how it would feel to have that lean body stretched taut across his lap, spanking creamy cheeks until they bloomed red.

He stroked himself, drawing out the pleasure as he pictured an elegant long-fingered hand in place of his own. He gasped as he slowly circled his thumb over the tip, erection pulsing as he imagined pale lips wrapped around his straining cock. *I'm sorry it took so long, precious.* He tried to envision what that handsome face would look like in the throes of ecstasy. The dark haired nin bit his lip and slowed his strokes as his mind replayed things he had seen Yoshi do during his service, adding a sharp twist of his wrist as he visualized burying himself in the elite ninja's tight heat.

On his knees, the illusionist's apprentice mused, remembering the sight of a long pale back arched in passion. *No, I need to see his face.*

Kenta picked up the pace, hand flying over his length, head tipped back in ecstasy. His seed poured over his hand as he came with a growl of Yoshi's name.

Kazuki stood hidden in the shadow of the doorway, playing with a strand of his hair. A slight smile lifted the corners of his mouth. He watched his apprentice's actions as he pondered how close he was to his goal. *Soon, Rin will be here, then I'll have her powers at my command, and a splendid new ki reservoir.* He thought about the shadow wolf, eyes lighting as the slight quirk of his lips stretched into a broad sadistic grin. *Pity you'll be unnecessary.*

I know that voice. Yoshi peered at the large figure cradling him, unconsciously leaning into the hand smoothing his matted locks. “Sasaki-san?”

“You know me,” Makoto whispered, raising a hand and tilting the shadow wolf's head to face him. “I’ve been worried.”

The elite leaned against a broad chest as the interrogator's hand continued stroking his hair. “Where are we?”

“A few hours outside Kanegawa. I came to retrieve you. Your assignment has been canceled. Rin is no longer Shuhan of Kobayashi shuudan. No one will be using you anymore.”

“Who?” Yoshi husked.

“I don’t know who they chose. I left to get you as soon as it was decided,” Makoto explained as he ran a hand over his head. “Does it really matter? Anyone would be better than that bitch.”

“Why you?” the shadow wolf asked.

“Because I couldn’t stand to see you hurt anymore. I’ll kill anyone who tries.”

Yoshi smiled at the response before shaking his head. Unfortunately, his fate had been decided years ago and he couldn’t imagine it changing, although it warmed his frozen heart to think that Makoto would want to. “You don’t need to worry about me Sasaki-san, although I’m grateful you care enough to try.”

The elite molded himself to the interrogator's body, wrapping long arms around his neck. “What would you like me to do to thank you?” Yoshi leaned in and sealed their lips together, hesitating only a moment before deepening the contact.

He knows who I am and he's still kissing me, was Makoto's last coherent thought before abandoning himself to the feeling and responding, pulling the lanky figure close and returning the kiss. He tickled the tip of his tongue along the seam of pale lips, coaxing them to part and allow him entry, sweeping inside to sample the feast that was Yoshi.

“Kami, you taste good.” The interrogator crushed their lips back together, tongues tangling sweetly as they slowly and thoroughly explored each other's mouths. He adjusted their position, leaning back until he was stretched out on the ground with Yoshi curled up on his chest, massive arms securely enfolding the slighter figure, all the while never breaking their connection.

Makoto suddenly realized just what he was doing. No matter how good it felt this wasn’t right. *Yoshi is just expressing his gratitude the only way he knows. It doesn't mean he cares.* He pulled back slightly, locking gazes with the elite's piercing mismatched eyes. “Takahashi-san, you don’t have to do this.”

“You don’t want to?” Yoshi replied almost mournfully.

“I didn’t say that. But I don’t want your gratitude ... or your pity.”

“I know, I’m dirty,” the shadow wolf stated in a heart-wrenchingly small whisper. “It’s wrong to like it, it’s not supposed to feel good.” He paused for a long moment. “What you must think of me.”

The interrogator pressed a kiss to the snowy crown and rubbed a soothing hand up and down his tense spine. “I only think good things about you, Yoshi. You’re so very strong, and brave...” Makoto trailed off for a moment although his hand never stopped its tender strokes. “But you’re so very sad, and lonely, I don’t like that.”

Yoshi turned his head to look at him with something like wonder as he continued. “It is supposed to feel good, you know. It’s normal to feel pleasure.”

“Then why?”

“You’re so beautiful,” Makoto rumbled as he stroked a pale cheek, “and I’m ... *I don't even want to look at myself.* The only reason someone like you would be with me is out of obligation. That makes me no better than that Yakuza.”

“You’re the first person who's cared about what happened to me since Oonishi-sama died,” the shadow wolf said frankly. “What could possibly be more beautiful than that?” Then Yoshi tipped his head and pressed their lips together.

Genki stood outside the holding cell, lips pursed and eyes narrowed as he studied the woman inside. With her ki suppressed Rin could no longer hide the effects of her addiction. *But*

she's still beautiful. After a moment of quiet regret he stepped up to the door and spoke, startling her out of her thoughts.

“Why, princess?”

“You, of all people, shouldn't be questioning me about it,” Rin retorted. “Besides, Kobayashi-sama started it. Who am I to question his decisions?”

“I'm as disappointed in him as I am in you. If I'd have known I would never have supported you for Shuhan.” Genki paced back and forth outside the bars. “I don't know how to even begin to apologize to Yoshi, much less make this right.”

“Why in Kami's name would you apologize? How burdensome can it be? Besides, he's not stable or trustworthy enough for anything else.” Rin shrugged expressively as she watched her old friend's face twist in distaste.

“Did you ever consider that maybe whoring him out was why he became unstable? As far as trustworthy goes, he's never done anything to endanger the shuudan or any of its shinobi,” the sage insisted.

“Only because Kobayashi-sama put a control jutsu on him,” she retorted. “He's just like his damn father.”

“Is your nose still out of joint because Ren turned you down?” the sage growled. “Get over yourself woman. He was six years older than you *and* in love with someone else, of course he turned you down.”

“Ren couldn't be trusted, and neither can his son,” Rin spat back. “It'll be no great loss when the Takahashi clan is gone for good.”

Genki buried his hands in his hair and groaned. “I'll leave you alone then. There's no talking to you.” With that he slowly retreated, leaving Rin alone to continue spinning her plans.

The sage slowly climbed the stairs back to the Shuhan's office. It felt odd to knock and wait to be admitted. Now a stranger was seated behind the familiar desk and Genki felt the world spinning out of his control.

“I should never have supported her nomination. What do you need me to do?”

“How would you punish her?” Daisuke asked as he lifted haggard eyes to meet Genki's angry ones.

“I don't know if I could,” the sage admitted. “There's more to the situation than meets the eye. Rin has a grudge against Yoshi because of something that happened long before the brat was in the picture.”

“And that would be?” the Shuhan prodded.

“You have an interest in ancient history?”

“I have an interest in anything that will help me deal with this situation. For some ungodly reason the clan elders thought I'd be good at dealing with the human side of this job. That and the paperwork,” Daisuke admitted as he eyed the teetering stacks, “and this incident was the trigger. It's important I deal with it quickly and fairly, but Yoshi's been so badly wronged I'm not sure there's any way to make it up to him.”

“Might as well get comfortable then,” Genki muttered. “This is gonna take a while.” He lifted an untidy stack of papers from an upholstered chair and balanced them tight against yet another stack. “The princess wasn't much for paperwork, huh?” He sprawled lazily in the now empty seat.

“It goes back to when we were all a lot younger. Anyway, I always had a thing for the

princess, but she would never give me the time of day, that is, until she met my cousin Ren.”

“You’re a Takahashi?” Daisuke asked, totally derailed by that bit of information.

“Mmhhmm,” the sage hummed noncommittally. “Haven’t used my clan name in years. Takahashi always were a touchy bunch.”

“What does this have to do with Yoshi?” the Shuhan demanded.

“Oh, right. Rin took one look at Ren and she was smitten. The only problem was he was already in love. I kept telling her she was too young, he wasn’t interested, but she wouldn’t listen. I used to follow and watch them,” he admitted. “She went crazy when she heard he was getting married, that’s when she moved to Tokyo. She would never have been in a position to take it out on Yoshi if I hadn’t nominated her for Shuhan.”

“I still haven’t found any record of the spell Kobayashi-sama cast on Yoshi to control his ki. You wouldn’t happen to know it, would you?” Daisuke laid his head on a stack of paper and shut his eyes.

“Dai, it’s time to call it a night.” Souta’s voice rang out of the shadows.

“Soon, Sou, I promise.”

“Now, Dai, I mean it,” the assassin insisted. “You’ll just have to come back tomorrow, Genki-sama.”

“Souta, I’m not done yet,” Daisuke insisted. “I know you mean well, but you can’t interfere with me doing my job. I’ll stop as soon as I can.”

The assassin’s lips thinned and the senbon between his fingers twitched, but he remained silent and faded back into the shadows. “Well, Genki?”

“I don’t know the jutsu, but Yoshi wouldn’t be the first person he used it on. I’m sure Kobayashi-sama would have at least tried it first,” the sage muttered. “I’ll look through his papers if you’ve found them. I may be able to recognize it.”

“Wonderful.” Daisuke shoved several thick volumes at the clearly startled sage. “Start with these. Come back tomorrow and I’ll give you some more. Where are you staying anyway?”

“The princess usually let me stay here,” Genki mumbled under his breath, studying the exhausted Shuhan. *Not the time to ask.* “I haven’t decided yet. I’ll stop by in the morning and check in.”

“Fine,” Daisuke muttered before laying his head on the desk.

“That’s it,” Souta insisted. “You,” he declared as he jabbed a finger at the sage, “get the hell out, and you,” he continued in a somewhat softer tone as he turned to address the Shuhan, “bed now.”

“I’m too tired,” Daisuke mumbled as he snuggled into the tumbled paperwork.

The assassin scooped up his sleepy lover, striding across the room and through the doors leading into the Shuhan’s private apartment, quickly stripping his charge and tucking him under the covers. Moments later he slipped in beside him, pulling Daisuke into his arms and holding him close as he joined his lover in sleep.

Makoto’s eyes went wide in shock. *He thinks I’m beautiful*, his mind kept echoing even as he returned the embrace, the elite’s tongue sweeping boldly into his mouth. “Yoshi ... wait,” the interrogator gasped when he pulled away for air. “Not here.”

“What?”

“If you still want this when we get home, I certainly won’t complain. I just want you to be sure, this feels too much like payment.”

“I don’t have a home.”

“What do you mean?” Makoto tilted his head and studied the suddenly nervous shadow wolf.

“I had to sell my family’s house a couple years ago...” Yoshi trailed off before squaring his shoulders and admitting, “and I got an eviction notice from the landlord just before I left. I imagine my stuff is in the street right now.”

“You’ll stay with me,” the interrogator declared. “At least until we get you a place of your own.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I insist. Besides, you made me promise to take you to my house. Don’t you remember?” Makoto said with a smirk.

“No. That was so rude of me.” Yoshi groaned as he massaged his temples. “I am so sorry.”

“No apology necessary. How are you feeling? Are you up to traveling yet?”

“I feel okay,” the shadow wolf ventured. He stood and stretched languidly before muttering “What the hell?” Yoshi pulled the waistband of his sweat pants away from his body, looking down in dismay. “Shit, I’d forgotten about those.”

“I didn’t want to try and take them out,” the interrogator hastened to explain. “I was afraid you’d wake up and kill me.”

“I can’t kill you,” the elite murmured. “I’m ki blocked, remember?”

“Then you’d hate me, that’s no better,” the torture master retorted.

Yoshi debated whether he should remove the piercings now or not. It wouldn’t be particularly comfortable traveling with them, but he also didn’t know how difficult it would be to do. He didn’t want to risk embarrassing himself in front of Makoto. Even though the interrogator was just doing his duty, it was nice not being alone.

“I’m good,” Yoshi decided. “Let’s go.”

“It’s going to get better. I promise,” a deep voice growled in his ear, sending shudders down the elite’s spine. He turned and peered intently into Makoto’s unreadable eyes, thoughts spinning as he tried to figure out the enigmatic torture master.

“Do you like what you do?” Yoshi instantly regretted his question at the pained hiss it drew in response.

“I did once,” the interrogator admitted. “I was very angry then. Now, it’s my duty. You of all people should understand that duty and desire rarely coincide.” He handed Yoshi a bandana. “This will have to do if you want to cover your face.”

“Thank you.” The shadow wolf stuffed it in his waistband and took a large hand in his. “Let’s go home.” They set off towards the shuudan at a brisk pace, each man locked in his own thoughts as the miles passed inexorably underfoot, marked only by the sound of the wind in their ears.

“I’m sorry.” Yoshi broke the silence after they had traveled about ten miles. “That was unnecessarily cruel of me. I was just curious.”

“I would never hurt you.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

“Right,” Makoto muttered.

“Really,” Yoshi insisted, “you’re just so different than I thought. I’m having a hard time reconciling the man you’re showing me with the man I thought I knew. You have to admit this is out of character for our esteemed head of covert operations.”

“When I was seventeen,” the interrogator rumbled, “I was captured on an assignment in Iwagashi shuudan's territory. I spent six weeks in their torture chambers.”

“I know, Kobayashi-sama talked about it constantly. He was so worried about you.” The shadow wolf paused for a long moment. “Eventually he sent me to service their Shuhan as part of the deal for your release. For a while I hated you. If you had just died, I kept thinking, then I wouldn’t have had to go to Iwagashi.”

“You got me released?”

“Mmmm,” the elite hummed. “I resented you so much. Everyone was so worried about how you were doing, and no one cared at all about what I had to do to get you back.” He turned sad, worried eyes to peer at the interrogator. “I was young, and scared,” he tried to explain, “it didn’t take me long to realize it had nothing to do with you. Since then, I’ve always regretted I didn’t go sooner and save you some of your pain.”

“After Iwagashi,” Makoto spoke up after a long silence, “I was so angry. I remember I was in the hospital shortly after I got back. There was this cute nurse, Hanseki Aoki. I always looked forward to her shift, at least until I overheard her asking to be reassigned. She said looking at me made her want to be sick.”

“It’s hard,” he continued thickly, “to have people look at you like a thing. Harder still to be recipient of their pity. I took my anger out in my work for many years, but now,” he shrugged his shoulders, “well, it’s been a long time, and I’ve learned to live with what I am.”

“Which is?” Yoshi prodded, eyes pinned on the scarred face.

“A boogeyman to scare children with, an inhuman monster.”

“You’re not a monster,” the shadow wolf insisted. “No monster would do what you’re doing for me. I’d trade with you if I could.”

“Yoshi,” Makoto began hesitantly, only to be cut off.

“Inside, where it matters, you are anything but ugly.”

What the hell is he doing, the assassin wondered as Daisuke leapt up from his desk and locked the office door, beckoning him over with a single crooked finger. “Souta,” he whispered. “I think it’s high time you had sex with your Shuhan.”

The toothpick the assassin was worrying flew out of his mouth when he found himself shoved unceremoniously onto his back across the desk and Daisuke climbed on top of him, grinding their pelvises together as he claimed his lover’s mouth in a wet, needy kiss.

“Dai,” he tried to protest. “We shouldn’t do this here.”

“Yes, we should,” the new Shuhan replied with a smirk. Daisuke yanked open his robes, giving the elite shinobi a birds-eye view of his lithe, naked form.

“You aren’t wearing anything under your robes,” Souta said in a strangled voice. “Kami help me but that’s so hot.”

“What are you going to do about it?” the younger man taunted as he dove in for another

sloppy kiss.

The seasoned killer squeaked when he felt his zipper opening, his erection springing up gracefully into Daisuke's deft hand. "I know you want this," the Shuhan whispered as he bent to take the leaking shaft into his mouth.

"That's not the poi ... NT," Souta stammered, thoroughly distracted by the motions of his lover's teasing tongue.

"And what exactly is the point?" Daisuke taunted before taking him to the root. He retreated up the length, nipping at the thick vein, until he reached the tip. The Shuhan nibbled the swollen head, dragging his tongue tantalizingly through the slit.

"Fuck if I remember," Souta muttered before yanking the slightly smaller figure up for another passionate kiss. The Shuhan took advantage of the movement, quickly unbuttoning his partner's shirt, running his hands over hidden muscles before tweaking a pert caramel nipple. The assassin shuddered, wiggling and squirming until he could kick his pants off. He grabbed bronze hips in an iron grip and ground up into Daisuke's plush ass.

"Dai, no." The Shuhan wrapped his hand around his lover's weeping erection and guided it to his entrance, pushing back until the head slipped inside. "You'll hurt your ... self?" Souta's eyes went wide in wonder when he realized the passage had already been stretched and lubricated. "When did you get so kinky?"

"The minute I heard you talking to Tatsuya about sleeping with the Shuhan." Daisuke continued his slow slide down Souta's rock-hard shaft. When he was finally seated flush with his lover's pelvis he tipped his head back, pulling the tie out of his hair to let it cascade in a silky cocoa sheet that fell to just below his shoulder blades.

The assassin watched in awe as strong thighs flexed and the younger man began to slide back up the length impaling him. Souta's gaze remained riveted on the erotic tightening of bronze muscles as Daisuke paused before sliding back down.

The new Shuhan was apparently in no hurry, setting a leisurely pace that soon had his lover panting and moaning wantonly. "Kami," Souta groaned when Daisuke let out a wail as his prostate was struck. The picture his lover made at that moment, lips parted and head tossed back in pleasure, sent his arousal spiraling even higher.

"I don't think I can last much longer," the assassin managed when Daisuke increased the pace. Souta wrapped his hand around the Shuhan's bobbing erection and began to stroke it firmly in counterpoint with the rhythm of his hips. The assassin sat up, strong arm around his lover, and pulled him tight against his chest as he began a punishing series of thrusts. Daisuke shivered and twisted before coming with a loud cry, seed spurting across the desk.

The assassin thrust a few more times into the clenching heat before giving a strangled wail and filling his lover with his seed.

"That was amazing," the Shuhan managed as he pulled himself upright, hair in tangles and come spattered across the front of his robes of office.

"You are going to be the death of me," Souta muttered as he helped his boyfriend off the desk before staggering into the bathroom to clean up and change.

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't enjoy that?" Daisuke asked. "Because you weren't very convincing if that's the case."

"No, no, I enjoyed it. Of course, now I won't be able to look at the Shuhan's robes without getting hard."

“Good thing I’m the Shuhan then. But, I’m afraid it’s back to work for me.” Daisuke kissed his bemused lover thoroughly and headed back to his desk.

Kazuki paced as he waited for Kenta to return with the results of his latest tests. “Well?” he hissed the instant his apprentice stepped through the doors.

“My lord,” the younger man began, “I am afraid you have less time than we thought. Your body is weakening at an increasingly rapid rate. We will have to make the energy transfer within the next two months. Fortunately you have several candidates to choose from.

Not that I want to use any of them, the spell-caster thought. “What news is there from Kobayashi shuudan?”

“Rin is locked in the dungeon awaiting Sasaki’s return. Genki is in town as well,” Kenta explained.

“And the new Kobayashi no Shuhan?” Kazuki prodded. “I need to know who it is.”

“This must be wrong,” the apprentice read with a frown. “It says they chose Sato Daisuke, a weapons instructor. That can’t be right, he must be a figurehead to hide the real power in the shadows.”

“Maybe Genki?” Kazuki mused. “Kenta, I believe it is time for you to pay them a visit and see what you can find out.”

“Should I do anything about Lady Rin?”

“I doubt the opportunity will present itself. I’m sure she has devised a plan, although I would expect you to help her if she requests it. I imagine she’s merely biding her time until Takahashi returns. We should hear about her escape very soon.” Kazuki smiled briefly before adding, “I expect you back in three days with all the information you can dig up about this Sato Daisuke. I need to know what he holds dear. Then, perhaps, we can ferret out who really holds the power.”

Kenta bowed deeply. “As you wish master,” he replied before grabbing a light pack and heading off at a run.

“Junko,” Genki gasped as he sat bolt upright in bed. “No one mentioned her at all.” He jumped out of bed, suddenly certain there was something critical they had been overlooking in this whole affair.

The sage barged into the Shuhan’s office, startling the man behind the desk and causing the hidden guards to flank their leader in a show of strength. “Good morning Genki.” Daisuke greeted him with a smile. “What are you in such a hurry about? Did you find something about the ki binding spell?”

“Where’s Junko? Is she in custody too?”

“Bring me Rin’s assistant Junko at once.” The Shuhan ordered before locking gazes with Genki. “Why are you so concerned about her?”

“She’s more than she appears. She’s stronger than you’d imagine and sneaky. I’ll feel more confident of your ability to keep Rin under guard if you have her in custody as well,” the sage

explained.

“I think it's high time Rin and I have a little face to face.” Daisuke peeled off his robes, leaving him clad in simple black pants and shirt. “Wait here for me.”

The Shuhan descended the stairs, relaxing his face and plastering on a cheery smile as he rounded the corner to Rin's cell. “Good morning, my Lady. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Daisuke,” she breathed. “Thank god it's you. This place has gone crazy. Let me out of here please.”

“I can't do that Lady Rin. I don't have the key,” he replied with a smile. “What happened anyway? Did you streak through town or something?”

“It's all Hayashi Hoshu's doing. He's had it in for me since we were teenagers,” she insisted.

“That was a long time ago,” Daisuke pointed out. “I'm surprised Hoshu harbored a grudge for that long.”

“Anal retentive bastard,” Rin grumbled. “Has a memory like a fucking elephant. The Hayashi are as bad as the Takahashi.”

“Where's Junko? She should be able to straighten this out.”

“I haven't seen her. I assume she's in her quarters, unless they arrested her, too.”

“I'll see what I can do for you, Lady Rin. I'll come back and check on you later.” Daisuke turned and strolled away, stopping just around the corner to press a hand to his mouth as the implications of her words sunk in.

The Shuhan slammed the door behind him as he flew back into his office. “It's worse than we thought,” he croaked, causing the sage to look up from the papers he was perusing with a start. “Apparently she's none too fond of the Hayashi either. The part that worries me is the fact that she wouldn't tell me where Junko is. By the way, I didn't tell her I was the new Shuhan. Let's keep that our little secret, shall we?”

Just then the guard returned empty-handed. “I am sorry, Shuhan-sama, Junko-san is nowhere in the village. I checked with her neighbors. The last time they saw her was the evening Rin was arrested. They believe she left later that night and hasn't returned.”

“I think it is safe to assume that Junko is no longer loyal to the shuudan,” Daisuke decided. “So, Genki, who would Rin turn to for help?”

“Kazuki,” was all Genki said, face falling at the thought of his former friend. “But she would never...”

“Never is a very long time. I've found out about a lot of things I thought could never happen this week.” The Shuhan rubbed his nose absently as he paced, before finally grinding to an abrupt halt and ordering the black ops to fetch Koga Aya. “I have to at least try to locate Junko,” Daisuke decided, “and the Koga are my best trackers.”

The shadow wolf ground to a halt about ten miles outside the boundaries of Kobayashi shuudan's territory. “Sasaki-san, who knows?”

“Eh?” the interrogator grunted as he dropped his pack and stretched. “Who knows what?”

“About me, who knows about me?” Yoshi prodded.

“I don't know. The only people I told were the clan elders,” Makoto explained. “I tried not to give them your name, but they wouldn't act without specific facts. Are you very mad at me?”

“No, not really,” the elite ventured. “What will they do to me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve disgraced the shuudan by my actions.” Snowy hair flopped over Yoshi’s eyes as he studied his feet. “I merely wondered if you’d discussed my punishment.”

“You won’t be punished,” the torture master assured him. “None of this is your fault. In fact, I’m sure they’ve been trying to decide how they can make it up to you.”

“You don’t really believe that do you?” the shadow wolf asked, scrutinizing the larger man with narrowed mismatched eyes.

“Of course I do. I promised you no one would hurt you. Do you really believe I’d walk you into an ambush?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean I don’t deserve punishment, I’ve compromised the safety of the shuudan by my actions.”

“You’re wrong,” the interrogator said, grasping a pale face in his hand and wrenching it towards him. “Rin is the one who endangered us. I swear to you there will be no repercussions for what you were forced to do. The elders were all very worried about you.” Makoto paused for a moment before he concluded, “I was very worried about you, and I won’t let anyone hurt you, ever.”

Yoshi studied the heavily scarred face for a moment. “Alright,” he declared, once again taking a large hand in his. “Let’s go home.”

Two hours later they were outside the main gates of the walled enclave. “Walk or jutsu?” the interrogator asked.

“I don’t have the ki to teleport,” Yoshi conceded. “Although I’d rather not be seen.”

“Fine.” The torture master wrapped an arm around the slender figure and traced the kanji needed to move them to his house. They reappeared in Makoto’s living room with a slight pop. “You wait here while I go check in,” the interrogator rumbled. “Make yourself at home, I promise I’ll be back soon.”

I might as well shower. Yoshi headed off in search of a bathroom. *Whatever happens I’ll handle it better if I’m clean.*

The last Takahashi emerged from his shower feeling much more like himself. *Now, to get rid of these damn piercings.* He easily removed the nipple rings and studied his reflection in dismay. “Guess I’m stuck with the holes,” he muttered before turning a wary eye on his penis.

Yoshi took a deep breath before starting to remove the first barbell, fingers scrabbling to maintain their grip when the little balls proved slippery and hard to unscrew. The more he fumbled, the more his body responded, and the pulsing twitches of his hardening cock only exacerbated the problem. By the time the last bar landed in the sink he was fully erect, silent tears of utter mortification running down his cheeks. *I am so sick,* Yoshi decided, unwilling to see his response as the inevitable reaction to so much handling. *I can’t believe I enjoy this.*

He grasped the throbbing shaft in his left hand, wiping his eyes angrily before attacking the piercings through the head. As he tugged at the stubborn rings his mind suddenly bombarded him with an image of Jubo toying with them. The shadow wolf was overwhelmed by the image, clapping his hand hard over his mouth to stifle a scream as echoes of the earth-shattering orgasm

he'd experienced tore through him and the tiny spark of arousal he'd felt built instantly to an engulfing flame. The lanky ninja let out a hoarse cry as he suddenly came hard, splattering his seed across the mirror and onto the heavy steel rods resting in the sink.

Yoshi sank to the floor and wept. *I wish I were dead. I'm not fit to be around decent people.* Eventually he drifted into a restless sleep, tossing and moaning on the hard tile floor as he remembered all the times his body had responded over the years, further proof of how worthless and wrong he was.

Makoto paced restlessly outside the Kobayashi no Shuhan's office. *I wonder who they chose.* He ran the prime candidates through his mind. *Probably Hoshu,* he decided just as the door opened.

"The Shuhan will see you now," Souta announced, standing back to let the interrogator enter.

The robed figure was standing at the far end of the room, staring out the window at the village. "Where is Takahashi-san?"

The torture master tried to put a face to the voice. *I know that voice, who is it?* "At my house, Shuhan-sama. He was uncertain of his reception and I felt it best to make him comfortable."

"Then we will talk there," Daisuke said as he turned, noting the shocked look on Makoto's face. "Surprised, Sasaki-san? The clans decided humanity was more important than strength. I am doing my best to live up to everyone's expectations. I hope I can have your support."

"Of course, Shuhan-sama, I am yours to command."

"Fine, take us to your house then." Daisuke grasped the interrogator's arm as the gestures were made and they disappeared.

The pair found themselves in Makoto's empty living room. "Wait here, I'll go find him." The interrogator headed toward the back of the house, peering into the empty study and bedroom before stopping outside the closed bathroom door. *Makes sense, he was filthy.*

"Takahashi-san," he called. "It's me, Makoto. The Shuhan is here to talk to you. Could you come out, please?"

Makoto waited, but no response came. "Takahashi-san," he called again, banging on the door. "Please answer me." When there was still no reply his patience ran out and he forced the door.

The interrogator took in the scene with practiced eyes, noting the pile of cum-spattered metal in the sink and the tear tracks apparent on pale cheeks. "Oh 'shi-san," he muttered as he scooped the sleeping man into his arms, "you couldn't help it." He walked across the hall to his bedroom, pulling back the covers and laying the lithe form down, tucking the blanket in carefully around him.

What am I going to do with you. He studied the slumbering shinobi for a moment before kissing the top of his head and heading back out to talk with Daisuke.

"He'd fallen asleep in the bathroom," Makoto explained. "I put him to bed."

The Shuhan studied his head of covert operations. "You like him."

"Of course I like him, why wouldn't I?" the interrogator countered.

“No, you like, like him,” the Shuhan stated. “As in, you want to have a relationship with him.”

“What I want is of no importance,” Makoto said with a shrug. “Whatever he wants, if it's within my power to do so, I'll give him. It's the very least I can do.”

“Because?” Daisuke prodded.

“Because Kobayashi-sama used him to get me released from Iwagashi shuudan. He was hurt because of me, he's been hurt so badly, so often and I ... understand.”

“Fine,” Daisuke said, “I will leave his recovery in your hands then. If there is anything you need?”

“Yoshi said he was being evicted, do you know if his things were thrown out?” the interrogator asked.

“I believe Tatsuya took care of it, I will make sure and let you know. You said Yoshi was worried about his reception?”

“He believes he should be punished, that his actions endangered the shuudan,” Makoto explained. “He's very confused and depressed. I think this particular assignment damaged him psychologically in a way the others didn't, although I don't know why. He was in terrible shape when I arrived. He didn't even recognize me until we were well on our way here.”

“And now?” Daisuke pressed.

“He seemed better, lucid, on the way here. Worried about what would happen to him now that his secret is out, but not desperate,” the interrogator decided. “I thought he'd be alright or I would never have left him alone.”

“I spoke with Rin today. From what I've managed to glean, this all started when Yoshi's father rejected her. A woman scorned is, apparently, nothing to trifle with. Yoshi just had the bad luck to be born his father's son.” Sad chocolate eyes met shuttered ebony as the Shuhan continued, “I'm at a loss as to how to punish her. Aya's out tracking Junko as we speak. I fear Rin may have sent her to Kazuki for aid.”

“I'll have a chat with her tomorrow,” Makoto said with a grin. “That is, if you wish it, Shuhan-sama.”

“For now just concentrate on taking care of Yoshi,” Daisuke decided. “I need him back at full strength. Genki's researching the ki-binding so we can remove it. Neko's more than happy to question Rin. In fact, you'd be surprised at the people who want a crack at her. Takahashi-san's more popular than he knows.”

“He should have a prettier nurse.”

“I think you'll be good for him. You have much in common and he seems to trust you. Maybe you can help each other,” the Shuhan suggested.

The interrogator pursed his lips. “That's not likely. I'm sure Takahashi-san will be happier with someone else now that we're back.”

“Because?”

“He's beautiful,” Makoto offered by way of explanation. “Not to mention a genius and the shuudan's strongest shinobi. Believe me, no one would turn him down. Why in Kami's name would he want to stay here?”

“Those are all wonderful qualities, and it would be easy for someone to accept them. However, you've seen Takahashi-san at his very worst, yet you didn't reject him. I imagine he feels safe with you. After what he's been through that's more important than something as

superficial as good looks. Besides,” Daisuke continued, mirth apparent in his voice, “your scars are sexy as hell. The elite have been running a betting pool about you for years; who, when, where...” He trailed off at the stunned look on the interrogator's face. “What, it never occurred to you that a big, strong, silent type with sexy scars and an intimidating personality might do well in an enclave full of ninja?”

The torture master made a strange gurgling sound. *I must have misunderstood, it almost sounded like the Shuhan was flirting with me.* He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, having no clue as to what to say.

Daisuke noted the look with glee. *Idea planted,* he thought with a smirk as he rose. “I’ll leave you to it then. Check in with me tomorrow. Tell Takahashi-san I’d like to see him.” The stunned interrogator finally shook off his stupor and headed to the bedroom to check on his charge.

Makoto perched on the edge of the bed, gingerly running a hand through silky strands as he attempted to soothe the restless shadow wolf into a deeper sleep. He was startled out of his thoughts when long fingers wrapped around his wrist and a hoarse voice whispered “Stay with me, please.”

“If that is what you want.” The torture master moved to stretch out on the other side of the bed, still fully dressed.

Yoshi let out a snort, “I don’t bite.” He scooted over and threw an arm across the interrogator's broad chest, snuggling into his side before drifting back to sleep. It took Makoto much longer, but after a time he began to relax, bringing an arm up to wrap around the lithe figure and tangle in soft snowy strands as his breathing slowed and he, too, passed into sleep.

THE SECOND GATE: SHIFTING SANDS

Makoto woke before dawn, the soft rays of moonlight dappling the room with a cool, hazy glow. He wrapped his arms more tightly around the man currently curled up on his chest, admiring the wintry picture the elite shinobi made, long pale limbs and sparkling icy hair splayed across dark sheets. The stoic head of covert operations let out a short bark of self-deprecating laughter, the last of his resistance melting away as he studied the handsome face in repose. “What do you want from me Yoshi?” he whispered while his hands stroked silky opalescent skin.

He was startled when sleepy eyes blinked open. “Everything,” the elite rasped. “Everything I’m not allowed to have.”

The interrogator's heart ached at the pain visible in usually shielded eyes. “The rules have changed Takahashi-san. You can have whatever you wish.”

“Neither of us is stupid,” the shadow wolf replied. “So don’t lie to me.”

“I have no desire to lie to you,” the torture master continued. “What is it you think you can’t have?”

“You, to start,” Yoshi said. “But I disgust you. Sometimes you forget, but then you always pull back.”

“No, it's not that...” Makoto trailed off, uncomfortable with delving too deeply into his desires.

“Then what?” came the elite's venomous retort.

“For god's sake, look at me. I’m hideous. You don’t actually want me, you just feel you owe me for saving you from that Yakuza.”

“So you’ve got scars, big deal,” the shadow wolf sneered. “Half the shinobi in the shuudan have scars. I, on the other hand, am a dirty, filthy, disgusting whore and I have been for most of my life. Excuse me if I don’t have a lot of pity for you.”

“You’re not dirty or disgusting and you're certainly not a whore,” Makoto insisted, cupping a pale cheek and forcing the skittish elite to meet his gaze. “You’re a prize, you always have been, anyone with eyes can see that. Why do you think so many people want you?”

“Some prize, booby prize maybe,” Yoshi grumbled as he neatly sidestepped the torture master's question. “If you mean that why do you keep pushing me away?”

“I’m afraid. I haven’t allowed anyone to get this close to me in a very long time,” the interrogator admitted.

The shadow wolf smiled when Makoto's words registered, then he leaned in and sealed their lips together. The kiss was soft, and tentative, giving the interrogator time and space to retreat if he so desired. The next kiss was firmer, decisive, though still chaste. A warmly molded connection that sent sparks surging through the scarred man's chest.

When their lips met for the third time Makoto took control, cradling the finely-boned face as his thumb smoothed over the shadow wolf's throbbing pulse. When the interrogator finally swept his tongue out to taste, Yoshi opened eagerly, heart hammering as he overrode his ingrained response and pressed tight against the larger form.

