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"Dysfunctional"

An Alternative Weiss Kreuz Doujinshi Novel

© 2001 by Jean D. {First chapter published on the internet August 20th, 2000}

This Fan-Fiction is M/M and rated NC-18 for violence and sexual content.

Information on the anime series:

http://www.ex.org/5.3/30-anime_weisskreuz.html

http://www.netrunner.at/wk/WeissKreuz_Anime.html

If you don't know the animated series Weiss Kreuz, also known as Knight Hunters, or if you do....*this* story is about what happens when the precognitive body gaurd of a rotten politician, sees the future going down the toilet if his real bosses get their way. He sets out to change the sequence of events that lead up to the event that everything hinges on. Except that by changing that scenario, he then finds he has to deal with the alternative consequences of his actions. The end of the world, jealous lovers, teenagers, the mafia, more paranormal crap, and the fact that while having paranormal powers is a plus, sometimes you get reminded you are still very, very human.

The original story and characters of the Japanese made animation, Weiss Kreuz were created and owned by Takahito Koyasu and Project Weiss. Characters from Kizuna were taken out to lunch and spoken to discreetly about 'favors'. Kizuna is a japanese manga created and owned by Kazume Kodaka. This is a doujinshi novel.

Doujinshi are accepted form of re-use of characters in Japan, as they do not threaten the main companies profits, and major changes have been made to the characters personalities, sexual preferences, attributes, and situations in such a way as to preclude infringing on copy writes.

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For updates on the site and any comments you'd like to make or questions you have, the updates for the Dysfunctional and Dimensional Interstice Publishing **website** will be announced on:

Dimensional Interstice ML

Chapter One

Dysfunctional

"Naoe Nagi," She came up to him in the hall of the private high school, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright, hugging her books for her next class. She spilled it out in one breath. "I'm having a party Saturday, it's my birthday, will you come?"
He was in biology with her. What the hell was her name? "Um, I can't. I....have to work for my family's business."
She looked disappointed. "Can't you get away for something special?"
He wondered why he suddenly felt so gypped. "No. They count on me. It's hard work. Anyway, happy birthday." He said, and left her to get to class.

Nagi sighed heavily in the back seat with Farfarello. They were at it again and the hostility was making Farf fret.
"Damn it, Brad!" Schuldig said, "I read minds, remember! I *know* you want me!"

"You read too much into it." Crawford informed him. "You make me *think* about what would happen if I gave into your incessant teasing! Everybody *thinks*, Schuldig, it can't be helped. That doesn't mean I'm going to do anything about the crazy thoughts you cause me just because I *think* them!"
"I hate you!" Schuldig said angrily. "You make sense even when you're ranting!"
"We're on an assignment here!" Crawford reminded him. "Can't you focus on anything but your crotch!"
Schuldig crossed his arms, sulking, angry.
To top it off, it was pouring. Nagi scowled. Why did they have to go out in this rain? Why did this jerk have to die tonight! Why was he in Schwarz!

Would it never end? He was trying to finish a paper for Lit, and then Schu came down from having a shower, wearing only his pajama bottoms, combing out his damp hair, heading for the kitchen, to raid the fridge, no doubt, and then, it had started.
Crawford was at the desk, on the computer.
And Schu'd caught a stray thought of Brad's. ('...it's that hair...makes him look like a girl...well, a stringy, tough girl....')
"Stringy and tough?" Schuldig had protested. "I'm thin and hard, thank you! You make me sound like an old chicken!"
Crawford sighed angrily. "Stay out of my mind!" He snapped.
Schuldig pouted, working out a last tangle.
"Haven't you got someplace to go?" Crawford demanded.
"No." Schu had said.
After a few more minutes, Crawford had focused on him again. "Why the hell not?

You’re always taking off."
"You always drive me off!" Schuldig protested. "Go away, Schuldig, leave me alone, Schuldig, get lost, Schuldig, haven’t you got some one to fuck, Schuldig, stay out of my mind, Schuldig!!"
Crawford had half turned to look at him, angry. "Well, don’t you!" he said. "Seems like you’re always finding someone to screw with!"
"Why not! You won’t have me! It’s fun fucking over Weiss! That Yohji, he’s a real sweet piece of ass! He’s totally in love with me now. You should hear him, ‘aye, Schu-Schu, more, harder, yesss!...’ " He imitated, rubbing the American’s nose in it. "Weiss wouldn’t have a chance against us now! All I’d have to do is blow him a kiss and he’d kill all his team mates for me!"
Crawford had had enough, taking off his glasses and setting them down. The next thing Schuldig knew Brad was on him, punching the hell out of him.
Nagi had grabbed his note book and ran upstairs to his room shutting the door.

Yet another night he should have been in bed. Nagi sighed, watching the rain come down as the car slid along the dark streets of Tokyo. They’d had to leave Farfarello at home, the constant rain had been making him more manic lately. And maybe the constant fighting as well....
Crawford pulled the car into an alleyway, shutting off the lights before parking. It was an MB, it moved very quietly, an asset to their line of work.
"We’re here." He stated and took out his gun, checking it. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and let's get this over with."
Schuldig checked his gun. "I’m surprised you even give a damn." He said coldly.
"I don’t." Crawford stated. "I want you focused on the job."
Schuldig didn’t dignify this with an answer. He hurt like hell from the beating and yet....at least he had that from Brad. That and his presence, and the blissful mental quiet that surrounded the American as long as he stayed close to him, their bizarre talents buffering each other.
They found their way into the building secretively. A hotel, with a good show of security. Their target was in one of the really ritzy suites. Schuldig took out the guards by mentally overloading them, which knocked them out.
They went in and wiped the guy, and every body with him out, neat and clean. Then they went back out into the damn rain.
"Was that focused enough for you?" Schuldig asked.
Brad frowned. "Don’t be a pest."
Schuldig stopped short in the down pour. Would it ever stop, or was this the second flood? "Fine! I won’t!" He stated, then turned and walked away.
"Schuldig!" Brad yelled at him.
Schuldig kept walking, his long legs moving him swiftly.
"Damn you! Be that way, then!" Brad said bitterly and got into the car, slamming the door and putting too much on the gas pedal, making it roar, shoot forward and stall out when he missed the gear. He swore and started it again.

Nagi made sure his seatbelts were on.

Nagi sat eating slowly, still not quite awake. He had school today and he'd been busy last night with his own excursions. Schuldig came down, woken by the scent of bacon and eggs, and in passing, ruffled his hair and bent to brush a kiss at his cheek. "It'll sort itself out," He murmured to Nagi's thoughts.
"Sah, Schu, mind your own business." Nagi said, making a face. Still, he thought at him. (Will it? How?)
(It will, trust me, you got it easy.) He got out the orange juice and poured himself a glass.
Nagi went back to his own thoughts.
Schuldig finished the orange juice and got out the stuff to make his own breakfast.
"So, did you crawl off to your Weiss boy last night?" Brad said coolly.
Nagi was startled, then realized, Crawford was talking to Schuldig. He got up to put his dishes in the washing machine and to get his butt out of there before someone tore him a new one off center. He put an arm around Crawford's shoulder and gave him a kiss on the temple where he knew it would be least suggestive of anything but affection for his sort of adoptive father. "Off to the grind."
Crawford hugged him in one arm. "Be good, Nagi." He said softly. "I don't need you tied up in detention."
"Is that a premonition?"
"With you, always." Crawford said dryly, smacking him on the butt.
Great! Another day of feeling as if he were a target. Was it any wonder he was a paranoid?

At school, Nagi found Omi. "Hi." he said.
Omi smiled a little. "Hi."
Nagi smiled back.
Omi looked around the empty hall, and then leaned to give the other boy a quick, furtive kiss on the lips. "Lunch break?"
Nagi nodded. "Hai." He said. "Omi-kun."
"Yeah." Omi was all ears for the sixteen year old.
"I.....I....."
Omi waited.
Nagi blushed and shook his head. "Lunch break." Then he ran off down the hall to his class.

It was right in the middle of the day, Crawford was just behind Takatori, heading into a restaurant when it hit him. He managed to hang on to the door handle he was holding open for the bastard, dark glasses hiding the fact that his eyes were no where near focused on the job of keeping the asinine politician's corpse safe and alive.
'My god,' he thought in shock. 'It can't be.....'

"Come along, Crawford, I'd like to eat now." Takatori ordered.
He followed the jerkoff in, to the reserved corner table, no where near wanting to eat now, not the way his stomach was spinning. Through the meal, he had to sort out what he had seen in that one horrific vision.
He had to do something. He had to stop it.
He had to change everything leading up to that one moment in time.....or see the world he knew destroyed.
Schuldig was going to love this.
And as the plan formed in his mind.....he realized.....he loved it too.

Nagi came home, not that he wanted to. Lunch had been....wonderful, but Omi had to go work the shop after school and there was no question of giving away their relationship to his team. Aye, just the thought of him....damn teenage hormones!
"I'm home!" he hollered, hitting the fridge.
After a snack, he went up to peek in on Farf, and then to his own room.
Schuldig's door was shut. Brad's was too, but that wasn't unusual. He kept his room locked all the time. Schu didn't. Not even when he was naked.
He tapped on Schuldig's door. "Oi, Schu-schu, you in there?" he rattled the knob just to make a point.
"Damnit! What, Nagi?" Schu answered, sounding mildly annoyed.
"What are you up to? You never shut your door, let alone lock it!"
"Fucking Brad, idiot, go do your homework!"
Nagi laughed. "Funny! You wish! You jerk, let me in. I need to ask you something!" He rattled the knob again.
"Nagi," Brad's annoyed voice came from behind the door. "Now is not the time."
Nagi's chin dropped. Then he proceeded to the next conclusion. "Ah, come on, I'm not falling for that. You're in there digging a bullet out of him or something!"
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Brad sighed. He caressed Schuldig's face, looking into the jade green eyes.
"Nagi, I'm telling you one last time, go away! What ever it is it can wait a few hours!" He took that pair of wide lips in his mouth, sucking at them furiously.

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Nagi frowned. "Ha, some joke! Schu-Schu better be okay in there! The last time you didn't take him to the hospital he nearly died!" He kicked the door for emphasis and went off to sulk.
******
"He doesn't believe us." Schuldig gasped when he was allowed to speak again.
"He will soon enough." Brad told him and started to pump him again. "You're a noisy slut."
"Ah....!" Schuldig melted.
******
Nagi turned, blinking. What was that?

Had he actually heard what he thought....
Schuldig...yelling out Brad's name..."Mien gott, Brad, harder!" , and then a sort of yowl...?
He went back to Schuldig's door and put his ear to it.
"....Baby." Brad's voice was husky with exertion. "Did you?"
"Jah, mein Lieber!" Schuldig crooned. "Ah, mein Mann, mein schöner Mann..." It turned into a moan of obvious pleasure.
"My hot little whore." Bradley said with lustful emphasis.
Nagi got his ear off the door as if it had been burned.
Well.
That settled that.
He covered his mouth so he wouldn't laugh and hurried down stairs to the living room, where he turned on the TV and found a cartoon. If they heard him, they would think it was from watching the cartoons.
He gasped and laughed himself blue in the face.

The phone had rang incessantly and no one had got it, so Nagi had. He sighed heavily and trudged upstairs to bang on the door.
"All right, you two, enough is enough!" Nagi yelled. "Takatori's on the phone and you'd better talk to him!"
"In a minute!" Brad yelled. "Tell him I'm in the shower!"
"You guys are sick!" Nagi accused, unable to think anything but the worst.....
"You little brat!" Schu yelled. "Not that kind of shower!"
"Whore!" Nagi yelled back gleefully and ran down stairs.

"Guys!" Nagi whined in protested. "What if someone sees you like that!"
All through the drive, they'd been holding hands, and kissing hands and rubbing thighs and murmuring things and just being incredibly embarrassing.....
When Brad had parked the car and the seat belts came off, they were practically in each other's laps, kissing.
Brad finally shoved Schuldig off and got out of the car. "Okay." he said, straitening his clothes. "Enough is enough. We've got a job to do." He was ordering himself as much as the others.
"Pigs." Nagi muttered.
"You mind your mouth." Brad warned him.

Next day, all afternoon and evening, Nagi had waited to get Schuldig alone.
"Schu-Schu." He tugged on his sleeve in yet another building they'd had to slip into to do a job.
"What, brat?" Schuldig asked, keeping an eye out. He really wanted to be in there with Brad, watching him systematically beat the living hell out of one of Takatori's enemies as a warning to the fool.
"Don't you know?" Nagi asked, annoyed.
Schu looked at him. "You know being around Brad shuts down my talent to just

when I want to read minds."
"So read mine!" Nagi hissed.
Schu entered the boys' mind. (Jah, you've got a mess on your hands.) He grinned wickedly. (Screwing Weiss seems to run in the gang.)
(Do you think I'm in love with him?) Nagi asked. (I thought....
Tot-chan....but Omi....) He ran out of words for the feelings he had for Omi.
(Who cares, you're having fun. You're young, enjoy it.) Schu informed him. (Why worry about love?)
(So what about you and Brad? Is that just 'fun'? Now that you've finally got him where you've always wanted him, you think it's just 'fun'?)
Schuldig gave him a light warning smack on the cheek. (I'm serious about Brad, Nagi. Don't trash me on this.)
Nagi looked at him with big serious eyes. (You'd better not screw him over the way you do everyone else, Schuldig. I mean it!)
Schuldig looked at him. Then he reached over and gently smoothed his hair. (I'm in love, Nagi.) he said softly. "Now stick to business."
Brad came out of the office, shutting the door, straitening his tie, looking a little flushed with the effort. "Let's go." He ordered.
Schuldig looked at him and thought how irresistible he was when like this.
Brad saw the look on Schuldig's face and moved to kiss him. "Let's go home." he murmured, caressing the flame hair.
Nagi rolled his eyes.

He handed in his lab report and the teacher glanced up, then took a good look at the slender, undersized boy. He had the most limpid, navy blue eyes, and such a serious little face. There were dark circles beginning under those eyes. "Naoe, a moment."
Nagi blinked. What the hell had he done now? "Yes, Sir."
"Are you well?"
"Hai." Nagi said, wondering what had brought this on.
"You look tired. Have you been studying too hard? You know your work is excellent."
"I'm fine, Sir. Just a little tired..."
"You're not sleeping? Is something wrong at home?"
"No." Nagi said. Then he smiled, and his teacher realized he had never seen the serious boy smile. "Nothing's wrong at all."
As he went back to his seat, the girl who had wanted him at her party looked at him shyly. He smiled at her, too, though it came across as a bit of a smirk.
It was just business as normal at Schwarz. And Omi was meeting him for lunch....

Chapter Two
"Under Pressure"

Brad frowned at him across the breakfast table.
"What the hell did I do now!" Schuldig said, un-nerved by the speculative narrowed eyes.
"What you said. About Kudoh Yohji." Brad stated.
Schuldig sighed. The honeymoon was over. 'Play stupid, idiot'. "When?"
"The last time I beat the living crap out of you." Brad said, annoyed.
"Oh....that time." Schuldig considered making a run for it. "And...what was it I said?"
Brad frowned even more. You could almost hear the thunder in the distance. "Read my mind, Schuldig."
Timidly, Schuldig obeyed.
Brad threw the memory of a couple of weeks ago at him....
/ / / / / "Why not! You won't have me! It's fun fucking over Weiss! That Yohji, he's a real sweet piece of ass! He's totally in love with me now. You should hear him, 'aye, Schu-Schu, more, harder, yesss! Weiss wouldn't have a chance against us now! All I'd have to do is blow him a kiss and he'd kill all his team mates for ME!" / / / / /
Schuldig winced. "Um...Oh, that."
"Yes, that." Brad said.
"Sooooo....?" Schuldig shifted uneasily in his chair, his toast getting colder by the minute.
"Do you really think it's true?"
Schuldig shrugged, trying to go for a casual, unconcerned look. "You know me, Brad, I'm an awful liar...I can't lie for damn."
"I want Weiss shattered." He said icily.
"Why do I get all the dirty jobs!"
"Because you ARE dirty, Schuldig. You're a nasty little pile of filth and I'm not going to go easy on you just because you're wearing My silk briefs."
Schuldig smiled, feeling all warm and silly suddenly. "You want them back, you come and get them."
******
Nagi walked into the kitchen half asleep and blinked, then turned around and marched right back out again. "Damn it!" He yelled at the shut door. "I want my breakfast! God, I'm never eating off that table again!"

"Pigs!" Nagi said, browned at having to had wait an hour to get his breakfast.
Brad smacked his face lightly in passing. "Mind your mouth. That better be decaf." He noticed the coffee cup the boy was sipping.
"MY mouth!" Nagi exclaimed. "Ha!"

"You're going to stunt your growth if you keep getting into the real coffee." Brad warned.
"You know, it's hard to respect a person once you've seen them...." Nagi started.
Brad turned and looked at him.
Nagi shut his mouth and drank his coffee as fast as he could. He needed the caffeine rush.
"Fake it." Brad ordered. "Just for that, you're going to wash out the car."
Nagi wailed. "Why ME! I'm not the one that didn't wrap up the body good enough!"
"Farfarello's tied up right now. That leaves you." Brad said with a mean smirk.
"Gees, Brad, what if *I* blow you, will that get ME out of all the shitty jobs?" Nagi tempted death.

He swore, wiping the tears out of his eyes and rinsing the sponge off in the bucket. The water was too pink again. He had to change it. He swore again, hauling it over to dump in the bushes and refill it. Why the hell did people have to bleed so damn much?
His backsides burned from the strapping he'd gotten for his mouthy-ness. Dumb, dumb, dumb, DUMB! Why the fuck had he had to go and say that!
Two hits of morphine and he was still aching. It wasn't fair!
He sniffled and wiped his sleeve across his eyes. He'd have to be careful in gym class. It was bad enough he'd had to pass off work bruises as rough play on the soccer field. How the hell was he going to explain strap cuts?
Damn Brad!
"I bet He enjoyed it, too!" He snapped angrily.
(Eh, brat, what did you expect?) A whiff of cigarette smoke and he knew Schu-schu had been sent to make sure he was working.
(Get lost!) Nagi ordered him, blocking him out.
Schu came and leaned on the fender, looking at him, amused. "You really do have it too easy, Nagi. Thinking you can mouth off Him like that and not get punished? Come out of your dream world. He's not going to let you behave like street trash."
"Somebody just explain to me why I got dumped into THIS mess!" Nagi hosed off the trunk carpet, the slightly red water running down the drive, diluted enough now not to draw interest. "Why couldn't I be normal?"
Schuldig looked in the trunk. The carpet and padding out, the spray painted metal was rough. If they ever did get inspected for evidence, there was no way blood wouldn't be found. He went into the garage and rummaged around. Aha, Charcoal lighter fluid. He took it back to the trunk and sprinkled a very little on the metal.
"Schu-Schu!" Nagi protested. "You idiot! The gas tank's under the trunk!"
"Oh, shut up." Schuldig said, wiping it around with a rag. Then he tossed the butt of his cigarette in.

