

around him. “Both my parents like you very much, Seiji. Tonight was a nightmare on a lot of levels. I’m surprised anyone could make any sense in that mess. What on earth were you doing there?”

“Koji invited us,” Seiji said, leaning against his lover. “He said he wanted to cheer me up.”

“And did it?” Takashi asked.

“A little, but...no, not really. Too much noise, too much confusion,” Seiji said softly. “But it did take my mind off...off what you were doing....Until I saw you.”

“And when I saw you, it focused my mind on what I was doing,” Takashi thought, but said, “Yeah, it was a shock. I just wonder why Jupiter Li picked the Arcadia to throw that kind of party.”

“I think Koji picked it,” Seiji said, thinking back, piecing it together. “He said it was time to kick some life into the place. Or something like that.”

“So he picks the one night I’ll be there doing something really stupid,” Takashi said slowly. “Did Yoshi know where the, the thing was being held?”

“The miai?” Seiji asked with heavy irony and Takashi could only nod. “No, he said he didn’t know and I believe him. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt us. Did you tell Ryuu?”

“I did, but Ryuu was as shocked as I was when I told him you were there,” Takashi said thoughtfully. “I guess I owe Yoshi an apology. That is, if he didn’t know and didn’t set us up.”

“Ta-ka-shi, we’re talking about Yoshi and Ryuu,” Seiji said firmly. “They’re our friends. Didn’t Ryuu come when you asked him for help?”

“He did, and I should have listened to him,” Takashi said.

“What? When?”

“We had lunch earlier in the week,” Takashi said. “He told me not to do— not to go to the thing, just say no, and I didn’t. I thought I could handle it all, keep all the balls in the air, and it all came crashing down around me.”

“Oh, Takashi.”

“When I saw you in that crowd, I knew I could lose you,” Takashi said, fighting to keep his voice level. “Not because I don’t love you or you don’t love me, but that you’d be swept away by events out of our control. We’ve been lucky so far, Seiji, we haven’t had much opposition.”

“Until now,” Seiji said resolutely. “But I know better now, and I’m going to fight Daitaro with every last breath in my body this time.”

“Well, I’m probably fired, so that’s not something you have to

worry about,” Takashi said, and seeing Seiji’s shocked face, went on. “I came out last night. My parents knew, but I told the Yamadas and Daitaro and his wife that I’m gay and I’m in love with you and I’m not leaving you. Ever. And it was easy, Seiji, at least easier than I thought it was going to be. The timing could have been better, but—”

Seiji’s lips on his intercepted whatever else Takashi was going to say that night.

Upstairs in the best suite at the Hotel Arcadia, a pair of hands released Koji Kawazu’s throat and dropped his lifeless naked body onto the bed.

“How’s Yoshi holding up?” Renge asked over lunch a few weeks after the events at the Hotel Arcadia.

“He’s still pretty upset about Koji,” Shimada said, sipping a mineral water. He was cutting back on his drinking due to the stress of recent events. He neglected to add that Yoshi was sleeping ten to twelve hours a day and crying without realizing it. The doctor they’d consulted had diagnosed the problem as grief and shock, prescribed time and rest to cure it, and suggested they come back if Yoshi wasn’t better in a few weeks. “They were more friends than rivals, after all. And between the police and the media, it’s been a hellish mess.”

“Are you two cleared?” Renge asked.

“I think so, we have each other as an alibi and our building security people saw us go in and not come out until the next day,” Shimada said, recalling with distaste how relieved he felt that the building security was keeping those kind of tabs on him and Yoshi. “It’s a nice building, that seemed to matter a lot to the police.”

Takashi and Seiji had gone through the same unpleasantness with the police, but with less stress since neither of them were a supermodel or muckraking reporter. Although Takashi and Seiji had made up and had an even stronger bond after the unfortunate events with the Yamada family, they were still under more stress than usual. Daitaro had indeed fired Takashi from Shimada Miyagi, but Kenzu Miyaguchi had recruited him within hours of the firing for Mishima Muramaki. It was a small step down in status and money for Takashi, but a large step up in being out from under Daitaro’s thumb. But Shimada wasn’t worried; he knew Takashi would work his way back to the top in no time. Especially since most of his SM clients, including Mr. Yamada of YKT Motors, followed him over to MM.

Renge sighed and shook his head. “Seemed kind of inevitable Koji getting murdered like that.”

“Murder is never inevitable, Renge,” Shimada said, trying to keep

the ice out of his voice. “Murder is a nasty, horrible thing that should never happen to anyone.” He’d been furious with the line most of the papers had taken that Koji somehow had his murder coming, that his rise from yakuza sex toy to respected actor was something he didn’t deserve and needed to be punished for. Shimada might have agreed that Koji needed to be reined in a little, something a better agent and a respectable, steady lover would have taken care of, but his death was a terrible thing that hurt everyone around it. Including Daitaro, who had had to admit that he was sleeping with Koji whenever he got the chance. In the course of the police investigation it had come out that Daitaro had told Koji where and when Takashi’s miai was being held, but that he had no idea Koji intended to arrange that riotous party at the Impala Bar. Neither Daitaro, nor Jupiter Li, who was back in China and reluctant to answer police questions in Japan, nor Norboru Suzuki, who was also sleeping with Koji whenever he could, had been completely cleared. Jupiter Li had no reputation to damage, but Daitaro’s and Suzuki’s professional and personal lives were savaged due to the publicity.

“You’re right, you’re right,” Renge said sadly. “I’m not used to this kind of thing happening anywhere near me.”