The heady mix of arousal and fear had the shadow wolf hard as a rock, and he let out a low broken moan when his weeping length brushed Makoto's sizable bulge. The lusty growl that spilled from the interrogator's throat in response sent frissons of excitement rippling through the elite's frame.

Yoshi forced unsteady hands to work on the cloth barrier still separating them, numb fingers somehow forcing slippery buttons through too small holes until he was finally able to push the shirt off broad shoulders. Pale lips nipped and nibbled their way down the interrogator's corded neck to a surprisingly sensitive collar bone. He worried a bronze nipple to hardness, lapping at the perked flesh before blowing gently, and smirked at the echoing groan it produced.

He turned his head, intent on teasing the other nub. In its place he found a wide ridge of scar tissue which he traced with his tongue, lapping and sucking his way down Makoto's heaving chest and across taut abdominal muscles. The elite stiffened when he found himself flipped on his back, tension easing when he recognized the answering lust in the interrogator's eyes.

Makoto kissed a path from the crown of the shadow wolf's head down his face, ending in another deep breathless kiss. "Want you so bad." The acknowledgment broke the barricade holding the interrogator's lust in check.

Makoto lapped and suckled his way down the lanky body, following satiny ribbons of scar tissue as they wound their way down the silky torso. He stopped to tease the tempting divot of the elite's naval before reaching his prize. The interrogator grasped the bobbing length in a calloused hand before dipping his head to swipe his tongue through the sticky beads of precum dotting the tip, closing his teeth gently around the trembling rings and giving a slight tug.

Yoshi bit back a scream, arching closer to the source of pleasure. The shadow wolf found himself swallowed to the root, wicked tongue swirling around the head, tangling and tugging on the captive rings as the interrogator's teeth scraped over the prominent vein.

"Stop or I'll come in your mouth," Yoshi husked, ending in a low, trembling moan.

"I want to taste you," Makoto growled in response, the vibrations sending the shadow wolf's arousal spiraling even higher. The interrogator growled again as he fondled swollen testicles, blunt nails tickling across the wrinkled sac.

Yoshi struggled against the hands holding him, desperate to thrust up into the hot wet perfection of Makoto's mouth. He started to shake when a finger began to teasingly massage his pucker, pressing and stroking the sensitive nerve endings. When the thick digit finally slipped inside he came with a long, keening wail, hands desperately scrabbling across scarred shoulders in search of purchase.

The interrogator lifted his head, licking his lips as his eyes locked with the shadow wolf's dazed, mismatched pair. "More," he rumbled, once again kissing the stunned elite breathless. He took advantage of Yoshi's distraction to change their position yet again.

The shadow wolf fisted his hands in rumpled sheets, goose bumps racing up his frame as a taunting tongue traced a wet trail over the arch of his foot and up the tender flesh behind his knee, ending with a sharp nip on his inner thigh. His eyes went wide in shock when Makoto's hot, wet mouth began to tease his puckered entrance while strong hands kneaded creamy cheeks.

The interrogator growled and moaned as he licked and sucked, thrusting the tip of his tongue inside with a swirling motion that had Yoshi scrambling for something to cling to. When he couldn't stand the temptation any longer Makoto inserted a lubed finger, quickly adding a second and thrusting them deep, stroking over the shadow wolf's prostate to hide the burn as he scissored the digits, stretching the tight ring for a much larger intrusion.

By the time he added a third finger Yoshi was once again rock hard, shaking and moaning as he tried to force the digits deeper. When he pulled his fingers free, the interrogator found himself pushed back as impatient hands yanked at his waistband, sliding pants and boxers down muscular legs.

The shadow wolf let his eyes roam over Makoto's broad form, drinking in his first unhindered view of his new lover. He idly noted the ridges of scar tissue crisscrossing the muscular torso and winding their way down long legs, before zeroing in. *That's the one he's worried about.* Yoshi's eyes fell on the thick puckered seam where one of the scarred man's testicles had been sheared away, so he dropped to his knees, laving and sucking the wrinkled sac.

The interrogator tried to pull back, but wiry arms wrapped around his hips, pinning him close until he relaxed. He let his legs fall open and rocked his hips into the sensation, groaning loudly when a slick hand wrapped around his straining cock and began to stroke.

"I want to be inside you when I come," Makoto gasped when he felt his already dripping arousal harden impossibly. "Please, tell me you want this."

Yoshi positioned himself over the twitching length, only to have the tables turned, yet again, as his back was pressed into the mattress and long legs were coaxed to wrap around Makoto's waist. They both held their breath as the broad head of the torture master's cock slowly parted the tight ring, and the thick shaft inched into the shadow wolf's body.

Once he found himself firmly pressed against smooth cheeks, the interrogator dropped his head to pant, hot breaths tingling against the sensitive skin of the elite's neck. Yoshi's head was reeling, his entire body hypersensitive.

"Please," he gasped. "Please," rocking his hips as he tried to tempt the larger man into doing what he wanted.

Makoto took a deep breath, gradually pulling his hips back until only the head remained inside, then snapping them forward with a twist, striking Yoshi's prostate head-on and drawing a warbling shriek from the reserved elite as he arched and writhed, short nails digging into the scarred flesh of the interrogator's back.

"Harder." Makoto was happy to comply, driving into him with long smooth strokes as he slid a hand between them to rub Yoshi's dripping length, tugging lightly at the captive rings as he spread slippery precum over the swollen head.

"So good," the interrogator groaned as his rhythm began to falter, pistoning into the clutching heat and tipping pale hips to slide even deeper. He twisted his wrist, dragging his nails across the slit of the shadow wolf's throbbing cock as he slammed home, and Yoshi came with a hoarse cry, clinging desperately to Makoto's broad form as he clenched and trembled, hot seed pouring out between them.

One, two, three more thrusts and the interrogator could hold out no longer, succumbing to the overload of sensation and filling Yoshi's ass with his cum before claiming his mouth in a deep, possessive kiss. "Thank you," he muttered. "So sweet, so fucking good."

"Mmmmmmm," Yoshi mumbled, eyes already drooping. "Sleep now, talk later." With that

he drew Makoto into the protective circle of his arms, nuzzling his face into a broad shoulder before dropping instantly to sleep. The interrogator couldn't stop grinning as he idly stroked sweat matted strands, his heart beat gradually slowing and his eyes slipping shut.

When the pair woke again the sun was high in the sky. "Shit," Makoto muttered as he leaped out of bed. "Yoshi wake up."

"Mmmmm, nope, sleeping." The shadow wolf dragged the covers over his head. "Come back to bed."

"I need to check in, and the Shuhan wanted to see you today," the interrogator fretted as he pulled on clothes. "You need to get up and get dressed."

"Don't wanna." Yoshi bunched the covers tightly around himself. "Want you to come back to bed."

"I would love nothing more," the interrogator replied, leaning over to nuzzle the pale column of the shadow wolf's neck, "than to stay here with you forever, but duty calls. Look at it this way, the sooner we get this over with the sooner you get your wish."

"Do you regret it?" Yoshi asked, sitting up and fiddling with the bed covers.

"Last night? Oh no, no, how could I possibly." Makoto perched on the edge of the bed, pulling the worried man into his arms and cupping the back of his head. He buried a hand in ragged snowy strands, bending to deliver a soft, chaste kiss. "I'm thirty-seven years old, and last night was the first time anyone ever truly desired me. How could I regret that?"

"Because it's me?"

"That makes me doubly lucky," the interrogator replied with a broad smile, "because I only want you."

Hooded eyes studied him warily, searching the impassive face for hidden answers. "Fine, I'll get up." Yoshi groaned, throwing off the covers and stretching wantonly.

Makoto felt his willpower desert him at the sight of all that alabaster skin laid out like a feast in his bed. "Maybe we could wait..." he hedged.

"Too late," the shadow wolf decided. "I'm up now. You'll just have to hurry home when you've finished with your duties."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"I think I should at least shower before going to meet our new Shuhan," Yoshi said. "Just because I am a whore doesn't mean I need to smell like one."

"You are not a whore," Makoto growled. "Don't speak that way about yourself."

"For the last three years my only job has been to be a plaything for other men. What term would you prefer?" the shadow wolf retorted. "Look, I'm just being honest. Now that the secret's out I'm sure everyone will be saying the same thing, hopefully not to my face, but I'll know they know. Does it bother you that everyone will be talking about what I've done?"

"They won't talk about it. Don't even think about it. If it gets out I'll take care of it."

"No, you won't. I don't need to be protected. Go to work Makoto, I'll see you later. I promise," Yoshi added when he saw a flash of pain in flat black eyes.

The interrogator didn't reply, instead pulling the shadow wolf in for a deep, wet kiss. "I'll look forward to it," he rumbled, running the back of his hand across a perfect cheekbone before

stepping back and turning to dress.

Yoshi hummed as he headed into the bathroom, setting the water to comfortably warm before stepping under the spray and quickly scrubbing all traces of the previous night's activities from his skin.

Kazuki's apprentice turned spy slid between two stalls in the market, taking in all the conversations around him. He quickly gathered a lot of information about the shinobi who had defied all odds and been chosen as Shuhan. He even saw the man himself, flanked by two guards, of course, slurping down soba at a stand near his office. It was rumored that the smaller of the pair of guards was the Shuhan's lover, but he hadn't seen anything to confirm it.

Just then he heard, "You have items stored for Takahashi-san? Please deliver them to this address as soon as possible." Kenta peeked around the gap between the stalls, trying to get a glimpse of who had been speaking. All he managed was the back of an elite striding away as the merchant began loading boxes into his truck.

Kenta slid unnoticed to the rear of the van, checking the labels on the boxes to be sure before squeezing into one of the larger cartons. *Not long now pet. We'll be together at last.*

Yoshi dawdled in the shower until the water ran cold, enjoying the feeling of the warm spray on his sensitive skin. He quickly dried off and wrapped a towel around his waist, wandering back into the bedroom in search of something to wear.

Five minutes later he came to the conclusion that he wasn't going anywhere today. He had no clothes of his own, and Makoto's were too big, so much so that he looked like a child playing dress-up. He found an old pair of shrunken sweat pants that at least stayed up, if only barely, and gave up the search for the time being, heading into the kitchen and turning on the kettle.

He had just poured water over his tea bag when the bell rang. "Who is it?" he called as he headed for the door.

"Delivery for Takahashi."

He opened the door on a haphazard pile of boxes. "Sign here." The delivery man shoved a paper in his face.

"Who sent these?" The shadow wolf studied the boxes for any sign of danger as he waited for a response.

The driver studied the papers in his hand. "Do you want them or not?"

"Yes, of course." Yoshi began shifting boxes inside. Once he had the last one moved he locked the door and started rifling through the contents. *Clothes*, he thought with glee, yanking out some underwear, a pair of pants, and a shirt before heading to the bedroom to change.

He was halfway there when a voice stopped him in his tracks. "Hello beautiful, happy to see me?"

The shadow wolf whirled, eyes wide, to face the intruder. He stopped in shock when he saw a man with hair a few shades darker than tree bark. "I promised I'd rescue you, don't you remember?"

“That was a long time ago,” Yoshi said flatly. “I no longer need rescuing.”

“Of course you do. You just don’t realize it.” Kenta moved closer, surreptitiously drawing a syringe and hiding it in his sleeve. “I’ve been searching for my opportunity all this time, now we can be together.” The intruder surged forward, jabbing the needle into the side of Yoshi’s neck and holding him until he fell limp.

“Time to take you home. Oh, the fun we’re going to have.”

Almost done. Makoto picked the last report out of his in-basket. He was just starting to read when his door banged open and a grim Daisuke marched in. “Where is Takahashi-san?”

“He didn’t come to see you?”

“If he had do you think I’d be standing here?” the Shuhan replied in frustration. “I know he’s been through a lot, but this is just insulting.”

“Let me go check on him,” the interrogator temporized. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll go with you.” Daisuke grabbed Makoto’s arm as he teleported. They reappeared in the interrogator’s lounge, now filled with tumbled boxes.

“Yoshi.” Makoto headed toward the bedroom. “Where are you?” His worry escalated when he found the forgotten clothes on the floor, morphing to near panic at the sight of the long cold tea. He tore open the bedroom door, rushing across the hall to the bathroom to do the same before slumping against the wall and staring into space. “He’s gone.”

“What do you mean he’s gone?” the Shuhan demanded. “Gone where?”

“I don’t know. It looks like he left in a hurry, apparently he didn’t even dress.” The interrogator indicated the abandoned items, stomach clenching at the thought of his new lover naked somewhere. He began to search the area, finding a few drops of blood splattered on the largest carton. “There’s some blood here, not much. Of course, he can’t put up much of a struggle ki blocked.”

Daisuke summoned a squad of black ops. “Spread out and search for Takahashi Yoshi. He can’t harness his ki and may be held against his will.” As soon as the masked nin dispersed the Shuhan turned his attention to Makoto once again. “Who do you think would do this?”

“I don’t know.” The interrogator shook his head. “Any of his so-called ‘clients’. The Yakuza who had him last seemed particularly upset to lose Yoshi so soon after his arrival. I’m sure he’s not the only one.”

Daisuke studied his torture master with concern. “We’ll get him back, Sasaki-san. I swear the full resources of the shuudan will be out searching until we find him.”

“I promised him,” Makoto muttered under his breath. “I swore no one would hurt him again. Now he’ll never trust me.” He stood to his full height, towering over the slight young man, “What would you have me do, Shuhan-sama?”

Kenta stopped just outside the enclave, shifting the bundle in his arms before setting off again. *I’ll never make it all the way back like this. I need to find a place where I can send for help.* Course set, he sprinted through the trees, speed slowed by the weight of the man he was

carrying. “You’re heavy enough. I sure hope you’re worth it.”

The elite kept his breathing slow and regular, opening one eye a crack to try and get his bearings. *Where the hell am I?* He struggled to catch more than broken glimpses of a man's chest and the foliage. Yoshi forced himself to keep up the pretense of sleep as his mind searched for a way to escape.

He almost gave his ruse away when he was dumped unceremoniously on the ground, the person carrying him huffing as they moved away. The shadow wolf carefully peeked under his eyelid, catching sight of a dark haired man at the far side of the clearing. *Now I remember.* He suppressed a shudder. *It's the boy I met all those years ago, the one who said he'd rescue me. Kidnap me, more like it,* Yoshi decided as he recalled how he'd been drugged. *What I really need to do is leave a sign. Someone will come looking for me ... I hope.*

The elite shinobi wracked his brain, trying to come up with a way to leave a signal for anyone searching, while not giving away the fact that he was conscious. He hadn't had a chance to dress properly, all he had on were Makoto's sweat pants. Just then his attention was drawn to the other side of the clearing where Kenta was making an elaborate series of gestures.

“You have news for me pet?” Kazuki's sibilant voice carried easily to where Yoshi lay. *This just went from bad directly to worst.* The shadow wolf had no trouble identifying the speaker. *My nutcase works for the shuudan's number one enemy.* He closed his eyes and continued to eavesdrop on the conversation. *The more I know the better my position.*

“Our information was correct,” Kenta replied. “I believe the best path to the Shuhan is through his lover, one Fukazawa Souta. He's one of the Shuhan's guards, and they're always together. Take him out and Sato will be at your mercy.”

Sato? They can't mean Daisuke, he's just a weapons instructor. The shadow wolf considered his options given this new information, and decided the wisest plan was for him to not drag the shuudan into this. If Kazuki was involved it wasn't worth the risk to everyone he had sworn to protect. *Maybe I can find a way to escape, someday. At least I had one good night first.*

“Why aren't you here?” Kazuki asked. “I said three days.”

“Well, uh,” his apprentice stammered. “I had an opportunity so ... I have Takahashi with me.”

“Very good, pet. I love initiative.”

“He's unconscious, and heavy,” Kenta admitted. “I could use some help.”

“I don't think so,” Kazuki replied. “You wanted him, I think it only fair you get him here.” With that he severed the connection, leaving his apprentice to curse in frustration.

“Fine,” Kenta muttered as he headed back to where the shadow wolf lay. He quickly administered both an antidote and a stimulant before dragging the apparently unconscious man to his feet. “You need to walk for me, beautiful.” He towed a stumbling Yoshi across the clearing and into the woods again. “We're only halfway there and my master is impatient. I trust I won't regret reviving you?”

Yoshi studied the ground and shook his head no. He'd spent too much time serving harsh masters to cross one without a plan. Kenta grabbed his arm in an iron grip and forced the pace, breaking into a run once they cleared the glade's edge and its thick undergrowth.

Makoto was wearing a track into the floor of his office as he awaited word from the trackers. Aya and the rest of the Koga clan were busy combing the forest in hope of catching the shadow wolf's scent. The torture master could stand it no longer and strode out of his office, heading up to the Shuhan's.

"Any word?" He burst through the doors, only to stop dead at the sight of Souta splayed across the Shuhan's desk, reddened ass raised high in the air and held in place by Daisuke's iron grip as he slid between inflamed cheeks.

"Oh, Kami, I'm sorry," the interrogator choked as he covered his eyes and turned to leave. "Please forgive my intrusion, Shuhan-sama."

"That's quite alright, Makoto. After all, I didn't lock the door."

"Dai, what?" Souta sputtered before he was cut off by a sharp smack to his ass.

"Did I say you could speak?"

"No."

"Just for that I think you deserve some extra punishment. Maybe I should let Sasaki-san spank you. I'm sure he'd teach you a lesson," the new Shuhan ground out between thrusts.

"NO!" both men yelled at once.

"You just earned yourself another punishment, Sou-chan," Daisuke decided. "I don't recall giving you a vote. As for you, Makoto, I'd be interested in watching your technique. I'm sure it would take your mind off things."

"I'd rather not, Shuhan-sama. I wouldn't want to permanently damage your 'pet', and I'm not sure my mind set at the moment would allow for anything else. Please excuse me, I'll be in my office if you hear anything."

"Sasaki-san, wait." Daisuke turned and placed a gentle hand on his arm. "I didn't mean to offend you. As I said the other day, you are terribly sexy. Souta and I would be delighted if you wanted to join us, wouldn't we?"

"Oh shit yeah," the assassin panted, sliding a hand under his belly to squeeze his leaking erection. "I bet you're hung like a horse."

"See, the invitation is there if you're interested," the Shuhan insisted.

"I appreciate the offer, Shuhan-sama," Makoto said sincerely. "You have no idea how much, but I'm afraid I can't accept. It would feel like a betrayal."

"I understand. We'll get him back soon, I'm sure."

"I hope you're right. I made Yoshi a promise and I don't wish to lose his trust." The interrogator headed towards the door, stopping to remark, "Perhaps I should visit Rin, I'm sure she'd love some company."

"Have fun," the Shuhan replied. "Let me know what you find out."

"Of course." Makoto shut the doors firmly behind him. *A kinky Kobayashi no Shuhan.* He shook his head as if it would clear the images from his mind. *An OPENLY kinky Shuhan,* he corrected himself, remembering what he knew about Kobayashi-sama and Rin.

"Alright, Dai, spill. Just what the hell is going on with Takahashi?" Souta demanded as soon as the door clicked shut. "Every time I ask you find some way to distract me, but it keeps coming up. If you don't want me snooping around on my own, you'd better fill me in."

"If I tell you, you can't breathe a word of it, ever. Do you really think you can manage that?"

“Of course. I am shinobi, after all.”

“It's just that it could be dangerous. You don't want Yoshi for an enemy,” the Shuhan fretted.

“Dai, seriously,” Souta continued, “I'm more likely to put my foot in my mouth if I don't know what's going on. You're worried, the elders are worried, hell, even Makoto's worried, and he doesn't give a shit about anything.”

“Oh, I think you're wrong there, Sou,” Daisuke said with a mysterious smile. “But I'll tell you.” He recounted what Yoshi had gone through, making sure to include Makoto's ill-disguised affection for the damaged shadow wolf.

When he finished he was shocked to see tears in his lover's eyes. “Oh, Sou, it'll be alright. We're doing everything we can to find him and bring him home.”

“I'm a horrible person, Dai,” the assassin choked. “I didn't know, I didn't mean anything.”

“What, beloved? What didn't you mean?” the Shuhan asked as he pulled his lover into a tight embrace.

“I called Takahashi a lazy whore,” Souta replied in a thick husky voice. “I was in a hurry and he wasn't paying attention to where he was going and I ran right into him, fell on my ass. I was pissed. I was just trying to get a rise out of him, I didn't mean...”

“It's alright, Sou, it's alright.” Daisuke hummed as he rocked them gently. “Tatsuya felt the same way. I'll tell you what I told him, Yoshi just wants to be treated normally, I'm sure he doesn't hold it against you. I would refrain from making any similar comments around Makoto though, he doesn't have much of a sense of humor where Takahashi-san's concerned.”

“So are they...” the assassin trailed off, making a suggestive hand motion by way of explanation.

“I have no idea. Do you want me to call Makoto back so you can ask him?”

“Kami, no.” Souta shuddered, glancing down at his now deflated length. “In fact, this whole thing has kind of killed my mood. Can we pick this up later, baby?”

“Of course,” the Shuhan replied as he kissed his lover sweetly. “Anything for you.”

Makoto took his time descending the stairs to the holding cells, reviewing what he knew about Yoshi's past in preparation for questioning the former Shuhan. *Okay, here goes nothing.* “Rin, I believe it is time for you and I to have a little chat,” he rumbled as he unlocked the door to her cell. “Let's go somewhere a bit more, comfortable, shall we?”

The interrogator grasped her arm in an iron fist and steered her down the corridor and into an empty room. “Where is Takahashi?”

“Lost him already, have you?” she asked with a smile. “Told you he was a pervert. He's probably out whoring himself. Have you checked the pleasure district?”

A vein bulged in the interrogator's temple at her taunts, but he forced himself to remain calm and stay focused. “Someone took him. Who would that have been, Rin? It will help your situation if we recover him.”

“I don't need your help. But it would seem you need mine. What are you going to give me in return, Makoto?”

“Your life,” the interrogator growled. “Where is Takahashi?”

“I can take you to him,” Rin offered. “Just take these suppression cuffs off me and I’ll be able to sense him, it’s part of the ki binding.”

“Let me guess, you need your hands free, too. I think not. Let’s try this again. Where is Takahashi? Tell me and you won’t suffer too badly.”

“Where’s Genki?” she demanded. “I should be questioned by the Shuhan, not some flunky.”

“Genki isn’t Shuhan,” Makoto replied with an unsettling smile. “And he wants nothing to do with you.”

“Not Hoshu.”

“No, not Hoshu,” he agreed. “The clans went in a different direction, but it doesn’t really matter. Shuhan-sama is far too busy to bother with the likes of you. If you choose not to help then you can just go back to rotting in your cell.”

“I never said I wouldn’t help. I said I couldn’t, not without my ki.” The kunoichi decided to try and bargain. “I’m not going anywhere with you watching me. Take off the cuffs for five minutes and you’ll get your precious shadow wolf back.”

Makoto studied Rin warily, if he made a mistake and she escaped it would be his head on the chopping block. “I think not. I’ll lend you mine instead.” *That way I maintain control.* He laid a massive hand on her shoulder and began channeling ki.

Rin concentrated as she traced a series of kanji in the air, eyes going wide when she realized where Yoshi was. “I found him. Should I take you there?”

“Wake up beautiful, we’re home.”

“Makoto?” Yoshi croaked as he tried to turn toward the source.

“No pet, it’s me,” Kazuki’s apprentice whispered. “Remember? I rescued you from Kobayashi shuudan.” Hard fingers stroked and pinched Yoshi’s pale flesh. “I’ve waited so long for you to be mine. I refuse to wait any longer.”

Kenta’s hands slid loose sweat pants down long legs, leaving Yoshi bare to his appreciative gaze. “Get me nice and wet, baby.” The delusional man forced the elite to his knees, pressing his hardened length against unwilling lips.

Yoshi tried to turn away, but an unrelenting hand twisted him to face front, thumb digging into the jaw joint until he opened his mouth. Kenta began to frantically fuck his face, slamming his hips forward hard enough to split the shadow wolf’s lip on his canine tooth. The blood only excited him further and he buried his fists in soft snowy strands, yanking the elite to his feet and slamming him face first onto the bed.

The sight of that perfect ass poised in the air drove Kenta wild with lust. He brought his arm down hard to deliver a stinging smack, his arousal surging as red bloomed on the pale skin. Again and again he swung with as much force as he could muster, but aside from an almost imperceptible tightening of his muscles Yoshi remained silent and still. His mind far away as he sought a way to get word of his whereabouts to the shuudan.

The apprentice’s control snapped and he buried himself in the unprepared entrance, immediately beginning a series of punishing strokes. His ardor further fueled by the feeling of Yoshi’s blood lubricating his cock and easing the way. “You’re even better than I imagined, beautiful. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you.”

His strokes became erratic and he finally came with a grunt, filling the pale ass with his come before pulling out. Kenta flipped the elite over, the smug smile dropping from his face when he took in Yoshi's sullen expression and flaccid length. "What's your problem?"

"I don't think he's as enthusiastic about this *reunion* as you are pet," Kazuki husked from the shadows by the door. The spell-caster glided forward until he stood nose to nose with his apprentice before turning and pulling the shadow wolf into his arms. "He's a pretty thing, Kenta, and pretty things need to be handled with care." The legendary spell-caster ran a gentle hand over the swell of Yoshi's ass, sending healing ki deep into the tissues to ease the discomfort before pulling him into a passionate kiss. "Far too pretty for the likes of you," the powerful nin declared, breaking the kiss to caress a pale cheek.

"But, master," Kenta protested. "You promised he'd be mine."

"And he was," Kazuki hissed. "Was being the operative word. Now he's mine." He twined his fingers with the shadow wolf's and towed him toward the door.

What the hell is going on? Yoshi panicked at the sudden interest. "I believe you and I have much in common, pretty one," Kazuki husked, pulling the shadow wolf from his reverie. "The unwanted attentions of Kobayashi-sama, for example."

Yoshi scrutinized the man next to him, desperate to understand what he was saying. "I, too, suffered at Kobayashi-sama's hands. You are welcome to stay here, with me. No one will bother you, or force you, although," Kazuki continued, "I would welcome your company in my bed. Should you care to join me, that is."

The shadow wolf inclined his head slightly by way of reply, wary of trusting himself to voice an appropriate response. "Come with me then." Yoshi found himself following in a daze, away from Kenta and his twisted desires.

"These are my private quarters." Kazuki threw open a set of double doors on a comfortable suite of rooms. The shadow wolf tried not to fidget when he realized that there was only one bed, and he would soon be sharing it with the man next to him.

"Yoshi," the spell-caster sing-songed, wrenching his attention back to the situation at hand. "Come join me." He patted the bed. "I promise not to bite."

The shadow wolf shuddered at the thought. He remembered all too well the ones who liked to bite. "I didn't mean to scare you, pretty one," Kazuki whispered. "I didn't think. Please, just sit and talk with me."

Yoshi slid onto the bed, one leg curled underneath him while the other hung over the side, facilitating a rapid escape. "That's better," the legendary continued as he slowly began to stroke soft, colorless, strands, massaging the tense scalp beneath until the shadow wolf started to relax. Only then did he move to capture the wary elite's lips in a slow, tender kiss.

"I meant what I said," Kazuki muttered. "It's been a long time since anyone shared my bed, for reasons I'm sure you understand. I'd like it if we could share pleasure together. I find you ... alluring."

Yoshi's eyes went wide at the last admission. He quickly analyzed the situation, coming to the conclusion that he would be in a much stronger position as Kazuki's lover than as the one who had rejected him. Course chosen he spared a moment to send an apology to Makoto before pulling the dark haired man into his lap and kissing him with passion.

Yoshi smiled at the way the handsome legendary melted into the kiss, maneuvering them to lie flat before slowly starting to peel the garments off Kazuki's upper body. Once the shirt was

shed the shadow wolf bent to lap and suckle flat nipples until they hardened, nipping the taut buds and sending shudders through the smaller man's frame.

“Like that do you?” Yoshi smiled, empowered by the reaction he was drawing. He laved a wet trail down a tense abdomen, easing restrictive garments over lean hips before rubbing his cheek against the twitching erection. “Do you want this?” he mouthed against the silky shaft, appreciating the way wiry muscles twitched and jumped as snowy strands brushed across Kazuki's taut thigh.

“You won't hurt me?”

“Oh, no, no,” the shadow wolf soothed. “Only pleasure, it doesn't have to hurt.” He wrapped experienced lips around the tip, flicking his tongue in the slit as his lips massaged the sensitive skin behind the head. Yoshi smiled around his mouthful when Kazuki let out a loud moan, the sound spurring him to take the length deep in his throat as he hummed his approval.

As soon as the responsive body beneath him started to thrust the shadow wolf changed his tactics, letting the throbbing length slide from his mouth as he moved to suckle tight, swollen balls. Kazuki's head thrashed, inky strands fanning out across the bedding as he fought against the pleasure surging through him. “Relax, enjoy,” Yoshi whispered huskily before spreading tense cheeks, licking a wet path down the crack to lap and nuzzle the tight pucker.

Kazuki let out a hoarse cry when the shadow wolf's talented tongue pushed through the clenched ring, and he spread his legs as far as they could go, unconsciously presenting himself to enraptured mismatched eyes. When a long finger finally slid inside, shivers raced through his lean frame and Yoshi moved up to capture thin lips in a heated kiss.

“Please don't stop.” Yoshi merely shook his head no, adding a second finger and scraping them across his prostate.

“Lubrication,” the shadow wolf muttered and a slim hand scrabbled in the bedside drawer, shoving a tube in Yoshi's direction. Kazuki watched in fascination as the elite fistfisted his erection, spreading the glistening slickness as his eyes slipped shut in pleasure.

Kazuki's eyes were wide and almost panicked as the thick head of the shadow wolf's penis nudged his entrance, so Yoshi dipped his head and kissed him again as he pushed deeper into the strangling heat, fighting the urge to thrust as velvety walls fluttered teasingly around his weeping erection.

The elite set a slow, steady pace, making sure that his remaining piercings dragged across the spell-caster's prostate with every stroke. He reveled in the powerful feeling of being in control for one of the first times in his life. Yoshi slid an arm under the lithe figure and pulled him tight against his chest, wrapping Kazuki's legs around his waist before gracefully rising to his knees, the change in angle causing him to penetrate even more deeply.

Kazuki keened his approval, azure eyes rolling up in his head as his balls pulled up tight. He gave a piercing shriek of Yoshi's name, writhing wantonly as his hot cum poured out between them. The shadow wolf tried to hold out, not ready to relinquish such a heady feeling, but his body had other ideas, and with one more deep thrust he came, filling the older man with his seed.

Yoshi nuzzled a long neck as he maneuvered them to lie on their sides, never breaking their intimate connection. “Rest,” he whispered even as his own lashes fluttered, curling protectively around Kazuki as they drifted into sleep.

Yoshi burrowed closer to the enticing warmth, stubbornly ignoring his brain's insistence that he pay attention, now. *Makoto's not complaining. Maybe we can sleep in today.* His train of thought fizzled out when the memories of where and who he was with came rushing back.

Just then the man in question turned his head and blinked open sleepy blue eyes. "Good morning, pretty," he whispered. "What's going through that head of yours?"

"Why me?" the shadow wolf managed, even as his brain berated him for his graceless response.

"I believe I was the first boy shishou loved. Although obviously I wasn't the last. I begged him to stop. Instead he told me I was special and taught me things he didn't teach his other apprentices. I felt powerful." Kazuki paused briefly, face wrinkling in displeasure. "When I turned seventeen I walked in on him with another boy. When I asked him why, shishou merely said I was too old for such things. But I didn't want to be. I didn't want to give up my place, I'd suffered so much to secure it."

"So you began searching for eternal youth," Yoshi murmured as understanding hit.

"Indeed. Along the way though, I realized I had all the power I needed without pain. In fact, you'd be surprised how enjoyable it can be causing it instead." The legendary shinobi maintained careful eye contact with the wary pair studying him. "I have not shared myself with anyone else. Until last night, that is. We are more alike than you realize, Yoshi. Your pain reminded me of my own, so I made sure it stopped. What happened after that I didn't plan. I never knew pleasure like that was even possible."

"And what happens now?"

"We eat breakfast," Kazuki said with a sad smile before changing the subject. "I can't let you go back, you know. If Kobayashi shuudan knew where I was they'd move against me. Will you stay here with me? I'd hate to have to eliminate you."

"No pain?" Yoshi pressed.

"No pain, I swear," the spell-caster responded without hesitation.

"Yes," the shadow wolf replied. "I'll stay with you." He leaned over and placed a chaste kiss on Kazuki's lips. "I only recently learned about pleasure. I am looking forward to exploring it in depth."

"Ah, pretty," Kazuki sighed. "There are things we need to discuss first." He turned away and appeared to study the wall. "Rin will be coming here. I know how much she's hurt you, but she also has the power to release your ki. In any event, I have what she desires, and she'll do as I command. Which brings me to the other thing we need to talk about. What do you know about the way I maintain my appearance?"

"You completely drain the ki from a younger donor. The process can be repeated and lasts longest if your victim has large reserves," Yoshi answered. "What does this have to do with me? Are you planning on using my ki?"

"I had thought about it," Kazuki admitted. "But that was before I met you. Now, I want you to choose."

"Choose what?"

"Choose my new donor. I take on many of their characteristics after the transfer," Kazuki replied. "I wish to be pleasing to you. There are three candidates prepared. Hopefully one will be to your liking."

Koga Aya rapped on the door to the Shuhan's office, tapping her foot as she waited for admittance. "Ah, Aya, any signs of Junko?" Daisuke asked when the doors opened.

"We tracked her to a glade outside our boundaries, then we lost her scent. She met with someone there, a man, he was headed this way," Aya admitted in defeat. "I'm afraid by the time we abandoned our search for Junko, we'd lost his trail as well."

"Any sign of Yoshi?" Daisuke probed.

"Why would we have seen Takahashi? I thought Makoto was retrieving him."

"He did, only someone snatched him from Makoto's house," the Shuhan confided. "We have yet to locate where he's been taken. I thought it was worth a try."

"Let me grab a bite and clean up, then we'll try to track them from Sasaki-san's," Aya suggested. "We should at least be able to point you in the right direction."

"Souta," Daisuke began as soon as the doors swung shut again. "Go fill Makoto in on Aya's report, see if he's gotten any more information. You should find him downstairs chatting with Rin."

The assassin shivered at the tone of his lover's voice before squaring his shoulders and heading for the door. "Oh, and Sou," Daisuke's voice rang out just as his hand grasped the knob, "don't forget you wanted to ask him about what he and Yoshi have been doing." The elite turned a blank face toward his lover, only to be met with a wicked smirk and the same rude hand gesture he'd used earlier. "You remember."

Souta shuddered at the thought. "Ha, ha, Dai, very funny. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Rin's cell was empty, so now Souta was moving from room to room, searching for the whereabouts of the former Shuhan and her interrogator. *Finally*. He heard voices, reached for the knob and opened it ... just in time to see the pair he'd been searching for disappear.