Nagi just stood there and prepared for death in one second for the second time in one day.
The fluid flared up in a flash, then died down.
Schuldig smothered the last of it with a throw rug. "That should do it." He lit another cigarette, calm as could be.
"God! You are the most majorly fucking idiot!" Nagi screeched. Then something possessed him to turn the hose on Schuldig.

"I don’t want to do this." Schuldig informed him over the noise of the blow dryer, working his shaggily j-rocker cut hair into a froth of flame locks with the expertise of long habit.
Brad leaned on the door frame, arms crossed, watching him. "You’re the one who said it could be done."
"I don’t understand why you are dwelling on it, you know damn well I was only trying to get on your nerves!" He fussed a bit more and then gave up and turned off the dryer, wrapping up the cord and tossing it in the drawer, slapping it shut.
"You shouldn’t give me ideas, Schuldig." He met his eyes coolly. "Don’t you know me by now?"
Ouch. "Yes. I do." Schu said. He sighed. Two sadists did not make a right. "And I had hoped that...." he suddenly felt so overwhelmingly lost. He leaned on the counter.
Brad gave him a minute, then moved to put a hand over his. "Hoped what?" He asked softly.
"That you’d...forgive me." Schu couldn’t meet his eyes now, not....now...
Brad tipped up his chin and looked into the green eyes, shining with tears.
"Don’t be such a girl." he kissed him, tenderly despite his cold words. "Don’t you think I love you the way you are? What did you think you would become? Relax, relax, Baby. I don’t want you to change. Never. You pinned way too much on having me love you." he murmured, stroking his bare shoulder and talking in-between kisses. "And I do love you."
Schuldig turned his head away. "Not enough to stop thinking you can still whore me out on business."
Brad forced him to turn back, hand tighter on his chin this time, and kissed him hungrily. "Don’t defy me, Schuldig." he warned. "Fast as you are, I can still take you down. If you love me..." he said with emphasis, "you will do as I say."
Schuldig looked at him now, stunned at his egotism. Did he realize just exactly where he had just placed himself in the scheme of things?
Then he sighed and kissed him, his gorgeous American. All that greed, arrogance and pride....."I do love you." He said. And it was his statement, confession and excuse.
He was going to hand Weiss to Brad on a platter. No matter what the consequences.

Brad let him go. "Pull yourself together and rinse off your face. Since when do you cry?"
Schuldig licked his lips nervously and shook his head. "Always. You just never noticed before." He wiped at his face and did as he was told, the cold assassin flicking back into place in his eyes. "You trust me?" He asked shakily.
"Always." Brad said.
"You're going to have to live with this, you know." He warned.
Brad smiled, caressing Schu's cheek. "Don't EVER think I don't know what you're up to."
"You had your chance to change your mind, then." Schu warned.
Brad backhanded him, as hard as he could.
Schu let it roll off and still looked at him, jade eyes like ice.
"This should help you convince him." Brad said, then kissed him, and bit his lip in a vicious snap.
Schuldig fought the rising lust, stuffing it back down into the depths of his soul. He had to be heartless for this.
This wasn't a kill he was being sent on.
This would change everything.

Yohji's head snapped up, startled, as if he'd suddenly remembered something....a look of worry on his normally lazy face.
"Nani, Yohji?" Ken asked, having almost snapped the stems of the flowers he was packing in his reaction to Yohji's sudden start.
"I...." he looked almost afraid....."Forgot something." he said. Yes, that was it. That would pass it off. He caught his hair back out of his face. He looked around and grabbed a green floral twist tie, putting his tawny mop in a pony tail. Suddenly, it was just too hot to have it loose on his neck.
Damn it, it had been two weeks.....he'd almost recovered, almost regained his sanity....why now? Why now when Aya had just begun to.....no, that had to be his imagination working over time. Left alone, he just wanted the other red head to fill an empty space he hadn't known had been there.....until Schuldig.
Fucking Schwarz fucked up everything!
'You are sick, Kudoh.' he told himself, as he realized what he'd just angrily thought to himself. But it was true!
He went out the back door, into the alley and looked around, then tried to be casual about going down the long way, toward the other street.
Sure enough, trouble was just around the corner, waiting for him.
(Hi, Yohji) Schuldig thought at him, his voice the same mentally as it was aloud, nasal, heavily accented Japanese.
Yohji looked at him. "Schuldig?"
A spreading bruise on his face, a cut lip. The fragile look of him, compared to his normal arrogance.
He drew a shaky breath on his cigarette. "Big as life." He said, a little

tremble in his voice.
"Gees, Schu, did Takatori get at you again?" Yohji asked, stunned.
He shook his head. "Crawford."
"What the hell for?"
Schu's mouth twitched. "Who the hell knows." He sighed. "Look I'm broke. Buy me a rice bowl." He flicked the end of the cigarette away.
Yohji wasn't fooled by the sudden display of bravado. Something was wrong here, very wrong.
He slid an arm under the flame redhead's. "Damn you! Where were you!" he demanded in a hushed voice.
Schuldig had to look away to hide the terrible grin he couldn't control, then passed it off as an attempt to pull himself together. "I just need.....to sit down." he said, the fought back laugh passing as a gasp.
He nearly lost it again as Yohji's other arm came around him, so tenderly supportive, such concern....after what he had done to him....
Brad was going to laugh himself black and blue over this....!

Nagi trudged down the street, kicking idly at bits and pieces of trash, winding up in the park. People were walking their dogs, lolling in the grass, kids were playing, the sun was setting, it was all very well and nice. He hated them all.
He found a tree to sit down under and lean against, very, very carefully. He sighed. Even that hurt.
"All right so I shouldn't have said it." he muttered.
And then Omi plopped down beside him and leaned on him, claiming a kiss from his cheek. "Why so glum?"
"Ow!" Nagi gasped, recoiling. "Damn it, I'm injured!"
Omi backed off a bit. "I'm sorry!" He exclaimed.
Nagi held himself still until the pain passed. "Shit." He said through his teeth. "I'm never going to be able to work again without remembering this."
"What happened?" Omi said, worried.
"I mouthed off at Brad and he really took my hide off." Nagi grudgingly admitted. "And if anyone as school sees it, I'm fried on both sides."
Omi leaned over and lifted his shirt, trying to see.
"Hey, quit it!" Nagi exclaimed. "We're out in public! Don't be touching me!"
"I don't care." Omi said. "Why shouldn't I touch you?"
"Because we're both boys, you fool." Nagi hissed.
Omi rolled his eyes. "Tell that to half the old ladies who come into the shop. How bad is it? Can we still....."
Nagi was surprised at his own ability to still blush. "I don't know....It's pretty bad. He used his belt on me."

Brad took it out on the punching bag. After two weeks of being able to just reach out and have someone to sate him, he was stuck with having to exercise

himself dead and take cold showers. How had his self discipline have gone to hell so easily after years of resistance?
They had warned him to control himself. The discipline that it had taken all these years, shot to hell in one moment of....
About ready to drop, he held onto the bag, panting, trying to think, wiping the sweat on the back of his glove.
After a few minutes, he forced himself to shove himself to his own feet and head for the shower.
He leaned on the tiles, letting the water wash over him, trying not to think.
Then it all welled up.
For a brief moment, he couldn't deal with it.
He punched the tile angrily, breaking two, the sharp pain shooting up his arm, clearing his mind of the visions assaulting him. He took a slow deep breath, remembering how to. Remembering who he was.
And when he opened his eyes again, they were cold and hard.
He would make their own future. Not the one Esset had planned for them. He would throw all their plans off track.

Yohji put him down on the bed, sucking at his mouth, reveling in the feel of him in his body, so hard and strong.
Schuldig held onto him, running his hands over him, catching his hair, feeling his muscular back, making himself once again familiar with this body, remembering once more how to be a professional.
Oh, but it was hard....giving himself to Brad had broken the paper wall between lust and love.
Suddenly, he pushed the blond away and sat up, unable to deal with it.
"What?" Yohji said softly in mild protest.
Schuldig shook his head. "I can't." he said.
Yohji sat up, putting a hand on his shoulder. "What? Why?"
Schuldig looked at him, into his eyes. "Can I ask you something?" He said softly.
"Anything." Yohji said, lost in the feelings he was having. How had he survived the past two weeks?
"Anything?" Schuldig said, his words breathed on the other man's lips.
"Hai." Yohji said, just barely audible.
"Do you love me?" He trailed his fingertips up Yohji's bare arm slowly, ever so lightly.
That caught him off guard. He froze mentally, an image of Aya sending a thrill through him that was incredibly sweet and painful and desirable.
Schuldig didn't miss a heartbeat, his nails little prickles on Yohji's chest.
"How much do you want him?"
Yohji drew a hissing breath. "As much as I want you!" he said. Then he forced a

kiss on him, taking what he wanted.
Schuldig threw his weight back, pulling Yohji with him, kissing him, moving up against him. He pulled his head away, breathing hard, to look at him. "I can give him to you." he said.
"Damn it, Schuldig, what are you trying to do to me?" Yohji kissed him again.
A hand in his hair pulled him off, and jade eyes looked up into his. "How sweet, how breathless, how blissful would it be.....to have us both?" Schuldig whispered.
"Stay out of my mind." Yohji told him. "And let me into your ass."
Shuldig drew his knees up and almost before Yohji knew it, he was in him, ah, god it was good....after weeks without.....
Schu closed his eyes. But it was no use. He could hear Yohji's mind, smell him, the feel of him, it was so familiar to him....he couldn't ignore it, he couldn't think...of...Brad. Now that he knew what it was really like to be with him, to have him.....
Oh, but Yohji...Yohji could think of Aya....
And Schuldig didn't didn't even have to make him.
He laughed softly, and got on with it.

"Schu's not home?" Nagi asked, looking around the kitchen.
"Not yet..." Brad sighed, sipping his coffee. Damn, the stocks sucked. He checked the ones he had invested in. Lousy day across the whole NASDAC. Some things, you couldn't predict.
Nagi peeked over the paper at him. "Did you feed Farf?"
"I took him a plate, he fed himself." Brad growled.
"Hey." Nagi said.
Brad put the paper down, looking at him coolly.
"I'm....sorry for being a jerk." Nagi said. "I just....can't deal with you guys being so...."
Brad relaxed a little. Things were only going to get worse around here...."It's all right, Nagi. I realize you were embarrassed. But you're never going to say anything of the sort to anyone in this team again, is that understood?"
"Yes." Nagi said.
"And as for your little affair with the Weiss boy," Brad smirked. "I'd be careful if I were you."
Nagi blushed. Of course Brad would know about it! He'd seen it coming. Damn, probably...seen....oh...shit...!
Brad slapped his arm, knowing exactly what he was thinking without having to be a telepath. "It's all right, Nagi. I've been seeing things since I was younger than you. Get your breakfast."
Nagi allowed himself to get over it. He had to. It was the only way he was going to get through adolescence, if he was going to be stuck here in Schwarz. He flipped a mental coin and then gave Brad a quick hug, and got one back, but it

was Brad who beat him to the shoving away.
"Eat your breakfest. And stay out of the real coffee."
Gee, he sounded a little tense. That would teach him to make out in the kitchen and then send Such off to pull his shit on Weiss.
Nagi just had to. "Well, at least Schu isn't here smoking up the place and talking his head off."
Brad sighed.
Nagi got the left over fried rice from the chinese place out and tried not to smile so openly. Revenge was sooo sweet. And after all, it was only his back sides that were hurting. He could just imagine where Brad was hurting.

"You are out of your fucking mind!" Yohji informed him angrily.
"I come to you for a little comfort and all you can do is think of Aya, it's not me that's out of My mind." Schuldig was rather enjoying this little vacation. Brad wouldn't let him smoke in bed, let alone stay in it all day. Mmmmm, he'd forgotten what it was like to simply wallow in sex.
He sat up, pushing his hair back, looking at the blond eurasian with sultry eyes. "Bring him to me, Yohji love. I'll fix him for you." He ran a hand up the tightly muscled arm. The man even kept that damned trick watch on in bed. It was nasty, that wire, he'd had it about his neck a few times. The memory made him shiver and press close to Yohji. "I want him too." he breathed in Yohji's ear.
"I want that pretty white skin, and long thin hands....you know I'm sex crazed, Yoh-tan. I could make him cry and beg for you. I could make him forget his sister."
Yohji got up abruptly. Christ, it was like having the devil around! His heart was racing, and everything in his brain told him, no, it was wrong, wrong...so very wrong....
Schuldig lay down again, arranging the sheets over himself to stop the chill he was getting from sweating like a pig. He took a deep drag on his cigarette. It was the last one from both their packs. "After all, he might as well have been here all ready. Are you going for those cigarettes or not?"
"I'm going!" Yohji found his shirt and put it on. The walk would do him some good. Clear his mind. Allow him to think in peace.
"Come back to me." Schuldig's voice came softly.
Yohji looked back at him. Schuldig quickly looked away, but not before he had seen that oddly out of place look in his eyes.
"I will, Schu." Yohji assured him gently. "Barring any trouble."
"Hey, we're in this business." Schu said, all off handed and shallow again, putting out the cigarette butt just before the filter.
Yohji found his boots.
If he could talk to Aya, reason with him....despite everything that Schuldig had done...perhaps he'd....allow him into Weiss, with Persia's permission.
When the hotel room door was shut, Schuldig sighed and stretched. Then leaned

off over the side of the bed, too lazy to even bother to get his butt out of it and rummaged for his own shoes, and the cigarette he'd stashed in one of them. He lit it up and sighed contentedly. It was the larcenous little pleasures of life that made it all so fun.
He laughed and laid back, blowing smoke rings at the stained ceiling. "I hope your fucking suffering for this, Brad." he said aloud. "I hope you're seeing me right now."

Brad shook his head to clear it, then pushed his glasses back into place.
"What?" Takatori snapped at him. The man had been distracted all morning. "What are you seeing?"
"Nothing of interest." Brad said. "I'm sorry, Mr. Takatori. My talent has been acting up lately. There's a lot going on right now, not all of it important."
"You will let us know if you see an earthquake or a market crash coming, won't you?" Takatori smirked.
"Yes, sir." Brad said, wanting to kill him then and there. Good dog, stay dog, sit. Fucking-go-for-your-throat-and-rip-it-out-dog. He glanced at Nagi, who was sitting on the sofa, not even paying any attention, his face unreadable, his eyes cold pools of navy blue.
The boy hated Takatori like some people hated rats or spiders. He wanted to step on him, squash him and be done. Brad could wholeheartedly agree, if it weren't for the timing.
Farfarello was at the window. He wasn't so manic, without Schuldig around. He'd taken his meds today without putting up so much of a fight. Oh, Brad had had it out with him! Orange juice, iron pills, vitamins, Prozac. If he couldn't feel pain, then what was the point of hurting himself? How the hell was that supposed to hurt God? God had made him unable to feel pain.
Farfarello had been floored by that one.
"You'd better start figuring out just what the hell God intended you for, Farfarello!" Brad had yelled at him. "You're in Schwarz to kill other people! Not yourself!"
When he'd come back from washing the blood off and changing his clothes, Farfarello had been quiet, and had been ever since. He'd dressed himself and come along quietly, not even fretting over his damn knives.
Brad knew Schuldig had been playing sick game with him, getting him worked up on purpose. Schu just couldn't help himself. The whole concept of pain as a way of life fascinated him, like a moth to a shrine candle. Schuldig liked to torment other people. For the way they tormented him, with their incessant noise.
He wondered why his mind wasn't noisy. Why Schuldig didn't hear him unless he made an effort? Was is because he was so out of step? Always ahead? But wouldn't Schu hear the thoughts he'd all ready thought anyway? How fast was the human mind really? Why did his love find only silence in him?
Takatori came to the end of his speech and looked at him, expectantly.

Brad had to use his talent to catch up with what he'd been ignoring. "Right away, sir." He said cooly. "Nagi, Farfarello."
They proceeded him out.
Ah, good. Another disciplinary action. He needed to hit something. Preferably something that would cry out and writhe in pain.
It amused him to think that they needed to make a punching bag that would make some noise when you hit it.
"I swear, I'm going to shoot him." Nagi breathed out in the hall way when they were away from the household guards. "I'm going to pull out my gun and just pop him right between the eyes."
"And yet you're screwing the hell out of his bastard son." Brad commented.
"I should send him a tape." Nagi said flatly.
Damn. Brad had to smile at that one. Schuldig was such a bad influence on the child.

Aya was waiting for him.
Shit, he might as well have had a rolling pin, the way he was standing there, glaring at him, arms crossed. "What?!" he said in aggressive self defense.
"You just take off without telling anyone anything for past forty eight hours now!" He looked at his watch just to be sure and glared again at Yohji. "Where the hell have you been!"
"I had something personal to do." Yohji said.
"Yeah, Ken told us! You just 'suddenly remembered' something and took off!"
Gee, he was pissed. "Why the big deal? Did anything happen while I was gone?"
Aya was very close to wringing Yohji's neck. "The last damn time this happened, we had to forcibly put you in the hospital!" He reminded him in a teeth clenched snarl.
Oh. That time.
He pushed his hair back. Well. Wasn't life just interesting that way?
Last time....he'd been with Schuldig, too.
He tried so hard not to smile at the damned irony of it. "Oh, shove a sock in it, Aya." he went up to take a shower and change.
Ken and Omi looked at Aya, Aya stood there in shock.

Brad tossed the keys on the tray on the foyer table. Cigarette smoke. Of course, he'd seen that he was going to be home, but still...it was heart grabbing that he actually was...he went in to find him, sitting by the window to the balcony, looking out at the city.
He went to kneel and take him in his arms, holding him, smelling him, kissing him, and feeling his skin against his own, running his hand into the flame locks. "Schuldig...." he breathed. "Baby..." How good this was....how he had missed this.