“I’ve done the crime beat, Renge; no one gets used to it.”

“I mean, I heard that crazy scene at the Impala was all a gay mad whirl,” Renge said with a shrug. “The tabloids and webloids had a field day with it, made it gaudy fun. And then they found his body...you know no one’s claimed it yet...”

Shimada recoiled mentally at this new piece of information and put aside whether he’d tell Yoshi about it. “Hey, Renge, what’s up, pal? You didn’t call me here to talk about Koji, and I’m losing my appetite.”

“Well, you’re really going to lose your appetite when I tell you the production company that had Koji starring in ‘The Occupation Boy’ have switched their sights to Yoshi,” Renge said. “And, without a huge, expensive, media circus lawsuit you’ll lose, I can’t get Yoshi out of it. I’ve checked with Media Mondial’s legal department about it and they said they won’t even try to go up against this American film company.”

Shimada looked up at the hovering waiter. “I’ll have that martini now. Make it a double.”

After an understandable initial resistance from Yoshi, Renge, without Shimada’s assistance or opposition, finally convinced him to go quietly. Renge and Shimada were understanding when Yoshi compared taking that role to wearing the dead Koji’s clothes or living in his

house. But Renge finally put forward the argument that Yoshi could think of it as a memorial to Koji. The capper was when Renge said he'd insist the film be dedicated to Koji's memory.

Shimada had merely assured Yoshi he'd stand by him whatever he wanted to do. He'd patiently explained what damages and legal fees could add up to and what the tabloids would make of it. But he promised his lover he'd be there for him whatever decision he made. He hadn't been able to read the script or even a synopsis since there wasn't one, and he was trying to get a copy of the novel in English as it hadn't been translated into Japanese yet. All Shimada, Yoshi and Renge knew at that point was that "The Occupation Boy" novel was about a love affair between an American officer and a Japanese boy in occupied Tokyo. It sounded like an unappealing project, but the veiled threats already being made by the Japanese production company on behalf of their American partners were even more unappealing.

"Okay, I'll just do it and get it over with," Yoshi said in the car on the way to a meeting over cocktails with the production company. "It will be like, like going to the dentist."

"That's the spirit, Yoshi," Renge said. He was driving so he didn't look around at him in the back seat. "And I promise to keep you out of movies from now on."

"I don't like it that they're shooting in Vietnam, Renge," Shimada said, next to Renge. "I've never heard of this place they're going to."

"It's cheaper, Ryuu, at least they say so," Renge said. "There's studio facilities and, well, ruins. Not many urban ruins in Japan at this point."

"They could blue screen it," Shimada said.

"I tried that argument with the Japanese producer," Renge said. "They're going for authenticity. That's—"

"And shooting in Vietnam a Japanese and American movie about the American occupation of Japan is authentic?" Shimada asked, irony and awe dueling for top spot in his voice.

"That's what they tell me, Ryuu," Renge said neutrally. "It is why they say they're using a Japanese director and as much Japanese talent as they can."

"And that's why they didn't get a Chinese boy actor, eh?" Shimada asked with a little grunt of laughter. "That's what they did for that stupid geisha movie, all those girls were Chinese, and America didn't care."

"I don't think most of America could really tell the difference," Renge said.

"I thought you liked Michelle Yeoh," Yoshi piped up in the back seat.

Shimada smiled over his shoulder at him. "Honey, I LOVE Michelle Yeoh, but she's Chinese and it was supposed to be about geishas. But my Michelle was great!"

"I'm more of a Gong Li fan myself," Renge ventured.

"And Gong Li was great, too. Mmmmm, Gong Li!" Shimada nearly growled. "I really hate that other girl, the little crouching short skinny girl, what's her name?"

"Ziyi Zhang," Renge said. "Not my type either."

"Yeah, I hate her," Shimada said.

"You two are weird," Yoshi said. "Ziyi Zhang kicks ass!"

"She's short," Shimada said.

"She rocks!" Yoshi said.

"Eh, maybe," Shimada drawled, glad to have Yoshi taking an interest in something other than sleeping, crying and not wanting to do the upcoming film. Maybe later he'd get some Jet Li, Steven Chow and Jackie Chan DVDs and have a martial arts film festival...in their bedroom.

"By the way, I think Michelle Yeoh was born in Malaysia," Renge said, interrupting Shimada's mental list making.

"That still doesn't make her or the other two actresses Japanese," Shimada said, hopping back on the dreaded subject. "Much less geishas during the Occupation."

"We're here," Renge said, pulling into the valet parking.

"And why the hell is this party being held at the Hotel Arcadia?" Shimada asked, getting out of the car and opening the back door for Yoshi, who nodded vaguely at his question. "Hasn't this place suffered enough?"

"That's the thinking, Ryuu," Renge said, tucking the valet ticket into his breast pocket. "The American producer figured the Arcadia could use a little positive business after..." He glanced at Yoshi, who looked away. "Could use the business. Let's go."

The Arcadia lobby and Impala Bar were their usual muted selves again. Two men wearing smart business suits and a younger man in a tasteful kimono were hardly noticed wending their way to one of the smaller banquet rooms.

"What the fuck, Renge? Isn't that Hiroshi Matsui over there?" Shimada asked, not staring at an elderly man in a kimono listening politely to a group of Americans. "Isn't he short listed for a Nobel Prize in literature? What's he doing here?"

"They brought him in to fix up this mess of a screenplay," Renge said, nodding to their host and the director of the film, Yuu Tanaka. "It appears the original screenplay got the American and Japanese-