Yoshi pressed up tightly against the legendary's back, grinding his erection into plush cheeks as he bent to whisper in his ear. "Do we have to talk about this now? I wanted to have breakfast." He easily swept Kazuki into his arms, striding back to the bed and depositing his new lover before crawling over and swallowing his erection.

The spell-caster tried to marshal his thoughts, but every time he got close Yoshi's wicked tongue distracted him. When a pair of agile fingers slipped inside to tease his prostate Kazuki gave up the attempt and abandoned himself to the feeling, arching wantonly into the hot mouth. "Please, please," he heard himself whine, startled at how needy he sounded.

"Please what?" the shadow wolf broke away to whisper. "What do you want?"

"Fill me," he demanded, morphing into a husky moan as a third finger made its way inside him.

"If it pleases you." Yoshi flipped Kazuki on his side and lifted one leg onto his shoulder before easing his way into the tight passage. "Sshhh, relax," the shadow wolf soothed as he wrapped an elegant long-fingered hand around the spell-caster's erection, thumb rubbing teasingly just under the head. "I would never hurt you."

Kazuki could only whimper and clutch the sheets as the elite began a slight rocking motion, the shadow wolf's piercings pressing and rubbing his prostate, sending electric currents rippling up his spine with the slightest movement. "You have no idea how good you feel wrapped around me." Yoshi groaned as he deepened his strokes. "I can't wait for you to return the favor."

Azure eyes widened as the legendary twisted to meet his lover's eyes. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course, don't you want to have your wicked way with me?"

"Anything you want." Kazuki leaned forward and captured plump lips in a long passionate kiss. So intent were the lovers that they never noticed the appearance of a triumphant Rin and a shocked Makoto.

"Yoshi?" The interrogator gaped, unable to process the sight of the man he was so enamored with wrapped so intimately around Kobayashi shuudan's most powerful defector.

"I told you he was a whore," Rin crowed as she wrenched her arm out of his now slack grip. "He'll sleep with anyone."

Makoto's mind was whirling, he couldn't face Yoshi now, not like this. He reversed the spell, collapsing onto the hard stone floor of the chamber in front of Souta's startled eyes.

"Sasaki-san, what happened?" The assassin rushed forward to help the interrogator to his feet.

"I need to see the Shuhan," Makoto gritted out before racing up the stairs, Souta hot on his heels.

"Shuhan-sama," the torture master began as soon as he burst through the office doors. "I let Rin escape and I think I know where Yoshi is, although I wish I didn't."

"One thing at a time, Makoto," Daisuke said. "Why don't you start at the beginning. Would you like a cup of tea? Sou, get Makoto some tea." The Shuhan turned back to the shell-shocked interrogator. "Makoto," he crooned, waiting for pained eyes to meet his. "What did she do?"

"She said she could find Yoshi, it was part of his ki control, but she needed to access her power. I thought if I lent her my ki instead I could control the situation." Makoto grasped his head in his hands, as if to wrench the pictures from his mind. "She said she knew where Yoshi was and she asked if I wanted her to take me there. I thought as long as she was ki blocked we could go, grab him and come right back. But..." The interrogator found himself unable to force the words past his too tight throat.

"Here's your tea." Souta pushed the fragile cup into shaking hands.

"Please continue, Makoto," Daisuke urged. "You went to get Yoshi and what happened?"

"We appeared in a bedroom, I think it may have been underground. Yoshi was," the interrogator swallowed hard, "having sex with Nakamura Kazuki when we arrived. At least, I'm pretty sure it was Kazuki. I don't have a picture of him to compare it to. In any event I was stunned, I just let go of Rin and returned. I'm so sorry, Shuhan-sama, I am ready to accept my punishment."

"Why would I punish you? You were understandably upset by what you saw, although I'd urge you not to judge too quickly. Takahashi-san is used to coping with this sort of situation. I'm sure he's just doing what he must to survive."

Daisuke stood and paced the space in front of his desk, worry furrowing his brow as he turned this new information over in his mind. "Obviously we can't allow this situation to continue, Takahashi-san belongs here and Rin has more than earned her punishment. Right now though, I'm more worried about you." The Shuhan came to a stop in front of the hunched figure

and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Please consider staying here. Let us help you forget what you saw. Being alone right now will only make things worse."

Yoshi kept murmuring in the spell-caster's ear, rubbing his thumb in tantalizing circles over the head of Kazuki's erection as he continued his slow, deep thrusts. "What do you need, baby?" The only response was a high pitched whine. "You need to use your words."

"You, I need you," the raven-haired man gasped. Yoshi smiled as he swooped down and captured thin lips in a breathtaking kiss.

Rin covered her mouth in astonishment, shocked at the submissive position she found her old friend in, and even more shocked at who he was with. "Are you insane, 'zuki?" she managed to choke out. "You do realize you're allowing a whore to top you?"

Her voice cut through the sensual haze the pair had fallen into. Yoshi sullenly pulled out, hovering protectively in front of his lover and watching Rin with angry, guarded eyes.

"You're questioning me, princess?" Kazuki asked as he pulled the shadow wolf closer. "I thought you still desired what I promised."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Rin retorted. "I did as you requested, now I want my reward. Besides, he is a whore, and a good one too. He's barely had a day off in three years."

"Remove the seal on his ki, Rin," Kazuki demanded. "Then we can talk about what happens next."

"Or what? You'll sic your little boy toy on me?"

"If I were you, I'd watch what you say," the spell-caster replied. "I've half a mind to send you back."

The kunoichi swallowed hard, thinking about the reception she'd face if she returned. "Fine," she bit out. "You know you blew a perfect opportunity."

"What are you talking about, princess?"

"Did you even see me arrive?" she asked. "The head of covert operations for Kobayashi shuudan brought me here. He was looking for you, Yoshi."

"Makoto was here?"

"I told him you were a whore, not to bother wasting time on you, but he just wouldn't listen. Now he believes me," Rin chuckled.

Yoshi's face fell, his mind insisting that Makoto had been so repulsed by what he had seen that the torture master had decided to leave him behind. "Because I'm a whore," he muttered, pain evident in his expressive eyes.

Kazuki heard the shadow wolf's pained mumble and leaned close to whisper his concern. "You're not a whore." He rubbed his thumb over the pulse point in the pale man's wrist. "Why do you let her get under your skin?"

The shadow wolf studied the duvet as he answered, fearing to meet the older man's piercing blue eyes. "He rescued me from the Yakuza. I chose him to teach me about pleasure. Then Kenta snatched me out of his house, in his clothes. He was very good to me, and I was nothing but trouble. He must hate me now."

"Who, pretty, Sasaki-san?" Kazuki lifted Yoshi's head to meet haunted mismatched eyes.

“He was alone for a very long time. He trusted me and I betrayed him. He’ll never believe I didn’t choose to defect.”

“Let me tell you a little story about choice.” Kazuki made sure to speak loud enough that Rin could hear. “When shishou finished with me I turned my attentions to the only boy who had offered me friendship. We became close.” He swallowed before continuing. “I was ready to pledge my heart to him and decided I had to tell him about the things we had done. He called me a sick, lying, traitor. I left the next day and we never spoke again.” The legendary took a deep breath before grasping Yoshi's chin and lifting his head to meet hard icy eyes. “The point, pretty, is that we don’t always get to choose.”

“Who rejected you?” the shadow wolf growled. “Who would dare after what Kobayashi-sama did to you?”

“Your uncle, Genki.”

Rin clapped her hand over her mouth in astonishment, stunned by the revelation. “You wanted to sleep with one of the biggest womanizers in all of Japan?”

“Genki's not my uncle,” Yoshi retorted, ignoring the woman's outburst.

“Close enough, they may have been cousins but he and your father were like brothers,” Kazuki explained. “Surely he must have been around when you were growing up?”

“I never heard anything about Genki being a Takahashi. He and my father always hated each other. In fact, Genki was upset when Oonishi-san took me as a student, said I wasn’t worth wasting his time on. There's no way we’re related.”

“I’m sorry, Yoshi, I thought you knew,” Kazuki said. “I never imagined anything would come between them.”

“Who was it?” the shadow wolf demanded.

“Who was what?”

“Who was the boy you caught your shishou with? What aren’t you telling me? It was my father wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” Kazuki admitted. “I imagine Genki must have gone to confront shishou and caught them together. If his reaction to my confession was any indication, he would have been very cruel to your father. It's no wonder they ended up hating each other.”

“I’ll kill him,” Yoshi muttered. “My whole fucking life and he never even bothered to tell me we were related. All those years I was alone after Oonishi-sama died.”

“It will be alright, pretty,” Kazuki assured him. “We’ll get our revenge on all of them, together.” He continued to stroke soft snowy strands as he turned his attention toward his angry friend. “Rin, I’m still waiting. Remove the ki binding now.”

She reluctantly traced a series of kanji, ending with a touch to each of Yoshi's pulse points. The shadow wolf shivered at the feeling of his ki flowing freely after so long. “Feels like ants under my skin,” he mumbled as he twitched.

“There, I kept my part of the bargain, now you keep yours,” Rin demanded. “It's time for you to deliver on your promises.”

Daisuke watched the interrogator closely. Makoto had yet to say a word in response to his offer. “Sasaki-san, don’t think so hard,” the Shuhan urged. “It's not a lifetime commitment. Stay

here with us tonight. Just sleep, if that's what you want. Tomorrow things will seem brighter and we'll figure out how to get Takahashi-san back where he belongs."

"I'm flattered," the interrogator admitted. "But I really think it would be better if I went home. I'm not very good company at the moment."

"Now you're just being silly. Souta, will you please try and talk some sense into him."

"I'd listen if I were you," the assassin confided. "Otherwise he'll use the voice on you. Trust me, you'll give in eventually, just save yourself the embarrassment."

"The voice?"

"You know, that dominant, commanding one," Souta continued, warming to the subject. "It always makes me picture him with a ruler in his hand and all I can think is punish me, please." A wide satisfied smirk spread across the assassin's face as his mind continued to expound on the ramifications of his lover's aggression.

"Thank you so much for sharing. However, I believe that's something best kept between the two of you."

"Seriously, Makoto," Daisuke cut in. "I'd rather not make it an order. You shouldn't be alone tonight. If not here, is there someone else you could stay with?"

"Honestly, I'm just fine on my own," the interrogator insisted. "I'll just go home."

"And stare at the boxes of Yoshi's things? I hardly think that's wise."

"Fine, then I'll stay in my office, but I have no intention of getting involved in a threesome with you right now."

"You will do what I tell you to, shinobi," Daisuke retorted. "Which is to stay here where I can keep an eye on you. I have no intention of forcing myself on you or anyone else. I have a more than willing bed partner, thank you. I am, however, rightly worried about your state of mind. I need to make sure you don't rush off and do something you'll regret."

"My apologies, Shuhan-sama, Fukazawa-san. I am distraught. I spoke without thinking. I know you are both honorable men. I didn't mean to accuse you..." Makoto trailed off into silence as the full impact of his situation hit home.

"It's alright," Daisuke pulled the tall man into an embrace. "We'll get him back for you."

"I don't think he wants to come back," the interrogator choked. "I'm afraid he's right where he wants to be."

"I refuse to believe Yoshi is with Kazuki willingly," Daisuke insisted. "All the evidence we have points to his being abducted. Until he tells us otherwise I intend to assume his actions are an attempt to stay alive in a very dangerous situation."

"Takahashi's a genius," Souta added. "He's still alive after everything he's been through. I have no doubt he can survive this too."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, really, but you didn't see what I did. Yoshi was ... he was in control."

"You don't honestly believe just because someone is on top they're in control, do you?" Souta chuckled. "Hell, I top Dai all the time and I've never been in control."

"Again, thanks for sharing," the interrogator gritted out as he pinched his nose. He didn't need any more information about his Shuhan's bed habits. "But you don't understand, it was obvious Yoshi was enjoying himself."

"Thank goodness," Daisuke interjected. "The last thing he needs is more trauma, he's been hurt enough." He pursed his lips in thought before elaborating. "I think you need to concentrate

on the positive aspects. After all, we know Yoshi is alive and apparently uninjured, and you avoided capture, that is also something to celebrate.”

Just then there was a knock on the doors and Koga Aya entered. “I’m afraid I lost the trail again, Shuhan-sama. I can tell you that the man who took Takahashi-san crossed paths with Junko. Perhaps if I were to start at that point?”

“That’s probably a good idea,” the Shuhan decided. “You should know that we have new information. Yoshi is being held by Nakamura Kazuki. Rin has escaped and joined them.”

“Should I take an extraction team?” Aya asked.

“No, not yet. We need more information on what we’ll be going up against. Souta,” Daisuke continued, turning toward his lover. “Go with her, find out what you can and report back no later than three days from now.”

“Is there some way to trace back and figure out where I was?” Makoto interjected. “Then you wouldn’t have to waste time hunting for the trail.”

“Maybe Hoshu knows a way?” the Shuhan mused, sending a runner to fetch the Hayashi patriarch to see what was possible.

Yoshi turned to Kazuki in horror. “Who else?” he demanded.

“The only one living is Oonishi Hideaki,” the legendary replied. “You do realize the Oonishi clan dying out was no mystery? Hideaki poisoned them, slowly, after the clan decided to send him for ‘special tutoring’ from Kobayashi-sama. Why do you think he hasn’t returned?”

“I never considered that there were any besides me,” the shadow wolf said. “Certainly none after me. Kobayashi-sama kept sending me out until his death. It slowed down to only a few times a year by then. I just assumed that was because we were at peace, more or less. I guess when he stopped using me himself I should have gotten suspicious.”

“I’m so sorry, pretty. It hurts even more knowing you weren’t special.” Kazuki pulled the lanky figure tighter and kissed his cheek.

“It should make me feel better,” Yoshi mused. “So why do I feel even dirtier?”

“We are special. We survived, you more than anyone else. As far as I know, you and your father were the only ones used as ‘barter’.” The spell-caster turned his attention back to Rin. “Did you use anyone other than Yoshi for your little ‘exchanges’?”

“No,” she replied haughtily, “I’m not a pimp. As I said before, it was in Kobayashi-sama’s instructions to his successor.”

“That does not excuse what you did,” Kazuki hissed. “There is no excuse. You ruined Yoshi’s life. He might have recovered after Kobayashi-sama’s death if not for you.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” the shadow wolf interjected. “I had nothing to live for.”

“You would have found someone eventually,” Kazuki insisted. “Are you, of all people, excusing her behavior?”

“Of course not.” Yoshi shook his head sadly. “But talking about it doesn’t change what happened. Better me than someone else.”

“Why would you say that? Why would you rather be hurt than someone you don’t even know?”

“I swore my allegiance to the shuudan and its people,” Yoshi explained. “My job is to

protect them, all of them, even at my own expense. Why should this be any different?"

"You truly are shinobi," Kazuki said with a touch of awe. "Did you never consider killing them all and disappearing?"

"Of course not. It was my duty. I helped build alliances for the shuudan after the clan wars. True, I resented it, but I wouldn't have wished it on any of my comrades. If it had to be done then I was willing to do what was required. I got Sasaki-san released from Iwagashi shuudan and influenced the signing of treaties we depend on. I'm not ashamed of the things I did, they were a necessary means to an end. I just wish..."

"What do you wish for, Yoshi?" Kazuki asked. "What would give you peace?"

"I wish I had confided in someone, perhaps Hideaki could have been spared. It's my fault, all those lives could have been saved if I had just abandoned my pride."

"No, no," Kazuki assured him. "Hideaki's father acted without knowing about you. I'm not even sure he knew what the 'special lessons' involved. I doubt his son ever talked to him about it."

"Have you seen Hideaki? Is he alright?"

"He murdered his entire clan to assuage his injured pride. How do you think he is?" Kazuki shook his head. "Seriously, pretty, I'm afraid he's quite mad. Apparently he lacked the emotional resilience you and I have. Perhaps that's the hindrance of growing up in a so-called loving family."

"Perhaps," Yoshi muttered. "Still, I would have appreciated the opportunity."

"This is all very touching," Rin broke in. "But I'm still waiting."

"And you will continue to wait until I'm ready to deal with you," Kazuki retorted. "Honestly, princess, I expected better behavior from you. Why so much hostility?"

"I didn't expect to be left to cool my heels while you wiled away time on idle chit-chat. After all, I've been setting all this up for years. I think I've more than proved my loyalty. What I don't understand is why you're wasting precious minutes comforting that." She indicated the shadow wolf with a tilt of her head. "He's nothing but a tool, and a broken one at that."

"She's right," Yoshi interjected. "No one should waste time on me. You two go take care of whatever you need to." He turned to Kazuki and shyly continued. "Could I maybe have a bath and some clothes?"

"We'll both bathe and dress first," the legendary decided. "You need to give me your opinion before I can proceed."

"As you wish," Yoshi agreed, bowing his head so his bangs flopped into his eyes.

"Rin." Kazuki turned to address her. "Why don't you go find Kenta and Junko. Have them bring you up to speed on what needs to be done. We will join you as soon as we're ready."

The kunoichi snorted, but moved toward the door, stopping to throw a parting remark over her shoulder. "Try not to get distracted again, my patience has its limits."

The spell-caster ignored her, totally engrossed in his new companion. "Come, Yoshi, let's get cleaned up and have breakfast. Then we can worry about everything else."

The shadow wolf obediently turned toward his new lover, accepting the arm that wrapped around his waist, pulling him close. "Not so solemn, pretty," Kazuki whispered. "You have a truly lovely smile. It's been a very long time since anyone's smiled at me like that."

"I was just thinking about Hideaki. Why didn't you do this with him?" Yoshi asked. "Maybe then he'd be, well, better, at least."

“By the time I came across Oonishi-san he was already beyond redemption,” the legendary explained. “Besides, he reminded me too much of myself. I said you were the first person I’ve been attracted to. Something about you calls to me.”

“I was his sempai when he joined black ops. He tried to get close, talk to me. I brushed him off like I did everyone else. I didn’t take care of him the way I should have, he was my responsibility,” the shadow wolf explained. “I failed him. I’ve failed so many people. I meant it when I said no one should waste time on me.”

“I hardly consider any time we spend together wasted. I feel better than I have in years. Just having someone who understands means a great deal.” Kazuki stopped to lock gazes with Yoshi’s wary mismatched eyes. “You mean a great deal to me. Please remember that.”

Rin made her way through the underground maze, eventually locating Kenta and her aide in a deserted laboratory. “You’re supposed to fill me in on what’s going on. While you’re at it, can someone please explain to me what the hell is going on between Kazuki and Yoshi?”

Junko looked at her mistress in shock. “How did you get here?”

“Makoto brought me,” she said with a snicker. “Boy, did he ever get an eyeful. He was so shocked he dropped me and headed right back home.”

Kenta growled at the implication. “What exactly are you alluding to, Rin? What do you think is going on between my master and Takahashi?”

“What’s going on between them is sex,” the former Shuhan replied breezily. “It doesn’t surprise me too much, but I never took Kazuki for a bottom. In fact, he’s acting like a love struck fool.”

“Explain yourself,” the apprentice demanded. “You’ve got no right coming in here making accusations.”

“I’m not accusing anyone of anything. I merely thought he wanted Takahashi for the transfer. His ki reserves are, after all, extremely high.”

“No,” Kenta yelled. “Yoshi’s supposed to be mine. He was always supposed to be mine. Besides, my master has never been bothered by the needs of the flesh, he wouldn’t waste precious time that way. Why don’t you stop spreading disgusting rumors and concentrate on what has to be done.”

“I’m sorry if it upsets you,” Rin retorted. “But I have no reason to lie about it. When we arrived they were quite intimately entwined. They’ll be joining us after they bathe and have breakfast.”

“Breakfast,” the apprentice screeched. “They are *not* eating breakfast together.” He stormed out and headed towards Kazuki’s chambers, eager to dispel the lies and once again take control of the situation.

Kenta threw open the double doors and stormed in unannounced, anger overriding his usual instinct for self-preservation. He stopped dead when he caught sight of his master, bent over the end of the bed, pleading with his obsession.

“Please, pretty, I need to feel you inside me.” The shadow wolf slowly inched his way into Kazuki’s tight passage, capturing his lips in an attempt to distract him from any discomfort.

“What the hell is going on here?” Kenta bellowed. “Get off of him.” He yanked Yoshi up by

his hair, tearing the lovers apart. The apprentice jerked the shadow wolf to his feet and shook him like a rag doll.

Yoshi drew himself up to full height as he gathered his ki in anger for the first time in years. “Who the hell do you think you are? I never asked you to interfere in my life, yet every time I turn around there you are. No more.” He surged forward, only to be stopped short by an arm wrapping around his waist and pulling him tight.

“I still need him, pretty one,” Kazuki husked. “Kill him now and you kill me too.”

The elite relaxed minutely, lip still drawn back in a feral snarl. “Your master has saved you for now. Next time you won’t be so lucky. Get the hell out of my sight.”

Kenta staggered out of the room, breaking into a run as he headed back the way he’d come. “Rin, I apologize,” he gritted out when he finally reached the lab. “You were right. Takahashi even tried to attack me. We need to eliminate him.” Even he could see the need to abandon his dream in the face of this new, and unpleasant, reality.

“I have an idea,” she said. “But I need to know when the next ki exchange takes place.”

“As soon as possible,” Kenta hurried to explain. “My master has, at best, two months left before he has to perform the procedure. Any longer than that and it will be too late. He’ll continue to burn through whatever ki reserves he may have and when they’re gone he’ll be dead.”

“What if Yoshi were the only choice?” Rin asked. “If we eliminate the other possibilities he’ll be forced to use Takahashi or perish. There’s no way he’ll risk that.”

“But mistress,” Junko piped up. “What about your reward? Kazuki-sama won’t give you what he promised if you thwart him.”

“So I get him to pay up first, or wait until afterward, he’ll see reason then, surely,” the kunoichi decided. “In any event, we can’t let things go on as they are. If nothing else, Takahashi is sure to turn him against us.”

Daisuke paced in front of his desk while he waited to hear what the investigation uncovered. As soon as Hoshu revealed Kazuki’s location, Makoto turned to address the Shuhan. “Let me go with Aya and Souta. I have the best idea of what we’re up against.”

“No, Sasaki-san. I’m sorry, but I need you here,” Daisuke insisted. “We have to bring the other clan heads up to speed on what’s happened and figure out what we’re going to do. Trust me.” He placed a supportive hand on the interrogator’s shoulder. “We will get Takahashi-san back. I won’t abandon him to Kazuki’s clutches.”

“We need to get going, Dai. I’ll see you in a few days.” Souta kissed the Shuhan passionately, heedless of the onlookers. “Makoto,” he said when the embrace finally broke. “I expect you to keep an eye on Dai for me. Don’t let anything happen to him while I’m gone.”

“I’ll keep him safe,” the interrogator assured him. “Just help me get Yoshi back.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t blame you if you never wanted to see him again.”

“Of course,” Makoto replied. “I owe him, more than I can possibly repay. I could never abandon him.”

“Then I’ll make sure he gets back to you,” the assassin said with a smile. “And you’ll owe me a foursome.”

“I never said...” the interrogator began to protest, giving up with a strangled groan when the

Shuhan and his lover merely laughed. "Fine, but you get to explain it to Yoshi."

"I can't wait," Souta chuckled. "I'll tell him when he gets back."

"Get going," Daisuke said, giving his lover a push toward the door. "The sooner you leave, the sooner you'll be back. Makoto, stay please," he ordered before summoning two black ops and sending them off to gather the clan heads. "Hoshu, do you think you could go find Genki and ask him to join us?"

"Certainly, Daisuke." The elder studied the younger man critically. "But don't you think this can wait until morning? You look like you could use a good night's sleep."

"I at least want to bring everyone up to speed. I promise to keep it short, we'll make our plans when we all have clearer heads," the Shuhan decided. "Maybe if we all sleep on it we'll gain some understanding."

As soon as the doors shut behind the head of the Hayashi clan, Daisuke turned serious eyes on the interrogator. "Makoto, you will be my night guard while Souta's away. That way I can keep an eye on you."

"I don't need a babysitter," he argued. "I said I'd stay and I will."

"I'm more worried about your mental state. You shouldn't sit at home brooding over Yoshi's things. No matter how you deny it, I know you're still upset by what you saw, anyone would be. I don't want you jumping to conclusions and making everything worse."

"What could possibly be worse?" Makoto asked. "At the very least I'll have to interrogate him. Assuming, of course, that he returns. Do you really think he'll trust me after that?"

"You can't be the one to question him," Daisuke decided. "That wouldn't be fair to either of you. We've kept this quiet so I think Hoshu or Genki would be a good choice. Maybe I'll do it myself."

"I assure you I can remain impartial. I have never let my personal feelings interfere with my job."

"Of course you haven't," the Shuhan soothed. "I didn't mean to imply anything of the sort. I just assumed it would be uncomfortable for you to have to hear Takahashi-san talk about his time with Kazuki."

"Why would I be uncomfortable?" The interrogator gave a studied shrug. "It's not like there's anything between us."

"Really? You didn't sleep with him?"

"I didn't say that," Makoto admitted. "Yoshi was just grateful because I brought him back from Kanegawa. It didn't mean anything."

"Are you sure about that?" the Shuhan pressed. "Because I doubt Takahashi-san ever willingly had sex. Don't tell him how unimportant it was, he might never have the courage to get close to anyone again. Do him a favor and let him down slowly."

"There's nothing to let him down from," the torture master grumbled. "I told you, he seemed happy where he was."

"Did he even see you?" Daisuke prodded. "I can't believe he'd willingly turn his back on you."

"He didn't see me, thankfully. I don't think I could stand it if he had. But they were..." The interrogator turned hurt, confused eyes on the Shuhan.

"It will be alright, Makoto." Daisuke pulled him into a gentle embrace. "I'll take care of everything. Please trust me."

“Of course I trust you, Shuhan-sama.”

“Good.” Chocolate eyes sparkled with mischief. “Then you won’t fight me when I do this.” Daisuke leaned in and kissed him, wrapping an arm around his waist to hold him close until he was finished.

“There, that’s better.” The Shuhan smirked when he released the dumbstruck interrogator. “We’ll pick this up after our meeting. Trust me, it will all work out.”

“If you say so,” the torture master rumbled, even as he doubted anything would be alright.

It was nearing midnight by the time the meeting finally broke up and Daisuke strode gratefully into his private apartment, throwing off his robes and hustling Makoto out of his coat before the torture master had time to protest. “That’s better,” the Shuhan declared before leaning in and capturing scarred lips. “Get undressed, we need to get some sleep.”

“I’m supposed to be guarding you, Shuhan-sama,” the interrogator demurred. “I can’t sleep on duty.”

“There’s a dozen black ops outside the doors, I doubt I’m in any danger,” the Shuhan retorted. “The position is a formality, as you well know.”

“The position is Souta’s,” Makoto protested. “I don’t want to come between you.”

“That’s nice to know,” Daisuke chuckled. “But you couldn’t even if you tried. Do you trust me, Sasaki-san?”

“Of course. That doesn’t mean I need to have sex with you.”

“That’s true,” he conceded. “But I think you should.” The Shuhan studied the interrogator’s face. “Right now you’re feeling hurt and betrayed because of what you saw. I’d like to help you try to see it in a different light.” He pulled the tie out of his hair before placing a hand on Makoto’s broad chest. “If not me, who would you prefer?”

“Yoshi. I want him back in my house, in my bed, in my arms. That’s all I want.”

“Be honest, Makoto,” the Shuhan warned. “Will you hold it against him?”

“No,” the interrogator insisted.

“Are you sure? Betrayal is the hardest thing for a shinobi to forgive. I’m not sure I could so easily push aside my doubts. If nothing else, I think you need to balance the situation so you both have equal shares of guilt and blame. It will make it easier for you to get past this.”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t want him to feel I cast him aside.”

“Isn’t that how you feel right now?” Daisuke pressed. “You believe he’d rather stay with Kazuki than come back to you. Don’t you feel abandoned?”

“I admit it hurts, I’d be lying if I said it didn’t,” the interrogator replied. “But if I hurt him it would make me feel even worse.”

“So it’s love then,” the Shuhan decided. “That makes everything easier. But I still think you need to equalize things. Give Yoshi something to forgive you for, then maybe he won’t beat himself up too badly.”

“You honestly expect me to believe that my sleeping with you will make him feel better?” Makoto demanded, hands on his hips.

“He’ll feel less guilty, and you’ll feel less hurt by his actions when you’ve done the same thing without it affecting your feelings,” Daisuke reasoned.

“What if it does affect my feelings?” the interrogator asked. “Then what do I do?”

“If it affects the way you feel about Yoshi, then you never loved him in the first place,” came the confident reply. “You need to know one way or the other before you see him again.” The Shuhan slowly unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off broad shoulders, then thumbed the button on his pants and slid them down long legs. “Come to bed Makoto,” he whispered as he wrapped his arms around the interrogator's neck and captured his lips in a deep, wet kiss.

Makoto finally gave into the temptation before him, returning Daisuke's kiss with equal passion as he lowered them onto the bed. “You're still wearing too many clothes,” the Shuhan grumbled as he deftly began to strip the older man, only to be cut short before he even had the interrogator's shirt all the way off.

“Are you sure about this? Because if you aren't you'd best stop right there.”

“I wouldn't have started if I wasn't sure,” Daisuke purred. “I've been watching you for years, and I'm not the only one. Souta's going to be so jealous that I got to you first. Now, can I get back to what I was doing please?”

“No, you're taking way too long.” The interrogator quickly shed his clothes before rejoining Daisuke on the bed, pinning the slighter man down and kissing him senseless while his hands roamed over all the smooth bronze flesh they could reach. He licked and nipped his way down the lithe form before swallowing the younger man's erection to the root.

“Kami, Makoto.” The Shuhan moaned as wet heat surrounded his throbbing length, groaning and arching when the interrogator's tongue dipped into the sensitive slit. Daisuke could only pant when the hot mouth moved to suckle his balls before flicking over his entrance. The interrogator found himself captivated by the way the puckered muscle fluttered under his tongue's probing, as if it were torn between accepting or rejecting the intrusion.

Daisuke gasped when two thick fingers worked their way inside him, scissoring and stretching before being joined by a third. “Hurry up,” the Shuhan panted as he thrust back hard against the intrusion.

“I don't want to hurt you,” Makoto rumbled as he continued to tease.

“You won't, I've done this before,” Daisuke managed to stammer, only to be met by a wicked smirk.

“I imagine I'm a lot bigger than Souta. Better safe than sorry.”

“Please,” the Shuhan begged. “I want to feel you. I'm ready, please.” The interrogator slid his fingers out and began pushing the broad head of his erection against the softened muscle until it slid inside, continuing the measured pace until his considerable length was buried balls deep in the smaller man.

“How's that, Shuhan-sama, can you feel me now?” Makoto husked as he paused to give him time to recover.

“So full,” he moaned. “Please, I need you to move.”

The interrogator pulled back until just the head of his swollen cock remained inside before beginning a series of shallow thrusts and gentle swirls that left Daisuke struggling for more contact.

“Fuck me like you mean it,” the Shuhan demanded. “I'm not made of glass.”

“Fine.” Makoto slammed forward and robbed him of the ability to speak as his prostate was pummeled with each forceful thrust. When a hand grasped his bobbing erection and began to stroke, Daisuke keened his approval, thrashing his head from side to side as he shuddered under

the dual assault. All his muscles tightened as he shrieked Makoto's name, coating them both with his come.

The interrogator lifted the now lax form, tilting bronze hips to deepen his penetration as he sped up his pace.

“Kami, so good,” Daisuke moaned, already hardening again from the intense stimulation. “You’re going to make me come again if you keep that up.”

“I live to serve, Shuhan-sama,” the interrogator teased, delivering a series of short rapid thrusts directly to his prostate. Makoto smiled as lust hazed eyes fluttered open and locked with his. “Back with us?”

“Mmmhmm,” Daisuke hummed in response as he began to thrust his hips up to meet the strokes, smiling in delight when Makoto's eyes fluttered closed and he let out a shuddering groan.

The interrogator knew he wouldn’t last much longer, so he wrapped his hand around the Shuhan's erection, thumb rubbing across the sensitive slit with every pump until Daisuke threw his head back and screamed his release. Makoto thrust once more as deeply as he could and came hard, spraying his seed deep inside the clenching passage.

“I think I can taste that,” Daisuke muttered. “Yoshi is a very lucky man.”

“Are you alright?” The torture master peered into unfocused eyes as he searched for any damage he might have inadvertently caused.

“Definitely more than alright. I can’t wait to do that again.”

“We need to sleep. It will be morning before you know it.” Makoto pulled out, rolling to his side and curling around the dazed Shuhan protectively. He stroked soft chocolate strands and placed a kiss on the top of Daisuke's head as his breathing slowed and he drifted into sleep.

The interrogator lay awake, reflecting on the events of the last few days, before abandoning any attempt to make sense of it all and shutting his eyes. Eventually he fell into a light doze, his troubled mind refusing to allow itself the respite of true sleep.

Clean, dressed, and his belly full, the shadow wolf ambled alongside his lover as they moved deeper into the underground complex. “Are you ready? I need to make the ki transfer soon.” Kazuki trailed off at the lost look in Yoshi's eyes.

“Why does it matter what I think?” the elite asked. “You’re the one that has to live with your choice.”

“I want you to still desire me,” the spell-caster answered honestly. “I don’t think I could bear to be alone again.” He stopped outside a door, swinging it open and urging the shadow wolf inside before entering himself.

“They’re all young and strong,” Kazuki explained. “Any one of them would serve me well.”

“This man is dead,” Yoshi announced with distaste as he bent to examine the first candidate.

“What? They were all fine yesterday.” The spell-caster moved to the second bed, frustration rising when he realized that man was dead also.

“I think someone's trying to tell you something,” the shadow wolf declared as he searched for a non-existent pulse on the third body.

“Princess.” Kazuki reached out with his ki to locate the kunoichi before leaving the room at

a run. Yoshi followed at a slightly slower pace, stretching out his senses to pinpoint any hidden danger as he followed his lover through the maze of hallways.

“Rin,” the legendary hissed when they located the trio in the depths of the complex. “What did you do?”

“Forced you to come to your senses,” she replied. “You wanted to drain Takahashi's ki, remember? He's standing not three feet away from you, so would you please just do it for Kami's sake so we can move on to more interesting matters.”

“There's always Kenta,” Kazuki whispered to Yoshi. “We'll figure something out.”

“Not Kenta,” the shadow wolf replied with a shudder. “If you were to become like him, there's no way I could stay with you.”

“Well, there's not a lot of options. You can take a look at everyone here, most of them are rather old and weak though.”

“Why can't you just stay as you are? I like you just like this.” Yoshi nipped at the long column of the legendary's neck.

“I would love nothing more. But I'm afraid the technique has its limits. I must renew my ki every two to three years, if not I die.”

“Kazuki-sama.” The door flew open, and an exhausted messenger stumbled in. “A spy from Kobayashi shuudan was snooping around outside. He's being brought in for questioning.”