"I've been waiting." Schuldig murmured in his ear and then licked it. He got up, pulling Brad with him.
Nagi sighed. "Come on, Farfie, looks like it's going to be a long night for some people."

Brad went stiff and shoved him away suddenly. "Will you NOT DO THAT!" He said somewhat loudly.
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Schuldig said, caressing him, moving to kiss his shoulder and neck. "I'm sorry. Forgive me." He leaned his head against Brad's throat.
"Next time you try that with me, I will break your fingers." Brad stated.
"I just wanted to....I'm sorry." Schu said again, caressing his ribs, tracing the bones under the boxer's muscles.
"Damn!" Brad said, mood ruined. He felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water on his libido.
"Please, Brad. Please...." Schuldig pleaded softly. "Don't be angry with me. Don't stop now. I need this so bad. I need to be with You."
Brad drew a breath and made himself set it aside. He kissed him, mechanically at first, then as he relaxed again, with more emphasis. "I suppose you pull that nasty little stunt on Kudoh." He said dryly.
"Don't be mean." Schuldig admonished gently. "Honestly, sometimes you can be such a bitch."
"No. You're the bitch." Brad informed him, and slid back into him, this time making sure those greedy fingers were occupied elsewhere.

Nagi sat up and grabbed his headphones, putting them on and pushing the button on the player, turning it up. Then he laid back down and curled up on his side, holding the pillow over his head.
What the hell would the neighbors think if the place wasn't so sound proof?
Did they HAVE to be so damned noisy about it!
He couldn't stand it. He got up, throwing the blankets aside and went to the door to their room.
Gees....
He braced himself and opened the door and concentrated on using his power to yank the bed away from the wall by a foot. Then he shut the door and went back to his room. At least the banging on the wall was taken care of. He put his head phones back on and pulled the pillow back over his head and tried to sleep.

Yohji sighed and thought some more about it.
It was insane.
But then, wasn't anything to do with that racy german import?

He looked over at Aya. Why flowers for fuck-sake? Would a tobacconists' have been too much to ask for?
Ha. Not many tabacconists had to have a reason to be moving large lumpy bags of things. Like fertilizer.
Un-hunh.
"Well, we all come to an end someday." He sighed.
Then he went over to Aya.
He watched him fuss over the damned flower arrangement until he was at a pausing point and then grabbed his wrists, turned him around and yanked him into his arms, planting a nice big open mouthed wet one on his lips, then took a good look into those amethyst eyes.
Aya blinked at him in shock.
"Ran." Yohji said using his real name. "I am tired of waiting for you to notice that I am totally and completely after your ass." Then he kissed him again.
Aya made a weird little noise, but not much else.
Yohji came up for air. "Say something! Yell at me, or hit me, but don't just stand there and not do anything!"
Aya tried to think. Then he looked at Yohji. "Anou, I thought you were terminally strait." He said, tossing his head a little to get his hair out of his eyes.
"Damn it, don't tell me you've been gay all along!" Yohji swore.
"Well, no one ever asked." Aya said quietly.
"Fuck, Aya! Ken's been making passes at you since week one!" Yohji exclaimed.
Aya turned to finish the arrangement. "I really hate his type."
"But....you act like such a virgin when ever anyone, male or female makes a move on you! How can you be such a cold fish!"
"Just because I'm more attracted to men doesn't mean I'm going to just sleep with anyone."
"Aya!" Yohji exclaimed. "Tell me! Is there someone...?"
A little frown crossed his lips. "No one." he said quietly after a long moment.
Yohji leaned on him, running his hand over the younger man's lower back. "I want you, Aya." he said. "I want you to be mine."
Aya reached around behind to grab Yohji's wrist and move him away, looking at him. "Where were you for two days, damnit?"
Was that it? Had Aya been turned off all this time by his womanizing? He took a deep breath and threw it all away. "That red head from Schwarz..." he hesitated. "God, Aya, he's a pro. I thought I couldn't have you....And he was there..." he let it fall.
Aya just kept giving him that evil Aya look.
Yohji couldn't take it. Schuldig had said he could 'fix' Aya's mind. Damn him! No, it shouldn't have to come to that...
Aya went back again to finishing the arrangement, cold as ever. Business was business.

Yohji sighed. Then went to the kitchen to rummage up something to eat.
Aya fussed with a few more flowers, then closed his eyes and drew a deep shaky breath.
After a moment, he pulled himself back together and went on about cleaning up the shop and getting ready to shut down for the day.
As long as he kept moving, kept busy, things would keep going on. It was the only way he could go on.

"You could stop this now." Schuldig said, pulling on a shirt. "I wish you would!" He started to button it up.
Brad gathered up his red hair and drew it out of the collar for him. Like flames tumbling down over the cream colored cloth...."No." he said. "Nagi has Omi. Now bring me the rest." He tried to put his hands on Schu's waist.
"Damn it! Why! Why not just let me kill them!" Schuldig pushed his hands away and moved to take a green waist length jacket off the back of a chair.
"Could you kill him so easily?" Brad asked coolly.
"Yes!" Schu told him.

Downstairs, Nagi looked up and sighed at the ceiling. They were at it again.
Just when he'd got so sick of them fighting about not wanting each other, they were fighting about wanting each other.
He forced himself to concentrate on the game. To ignore the threats and accusations, the sound of fists striking flesh, the struggling.....
Schuldig would end up covered with bruises. Brad would be like ice for twenty four hours. Schu would be quiet and need someone else to hang around. Brad would be even more picky and imperious.
'And I get stuck in the middle.' Nagi sighed. "I wish someone would lock ME up in a padded room."
Schuldig came storming downstairs and out the front door, slamming it behind him.
Nagi's mouth twitched in a frown, looking at the foyer.
From upstairs, he heard Brad yell an obscenity and then hit the wall.
Nagi winced. That had to have hurt.
Then, after a few moments, he heard another noise.
Christ, it creeped him out!
He steeled himself. Then he got up and went slowly to walk up the stairs.
Brad had flung himself down on the bed, face on his arms.
'You could run out the door, too.' Nagi told himself.
Then he went over to sit on the bed side and put his hand on the man's shoulder.
"Why do you guys always fight?"
Brad turned over, looking up at him, eyes reddened, wet. "I see it coming, and I can't stop myself. I'm angry before I know it, because...I see it coming." He

wiped his eyes. "Nagi, go get some food. I'm too tired to think or do anything any more today." He sighed and closed his eyes.
"What do you want?"
"I'd kill for a steak."
Nagi smiled at little. "You kill for everything we have." He said, and leaned over to murmur. "Stop beating up on yourself."
"Go, Nagi." Brad said. "Wake me if I'm asleep."
Sometimes, the boy was just too old and wise for his own good. He felt the shift as the small body left the mattress, then his feet padding down the stairs. He was hit with a premonition, Nagi waiting, annoyed, in the restaurant, worried....
He shut it out and turned to curl up on his side. None of them had any right to any pretension of a normal life. It was time they all just got over it!
So why did he feel like some sort of rotten fucked up parent who expected the child to take care of him while he wallowed in his addiction?
He sighed.
Because maybe I'm trying to make a home for all of us....Or at least...a safety net.
Another vision assaulted him...worse for him being so down and so tired.
He had to do this. This would stop the worst of it! They might survive this.....together.....

He'd claimed he could with absolute certainty. At the time.
Now, right now, the answer was no. He couldn't kill the man if he tried. He needed this comfort now.
"Doesn't he know enough not to hit you in the face?" Yohji looked at the ring cut on his cheek bone critically.
Come to think of it, why WAS he hitting him in the face more often now? "Duh." He said. "Give me a cigarette."
"Can't you buy your own?" Yohji grouched, taking his pack out and holding him out one anyway.
"It's cheaper to take yours." Schu said simply. "Don't be lazy, light it."
Amazed at his arrogance, Yohji did as he was told, then leaned over and put it to those pink lips.
Schu took it, drawing in deeply and looking at him. "Women have you so trained, you're pathetic."
"Hmm, so that's why your sitting on a bed with me in a cheap hotel, right?" Schuldig smiled. "It's nice to be with a real man." He purred.
"Coming from you, that's a fucking insult." the blond stated.
"Are you going to spend all night staring at me or are you going to settle this?" Schu said flatly.
"What is this with you!" Yohji demanded. "One minute you're all...." He shook his head in frustration, "and the next, it's like you're buying drugs! This is

Aya here, not a brick of coke!"
"I don't have the answers!" Schu told him sharply. "All I have is that if I don't get Aya, we're all going to hell, bullet express!"
"Just what the hell has Crawford seen!" Yohji said coldly.
"He won't tell me. And it's got him stressed out of his mind." Schuldig frowned. As long as he'd been off the stuff, he could use something right now, damnit. He decided to settle for what he could have. "Oh for crisakes, forget all that now." He leaned over to put his mouth over Yohji's. (We'll talk later, when I have my brains back.)
(And mine are a mess?) Yohji retorted.
Schuldig broke off the kiss to look into his eyes and then laughed, pouncing on him, pinning him down on the bed. "Exactly." He smiled.
Yohji grabbed him, holding him, kissing him happily. "Mmmmph, to hell with Aya. I want you."
"Only because I'm here." Schu said. "Sometimes, I do believe, you are a worse whore than me."
Yohji rolled him over onto his back and started undoing his jeans. "Shut up, Schu-schu." he said, and dove his hand in to grab him, kissing him fervently. Schuldig closed his eyes....it was so good, the way Yohji took him over and slowly drove him that close to madness. Almost before he knew it, he was gasping, aching with pleasure, filled to spilling over and emptied, held tenderly and kissed, his mind as quiet as could be from exhaustion alone. . Yohji held him, keeping his own mind as silent as possible, just letting his feelings ride unexamined.
"Thank you." Schu said softly, caressing the hand on his chest. Then after maybe half an hour or so, he got up. Yohji was asleep.
He found and pulled on his clothes.

Brad woke...."Schu?" He said sleepily.
Schuldig squirmed closer to him and wrapped himself around him. He sighed. Home.
"Still mad at me?" He whispered.
Brad squeezed him tightly. "No." he said softly. "Just glad you came back."
Schuldig kissed him and settled down to sleep. No thoughts, no dreams, just....silence, still and black in his mind.

Nagi woke at first with a start, thinking he'd not set the clock.....but then he settled down when he realized it was a no school day. Still, it was another day in Schwarz. Probably someone to threaten or kill, Takatori to deal with, Farfarello to deal with.....He sat up, listening carefully.
Schu and Brad to deal with. He could hear voices from down stairs. Hey, not yelling yet. End of the world already and he'd missed it?
He got up, resolved to face another day.

"....on earth are you planning to do about it?" Schuldig was in the middle of saying when Nagi walked into the kitchen and headed strait for the coffee pots.
"Nagi!" Brad snapped. "Decafe!"
"Bite me." Nagi said, pouring himself a cup of real coffee. "I'm small boned, I'm going to be small all my life. Being around you two has more than likely stunted my growth. I'm drinking real coffee until it comes out my ears and then some from now on. You never let me sleep anyway!"
"Brad, don't!" Schu ordered behind him. "I mean it!"
Whoo, slight hysteria there in that obnoxious voice of his. Nagi steeled himself and drank his coffee.
Schu had got between Brad and the boy, looking him in the eyes, ready to fight him yet again, but this time for a real reason. "Don't hit him again!" He warned.
"He can't continuously defy me!" Brad said angrily, yet realizing he was over reacting.
Schuldig got into his mind and in seconds had all the thoughts in there. Such anger, such stress....(Brad, listen to me, you're red lining too often lately! Remember your training! Anger isn't how you control things. It's how you loose control! You're going to HURT Nagi! Do you understand! Do you want him in the hospital? Do you want him hating you! You're going to hurt him because he won't let you help him?)
Brad drew a deep breath.
Schuldig helped him calm down by embracing him, and laying his head on his shoulder.
He had to unclench his fists....to hold him in return.
Nagi took his cup and sat down at the table. Other kids had real parents and real problems to deal with. He had a couple of psychopaths and mega bizarreness to deal with.
'Let's see now,' He thought to himself. 'What's the score? Schu finally get's Brad to realize he is in love with him and gets him in bed. Brad finally realizes he is in love with Schu and it drives him insane. Obviously he is insane in the first place, because he is in Schwarz. But Schu is enough to push anyone over the line. Brad somehow decides that he has had enough of Schu's infatuation with Weiss pretty boys and instead of accepting him being in love with him and wanting to be with him only, orders him to go back and seduce Fujimiya and Kudoh into coming into Schwarz. Which, presumably, will lead to ME never getting any sleep at all and the place going from mere nut house to total mad house. Welcome to my world.' He sighed, depressed, and drank his coffee.
"Let him have his damned caffeine!" Schuldig looked at Brad again. "Who cares if it stunts his growth. You were saying about this whole thing with Esset. It's just too scary, Brad. How can they hope to do anything like this. It's like some

horrible sci-fi movie."
"How the hell do I know." He muttered. "Who ever thought there would be creatures like us. Maybe the world IS a paranormal place and the dimensions are getting closer. All I know is that if we don't stop it, it's going to be Hell here."
"You guys are scaring me." Nagi said.
Brad sat down to reach over and take his hand, looking at him. "Nagi....it scares me." He proceeded to tell him exactly what he was seeing was going to happen.
".....And if we want to survive this, we're going to have to tread a fine line between two living hells." He finished.
Nagi felt all cold inside. The only things warm were the coffee mug in one hand, and Brad's hand on his other. "WILL we survive?" he said in a small voice.
"If we fight it every step of the way." Brad said. "If we break as many of the patterns we've been set in as possible. If we destroy the line of time as Esset has set it moving."
"Those old bastards told you NOT to have anything to do with ME, didn't they!" Schuldig finally realized in shock!
Brad looked up at him. "That's not why I didn't, Baby!"
"Then how do you explain all these year of torturing me!"
Brad shook his head. "Don't dwell on this now! Put it aside, it's over and done with!"
"If you start fighting again, I SWEAR I will slam you BOTH through a wall and use you for shooting targets!" Nagi put both fists down on the table. "I can't TAKE it anymore! STOP it! Just STOP it!"
They both looked at him, stunned.

Yohji felt as if he couldn't stand it anymore.
Waking up alone....the faintness of the german's cologne on the pillow, the memory of his kisses....
He'd gone home, feeling very oddly out of synch with reality.
"Again?" Aya had hissed at him.
"Whatever." Yohji had told him, going upstairs.
Manx had shown up. Persia wanted them to go after Schwarz. To eliminate Takatori's body guards once and for all.
Aya had looked over at him.
And....oddly enough...he had seen something strange in those purple eyes. Hesitation? Worry?
He'd kept his mouth shut until later, when they were casing Takatori's mansion.
"If you're thinking I can't do it, you're right." He said.
Aya looked at him. "It's better we kill Takatori. Never mind Schwarze. I don't think they're here."

Yohji knew how to find out.
God it was sick. The first time it had happened.....he had felt nauseated, turned inside out....and now....He simply longed for it.
He calmed his mind and focused. (Schuldig? Can you hear me?)

Inside the mansion, Schu blinked and looked up from the magazine he had been bored enough to pick up off a coffee table. (Bradley. They're here. Weiss.)
Brad looked at him. (What now?) He thought coldly.
Schuldig shrugged. (Anything you want.) At this point, he could care less one way or the other.
Brad looked over at Takatori, making his deals with the drug importers. (What do they want?)
Schuldig reached out, finding and slipping into Yohji's mind, able to do so from this distance because he knew him so well....(Yoh-tan, are you going to be a pest?) He teased.

Aya saw him shiver, his eyes closed, his face intent. He.....he was beautiful....
(We're under orders, Schu-schu. Aya wants to kill Takatori, but Persia wants you guys dead.)
* * *
(And will you kill me, love?) Schuldig sent thrill of raw passion through his neural system.
* * *
"Ahhh!" Yohji gasped, nearly falling to his knees.
Aya blinked, what the hell was going on?
Yohji caught himself and shook it off. (Stop that! This is serious! Aya wants Takatori. Not you guys!)

Schuldig looked sidelong at Brad. (Takatori. Not us.)
Brad looked at Takatori and the drug importers and their guards, one each, the rest outside. (Tell Nagi and Farfarello to stand ready.)
Schuldig conveyed the order.
The both of them looked to Brad.
He watched carefully. (Will Takatori satisfy them?)

Yohji opened his eyes, looking at Aya. "Crawford wants to know if Takatori's death will settle this?"
"They are here?" Aya asked quietly.
Yohji didn't answer.

Aya tried to think. It was so hard to make up his mind, with all they had been through...."Tell Crawford...." How odd the word felt in his mouth. "Tell him 'Yes'."

Schuldig relayed the decision to Brad.
Brad thought it over, watching Takatori, checking the possibilities in the future. Then he raised his hand just a bit, and gestured slightly.
Nagi and Farfarello easily moved into position ever so smoothly.
Nagi's hand slipped into his jacket.
The hand came down.
Schuldig hit the guards with a mind shattering wave of sound, the feed back of his own power, what he heard every minute of his life unless in physical contact with Brad, or drugged out of his mind.
It was a trick he didn't play too often, but when he did, he played it to the hilt.
They went down, blood trickling from their ears, eyes and noses....
Nagi pulled his gun and aimed for Takatori, who snarled and aimed one back at him.
Nagi didn't flinch, didn't blink, just pulled the trigger.
Takeori's shot went wide.
Nagi's hit home.
Farfarello laughed like a hyena and set about using his knives.
Brad stepped aside to avoid getting blood splashed on his suit.

Aya, sword out, moved along the corridor, eye, ears, straining to hear, to pick up any one heading their way. With Schwarz on the inside and they moving in, the mansion was a war zone.
Brad saw flashes of the future as it changed from minute to minute.....So much going on....so many things ending and beginning.
Nagi grabbed his arm. "Brad! Let's go!"
He snapped out of it and headed out the door with the others, drawing his gun.
Things progressed, until rounding a corner, he found himself gun to face with Fujimiya, slapping out an arm to block a sword slash. Brown glared into purple and back as they faced each other down.
Then Aya pulled the katana back and down, face set hard and cold, ready to raise it again if need be, and at a second's notice.
Brad raised the gun, drawing a deep breath, forcing himself to calm.
"Not a one alive." Schuldig said aloud.
Weiss faced Schwarz across a couple of dead guards who's blood was soaking the carpet, making it squish under their feet.
"Aya..." Ken said, angrily ready to fight them.
Omi had already pocketed his darts.