“Do we know who it is?” the spell-caster asked.

“We've identified him as one Fukazawa Souta, an elite assassin.”

“Ah, the Kobayashi no Shuhan's lover,” Kazuki said with a wicked smile. “What absolutely perfect timing.”

“Souta's not the Shuhan's lover,” Yoshi said. “I may be out of circulation, but even I know he's been living with Daisuke forever.”

“That's true,” Rin agreed. “I've watched them interact. Daisuke's just a weapons instructor, not even on the elite duty roster, you must be mistaken.”

“Sato Daisuke is the new Kobayashi no Shuhan,” Kenta insisted. “I saw him in the robes of office myself. Shows how low the shuudan has fallen if he's the best they could come up with.”

“Well, whoever this assassin is, he's just in time to solve my little problem,” Kazuki decided. “Bring him here,” he told the runner.

“Is this Souta more to your taste pretty? I'm running out of choices.”

Yoshi merely shrugged, even as his mind desperately tried to figure a way out. The last thing he wanted was for harm to come to someone he knew. “I never looked at him that way,” he mumbled. “Are you sure you want me to choose? You aren't going to let me go in any event.”

“That is not the point,” Kazuki insisted. “I want you to desire me. That will never happen if I'm not attractive to you.”

“I don't worry much about things like that. Sometimes the prettiest packages hold the worst surprises. What I want,” Yoshi husked into a blushing ear, “is for you to stop worrying and take me back to bed.”

Kazuki groaned, gathering the elite into his arms and kissing him senseless. “That is a wonderful idea, Yoshi. Rin, prepare this Souta for the ki transfer ... and make sure nothing happens to him. I'd hate to have to renege on my promise.”

The pair swept out of the room, leaving the frustrated woman to her task. As they were exiting a pair of guards appeared dragging a semi-conscious and heavily bound Souta between

them. "Yoshi, am I glad to see you. I promised Makoto I'd bring you back. I'm gonna get a foursome." He started to sing, oblivious to the appalled look on the shadow wolf's expressive face.

"Well?" Kazuki queried as he pulled the elite close. "Will he do or not?"

"Let's see, shall we." Yoshi pulled a startled Souta into his arms and kissed him thoroughly. He nipped at a sensitive ear, using the gesture to cover his nearly inaudible whisper. "I'll find some way to get you out of here, just cooperate for now."

The shadow wolf pulled back and turned to his lover. "He'll do," he told the legendary huskily. "Right now I'm more interested in you." He drew Kazuki in for a long, deep kiss, reveling in the way the feared ninja melted in his embrace.

"Bed, now," Yoshi urged as he dove back in, pinning his powerful lover's head while he ravished his mouth, only relenting when they were both breathless and panting.

As soon as they parted Kazuki quickly made the gestures to move them to his quarters, already tearing at their clothes before they reached their destination.

"I believe it's high time you return the favor and take me, Kazu-sama," the shadow wolf declared. He sprawled out enticingly and beckoned the spell-caster into his arms.

"I've never..."

"Do what feels good when I do it to you," Yoshi suggested. "I trust you not to hurt me. Now kiss me." He smiled when the legendary dipped his head to nuzzle the pale column of the shadow wolf's neck, worrying a morsel of flesh even as he hummed his enjoyment.

Kazuki slicked his fingers and slid one into the hot furnace of Yoshi's body. "So hot, so needy," he murmured. The muscles twisted and contracted around the digit, and he added a second finger and thrust them in and out as his lover groaned and pushed back against the intrusion.

"Hurry," the shadow wolf husked as Kazuki squirted lube on his leaking erection. Time seemed to stop as he began to ease his way inside. Yoshi finally ran out of patience and snaked a long leg around his lover's waist, using it as leverage to crush their bodies together.

Kazuki froze, buried to the hilt, and struggled to regain his composure. "So beautiful, so sad. How can I make you smile, pretty?"

Let me go home. The shadow wolf forced such ideas to the back of his mind. Summoning memories of his night with Makoto he smiled beatifically, eyes fluttering shut in pleasure. "Move."

The spell-caster was eager to comply, setting a brisk, erratic pace as he strove to massage the shadow wolf's prostate with every stroke. All too soon the elite was keening his pleasure as he shot ropey streams of come between their straining torsos, shattering Kazuki's restraint. He thrust frantically into Yoshi's suddenly too-tight passage, throwing his head back with a groan as he shot his seed deep inside his lover's body.

"Thank you, pretty," the legendary whispered. "You have no idea how much I appreciate this."

"Yes, I do," the shadow wolf replied in a tight voice. "Thank you for giving me pleasure."

"That's my one desire," Kazuki mumbled sleepily. "To please you enough that you never want to leave me."

"Rest." Yoshi combed his fingers through long inky strands. "I'll be right here when you wake up." As soon as the older man fell asleep the elite slipped out of bed, heading into the

relative privacy of the bathroom.

“Boss, where are we?” his wolf familiar asked as soon as he appeared, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

“Kazuki's headquarters. I need you to take a message to the Shuhan right away. Tell him they've captured Souta and I'm working on a plan to help him escape.”

“And what about you?” Pi-natsu whined. “You need to get out of here.”

“Souta first. I'm okay where I am for now,” Yoshi insisted. “But Kazuki's going to use Souta's body to renew his ki if I don't stop it. Now get going.” The stocky wolf gave him a look that clearly mirrored his disbelief, even as he reluctantly obeyed and set off for home.

Just after dawn Makoto's eyes popped open and he abandoned the pretense of sleep, rolling over and studying the man next to him. *Last night was enjoyable, certainly.* It was a heady feeling having someone share himself so generously. Still, fun as it was, it couldn't compare with the few brief hours he'd spent with Yoshi. *Maybe today.* The interrogator concentrated, willing the idea into reality. *Maybe today he'll come home to me.*

With that thought running non-stop through his head he rose and showered, pulling on his clothes and fixing coffee before reaching out to shake the Shuhan awake. “Daisuke, it's time to get up. Coffee's ready, the clan heads will be here soon, and you need a shower.” He grinned when sleep-fogged eyes blinked open to regard him with bemusement.

“Good morning, Makoto.” Daisuke smiled brightly as his gaze landed on the interrogator. “Did you sleep well?”

“Not really,” the torture master admitted. “But I did rest. I need to thank you, Shuhan-sama, you were right, my feelings are a lot clearer now.”

Daisuke rose and stretched, running his fingers through his hair to loosen the tangles as he moved toward the shower. “So,” he called as he stepped under the spray, “any ideas about how we can get Yoshi back?”

The interrogator leaned against the doorway. “As much as I'd like to say yes, I think we need Souta's scouting report before making any plans.”

“He should be back in a couple of days.” Daisuke finished rinsing the shampoo from his hair. “I'd like to have at least an approach decided by then. If we only have to refine our plans, rather than start from scratch, we'll get to our objective that much sooner.”

“You're good at this,” Makoto said. “No offense, I'm just a bit surprised.”

“I'm not the strongest fighter, it's true,” the Shuhan admitted. “But I've taught and studied tactics for years. Still, I'd hold on to your opinion until after you see if we succeed.”

“Our success or failure does not, necessarily, reflect on your planning,” the interrogator pointed out. “Make sure you don't take on guilt that isn't yours.”

“Responsibility and guilt go hand in hand,” the Shuhan replied. “Still, I thank you for your concern.” He finished drying off and dressed in basic blacks, gratefully accepting the cup of coffee pressed into his hand. They were just sitting down to eat when they felt the familiar ki displacement accompanying teleportation.

“Hey, Sasaki,” a gruff voice demanded from the area of his kneecap. “Where's the Kobayashi no Shuhan? I have a message for him.”

“Pi-natsu, where's Yoshi?” the interrogator demanded.

“Kazuki's headquarters,” the wolf familiar replied, his confusion over the situation apparent. “And he's a lot more worried about getting Souta out than he is himself.”

“What about Souta?” Daisuke interrupted. “Hurry up and give me the message, Pi-natsu.”

“So you're the new Kobayashi no Shuhan?” the wolf muttered in astonishment. “Will wonders never cease. I'm ready for things to go back to normal now.”

“Report,” the Shuhan snapped in a voice that had caused the strongest elites to quake in their boots.

“Souta was captured outside Nakamura shuudan,” Pi-natsu explained. “Apparently Kazuki is planning on draining Souta's ki to extend his own life. The boss has a plan to help him escape, but needs you to position an extraction team outside their borders to ensure he gets away.”

“Yoshi isn't leaving with him?” Makoto was stunned. “He'll never get away. They're sure to tighten security if Souta goes missing.”

“The boss said to tell you he's planning on staying until he can do it safely.” The stocky wolf huffed. “He refuses to put the shuudan in danger of retaliation. He also said to make sure you know that he misses you Sasaki, and he hopes to be home soon.”

“See, Makoto,” Daisuke chimed in. “I told you he wasn't there willingly.”

“But why doesn't he just leave with Souta?” the torture master wondered. “It makes no sense to stay behind.”

“I'm sure Takahashi-san has his reasons. The important thing is that he plans on coming back.”

“No, it isn't,” the interrogator insisted. “You're just saying that because Souta's not the one staying behind. How would you feel if our positions were reversed?”

“The boss is alright, you know.” Pi-natsu studied Makoto's angry face. “Kazuki isn't going to hurt him. They have ... history that they share.” The demon struggled to explain, the motivations behind this, as with most human decisions, eluding him. “They trust each other. If Yoshi says he'll be back then he will; he never breaks his promises.”

“Then tell him I'm waiting, and to get his ass home as soon as possible.” The stocky wolf nodded and faded from sight.

Pi-natsu reappeared in the bowels of Kazuki's headquarters, nose wrinkling in distaste at the smell of stale recirculated air. He got his bearings and trotted down the short hall into an expansive bedroom, shuddering at the sight of his master curled up intimately with Kobayashi shuudan's most infamous renegade.

“Boss,” he hissed. “Hey, wake up.”

Yoshi jerked awake at the touch of a wet nose, slipping noiselessly out of the large bed to head into the bathroom. “Well?” he whispered as soon as they were out of earshot.

“The team will be in position later today and will remain for up to ten days if necessary,” his familiar explained. “Oh, and Makoto says to get your ass home soon, he's waiting for you.”

The shadow wolf broke out in a wide smile at the news. “As soon as I can,” he muttered. “Not too much longer now. Pi-natsu, go and link up with the extraction team, make sure Souta gets to them safely.”

“Yes boss, I’ll see you soon,” he replied with a feral smile.

“I sincerely hope so.” Yoshi’s answer was lost as the stocky wolf disappeared in a puff of smoke. The elite flushed the toilet and washed his hands before heading back to bed, relieved to see the spell-caster hadn’t stirred.

He lay awake, reviewing his plans as he absently stroked Kazuki’s back, fingers drawing comforting circles on the silky skin. When the legendary shinobi finally stirred Yoshi merely snuggled up against him, pressing the length of his body against his bed mate’s as he draped an arm across a hard chest.

“Good morning,” the shadow wolf husked. “How are you feeling?”

“I will never tire of waking up to your face, pretty. More importantly though, how are you feeling? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Oh no, no,” the elite replied. “You were wonderful, you didn’t hurt me at all.”

“That,” Kazuki declared with a smile, “is very good news.” He leaned forward and kissed his pale lover, gently nibbling a plump lower lip before pulling back. “We should eat and clean up. Today is a busy day.”

As they dawdled over breakfast Yoshi decided the time had come to start implementing his plan. “Do you know where Oonishi-san is?” He fixed his lover with his best mismatched puppy dog eyes.

“Why so curious, koi?” The legendary neatly parried the question with another question.

“I was just thinking. You say he’s insane, but he’s very strong, and he can harness powerful illusions. Maybe that’s the body whose ki you should be draining. It reminds me much of this one.” Yoshi’s voice softened affectionately as elegant fingers stroked Kazuki’s cheek. “I could even help you master the powers of his clan. The most powerful Oonishi in many generations was my shishou.”

“So, you desire Hideaki?”

“No, no,” Yoshi hastened to correct his lover. “I desire you. But you say doing nothing is not an option. Hideaki is similar to you in many ways and his ki is powerful. I just thought it was an elegant solution.”

“If that is what you desire, then so be it. I’ll send word that I need to see Oonishi-san immediately. When he gets here...” Kazuki trailed off uncertainly. “Are you sure about this, Yoshi? You said you felt like you’d failed him. Is this some sort of twisted revenge?”

“No, more of a rescue,” the shadow wolf whispered. “If he’s truly lost his mind then this will free him from the agony of his life. It’s the least I can do, especially since I’m responsible for his mental state.”

“You are not responsible,” Kazuki retorted. “But if it eases your conscience, all the better. I’m happy with your decision.”

“Shall I go let Rin and Kenta know?” Yoshi asked. “They shouldn’t waste time on that Kobayashi spy. Unless you want to keep him ready just in case?”

“Tell them to hold on to him for now, but keep him sedated. We don’t need the distraction of an escape attempt,” the legendary decided.

“I’ll be right back.” The shadow wolf rose and glided out of the apartment to make sure his lover’s wishes were carried out.

Daisuke watched as the meeting dispersed, waiting until most of the clan heads were gone before snagging Genki's sleeve and pulling him aside. "Pi-natsu said Kazuki and Yoshi have shared history. What exactly would that be?"

"I'm not sure I know what you're referring to," the sage hedged.

"Stop it. He was your best friend, and Yoshi is your cousin's son. Don't bother stalling, I can see you know. I don't have time to pussyfoot around. I need you to tell me."

The sage shook his head. "It was a long time ago. I don't see why it's relevant."

"Humor me," Daisuke demanded in a tight, hard voice.

"Apparently shishou liked pretty boys. Yoshi wasn't the first by a long shot, although Kazuki might have been. He certainly thought he was. You have to understand, I was just a teenager myself. When my fellow apprentice, my friend, told me about what was going on between our master and himself I got angry and called him a liar. When I went to confront shishou I found him doing exactly what Kazuki had accused him of, only with my cousin. Ren and I argued," Genki stopped and seemed to consider what he'd just said. "To be honest I accused him of terrible things. After that day we never spoke. I only found out about what Kobayashi-sama had done to Yoshi when you told me, although I'm sure there were a string of others."

"Well, that explains the connection Pi-natsu mentioned," the Shuhan muttered.

"Pi-natsu was here? Is the brat okay?"

"What difference does it make to you?" Daisuke retorted. "It sounds like an awful lot of misery could have been avoided if you hadn't been so disgusted by the thought of two men together."

"It wasn't like that." Genki tried to rationalize his actions. "Shishou was the Kobayashi no Shuhan, I was his apprentice. It seemed sacrilegious to accuse our leader of what amounted to rape. I realize my mistake. Why do you think I stayed away? I'm not proud of my actions, but I can't undo the past."

"You may not be able to undo it, but it's high time you faced up to it," the Shuhan declared. "You can start by figuring out some way to bridge the gap between you and Yoshi. He needs to know he has family and that you're on his side."

"No," Makoto growled from the shadows. "You leave Yoshi alone old man, or I will personally remove your genitals, saute them in some butter and serve them to him for dinner."

"Relax," Daisuke soothed, laying a hand on the interrogator's chest and capturing his complete attention. "He's not going to hurt Yoshi. Are you, Genki?"

"How can he not? Yoshi already hates himself, finding out his only surviving family member hid that relationship his entire life. Your nephew already insists on referring to himself as a whore. What do you think your thoughts on the matter will do to him?"

"Makoto, that's enough," the Shuhan snapped. "This isn't helping anyone. Genki already said he regrets his actions."

"Like that changes anything. He doesn't need your judgment old man, or your forgiveness."

"Go away, Genki," Daisuke said with a wave of his hand. "I'll talk to you later." He turned his back on the sage, wrapping his arms around the interrogator and rubbing his back as he murmured comfortingly in his ear.

"Yoshi'll never be happy here," Makoto muttered as he leaned into the comforting embrace.

“Shit,” the sage yelped as Daisuke kissed the interrogator's cheek, immediately dropping his eyes and cursing his reaction.

“Do you have a problem with something, Genki-sama?” the Shuhan asked in a deadly cold voice.

“No, Shuhan-sama, I was just leaving,” the sage wisely replied and he fled the office, wiping the sweat from his brow once he was safely outside.

“Come back to bed, Makoto.” The Shuhan tugged the larger man through the double doors and into his bedchamber as impatient fingers worked at their stubborn clothing.

“Daisuke, wait.” The interrogator hesitated. “Last night was wonderful, but I don't think we should make it a habit. Yoshi will be home soon and I don't want him to get the wrong idea.” He stopped at the lost look on the younger man's normally happy face. “What's wrong?”

“I'm worried about Souta. I just hoped you could distract me for a while. Gomen nasai, Sasaki-san, it was wrong of me to assume.” Daisuke sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I forget that we really don't know each other.”

“That's true. So why don't we get to know each other?” Makoto pulled the startled Shuhan into his arms, settling them easily on the bed as he stroked a comforting hand up and down the younger man's tense back. “How long have you two been together?”

“Almost fifteen years,” Daisuke said with a sharp bark of laughter. “This may surprise you, but you're the first man I've slept with other than Souta, although I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it. We were just kids when we started seeing each other. I was fourteen, and he was only a few years older. I don't know how I'll survive without him.”

“You won't have to, at least not now. Yoshi's sending him home to you, remember? He won't let you down, Daisuke, and I'll be more than happy to distract you until Souta gets back.” Makoto raked his fingers through long chocolate hair, gently easing the tangles before scratching blunt nails against the younger man's skull.

“No, you're right,” the Shuhan muttered. “I need to make sure Souta's safe.”

“He'll be here before you know it. He won't want to miss out on that foursome he conned me into. The interrogator pulled Daisuke close, smoothing his hand over a bronze cheek. “Let's just get some rest, shall we. Everything will look brighter when we've had some sleep.”

Yoshi masked his ki and hovered outside the medical lab, waiting until it was deserted save for Kenta and Souta. He slipped up behind Kazuki's apprentice and rendered him unconscious. The shadow wolf scooped up the limp form, putting it in Souta's place and casting an illusion to disguise Kenta as the captured shinobi. “Better safe than sorry,” he muttered as he injected the apprentice with a sedative.

“Wake up, Souta.” He patted the sleepy man's cheeks until his eyes fluttered open. “That's it, I'm going to give you something to help you get going.” He injected a stimulant into the assassin's bicep.

“Yoshi-san,” he slurred. “Wh't'r you doing?”

“Helping you get back home,” the shadow wolf said, casting another illusion as he helped Souta to his feet. “You look like Kazuki's apprentice so you should be able to walk right out of here. Go about a mile and you'll run into an extraction team from home, they'll be looking for

you.” He hustled the assassin towards a hidden door. “Oh, and make sure you drop this disguise when you rendezvous or they may attack. Good luck.” He pushed the startled nin out the door and shut it behind him.

He turned to see a smirking Rin surveying him intently. “What are you planning, Takahashi? I know there's no love lost between you and Kenta.”

“There was news of more Kobayashi shinobi snooping around. Kazuki wished him to investigate. By the way, you don't need to worry about preparing Fukazawa. There is a more suitable body on the way.”

“More suitable, huh?” she said. “And just who would that be?”

“Oonishi Hideaki,” the shadow wolf replied with a smirk. “He is, after all, far stronger and therefore a much better choice for Kazu-sama.”

“What game are you playing? You must have some ulterior motive for wanting an Oonishi to show up here.”

“I really don't want to waste time talking to you, Rin,” the elite declared. “If you insist on asking questions you'd do better to take them to Kazuki himself.”

“Fine,” she huffed, pushing past him to head toward the spell-caster's quarters. “It's past time for him to pay up anyway.” She stormed down the hall and threw open the door. “Hey, I want what you've promised me, I'm tired of you stringing me along.”

“If I give you what you want will you shut up and go away?” Kazuki inquired. “Seriously, princess, you need to work on your people skills.” He moved into the open living area, forming elaborate patterns in the air with his hands as he chanted under his breath.

He wouldn't. Yoshi recognized the forbidden spell and he leaned back against the wall to watch the scene play out. An eerie green mist slowly rose out of the ground in front of the spell-caster, thickening and contracting as it gained height.

“Last chance to change your mind,” Kazuki warned, but the kunoichi merely shook her head, eyes never leaving the roiling mass. “Fine, then I hope you're happy.”

The mist continued to swirl and condense until it finally revealed an average sized man. Rin dropped to her knees, tears pouring down her face. “Is it really you?” She leapt up and flung her arms around the confused newcomer's neck, nearly strangling him in her joy.

Kazuki ignored the reunion, all his focus on Yoshi's reaction. The shadow wolf's eyes merely widened momentarily before he buried his face in the spell-caster's shoulder.

“Are you alright, pretty?”

“Why him?” the elite managed. “I don't want him to see me like this.”

“Like what?” Kazuki crooned. “You aren't doing anything wrong. He has no right to judge you, not after what you've been through.”

“Rin? What's going on?” the man asked. “Where are we?”

“I can't believe it's really you, Ren,” she sobbed. “I thought I'd never see you again. It's been so many years.”

“Why am I here?” He tried to pry tenacious arms from around his neck. “I need to breathe.”

“I've missed you so much. I've been trying to get you back for years.”

“Back from where?” the newly revived man asked in confusion.

“From the dead,” Kazuki said with a sadistic grin. “She betrayed Kobayashi shuudan, ruined countless lives and almost destroyed your son, just to bring you back. You should feel honored.”

“She was Kobayashi no Shuhan before they removed her for treason,” Yoshi added spitefully. “Now she's nothing but a traitor.”

“You should talk, whore,” she snapped back. “You’re only sleeping with Kazu because you want something. I just haven’t figured out what yet.”

“Stop it, princess. You have no right to talk to him like that, or at all,” the spell-caster threatened.

“What did you do to my son? Get away from me,” Takahashi Ren demanded, pushing her to the ground. “Don’t touch me.”

Rin wrapped her arms around her beloved's legs, clinging to him as he struggled to free himself. “No, you don’t mean that.”

“Of course I do,” Ren retorted. “How could I not? Loss is part of life Rin, it's what we accept when we become ninja. This is a betrayal of the worst sort. And why me? There was never anything between us. Why didn’t you live your life, find someone to love?”

“Because she's selfish and heartless,” Kazuki hissed. “She never once thought about how her actions hurt those under her. Payback's a bitch, isn’t it, princess?”

“You bastard.” She turned wild eyes on the spell-caster. “I did what you asked, why did you betray me?”

“I didn’t betray you. I gave you exactly what you wanted. It's not my fault you didn’t anticipate the consequences of your actions.”

“This is your fault, whore,” Rin growled, turning her attention to the shadow wolf. “Why anyone would waste time on something like you is beyond me.”

“He is not a whore,” Kazuki rasped. “Yoshi is, and always has been, the consummate shinobi. He did as you ordered ... pimp.”

She rushed at the shadow wolf, only to find herself held back by Kazuki's hard hand. “Touch him and die,” the spell-caster threatened. “You’ve hurt him enough.”

“Stop it,” Yoshi's voice cut through the clamor. “Rin, why do you hate me so much? I never even met you before you became Shuhan.”

“You look like your father, whore. He betrayed me, you paid the price.”

Recognition finally hit, and Ren's eyes widened as he realized the powerful shinobi in Kazuki's arms was his grown son. “Yoshi?”

“You're dead, I found your body. You aren't real,” the shadow wolf whispered brokenly. “Please, stop this, Kazu. I'll do whatever you want. Just don't make me talk to him.”

“Oh, pretty,” the spell-caster husked, pulling the trembling shadow wolf into a tight embrace. “I am sorry, I never meant to hurt you. Can you forgive me?”

Kazuki decided they'd heard enough. Before Ren could say more he cast another illusion, watching dispassionately as both Rin and Yoshi's father were consumed by a ball of sickly green fire. “Come, pretty.” He grabbed the stunned shadow wolf by the elbow. “Let's get away from this stench.”

Yoshi found his voice when they were out in the corridor. “Why? Didn’t you need her?”

“Kenta can perform the ki transfer on his own,” the legendary assured him. “She called you a whore one time too many. I will not let you be spoken of like that.”

They continued down the hall to the lab, opening the door to find Kenta lying motionless in the bed Souta had once occupied. Kazuki rushed over to check on his apprentice's condition, letting out a wail of despair when he realized the man was dead. “That bitch. Even dead she

thwarts me.”

“Are you sure it was Rin?” Yoshi asked.

“Her ki is all over him, and his skull is crushed,” the legendary explained. “He obviously fought back.”

I'm sure he did, because I cast the illusion to make him look like Fukazawa-san. She never even knew who she killed. “What about Junko?” Yoshi suggested. “Can she do what needs to be done?”

“No, she doesn't have the training. I-I'm going to die.” Kazuki staggered back against the wall, clutching his chest in shock.

“No you will not.” Yoshi grabbed the spell-caster by the shoulders and pulled him into a protective embrace. “We'll figure out something. I can harness my ki now. I trained under Oonishi-sama for years, you can teach me the technique. Junko and I will perform it together.”

“I doubt that will work, although I appreciate your willingness to try,” Kazuki replied faintly. “Let's see if we can find her.”

They hunted the bowels of the complex, eventually sensing her weak ki in Rin's quarters. When they finally broke down the doors they found the young woman lying in a pool of scarlet, both her wrists slashed. “Why?” Yoshi asked as they worked to stop the flow of blood.

“I saw what she had Kazuki do,” Junko whispered. “She never told me. I wouldn't have let her disturb your father's rest. Now she's gone, and there's no one left for me to live for.” She shut her eyes, chest rising and falling sporadically before stilling completely.

“She's dead, pretty, and so are our hopes,” the legendary declared. “There's no way you can do this without her.”

“I won't let you give up,” the shadow wolf insisted. “We will figure something out. Hideaki will be here soon.”

“Will you stay with me till the end?” Kazuki asked in a small voice.

“Of course I will,” Yoshi swore. “I won't leave you alone.” He scooped the forlorn figure into his arms and strode back toward the living quarters. “We'll go rest now, when our minds are clearer we can try and come up with a plan.”

THE THIRD GATE: GATHERING STORM

Souta staggered through the forest, stumbling in his haste to put distance between himself and his captors. “Hold.” A familiar voice rang out, and he looked up in relief to see masked figures looming over him.

“Thank god,” the assassin breathed, making some gestures and releasing the illusion.

“Fukazawa-san, is it really you?” the black op asked.

“Yes. I’m so glad to see you guys,” Souta replied. “We need to go rescue Takahashi. He helped me escape but he stayed behind.”

“Our orders are to extract you and get you back to the shuudan,” his escort replied. “Takahashi wasn’t mentioned. He must be someone else’s problem.”

“He’s my problem,” the assassin insisted. “He risked himself to save me, I can’t just leave him behind.”

“You’re going to have to. My orders are clear,” the operative retorted. “We’ll carry you if you resist.”

The group set off toward home at a brisk pace, opting to carry the still unsteady Souta so they could make better time. When they reached the gate the Shuhan himself came running out to greet them, pulling his lover off the black op’s back to wrap him in a desperately tight hug.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Daisuke muttered. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“Takahashi saved me. I wanted to go back for him but they wouldn’t let me.” He jerked a thumb toward the black ops contingent.

“Yoshi says he has a plan,” Makoto cut in. “We’re trusting his judgment. How was he, did you see him?”

“When I first arrived they took me to see Nakamura Kazuki. Yoshi was there. I was pretty out of it, but I’m sure he kissed me and told me he had a plan. I didn’t see him again until he was shoving me out the door. He’s not restrained though and I didn’t see any injuries.”

“Kazuki was planning on transferring your ki into his body,” the Shuhan explained. “Did they do anything to you?”

“They kept me pretty doped up. I did think it was odd no one tried to question me. Now I guess I see why,” the assassin muttered.

“I think you two should take this somewhere more private,” Makoto suggested. “You really don’t need this spread all over town. Besides, I’m sure you want to catch up. I’ll see you both later.”

The Shuhan and his lover disappeared, rematerializing in their private quarters. “I missed you so much,” Daisuke moaned as he kissed every inch of his lover’s face. “I’m so glad you came back to me.”

“I love you too,” Souta husked. “I was so worried I’d never get to taste you again.”

“I have a confession to make.” The Shuhan studied his lover solemnly. “I need to tell you right away.”

“What, did you have my funeral already?” the assassin joked.

“I slept with Makoto. He was worried, I was worried. I know it's not an excuse and I wouldn't blame you for being mad at me.”

“It's alright, Dai,” Souta soothed. “I'm not upset. How was he?”

“It was nice, different, I don't have much to compare it with. He's hung like a horse though, you were right about that,” the Shuhan stated.

“So, are we still on for that foursome? Because I *will* feel cheated if you're the only one who gets to experience Makoto's monster cock.”

“Souta!” The Shuhan smacked him hard on the shoulder. “You are incorrigible. Still, as far as I'm concerned it's a go. Of course, you need to convince Yoshi.”

Both men turned when they felt a new ki source appear. “Hey, Sato,” a gravelly voice proclaimed. “I have a message for Sasaki-san, where is he?”

“Pi-natsu, is Yoshi okay?” Daisuke asked.

“There's been a change of plans,” the demon wolf announced. “Rin, Junko and Nakamura's apprentice are dead and Kazuki is dying. The boss needs to stay with him until then. He should be back in a few months. Now I really need to find Makoto, do you know where he is?”

“I'd try his house,” the Shuhan ventured and the familiar disappeared without even a word of farewell.

“Now, where were we?” Souta muttered as he pulled his lover into his arms and kissed him breathless.

“Hey Sasaki,” the wolf began as soon as he appeared. “I have a letter for you from the boss.” Pi-natsu dug in the bag strapped to his flank until he located it, quickly passing it over and turning to leave.

“Do you want something to eat or drink?” Makoto asked as he turned the envelope in his hands, hesitant to open it and see what was inside.

“I'd love it, but I have another letter to deliver. I'll be back later, boss said to wait for your answer.”

The interrogator sat down at the table, passing the envelope back and forth between his hands as he tried to prepare himself for whatever it might contain. When he could stand it no longer, he started to read, picturing Yoshi bent over in concentration as deft hands inscribed the elegant strokes.

My dear Makoto,

You have no idea how happy I was to hear you were awaiting my return. I wish I could say it would be soon, but circumstances here have changed. Rin and Junko are dead, and Kazuki only has a few months to live. Once he is gone I will come directly home. I hope you will still be glad to see me.

There are reasons behind my actions. I don't have time to go into them here, but were I to leave now, Kazuki would raze the shuudan to the ground to get me back. I would, in any event, refuse to leave him to die alone. I have grown to care for him in my time here. We have eased

each other's pain.

I hope to see you on my return.

always,

Yoshi

He sat down on the couch, put his head in his hands and cried tears of loss and frustration, unable to reconcile the thought of his Yoshi having feelings for the much reviled traitor. *He said there was more to explain. I need to trust him, he isn't trying to hurt me ... I don't think.*

Finally throwing up his hands in frustration the interrogator made the signs and appeared in the Shuhan's office. "Daisuke, could I talk to you a minute?"

"In here, Makoto," Souta called from the private quarters. "Come on in."

"I need your help," the torture master began, following the sounds into a spacious kitchen. "Yoshi sent me a letter, and he wants an answer. I have no idea what to say."

"Can I see what he wrote?" Daisuke held out his hand until the paper was passed his way. As soon as he opened it Souta darted behind his back, chin on his lover's shoulder as he, too, read the private message. Makoto felt his cheeks heat as the Shuhan and his lover sent him long, measured looks before refolding the letter.

"How do you feel about his decision?" Daisuke waited patiently while the interrogator gathered his thoughts.

"I'm not happy about it," Makoto admitted. "It hurts to think he's so close to Kazuki. Is Yoshi using me for some twisted reason? Not that it would matter. Anything he wants, I made a promise."

"Well, if that's the case just speak from the heart," Souta suggested. "Tell him you love him and to hurry home to you."

"I never said I loved him."

"Yes you did. It's in everything you say," Daisuke retorted. "Now go write your response, get it to Pi-natsu and hurry back. Dinner will be ready in half an hour."

"You don't need me intruding on your dinner. Souta just got back, I'm sure you two want to spend some time alone," the interrogator demurred.

"Oh no, you don't," the assassin insisted. "There's no way Dai's gonna have all the fun. Go do what you need to and get your ass back here."

"Pushy, pushy." The interrogator disappeared, grabbing a blank page and scribbling a few brief lines before infusing it with his ki. Not five minutes later Pi-natsu was back to collect the letter, refusing refreshment yet again.

"I'd love to, but the boss is waiting. He'll be impatient to know what's going on. I'm sure he'll be back in touch." The shaggy wolf disappeared with a faint pop, leaving the interrogator rushing to change for dinner.

Genki stared at the paper in front of him in horror. In it Yoshi had detailed the fate of Rin, the brief revival of Takahashi Ren, Junko's suicide and his part in Kenta's death. He sent a brief prayer up for the princess in the afterlife. He'd miss her raucous presence, even if she did do despicable things at the end. He didn't know how he felt about the rest of the news, in particular the last few sentences.

Kazuki is dying. He has, at most, two months left to live. I will be staying with him. We have become very close during our time together. He wishes to see you in the hope of healing the breach between you. He still loves you, you know. I also welcome the chance to clear the air between us. You don't need to come now, but send word so we know to look for you. And don't wait too long, you wouldn't want to arrive too late.

The sage sat deep in thought, lost in memories of long ago days when he was still in training. *Before I knew about shishou. Before it all turned to shit.* Genki dug deep, trying to sort out how he felt about his old friend, not to mention his only living relative. Patching things up with either man was a daunting prospect for the easy going shinobi, the thought of dealing with both of them at the same time was almost overwhelming.

It's now or never. He pulled the letter over and penned a response before sealing it and shoving it in his pouch until Pi-natsu returned.

I wonder where that damned wolf is? Yoshi continued to comb the tangles from his lover's long dark hair. "There you go, koi. All done."

"Thank you pretty," Kazuki husked. "You take such wonderful care of me."

"Why wouldn't I? I love you, it gives me pleasure to make you feel special," the elite replied easily, a wicked smile creeping onto his face. "You could always repay me, you know. I can think of a few things I'd enjoy."

"Oh really?" the spell-caster quipped back. "And what might they be, or do I have to guess?"

"I'll let you know when you're getting warm." Yoshi leaned in and kissed the lithe man possessively, reveling, as always, in the way the powerful nin melted in his embrace.

"Oonishi-san should be here in a few days," Kazuki ventured when they finally broke for air. "What are you planning to do with him?"

"I really don't want to discuss this right now." The shadow wolf dove back in for another long, searching kiss.

"I'm serious," Kazuki insisted, pulling back to survey his younger lover with haunted eyes. "I know you feel guilty about what happened to Hideaki, but I'm not going to let you put yourself in danger. He's too volatile for you to discuss such things with him."