Nagi pulled the clip out of his gun and slapped a new one into the handle, holding it up, but ready.
Farfarello licked his lips in anticipation....
Schuldig kept his eyes on the Weiss redhead.
Yohji leaned on a wall and took out a cigarette, being the consummate slacker that he was.
Aya sheathed the sword.
Brad remained en gaurde a few moments more, then holstered his gun.
Aya tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flick of his chin.
He glared at the Schwarz red head with pure hatred.
Schuldig smiled, an evil smirk.
Then he got into his head.

Chapter Three
"Changing Tides"

Crawford stood on the pier, looking out over the ocean. The alignment. It had come and passed. Esset had lost their chance. No big conflagration, no end of the world, no nothing. Just a poignant little scene on the end of an old pier, a small ceremony of letting go.

Perhaps a world had ended after all.

Aya leaned on the railing, his back to the view. The frown on his face was even more set now.

He'd pulled the plug on his sister.

Schuldig had tried. There was nothing, no brain activity, no soul. Just a body, laying there pristine and undying.....and incredibly dangerous if Esset had had their way.

He held the urn the ashes had been in to his belly, the ache in his soul incredible.

Yohji rested a hip on the rail beside him and leaned close ever so slightly, a hand on his shoulder. "Ran." He said softly. "Get rid of it."

But he just stood there, staring tearlessly at the boards of the pier.

Brad took the empty urn from him and flung it out over the water as far as he could. It hit in the darkness with a wet, 'thup' noise and was gone into the depths.

Aya looked at him, lost with out the one thing his life had been anchored on.

Brad pushed his glasses up his nose and looked back in cold hardened annoyance. He could never understand why people could hang on to the past so.

And despite Yohji right there, more than ready to comfort him, Aya put an arm up and around Brad's shoulder, pressing close to him, his cheek to his other shoulder. And finally he started to grieve.

Uncomfortable with the situation, Brad held him anyway.

Schuldig had warned him. He'd lost his chance to change his mind. It was that simple.

Life would never be 'simple' again.

He looked at Schuldig over the younger redhead's auburn hair. He stood there, a few feet away from it all, arms crossed, the perpetual smirk on his face not so happy, just there out of habit, a feral bearing of teeth. In the moonlight, his eyes glittered dangerously.

Brad sighed and tightened his arms about Ran Fujimiya, softening his body language to the sobbing younger man.

And once again regretted the way he had chosen to destroy Weiss.

/ / /[You'll have to live with this, you know.]/ / /

Schu's smirk faded to a mild pout. (Shut him up and let's go!) He demanded.

Brad took the easy way out. He popped Aya one on the chin, knocking him out and gathering up his unconscious body.

"Not that way!" Schuldig said aloud, annoyed.
"Then next time, you do it." Brad snapped.
Yohji rolled his eyes. Of all the people in the world to have as competition, why this cold assed jerk?
(I heard that.) Schu said in his mind.
(Deny it!)
(Hah! And then get a sex change, right?) Came the sarcasm.
Yohji looked him over, mentally picturing it.
Schuldig gave him a jabbing headache for that insult.

Nagi woke to the sound of the key in the door. He sighed, snuggled close to Omi on the couch. The movie was over, rewound, the screen blue. What bliss to fall asleep in a lover's arms. For that matter, what bliss to sleep....
Brad surveyed the tangle of teenager on the sofa and frowned. Where was he supposed to dump Aya/Ran/Whatever he was calling himself now....
"My room." Schuldig reminded him. He hadn't slept in there for two months.
"I'm sure Farfarello wouldn't mind sharing." Brad said coolly.
"Crawford...." Yohji warned, having had about enough.
Brad gave him a look. While he might not appreciate the 'white rose's' infatuation with him, he certainly had every reason to make Kudoh's life a living hell.
(Brad....no....) Schu's mind whispered softly in his.
He sighed, chastised. He took Aya into the room and put him on the bed, Yohji drawing up the coverlet over him, checking his jaw.
"I have to admit, you're an expert, Crawford." Yohji stated. "Not even a bruise."
Brad ignored him and went to grab Schuldig's arm and haul him into his bed room and shut the door, locking it.
"Sah...Jealous!" Yohji said in mild exclamation.
He looked down at Aya, forced to rest at last after three days. Then he sighed and got under the coverlet with him, sliding an arm under him, the other around him, making himself comfortable. At least when Crawford deflected his advances, Aya would come to him for a little comfort. But so far, it had been only that, arms to hold him, awkward response to a kiss, sleeping with him, always pushing him away before it went too far. The murderous man was deeply shy.
In the living room, Nagi reached for the remote and shut off the T.V. Then he drew the throw blanket over he and Omi and settled down again. Omi slept like a rock. Nagi supposed the so-called 'good guys' could do that.

Yohji caught Schu in the bathroom the next morning, pushing him back in gently and shutting the door, catching him and kissing him fervently. "I'm going to die if I don't get some, Schu, I can't take much more of this!"
"Because you're a pig." Schuldig informed him, but he undid his pants.

Yohji knew from experience Schu was no romantic. He turned him around and bent him a little over the sink counter and got right in. It gave him a very mild and fleetingly temporary case of the creeps, realizing that he was using Crawford's leavings as lubricant. Then he forgot about it as the wonderful sensation of doing Schuldig shut out everything else in his mind.
"Make it quick, will you!" Schu said, a hand over the hand on his genitals.
"Just for that....I'll slow down." Yohji murmured, teasing, and did.
"To hell with that..." Schu said, sharing the sensations he was having with Yohji, mind to mind.
In minutes, he pulled away from him, yanking up his pants and zipping them, leaving Yohji hanging onto the counter for support. "Happy now?"
"Oh...very." Yohji said, relieved, but a bit dizzy.....
Nagi looked at Schuldig icily when he came out, having been leaning on the wall across the hall, waiting. "Some people actually like to use the bath room for it's intended purpose occasionally."
Schu gave him an archly insulting look and went to start the coffee.
"Out, Kudoh, or I'll take you out!" Nagi ordered Yohji, loosing his temper.
"Keep your pants on, you little shit." Yohji said arrogantly and pulled his own up, getting out of the bathroom. "What Omi sees in you....."
Nagi shut the door and locked it.

"Persia' is quite the business man." Crawford stated, in the process of cleaning his gun. "But he's a narrow minded fool, and yet another damned Takatori. I've been independent before. A new definition for a new century, Fujimiya. You've broken one chain. Break another. Kritiker will try to destroy you, it doesn't matter than you and Kudoh have left. We're going to end up killing them to keep you alive. You should do it yourself."
Aya watched those perfectly manicured hands work with precise movements, the expertise of long practice, stripping the gun down to it's parts, cleaning and oiling, and re-assembling it, until the clip clicked into place and a quick movement chambered a round, then locked the safety.
He'd seen those hands grab Nagi out of range of a car explosion, clasp over the mouth of a kidnapping victim, beat down one of Taketori's Yakuza backed successors, and catch his sword in mid-slash, palms slapped shut on the back of the blade, those perfect brown eyes glaring at him with haughty amusement, but no fear. Never fear.
Brad's expression now was barely annoyed. As opposed to fully annoyed and incredibly annoyed. He had a few others. Petulant, disdainful, hateful, and when Schuldig didn't know he was watching him, serene. His heart shaped face, his long oblique set eyes with their impossibly thick lashes, the delicacy of his features. A reality check, the incredibly dangerous man, the cold hearted killer, the leader of what had been Schwarz, was a beautiful boy in an Armani suit.

Aya sighed.
Brad frowned ever so slightly more.
And Schuldig and Yohji came back from the take out with bags of chinese food and beer, in a whirl of welcome noise and insults and stupid bragging about the girls who had fallen for Yohji's bullshit and the man who had mistaken Schuldig for a girl from behind, and Brad had gotten up to grab him and take the bags and set them aside, kissing him and pulling him protesting into the bedroom.
"Are they always like that?" Omi wondered.
"It's worse lately." Nagi said, picking up the bags and taking them into the kitchen. "I have to fix Farfarello a plate and lay out his meds. Save some for me." he looked into Omi's limpid eyes for just the briefest moment.
"Sure." Omi said. "I know how Aya and Yohji can eat."
Well, maybe how Yohji could eat. Aya wasn't eating lately. Not for a few days now had he taken any more than a few bites and then pushed his plate away.

"Brad...Brad! Slow down!" Schuldig protested, trying to hold him off.
He broke off the mad rush to pull off clothes. "What!" He said.
"For one thing, I'm hungry!" He said, pulling his shirt back up on his shoulders, green eyes annoyed. "And you're acting weird!"
"Me? Acting weird?" Brad stated. "You're the one acting weird! Since when don't you want it!"
"You never talk to me anymore, you just.....grab me." Schuldig pouted. "I'm tired of people just grabbing me. Come on, let's eat. Then later, we can do this slow and....take our time...." There was just a little bit of a beg in his voice.
Ah...there it came!
He ducked the strike, and put his shoulder in Brad's middle, shoving him back into the dresser. He backed off, pushing his hair back. "I'm not in the mood for this, Bradley!" He announced warningly.
Brad scowled. "If it were Kudoh...!"
"You see! That's what this is all about. Not You and Me! It's about You being jealous and thinking you're missing something! Damnit, Brad! I told you! I told you you would have to live with it! Your plan worked! You got what you wanted. Esset is so mad at us, we're going to probably be stalked all our lives or at least until those old fools die! I love you, I don't want to leave you, you're everything to me! But stop hitting me or I will!"

"Gees." Yohji said, glancing up at the ceiling "Maybe someone should break that up."
Nagi put an open bottle of beer on the tray. "Sure. Give it a try. They will turn on you and tear you to pieces, and then make up over your corpse. They were fighting the day Brad picked me up and they have fought ever since, and before that, they fought for four years. Brad always hits him, Schu always lets it

slide. Broken nose, broken jaw, broken ribs, broken arm, bruises on bruises on bruises. It's a sick relationship, but it's a relationship and you guys should keep your noses out." He went to take Farf his dinner.
Aya got up from the table.
Yohji looked at him.
Aya didn't look at him. He went upstairs to the bedroom door.
He steeled himself, then opened it.
Brad was there, leaning on the dresser, Schuldig was standing by the bed, red faced and short of breath, both so angry they couldn't see strait.
"Hey, you guys." Aya said, almost his old self. "The food's getting cold."
Brad pushed his hair back and straitened his glasses.
Schuldig buttoned his shirt back up, cursing mildly over a lost button.
"The both of you need some kind of fucking therapy." Aya said, and left the doorway to go back down.
Brad went red.
As if he needed that.....kid....to tell him he needed mental help!
"Okay, so we're both sick in the head." Schu said sarcastically. "What else is new?
I deliberately left you as alone with him as possible. You didn't do anything about it, did you!"
"Baby....I don't want anyone but you." Brad said, more angry at himself than anyone else.
"What about that safety net? How long do you think he's going to stay around after letting his sister finish her dying because You said to!"
Brad frowned, crossing his arms, the anger gone stale in his system.
"I....can't." He said.
"Why not! You were just about to beat the crap out of me and rape me!" Schuldig reminded him.
"He's.....he's a virgin." Brad said awkwardly quiet. "I've...never been with....someone that innocent."
Schuldig's chin came up. No, he remembered. Brad hadn't. He paid for his pleasures. He preferred professionals. In fact, it excited him more to know that he was getting the best for his money, and Schuldig had many nice new things even though their relationship was non-business.
"God, Bradley, you are sooo whacked in the head." Schu said. "I think you took a few really serious hits in the skull when you were training. I'm hungry, and I'm going to go down and eat. I'm the one who had to stand in that restaurant and smell all the food cooking." he went out the door and down the stairs.

Nagi looked up. "Well, that was quick."
"Shut up." Schu told him, sitting down and grabbing a carton.
"Whore." Nagi said.
Schu shot him a look that warned him he was THAT close to death.

Omi, Aya and Yohji looked somewhat uncomfortable in varying degrees.
Brad came into the kitchen, his clothes straitened and took his place at the table.
Schuldig poured a beer for him and started putting choice things on a plate for him. Yohji couldn't help thinking that the german had been in Japan so long he'd learned to be a good wife!
Schuldig shot him a glare.
Yohji ate his dinner and occupied his mind with more useful things.
Nagi and Omi started misbehaving below the table, poking and swatting at each other until it got out of hand and Aya twisted Omi's ear and Brad snapped "Knock it off!" at Nagi.

"Aya." Schuldig said softly to him in the hall way when Aya came out of the bathroom from taking a shower.
Aya looked at the snake on two feet. He was wearing an indigo dyed cotton house robe with white water patterns swirling on it. How appropriate. "What?" He said flatly.
One hand held the cotton robe closed on his own chest, the other reached out to catch at the sleeve of Aya's terry cloth bath robe. "Come in here." he said, no wicked smile, no evil gleam, just that....lowered eyelashes look.
"Hell no." Aya said.
Schuldig tugged gently. "Just....come, sweetie, don't make me force you." He breathed.
Aya looked past him, into what he could see of the bedroom. Brad was on the bed, the sheet over him, propped up on one elbow, his back to the doorway.
Schuldig moved to slip an arm around his waist, hugging him lightly. "You want him, don't you?" He whispered, sliding the other hand under the robe, squeezing Aya's chest muscles. "Hmmm? Don't lie to me, I can see your every thought. And yes, I am a snake." he chuckled softly. "And you must be Eve." He looked into the purple eyes. "Time for that apple, dearest."
Aya, for some reason, let him draw him into the bed room, heard the door shut behind him.
Yohji was sitting in the low backed whicker arm chair, smoking a cigarette, in nothing but his briefs.
Aya blushed red. "No." He tried to pull away from Schuldig.
"Yes." Schu-schu said, not letting go.
Brad shifted to lay on his back and look at them, annoyed nearly out of his last shreds of patience. "Then let him go, Baby, and come back to bed. Or I swear to god, I'll do your boyfriend."
Yohji raised an arrogant eyebrow at THAT threat.
"Give me a hand here, Yohji." Schu said. It was softly spoken, but it was also an order.
Yohji put out the cigarette and got up, stretching languorously and then came to

undo the belt to Aya's bath robe while Schuldig held onto him.
"Yohji....!" Aya protested.
"Stop it, Ran." Yohji told him. "I'm sick of seeing you moon about like a school girl over Him. You look more foolish than Omi did over Ouka." he slid the robe down off the finely muscled white skinned shoulders.
Aya felt so weakened as Yohji put his mouth to a nipple, caressing him, and Schuldig knelt to take him into his mouth, and those cold, velvet brown eyes watched him coolly from the bed, so strange with out the glasses to shield their beauty.
The room was so quiet, except for somewhat heavy breathing and gasps, and wet noises from busy mouths. The silence and strong hands and tormenting lips were drawing all the fight out of Aya. The man on the bed, watching him, waiting for him....
His knees went weak, Schu's expert invasive tactics the last straw. Yohji caught him and Schu drew away. Aya reached faintly for the copper red head....it had been so good....
Yohji walked him to the bed. Schuldig moved around the foot of the bed to loose his own robe and get on the bed to snuggle up to Brad, kissing him on the shoulder and neck, drawing the sheet down off him as if unveiling him.
Aya laid down willingly now, to Crawford, to his arms. His mouth was so sweet....Schuldig had left him longing for more inside him....
Yohji shed the briefs to lay on the edge of the bed, watching him, stroking Aya's shoulder and upper arm.
Schuldig gave Brad a gentle push. (Get in him. He's ready to die.) The german's annoying mental giggle as awful as the vocal one.
Yohji stifled Aya's yell of pain with his hand as Brad entered him, going further than Schu's fingers could have, a little too fast...
Schu caught Brad's hips, holding him. (Don't move, wait until you feel him relax!)
Aya slowly came away from the pain. Things focused again.
And Brad was on him, in him....at last! He caressed the silk-like true black of his hair, and looked right into those eyes. He kissed him, a soft moan escaping his throat.
(Now. But gently.) Schuldig said softly in Brad's mind, knowing exactly what was going on in Aya's.

Nagi slapped both hands over his mouth to stop a giggle. But still a sort of high pitched squeak got out his nose. He ran back downstairs and threw himself on the sofa, putting a cushion over his head and started to laugh insanely.
"What!" Omi asked, giving up on the video game, since Nagi's behavior had thrown him off guard and he'd been 'killed'.
Nagi had gone up to get another game from his room, but the noises coming from Brad and Schu's room had sounded kind of....different, and he'd just plain been

curious, since Yohji and Aya had also disappeared up stairs and no one was in any of the other rooms.
Now he was laughing so hard, he couldn't breath.
"What!" Omi demanded again, wanting in on the joke.
Nagi tried real hard, but he couldn't, not without shrieking out loud. He pointed up and then held up all four fingers, then pointed up again and made a palm pushing motion, then took a deep gasp for breath and buried his head under the pillow again!
Omi didn't quite get what was so funny about that. "Damn it Nagi, what's so funny about that?" He held up the pillow and peeked at the shine of his eyes.
Nagi held up all four fingers tight together this time, then laughed harder.
Omi's eyes went wide. "The four of them.....together?" He said.
Nagi couldn't help it. He sat up and roared with laughter.
Omi ran up stairs on professionally silent feet and put his ear to the locked door.
He turned bright red and had to go into the bath room and splash cold water on his face and the back of his neck.
It was no use.
He'd got a nosebleed.

Aya wasn't the same the next morning. He leaned on the frame of the sliding glass door to the balcony off the kitchen, looking out over the city, drinking a cup of black coffee in a somewhat shaky hand.
Brad came down, dressed immaculately as usual. The brats were asleep on the sofa, the TV blue screened again, damn it. He went to shake them awake and turned off the TV. "Get up. Get get washed and dressed, the both of you. This isn't a teenage flop house."
Nagi groaned and sat up, stretching. He looked at Brad, glaring at him all prissy like in his suit and glasses. He couldn't help it. He started laughing again, and had to run upstairs. Omi giggled and followed him.
Aya's mouth twitched in a frown and then he sipped his coffee, not even bothering to look.
The way he stood there, in his jeans and sweater, shoulders hunched, one arm holding himself, Brad could read the tension in his body.
Well.
Sure.
They'd all three had him last night.
So much for his virginity.
Brad tossed his jacket and tie over the back of a chair and went to take out some eggs and bacon. As long as he had lived here in Japan, he still liked the greasy american style breakfast.
Schuldig came down. "We're almost out of sedatives, and there's only three more rolls of sterile bandage. Do you think we should ask the doc about that new

stuff. I mean, he IS schizo, isn't he? Isn't that what they call someone with two personalities?" He said over his shoulder, going over to Aya and snatching his coffee to swallow some and then grabbed him, pressing his lips to Aya's. Aya put up small protest, but Schu pulled away before he could really complain.
"Needed sugar." Schu gave the cup back. Then he went to embrace and kiss Brad in a lurid tongue swap.
"My Hot hunk of man." He purred and squeezed Brad's bottom before letting him go just in time to save his bacon from burning. He managed to light a cigarette with one hand and get a cup of coffee with cream and sugar in it with the other.
"Schuldig, OUTSIDE!" Brad ordered. He'd had just about enough of this smoking in the apartment thing.
Schu rolled his eyes and went to unlock the glass and step outside onto the balcony. My, the city looked pretty today. And noisier than hell. He enjoyed the bracing wind whipping his hair about his face, drawing deeply on the cigarette, and having a mouthful of coffee. Then he looked at Aya, who was for all the world, simply sulking behind the tinted glass. He walked over to look at him, then tapped on the glass.
Aya met his eyes with an evil look.
Schu smiled. (Now that's not pretty.) He said in Aya's mind.
Aya hated him with everything he had.
(That's been tried. It doesn't work.) Schu made a kiss at him and went to lean on the railing and enjoy his coffee, sifting through the thoughts from below for any interesting news.
Brad had seen the whole exchange and was not amused. "Aya." He said a bit sharply.
The young man turned a little to look at him.
"Come here."
Aya went over, setting down the cup, not meeting the other man's eyes.
Brad reached into his auburn hair and grabbed a handful, pulling him to his mouth, french kissing him, until he felt him sigh deeply and respond. He kissed him again and again, until Aya was pressing against him, holding him, kissing him back.
Until he was certain that it was not just last night.
Then he broke it off, resting his cheek on Aya's, then kissing his neck. "If you don't respect my Schuldig, I'll tear your heart out and feed it to Farfarello. Do you doubt me?" He said, his voice like ice.
Aya sighed again. "No." He said softly, clinging to him.
Brad kissed his cheek and pushed him away to let go of him. "Was it so awful, last night?" he asked archly, sitting down to his breakfast and newspaper.
Aya pinkened. The things they had done to him.....but...."No." He admitted, feeling awful.
A fit of boys' laughing up stairs caught both their attention and Yohji's yelling at Omi was proof enough he was awake. Something about ice cold shaving

cream....
Brad grimaced and unfolded his paper.
Nagi and Omi came tearing down stairs, nearly falling over each other and out the front door.
"Fucking SHIT!" Yohji swore, half way downstairs in his pajama bottoms, a smear of shaving cream on his torso. "You little monsters!"
"Quiet down, Kudoh, you'll upset Farfarello." Brad warned.
Yohji tossed his chestnut blond hair back and went back upstairs to wash the stuff off.
Aya sighed and looked in the refrigerator.
Schuldig came back in and slid a hand up his lower back, resting his chin on his shoulder. "I'll make you breakfast, Sweet." He gave him a gentle push away and started to get a few things out of the fridge.
Aya ended up eating scrambled eggs and left over chinese. It wasn't bad.
Yohji came down and sniffed the air. "You guys save me any?" he demanded accusingly.
"Pan." Schu pointed to the stove.
"Those brats! From now on lock the door when you guys leave me defenseless." He scraped out the pan onto a plate and grabbed the soy sauce dousing it liberally.
(I swear you'd put that stuff on doughnuts.) Schu complained to him mentally.
"That would be you presuming." Brad said coolly.
Yohji looked at him, lighting up in the middle of eating his breakfast. He gave him a slow lazy smile. Last night had taught him some strange new respect for the American. "I don't see why I shouldn't. "
Schuldig snatched the cigarette and took a drag on it before flicking it into the sink and turning on the water. "No more smoking in the house." He said poutingly.
Brad was looking at Yohji.
Schuldig just had to see what he was thinking.
It damn near made him blush. He sat down again and ran his hand into Brad's lap under the table.
And ran right into another pair of fingers.
Brad's hands were both in sight above the table.
He looked at Aya, eating his breakfast with his right hand.
Then he smiled licentiously and twined his fingers with Aya's, meeting his purple eyes.
Aya hesitated. Then he changed his mind and ran his thumb along Schu's palm.
"Break it up, you two." Brad warned, seeing the disaster that was about to occur if they kept up this new found flirting.

Chapter Four
"It's A Beautiful Life"

A fight in the street. That was what it had nearly turned into.
He'd stood there, facing down Ken and Sakura outside the Koneko no Sumi Ie. Ken was defensive, aggressive, dark eyes darker with anger. Sakura had had him by the upper arm, wanting him not to get hurt, but not wanting to hold him back if Aya attacked him.
"I know you can't understand...." Aya said.
"I never understood you!" Ken spat out in a voice raw with betrayal. "You threw away yourself for your sister, took her name....and now that you've finally let her go, you throw away what little of you was left at all! Who are you, damnit! Jesus, Fujimiya, look at you! Are you a boy or a girl? Friend or enemy! Do you even know! Did you ever! Do you even have a mind! For two years I fought Schwarz beside you, dragged you home when you were wounded, sweated over you in the hospital, praying you'd live through it, put up with your fucking attitude...!"
he was so angry, he ran out of words, his fists clenched. "Now that FUCK Crawford snaps his fingers and you run at his heels! Birman was right! You are nothing but a DOG, Aya! Youji I'd expect it from! Omi, well, he's a Taketori, isn't he! But YOU! I thought you were better! But you're nothing but a dog!"
Sakura tightened her grip on his arm, pulling on him. "Ken...Please....People are staring. Let him go. Believe me....he can't fight them." There were tears in her eyes. She knew too well...."Aya, just go!" She ordered him.
He'd taken one last long look at her. She was....so like.....
Then he'd gone back to the waiting car and gotten in, not looking back again.

A hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently, a faint shaking.....
He opened his eyes.
"We're landing." Youji said.
He'd been dreaming. Re-living it all.
He sighed and sat up, watching out the window as the ground came up to meet the jet. Another day, another land, the same world.
As the roar of the engines died out with a rumble, he gathered himself back together.
He wasn't Birman's dog any more.
He was nobody's dog.
Dogs didn't wear silk and cashmere, or for that matter, a twenty carot strip of diamonds from their ear.
What was he now?
Did it matter so?
An assassin.
Would you argue with someone capable of sending you to your death with one

slash, one shot? Would a definition be of any use to you as you lay bleeding out your life on the ground, your eyes glazed over, your soul ripped away to eternity with one last thought of how unfair it all was....?
Aya/Ran Fujimiya stood tall, one of six men, two of them, little more than boys, who got off a private jet at a small airport outside of Rostock, Germany.
Six young men dressed very expensively, each carrying a brief case, each moving with a grim determined silence, the tallest, thinnest one lighting a cigarette against the cold breeze of coming winter in a northern European land. He smoked it as fast as he could in the walk to the limo, having to flick it away at the end of one long elegant arm before being last to get into the sleek black car.
One case held the latest in technology, a lap top computer. One held money. A ransom payment in UK thousand pound notes. One held explosive. Enough to take out a city block. Three held semi-automatics and the latest in explosive load bullets.
The ransom was candy.
The job was destruction. Complete and total destruction.
Since the beginning of this, they had worked to reach this point in time. They were on schedule.
And still Crawford was impatient. He sat there, eyes in the future, mind in the past, a fist clenched on his thigh.
A watch quietly beeped and Naoe Nagi drew out a slim box of pills, taking one out and handing it to Farfarello, who took it and reluctantly swallowed it with a grimace. Nagi looked in the limo's mini bar and pulled out a bottle of mineral water and passed it to him.
Farfarello unscrewed the cap and drank it down. "Damn, I hate 'em friggin' things." He muttered in liltingly accented english.
"You're more useful sane, Jei." Crawford stated.
"Ye shoul' try it, 'fore ye place such a high value on't." Farfarello softly retorted.
Crawford closed his eyes.
"Yer a fuckin' greedy man, Bradley Crawford, to throw away a billion dollars, and more than likely, six lives fer yer daft little pretty play thing."
"Yours will be first, Farfarello." Crawford said coolly. "If you don't shut up."

Farfarello smiled. "There's the spirit, me darlin' man. Ye can't live much longer on that stuff, ye know, you'll have to sleep sooner or later, or once and for all."
Brad opened his eyes, pushing his glasses up to focus on him. "Shut up, now, Jei." he said icily. "Or you'll be licking your own blood off your knives."
"Ah, ye ragin' homosexual, you couldn' half try it in the state yer in. Better give him another hit, Nagi. He's fadin' out on us."
Nagi looked at Brad. The dark circles under his eyes, the pinched haggard look to his face. He wasn't so sure it was a good idea....

But Brad sighed and took off his cuff link, sliding his sleeve up his arm.
Nagi took out one of the already prepped hypodermics. "You're going to have one hell of a time coming off this stuff." he commented, making sure there were no bubbles in the needle. Then he carefully found a vein and slipped it in.
Brad winced as the fire ran up his veins. Enough. Enough to keep him moving, thinking, reacting fast to do the job....then....he could rest.
For a moment, his heart protested as the drug hit it, beating wildly, damn near stopping, then the pain passed and he found Youji and Aya looking at him in near frightened concern. God. He ignored them, closing his eyes.
He could rest a little....just a little.....until they reached the hotel in the city.

It was no one's fault really.
They'd been on their feet, re-aligning the team, learning to function as unit, breaking old ties, establishing new ones, defending their position.
Persia had personally come after his people, to free them or kill them.
Nice try.
Crawford, in one of his bizarre moods, had made the decision to let him live.
There was something about his arrogant, condescending smirk that made them think maybe it'd been better to kill the man out right. Crawford had obviously seen something in store for him that would be much worse than a bullet in the brain.
Then there had been getting Farfarello to a doctor specializing in treating chemical imbalances that caused the kind of aberrations he was having, and finding the specific medications. That had taken a real burden off the entire team.
The real problem had been other Esset teams scattered over the world.
Crawford had been aware of this. The scramble to find out as much about the other teams as possible had been part of the fun.
They'd gone on a killing spree, hunting down and taking out each team as located. Crawford had always been aware his team wasn't the only one with un-natural talent. But they had been brought in too often to not be the best ones available. And they'd been kept at the focal point of the dimensional conjoining. But the competition had been enough to give them a good run.
Working too hard, being too powerful, making money too fast, spending too freely, entering an almost nirvana like state of being above it all. It became like an addiction. There was an incredible high in being able to just walk into a place and shoot everyone in sight, clean and sweet, unchallenged and walk out with no fear of reprisal that could matter worth a damn, never worrying about money for anything, moving through the world like most people moved through one city. Their reputation had grown into near legend in the organized crime world in only six months.
So, they'd gotten a little silly.

Someone had turned their back at just the right moment.
And Schuldig was gone.
Because he'd been expecting it all along, Brad hadn't really seen it coming.
Sooner or later, Esset would try to take one of them, any of them.
Perhaps if it had been any of them but Schuldig....
But no....there were no 'ifs', no self reproaches.
Just a cold, hard, gray dawn on the end of that night two weeks ago, as they stood in the parking lot of a hard core dance club in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, and felt like shit, having searched the whole place for Schuldig and only been told he had been seen in the arm of a man, presumably drunk and willing enough....
Esset had gotten hold of him.
And down through the negotiations, it was decided that Crawford could buy the team free, ransom Schuldig, and be free, for a billion dollars, part of the money he had stolen from them when he wiped out most of their other teams, Nagi rerouting bank accounts and payments.
As if he couldn't see right through the fact that they were baiting a trap with Schuldig. Deprived of their immortality, and the renewal of their fading power, the old fools were having one last swipe at him.
The other's could sleep in turns. But Brad didn't dare. If he so much as missed one premonition, lost track of one single factor involved, he feared loosing Schuldig forever.
They had promised him the redhead was merely restrained in their custody. His visions had told him they weren't exactly lying. Schuldig was still alive. Being mentally tortured, gone at with brainwashing techniques....
They wanted him to come in. They wanted him back on their leash.
He would never submit to that. He would put a bullet to Shuldig's head and then his own first.

The phone call came. Aya brought him the phone. He sighed and took it, then answered. "Crawford."
Youji had the phone programmed to the computer, tracing the call.
"This is the address." the voice on the line said, and then spoke clearly and swiftly.
"You have an hour. Come alone. We're aware of your cadre. Do you understand?"
"Hai." Brad said tiredly.
"This isn't Japan, Crawford." The voice chuckled. "Getting tired, Oracle? How long can you stay awake? We know you're weakening. Come alone and bring the money." Then there was the click of the hang up.
He pressed the reset button and handed it back to Aya, annoyed. He looked at Youji, who shook his head. Too encoded a call to trace. All they had was the address.

Well, so be it. He got up off the sofa.
"More?" Nagi asked, looking up from his work.
He shook his head. "One more will kill me." He stated, knowing it for a fact.
"This is going to be the hardest thing we're ever going to have to do. I expect it to go well. They're old and weak and their powers have begun to lag since the conjoining passed. But they have the benefit of experience and being in their own territory. Don't disappoint me."
Nagi carefully molded another piece of plastic explosive and slid it into another pocket in the lining of the specially re-tailored jacket. "Don't blow your ass to kingdom come." He said litely, holding it up for him to slip it on.
He buttoned it. "Well?"
"It should pass." Aya said. "It's just a little heavy looking."
"Hopefully, I'll have it off before they notice." he stated. He'd have an excuse to take the jacket off by the time he got there. It wasn't as if he wasn't already sweating from the stress he was under and the adrenaline shots.
Aya couldn't resist, slipping his arms around him, stealing a kiss. If it were the last time.....
Brad let him have what he wanted and then pushed him away. "Stop it." he said. "We have less than an hour now." An hour, and over two weeks of living hell were over.

Two weeks. Schuldig was well aware of how long they had had him. When the guards took him from the cell and stuffed a heavy black bag over his head, he could read in their minds that he was to be taken to the pick up site.
He was so messed up from being pumped full of drugs to keep him from using his talent. But when they put their hands on him, he could still read them loud and clear.
There was a sniper to be waiting, to shoot them both.
Him and Brad.
His heart pounded. Two weeks of waiting in this living hell, just to die? Just to loose the one thing in this shitty world he loved forever?
They lead him by his shackled wrists. They had him pretty well chained up, with his talent for swift movement.
He tried to calm himself. Brad was an expert. He knew his way around the Esset. And the only reason he'd gotten into this predicament was because he'd had too much to drink. He'd counted too much on someone else looking out for him.
(Oh, god, if I live through this, I swear I won't go overboard again.)
Then he snickered at himself for actually having prayed.

Youji climbed up the nylon line with the help of a moving clamp and made it to an upper window of the where house. He would take the top floor. Omi was tracking their heat signatures via satellite. Nagi had taken the back alley with

his mini-uzi. Aya and Farfarello had the sides. They weren't to respond, simply to listen to Omi's position reports.
"Nine inside." Omi's voice came softly over the earpiece. "One on what could be a cat walk or a mezzanine from the movement."
Yohji slipped inside, looking around. Dressed in black, thin as the shadows he could easily hide in, he moved on silent feet, searching. Mezzanine. Someone with a rifle seemed most likely, in case the deal went sour.
(Youji!)
He staggered, the sudden presence of a very upset telepath in his head throwing him off. (Schu...back off! I can't think!)
The power faded down to a whisper, still near hysterical. (I'm drugged. Sniper. To take out Brad and me. They're not letting us go. Where are you?)
(Above. I'm tracking the sniper. We're getting you out of here. Alive. Now shut up and let me do my job.)

Brad stood by the car in the cold night air for a moment, looking up at the building. Then he closed his eyes and drew in a deep slow breath. He concentrated on every ounce of reserve he had left or caused by the stimulant, and when he was ready, he stood up straighter and put the spring back into his walk. He came across now as if he had been well rested and could care less that he was walking into a trap.
The impression was frighteningly competent, the usual arrogant smirk on his face, the case with the money in it in one hand, the other in his pocket.
He walked in and set the case on the table that had been dragged out onto the old factory floor. "There's your money. I want my man."
The three of them sat there, looking at him.
"You've greatly disappointed us, Crawford." The old woman said.
"Tough shit." Brad said litely. "Give him to me."
The case was opened, the money examined. "You took far much more than this from us." The taller man stated with a precise Swiss accent to his german.
"This was the agreed upon price." Brad held stubbornly, taking off the jacket and putting it over his arm.
A sigh. The case was closed. "We've changed our mind." The old woman stated.
"Oh, really?"
"You have a choice. Return, and all is forgiven. Or die." The other man, who had always reminded him of some comfortable farmer, said.
A body falling disturbed the conversation. Youji looked over the mezzanine railing from above the factory floor. "Now, Crawford!" He yelled, dropping him an automatic pistol.
He threw the jacket down, caught and aimed the gun in a move so swift, he had to think about it later. "I think I'll choose death." He smirked, and began pulling the trigger.

He held his love tightly to his side in the car as the other's dove in and slammed the doors while Omi got it running.
"There's a substructure reaching beyond the surface base of the building." Omi said as he drove them away from the factory building in the run down area. "It's been here since the 1930's. My guess is, we've got them."
The explosion pretty much confirmed that. Garbage and stone work rained down briefly about them striking the car, cracking the back window so that he automatically shielded Schuldig as best he could from the flying bits of glass.
Youji laughed a little. "That was close."
"Wha's that yer clingin' to?" Farfarello inquired, pretty damned amused himself.

Youji patted the brief case with the end of his wire still tangled around it.
"No sense wasting good money on a bon fire."
"We are sooo good." Nagi purred.
Aya pulled a few bits of window glass out of his hair and was glad for the tight turtle necks they'd worn. Then he helped Crawford clean up the glass that had spattered on him and Schuldig. "Hey." He said softly in Schu's ear, "Welcome back, Slut."
"Fuck off, Aya." Schuldig said tiredly. He only wanted to have a long bath and sleep for a week with Brad in his arms. And maybe Youji to warm his aching back.