"And just how do you think he'll react when he finds us here, together?" Yoshi asked. "He's too intelligent not to look for a connection. He knows me too well to believe I'd willingly betray Kobayashi shuudan. We have had a few encounters in the past. I guarantee he has all the powers of perception his clan are so well known for."

"Fine, then tell him what you will," Kazuki snipped through pursed lips.

"What's really bothering you?"

"What if he wants this too? Will you share yourself with him?"

"What would you have me say, koi?" The elite pulled his lover close and tipped his head to look into azure eyes. "Would you have me deny him? Would you deny him?"

"I would keep you all to myself, beloved." Kazuki shut his eyes and leaned his head on the shadow wolf's broad shoulder. "I have so little time left and I do not wish to share."

"Then we shall not. I will not hurt you, not knowingly." Guilt crushed Yoshi's heart as he

reminded himself, yet again, that it was his fault the spell-caster was dying in the first place. This wasn't what he had envisioned when he switched Kazuki's apprentice with Souta.

Yoshi cuddled the smaller man close, laying soft kisses on the top of his head as he crooned his devotion, smiling when tension eased from the spell-caster's shoulders and his head drooped, inky mop tumbling against the firm planes of the shadow wolf's chest. "I'm sorry," Kazuki whispered.

"For what?"

"For being jealous, for doubting you," the spell-caster whispered. "I didn't think."

"It's fine," Yoshi soothed. "Just kiss me." The legendary shinobi leaned forward and kissed his lover, putting as much emotion as he could into the gesture.

"I will always love you," Kazuki whispered. "And I promise never to doubt you again."

"I love you too ... at least, as much as I am capable of love," the shadow wolf whispered as he cuddled his pliant lover close. "You've given me a peace I've never had before."

"What will you do when I'm gone?" Kazuki asked. "Will you go back to Kobayashi shuudan?"

"I'd like to. I don't know anywhere else I'd be safe. Still, I don't expect a joyous reception. At the very least I'll be held for interrogation. Then there's the question of my punishment."

"Why would they punish you? Didn't you get kidnapped? They must realize you aren't here willingly. How can they punish you for something beyond your control?"

"I sent them a message," Yoshi muttered. "I had Pi-natsu let them know Rin and Junko were dead and you were dying. I said I would only return after your death."

"Why would you do that? Now they'll be imagining all kinds of horrible things about you. At the very least they're sure to question your loyalty. You've given so much of yourself to keep them all safe, it isn't right you be seen as a traitor."

"I didn't want them to attack. You deserve some peace for the time you have left," Yoshi insisted. "I was trying to protect you."

"Oh, pretty," Kazuki said. "When will you stop hurting yourself for other people's benefit? I don't care if they launch an attack against me or not. I care very much that you'll be tortured because of our relationship."

"I don't," the shadow wolf insisted. "I only care about making you happy, however it is in my power to do so. If that means some risk to myself, so be it." He lifted the smaller man, settling them both comfortably on the bed before sliding the kimono from his lover's shoulder to place tender kisses on the exposed flesh. "Now, as I recall, I was getting ready to make love to you, koi. You aren't trying to distract me, are you?"

"No, never." Kazuki's heartbeat raced as strong hands slid inside his kimono to stroke and pet sensitive flesh and Yoshi made good on his promise.

Makoto arrived outside the Shuhan's office at the same time as Hayashi Hoshu. He opened the door for the dark haired man and ushered him inside while he went to find Daisuke. "Hey, where are you guys?" The interrogator followed sounds back towards the bedroom.

I am not walking in on them again. This can wait until they come out. "Shuhan-sama, Hayashi-san is here to see you," he called through the door. "We'll be in your office."

“Get your ass in here, Makoto,” the Shuhan's voice sounded a bit muffled and the interrogator's mind went wild imagining various reasons why. “Today.” The voice was louder this time, with an irritated edge that had him jerking the door open almost without thinking.

“Hoshu says he needs to see you tonight,” the torture master declared. “What should I tell him?”

The Shuhan untangled himself from his slumbering lover, slipping on a yukata and heading for the door. “Keep Sou company until I get back. That means getting naked and in the bed,” he added when the interrogator began to sit in a nearby chair.

“Is that an order?” Makoto asked.

“Yes,” came Daisuke's firm reply, although a smile quirked his lips. “I'm sure I'll be back before he wakes up.”

“I thought we were having dinner.” The usually stoic torture master was almost pouting.

“We are, the main course is right there in front of you. Feel free to start without me.” The Shuhan winked before slipping out into the hall and heading for his office.

“What can I do for you, Hoshu?” he asked as soon as he opened the door. “I had retired for the night.”

“I need to get some things off my chest, Shuhan-sama,” the clan head said. “I have information about Kobayashi-sama's habits that I should have given you before now.”

“Sit down,” Daisuke offered. “Would you like tea?”

“No, although I wouldn't turn down sake.”

“Sake it shall be. Just give me a moment.” The Shuhan headed back into his quarters to snag a bottle and two saucers. He stopped for a moment to listen at the bedroom door, slurping sounds and Makoto's broken muttering sending him a picture of his lover sucking cock with his usual gusto. *Have fun Sou*, he thought before rejoining his guest.

“So, Hoshu.” Daisuke poured them each a saucer. “What did you wish to tell me?”

“Many years ago, I happened to see Kobayashi-sama and Takahashi Ren together... intimately,” the elder began. “I couldn't stop myself, I know it was wrong, but I watched them. I even followed Ren and waited for the chance to do it again.”

“It's not something to be proud of surely, but I don't see where it changes anything,” Daisuke soothed. “Certainly it's nothing to get worked up about now.”

“I suspected something was going on with Yoshi after Oonishi-san's death, but I chose to overlook it. I failed him. I was an elder, a leader of my clan. I should have looked out for all of them better. I did not protect my comrades or my village by my silence.”

“I understand you're upset,” the Shuhan stated. “But none of what happened is your fault. In fact, anything you might have said would have only made things worse, for you, if not for them. We all made mistakes where this situation was concerned. No one wanted to acknowledge what was going on right under our noses. It's becoming clear that many people had at least an inkling, if not outright proof.”

He stood and strolled over to the glass doors that led to his balcony, staring up at the heavens as if looking for enlightenment. “I think we all need to move forward, dwelling on events long past won't change the course of history, and if they did it might well not be for the better.”

He fixed the elder with a pointed look, forcing him to hold eye contact. “Yoshi's ‘activities’ were pivotal in ending conflicts between the shuudan and forging alliances. Had they not

occurred we might not exist. As much as I despise the idea of what was done to him, I can't in good conscience say I wish it hadn't happened. Do you have any idea how hard that is for me to admit? Good, kind, caring Daisuke has to finally admit that we can't save everyone, and we shouldn't even try."

The Shuhan sipped his sake as he fought to regain his composure. "It's late, I think we both need a good night's sleep. If you still feel the urge for reparation come back and see me. I'm sure we can figure out something fair."

"Of course, Shuhan-sama, I'm sorry to keep you up so late. Thank you for listening to me," the clan leader said with an apologetic bow.

"It's alright, that's why you chose me, right?" Daisuke showed the other man to the door, slumping against it in exhaustion as soon as it shut.

"Hey guys, did you miss me?" he joked when he opened the bedroom door, although his voice was tired and lacked its normal joyous lilt.

"What happened, Dai?" Souta moved to wrap a comforting arm around his lover. "Did Hayashi-san complain about your lack of morals?"

"No, nothing like that. I've just had to face a lot of hard truths lately. I'm not the person I thought I was. Very few of the things I thought were immutable truths are actually black and white. I'm less and less sure I was the right choice for this position."

"Come here," the assassin cooed, holding out his arms to enfold his lover. "Let us help you forget."

"That's right, Daisuke," Makoto rumbled as he scooped both men into his lap. "I haven't had my dinner yet." He kissed the Shuhan passionately, devouring his mouth as if he would never get another chance before turning to a dazed Souta and repeating the action. "Now kiss," the interrogator ordered, "I want to watch you love each other."

The long time lovers melted together, passion fueled by their time apart and the excitement of having Makoto calling the shots.

"Mmmmmm, you taste so good, Dai, like caramel," Souta muttered before diving back in for more, hands sliding up the slender column of Daisuke's throat as he reveled in the trust his lover was showing him.

Makoto reached between them and wrapped his hand around both of their bobbing erections, squeezing the silky flesh together. He stroked them roughly before linking their hands in place of his. He leaned back to watch the pair in appreciation for a moment before slicking his fingers and sliding one deep inside Daisuke. He then did the same to Souta, slowly thrusting and swirling as their slick forms danced against each other.

By the time he reached three fingers both men were moaning uncontrollably, desperately trying to reach their peak. "Nuh uh, not so fast. We're just getting started." The interrogator laughed at the wide eyed look of surprise gracing both men's faces. "You do still want this, don't you?"

"As if I'd let you back out now," Souta rasped. "If you don't fuck me soon I'm going to knock you down and take what I want."

"Pushy, pushy. Not that you'd get very far against me, but it's an interesting thought."

"You'd be surprised what I can do," the assassin said, trailing off into a guttural moan as his prostate was targeted.

"Daisuke," Makoto sing-songed, "Lie down on the bed for me." He helped shift the slender

man, carefully arranging him on the sheets, legs splayed wide, before grabbing the startled assassin and settling him gently in the cradle of the Shuhan's hips. "Fill him, Souta. I want to see how you get him to make those wonderful noises."

Ever so slowly the assassin inched inside the hot furnace of his lover's body, coming to a stop pressed tight against slick bronze flesh. Before he even had a chance to adjust, Souta felt large hands spread him wide as Makoto's thick cock slowly filled him, and filled him, and filled him. "Jesus, you really are huge," he choked out as he was stretched far more than he had ever been before.

"Not really." The interrogator fought the urge to just thrust in to the hilt. "Yoshi's just as big."

"You're not helping if you're trying to talk me out of that foursome. No wonder Kazuki doesn't want to let him go," Souta mused, instantly regretting it when Makoto started to retreat. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. Please don't leave me hanging like this."

"I wouldn't do that to you." The interrogator slammed back in to the hilt, causing both men below him to let out wanton moans.

"Oh Kami," Daisuke grunted. "He pushes you so deep inside me, Sou, you wouldn't believe how good it feels."

"Uhhnnnn," was the snappiest retort the assassin could manage, so overwhelmed was he by the dual sensation of filling and being filled. Every snap of Makoto's hips sent electric fire racing up his spine, even as it thrust him balls deep inside his lover's clenching passage.

When both men below him were close the interrogator stopped, easily pinning them in place as he teased Souta with series of shallow thrusts that had them both begging for more. "What was that? Did you say stop?"

"No, no, no, nooooooo," the assassin begged. "Please, oh please."

"Please what, Souta?" the torture master asked. "Please stop now?"

"Hurry up and fuck him, Makoto," Daisuke threatened. "Or I'm going to take matters into my own hands."

"Oh really? And how were you planning to do that?"

"Like this." The Shuhan somehow managed to gain the leverage to roll all three of them over so Makoto was on the bottom of the pile. "There you go Sou, make me feel it." He let out a deep sensuous moan when his lover did just that.

Souta was in heaven, thrusting up into Daisuke, then back onto the hard length piercing him until the interrogator's hand managed to wrap around the Shuhan's weeping erection. After only a few rough strokes the younger man keened his approval as he came hard.

Makoto saw his opportunity, hammering up into the trapped assassin until he screamed, clenching and writhing around the massive erection still pounding into him. Only then did the interrogator let go, sending Souta into yet another series of shuddering climaxes as hot seed poured out against his prostate.

"Oh gods that was good," the assassin gasped as soon as he regained his voice. "Why haven't we done this before?"

"We never had the opportunity," Daisuke mumbled sleepily in reply. "Love you, Sou."

"Love you too, baby. Thank you for an earth shattering experience, Makoto. Feel free to join us anytime."

"Sleep." The interrogator slipped out of the bed, leaving the lovers comfortably curled in

each other's arms. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You're not staying?" The Shuhan snuggled deeper into the assassin's familiar embrace.

"I'll see you both in the morning." Makoto pulled on his clothes, bending to place a tender kiss on each man's forehead before heading home.

"Nakamura-sama," the servant began as soon as he entered, "Oonishi Hideaki and a companion are here to see you."

"A companion?" Kazuki mused. "Do you know who that might be, koishii?"

"Probably Katsutoshi, a swordsman from Mochizuki shuudan," Yoshi decided after a moment's thought. "They were together the last time I encountered Hideaki."

"You've seen him recently then? When was that?"

"We had a little run in a few years ago, before Kobayashi-sama's passing," the shadow wolf said. "I'm embarrassed to say he caught me off guard."

"Did he hurt you?" Kazuki hissed.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter," the elite insisted. "We were on opposing sides. It's the ninja way."

The spell-caster once again cursed the system they were born into. *If only we weren't shinobi*, he mused, although not for the first time, *then Yoshi wouldn't have suffered so*. "I'm saddened at the thought of you in pain, pretty. I wish I could go back and prevent it."

"That's very sweet of you. But I wouldn't be the same person without my experiences. I probably wouldn't even give you a chance."

"Send him in." Kazuki wrapped a protective arm around Yoshi and pulled him close as the doors swung wide.

"Nakamura-sama, Takahashi-san, how nice to see you," Katsutoshi greeted them as he entered, carefully leading Hideaki by the elbow.

"You sent for me?" The last Oonishi pressed both hands to his head and dropped to his knees.

"Is it bad?" The swordsman knelt beside his companion and stroked his back.

"What's wrong with him?" the shadow wolf asked, concerned eyes tracing over the huddled form.

"It's his eyes. A side effect of the illusions he weaves," Katsutoshi explained. "He's lost his sight already, and still the headaches continue."

"Yoshi-senpai?" Hideaki asked. "What are you doing here?"

"He is my companion," Kazuki declared. "Where else would he be?"

"Be nice, koi," the shadow wolf warned. "Kazu's apprentice kidnapped me. He brought me here and Kazu-sama saved me from him."

"Why did you call me here? Travel is difficult for me now. Everything is difficult for me now."

"The three of us have much in common. I know about Kobayashi-sama, and I know what happened to your clan." Yoshi paused when Hideaki grew rigid, turning hazy sightless eyes in his direction. "Kazuki and I were also targets of Kobayashi-sama's attention. And, unlike the two of you, he also shared me with others. He even had Rin continue to do the same thing. I

hoped...”

“Hoped what, senpai?” Hideaki asked.

“Hoped you could help us. That we could help you. I’m sorry I didn’t realize what was going on. I know you tried to talk to me. I was too closed off to listen and I am truly sorry. I wish to ease your pain now, if I can.”

“It’s a bit late for healing don’t you think?” the Oonishi declared, pinning the elite with sightless eyes. “Now revenge, that’s something I could support.”

“Who would we target?” Yoshi asked with a shrug. “Kobayashi-sama and Rin are both dead. I refuse to punish the entire shuudan for the actions of a few.”

“How about everyone who knew and did nothing to stop it?” Hideaki suggested. “They’re just as guilty.”

“Then you might as well start with us,” the shadow wolf declared. “We both knew what was happening. I admit I thought I was the only one, but still, I did nothing.”

“Sniping at each other won’t help anyone,” Kazuki declared. “Why don’t we all get comfortable.”

Daisuke was sitting behind his desk, doggedly working through yet another stack of backed up paperwork, when the door burst open and Genki strode in. “I found some information in shishou’s papers that you need to see.” He shoved one of the former Shuhan’s bound journals into the surprised young man’s hands.

“Is it about Yoshi?”

“No, just read it.” The Shuhan turned his eyes to the page in front of him, mind shying away from the meaning of the words dancing in front of his eyes.

“This must be a mistake,” he declared. “There’s no way this could be true and I didn’t know.”

“I’m sorry, Daisuke. But there’s no reason for him to put it in his private papers if it wasn’t the truth.”

“I need some time alone please, Genki-sama,” the Shuhan said in a shaky voice. “Could you come back later?”

“Are you sure you’re alright alone?” The sage peered into unfocused eyes.

“I’ll be fine, besides I’m not alone,” Daisuke croaked. “Souta’s here.”

The assassin stepped out of hiding when his name was mentioned. “What did you do to him?”

“I meant him no harm,” Genki answered warily, hands spread wide to indicate his intentions. “I just thought he needed to know.”

“Know what?” the elite killer pressed. “He’s got enough to deal with as it is.”

“Kobayashi-sama was my father,” Daisuke said in a small, hopeless voice. “He never said anything, even after my mother’s death. He let me go to the orphanage with all the other unwanted children. When I was older though, we played shogi together. I thought we were close. Kami, what a fool I’ve been.”

“It’s alright, Dai, he’s the one who missed out, not you.” Souta pulled the Shuhan into his arms. “It’s all moot now anyway. They’re all dead, you’re safe here with me so just relax.” The

assassin turned his head to address the sage. "Get out of here, Genki. He'll talk to you later when he's had time to adjust." With that abrupt dismissal he carefully wrapped an arm around quivering shoulders and guided his lover back to bed, climbing in with him and pulling the shivering form tight as he whispered words of comfort.

"Do you think that's why I enjoyed training children, even the ones that were terrible?" Daisuke croaked when his tears stopped. "Am I a pedophile like my father?"

"Oh, no, no, Dai, you are the sweetest person I've ever met. You would never, ever, do anything like that. This information doesn't change who you are and you can't start second guessing your life because of it." Souta's mind devised painful tortures for the deceitful bastard who'd ruined so many lives. *Too bad he's already dead, that's one job I would have gladly done for free.*

"Tatsuya," the Shuhan gasped, yanking the elite out of his morbid train of thought. "He needs to know. We're half-brothers."

"Do you want me to go find him?" Souta suggested. "I'll snag him and bring him back here."

"No, I don't want to be alone." Daisuke replied in a tiny voice. "Send someone. Make sure Tatsuya knows it's important."

About twenty minutes later Kobayashi Tatsuya cautiously opened the doors to the Shuhan's office. "Hello, Daisuke, you wanted to see me?"

"We're in here." Souta poked his head out of the apartment door. "Come on in. Would you like some sake?"

"Sake in the daytime, I thought that was more your predecessor's style." Tatsuya looked around for an ashtray, settling for flicking his ashes in his hand.

"Genki found something in your father's journals that I think you should know."

"Are you alright?" Tatsuya asked. "You're very pale and your hands are shaking. Whatever it is I'm sure it can wait for a better time."

"There won't be a better time," Daisuke replied with a shake of his head. "You deserve to know." He pushed the journal into his hands, indicating the section in question. The elite easily deciphered his father's familiar writing, mouth dropping open in shock when he read the revelation contained within.

"We're brothers?" he gasped, cigarette falling unnoticed from his lips, only to be snatched up and snuffed out by a wary Souta.

"Half-brothers. But I guess that's a moot point. Do you have any idea why he kept this a secret for so long?"

"Besides the fact that my mother would have killed him, you mean?" Tatsuya replied. "I can't believe that bastard did this to her. Sorry, Daisuke, no offense. It's just a little overwhelming."

"Tell me about it. I thought I'd heard all of the nasty secrets surrounding Kobayashi-sama, but this one really threw me for a loop. I never, ever anticipated anything like this."

"So now what?" the clan head asked. "Are you planning on telling anyone?"

"No, like all of Kobayashi-sama's other secrets, this one would ruin his reputation, and that is something we can't afford to have happen," Daisuke decided. "I probably should have kept it to myself, but I thought you had the right to know."

"I'm sorry he never told you, Daisuke," Tatsuya said. "You're a good man and I'm proud to

have you as a brother, even if it is a little late in life when we found out. I'd like to tell Mayu, if that's all right."

"Of course. Tell her I said hello."

"Thank you. Call me if you need anything." He fumbled out and lit yet another cigarette. "By the way, when is Yoshi coming back? I really need to speak with him."

"We got a message from him a few days ago. He'll be back in a couple months." Souta was grateful for the change in topic as he could feel some of the tension leave his lover.

"Oh, well then, I guess I'll just see you guys later. We should all get together for dinner sometime soon. Let me talk to Mayu and we can work out a time," Tatsuya suggested.

"That would be nice," the assassin replied. "I'm always up for dinner, especially if Mayu's cooking."

When the doors shut behind Tatsuya the Shuhan flew into his lover's arms. "I love you so much. You aren't going to leave me now are you?"

"Why would I leave you?"

"Everything's complicated, and everyone knows about our relationship. It's just so different now, and I'm not the person you thought I was," Daisuke stammered through his tears.

"Oh, baby," Souta whispered as he pulled his lover close and stroked his hair. "I don't care about any of that. The only reason I kept us a secret was because I was afraid of the repercussions. I was never ashamed of you. I have every intention of spending the rest of our lives together." He pulled his exhausted lover into bed and wrapped him in his arms, crooning comforting words until the younger man finally cried himself out and fell into a restless sleep.

Tatsuya walked home on autopilot, his mind a million miles away as he pondered all the facts about his father that had come to light. "Mayu, I'm home. I need to talk to you."

"I'm glad you're here," she replied as she kissed his cheek. "Dinner is almost ready. Get cleaned up and I'll get it on the table."

"We need to talk," he mumbled. "There are things you need to know."

Mayu's eyes widened. "Sweetheart, does this affect us?"

"Well, maybe," he decided. "I don't want to keep anything from you."

"Are you having an affair?" she asked. "Are you leaving me?"

"Oh no, no," Tatsuya hastened to assure her. "Nothing like that. It's about my father."

"Well, whatever it is it's gotten you tied up in knots," Mayu stated. "Just spit it out."

"My father, the Shuhan, Kobayashi-sama," Tatsuya stammered, "he ... had a thing for boys. He abused Yoshi when he was younger and gave him to other leaders for the same reason, and Takahashi wasn't the only one."

"Oh, 'suya, I'm so sorry. I can see where that would be terrible news. Are you sure of the source?"

"It was in his papers, and that's not all," he continued, eyes fixed on the carpet. "He had an affair. Daisuke is my half-brother."

"But Daisuke grew up in the orphan..." she trailed off as realization hit. "He never even tried to..."

"The man I thought I knew, the one I called father, it's like he didn't exist at all," Tatsuya

choked out as he wrapped his arms around his wife and held on tight. "I'm not even sure who I am anymore."

Yoshi tossed and turned, mumbling under his breath as he relived his time in Iwagashi shuudan. He managed a strangled, "Makoto," before falling still again. Kazuki watched with guarded eyes, gently stroking the long pale back until the elite relaxed and slid into deeper sleep. The spell-caster opted to remain awake, pulling on a robe and slipping out of the room to go in search of their guests.

"How is he?" Kazuki asked.

"Sleeping, for now," the swordsman replied. "What do you want, Nakamura-san?"

"Now, now, no need for such hostility," Kazuki insisted. "I have no intention of hurting him. Yoshi wanted to see him. He's struggling with the fact that others suffered as he did. I had hopes that Hideaki could help him heal, but it's obvious that's the furthest thing from his mind."

"Do you blame him?" Katsutoshi arched a brow. "Why do you care anyway? I would have thought Takahashi was high on your list for elimination. The last thing I expected was to find you shackled up together."

"In the first place, we aren't 'shackled up' as you so pithily put it. I care for Yoshi. I'm trying very hard to help him as he's helped me. I only have a few months left. I was hoping ... I don't know what I was hoping for. Yoshi was able to look past everything I've done and help me. I'm afraid of what will happen to him. He's planning on returning to Kobayashi shuudan, despite the fact that they'll probably treat him as a traitor," the spell-caster explained.

"Wait a minute, how can you be dying?" the swordsman asked. "I thought you had that eternal youth spell?"

"Unfortunately it requires a shinobi trained in the technique as well as a ki donor. Rin graciously deprived me of both before her death. Now I have less than two months left. Without the ability to drain the ki from another I will die ... and when I do Yoshi will be alone. I'm just trying to do what I can for him before then."

"I understand," Katsutoshi whispered. "I have tried to help Hideaki as best I can. Unfortunately, there is very little I can do. The headaches grow worse by the week. I fear I will lose him soon."

"I am sorry I summoned him. I didn't know he was so ill. It certainly wasn't worth causing him more pain."

"You really have changed. You never cared about anyone's pain but your own before."

"We are alike, Hideaki and I," Kazuki stated after a moment's thought. "But Yoshi is different. He absorbed the pain, humiliation and deceit they threw at him and kept going back for more. His dedication to his shuudan in the face of all that," the spell-caster wracked his brain for a way to explain. "It takes an inner strength that I greatly admire. Do you know how the last great clan conflict ended?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Katsutoshi asked.

"Kobayashi-sama used Yoshi as barter to cement treaties and facilitate the release of prisoners. He spent many months as a guest of both Shuhan and Yakuza. They did unspeakable things to him. Although he was still a teenager he accepted the assignments, again and again.

Even today he claims that he would do it all over if ordered to. I have never met anyone who lives the principles of shinobi the way he does,” Kazuki explained. “I cannot help but admire him.”

“Does he know why Hideaki slaughtered his clan?” the swordsman asked. “I know he's worried about Takahashi's reaction.”

“Your lover has nothing to fear. Yoshi understands why he did what he did, he isn't out for vengeance. In fact, he carries a heavy burden of guilt. He believes if he had said something about what was happening, Hideaki, and hence the entire Oonishi clan, might have been spared.” Kazuki frowned at the thought. “I've told him it was not his fault, but I don't think he believes me. I had hoped Hideaki could convince him otherwise. Judging from the nightmare Yoshi was having before I left, I fear it's doing more harm than good. Nevertheless, you are welcome to stay as long as you want. Perhaps we can find some way to ease Hideaki's symptoms.”

“He's not my lover,” the tall swordsman replied. “Our relationship is ... complicated, although I do care for him very much. If you could find some way to ease his distress you would earn my eternal gratitude, both of you. But for now I need sleep, and so do you. We will see you in the morning.”

The spell-caster headed back towards his quarters, intending to slip quietly back into bed, only to be met by an enraged Yoshi. “Where were you?”

“Speaking with Katsutoshi, why?”

“Don't lie to me,” came the growled retort. “I saw how you looked at him when they arrived.”

“How I looked at who, pretty?” Kazuki asked.

“Hideaki. I know you were with him, don't lie to me anymore.”

“I went to check on him, it's true. But he was asleep, I spoke with Katsutoshi about his condition.”

“Stop lying to me,” Yoshi demanded. “I know you want him. Why wouldn't you? He's far prettier than I'll ever be, and less well used.”

“Oh, no, no, koishii,” Kazuki assured him. “Never, ever will I want anyone else as long as I have you.”

“So you say.” The shadow wolf turned his back on his lover in an attempt to regain his composure. “But your actions speak otherwise.”

“Yoshi.” The spell-caster wrapped his arms around the rigid elite, resting his face against the broad back. “What can I do to prove it to you? Do you want to speak with Katsutoshi yourself? Do I need to send them away? Please answer me.”

“It doesn't matter,” came the defeated reply. “Of course you should do as you wish. I have no right to dictate to you.”

“Yes, you do.” Kazuki turned Yoshi to face him, gently lifting his chin so their eyes met. “I will do anything you wish that is within my power.”

“Stay with me? Please?”

“I will never willingly leave you,” he promised, kissing the forlorn elite passionately to seal the bargain.

Makoto paced his house restlessly. Daisuke had been right, the longer he looked at the boxes of Yoshi's possessions, the worse he felt. *This is pointless, there's no reason to keep this stuff here. Who knows if he'll ever come back.* He pulled on his coat and headed for the Shuhan's office.

"Daisuke?" he called when he entered. "Can I ask you a question?"

"He's not feeling very well." Souta stuck his head out the apartment door. "Could it wait?"

"Of course, I was just wondering what happened with Yoshi's house. I was going to send his things over," Makoto said. "It can wait until tomorrow."

"No it can't," a haggard Daisuke declared when he appeared at his lover's shoulder. "Hoshu was taking care of it. Go check with him."

"Is everything alright?" the interrogator asked. "You look like someone died."

"I'm just tired," the Shuhan insisted. "I'll be fine after a bit of rest."

"If you're certain..." Makoto demurred, waiting for a protest. "Then I'll be off, my apologies for intruding."

The interrogator located Hoshu in his clan compound. "Shuhan-sama says you looked into the matter of Yoshi's house."

"I used some of the discretionary fund to repurchase his family home," the elder replied. "Why?"

"I wish to get his things moved in before he returns. Do you have the key?"

The elder disappeared inside, quickly returning with the object in question. "Thank you," the interrogator replied. "I will return it as soon as I am done."

"You might as well keep it," Hoshu said. "You're more likely to see him when he returns than I am."

"I seriously doubt that," came the bitter retort. "However, I will do as you wish." Makoto gave a weary shrug before heading home. Once there, he grabbed the first boxes he came to and headed for the shadow wolf's house.

"Good morning, Makoto. How wonderful it is to see such a dedicated shinobi as yourself. Have you by any chance seen my friend Yoshi?" Jun appeared out of nowhere, effectively blocking the interrogator's path.

"Why are you asking me?"

"You are carrying a box with his name on it," Jun pointed out. "Despite what everyone thinks, I'm not stupid."

"He's ... away," Makoto admitted. "His things were delivered to me by mistake. I was just taking them to his house."

"I will be honored to help you with your task." Jun snatched the boxes out of the interrogator's arms and set off, leaving Makoto scrambling to catch up.

"Now that we have finished with our task," Jun declared, "I would like you to explain exactly what is going on."

"How well do you know Yoshi?" Makoto replied enigmatically.

"He's been my friend since we were young," Jun admitted. "So I know him better than anyone, but I cannot honestly say that is well. Yoshi has always been secretive."

The interrogator studied the man in front of him. Jun would generally be his last choice for companionship, but he sensed an opportunity to gain valuable insight. “How would you like to join me for sake?” Makoto grasped a burly arm and began to steer them towards the nearest bar, not stopping until they were seated in a secluded corner away from prying eyes.

“Why have you brought me here?” Jun asked. “If you wish to know Yoshi's secrets, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you.”

“Nothing like that,” the interrogator assured him. “I just thought a drink would be nice after moving all those boxes, my treat.”

“May I ask what your interest in my friend is?”

“It's ... hard to explain.” Makoto poured them each a saucer of sake, lifting one to his lips and toasting “Kanpai” so the loud man would do the same.

“I'm sure it is.” Jun paused for a moment while the torture master refilled his cup. “Nevertheless I would like an explanation. Are you planning to interrogate him? Because I cannot allow that.”

“Oh no, no.” The interrogator poured the enraged elite another sake. “I would never hurt Yoshi. I just want to understand him a bit better.”

“Perhaps you understand him better than I,” Jun suggested with a grin and a wink.

It's going to be a long night, Makoto thought. I hope it's worth it.

Several hours later both men were noticeably inebriated. Jun due to Makoto's efforts, and Makoto in a misguided attempt to dull the assault on his senses the other man presented. Worst of all, the interrogator had made no headway whatsoever on uncovering information about Yoshi.

“Well my friend,” Jun slurred. “I believe it is time for a contest.”

“Contest?”

“A contest of strength and skill to end our evening of comradery! If I win you shall tell me how you and Yoshi-kun's became so close.”

“And if I win?” the interrogator asked, thinking he saw a way out of this fiasco of an evening.

“Then I shall answer a question of yours, of course.”

“You're on,” Makoto growled. “What does the contest consist of?”

“Hand to hand combat, of course,” the drunken elite proclaimed, smile growing even wider. “Are you ready?”

Makoto realized he was drunker than he thought not ten minutes later, when he found himself pinned. “I win,” Jun proclaimed. “Now tell me how you got so close to Yoshi.”

Without thinking the interrogator reached up, cradling the burly elite's face in his hands. “I did this,” he muttered before kissing the startled man.

The kiss lingered longer than was necessary for demonstration purposes. Then both men opened their eyes and really looked at who they were kissing. Jun leapt back, stumbling comically before landing hard on his ass, mouth hanging open. Makoto also tried to jump back. Unfortunately he was already laying on the ground, so he only managed to slam his skull into the pavement hard enough to make him see stars.

“You ... and my friend...” Jun stammered before rising to his feet. “I weep manly tears of joy that my dear friend has found true love!” he proclaimed. “I vow that I, too, will find my true love.”

Jun yanked the startled interrogator into his arms, squeezing the already drunk and concussed man hard enough to crack ribs as he continued to babble loudly about the wonders of love. Makoto wondered if perhaps he was caught in a particularly diabolical illusion. He made the hand gestures and muttered a release spell, but nothing changed. *Maybe I'm dead*, he pondered as best he could with his foggy brain. *This seems like hell.*

The interrogation master reached out and poked the enraptured elite, hard. "Jun, let go," he managed to gasp just as muscular arms withdrew, dropping him unceremoniously on the ground. "It's not what you think."

"Oh, were you just using Yoshi for sex then?" Jun cocked his fist and slammed it into the interrogator's face.

"No!" Makoto shouted. "What were you thinking, hitting me like that?" The interrogator rose to his feet, jumping back with a strangled, "Don't help me." Once upright the torture master gritted out, "He left me for someone else, and I don't think he's ever coming back."

The realization hit the drunken man like a freight train. Makoto dropped to his knees with a resounding crunch and buried his face in his hands, crying all the tears of rage, frustration and loss that had been building up inside him.

"There, there," Jun attempted to calm the distraught figure. "Let's get out of the street and we shall work out a plan to win back your love." He hoisted one of the torture master's arms over his shoulder and pulled him to his feet, looking him up and down. "I believe you should go to the hospital."

Daisuke trudged back into his office and began once again sorting through the slowly diminishing stack of paper, squinting crossly at the mess. One of the stacks slid sideways, creating a small avalanche across the surface of the desk and frustrating the Shuhan further. He grabbed a small volume from the pile and flipped it open, interest piquing when he realized it was Rin's private journal.

"Oh, Kami." He dropped the book as if it were diseased. "Souta, I know what this was all about."

"What are you talking about Dai?" his lover asked.

"Why Rin hated Yoshi so much," the Shuhan stated in a calm voice, even though his face was now the color of cottage cheese.

"Put your head down." Souta grabbed his lover when he began to sway, pushing him back in the chair and shoving his head between his legs. "Breathe deeply and relax."

"I'm okay," Daisuke's muffled voice floated up. "It was just startling. She didn't really lie about it, but she didn't tell the whole truth either."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"There was a retrieval that was scheduled to take place, a hostage swap. One of our shinobi was to be returned in exchange for a week with Ren and his nine year old son. Ren committed suicide rather than go through with it, the exchange never took place, and Rin forever lost any chance with the man she was besotted with. She hates Yoshi for being the reason for Ren's suicide, even though he had no idea."

"He was shinobi," Souta said. "That carries certain obligations."

“The assignment was dropped before Yoshi was ever told about it,” Daisuke retorted. “He isn’t responsible for his father's decision.”

“I didn’t say that he was. I just meant that he’d fought and killed. He wasn’t a child anymore, Dai.”

“He was nine years old. Shinobi or not, no nine year old should ever be put in that position,” the Shuhan argued. “How would you feel if it had been me instead of Yoshi?”

“I get your point,” Souta conceded with a shudder. “So what does it mean to us now?”

“Nothing really, with Rin dead it's a moot point, just more dirty laundry to bury,” Daisuke concluded with a bitter laugh. “Even if we had known her motivation from the start it wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“So, do yourself a favor and let it go,” the assassin urged. “It didn’t happen, that's what's important.”

“Thank you.” Daisuke pulled his lover into a tight embrace. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Me either,” Souta retorted. He kissed the Shuhan, smiling when his lover melted into him.

“Ahem,” a deep voice interrupted their lip lock, causing both men to turn towards it in irritation. “Sorry to interrupt,” Genki said. “I need to speak with Daisuke before I go.”

“Go, where are you going?” the Shuhan asked. “We need your help here.”

“I’m going to meet with Yoshi and Kazuki, they asked me to come.” The sage pulled out the invitation in question and tossed it over.

“We can’t let you just go traipsing off to Kazuki's lair, even with an invitation,” Daisuke decided.

“You can’t stop me. I don't care if you are the Shuhan. I owe it to both of them. They’re willing to give me a chance to fix things between us. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“That depends. Are you going to make things better or worse?” the Shuhan asked. “Because we really can’t afford to have you pissing either of them off.”

“Daisuke, you wound me,” Genki said with a broad easy smile. “Don’t you think I’m capable of tact?”

“No,” came the blunt reply. “I think you’re a homophobic idiot who blurts out disgusting things when he's scared.”

“I was a child,” the sage shot back. “That was almost thirty years ago.”

“Stop it,” Souta yelled. “Genki, things have been very stressful and I understand you’re upset, but if you yell at Dai like that again I’m going to throw you out of this office.” Once he had both their attention he continued. “How can you be sure you’re not walking into a trap, Genki?”

“I’m not,” the sage admitted. “But I’m willing to take the chance. You should be, too. Don’t you want to get Yoshi back?”

Yoshi stayed awake, stormy eye locked on his lover's sleeping form, trying to come up with a plan to make the legendary shinobi stay with him. As soon as Kazuki began to stir he knelt submissively on the bed, hands clasped behind his back and head bowed.

“Koishii, what are you doing?” The sleepy voice startled the tense shadow wolf, making

him shift awkwardly before catching himself.

“I thought perhaps you were frustrated, Kazu-sama,” the elite replied in a velvety, sensuous voice. “Do you have desires you’ve been denying? Do you need to hurt me, mark me, make me bleed? I am yours to do with as you please.”

“What are you talking about?” the spell-caster asked, confusion evident in his expression. “Of course I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Are you sure? Perhaps if I looked like this?” He made some gestures and cast an illusion, fashioning himself to look like Hideaki as he continued watching his lover through hazy guarded orbs.

“Why are you doing this?” Kazuki asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Or perhaps this is your greatest desire.” The shadow wolf manipulated the illusion, splitting himself into two beckoning copies, then morphing one into the impressive figure of the swordsman Katsutoshi.

“No,” the legendary insisted. “I want you, just you. Now stop this foolishness and talk to me.”

Yoshi dropped the illusion, fixing his lover with an enigmatic look. “Do my scars bother you?” He ran a hand over his torso as he cast another spell to hide the scars that crisscrossed his chest and abdomen.⁸

“Nothing about you bothers me ... except your insistence that I desire someone else.” Kazuki pulled the lanky man into his arms. “What started all this?”

“I wish to make you happy. Is there something wrong with that?” the elite replied. “Some hidden reason, perhaps, that you’re lying to me?”

“Stop this, Yoshi,” his lover hissed. “I’m sorry having the Oonishi here upsets you so, but I have done nothing to warrant your accusations. I have been painfully honest about my feelings for you. If I had wished to beguile you it would have been with words of power, not love.” Kazuki leaned in and kissed a pale cheek. “What has you doubting me so, pretty? Please talk to me.”

“That’s just it,” the shadow wolf whispered. “I’m not pretty. I’m freakish, scarred and ugly, inside and out. No one could want me, not really. Seeing Hideaki merely reminded me of what I already knew, and yet you say you don’t desire him. You must want something from me to go to all this trouble, something important that you’re keeping hidden.”

“The only thing I want is for you to stay with me. I’m dying, and I’m scared. I want someone to hold me when it happens, and cry for me when I’m gone. I want to be remembered. I want the things anyone would want. Will you give me that? Can you? I know it’s cruel to ask you to care for me when I’m going to leave you, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s my fault, you know,” Yoshi stated. “Everyone I care about dies too soon, my father, my shishou, now you. I’m a curse, you were doomed the moment you took me from Kenta.”

“I don’t believe that, koishii,” the spell-caster retorted. “You have done nothing to hurt me, and I don’t believe you ever would. But even if that were the case I wouldn’t change what’s happened. The only thing I need, my sole desire, is for you to show me how much you love me.”

“That I can do, gladly.” Yoshi captured thin lips with his own, swallowing his lover’s needy moans as he guided them towards the bed. He pressed the smaller man into the soft pile of bedding, holding him there as he pulled back to observe, eyelids drooping lustfully as he memorized the way the lithe figure writhed under his touch.

“Stop with the teasing and love me,” Kazuki demanded, surging up to grasp a fine-boned wrist and pull the shadow wolf down on top of him.

“I’m not teasing. I want to remember you just like this, always.” Yoshi lavished the legendary with needy kisses, pulling away from his lips to suckle the long column of Kazuki’s neck, continuing down across prominent collarbones to the flat planes of his chest. The shadow wolf rubbed soft pink nipples with the pad of his thumb until they stiffened before bending to nip and suckle the taut buds.

Yoshi took his lover’s bobbing erection in his hand, lightly rubbing the satiny skin as he palmed the rigid length, before dropping his head and swallowing it to the root. Kazuki screamed his delight when that hot, wet mouth engulfed him, sending ripples of pleasure through his frame.

“That’s it, sing for me,” the shadow wolf crooned before once again taking the twitching length deep in his throat. His wicked tongue distracted the spell-caster as two fingers slid deep inside his ass, hastily stretching him for what was to come. Unable to delay in the face of his lover’s wanton pleas, Yoshi slicked his cock and slid into the well prepared entrance, stopping when he was fully seated to revel in the clutching heat.

“Move, damn you,” Kazuki cursed, desperately trying to thrust his hips against his larger lover. He gasped in delight, all protest forgotten, when pale hips pulled back and thrust forward, chasing the breath from his lungs when his prostate was grazed. The shadow wolf noticed and teased the spot, pulling back an inch or two, only to push back in, rubbing the tender bundle of nerves until the legendary was keening his approval. He pulled out, ignoring his lover’s heated protest, and rearranged them, pulling the lithe man into his lap and down onto his impressive length. Yoshi clutched the quivering form close to his chest as he drove up into him.

When a long-fingered hand wrapped around his dripping erection Kazuki began to writhe, pressing back onto the length piercing him before thrusting up into the encircling hand, letting go with a piercing shriek of the shadow wolf’s name. Yoshi continued to drive into the clutching heat, growling in abandon when the passage suddenly seemed to shrink two sizes. He caved in to the pleasure jolting through him, filling his lover to the brim with his cum. After pulling out he pressed Kazuki’s face to the bed, leaning down to lap at the quivering ring, tasting himself on his lover as he memorized the sight of his seed dripping out of the powerful man.

“Again,” the spell-caster gasped. “Love me again.”

“I need to rest first,” Yoshi whispered. “Give me ten minutes.”

“No more than that. I don’t want to waste a minute of the time I have left,” Kazuki replied. “I have a lot of time to make up for and not much time to do it in.”

“Well then, we’ll have to make the most of the time we have.” He pulled the slighter man close, running his fingers soothingly through long silky hair as their breathing returned to normal. Yoshi lifted the light figure to straddle his lap, wrapping strong arms around his lover and kissing him possessively.

Kazuki gasped when he felt his lover’s erection pressing against his softened entrance, wiggling in the confining embrace as he tried to press back against it. “No, no, no, I’m the one in charge, remember,” Yoshi whispered, thrusting his tongue in the spell-caster’s mouth as he pressed inside to the hilt.

The shadow wolf refused to relinquish those lips, continuing the demanding kiss as he slowly began to thrust, arms holding his writhing lover firmly in place as he set an achingly

slow, measured pace. The elite was determined to hold out as long as possible, changing the rhythm whenever he felt himself drawing close until he could no longer maintain his composure. Yoshi drove up into the man in his arms with deep, punishing strokes until Kazuki screamed his name, shooting burst after burst of hot seed between them. At the sound of his lover screaming his name, the elite gave himself permission to let go, thrusting madly into the sucking wet heat until he felt the hot coil inside him snap. He came with a strangled moan, dropping his head on the older man's shoulder and panting wildly as he held on tight, refusing even now to relinquish what he had found.

Genki approached the site of Kazuki's headquarters with trepidation. As Daisuke had so helpfully pointed out, an invitation did not necessarily indicate safety. Knowing the feelings the two men inside had for him, the sage was fairly certain he'd be lucky to survive the encounter. Still, he'd said he was coming and it was a promise he intended to keep.

"My lord," the servant bowed deeply, waiting for a signal before continuing. "You have a visitor. Shall I show him in?"

"We have company, Yoshi," the spell-caster called to his lover. "Put something on and come here."

A few minutes later the shadow wolf wandered out of the bathroom, dressed in only a pair of sweat pants slung low on his hips, dampness still sparkling in his disheveled locks. "Good morning," he husked as he dipped his head to nibble the long column of the legendary's neck, never noticing as the door opened and Genki was shown inside.

"What are you doing here?" Kazuki hissed, causing the elite to stop what he was doing and lift his head to regard the sage with mild distaste.

"I asked him to come. I thought, perhaps, you had things to say before ... while you can," Yoshi explained. "You loved him once."

"I thought we settled this," Kazuki retorted. "Why do you keep insisting I want someone else?"

"I don't want you to have any regrets," the elite fired back. "I couldn't live with that." Genki's mouth dropped when Yoshi gathered the powerful shinobi into his arms and kissed his forehead. "Your happiness is important to me, Kazu-sama. At least clear the air between you. I promise not to be jealous."

"I should hope not, pretty," the spell-caster retorted. "This is your idea, after all."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," Genki muttered. "It's very rude, especially since you invited me."

"Yoshi invited you," Kazuki pointed out. "He's trying to distract me from my imminent demise, not to mention more pleasurable pursuits."

"I would never distract you from the pursuit of pleasure," the shadow wolf purred. "But that still leaves a lot of hours in the day."

"Not necessarily, koishii." The spell-caster pressed himself against his taller lover and rocked his hips suggestively.

"Stop that," the sage bit out, hand over his eyes. "Are you going out of your way to make me uncomfortable?"

“Hardly,” Kazuki retorted. “I’m attempting to enjoy myself with my chosen companion. It shouldn’t be so surprising considering my projected life span.”

“Who says you’re dying anyway?” Genki asked. “You look a hell of a lot better than I do. You even look better than Yoshi. I would never guess you were on your last legs.”

“Watch yourself old man,” the elite snarled, moving protectively in front of his lover. “I don’t like what you’re implying.”

“Is that so, brat?” the sage growled back. “Well, maybe I don’t like the fact that you’re sleeping with a traitor. Not to mention the details, like the fact that said traitor is not only a man, but also old enough to be your father.”

“Why is any of that your business?” Yoshi asked, body rigid and fists tightening.

“You’re family, even if I never had the guts to acknowledge it before now,” Genki mumbled. “I’m trying to protect you.”

“You’re too late,” the shadow wolf retorted. “By about twenty years. I guess chasing women was more important than claiming your only living relative.”

“I didn’t ... I wouldn’t... How could I...?” the sage stammered, unable to muster a comeback in the face of his indignation. “You can’t just dump everything on me, I wasn’t even around.”

“Because you were too busy running away,” Yoshi said. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I didn’t bring you here for me, I brought you here for Kazu-sama.”

“What is with all the lovey-dovey stuff, then? Fine, I get it, you’re sleeping together. You don’t need to rub my nose in it.”

“We aren’t doing anything of the sort,” Kazuki interjected. “I’m sorry if it bothers you, but I love Yoshi very much and I have no intention of hiding it.”

The sage’s face twisted in distaste but he held his tongue. “I’m not asking you to hide anything. I would, however, prefer not to see you stick your tongue, or anything else, down my nephew’s throat.”

“If that is your preference.” Yoshi pulled Kazuki close and thoroughly explored his mouth, making sure the sage got a good look at his tongue in action. He smiled against his lover’s lips at the loud groan it garnered.

“Take me back to bed, pretty?” the spell-caster entreated. The shadow wolf was quick to comply, ignoring Genki’s protests as he swept the slender figure into his arms and headed back to the bedroom.

“What am I supposed to do?” the sage yelled at their retreating backs.

“Anything that doesn’t involve interrupting us,” Yoshi broke the kiss to murmur. “Unless you want him to join us, koi?”

“No, he had his chance. I told you, I won’t share you with anyone.” The shadow wolf kicked the door shut, leaving the sputtering sage to cool his heels to the sounds of their lovemaking.

Makoto opened his eyes, blinking several times as he tried to work out where he was. “You’re in the hospital,” a familiar voice supplied. “Care to explain why?” The interrogator looked up into the worried face of his Shuhan and merely shook his head, unable to recall exactly

what had befallen him, until he noticed the figure hovering in the background.

“You!” he roared as he attempted to climb out of bed, only to fall flat on his face and refracture his already broken nose when he realized, too late, that both of his legs were in casts. “What did you do to me?” he bellowed. “I am going to kill you when I get out of here.”

“Now, now, Makoto,” Daisuke soothed. “There's no point in blaming Jun. From what I heard going out drinking was your idea.”

“I just wanted to find out more about Yoshi,” the interrogator gritted out as he attempted to reset his own nose. “I certainly never intended on ending up like this.”

“That's reassuring,” the Shuhan chuckled. “But I'm still waiting for your explanation.”

“I am afraid it is my fault, Shuhan-sama,” Jun declared. “I challenged the lover of my dear friend to a competition. Perhaps that was a bad idea when we had already been drinking.”

“Obviously.” Daisuke pinched his nose to ward off the headache prolonged contact with Jun tended to give him. “What was the nature of this competition?”

“Hand to hand combat,” Jun replied. “No weapons allowed.”

“So Jun beat you up?” the Shuhan asked.

“Not exactly,” Makoto answered in a nearly inaudible voice. “Although he did beat me, we just ... there was a little confusion when I answered his question.”

“Which was?” Daisuke prodded.

“How I got so close to Yoshi,” the interrogator admitted sullenly.

“Makoto kissed me,” Jun supplied. “Then he smacked his head on the ground and I punched him in the face.”

“That explains the concussion and the broken nose. What happened to your ribs and knees?”

“Jun broke my ribs hugging me, and I broke my knees falling on the pavement. Now if we're done with pick on Makoto day, do you think I could get out of here?”

“I'm afraid not,” Daisuke said. “You're going to have to stay in the hospital for a few days. There's no way you can take care of yourself like this.”

“But I hate the hospital,” the interrogator whined. “The food is awful and there's nothing to do.”

“I'm sure your office will be more than happy to run your paperwork over for you,” the Shuhan countered. “That'll keep you busy.”

“I will be honored to help you, lover of my dearest friend,” Jun insisted. “I vow to make sure your every need is catered to.” Makoto cast a panicked look in Daisuke's direction, praying the Shuhan would take pity on him and somehow divert the overenthusiastic nin from his self-appointed task. *After all, Daisuke used to work with him, certainly he knows just how horrible that would be.*

“I think that's an excellent idea,” the Shuhan replied with a smirk, crushing the interrogator's hopes for a speedy, and quiet, recovery. “I'll check in on you in a day or so, Makoto. You take good care of him, Jun. I'm sure Yoshi would be upset to come home and find him injured.”

“I hate you,” the interrogator muttered, slumping lower in the bed and praying for unconsciousness to once again overtake him.

Genki retreated to the kitchen, turning on the radio and running the water before slumping

in a hard backed chair and covering his ears with his hands, all in a futile attempt to block out the sounds currently filtering out of Kazuki's bedroom. *Do they have to be so damn loud about it? Haven't they ever heard of discretion?*

Obviously not, he decided with a wince at a particularly enthusiastic warbling of the shadow wolf's name. *Maybe I should go look around*. He wandered out into the hall, following the maze of passageways, opening random doors and peering inside in an attempt to gain some sense of his bearings in the underground complex.

A few minutes later, Yoshi left his exhausted lover to sleep and slipped out in search of his uncle. He ghosted down familiar corridors after the sage, willing to waste some time in observation before confronting him.

Genki threw open yet another door, expecting to find an empty room. He was shocked, to say the least, to find the doorway blocked by Katsutoshi's large frame. "What do you want?" the swordsman rumbled.

"Nothing?" the sage replied, taken off guard.

"Good, Hideaki finally got to sleep. So, what are you doing here?"

"Apparently Yoshi is banging Kazuki. Quite enthusiastically if I were to judge from the noise level. I'm just trying to get out of earshot."

"Thanks for sharing. I meant here in the complex, not at my door," Katsutoshi grumbled. "Do you always take everything so literally?"

"Sorry, it's been a rough day," the sage explained. "I'm here because Yoshi asked me to come, although apparently only so he could push my buttons. What's going on between the two of them anyway? And why are you here?"

"We're here for the same reason you are, Yoshi sent for us. Hideaki couldn't say no to his request. As for what's going on, as you so quaintly put it, they say it's love. Who am I to argue?"

"Hideaki. You don't mean Oonishi Hideaki, do you?" Genki asked.

"Yes, why?" Katsutoshi was puzzled by the sage's reaction.

"My nephew seems to have a thing for traitors," the legendary explained. "I can't believe he's cozying up to that bastard."

"Watch what you say old man," the swordsman growled. "You don't know the whole story. It's not mine to tell, but I swear, if you hurt Hideaki I'll tear you to pieces. It's been good for him, being here. Takahashi-san and Nakamura-sama have helped him find some measure of peace. I won't let you rip that away from him."

The shadow wolf decided it was time to make his presence known. "No one will be taking anything from Hideaki," he interjected. "You have nothing to fear, Katsutoshi, I give you my word." The swordsman inclined his head in acknowledgment, turning to go back into the room when the slightly raspy voice continued. "How is he this evening?"

"He's doing much better, Takahashi-san, thank you for your concern," Katsutoshi said with a bow. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go check on him."

"We'll see you in the morning then," Yoshi replied with a smile. He clamped strong fingers on his uncle's shoulder, effectively preventing him from escaping. "What were you thinking?" he hissed as soon as the door had closed. "Do you want to die?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Genki bellowed, anger rising when a hand clamped over his mouth.

"Not so loud, you'll wake Hideaki," the elite warned, eyes narrowing as he glared at his

relation.

“Who the fuck cares?” The hand was shoved deeper into the sage's open mouth, sealing it shut. “Who do you think you are?” He attempted to scream around the barrier as his nephew watched him with lazy disdain.

“How you got to be a sage is beyond me,” Yoshi said. “Stupid and stubborn. You obviously coasted on your master's coat-tails, I can't believe you earned that reputation of yours.”

“I...”

“...am the great Genki, Sage of Wolf Mountain, blah, blah,” the shadow wolf sneered. “You talk a good game, but all I've ever seen you do is drink, gamble and prey on women. Not very successfully, I might add.”

“That's camouflage,” the older man retorted. “People think I'm not paying attention to anything but pretty girls. I pick up lots of valuable intelligence that way.”

“I doubt anything you're involved with could be labeled intelligence. Obviously you're from the inbred portion of the clan.”

“Okay, I get it, I'm not your favorite person. So why did you ask me here in the first place? You can't possibly think I'd go along with this.” Genki waved his hands in the air when he failed to come up with a word to describe the situation.

“To tell you the truth I had no idea. After all, Rin was in contact with Kazu-sama for years.” Yoshi observed the sputtering sage through half-lidded eyes for a moment before continuing. “However it really doesn't matter if you like the situation or not. I asked you here so you could make amends for the lousy way you treated Kazuki all those years ago. If you have any decency you'll get down on your knees and beg his forgiveness.”

“And if I don't?”

“I imagine I could force you to do as I ask.” The shadow wolf gathered ki in his hand. “But I'd rather not,” he concluded as he let the energy dissipate. “I'd like to think you have a decent heart in there somewhere.”

“And what did I do that was so horrible?” the sage asked.

“Kazuki was in love with you, you stupid idiot. When he tried to confide in you about Kobayashi-sama you told him he was disgusting. He never did have the courage to tell you how he felt about your worthless ass. Why did you think he left so suddenly, even though he was being groomed to be the next Shuhan?”

“I was a teenager, I'd never even considered the idea of two men together. What he was describing was just sick.” Genki frowned. “I still don't see the attraction. Although I have to admit, it seems a lot more common than I thought.”

“What better lover for a man than another man?” Yoshi asked with a shrug. “Who else knows what feels good, where to touch, how to touch? Who else is strong enough that you don't have to hold back?”

“You just don't know any better,” the sage decided. He pursed his lips and studied his nephew carefully. “You know I'm sure I could fix you up with some girls who would show you a good time. Give you a little experience, if you know what I mean.”

“No thank you. Not interested. I'm perfectly content with my choice in lovers. You're the one who has the problem. Maybe I should fix you up with a nice hot guy who can give *you* some experience.”

The sage paled at the thought, shaking his head and waving his hands. “No, no, don't

trouble yourself,” he demurred. “I’m just fine, thank you.”

“So, what do I do with you then?” Yoshi asked. “You don’t seem inclined to make amends. You certainly don’t seem happy to claim me as a family member. This was a mistake. You should just go back home. Tell Makoto it won’t be long until I return.”

“Wait just a minute.” Genki rounded on the startled nin. “You can’t just dismiss me like that. I’m not some lackey you can summon on your whim.”

Yoshi grabbed the sage's shirt and yanked him forward so they were nose to nose. “Listen ‘Uncle’, I asked you here for a reason, one which I made perfectly clear in my invitation. It appears you have no intention of doing as I asked, and I won’t allow you to ruin the time Kazu has left. So either put up or get the hell out.” He dropped his hold and turned to leave, stopping to add, “I’ll send someone to show you to a room for tonight. I expect you to be gone in the morning.”

Genki slipped quietly back into town a week after his departure, studiously avoiding the Kobayashi no Shuhan. Therefore it would be an understatement to say that he was displeased to run face to face into a glowering Sato Daisuke.

“Oh no, you don’t.” The Shuhan began dragging the sage away by his ear. “I’ve wasted enough time hunting for you.”

“Ouch, that hurts,” Genki grumbled. “Let go of me, I’m not some child you can just drag around.”

“No, you’re an adult, which makes it ten times worse,” the Shuhan scolded, building steam as he warmed to his subject matter. “Just because you know a few secret techniques you think you can do whatever you want. Well no more!” He began tugging the reluctant sage towards headquarters, lecturing him loudly as they went. “I told you to report back to me as soon as you returned, but no, the great Genki is too high and mighty to follow the orders of his Shuhan. I’ve wasted two weeks looking for you.” Daisuke continued to tow the now red-faced sage toward his office, throwing open the door and shoving the larger man forcibly into a chair. “Now report!”

“There’s nothing to report. I went, I saw Yoshi and Kazuki. The brat got pissy and threw me out the next morning. End of story.”

“What did you do?” the Shuhan chided. “I told you not to make thing worse.”

“I didn’t do anything,” the sage retorted. “Just because I didn’t enjoy watching them make out.” He came to a halt at the incredulous look on Daisuke's face.

“You told Yoshi it was disgusting, didn’t you,” the Shuhan growled.

“No, not exactly,” Genki squeaked as he raised his hands to shield his face. “I just offered to set him up with some nice women. You know, for experience.”

“You really are an idiot, aren’t you,” Daisuke said as he ran a hand over his face in dismay.

“Don’t get mad at me,” the sage grumbled. “I’m not the one consorting with traitors. Did you know he has Oonishi Hideaki there with them? That psycho gets kid glove treatment while I get tossed out like yesterday's trash.”

“That makes sense,” the Shuhan mused. “Kobayashi-sama seemed to have a thing for handsome young geniuses, Kazuki, Ren, Yoshi, Hideaki. I wonder if I could pick the others out of the records?”

“What kind of sense does consorting with traitors make?” Genki yelled. “You’re supposed to be the Shuhan, don’t you even care?”

“That’s right, *I’m* the Shuhan, which means *I* make the decisions about what is acceptable and what isn’t, not you. I knew I shouldn’t have let you go, now you’ve messed everything up. You better hope Yoshi comes back, otherwise you get to explain it to Makoto ... and Jun.”

The sage shuddered at the mere mention of the combat specialist, shaking his head to clear it of the images it was assaulting him with before asking in a strangled voice, “Why should either of them care?”

“Makoto is in love with Takahashi-san and has been as grouchy as a bear with a toothache ever since his disappearance. Jun is Yoshi’s closest friend, and an admirer of love in all its many forms,” Daisuke explained. “Jun-san has declared it his mission to make sure Makoto and Yoshi get back together. I should warn you,” the Shuhan continued with a smirk. “Makoto has been hospitalized three times already due to his ‘help’. I shudder to think what he’d look like if Jun had actually been trying to hurt him.”

Genki’s face twisted as he tried to picture the circumstances leading to Makoto’s hospitalization. The interrogator was no pushover, the sage had seen the scars left by his time in the torture chambers. He’d also seen what was left of Makoto’s ‘guests’ by the time he was through with them. He didn’t even want to imagine the damage the torture master could inflict if pushed.

He was jolted out of his reverie by Daisuke’s next words. “I think you should go over to Makoto’s and bring them up to speed on your visit. Let them know how Yoshi is doing.”

“He should be back soon,” Genki ventured. “Why don’t we let it be a surprise?”

“Go see them, now,” the Shuhan insisted. “You really don’t want me to have you dragged there, now do you?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Shadows,” the Shuhan called, turning his head to address his black ops. “Please escort Genki-sama to Sasaki-san’s, and make sure he goes inside. You’re allowed to use whatever force is necessary.”

Yoshi rolled on his side and studied his lover. Even in sleep it was obvious that his body was failing, the hoarse rasp of his labored breathing filling the silence in the darkened room. *This is all my fault. There has to be something I can do to help him.* The shadow wolf was so lost in contemplation he never noticed the pain filled eyes watching him. “It’s all right, pretty.” The legendary shinobi’s words shocked his lover into action.

“Don’t fuss, you’ll wear yourself out,” Yoshi admonished, even as he moved to help settle the frail figure more comfortably. His heart clenched at how fragile his lover had become. “Do you think you can eat something? I can heat some soup.”

“No, don’t leave me,” Kazuki entreated, holding his arms out to beckon the elite closer. “I want you to hold me.”

“Of course.” Strong arms carefully lifted the spell-caster and settled him in Yoshi’s lap, wrapping around to cradle him close to the younger man’s body. “How’s that,” the shadow wolf asked as he stroked the ailing man’s long, dark hair.

"I'm going to miss you Yoshi. I wish we had more time to spend together."

"Maybe we could try the ki transfer anyway?" the shadow wolf suggested in a voice hoarse with unshed tears. "Katsutoshi, Hideaki and I. It wouldn't matter who the donor was. We could use my ki."

"No, pretty," Kazuki shook his head. "I will not allow that. You of all people do not deserve to have your life cut short." A knock on the door interrupted his labored speech and Yoshi growled at the intrusion.

"What is it?" he demanded, eyes never leaving the man in his arms.

"A message arrived for you," the runner replied nervously. "It's marked urgent, your eyes only."

Yoshi snatched the envelope from the man's hand, watching as he fled before breaking the seal and flicking it open. "It's from Sato-san. He wanted to reassure me of my welcome in light of Genki's unpleasant visit. You and Hideaki are also welcome to return to the shuudan, should you so wish. Do they have the ability to do what you need? I can take you there if it means you don't have to die."

"I doubt anyone there has the skill. It's too late in any event, I wouldn't survive the trip. You need to face the fact that I'll be dead soon, pretty. You can't keep holding on to false hopes for some last minute rescue." The spell-caster reached up and wiped a tear from an alabaster cheek. "Don't cry for me. I never want to make you cry."

"I'm sorry," the elite gasped. "I'm trying, but it's so hard. I'm not ready to let you go yet."

"Then don't. I'm still here with you Yoshi. Just kiss me and help me remember happier times," his lover entreated.

"How could I ever deny you," the shadow wolf muttered as he sealed their lips together in a passionate, oxygen stealing kiss, his lover slumping bonelessly against him as their tongues battled.

"I want you to make me a promise, Yoshi," Kazuki broke away to whisper. "I want you to promise me you'll find someone and be happy."

"You're asking me to forget you?" he responded, the hurt resonating from him almost palpable. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"You should be happy," the spell-caster said, locking eyes with Yoshi's wary mismatched pair. "You've made me happy, helped me make peace with the past. It would be supremely unfair if all you took from our time together was more pain."

"You're the only person who's ever loved me." The shadow wolf dropped his head so his bangs would hide his troubled eyes. "I never thought anyone *could* love me, and I certainly didn't expect to develop such feelings in return. You helped me become human, in a way I haven't been for a very long time. These are the first tears I've cried since my mother died. I was four. That's a very long time to live without feeling."

"All the more reason not to give up now," Kazuki insisted. "Don't lock yourself away again, please."

"I'll try, since you want it so," the shadow wolf agreed. "But I need some time first."

"Not too long, pretty one," the spell-caster mumbled. "The longer you wait the harder it will be." He laid his head on Yoshi's chest and shut his eyes, the last of his energy seeping away as he slipped back into sleep. The elite continued to cradle his slumbering lover, stroking his hair and basking in his presence, unwilling to sleep as long as Kazuki was still breathing.

Katsutoshi was awakened in the wee hours of the night by the sound of the shadow wolf's screams. "Go help him," Hideaki urged. "I'll be fine here." The swordsman pulled on some clothes and raced towards the spell-caster's quarters. He threw the door open, only to stop dead at the sight of Yoshi clutching Kazuki's body as he pleaded with his dead lover.

"Just a little more time, koishii," the elite begged. "I'm not ready to let you go yet."

"Takahashi-san, let me have him." Katsutoshi held out his arms to receive the body.

"No, you can't take him from me. I'm not going to let you."

"Please don't fight me," the swordsman entreated. "He needs to be properly taken care of."

"I'm taking care of him, aren't I, Kazu-sama," the shadow wolf crooned as he stroked the lifeless face. "He doesn't need anyone else."

Unable to come up with a way to separate the distraught nin from his lover's body, Katsutoshi headed back to fetch Hideaki, hoping he would be able to get through to his former comrade.

"Yoshi." The Oonishi's soft, emotionless voice cut through the haze around the shadow wolf, and he turned his tear-streaked face toward the source of the sound. "You need to put the body down now."

"But..." his lower lip quivered as he fought back more tears. "I ... can't."

"Give him to Katsutoshi." Hideaki moved forward and wrapped his arms around the lanky figure, gathering Yoshi close to sob on his chest as his partner lifted Kazuki's body from his arms.

"It's all my fault," Yoshi whimpered through his tears. "I never wanted him to die, you have to believe me."

"I saw how you stayed with him, cared for him. Of course you didn't want him to die. It's not your fault." The Oonishi petted snowy strands in an attempt to ease some tension from the taut frame. "He chose his path when he started using the technique. Eventually it was going to be his downfall. Kazuki knew that, no one is blaming you."

"I'm a jinx," the shadow wolf muttered. "It's my fault. Everyone close to me dies."

"Everyone dies, senpai," Hideaki declared. "Whether we're ready for it or not. He had the luxury of dying in the arms of the one he loved. That's a rarity for a ninja." He pursed his lips in thought, turning blind eyes towards Yoshi's face. "You've been with all of your loved ones when they died, haven't you, senpai? Your father, your mentor, and now Kazuki. Maybe you're the one that's jinxed, watching the ones you love die and leave you behind."

After what seemed like hours, the shadow wolf's sobs slowed, body slumping in exhaustion as the events of the night caught up with him. "Just rest," Hideaki crooned as he helped the taller man stretch out. "You'll feel better after you sleep."

"Stay with me," Yoshi grasped a thin wrist firmly and tugged him toward the bed. "Please don't leave me alone."

"You're not alone, senpai. Rest now, I'll stay with you," the last Oonishi promised as he sat down on the bed. "Everything will work out, you'll see. We'll talk when you wake up."

Several hours later Katsutoshi crept back into Kazuki's rooms, gliding up to the bed and bending to whisper in Hideaki's ear. "It's done. Thank you for stepping in. Takahashi-san wasn't

listening to me.”

“He is mourning, Katsutoshi. His heart is punishing him for his loss. Listening to anything but that right now is impossible for him,” he whispered airily, hand still petting the tangled mop of snowy hair as he kept his tone placid and light. “Tomorrow he must make many hard decisions. Just keep everyone away for a few hours. I’ll let you know when he’s awake.”

“Are you sure you can handle this?” the swordsman asked. “I can stay with him.”

“I don’t mind. It’s nice to be useful again. Yoshi is strong, he’ll be fine once he accepts what has happened.”

Early the next morning Yoshi woke with a start, pulling the dark haired form into his arms and nuzzling a pale neck. “I had the worst dream, koishii. I’m so glad I’m awake now.”

“Good morning, senpai.” Hideaki rolled over to face a startled shadow wolf. “I’m afraid it wasn’t a dream. I’m sorry to do this, but you’re in charge. There are things that need to be taken care of and decisions that have to be made.”

“In charge of what?”

“This shuudan, of course,” came the silky reply. “You’re the new Nakamura no Shuhan.”

“Absolutely not,” Yoshi demurred. “I’m not even a member of this shuudan.”

“You’re the strongest shinobi here. You were the deceased Shuhan’s lover. Who else would they choose?” the Oonishi asked.

“I don’t care,” he insisted. “I won’t do it.”

“Then you need to decide who will, and what their relationship with Kobayashi shuudan will be,” Hideaki continued. “Do you wish revenge on them or not? The course of this shuudan is in your hands now.”

“I want to go home,” Yoshi declared in an almost child-like voice. “I just want to go home.”

“So you’re returning to Kobayashi,” the Oonishi said. “I assume you wish conflict between the two shuudan to end?”

“Yes, of course. But I can’t arrange that. I can’t stay here anymore.”

“Just for a few days, senpai,” Hideaki suggested. “Then we’ll make sure you get home. Would you like me to send word to someone?”

“No ... yes,” the shadow wolf decided at the last moment, voice hardening viciously. “I would like to send some letters. I’ll have my familiar take care of it.” He stood and stretched, moving to the desk and scribbling several notes. He summoned Pi-natsu to carry the messages, staring off into space long after the wolf had disappeared.

“Who are you thinking of?” Hideaki’s voice snapped Yoshi back to the present.

“My ‘Uncle’ Genki. He was too high and mighty to swallow his pride and do what was right. Now it’s too late. I hope it hurts when he realizes it.”

“You’re not usually so vicious, Yoshi. What did he do to you?” the Oonishi asked.