But then he freed a hand to feel for Aya's and take it.
Aya smiled, holding him.
"Lord, I'm surrounded by Sodom and Gomorrah combined." Farfarello complained.
"The window's open, I'm smoking." Youji stated, lighting up.

It had taken a week to recover, Schuldig having spent six hours in the tub, then screaming about his hair being ruined for ever and ending up in the most expensive salon in Tokyo getting it hot oiled and pampered. While Schu fussed and fretted and detoxed from all the drugs, Brad just took it real easy and let the effects of the adrenaline and stimulants wear off. The doctor said his heart might just recover if he just rested as much as possible for the next six months. Otherwise, he was looking at one of those heart attacks executives his age were always having.
"One more question, Doctor." Brad had said coolly.
"Yes?" The woman doctor was hastily scribbling on the chart.
"Am I okay for sex?"
She had looked at him. "Don't strain yourself."
Brad had smiled a little, putting on his shirt.

Ha. Don’t strain himself.
Half the time he couldn’t figure out exactly who he was in the process of making love to. Somehow, he had his mouth on Aya’s, a hand in Youji’s hair as he ate Aya’s chest, and Schu-Schu was kissing his neck and shoulder, making his head spin with the wonderful sensations. He tried to sort it out and find someone to get into in this mess, aching to do some serious screwing. "Mmmmph...come on, somebody either go down on me or let me in."He complained. Then he sighed in relief as someone pressed backwards into his arm....Aya from the feel of silken skin that avoided sunlight....He never tasted of nicotine like the other two, so sweet, like honey. He slid into him and began to move eagerly, the sensation worth the wait.
Aya wasn’t as noisy as Schu-schu, but he could sure put up a fuss, and he was certainly making enough noise right now. Brad wondered and spared a hand to feel....
Youji, giving the poor thing a blow job while he did him from behind. Brad laughed and set his teeth in Aya’s shoulder, wanting to make him cry out more....Schuldig stuck with beating himself off against his thigh, holding him from behind.
Things were going so damned well....he was so near coming.....
"Goddammit!" He swore, shoving everybody away, sitting up in the bed, turning on the light, pushing his hair out of his eyes. "Who did that!" He demanded.
Leaf green, emerald, and amethyst eyes all looked innocent.
He moved to sit with his back against the head board of the bed, his offended bottom safe out of harm’s reach. "Well SOMEBODY did it!"
There was a thump on the wall as a shoe hit it from the other bedroom. "Hey, shut up over there!" Nagi’s muffled voice called. "SOME people have school in the morning!"
Youji sat up, looking Brad in the eyes. Somebody had to confess, or they were all going to suffer. "I think it was me." He said. "Wrong ass." He chuckled.
"Now come on, Brad. Focus on the assignment." He teased.
Schuldig and Aya grabbed his ankles and slid him back down flat, pouncing on him.
There was a brief struggle and Schuldig won, claiming his prize. Aya whined in frustration, but Youji was more than willing to console him.

"Pigs." Nagi muttered in annoyance.
Omi’s arm stole back around him, hugging him close. "Sleep, Nagi. I don’t want to be late in the morning."
"Christ, there goes Schuldig." Nagi complained as the German cried out in pleasure.
Omi gave up. ‘MMMmmmm, let’s make some noise of our own." he slid his hand past the elastic waist of Nagi’s pajamas to caress his silky skinned bottom.

"Ooooh," Nagi groaned. "Is there such a thing as too much sex?" They were going to be late in the morning, and if on time, dead tired all day....
"Let's find out." Omi said enthusiastically.

"Take your pill!" Nagi ordered Farfarello a the table the next morning.
"I'd rather be outta ma mind than listen ta you lot go at it like banshees all night!" The Irishman complained.
Nagi glared at him.
He sighed and gave up, taking the pill.
"Farfie, come join us." Schuldig smiled sensually, still tingling from exertion despite four hours sleep.
"Would ya be taken advantage of the mentally disturbed, then, ye fuckin' whore?" Farf said coolly, his amber gold eye baleful.
"Mind your mouth, Farfarello." Brad warned.
"Aye, an where's yours been, Crawford? I'll speak me mind while I'm in it, tis the price you pay for keepin' me lucid when I'd rather be droolin' in ta corner."
"Eh, what's he going on about?" Youji's English sucked and understanding the Irishman's bizarre version was beyond him.
"Complaining as usual." Brad said calmly. "And as for you," He glared at Schuldig, "Don't give me nightmares."
Schu-schu smiled coyly. "Sah...you're so pretty in the morning." He praised. "My big hero."
Brad pinkened. "Stop it." he ordered. "We have business to attend to and...."
"..."I want everybody focused"!" Aya, Youji, Schuldig, Nagi and Omi chorused at him, to his complete annoyance.
"Stick in the muck." Farfarello said, highly amused at his anger.

He hauled Nagi up the stairs to the boy's room and threw him on the bed, shutting the door.
Nagi half sat up, shoving his hair out of his face, glaring back at him.
Crawford leaned on the door, breathing hard.
"Beat me if you're going to!" Nagi yelled at him. He just wanted this over with!

"I feel like killing you." Brad said evenly, despite his anger.
Nagi sat there, waiting for it.
"I put you in the best damn school in Tokyo and you get EXPELLED!"
"SO!" Nagi yelled back at him.
Brad rounded himself up. "If it were fighting, I would understand. If it were a problem with a teacher, I could possibly understand....But for INDECENT BEHAVIOR! What the HELL were you thinking!"
"I wasn't." Nagi said defiantly. It was that simple.

"And whose idea was it to go at each other in the supply closet?" Brad snarled.
"Mine." Nagi stated.
"Why? Why would you do a thing like that! You have a home, you have a bed, why take a stupid chance like that!"
Nagi shrugged. "I wanted to."
"Well I certainly didn't' want to go down to that jail and bail you out!" Brad announced to the whole world.
"Then maybe you should have sent Schuldig!" Nagi informed him.
"Right! Send HIM, with you and Omi caught in homosexual activity in an exclusive educational institute in Japan! Do you WANT the Law down on us! Because I really don't like the idea of doing jail time in Japan of all places! Do you have ANY concept of what they do to people even suspected of pandering children?"
Nagi frowned. "No body seemed to care much when I was on the street!"
"You're not on the street now!" Brad stated. "Damn it, Nagi, you've put us all under surveillance and you know it!"
"Why the hell would anyone care!" Nagi protested.
"Take a good look." Brad said icily.
Nagi still frowned. "So you're gaijen, so what?" He said quietly. He had learned to deal with the cruel teasing at school.
"Prejudice still runs bone deep in this country, Nagi. And a gaijen with an excessive income and no reasonably explainable means for it, with two teenagers in his custody, one of them under consensual age, caught getting in on in a closet? Put a big RED sign on me why don't you! Hello, police, criminal here! This could cost us our citizenship! And that means you go into a foster home! Because there is no way they'd let you leave the country with us!"
Nagi was beginning to let go of his defensive anger and really look at the problem. Yes, it had been embarrassing. And Omi was stuck downstairs, probably with Schuldig after him, despite the quiet. More likely with the quiet, with Schu-schu torturing him mentally.
"You're about to disappear." Brad stated.
Nagi looked up at him sharply.
"No records, no crime." Brad said. "I'm really disappointed in you, Nagi. You could have done something with the rest of your life. You've condemned yourself to This life. Good for nothing more than pulling the trigger on a gun."
"Well what was I supposed to become?" Nagi asked quietly. "And what's so wrong with this life?"
"Haven't you learned anything in the past two and half years?" Brad asked him coldly.
"Yeah." Nagi said. "That we win. And everybody else looses."
Brad sighed, closing his eyes. "I suppose that's it, then." He said quietly.
Then he turned and opened the door, leaving the room and shutting it behind him.

"These guys are supposed to be the best in Japan." The man behind the mahogany desk said to his three top men. "They know their way around the Yakuza, they've worked international. That massive hit on the opium ring in Iraq, rumor has it it was these guys. It's got their M.O. all over it."
"Awful expensive." One guy grumbled.
"If we're going to make it over here, we need to pay the price. It's not like we can't cut them loose later."
"I still don't like it." Another said. "What the hell do we know about these guys except they're pricey?"
"The leader's American." The Boss said. "An ex-extreme boxer by the name of Crawford. Supposedly, he was such a killer, they couldn't get him in the ring after the first couple of months. No one would take him on, even for the money they were puttin' up."
That pretty much spoiled the mental picture they had of him when they were announced and Crawford actually walked in.
The double doors to the palatial office were opened by two guards outside, and four men walked in. None of them looked at all like an ex-boxer, let alone the kind the extreme sports turned out.
The redheads caught the eye first. It was difficult to say which one more. Both were dressed in fine clothes, thousands of dollars going into soft natural fabrics hanging just so on trim hard bodies that moved with the grace of tigers. The long flame haired one with green eyes and subtly sensual body language of a woman, or the strangely cut magenta auburn one with the strip of diamonds hanging three inches off his left ear and purple eyes in a stone cold face. Then there was the tall sandy blond, wearing an outfit that for some reason, more than adequately covered everything but his midriff. The most normal looking one was still an escaped fashion plate, a black cashmere coat over his shoulders, charcoal colored Italian silk suit, polished pant boots, diamond cufflinks and Cartier watch, even the glasses he wore fine silver framed designer wear. His 1930's haircut was the only thing that made his heart shaped face masculine, that and the coldness in his chocolate colored eyes, once you were able to see it.
He was the one that came forward as the rest gave the place the eye. "I'm Crawford." he said. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. D'Angelo."
D'Angelo was struck very odd by this. He'd just been wondering which one was Crawford. His answer had come as if the man had know what was in his mind. Now that he looked at him, he saw the coat hid broad shoulders, and the man had a strong jaw, despite it's deceptively fine line. D'Angelo stood to reach across the desk to shake hands. "You were a boxer?"
Crawford peeled off a thin black leather glove and gave him a firm grip of a handshake. "I had hopes." he said calmly. "My associates, Schuldig, Aya/Ran Fujimiya, and Youji Kudo."

"I was expecting....a more mature crew...I suppose." D'Angelo said, noting that Crawford put the glove back on. "Would you care to discuss this over drinks? Michael, get our guests what ever they want."
"No, thank you." Brad said. "Let's keep this strictly business, shall we? Your offer is most generous. But my terms stand as they are. We work outside exclusively. We will not provide you or your household with guard. You are to call on us only for reinforcement, recovery or disposal. And we do not divulge information on our other employers. Needless to say, if there should be some conflict, a simple offer of more money will settle the question as to who we serve."
"How much would it take to buy your exclusivity?" D'Angelo inquired.
Brad smiled. It was a surprisingly evil smile. "Around eight million US a month, Mr. D'Angelo. We are expensive. Because we get the job done."
"Sounds to me as if you're running a nice little protection racket." D'Angelo said coolly. "Are we all paying you not to kill us all off for each other?"
The smile widened a bit more, and the head tipped a little, a sparkle in the eyes behind the silver framed lenses. "That would be telling, now wouldn't it?"
"Yet you're willing to attack the Yakuza? I'm curious. Why, when everyone else is so afraid of them here in Japan, are you willing to take them on?"
"We're that good." Crawford stated. "You pay enough, we'll wipe them out."
"Wouldn't that be killing the goose that laid the golden egg?" One of D'Angelo's men said archly.
Brad looked at him. It was like being considered for dissection. Vivisection.
"Not at all." He said. "Death is unavoidable. There will always be a need for my services somewhere in this world." He looked at D'Angelo. He took a computer disk out of his pocket between two fingers, holding it up. "This is all the information you'll need to deal with us." he flicked it onto the desk mat lightly. "The rest is up to you." He turned and walked out the door, his men behind him.
D'Angelo winced as the doors were shut. He'd been getting a head ache. He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a bottle of pills. "Get me some water." He ordered curtly.
"What a pack of freaks." One of his men said derisively. "If that's what they call enforcement here in Japan, I don't think we even need those guys."
D'Angelo picked up the disk and looked at it. "On the contrary. I think we do."

"Well?" Youji asked in the elevator.
Schuldig smirked. "He thinks we're freaks, but we'll get the job done."
"How nice." Youji said archly. "I wonder what gave him that impression?"
Schuldig reached fingertips to ruffle his bared tummy. "Gee, I wonder."
Youji caught his wrist and yanked, pulling him to him, an arm around his neck, his mouth over the other man's. Brad watched, amused. Aya watched Brad, thinking

about doing the same....
The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened.
Schuldig put the finish to the kiss and when they broke it up, saw that two very shocked Japanese women were standing there waiting to get the elevator, their eyes even wider when they saw that one of the two was actually another guy.
"Ladies." Youji said with polite elegance as they walked out past them.
The women giggled with embarrassment.

Chapter Five
"Paid"

"Damnit Yohji, why did you have to do that!" Aya tied the strips of cloth around the compresses, hoping to stop the blood loss.
"Could it possibly have been ta save yer stupid life!" Farfarello was trying very hard to keep the damn near anorexic man in a position to be bandaged in the back seat of the car despite the way Omi was taking corners. "Tsukiyono, slow down, you'll have the cops on us and then Crawford, and I'd rather die first than put up with his blather!"
"Yohji." Aya yelled at him. "Yohji are you with us!"
"...tired...."
"Don't die on me!" Aya ordered.
"Die on...Farf....?" Yohji rasped a weak laugh...it seemed so funny at the moment.

Crawford walked in with flowers.
It was such an odd sight. Yohji realized he'd forgotten flowers....
Crawford had that stressed look on his face, the bouquet in his hands. "You're full of holes." He said.
Yohji smiled. "They won't let me smoke."
"I...didn't see it coming..." he said awkwardly. "Not until the last minute."
"It didn't happen til the last minute." Yohji said. "Where are the others?"
"This is intensive care. They won't allow more than one visitor. Upsets their precious routine." He came to sit on the edge of the bed and set the bouquet aside, and then, leaned over and kissed him gently on the mouth.
Yohji responded, glad for any familiar touch. He'd woke up alone and thought himself abandoned again....
"They could at least shave you." Brad said.
"Hey, it took me four days to grow this." Yohji joked.
"Well, you had nothing better to do than lay around and grow hair." He caressed the fuzzy jaw. "Schu told me I had to do that."
"Damn telepath, can't get away with anything." Yohji sighed. "Hope it makes him happy."
"This one is from me." Brad kissed him again, this time a little longer, a little more relaxed about it.
"Sadist." Yohji said when he'd drawn away. "I'm incapacitated here."
"You were willing to die for Aya?" He searched Yohji's leaf green eyes.
Yohji didn't dare shrug, though he ached to. "I was willing to see him live, big difference."
Brad sighed. "As soon as they are willing to release you, I'll take you home and make him wait on you hand and foot." He grasped Yohji's hand and squeezed gently.

"Why, Bradley Crawford, who would ever guess you were such a romantic bastard." Yohji teased with almost his usual energy.
"Don't let it go to your head. I have to work twice as hard without you. And Schuldig whines about his back being cold." he started to get up.
Yohji kept his hand, looking at him. "Not so fast, man." He said quietly.
Brad settled again.
"I've got nothing better to do in here than think." Yohji said. "How much things have changed for all of us."
"It's best not to." Brad said pensively.
"There was a time I hated you." Yohji went on.
Brad was quiet.
"Then I got so jealous of you, I wanted to tear your guts out and feed them to the sharks. But now....I miss you." He squeezed the hand in his gently again. "I give up. I admit. I've lost. And it's true. I would do anything Schuldig wanted. To...have Aya. Fuck it...I'm grateful is what I'm saying." He pulled his hand away, annoyed at himself.
"Those drugs they fill you up with in here really mess up your mind, don't they?" Brad said. Then he leaned forward and whispered close to Yohji's ear, ever so softly. "I miss you, too. I like the way Schuldig has screwed up all our lives. I've never been so content." He kissed him on the temple. "Get well, Kudoh. I've work waiting for you." He got up this time. He gave the man a little smile, then turned and walked out.
Yohji sighed and settled a little more into the pillows. Now what kind of work, he wondered with a slow smile, would that be?

Nagi and Omi were being too loud, over excited about a new game for the system.
"Oh, MMMaaannnn, that move is awesome! How do you suppose they manage to track it so real!" Omi exclaimed.
"That's not so real, nobody can kick that high at that angle....try it!" Nagi challenged.
"NOT in the LIVING ROOM!" Brad put an end to it before it got any further and the lamp was taken out along with the glass table top. "Play the game or go practice in the rec-room, but not both!"
"How's Yohji!?" Omi demanded cheerfully shoving Nagi anyway.
"Alive." Brad sorted out the snail mail. Shit! Was it tax time again?
Nagi shoved Omi back.
"STOP it." Brad warned.
Too late, Omi bumped the end table the lamp wavered, Nagi tried to catch it with his power and it fell, smashing through the table top as Nagi fumbled it.
"Ooops." Nagi said.
"I warned you." Brad sighed, going into the kitchen. "You should practice more, Nagi, or stop being so distracted."

Omi knelt to help him pick up the bigger pieces of glass and put them in the trash can. "I think he means me." He said quietly.
"I think so, too." Nagi said, not happy.

Omi found him on the balcony, laying on the fake grass carpet, looking over the edge through the bars, absently kicking his feet in the air. He sat down next to him. "What are you thinking?"
"Nothing." Nagi said.
Omi leaned over. "If I give Schu forty thousand yen, he'll tell me."
Nagi's mouth twitched, kind a of frown-smile-smirk half hearted attempt.
"Everything I do is wrong."
"Would that be because you're a teenager?" Omi asked.
Nagi looked at him. "Duh."
"Okay, so I'm older by a year, I've been through it." Omi said. "I've already had this lecture from Yohji. You want it word for word, or just the high points."
"There are high points?" Nagi said dully.
"Yeah." Omi leaned on the railing, his back to the city. "You think you do everything wrong, but what do you do right? And who are you in competition with?"
Nagi thought this over.
Omi just waited for it to sink in.
Nagi sighed. "They're all grown up. They don't make mistakes like I do. And they expect me not to make mistakes and I'm not all grown up. Hell, I've been lucky to live this long."
"But we have." Omi said.
Nagi rolled up on his side and reached to put his hand on Omi's cross-legged thigh, finding his hand. "You could have not come to me."
Omi looked down at him. "I could have shot you down in cold blood, too. But here we are."
"Yeah." Nagi said, laying his head back down on his arm, holding Omi's hand, looking down at the city moving along just like it did every day, not knowing that despite the concrete and steel, it was still a jungle, and the predators rested, watching the herds move....

Schuldig sat up, looking at Aya with jealously glittering eyes. He had Brad, mouth, arms, everything. He was flat out monopolizing him.
"That's enough!" He shoved Aya's shoulder, pushing him away.
Brad sighed. This fight had been brewing....
Aya sat up now, too. "Back off, Schuldig!"
"YOU back off!" Schuldig tossed his head to clear his flame hair from his face.
"I was here first!"

"Because you're a greedy whore!" Aya accused.
"Who's GREEDY?" Schu was outraged. "Who GAVE you everything you have!"
"Who TOOK everything I had!" Aya retorted.
"Oh, now lets see....That would be...Your corpse of a sister!?!" Schuldig let it fly.
Brad covered in true boxer style, fists up, forearms blocking. It didn't help that he was on his back, naked and erect in the middle of a cat fight, with the cats being two 170 pound or so young men, expert in hand to hand combat and seasoned killers.
Somewhere in the name calling, slapping and hair pulling, he managed to slide out from under them and off the end of the bed, gathering up his pajamas. He looked at them trying to strangle each other and sighed. Then he went to the spare bedroom that by all rights should have been Aya and Yohji's, and locked the door. It didn't help one bit that he knew how it was going to end. He was still aroused and frustrated. He tossed his pajamas on the chair and flopped on the bed.
"Damnit! I can't BELIEVE I'm stuck with playing with myself!" He complained to the ceiling.

Schu came, noisy as ever, drenched in sweat and panting. Recovering a little, he moved to bite him on the back of his neck for good measure. "Give up?" he inquired.
Aya nodded, tears on his cheeks.
Schu pulled out and let his wrists go, sitting up.
"Damn it!" Aya swore..
"Don't ever mess with me, katchen." Schuldig hissed at him. "Rape is what I do best."
"Bitch." Aya said angrily.
Schuldig laughed. "You liked it!" he accused, proud of himself. Then he found his pack of cigarettes. Well actually, one of Yohji's, but who was counting? He took one out and lit it, looking down at Aya who was wiping at his face. "Don't cry. What's to cry for." He said coldly.
"What you said....about my sister...." Aya wiped his face again with his hand.
"Damn you!" He said shakily.
"And you believe me?" Schuldig sneered.
"Well? Was it true!"
"So sue me, I lied." Schuldig said snidely.
"Then what is the TRUTH!" Aya demanded.
Schu shrugged. "She was in a coma, her brain was dead. I lied, Aya, you didn't kill your sister when you signed the papers to withdraw care."
"Why would you say such a thing at all?"
"Hey, being pissed off makes that sweet ass of yours all the tighter." Schu

purred."You steal my man, babe, I'll fuck you over. Simple as that."
"I wasn't stealing him." Aya said, curled up on his side, having drawn up the blankets. Damn it hurt, someone being that rough!
"Well you were certainly taking up a hell of a lot of him!" Schu drew a deep drag on the cigarette and exhaled it in an annoyed huff.
Aya decided to just ignore him, not even thinking.
It took all of three minutes for this to get on Schuldig's nerves. He put the cigarette butt out and looked down at the maroon colored mop.
He thought it over some more. Well.....damn it.....he had been taking up too much of Brad's attention.....
He debated another cigarette. But Brad hated the room stinking of smoke. He examined a bite mark on his wrist. The skin was broken. Probably already infected. He sucked at it to make it bleed clean.
Then he looked down at Aya again.
He gave up.
"Sweetie?" He said softly.
No answer.
He leaned over on one elbow and drew a long lock of hair off Aya's ear and leaned over. "I know you're not asleep." he whispered.
Aya still ignored him.
Schuldig sighed. He ran a hand over an incredibly white shoulder and upper arm.
"Don't be mad at me."
"You're a sick fuck, Schuldig, to think you can get away with shit like this and no one be mad at you." Aya said quietly.
He pressed his lips to that pearl colored flesh. "Aya...." he slipped an arm around him. "Don't be angry at me anymore."
"Why the fuck not?" Aya stated.
"You're so spoilt." He got up and went to find Brad so he could at least get some sleep.

"I can't believe you took this job." Nagi said. "How could you take this job?"
"That would be you questioning me." Brad informed him.
"Hell, yes!" Nagi retorted. "After the lecture you gave me...."
"After the lecture I gave you, the people you got all too interested in us came snooping around, Little Boy." Brad said icily. "Do you have any idea of how hard it is to argue with Japanese authorities about Not wanting to work for them?"
Nagi frowned. "We're screwed, right?"
"Not if we do this job."
Nagi put his hands to his head, pulling the hair back from his forehead and looking very stressed, sighing deeply. "This sucks."
"You're always bitching about how I expect a boy to handle a man's job...."
Nagi thumped his fists down on the table. "Sadist!" He accused.

Brad just smiled evilly at him.

(Target.) Schuldig's annoying voice said mentally in both Omi and Nagi's heads.
(Sah, how I wish YOU were out here....) Nagi muttered at him.
(Shut up and listen. White Lexus four door, driver, guy in back seat....)
(Spotted him.)
That evil chuckle...(Do try to look innocent, Brat.)
(Hah!) Nagi just had to yank his chain. (There but for Brad goes YOU, you PIG!)
A sharp migraine like pain hit him briefly, but damn, it was worth it!
Sure enough, the car slowed.

(Bait taken.) Schuldig relayed to Brad from the fire escape he was on.
The car had slowed down, stopped and backed up. Omi had gone to talk to the man in the back seat, and now both boys were in the car.
(My, but Tsukiyono is a brazen thing.) Schu commented.
(And you're surprised?) Brad thought wryly back at him.
(Just because you can see ahead doesn't mean you can make fun of us slower ones, mein Mann.)
(Pay attention, Schuldig.) Brad ordered.
(Turning left.) Schu reported with a sigh. (Aya, your tag.) He shared the mental image with him.
(Got him.) Aya thought back a moment later. He pulled away from the curb to follow the car in the non-obvious little Nissan Brad had insisted he drive for this. He hated it. Being reduced to a Nissan and ordered to wear a t-shirt and jeans, take his jewels off and to tie up his hair under a cap like some common....person....again.
The target was a dealer in children. The police had done their best. Now it was under the table. Since the government had disbanded the Crushers, there was no one to do the really dirty work of beating down the gangs. Having discovered Crawford's....muscle for hire?.....business the people in charge had made him an offer. Get this guy, or loose custody of Naoe Nagi.
The two men had been quite graphic about what happened to little perverts in juvenile detention. "Better he use some of his time saving decent kids from getting grabbed." The more obnoxious man had said.
Brad had not told Nagi about this meeting. It had been all he could do to keep from pounding the man into a bloody pulp for his attitude. As far as they were concerned, he was already tried and found guilty of being no better than the creeps they were after, and they had no problem forcing him to use 'his boy' to do their dirty work.
(Let me kill them,) Schuldig had hissed in his mind when they'd left.
(No. We'd be the first suspects in the matter.) Brad had said. (Wait. They will find they have taken on the wrong man soon enough.)

So now Aya was following them in the car, thinking how this all sucked so much. He actually felt damn near naked with out the cool caress of platinum against his skin, the weight of the diamond ribband gone from his ear. At each stop signal, he absently fretted at the lobe, and scowled at his bare fingers on the wheel. Annoyed, he picked up the palm sized digital phone and opened it, hitting the button for Crawford's. "You owe me for this!" He hissed.
"What now?" Brad asked.
"Must you always snap at me?" Aya asked.
"Who snapped first?"
Aya frowned. "Buy me that bracelet and I'll forgive you."
Brad laughed. "You're starting to clank when you walk. Do you still have them?"
"Of course." he said, watching the car in front of him, stuck in traffic. "And when I get home, you're paying for this."
"You're too obvious as it is, Ran." Brad deliberately used his male name.
Aya frowned, turning after the white car in front. "They're heading toward the docks. Bracelet, Brad."
"What the hell do you need with more diamonds?" Brad's voice came, calmly amused.
"Haven't you ever heard, U.S. of A. Boy? Diamonds are a girl's best friend."
"You want it so bad, tell Yohji."
Aya scowled. "Ssssaaahhh! Don't be like this to me, Lover."
There was a heavy sigh. "He's not going to put up with you forever."
"You're forgetting he brought me to Your bed."
The silence was much longer this time. Then he spoke softly. "You could at least go to the hospital."
"No." Aya stated. He was never going into a hospital willingly again.
"You're so cold."
"And Schu-Schu's so hot, and you're caught in between." Aya purred. "Don't tell me you don't like it, Lover, all that fire and ice. Do you want me to melt? Buy me more ice...." He laughed softly.
In his car, Brad closed his eyes, momentarily over come by the memory.....Damn Schuldig and his big mouth....Then he growled into the phone. "Go see Yohji, I'll buy you TWO bracelets, Princess....now be a good girl and FOCUS ON THE FUCKING JOB!"
Aya winced at the phone, held suddenly away from his ear. Then he held it back to his ear gingerly. "Since you put it That way." he said sweetly. "A job is a job. I'm parking the car and going in. It's a warehouse." he relayed the address.
Schuldig got into the car and looked at him. From the look on his face, Schu automatically checked his mind, basically in long habit of self defense. "Oh, Brad." He said, dismayed.
"One of these days.....I'm going to cash him in." Brad growled, thinking evil thoughts of death and dismemberment.....

At a stop light, Schuldig moved to caress him. "You spoil him so."
"He's a damn pretty toy." Brad admitted. No use lying to his Schu-schu.
"And if I started fussing for expensive things?"
Brad glanced at him. "You don't need anything to make you more beautiful to me, Baby." He said honestly.

They were such pretty boys, with their blue eyes, one so dark as to be navy, the other violet. Still androgynous even at their ages. They'd go for a good price....when he was done with them....
Omi wondered who needed a telepath when you could practically read people's faces most of the time. In the car, he'd automatically shut himself off to the man's touches and caresses. Nagi had had it a bit harder, his temperament too fine to put up with such things. The man's ego had taken it for shyness. Well, perhaps it was. But Omi had been too well trained by Weiss to bother with how his body was being pawed.
Crawford wasn't happy with him. He knew he blamed him, the older, for the whole janitor's closet thing. It was hard, seeing Aya change so because of him. And Yohji....Yohji had needed maybe some psychological counseling before, but now...he let them walk all over him, because he wanted Aya, and Aya wanted only Crawford.
The Aya he'd known for over a couple of years was gone. This new Aya....vain and arrogant, spoilt and greedy, emotional, manipulative, sometimes it was hard to figure out just exactly when the change had happened. And maybe....this was the real Aya. He'd always stood out, he'd always been so cold, almost hateful.
But to see his strong, confident leader reduced to Crawford's 'Princess', and liking it!
He smirked. He looked at Nagi, on the other side of the pervert who's hand had slid up the leg of his shorts to play with him coyly.
Nagi was damn near pouting.
Omi half turned, making himself more available. "You're making my boyfriend jealous." He informed the man.
"So, you two are actually....a pair?"
"Since we were babies." Omi knew just exactly how to turn pederasts on. He could always carve him to ribbands later to make up for the wrench in his stomach. He smiled sweetly, knowing he looked as innocent as an angel.
Nagi shot him a look that said, you bastard, do I really know you? Then looked out the window, keeping an eye out for the guy's cars.

Brad stood there, cold as ice himself, facing down the detective in charge of the operations.
"Quite a professional job." The man said, pleased to have the fancy dressed foreigner under his thumb.

A professional job? Brad took that one to heart. I'll show you professional, you swine.....
(Easy, Brad.) Schu warned.
"Though what their parents will do with them...." The detective said. "Most probably didn't want them in the first place." He smirked.
(Okay, my turn to want to kill him.) Schu stated litely.
"Tell your masters I've paid our dues." Brad stated through clenched . "Release my son!"
The man's eyebrow went up a little at this. "We need to get his statement. Then you can pick him and the other one up at the station."
"Take his statement now, in front of me. He's a juvenile and I know his rights!"

Schuldig was a little amazed at this last bit of Crawford's surfacing. To have him finally admit to how he felt about the little creepy boy....though Schu had learned to like his team mate, the boy was perhaps more whacked then he was, in his opinion.

"Well." Nagi said in the car on the way home. "That was just....special."
"Mm-hmm." Brad agreed coolly.
Nagi didn't want to be too close to Omi right now. He found Brad's arm about him comforting. It was reassuring to have a man he could lean on and touch and not be molested by. "Do we have to stay in Japan?"
Brad was a little surprised by this. How long had he been in this country? His entire adult life....so much so that Schuldig harassed him about thinking in japanese instead of English. "This is my territory, Nagi. I won't be run out of it by these....hyenas. Clearing up that ring of child slavers has made me do some thinking. This has to be to our advantage. We'll take care of those pigs." he gave him a little squeeze and rubbed his arm.
"Any news on Yohji?" Omi asked.
"He's doing well." Brad said coolly, his glare on the back of Aya's seat.
"I'm going!" Aya snapped.

Bored. Bored. Bored. More bored. And damn it, he was getting hooked on soap operas.
The door opened. He expected it was a nurse. He kept his eyes closed, to dull witted from bed rest and meds to care.
A whiff of Fendi cologne made him open them in surprise. "Aya?" He looked up at him.
Okay.
He was getting worse.
Aya stood there in a silver/charcoal Valentino silk suit maybe a size too loose just for style and an amethyst silk shirt that was more than likely, dyed to

match his eyes. The diamond ribband ear dangle had been the start. Now he wore a half caret on the crease of his right nostril, four nice fat ones on his slender fingers, a nasty great pendant on a platinum chain peeked out of the unbuttoned placket of the shirt and god only knew what he had on underneath the lush clothing. And when he raised a hand to pull that fussy habit of fretting at his hair, his cuff link flashed and a four row pave bracelet caught the light from the window like a sheet of radar reflector.

What had happened to the boy with the sleeves hacked off his sweatshirt?

Hunh. Buried alive under Schuldig and Crawford, that's what.

"Between you and Crawford, I haven't a chance of convincing any of the nurses to take me seriously enough to be seduced." He said coolly. Oh, the irises and grass were the last straw. Could he be any more of a picture? And was that....lip gloss....???

"Don't be an ass, Yohji, what do you need with nurses." He set the bouquet aside to draw a chair up.

"Nice bracelet." Yohji said. "New?"

Aya got the message. And ignored it. "How are you?"

"Bored out of my mind and ten pounds heavier. How are you?"

Aya sighed. "Alive, thanks to you."

"Tell Brad I said thanks, I owe him." Yohji stated.

Aya frowned. "You know how I hate hospitals."

Yohji sighed, looking at the ceiling. "I take a hole in the heart for the guy and he pouts at having to visit me. Go away, Aya."

"No. I'm to stay the whole hour." Aya said. "You can be civil."

"Do you miss me," Yohji asked, still not looking at him. "When Brad's only able to see Schuldig no matter how you make yourself sparkle, do you miss my eyes on you?"

A little sob made him look.

Damn, Aya was getting to be such a girl!

"I'm sorry, Yohji, you know how I hate these places...." Aya pulled out a handkerchief. "I have nightmares of you laying here...all tubes and wires...."

"What the fuck are you crying for!" Yohji demanded. "Stop it!"

"Don't yell at me!" Aya retorted.

This, coming from the guy who used to yell at him all the time! Suddenly he wished for Schuldig, to tell him what was going on in that expensively coiffured head. He usually dumped a girl by the time they got to the early stages of pouty crying. He'd had to put up with it from 'Ran' half a year now.

"Aya, I'm sorry. I just....want out of here, that's all. Aya is that lip gloss? Can I have a kiss? I'm starved for anything that even tastes like sex."

"Mou, Yohji." He dabbed at his nose. "You're such a pig."

"Well?" Yohji insisted.

Aya moved to lean over and kiss him. Good thing he'd shaved. It was lingering and sweet and tasted of honey. Exactly the way an Aya Fujimiya should taste....

"Get me out of here." He whispered when he could.
Aya licked his mouth, exciting him. "Brad says you stay until the doctors say your heart is healed."
"Disobey him." Yohji moved up to catch those sweet lips again....
"Ha!" Aya laughed, unable to go on with the romance. "You couldn’t afford it." he wiped at his eyes again and blew his nose and was Ran again. "So let me fill you in on the latest news. Turn that damned thing off." He grabbed the remote and silenced the television.

Chapter Six
"Subtle Music"

Brad had been ignoring them. Pests, the both of them. He was trying to sort out the books to deal with the taxes and they were fussing for sex.
Yohji, at least, left him alone, sitting on the sofa, watching some movie on the television, oblivious. The doctors had released him, but he was under warning not to strain himself at all, his chest cavity and heart muscles still weak from the operation to close up the bullet hole. Nagi and Omi were off somewhere. Heaven only knew where Farfarello got to these days.
Aya and Schuldig had put on a CD and were dancing close and slow to some samba or rhumba thing, he didn't know, it was just Latin sounding.
For all the arguing they did, they got along well enough when it came to getting what they wanted.
He knew they were conspiring against him. They would gang up on him, and face consequences later.
It was all done quietly, Schuldig in Ayas' mind. They swayed to the music, gently nuzzling, soft kissing, gazing into each other's eyes.
And plotting to get him up to bed so they could then start another fight over him.
"Can't you two just go fuck each other?" he growled.
They looked at him, green and purple eyes narrowed like two wild cats on a stray lamb.
Then Schuldig kissed Aya again and they ignored him.
And the phone rang.
Aya sighed and gave up, leaving Schu to go get it.
Except that Schuldig followed him and worked his hands up under his shirt and down his pants while he tried to deal with the caller.
Aya tried very hard to concentrate, but when Schuldig slipped his pants off his hips and knelt to begin covering the white flesh of his rump with sensual kisses, he damn near lost it!
"Brad! Phone!" Aya put the caller on hold and braced himself against the table as Schuldig's mouth and hands destroying all his balance, physical and mental.
"It's....D'Angelo....uunnnhhhh!" Fingers....
He wasn't going anywhere near that mess. He picked up the phone on the desk and pushed the button. "Crawford." he stated.
"What the hell does it take to keep you OFF my people!" D'Angelo demanded.
"I'm sorry, to whom are you referring?" Brad said calmly.
D'Angelo proceeded to inform him in very loud, completely understandable English as to the incarceration and interrogation demise of one of his partners....the child merchant.
"Hold on a moment, please." Brad pressed the button. "Schuldig! Turn off that damned stereo!"