“He didn’t do anything to me, or for me. I only recently found out we were related. Genki is the reason that Kazu left Kobayashi shuudan in the first place. I gave him the chance to clear the air, make amends for the mistakes of his youth. All he did was make things worse. How hard is it to be civil to a dying man, anyway?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tried,” Hideaki answered. “Just don’t make the mistake of throwing away your life chasing revenge. I can tell you from personal experience it isn’t worth it.”

“So, am I to just ignore how I feel?” the shadow wolf pressed. “Because I don’t think I can

do that. He has no right to judge me.”

“Ahhhh,” the Oonishi murmured as understanding sunk in. “Are you concerned about what he might have said when he returned? If you’re worried about retribution you don’t have to go back.”

“No, the Kobayashi no Shuhan has assured me I’m welcome. So are you, should you ever want to return,” Yoshi added.

“I’m welcome in Kobayashi shuudan?” Hideaki said, disbelief clear in his voice.

“Do you remember Sato Daisuke?” the shadow wolf asked. “He worked at the Armory.”

“Of course,” came the puzzled reply. “Why?”

“He is the new Shuhan. He says he’s determined to right Kobayashi-sama’s wrongs,” Yoshi explained. “I’m not sure if I should, but I *want* to trust him.” His expressive face fell when realization hit him once again. “I can’t breathe here. Everything reminds me of Kazuki and I just can’t breathe.”

“It will be alright, senpai,” the Oonishi assured him, although in his heart he didn’t know if he believed the lie he told so easily.

“I have a message for you from the boss.” Yoshi’s wolf demon’s gravelly voice broke through the silence of the Kobayashi no Shuhan’s office, making Daisuke jump in his seat before turning to address the familiar.

“Good morning, Pi-natsu. How is Yoshi doing?”

“Kazuki died last night. The boss is upset right now, but he’ll get over it.”

“It isn’t that easy to forget someone who’s died,” Daisuke chided. “Not if you truly cared for them. I’m sure Takahashi-san is hurting right now.”

“Boss has had lots of people die,” Pi-natsu said with a shrug. “He always gets over it. Now he’ll finally come home. I gotta go deliver the rest of these.”

The Shuhan flicked open the letter and scanned it, jaw dropping in shock as he read.

Kobayashi no Shuhan-sama,

Apparently I am now Shuhan of Nakamura shuudan. I have no intention of retaining this title, yet I would love to cement a treaty between our shuudan while it is in my power to do so. I believe such an alliance would be in the best interests of people on both sides. I hope you agree.

If you send someone with treaty documents I will gladly sign them before I resign my title and return home. Assuming, of course, that I am still welcome. Please send word with Pi-natsu.

Takahashi Yoshi

Daisuke penned a reply, sealing it and setting it aside to give to the demon on his return. Then he sent a runner to fetch his candidate for treaty negotiations.

“Hey, Makoto,” the wolf familiar grumbled from next to the interrogator’s desk. “Message for you.” He dug out an envelope and passed it over, looking expectantly up at the scarred man.

“What?” Makoto growled, glaring at the letter as if it would bite.

“I’m supposed to wait for a reply,” Pi-natsu said. “Got anything to eat around here?”

The interrogator ignored the request and tore open the letter, glancing at it briefly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s it?” the familiar asked. “I come all this way and that’s the best you can do? The boss

is really upset. He could use a more positive response.”

“Do you even know what it says?”

“No,” Pi-natsu retorted. “But I know the boss cares about you. He didn’t want to leave, you know.”

“But he didn’t return when he had the chance, either,” Makoto shot back.

“It’s complicated. I don’t understand it. I’m sure boss can explain it if you ask. Just give him a chance.”

“I said I wasn’t going anywhere. If Yoshi comes back he knows where to find me. It’s the best I can do at the moment.”

“I’ll be sure to leave out your pissy attitude when I pass the message along.” Pi-natsu faded away, leaving the interrogator to slump behind his desk as he tried to pin down his elusive feelings.

Genki was a bit harder to find, and the demon was panting heavily by the time he located him. “Letter for you, shit head,” the wolf growled as he dropped it in the sage’s lap and abruptly disappeared away.

“Rude, little…” Genki turned his attention to the paper in his hand. He drained his saucer, refilled it, and drained it again before unfolding the letter to study its contents.

Genki,

Kazuki passed away this evening. I shall be returning home shortly. Please be gone when I return.

Takahashi Yoshi

“That conceited little brat,” the sage muttered angrily. “Who does he think he is, anyway? He can’t throw me out of this shuudan. I’m not the one who’s been consorting with traitors.” He paid his tab and hurried to the Shuhan’s office to inform him of this latest outrage.

“Daisuke, I need to talk to you.”

“I already told you, Genki,” the Shuhan replied wearily. “I am not going to punish Jun-san, especially since you won’t even tell me what he supposedly did.”

“No, it’s about this,” the sage insisted, shoving Yoshi’s letter into the Shuhan’s hands. He began to pace, grumbling the entire time about ungrateful brats and uppity whelps.

“So, you’re leaving then,” Daisuke said. “I’m sure you’ll be able to come back and visit in a few years when Takahashi-san calms down.”

“Wait just a minute,” the sage roared. “You can’t boot me out. They may have given you the title, but I’m the strongest ninja in this shuudan and you’d better not forget it.”

“That sounds suspiciously like treason, old man.” Souta stepped out of the shadows, locking a hard hand around Genki’s arm. “Do you wish him confined, Shuhan-sama?”

“For the moment, until I can decide what to do with him. Just get him out of here before I do something I’ll regret.” Daisuke watched with dismay as the sage was led away, a familiar voice pulling him from his contemplation. “Ah, Tatsuya, just the man I need to see. I have an important mission for you.”

“Senpai, you need to eat something.” Hideaki’s voice cut through the haze surrounding the elite and he turned his head toward the speaker.

"I'm not hungry." Yoshi rolled over and pressed his face back into the rumpled bedsheets, sensitive nose seeking out traces of his absent lover's scent.

"It's been almost a week. I'm not going to let you starve yourself to death," the Oonishi said. "Either you eat on your own or I'll have to have Katsutoshi feed you."

"I want to go home," the shadow wolf explained. "I can't move on here."

"I understand that. But I can't let you leave until I know you will take care of yourself. Besides," Hideaki continued after a brief pause, "you sent word that you wished to negotiate a treaty. The least you can do is wait until the negotiator gets here."

"Perhaps they're not interested." Yoshi shrugged, not concerned one way or the other. "I'm not going to hang around here indefinitely and wait."

"Give it a few more days. Then make your decision. Peace moves much less swiftly than war, after all."

"Why do you care so much, anyway?" the shadow wolf asked. "You have no intention of returning to the shuudan."

"You and Kazuki-sama were very good to me. You helped me make peace with what happened to me, and what I did as a result," he whispered. "I owe you for that. Besides, you remind me of Katsutoshi. I hope by comforting you that, perhaps, I'm ensuring someone will comfort him when I am no longer here."

"Aaa." Yoshi watched frustration flit across the Oonishi's face at his enigmatic response. "Are you sure you won't come back with me and consult our medics? Perhaps they can do something to stop the progression of your condition."

"No, it's fine," Hideaki insisted. "I'm blind. What's the point of healing a blind ninja?"

"You're more than just your skills as a ninja," Yoshi murmured. "No one would be heartless enough to turn you away because of that."

"Perhaps I do not wish to continue like this indefinitely. I should have a say in the matter, should I not?"

"Like you're giving me a say in what I do?" the elite pointed out. "Leave me alone, Hideaki. I promise to eat something later. Right now I'm tired." The shadow wolf rolled over and presented his back, rejecting any further attempts at conversation.

It was two more weeks before Yoshi hauled himself out of bed and into the shower, gratefully washing his matted hair. He drifted into memories of Kazuki helping him with this same task, staring off into space as his mind wandered, hot water thundering down on his motionless form. When the spray began to run cold he shook himself out of his stupor, toweling off and dressing in basic blacks.

"Senpai, you're up," Hideaki noted with surprise when he arrived for his daily attempt to rouse the elite.

"It's time to get moving," Yoshi admitted. "What do I need to take care of before I leave?"

"Kobayashi Tatsuya is here with the treaty from Kobayashi shuudan. I don't think he likes being around me, but he's been remarkably patient."

"How long has he been here?" the shadow wolf asked.

"About a week," came the airy reply. "He's been training with Katsutoshi. He's getting

restless though. I don't believe he trusts my explanation that you're mourning. He's afraid I've done something to you."

"That's ridiculous, you would never hurt me," Yoshi retorted. "I need to talk some sense into him."

"It isn't important, senpai," Hideaki assured him. "He believes I am a traitor, and he's right, circumstances notwithstanding. There is no reason why he, or any other member of Kobayashi shuudan, should treat me with anything other than contempt."

"There is every reason. You were lashing out against what had been done to you. I admit, your actions were extreme, but I understand why you felt compelled to do as you did. Apparently Sato-san does also, as he has extended an invitation for you to return."

"An invitation it would be unwise of me to accept. Tatsuya seems like a decent man. He is aware of my history and still has problems accepting me. Think how the other shinobi would react."

"Once they know..." the shadow wolf trailed off into uneasy silence. "I wouldn't want them to know about me either. I understand. I will miss your friendship though. You and Katsutoshi have been a great comfort to me."

"Then I have merely returned the favor," the Oonishi said. "I will send Tatsuya-san to see you now."

"Hideaki." Yoshi's voice stopped him halfway to the door. "I would like you to consider taking over as Shuhan. You have the intellect, and the training. I'm sure Sato-san would allow me to act as ambassador. It would give me an excuse to come and visit you."

"That's a very generous offer, senpai. Are you sure it's wise to give someone like me so much power?"

"I'm not worried. I believe you'll uphold the treaty with Kobayashi shuudan. Beyond that it's up to you how to best rule these people," the shadow wolf decided. "I don't know of anyone else who would be capable. I do not wish to stay here any longer. You would be doing me a great service."

"If you insist, senpai. I will be honored to succeed you."

"Yoshi." Tatsuya's voice suddenly rang out, causing both men to turn toward him. "It's good to see you," he continued as he strode forward to clasp forearms with the shadow wolf. "I've been worried about you."

"I needed some time to myself, Kobayashi-san," Yoshi explained. "I am sorry to have made things difficult for you."

"Oh no, it's fine," Tatsuya assured him. "I've been training with Katsutoshi. I haven't had such good workouts in a long time. I'm just glad to see you up and about."

"I was ... unsure of how to move forward. Now, I'm ready to go home. I no longer belong here. Did Shuhan-sama send treaty documents for me?"

"If you will excuse me," Hideaki began. "I'll leave you to your negotiations."

"Wait," the shadow wolf commanded. "This affects you more than me. Tatsuya, Oonishi-san has agreed to succeed me as Shuhan. Ultimately he will have to enforce any agreement we make."

"How did you get to be Shuhan anyway, Yoshi?" Tatsuya asked. "Wasn't it that traitor Nakamura's position?"

"Kazuki-sama was my lover." The shadow wolf stared blankly into space as his mind

returned to happier times.

“Takahashi-senpai is the strongest shinobi in the shuudan, as well as the former Shuhan's confidant,” Hideaki explained. “He was, of course, the council's first choice to succeed Kazuki-sama.”

“You had sex with Kazuki?” Tatsuya's cigarette dropped from his mouth in shock.

“Yes. Does that offend you?”

“No, no,” he assured the shadow wolf, waving his hands in denial. “I was just surprised, that's all. How on earth did you two ever, you know?”

“We had history in common. It was enough to bring us together. Who knows why people find solace in each other,” Yoshi concluded with a shrug.

“My father was a bastard,” Tatsuya gritted out, fists clenched unconsciously at his sides. “I am sorry for the hurt he caused you, Takahashi-san. I take it he had turned his attentions to Nakamura Kazuki also then?”

“He was your father's favorite apprentice,” Yoshi said, dropping his head to fix worried eyes on his feet. “I'd really rather not be the one to discuss this with you, Kobayashi-san.”

“With my brother then,” he remarked as he lit another cigarette. “He's anxiously awaiting your return.”

“You don't have a brother, Kobayashi-san, at least not one that's alive.”

“There have been a number of shocking revelations since Rin was replaced,” Tatsuya assured him. “Not the least of which was the fact that Sato Daisuke is my half-brother.”

“Daisuke?” the shadow wolf said in surprise. “I was wrong then.”

“Wrong about what, senpai?” Hideaki asked.

“I always assumed Daisuke was like us. He was always so pretty and he spent so much time with Kobayashi-sama, playing shogi, drinking tea. I never imagined. Did he know?”

“No, he was as surprised as I was,” Tatsuya replied wryly. “Just another dirty secret for him to keep.”

“Another secret?”

“He's kept this whole thing secret, what Kobayashi-sama and Rin did, what you were forced to do, who else was involved. Well, except for the clan elders, Souta and of course Makoto. There were some people who had to be told, but they've all been sworn to secrecy.” He took a deep drag off his cigarette and blew the smoke out in a long trail. “Daisuke's determined you should be able to live as you choose, without worrying about your reputation or the threat of reprisals.”

“I had hoped they would send Sasaki-san to negotiate with me,” Yoshi admitted. “I need to speak with him.”

“Shuhan-sama had Genki arrested for treason just before I left. I imagine Makoto is busy interrogating him,” Tatsuya explained.

“Aaaa. Shall we get started then?”

Souta stepped out into the anteroom, looking around carefully before stepping back into the office and locking the door. “What are you doing?” the Shuhan asked as he continued to dig through the mountains of paperwork left in Rin's wake.

“I’m protecting you,” the assassin replied.

“Protecting me from what?” Daisuke turned to peer into his lover's eyes.

“Scandal.”

“What scandal?” the Shuhan asked in alarm.

“The scandal it would cause if someone saw this.” Souta dropped to his knees in front of his lover's chair, undoing the startled man's pants and taking his cock into his mouth.

“Sou ... ahhhhhh.” The Shuhan groaned as he was encased in the talented warmth of his lover's mouth. Years of practice had given the assassin great range of movement with his lips and tongue. He demonstrated his skill as he nipped at the ridge before dipping aggressively into the slit, squeezing the base of Daisuke's rapidly swelling cock to prevent his playtime ending too soon.

Souta began to bob his head, sucking and slurping the dripping length until the Shuhan could stand it no more and began to thrust up wildly into his mouth. The assassin swallowed the pulsing cock deep in his throat again and again until, with a nip to the tip, Daisuke came, shooting his seed down his lover's throat as he thrashed and twitched.

“What was that for?” the Shuhan muttered once he could speak.

“You looked stressed,” Souta replied. “Feeling better now?”

“Umhhh, but I’d feel better still if you took me to bed.”

“Your wish is my command.” The grinning assassin swept his lover into his arms and headed for the bedroom at top speed.

It took three days to finish hammering out the treaty and Yoshi was exhausted by the time the last document had been signed. “Now's as good a time as any. Hideaki, are you ready to assume your duties?”

“You want to do this now?” the Oonishi asked. “Can’t it wait until morning?”

“I want to leave tonight,” the shadow wolf insisted. “You’re welcome to wait until morning, Tatsuya, but I find myself anxious to get home.”

“No, that's all right, I’ll go with you. If you don’t mind, of course,” the Kobayashi patriarch decided. “I’d understand it if you’d rather not travel with me.”

“I’m happy to travel with you, Kobayashi-san. You’ve never done anything to harm me. I’m not one to hold the acts of the father against the son. It would be hypocritical of me, to say the least.”

“Daisuke uncovered information about your father also. Let's just say my family owes all the Takahashi an apology,” Tatsuya said with a grimace, shifting uncomfortably as he faced his fellow elite.

“Not all of them,” the shadow wolf grumbled. “My uncle seems to skate through everything untouched.”

“You have an uncle? I thought you were the last Takahashi.”

“So did I. Unfortunately it appears I’m related to Genki, the great asshole of Wolf Mountain.”

“I told you he was arrested just before I left,” Tatsuya cut in. “For treason. You didn’t seem concerned.”

"I'm not concerned. At least, as long as I don't have to see him. I wouldn't piss on the old man if he were on fire." The elite turned to Hideaki and touched his elbow. "Are you ready, kohai?"

"Certainly, senpai, let's get you out of here," the Oonishi replied. "What do I need to do?" Yoshi walked him through the ritual, heaving a sigh of relief when the swearing in was complete and he could hand over the symbols of office.

"Nakamura no Shuhan-sama." The shadow wolf bowed deferentially. "With your permission I would like to leave now."

"Of course, Yoshi. We'll miss you," Hideaki admitted. "I hope you'll come visit us."

"You couldn't keep me away." Yoshi wrapped his arms around the slender figure and pulled him into an embrace. "I wish you were coming with me." He did the same to Katsutoshi, adding, "Call me if his health worsens. I'll come right away."

"Thank you, Takahashi-san," the swordsman rumbled. "I appreciate your concern. Hopefully I will not need to summon you."

The shadow wolf quickly shouldered his pack, following Tatsuya out of the underground stronghold. Once outside, the pair headed off at a rapid pace. Yoshi only stopped when the compound was almost out of sight, casting one last wistful glance back before turning determinedly towards his home and his future.

"We should rest soon," Tatsuya ventured after a few hours traveling.

"If you like," Yoshi demurred. "I think I'll keep going though. I've been dreaming of home for a long time."

"You won't make it without rest," Tatsuya argued as he lit another cigarette.

"I've done nothing but rest the last few weeks. I really don't want to stop now. Don't worry about me, Kobayashi-san, I can take care of myself," the shadow wolf assured him. "I'll see you there. I promise to check in at headquarters when I arrive." With that he was off, racing gracefully through the trees as he rushed toward his destination. As the ground sped by under his feet Yoshi's mind mourned everything he was leaving behind, and filled with rising trepidation about his future.

"Daisuke, I need to talk to you." The torture master hobbled through the doors, balancing on one crutch so he could shut them and ensure their privacy.

"What is it, Makoto?" the Shuhan asked without looking up. "I'm kind of busy."

"Yoshi's going to get back any day now."

"I am aware of that. Tatsuya went to engage in treaty negotiations with him before his return," the Shuhan murmured, eyes on the document in front of him.

"What do I say to him? I have no idea how to win him back. He's been the lover of an incredibly powerful, charismatic, man. How can I ever get him to look at me again?"

Daisuke looked up sharply, eyes softening at the sight of the nervous man in front of him. "Sit down and relax, Makoto. After all, you can say the same thing."

"But it's not the same," the interrogator insisted. "Not the same at all."

"What did Yoshi say to you?" the Shuhan prodded.

"That Kazuki had died and he would be returning very soon. He said that he thought of me

often and hoped I would allow him to explain.”

“Well, that seems like a good place to start,” Daisuke decided. “After all, you shouldn’t form an opinion without all the facts.”

“But I don’t know if I can face him. I don’t know how I feel about any of this. I don’t want to upset him, but I’m confused. I don’t want to mess this up.”

“Woo him,” Souta's disembodied voice piped in from behind the desk.

“If you’re going to eavesdrop you might as well show yourself,” the Shuhan insisted.

“Sorry, Dai, it wasn’t official business.”

“It's okay,” Daisuke said. “Just come out and talk with us.”

Souta dropped the concealment illusion, striding forward to perch on the corner of his lover's desk. “Yoshi's never had a normal relationship, never dated, never been pursued, never been *wooded*. You need to show him how special you think he is, and how serious you are. You are serious, aren’t you?”

“What do you think?” the interrogator growled. “Would I be submitting myself to this...” he twirled his hands in the air as he struggled for the right word, “humiliating interrogation if I wasn’t serious?”

“Maybe I’m confused,” the assassin admitted. “It just sounded like you were having second thoughts.”

“About me, never about Yoshi.”

“Well then, let's see what we can do to ensure you get what you want,” came Souta's confidant reply.

“Why don’t you two take it inside?” Daisuke interjected, indicating the apartment. “I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. Go make dinner and I’ll join you once the clan heads leave.”

“I don’t need dinner.” Makoto backpedaled toward the door as he shook his head in negation. The last thing he wanted right now was another threesome with the Shuhan and his lover. As enjoyable as it had been, the torture master was already a bundle of nerves when it came to dealing with Yoshi, he didn't need to make the situation even more awkward. “Thanks for the offer, though, I appreciate it.”

“Just food.” Souta looped his arm through the interrogator's, dragging him toward the Shuhan's private quarters. Once inside he headed for the kitchen, pulling ingredients out of the cupboards and fridge and beginning to chop. “Hand me that cabbage, will you?”

“So, how exactly do you woo someone?” Makoto handed the item in question to the assassin, cautiously staying well away from the flashing knife he was gesturing with.

“I think you should try asking him out. Take him someplace special. The important thing is that he sees you want to spend time with him, not just jump into bed.”

“Is that what you did?” the interrogator wanted to know.

“Not exactly, but Dai is a completely different case. We’ve been together since before we were really old enough to know what love or commitment was. Not that I’m complaining,” Souta was quick to add. “But I didn’t have to convince him, not the way you need to with Yoshi.”

“What if he doesn’t want to be convinced?” Makoto asked. “Then what do I do? I’m afraid I’ll never measure up now.”

“To Kazuki? You can’t replace him, whatever he was to Yoshi. The best you can do is be important in your own way. Be supportive, let him know how much you care, then see where you are. I know it's not what you want to hear,” Souta continued honestly, “but it's the only way.”

When he's ready to move on he'll come to you, assuming he knows he's welcome."

"So, a date then," the interrogator muttered.

"I know it's not hot monkey sex, but dating can be fun," the assassin assured him. "It'll be even hotter when you finally get around to it."

"It's not that," Makoto hedged. "It's just ... I don't know anything about dating."

"Well then, we've got a lot of work to do, don't we?" Souta declared, setting out to explain the intricacies of dating while dinner simmered.

Hi, I'm home. No, that's assuming a lot. I'm back ... sounds flat. I've missed you, well that's not entirely true and he knows it. The shadow wolf's mind whirled as he tried desperately to come up with something to say, hand frozen halfway to the bell.

"Can I help you?" Makoto asked as he opened the door. "Oh, Yo ... Takahashi-san, you're back."

"My things are here," Yoshi mumbled as he examined his feet.

"I had them moved to your house," the interrogator explained as he fumbled for the key. "Here you go."

"I don't have a house. Where are my things?"

"Shuhan-sama reacquired your family home for you. All your belongings are there."

"Oh. I'll be going then." Yoshi forced his feet to turn away from the one place he'd expected to be welcome and trudged towards headquarters. Anything to delay his return to his childhood home, a place he hadn't set foot in since his father's suicide.

By the time he reached the tower he was debating the wisdom of returning to Nakamura shuudan. *At least I'm wanted there. Here I'm just an embarrassment.* He slowly dragged his feet toward the Shuhan's office, knocking on the door and waiting for admittance.

"Takahashi-san, you're back." Daisuke rose from behind his desk and came forward to greet the elite.

"Thank you for allowing me to return, Shuhan-sama." Yoshi bowed his head and studied his feet. "I am reporting for interrogation."

"Why?"

"I have consorted with traitors. Obviously I need to be debriefed to assure my loyalty," the shadow wolf elaborated. "What were you planning on doing with me?"

"I thought we could sit down and talk about what happened. I don't think you'll lie to me." Daisuke studied him carefully. "You, of all people, have more than proved your loyalty. So," he went on as he seated himself in a comfortable chair, motioning for his guest to do the same. "Would you like something to eat or drink? You must be tired. Did Tatsuya go straight home?"

"I'm afraid I left Tatsuya along the way. He wanted to stop for the night. I was in a hurry to get back," Yoshi explained. "I hope you aren't upset. The treaty is signed, he has it with him. Oonishi Hideaki is the new Nakamura no Shuhan. I hoped you might let me act as ambassador between our shuudan. I promised to visit."

"It's nice to hear you were in such a hurry to return to us." The Shuhan mentally cheered at the thought of what it might mean for Makoto. "What will you do now?"

"Go home, I guess," the shadow wolf decided. "Apparently I have one."

“Did you not want it?” Daisuke leaned forward to study the mismatched eyes behind the mask. “I assumed you were living there before you ran low on funds.”

“I haven’t set foot inside that house since my father’s suicide,” Yoshi explained. “I’ve lived in the bachelor quarters since Oonishi-sama’s death. I never got around to moving back. I guess I can’t put it off any longer.”

“If it makes you uncomfortable,” the Shuhan began, only to be cut off.

“It’s fine, you went to so much trouble on my behalf. There’s absolutely no reason I can’t stay there,” the shadow wolf was quick to assure him. “Did you wish me confined at home?”

“I don’t want to confine you at all. You misunderstand me. You are free to do as you wish. Are you planning on returning to active duty? I have some projects I’d love to have your input on.”

“Don’t you want to know about what happened?”

“We know you were drugged and kidnapped from Makoto’s home. Souta and Koga Aya tracked you to Nakamura shuudan. That’s when they captured Sou. Thank you so much for helping him escape,” Daisuke continued. “I don’t think I could survive without him.”

“I couldn’t stand by and do nothing. Unfortunately my plan backfired. Rin killed Kazu’s apprentice. She wanted to force Kazu-sama to use my body for his ki donor. She pushed him too hard though and he killed her. I wasn’t sorry when she died, but the expertise necessary to perform the technique died with her,” he trailed off, staring off into space for a long time as he relived the last few days with his dying lover. “So in reality, I killed Kazuki. I didn’t mean to, but that doesn’t change the result. I’m a very bad person.”

“No, no, you aren’t a bad person.” The Shuhan wished there was a way to convince Yoshi of the truth of his words. “You couldn’t have foreseen the chain of events. You stayed with him, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did. How could I not? He needed me, as I needed him,” the shadow wolf said. “It was nice not being alone.”

“You don’t have to be alone Takahashi-san,” Daisuke insisted. “Just give yourself some time.”

“That would be unwise, Shuhan-sama. I bring bad luck to those close to me. It’s best if I remain alone.”

“I don’t believe that Yoshi. We’re ninja. Terrible things happen to ninja, and they have nothing to do with you. Your shishou died in an ambush. How was that your fault?”

“It should have been me. We were together. I was faced off against a more experienced opponent. I must have gotten knocked out. By the time I came to shishou was dying in my arms.” He turned his tear-stained face toward the dumb-struck Shuhan. “It was my fault.”

“Oh, Yoshi,” Daisuke breathed. “How can we ever make up for what’s happened to you?” He pulled the elite close, rubbing comforting circles on his back until his ragged breathing eased before pulling back to examine him critically. “You’re nothing but skin and bones. How long has it been since you’ve eaten?”

“The last few weeks have been difficult for me,” the shadow wolf murmured. “I haven’t done much but sleep. I guess I lost more weight than I realized.”

“Makoto will have a cow when he sees you looking like this. He’s been worried sick about you.”

“You don’t need to lie to me,” Yoshi whispered. “I saw Sasaki-san before I came here. He

couldn't wait to get rid of me. Did he even answer my letters, or were you just trying to lure me back here?"

"I wouldn't do something like that." Daisuke was affronted by the underlying accusation. "Did you ask how he got injured?"

"Makoto was injured? Who hurt him?"

"Jun-san. Makoto agreed to a competition in order to learn more about you. The pair of them had been drinking. Let's just say he'll think more than twice about wrestling a hand to hand combat specialist again, and he probably won't be drinking for a while." The Shuhan snickered as he recalled forcing the details out of his master interrogator.

"Is that why he doesn't want anything to do with me?" Yoshi's eyes radiated his confusion. "I don't understand."

"Just give him some time," Daisuke urged. "Everything will work out. Now, shall we talk reparation?"

"I'm sorry, Shuhan-sama," the shadow wolf stammered in surprise. "I'm afraid I don't have the funds for that. Perhaps if I contacted Hideaki he could arrange for me to borrow some money from Nakamura shuudan to repay you."

"What are you talking about?" the Shuhan asked. "You don't owe us anything. Kobayashi shuudan, on the other hand, owes you a debt I don't know how to repay. Obviously I've done what I could to restore your finances. I repurchased your house, and your bank account has been credited for assignments and expenses for the last three years, at top pay, but that doesn't begin to restore what you have lost."

"Why would you do that for a whore like me?" Yoshi asked in a very small voice. "I'm not worth all this."

"Of course you are," Daisuke protested. "In all fairness, you're the one who should be in this office, not me. Do you wish my job, Takahashi-san?"

"Oh no, no, Shuhan-sama. I am not fit for the office. You are a good man, it will be my pleasure to serve you. I will return to duty, if that is your wish," the shadow wolf replied formally.

"Wonderful. Report here to me in three days, you're on leave until then. We're glad you're back, Yoshi." Daisuke gave the lanky shinobi a brief hug before watching him amble aimlessly out of the office. "Shadow," he summoned. "Follow Takahashi-san and make sure he gets home undisturbed. Keep watch on him, don't let him know you're there and don't interfere with anything he may choose to do. Well, stop him if he tries to harm himself, otherwise no interference."

"What the fuck did Makoto do?" Souta's voice rang out as soon as the black op departed.

"I have no clue," his lover replied in frustration. "Obviously it wasn't well received."

"Should I go talk to him?" Souta asked. "He's going to blow it."

"In the morning," Daisuke decided. "Let's let them sleep on it."

Yoshi spent his first night back huddled uncomfortably in his childhood bed, arms around his knees, trying to convince himself he'd made the right choice in returning. He'd blindly assumed he'd move back in with Makoto. Obviously he should have thought things through

more before leaving the safety of Kazuki's lair. *I can just go back. If this doesn't get better I'll just go back.* But he knew that wasn't possible. *You couldn't breathe there. There's nothing to go back to.*

By the time the first glimmer of dawn arrived the shadow wolf was showered and dressed, anxious to get out of the too quiet house and into the world. He threw open the door and ambled towards the market, addressing his hidden shadow. "You might as well come out. I know you're there."

"My apologies, senpai." the masked figure replied with a bow. "I should have known you'd sense me."

"Maa, it's alright. I expected to be under guard," Yoshi replied. "What are my limitations?"

"Excuse me?" the black op asked.

"What's off limits?" Yoshi ventured. "Am I confined to the village in general, or are there certain areas I need to stay out of?"

"You're not under guard, sir. I'm supposed to make sure no one bothers you."

"Suicide watch?" The shadow wolf smirked, suspicion confirmed by the sudden tightening of the black op's muscles.

"Uh, no," the masked figure stammered. "Why would you be on suicide watch?"

"Why indeed?" Yoshi whispered to himself before setting out once more, veering into the first open stand to try and quell the growls emanating from his empty belly. Two bowls of plain soba later he sat back and contemplated his surroundings. *This is home*, he decided, smiling to himself at the sight.

Yoshi looked up and stopped dead, dropping the piece of fruit in his hand to roll unnoticed across the floor as he stared, riveted, at the scene playing out on the other side of the street.

Makoto hobbled through the market on his crutches, intent on grabbing something to eat and heading over to headquarters to try and find Souta. He had a sinking feeling he'd done something wrong with Yoshi the night before and was anxious to correct the situation. He was so intent on his goal that he never even saw the blur bearing down on him.

"Makoto, my good friend," Jun exclaimed. "You are exactly the person I was looking for. I need your advice on an interrogation I am conducting." He threw an arm around the torture master's waist and pulled him into an overly-enthusiastic hug.

"Put me down," the interrogator growled, angry at being manhandled, especially in public.

"But, lover of my friend Yoshi," Jun protested. "It is my duty to help you until your beloved returns."

"One, I don't need help and two, he got back last night. Now let go of me."

"Why are you not with your beloved?" Jun asked. "Weren't you excited to rekindle the flames of love together?"

"He only stopped by to pick up his things," Makoto explained. "He left as soon as I gave him the key."

"You should have forced him to stay and work things out," the combat specialist declared. "You will never win his love if you don't."

"Please put me down," the interrogator said, wary of the attention they were drawing. "We can go somewhere and talk, just not like this."

"An excellent idea, my friend." Jun shifted the startled interrogator to a more comfortable position in his arms and set out at full speed for some unknown destination.

That's why Makoto wasn't interested, Yoshi concluded. He's involved with Jun. He turned the picture of the two of them over in his mind for a while, deciding that his self-proclaimed friend, while overly loud and sometimes scarily happy, was a strong, loyal and good man ... and a far better companion for the interrogator than the shadow wolf could ever hope to be. *It's for the best. He'd only get hurt being involved with me.* The elite dragged himself through the rest of the shopping before heading towards his too empty home, wondering what on earth he could do to fill up the next three days.

Daisuke looked up from his paperwork when the doors flew open and Makoto and Jun tumbled in. "Would you let go," the interrogator snarled as he yanked himself loose and tottered to his feet.

"Well, good morning to you both," the Shuhan said. "Celebrating Yoshi's safe return, are you?"

"I was *trying*," the interrogator began, heavily stressing the try, "to find Souta. I think I messed up last night and I need his help."

"I concur with your assessment." Daisuke slapped his hands down on the desk. "Especially since Takahashi-san accused me of faking your correspondence with him. What the hell did you say?"

"I said his things had been moved to his house and I gave him the key," Makoto admitted. "He caught me off guard. I didn't know what to say. He said he was just looking for his stuff."

"He was looking for an invitation to stay with you, stupid," the Shuhan growled. "Now he thinks you hate him and everyone will be better off if he doesn't get too close. I have him on suicide watch."

"Yoshi would never kill himself," the interrogator declared. "He doesn't want to be like his father. He's shinobi. He won't die unless you order him to."

"I wouldn't be so sure," the Shuhan muttered. "Souta, come give Makoto a hand. Jun, what news do you have for me?"

"I have spent the last three days with Genki. He has yet to admit to the error of his ways, although he seems to be protesting less and less."

"Protesting what?" Makoto wondered.

"My efforts to help him appreciate the wonders of manly love," Jun replied with a frown. "Perhaps you should assign a female interrogator, Shuhan-sama."

"No, no," the Shuhan insisted through his chuckles. "I think you're the perfect man for the assignment."

Just then Souta poked his head through the apartment door. "Get your ass in here, Sasaki," he commanded. "We need to figure out how to fix this mess you've made."

"I didn't do anything," the interrogator insisted.

"Exactly," the assassin agreed. "Now get your ass in here so we can take care of it."

Makoto awkwardly made his way into the apartment, dropping onto the couch and burying his face in his hands. "What's wrong with me? Why can't I speak a straight sentence when Yoshi's around?"

"Write him," Souta suggested. "That way you can be sure to say the right thing. You can tell him how glad you are that he's back in the village and ask him out on a date."

"In a letter?"

"Do you trust me?" the assassin replied.

“Fine. What do I say?” Makoto grumbled.

“Have you decided where to take him on your date?” Souta asked.

“I guess out to eat. That way I have something to do with my hands.”

“And something to stick in your mouth when you say something stupid,” the assassin muttered.

Several hours later Yoshi was startled out of his contemplation by urgent banging. As soon as he cracked open the door Makoto shoved an envelope into his hands and disappeared. The elite wandered back inside, eying it distrustfully and checking it for booby-traps before opening it.

My Dearest Yoshi,

I am so sorry if I upset you last night. I was surprised to see you and didn't know how to react. I'd love it if you would agree to have dinner with me tomorrow night, at, say, eight o'clock? I'll pick you up at your house. Please say yes.

Makoto

Yoshi stared at the words for a long time, trying to uncover the meaning hidden behind the simple phrases. He decided he would have to take a chance and say yes if he were ever going to figure it out, giving in and summoning Pi-natsu. “Go tell Makoto I said yes,” the elite commanded as soon as the stocky wolf appeared.

“Yes to what?” the familiar asked.

“Dinner,” the shadow wolf muttered.

“Like a date?” Pi-natsu pried.

“No,” Yoshi bristled. “Like dinner, between friends. He's seeing Jun now.”

The look of disbelief the demon sent his way was unmistakable. “If you say so boss,” he rumbled before disappearing. The familiar returned almost immediately, “Wear nice clothes,” he rasped before leaving the shadow wolf alone to contemplate what the next day would bring.

Yoshi studied the kimono in his hand with dismay. It was the only piece of dress clothing he owned, and he had the sneaking suspicion it was overly formal. Of course, he had no idea what would be appropriate. Nice clothes left a lot of room for interpretation. *I think I need some help*, he decided, unsure of who would know about such things. Jun was obviously out, he couldn't face his so-called friend just yet. It would take time to get used to his relationship with Makoto. Then he could learn to hide his bitterness over how things turned out. *It's all for the best*, he assured himself yet again.

The shadow wolf briefly pondered asking his shadow. He realized he'd never seen the man in anything other than basic blacks. That led him to start wracking his brain for anyone he knew who wore civilian clothes. He finally concluded that Tatsuya was the most likely candidate. *Even if he can't help me*, Yoshi mused as he walked, *he's not likely to laugh at me*.

“Takahashi-san,” Mayu murmured when she opened the door. “How lovely to see you. Won't you come in?”

“I was looking for Tatsuya,” Yoshi ventured. “Is he home?”

“He's still sleeping,” the kunoichi replied. “Let me get him for you.” She darted from the room before he could protest, slipping into the bedroom to shake her husband. “Tatsuya, wake

up. Takahashi Yoshi is here looking for you.”

“What does he want?” her husband mumbled.

“He wants to talk to you. Get your lazy ass out of bed so I can find out what it's about.”

“Go ask him yourself. I only just got to sleep thanks to his running off on me. I'll be damned if I let him drag me out of bed.” His rant was derailed when Mayu grabbed his ear and yanked hard.

“Kobayashi Tatsuya, get up right now,” she demanded. “Yoshi never talks to anyone about anything. If he wants to see you it has to be important.”

“His definition of important and mine aren't the same.” Nevertheless, he threw back the covers and lit a cigarette. “If it were really important I would have been summoned.”

“There are things of importance not having to do with with the shuudan.”

“Not this early in the morning there aren't.” Tatsuya continued to complain even as he dragged himself out of bed and pulled on the first pair of pants he found. “Morning, Yoshi.”

“I'm so sorry Mayu woke you up. I tried to stop her.”

“It's alright,” Tatsuya replied with a shrug. “There's no stopping her once she gets going. What can I do for you?”

“I know this is going to sound ridiculous, but I need your advice. I need some dress clothes,” Yoshi explained.

“What kind of clothes?” the kunoichi jumped in. “Where are you going?”

“Just out to dinner,” the shadow wolf hedged.

“Like a date?” Mayu squealed. “Who's the lucky girl?”

“Sasaki Makoto,” Yoshi replied. He watched through guarded eyes as her excited daydreams were dashed.

“Oh,” she murmured. “It's not a date then.”

“No,” the shadow wolf agreed. “He's seeing Jun now.”

“Did you want it to be a date?” the kunoichi asked.

“What difference does it make?” Yoshi shrugged. “I blew it. I spent too long with Kazuki. Makoto moved on, and now I have to as well.”

“Okay, I need the whole story.” Mayu grasped a thin wrist and tugged the elite towards the couch, pushing him into its grasp. “Tatsuya, bring us some tea.”

“Yes dear,” he murmured as he took the opportunity to step outside for a cigarette.

“So, how long were you two going out?” Mayu prodded.

“We weren't exactly dating. I was staying with him after he rescued me, until Kazuki's crazy apprentice kidnapped me, that is,” the shadow wolf explained. “Makoto was upset by my relationship with Kazuki, particularly when I stayed with him.”

“What relationship was that?” the kunoichi pried.

“We were lovers,” Yoshi said. “We were important to each other. He needed me. No one ever had before. No one hurt me or forced me to do anything. It was nice.” He smiled wistfully, unaware of the horrified look on the kunoichi's face.

“Someone hurt you?” she managed.

“Didn't Tatsuya tell you?”

“No, he didn't. Are you alright Takahashi-san?” Mayu's voice was full of compassion as she wrapped her hands around the elite's.

The shadow wolf shrugged expressively. “Maa, it was nothing ... and call me Yoshi, please.”

Takahashi-san sounds like my father.”

“I’d be happy to help you find some clothes, Yoshi-san,” she offered. “It would be my pleasure.”

Makoto burst into the Kobayashi no Shuhan's office, skidding to a stop in front of the desk. “Where's Souta? I need his help right now.”

“What did he say?” the assassin asked as he stepped out of his concealed position.

“He said yes. Now what?” the interrogator asked.

“You really are hopeless,” Daisuke declared with a laugh. “Take the day off and give him a hand, Sou. He’ll muck it up if you don’t.”

“Okay,” the assassin agreed. “Where are you taking him?”

“I have no idea. I don’t really go out to eat. Oh Kami, I don’t know what he likes. What if he's allergic to something?” Makoto began to panic at the thought of what should be a simple dinner.

“We’ll check his records, they’d list any allergies. I’ll book you a room at a decent restaurant so you can have some privacy.” Souta drifted into fantasizing about the white-maned shinobi. “He is gorgeous, isn’t he?”

“In my opinion he's very good-looking,” Makoto admitted.

“He has all the luck, good-looking, talented, genius,” Souta said.

“Yes, I’m sure it's so lucky to be abused for years,” Daisuke broke in.

“Oh Kami, I’m so sorry, I didn’t think,” the assassin back-pedaled. “I didn’t mean...”

“It's alright, Souta,” Makoto assured him. “I know you just weren’t thinking. You’ve been a huge help.”

“I want my foursome,” the assassin explained.

“I need a twosome first,” the interrogator grumbled. “Can we please get back to my date? What should I wear?”

After Souta recovered from the fit of giggles triggered by Makoto's question, he took a deep breath, willing himself to relax. “What were you thinking of?”

“All I really have is basic blacks, but I said nice clothes, like an idiot.” The interrogator smacked himself on the forehead. “I have no idea what's appropriate.”

“Would you like me to go shopping with you?”

“I’m not going to fit into your clothes,” Makoto pointed out. “So I don’t see that I have any choice.

“You make it sound so horrible,” Souta complained. “I’ve got good taste, don’t I, Dai?” he asked.

“Yes dear,” the Shuhan answered with a snort of laughter. “I’m sure you’ll turn Makoto into a sex god.”

“But I don’t want to be a sex god,” the interrogator protested. “You said I was supposed to wait and woo him.”

The Shuhan and his lover leaned against each other until their gales of laughter had passed. Souta ventured, “Like it or not, you are a sex god, Sasaki. Now let's go get you outfitted to snag your man.”

"I'm liking the sound of this less and less," came the mournful reply. The enthusiastic Souta easily swept Makoto's protests aside as he grabbed the interrogator's arm and towed him off toward the market.

Seven forty-five found Yoshi studying himself in the mirror. After an entire day of shopping he had somehow ended up dressed in the kimono he'd had in the first place. "You look very handsome, Yoshi-san," Mayu assured him.

"Good, now let's get going and give the poor man some privacy." Tatsuya took his wife's elbow and steered her towards the door. "I'm so sorry," he mouthed over his shoulder.

"Thank you for your help, Mayu-san," Yoshi said with a bow. "I never would have gotten it done on my own."

"Just remember what I said." The kunoichi continued coaching as her husband hustled her toward the door. "You need to seduce him."

I have no idea how to go about doing that, the shadow wolf despaired as the couple left him alone with his scattered thoughts. *I don't want to screw up. This is my chance to tempt him away from Jun. But is that really fair to Makoto? He deserves so much better than me.* He was so lost in his internal debate he almost missed the bell. "Coming." He bolted for the door, stopping to smooth his kimono and compose his features.

"Sasaki-san, you're right on time," Yoshi murmured, looking up into startled ebony orbs. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no," the interrogator assured him as he tried to cover his nervousness. *He is so far out of your league,* Makoto's mental voice piped up. *Just look at him.* So look he did. The torture master couldn't seem to stop staring at the elegant figure, back ramrod straight and alabaster skin flashing against the black silk of the kimono. "Please, call me Makoto. There's no need to be so formal with each other, is there?"

"So, Makoto," Yoshi purred. "Shall we go?" He used the opportunity to study the interrogator, raking his eyes over the large form, enjoying the play of muscles under the fitted pants and shirt. "Where are we headed?"

"It's a new restaurant. They have a special method for grilling the meat and vegetables that's supposed to be delicious," the interrogator explained. "I haven't actually eaten there myself. I hope it's alright."

Ten minutes later they were being seated at a cozy table in a small private room. Before they had a chance to speak a flurry of staff poured into the tiny space, warming sake and setting heated stones in front of each man. Large platters of meats and vegetables were placed in between them before the waiters turned as one, bowed, and disappeared.

"You cook on the stones." Makoto was thankful he asked about it when he made the reservation, it was better than searching for something to talk about. "I thought this way you could relax and enjoy the food."

"Thank you. I was wondering how to make a good impression while still managing to stay vigilant. I'm not worried about you," the elite hastened to explain. "I'm just not comfortable around strangers."

"You don't need to make a good impression."

Of course it doesn't matter what impression I make. I've already blown it. “It was particularly thoughtful of you then,” the shadow wolf whispered.

“What's wrong?” the interrogator probed. “Did you not want to be here?”

“Oh no, it's not that,” Yoshi demurred. “I just wish things had turned out differently, that's all.”

“You miss him, don't you?” Makoto asked.

“Who, Kazuki?”

“Who else?” the interrogator replied with a shrug. “You said he was important to you.”

“He understood me,” the shadow wolf explained. “He suffered as I did. We had nothing to fear from each other.” He turned his piercing gaze on the impassive torture master, studying him carefully. “I killed him. I didn't intend to, but my actions led to his death. How could I leave him to die alone knowing it was my responsibility?” Sharply distrustful eyes watched the interrogator like a hawk, searching for signs of rejection. “It's really for the best that you're seeing someone else. I'm bad luck. Jun's a good man. I think I understand what happened.”

“I don't,” Makoto whined. “What does Jun have to do with anything?”

“I saw you two yesterday, at the market. He's a bit loud, but I think I can see the attraction.”

“I am not attracted to Jun,” the interrogator insisted. “Believe me, that is the farthest thing from my mind.”

“But he was hugging you, and then he carried you off in his arms,” the shadow wolf protested. “It was all very romantic.”

“Trust me, the words romance and Jun never even entered my mind at the same time,” Makoto insisted. “He wanted help with an interrogation. He has insisted on 'helping' me until your return.”

“Helping you?”

“After I got out of the hospital I had trouble getting around on my crutches,” the interrogator explained. “Jun felt he had to help me since it was at least partially his fault I was injured.”

“You're not dating?” the shadow wolf asked.

“Oh, Kami, no. That will never happen.”

“Why did you turn me away then?” the elite whispered.

“I didn't turn you away. I just gave you your key,” Makoto protested. “I thought you would still be upset over Kazuki. Souta said I should give you some time and space to recover.”

“You're taking relationship advice from Fukazawa Souta?” Yoshi arched a single brow in surprise.

“I need to confess. I saw you with Kazuki when Rin escaped. You were having sex, and from what I could see, you were enjoying it. I assumed you weren't coming back and I ... well, I was pissed off. I wanted to hurt you, so I slept with Daisuke, and then with he and Souta together.”

“What?” The shadow wolf was confused. “You slept with Daisuke?”

“I'm sorry,” the interrogator swore. “I know it was petty and childish, not to mention pointless. I couldn't forget you, no matter how hard I tried. Please don't reject me just because of that. I know it's the oldest excuse in the book, but it truly didn't mean anything.”

“You don't owe me any apologies, I missed you too. I thought of you every day. I always intended on coming home, but I knew you'd be better off without me.”

“That's ridiculous,” Makoto insisted. “How could losing you be better? I've missed you terribly.” He lifted a long fingered hand to his lips and kissed it. “So, how is it being back in your own home again?”

“It's a little weird, to be honest. I haven't lived there since I was a child. I had a hard time sleeping,” Yoshi admitted.

“It's a beautiful house.” The torture master slid some meat onto his stone, covering his awkwardness with the small talk by fussing with his cooking food. He poked at it with his chopsticks, drawing a smile from the solemn shadow wolf.

He's nervous. Yoshi relaxed enough to draw his first deep breath. “It's too big for one person.” He selected a few shrimp and some eggplant, studying the interrogator as he placed them on the stone to cook. “You look good in those clothes.”

“They're a little clingy for my taste,” Makoto concluded after a moment's thought. “Souta assured me I looked hot. I wanted to impress you. You look amazing in that kimono.”

“It's too formal. I knew it would be wrong,” Yoshi fretted. “I just wanted to make sure I looked my best so I could lure you away from Jun.”

“Silly man. No one with eyes could resist you, no matter what you wear.” The interrogator cupped a creamy cheek in his hand, rubbing the satiny skin with his thumb as he locked eyes with the elite. “You're beautiful.”

“So,” Yoshi ventured, eager to change the subject. “How have things been around here since I've been gone?”

“It's been good, busy,” Makoto decided. “Things are running a lot more smoothly. Daisuke's almost caught up on the backlog. The clan heads have been helping him out.”

“That's good,” the shadow wolf said. “You slept with the Shuhan?”

“You were sleeping with the head of Nakamura shuudan. Kazuki was powerful, beautiful and charismatic,” came the bitter retort. “How could I possibly compete with that? Daisuke and Souta were kind enough to offer me some comfort.”

Yoshi had no response, merely studying his companion as they continued to eat. He leaned back from the table and remarked, “That was very good. I'll have to remember this place.”

“I'm glad you enjoyed it. Does this mean you'll go out with me again?”

“Are you sure you want to?” came the wry retort.

“How could I not?” the interrogator admitted. “No one could possibly measure up to you. How does tomorrow night sound?”

All too soon the pair were standing outside Yoshi's door. “So, would you like to come in?” The shadow wolf peered uncertainly into unreadable ebony eyes.

“There is nothing I would like more,” Makoto said. “However, I'm going to pass.”

“Aaaa. Well, then...” Yoshi trailed off in surprise as a large arm moved up to block his escape.

“That doesn't mean I'm done with you,” the interrogator whispered. The shadow wolf realized he was trapped when the other arm moved up to pin him in place, and a delighted shiver raced up his spine when the large body pressed intimately up against him. “I want to learn everything about you,” Makoto rumbled. The hairs on the back of Yoshi's neck stood up when

hot breath washed over his sensitive ear. "All the good and the bad. Who's been kind, and who hurt you. I don't care how long it takes. When I know you inside and out maybe I'll know how to make you never want to leave me."

The shadow wolf's heart sped up when Makoto leaned in to press their lips together, eyes sliding shut as he memorized the feeling of soft silky flesh against his scarred, slightly chapped pair. The interrogator kissed his lanky lover to the beat of their hearts. After a lifetime, or a few moments, he wasn't sure which, those delectable lips opened and he was granted a taste.

Makoto's tongue swept into the shadow wolf's mouth, coaxing, caressing and finally claiming it for himself as he dominated the smaller man. "I never wanted to leave you," Yoshi whispered when the kiss broke. "You make me feel safe."

"I swear I will keep you safe." The interrogator trailed his lips over high cheekbones and ghosted over the infamous red eye. "You are precious to me."

Yoshi pulled back, eyes sharpening as he searched the impassive face for answers to unspoken questions. "I'd appreciate it if you'd at least come in for a cup of tea. It's surprisingly lonely being back in this house."

"Of course, I'm always happy to spend time with you." Makoto followed him inside, peering into the rooms they passed on their way to the kitchen. Once there, Yoshi exploded in a flurry of activity, locating the tea and a pot before setting the water on to boil, only to hunt for two clean cups.

"Enough." The interrogator pulled the smaller man into his arms and kissed him thoroughly. "You don't need to fuss over me."

"I know you didn't want to stay," the elite demurred.

"I didn't say that," Makoto corrected him. "I said I was going to pass. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to restrain myself."

"Why should you?" the shadow wolf asked. "I'm a bit confused."

"I don't want to have sex with you." Makoto paused to marshal his thoughts, only to be jerked out of his introspection by Yoshi's bitter response.

"Because I'm a filthy whore," he stated. "No, not even that. I'm just a slut who'll sleep with anyone. Why would you want to sully yourself?"

"No, that's not what I meant." The interrogator grabbed Yoshi's arms, forcing him to stay. "What I was trying to say is that I don't want to *just* have sex with you. I told you I spent time with Souta and Daisuke while you were gone."

"Yes," the shadow wolf muttered. "That wasn't slutty at all."

"Would you shut up and listen to me." Makoto pushed the elite's arms above his head, pinning him in place so he could continue. "I want what they have. Not just sex. Fun, companionship, friendship, family. So I don't want to just fall into bed with you. Not that I don't want to, it's taken all my will power not to just rip that kimono off you. I want to do this right, and that means I need to get to know you. I don't want to have sex with you Yoshi, I want to make love with you."

Makoto studied the dumbstruck shadow wolf, unsure of what his reaction would be to the interrogator's unplanned, and uncoordinated, confession. "You love me?" Worried eyes searched the interrogator's face for answers.

"Very much," Makoto assured him. "You're all I can think about."

"You don't hate me?" Yoshi pressed. "This isn't some kind of trick? Punishment for what I

did to the shuudan?"

"You didn't do anything to harm us. You risked yourself to save Souta. Besides," the torture master continued, "anyone who wants to hurt you has to go through me. I swore I'd keep you safe."

"You can let me go now," the shadow wolf muttered, red flaring in his cheeks. "The tea is ready."

"But I don't want to let you go." Makoto pressed himself flush against the elite. "Can you feel how much I want you, Yoshi?" The interrogator bent his head and kissed him passionately, heart soaring when the shadow wolf melted in his arms.

"Stay with me? We don't have to have sex, but, it's so lonely in this house, I can't sleep. Please, I don't want to be alone."

"Of course I'll stay." Makoto smoothed ruffled strands out of the shadow wolf's eyes. "Anything you want." He scooped up the smaller man, shocked at how fragile he seemed, striding back the way they'd come until he reached a large comfortable room with a couch draped in sheets and a long unused fireplace. "This looks like a good spot." The interrogator whipped the sheet off the couch and deposited his cargo before setting the logs ablaze. Then he stretched out with Yoshi sprawled on his lap, cradled in strong arms. "So, why don't you tell me about growing up in this house?"

"I don't remember much. My mother died when I was four, I have her eyes ... eye." He fixed the interrogator with a shuttered gaze, pausing for several moments. "After that it was just me and my father. We were both away on assignment most of the time. One day when I was nine I got home early. I knew something was wrong as soon as I opened the door, it was so quiet. Then I smelled the blood, there was so much blood. I tried to revive him, but it was too late. That was the last time I was in this house. I went to live with Oonishi-sama and his family. When he died I moved to the bachelor quarters. Now I find myself back here again."

"You should renovate. You know, change the rooms around, get new furniture, paint," the interrogator suggested. "I'd be happy to help."

"Why would you want to do that?" Yoshi asked.

"This is your home. I want you to be comfortable in it," Makoto explained. "I think we could be happy here."

"You'd move in with me?"

"If you'll have me. I'll live wherever you wish."

"Here is good," Yoshi said with a small, genuine, smile. "Here is very good." He rolled over and nuzzled into the interrogator's broad chest, relaxing into the affectionate embrace. "Your turn, tell me about your childhood."

"My father died on a mission when I was eleven," Makoto explained. "My mother was pregnant with my brother. She died when I was fifteen. When I was seventeen I was captured by Iwagashi shuudan. It was supposed to be a straight-forward in and out, just get an idea of their numbers. Everything that could go wrong, did. Both men with me were killed and I was captured. Since my return I rarely accept assignments outside our borders. My brother was killed at fifteen, since then I've been alone. It's a pretty typical story for a shinobi."

"That was ten years ago," the shadow wolf realized.

"You seem surprised," the interrogator said. "Unfortunately you're not the only lonely man around."

“Well now we don’t have to be lonely anymore. We have each other.” Yoshi tilted his head up to fix the tall man with a wary eye.

“Yes, we do,” Makoto agreed. “Now relax, go to sleep. I’ll be right here.” He rubbed comforting circles on the shadow wolf’s broad back, smiling slightly when the tension left the lanky frame and Yoshi slipped into slumber. The interrogator frowned as his thoughts turned to how light the elite was. *We’ll get you back in shape, 'shi-san.* His musings extended from the man to the evening they had just shared, and he drifted off to the rhythm of his lover's breathing.

Yoshi woke in the wee hours of the morning, snuggling further into the warm body beside him as he watched the last of the logs crumble into embers.

He thought back over the events of the past months, taking note of all he had gained and mourning what had been lost. The shadow wolf said a last good-bye to Kazuki and all they had shared before shutting the door on his past. Makoto was offering him a chance to start over, and he planned on making the most of it.

It wasn't what he'd hoped for, perhaps, but it was a start. For now it was enough to lie in the warmth and listen to the comforting sound of Makoto's heart.

THE END

GLOSSARY/CHARACTER KEY

Shinobi is set in contemporary Japan, and utilizes certain phrases and conventions that do not have an exact correlate in English. One key example is the honorifics used after names which indicate subtle relations between the characters. In order to help readers unfamiliar with Japanese, the following glossary and character outline should cover any unfamiliar terms as well as reveal the deeper meaning behind the characters' names.

Just what is a ninja, anyway? The word itself derives from the Japanese Shinobi-no-mono, which is written with two kanji characters that can also be pronounced as nin-sha, if the Chinese pronunciation is used instead. The first character, nin, suggests concealment, while the second, sha, means person. Thus we get ninja, a person who hides his presence. In Japanese, the word is applied to a person who does covert, military operations. Sometimes shortened to simply 'nin' when referring to an individual.

Please note that this is a work of fiction, and does not refer to any actual person, living or dead. All the characters and locations contained within are fictional, and exist only in the author's mind.

All names are written as they would appear in Japan, surname first, given name second. Honorifics are applied to either the given or family name.

- san — standard honorific
- sama — used with someone of a much higher status than yourself
- chan — diminutive used for girls
- kun — diminutive used for boys

The less formal the honorific, the closer the relationship. No honorific is used only with your closest companions. The use of no honorific or a derogatory one outside of this is considered extremely insulting.

A few other terms that need explanation:

- no — of i.e: Kai no Shuhan is the leader of the Kai.
- kotatsu — a low table with a skirted edge and a heater built in, in winter it is particularly nice to lounge around.
- furo — soaking tub, in Japan you always shower before soaking to keep the water clean
- engawa — porch
- senpai — senior, elder, superior

kohai — junior, younger, inferior
yare, yare — yeah, yeah
koishii — beloved
koi — love (term of affection)
yosh — yes
shishou — master (denotes master/student relationship)
kunoichi — female ninja
kunai — knife with a triangular blade, originally derived from a trowel
senbon — throwing needle, often tipped with poison
miso soup — a mixture of broth and miso. Miso is a paste made of fermented soybeans, it is characterized as red or white based on the variety of fungus used in the fermentation.
okonomiyaki — a Japanese savory pancake containing a variety of ingredients.
sukiyaki — a dish in the hot pot style consisting of thinly sliced beef, slowly cooked at the table with vegetables and other ingredients, in a mixture of soy sauce, sugar, and mirin (a low alcohol content rice wine)
onigiri — white rice in a triangular shape wrapped in nori (seaweed). They are often stuffed with umeboshi (salty pickled plums), salted salmon, or other salty ingredients

Takahashi Yoshi (better, best, but also is read as quiet, tranquil) Ninja identity - ookami no kumori (shadow wolf), derogatorily called arubino (albino) and metsuki no kagai (evil eye). The Takahashi clan is from Chiba, although Yoshi's branch of the family lived in Tokyo.

Sasaki Makoto (sincere, honest) The Sasaki clan is also from Chiba and has long been allied with the Takahashi clan.

Sato Daisuke (great help) former armory weapons instructor, now Shuhan of Kobayashi shuudan.

Fukazawa Souta (smoothly well built) elite assassin

Watanabe Jun (swift steed) specialist in hand to hand combat

Kobayashi Tatsuya (to be accomplished) current head of the Kobayashi clan and son of the former Shuhan

Kobayashi Mayu (true reason) maiden name Fujiwara — Tatsuya's wife and mother of their twins — Kiyoshi and Ko

Nakamura Kazuki (one shining) — shinobi who defected from Kobayashi shuudan to start his own rival group of clans

Kenta (good health) — Kazuki's apprentice

Hayashi Hoshu (conservative) — head of the influential Hayashi clan, currently the most powerful in Kobayashi shuudan

Koga Aya (colorful) — matriarch of the Koga clan, known for their trained tracking dogs

Kikuchi Naoki (honest + tree) — head of the Kikuchi clan of poison experts

Kikuchi Naoto (honest person) — Naoki's son and heir

Kai no Yuu (superior/gentle) - Shuhan of Kai shuudan, he replaced his father. The Kai clan is from Hokkaido

Kai Takumi (craftsman) - Yuu's older brother

Abe Shouhei (soaring calm) - personal guard to Kobayashi shuudan's Shuhan

Narita Daichi (great land) - head of the Narita clan of shape shifters

Kobayashi-sama — Tatsuya's father, Shuhan of Kobayashi shuudan before Rin

Oonishi Hideaki (wisdom, cleverness) — last surviving member of the Oonishi clan, powerful weavers of illusion. His uncle was Yoshi's teacher.

Katsutoshi (to win cleverly) — companion of Oonishi Hideaki, he is a swordsman originally from Mochizuki shuudan

Takahashi Genki (source of reverence) — he is the sage of Wolf Mountain and a Shinto priest. Usually just referred to by his given name Genki as he has disassociated himself with the clan.

Masa (righteous) — ninja

Isamu (rock) — ninja

Akako (red) — ninja

Yoshido Sanosuke — Yoshi's psychiatrist

Rin (cold) — kunoichi who rose to lead Kobayashi shuudan.

Takahashi Ren (correct) — Yoshi's father. Famous for his demon wolves, he committed suicide when Yoshi was a child.

Junko — Rin's assistant

Endo Akihiko (bright) — head of a small clan specializing in tactical assessment and planning

Shuhan applies to the leaders of all the shuudan. The major shuudan include Kobayashi, Iwagashi, Mochizuki, Kai and Nakamura.

Yoshi's wolf pack:

Oushi — ox

Pi-natsu — peanut

Onchou — grace

Konki — energy

Kesshin — determination

Shinzui — spirit

Hishou — flight

Chuugi — devotion

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SHINOBI

Book Two:

Struggle for Balance

By

Sessha Batto

The shinobi clans fulfill a shadowy role in Japanese society. There are always acts too heinous for hardened Yakuza and beyond the expertise of hired killers. When you need those special skills the ninja clans are the only place to turn.

The reasons why the talented families originally banded together to form the shuudan have never been common knowledge, and over the succeeding seven centuries new alliances have formed and dissolved between them. These shifts of power left lasting scars on the hidden enclaves, and their leaders bartered with each other for the men and materials they needed to rebuild.

For the last twenty years the leaders of Kobayashi shuudan have added an extra incentive to the mix, an elite shinobi bound as a sex slave. The last member of the powerful Takahashi clan—brilliant, beautiful, and destined to a life of abuse under the guise of duty, Yoshi's sense of honor compelled him to fulfill his assigned duties, even as his heart ached to rebel.

Recently, however, the status quo has begun to shift. The new Kobayashi no Shuhan, leader in the shadows of the powerful clans, has discontinued the practice, freeing Yoshi to forge his own path.

THE FOURTH GATE: WINDS OF CHANGE

Takahashi Yoshi shut his eyes and concentrated, rearranging his view of the world as he contemplated the changes the last few months had brought to his life. On the surface, of course, things seemed much as they always had been. Perhaps that's why he was having such a hard time reconciling all that had happened.

A crack and a hiss made him turn toward the source of the sound, the corner of his mouth quirking as he realized it was merely logs settling in the fire. He curled more tightly into the warmth of the large body slumbering behind him. *I never would have guessed the intimidating head of covert operations was a cuddler.* His smile broadened as he lingered on the memories of the brief and tumultuous relationship he found himself in.

When Makoto had uncovered the truth behind his duties, Yoshi had expected condemnation. After all, he was the shadow wolf of the Takahashi clan, arguably the strongest shinobi in the shuudan. *And a whore,* the voice in his head was quick to point out. After years of hiding the truth, all his secrets were now stripped bare in front of the one person he wanted to impress. *Of course, he would have figured it out, I can't hide anything from him.* The master interrogator was too skilled at his craft to deceive for long. *Still, it would have been nice.*

The lanky shinobi cautiously shifted, not wanting to wake his slumbering lover. *At least, I think we're lovers, Makoto said he wasn't going to leave me,* Yoshi reassured himself before returning to his contemplation. If he were to be honest with himself, at least, it was something he'd been avoiding from the moment Makoto had pulled him, half dead, from the clutches of the Yakuza who'd been his last client.

I wish he hadn't seen me like that. Somehow, Makoto was able to look beyond his sordid past. When he'd been kidnapped the interrogator had worked tirelessly to get him back. The shadow wolf suppressed the shudder racing through him at the memory of his treatment at Kenta's hands.

Nothing's ever simple though. Now came the nearly insurmountable task, to get past the relationship he'd formed with his rescuer. The past he shared with Kazuki had kept them together until the older man's death. Now that he was back home he could only hope that Makoto would be as forgiving of his willful actions as he was of those out of the shadow wolf's control.

Tatsuya smiled as he crossed the enclave on his way to the Shuhan's office. It was a pleasant change to see people taking their time to socialize as they went about their business. The knowledge that they were no longer under the threat of imminent attack had worked a kind of magic on the inhabitants, freeing them up for more normal pursuits.

By the time he reached the administration building he was whistling under his breath, and he took the stairs two at a time.

“Brother,” Tatsuya greeted the Kobayashi no Shuhan, leader in the shadows of Kobayashi shuudan.

“You don't have to call me that,” Daisuke protested.

“Okay, half-brother,” the clan head conceded. “He would have been proud to have one of his sons following in his footsteps, you know.”

“Pardon me for not getting excited,” the current Shuhan muttered. “He didn't acknowledge me while he was alive. Why should I care if he's proud of me in the afterlife?”

“You're right,” Tatsuya agreed. “I wasn't thinking. I'm here to report on the treaty negotiations.”

“Please tell me there weren't any surprises? Takahashi-san led me to believe that he was agreeable to the terms.”

“Everything is as we expected. I never would have thought Kobayashi and Nakamura shuudan would be allies. After all, Kazuki founded his alliance for the sole purpose of wiping us out.”

“I believe we have Yoshi to thank for that. Apparently he and Nakamura-san became very close. That's one thing our so-called father did for us, at least.” Daisuke sighed heavily, feeling, yet again, the weight of the web of secrecy the shuudan's existence depended on. “It is unfortunate that Kobayashi-sama's 'proclivities' nearly led to our destruction. We are truly lucky that Yoshi is able to move past the abuse he suffered at his hands.”

“I still find it hard to reconcile the man I knew as father and the pedophile those papers describe,” Tatsuya insisted. He waved his hand dismissively, as if wishing the contents of the Shuhan's office to vanish. “If I hadn't had confirmation in his own writing I don't know if I would have believed it.”

“How did Yoshi seem to you? I expected you back days ago.”

“He didn't come out of his room for a week. Hideaki said he was mourning. When he did ... he seemed the same as ever.” Tatsuya shrugged before crushing out his cigarette and lighting another. “I keep expecting him to suddenly start acting differently. Now that we know what's been going on, I mean.”

“I imagine our shadow wolf's fondest wish is for everyone to forget they ever heard about his history. I've been cross-checking the records. Our dear father not only abused Takahashi-san, he bartered his body for treaty concessions. Even worse, he lent him out as a reward to our allies. Rin really was just following in his footsteps.”

“There's nothing you can do about it now, Daisuke. Yoshi's back home where he belongs.” Tatsuya tried, and failed, to hide the smirk threatening to break out on his face. “I spent the afternoon shopping with Takahashi and my wife. Apparently he had a date with Sasaki-san this evening. Judging from how nervous he seemed I think he's happy to be back.”

“Souta spent the afternoon coaching Makoto. Hopefully their dinner was a little less demoralizing than their last encounter.” The Shuhan frowned at the thought of losing the shadow wolf's skills. Unfortunately there was nothing he could do to smooth out the strained relationship between the two men. As frustrating as he found it, there were times where one needed to be patient and just let things run their course.

“Well, if my wife has anything to say about it the evening will be a huge success. You'd

think it was our relationship she was trying to salvage.”

“Between your wife and my boyfriend they don't have a chance,” Daisuke chuckled. “Get out of here, I'm sure Mayu is waiting. We'll have dinner in a couple of days.”

As soon as the door clicked shut behind Tatsuya, the Hokage's lover separated himself from the shadows, shrugging off his cloaking illusion and flopping down in a comfortable chair. “I wonder how the big date went?”

“I'm sure you'll get a play by play in the morning, Sou,” Daisuke assured him.

“But I want to know now,” the assassin whined.

“I know you do. But if you interrupt them Makoto will kill you, and I don't want that,” his lover chided.

“Oh, they're not having sex,” Souta declared.

“And how do you know that?”

“I told Makoto not to.” The assassin shrugged. “I said it would be best to go slow.”

“And you honestly believe he's going to pass up a chance to sleep with the man he's been pining over on your say so?” The Shuhan arched a brow in disbelief.

“Yup,” came the smug reply. “He trusts my judgment.”

“Why?” Daisuke wondered.

“I snagged you, didn't I?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sessha turned to writing full time after a twenty year stint in video production editing, scripting and creating motion graphics. Her first novel *Strength of Will* is currently being edited for re-release. Her short story *Wintersong* is included in *Dancing in the Dark: An Anthology of Erotica*. Her Celtic fairy tale *Amadan na Briona* is part of eightcuts gallery's *Once Upon a Time in a Gallery* exhibit. Her short story *The Poetry Game* is included in *New Sun Rising: Stories for Japan*, an anthology for tsunami relief. Originally from Belfast, she lives in the States with her husband, son, a very old cat and too many swords.