"I'm listenin' to that, man." Yohji complained. "Let it ride."
"How can you watch television and listen to the stereo?" Brad complained.
"It's a boring movie." Yohji said, not moving his lanky body one inch to solve the problem.
Schuldig pulled away from Aya, getting up to go turn down the music, a harassed look on his face. He went right back to Aya, pressing to him, running his hands over his now bare torso and hips. He was real busy right now....
Brad sighed and pressed the button again. "I'm sorry, we seem to be having rather a party here at the moment." he gave them an icy look. "I didn't know Mr. ---------- was an associate of yours. The contract in no way lead to you."
"No, but it cost me plenty!" D'Angelo said angrily.
Brad slapped his palm over the receiver. "Yohji!"
Yohji was kneeling up on the sofa, looking pensively over the back at Schu and Aya....."I'm not doing anything!" He complained.
"Go for a walk!" Brad ordered. "The doctor said mild exercise!"
Sighing heavily, Yohji got up and got his coat from the foyer closet. "Never get to have any fun ever again at this rate...." he grumbled.
"And NOT to the strip joint!" Brad warned.
Yohji looked back at him. Damn his talent! Then he shut the door on him.
Brad looked at the two red heads. Damn it. Were they trying to kill Yohji in his weakened state? He remembered D'Angelo. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?" He said softly polite as a snake.
"You're dead, Crawford!" D'Angelo said coldly. "Do you hear me? Dead!"
"Now, Mr. D'Angelo, you don't want me for an enemy." Brad warned, undoing the knot of his tie and pulling it off.
"HA!" D'Angelo hung up on him.
He put the receiver down and got up, stripping off his shirt. "D'Angelo has decided he no longer requires our services." he said, walking over to them.
"We'll dispose of him Friday." He grabbed Schuldig's copper flame mop and yanked his head back, kissing him hungrily. Then he got Aya by his hair as well and hauled them both up stairs to the bed.

Nagi and Omi came out of the movie theater in the mall, both pretty much wound down and looking to go home and sleep. Nagi walked with one hand in Omi's back pocket, one in his own, Omi, an arm about Nagi's shoulders. Nagi was now past caring what people thought or remarked about them. Omi was letting his hair grow. He looked even more like a girl, until anyone looked twice and saw he was a little old to be flat chested and narrow hipped still.
Nagi had been upset with him after the whole police thing. To discover that his Omitchi was as easy about having strange men grope his body as Schuldig....had thrown their relationship off track. Then Omi had explained to him about the kidnapping and what had happened. And how he'd decided just not to deal with it

at all was the best way to deal.
‘Why should I spend years in therapy when I can just accept it and get over it’ was how he’d put it.
Nagi had thought it over. He didn’t much deal with his past either. It was just that....he wanted to see his love with perfect eyes, and this was a major flaw. Bu....he didn’t want to loose him....
"Oi, Yohji, who let you out?" Omi spotted him seated on the stone bench outside the building’s entrance, smoking a cigarette.
"Orders. Things got little hot and I’m far too fragile for such lurid going’s on." He drawled sarcastically.
"Never mind the bullet wounds." Omi teased. "I don’t know how you survived it before. Nagi and I can hear what’s going on in there. You guys aren’t quiet."
"Pour salt in a sword cut, why don’t you?"
"Ahh." Nagi said.
Yohji flicked the butt away and got up, looking at the doors. "What do you want to bet we can hear them down here in the lobby?" He imitated Schuldig’s gasping sobs of ecstasy noisily.
Nagi and Omi went into a giggling fit and an lady walking her dog was scandalized.

The doctor put the X-rays up on the light box. "The wounds are healing quite well."
"So, Doc, when can I go back to being ME?" Yohji asked.
She looked at him. "You mean a regular lifestyle? As long as you don’t strain yourself with alcohol and drugs, AND I might add, smoking, you should be less easily tired out in a few weeks. Other than not lifting anything heavier than ten pounds, you’re fine."
"I MEAN I’ve got a couple of honeys that have been going without the Youdge, When can I go back to screwing like the two legged rabbit I am?" He said in a low purr.
She frowned a little. "Do you realize what a dinosaur you are when it comes to your health?" She asked flatly.
"That would make me a rare beast." Yohji was in full flirt mode. "And flattery will get you anywhere, Doc...."
She shoved him away from her. "That will be all, Kudoh-san." She stated.
"Seriously Doc, I need it in writing." He said, not to be deterred. "You know, like for an employer that I’m okay for regular work....?"
She glared at him. "Your ‘girlfriends’ must be very picky, considering how low they are obviously willing to go."
She sooo want’s me, Yohji thought egotistically. "Girls are easy. It’s the guys. They get more than a little rough and I can’t play till I’m okay."
She went pale.

"Ha!" He said, "The look on your face! Seriously Doc, my fiancé won't give me any until I'm cleared for it. Just write her a nice little note telling her I'm not going to drop dead in the middle of doing the wild thing so I can have my life back?" He wheedled.

He slapped the note down on Brad's desk. "Read it and weep." He crowed. "No more hogging all the action."
Brad actually read the note over carefully. "It says you're not to engage in extended strenuous activity. Normal sex of about twenty minutes duration should not injure you."
"Gees, did she have to get so graphic?" Yohji complained.
Brad smirked. "Looks like you're still out of luck...."
"Common, Brad!" Yohji whined. "Don't be a prick!"
"I can't have you weakening the team, Kudos." Brad said litely, terribly amused. "You're still off active duty for another two weeks." He pulled the desk calendar over and made a note of this decision.
Yohji did a slow burn. "Hey, it says twenty minutes. If you're so concerned....YOU deal with it, you control freak!"
Brad sat there and looked up at him speculatively.
Yohji leaned on his hands on the desk, looking right back at him. "Time we dealt with your penetration issues, Brad." He said sultrily.
A flash went across those chocolate eyes, like lightening. Yohji had seen it before, when Brad had gotten a premonition. Brain electricity or something, an extra bright firing along the sensors of his optical nerves?
What ever it was, Brad's evil smirk didn't even flinch. "Do you want to die, Kudoh?"
"Okay, so I like it uke just as well." Yohji backed down as smooth as if he hadn't made the threat at all. "And...now would be good."
Brad sighed, looking at the paper work all over the desk. Taxes. He hated taxes. Then he got up an came around the desk to draw Yohji into his arms. He was so thin, so fine boned.
Yohji kissed him hungrily then broke it off. "I think I'm going to come right now, just having someone to hold me after so long..."
"Ah-ah. I want the whole twenty minutes." Brad said.

He went slow and careful with him, drawing off his clothes, caressing the bullet scars, the long y scar across the ribs from the heart operation. "You were so perfect..." He frowned.
"Don't make me any more self conscious." Yohji requested softly.
Brad pressed a kiss on his mouth. "Are you okay?" He asked.
"Kind of.....dizzy...."
He got him to the bed and made him lay down. "Do you realize we've never been

alone together?" He said, unbuttoning his shirt.
"You're not counting that time we ran into each other in that parking complex and I tried to kill you, are you?" Yohji asked.
Brad smiled a little. "Should I?" He finished stripping and sat down on the edge of the bed, half leaning over him, sliding his hand up the other man's hip.
Yohji smiled lazily and undid the catch on his watch, taking it off and putting it aside.
"Should you?" He asked back at him.
Brad got on him, kissing him hungrily. "Revenge is so sweet, Weiss." he growled.
"As long as you use the lube." Yohji warned mildly.
Brad laughed softly. "Yohji...." He kissed him and looked into his eyes. "Did I ever tell you you were my favorite?"
Yohji pulled the glasses off and put them aside as well. "Now that we're both disarmed, You are the biggest liar in history. But I think I can believe that for at least twenty minutes if you do....it.....just....right." He melted with a sigh as Brad got to work on him.

"You screwed Yohji." Schuldig said, sitting in the kitchen, cleaning a sniper's rifle.
"He needed it." Brad got a beer out of the fridge and sat down.
"He could have come to me." The redhead said.
"You're too rough, Baby. The doctor said normal sex, not ride him into the ground and then kick his ribs in sex."
"I wouldn't have been rough with him." Schu protested mildly, his eyes on his work.
"Someone is jealous." Brad sipped his beer from the bottle. "And it wasn't my idea, it was his."
"I gave Aya to you. Yohji was mine."
"Your's, mine and, the girl next door's." Brad said, feeling a little silly.
Schu looked at him icily then back at the gun parts. "Is he okay?"
"Resting quietly." Brad reached over to catch his hand. "Where IS the girl next door?"
"Picking up the Porsche from the body shop." Schuldig said. "That scratch last week, remember?"
"I'm lucky he didn't want a new one." Brad frowned briefly and had a rather large swallow of beer.
"Don't let him black mail you any more." Schu advised. "Smack him when he starts crying. You never stopped to be so fine with me."
"You never cried." Brad accused mildly. "Odd, how he turned out to be a bigger whore than you."
"At least I'm honest about it." Schu looked coolly at him again. The cool turned to warm when he realized Brad was looking at him rather predatorily. Screw

cleaning the gun...Screw Brad! He got up and went to haul Brad's chair out so he could straddle his lap and kiss him. "Got any left for me?" He purred, moving his crotch against Brad's with a hell of a lot more than just suggestion.....
"Baby." Brad french kissed him back. "I'll have some left for you when I'm dead in my grave."
"Hmmmm, when was the last time we did it in the kitchen...?"
"Oh, no, you don't." Brad got up, still holding him slung about his hips. "Lucky me you're such a light weight."
"Mmmmm, you're so strong." Schu said, feeling really silly and liking being in this position. "Think you can make it up the stairs with me?"
Brad put the bottle down on the table and hefted him up and over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, then picked up the bottle again. "This will do."
"Brad, put me down!" Schu protested. "Brad, this is embarrassing!"
"No one is here to see but Yohji and he's not looking." Brad smacked him on the tight denim clad ass. "And how many times have I seen you do this to other guys? Take your punishment like a man, you big baby."

Yohji came out of a strangely drifting sleep to hear that gawdawful noise from the other bedroom. Schu's at it again, his mind registered. Oh, how he could sooo sympathize.
Brad must be on viagra or something. That man had the most serious stamina.... He fell back into a deeper sleep with a smile on his face.

Aya came home, hanging the keys on the rack over the foyer table. The place was quiet. Farfarello's keys were gone, as were Omi's, but the other three sets were there. He looked around.
Then he frowned. The damn tax paperwork was still all over the desk.
He went upstairs.
The door to the spare bedroom Yohji had been ordered off to was shut. He opened it carefully.
Yohji lay in a tangle of sheets, sprawled belly down, snoring ever so softly.
He shut the door and went to the other bedroom.
Schuldig lay draped across Brad, both sound asleep and naked, Brads' hand tangled in Schu's unruly locks, Schu's head over his heart. It was just too damn precious. He went in and plunked down on the bed deliberately to wake them. "Hi, I'm home." he stated.
They woke suddenly, startled. Then calmed down almost instantly.
"Aya.....why so noisy....?" Brad complained, fumbling for his glasses.
Aya picked them up and opened the temple pieces to slot them onto his face for him. Then he leaned over and kissed him. "I'm lonely." he complained. "Why is everyone asleep in the middle of the afternoon?"
Schuldig sniffed and rubbed his nose, then sat up, scratching his bottom and

ribs, then stretching with a deep happy sigh. "A. Laziness, B. Good sex." he looked down at Brad. "Der war Himmel, mein grosser starker Geliebter." He caressed the American's cheek lovingly.
"Dann muss Himmel ein verfluchter noiseyplatz sein." Brad snickered.
"Will you two stop babbling in German?" Aya complained.
Schuldig got up off the bed and scratched some more. "I'm for a shower. He's all yours, Sweetie. If there's any left after doing Yohji and me." He went off to the master bathroom and shut the door.
Aya looked down at Brad. "Well?" he said icily.
"Take those clothes off and lets find out." Brad said simply. My, but he was on a roll today. In fact, it was rather nice to just fuck the afternoon away and forget about the tax work.
He watched Aya peel off his clothes, revealing a fortunes' worth of diamond set platinum, the earring, the nose piercing, the rings, the bracelets, armlets and necklaces, the pierced nipples with their solitaires, the loose belt of diamond pave hanging on his hips, the anklets, the purple tattoo stating 'expensive' in Kana on his lower right back.
He was cold and luscious and the purple shimmer lipstick added to the bizarre image he presented, reminding Brad of an illustration in an Edger Rice Burroughs's Mars series book. "Mmmm, my Princess..." Brad took off the glasses and tossed them back on the bedside table. "Come down here." He reached up. Aya slipped into his arms, kissing him hungrily, stretching and spreading his legs as he was rolled onto his back, thrilled to the pressure of Brad's body on his.
And Brad laughed mentally, thinking how making love to Aya was like rolling in treasure.

Stupid fucking taxes....
He slapped the pencil down and pushed his hair back tight from his forehead, wanting to just scream.
Nagi and Omi were hunched over their lap tops, junk food all over the coffee table, empty soda bottles everywhere...working like hell to do the job he'd assigned them
Destroy D'Angelo electronically. Bank accounts, payments, credit, any supplies and services what so ever, from banking transfers to the gardening service at his house. Even the maid was called and canceled. The gas cards, the registration on his cars, the lease on his mistress's luxury apartment, his kids kicked out of school, his wife informed of his mistress, his father's senior care facility. Everything, anywhere in the world that had belonged to D'Angelo was now neatly removed from him.
It was like a game to those two, giggling and laughing and seeing who could rack up more 'points'.

He watched them and looked at the mess in front of him, and then looked at them again. And an even more evil plan formed in his mind.....

They were in the elevator of the building D'Angelo had a floor of for his purposes.
Farfarello claimed a corner, Nagi and Omi another, the rest leaning on the pine railings or standing comfortably.
"You know what I don't like about those movies?" Yohji was saying. "The way they portray assassins. They make us out to be either some super physical obsessed perfectionists, or freaky assed looser terrorists."
"Let's see hands, people." Schuldig said. "Who here is a super physical obsessed perfectionist freaky assed looser terrorist?"
"Shut up, Schuldig." Brad said wearily.
"My point exactly!" Yohji said. "I mean, Weiss was supposed to be the good guys, right? And you guys in Schwarz were the bad guys. But we're all out to do one basic thing. Kill people for a living. Now what are we? Gray?" He rolled his eyes.
"A pack a bloody ragin' queens is what ya are." Farfarello said. "I'm movin' out, Crawford. I can't bring m'girl home to you lot a pansies, she'll think me more nuts than I am."
"That's a comfort, seeing as how the last one you brought home cost me a new floor and re-carpeting." Brad said coolly to him in English. "And is she prepared to see to it you take your medications and eat regularly, or face getting sliced up like a Christmas goose?"
"She's a nurse from the clinic." Farf admitted, suddenly a bit shy.
"Farfie, you MAN, you!" Schuldig said teasingly proud of him. "God, she must be totally fucking sick!"
"Mind yer manners, ye wee filthy bitch dog." Farfarello told him.
"Grrr, Ruuff!" Schu-schu barked at him suggestively.
Brad slapped him up backside the head sharply.
Schuldig pouted. It had stung!
Aya took his arm and drew him to him comfortingly. "Stop hitting him, Brad." he said.
Brad gave him a cool look. If he didn't have balls.....
"It's just a job, like any other." Yohji said. "Why do they have to ruin it in the public's eye?"
"We're evil, that's why." Nagi said. "We kill people, that makes us evil."
"So do soldiers in war. What makes it so different? Not the money. Soldiers get paid too."
"They're doing it to defend their country, under orders."
"So? We're defending ourselves. You go into this work, you might as well slap a target on your back. And what kind of a fucked up world would this place be if

there weren't people like us to do the job right? Amateurs, out killing everyone and anyone. Look at the crime rates. All these little street gangs, and the mess in the United States and what's left of Russia?"
"Don't take it so seriously, Kudo." Brad said. The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors open. "Okay, people let's do this."

D'Angelo was a broken man. He was sweating profusely, his suit jacket and tie off, his shirt sleeves rolled up, his hair messed from pulling at it. He paced the expensive khelim carpet, drinking the last of the good whiskey and knowing he would have to send someone down to pay cash for more if he wanted it. No more delivery service. No more nothing! Damn it!
The two bullets taking out the guards outside were silent, so he was not prepared when the doors were kicked in to the reception office, then to this office and a nasty array of guns was pointed around the room on everyone in it. Crawford stood there, hands in the pockets of his black Burberry trench coat, pretty as a picture.
So, the Devil had come to collect him.
"I warned you." Crawford said softly.
"We can cut a deal...." D'Angelo said in desperation.
"You have nothing left to offer."
"My men, an entire army...."
"Is as broken as you.' Brad said. He looked at the few remaining with D'Angelo.
"Schuldig? See anything you like?"
"Sah, Brad, no lookers." Schu made a face. "I'm just not in the mood."
"Well. Spared from a fate worse than death." Brad smiled angelically. "Kill them. Messily." The angel went evil.

Nagi gazed with half closed eyes up at Omi working away at him. It felt so good...it had been an exciting day, destroying that gangster, leaving them both in an over hormonally aroused mood. They'd barely been able to get upstairs, but Brad was mad about the sofa having to be cleaned three times running....
Omi reached the breaking point and couldn't hold himself up any longer, collapsing on him, slipping his arms around him, pushing as hard as he could. Nagi held onto him, straining with him.
He felt Omi's penis jump spasmodically and the warm fluid run out between them, and came himself, filling Omi, with a soft cry of joy.
Their mouths found each other and they kissed for what seemed forever.
Until it was broken up by a muffled laughter and a shoe hitting the wall. "Hey, quiet down over there!" Brad's voice yelled. Then there were peels of laughter from four supposedly 'mature' males.
Nagi blushed and swore.
Omi giggled and rolled of onto his back. Then he found Nagi's hand and held it

up between them at their shoulders. "Hey, fair's fair." He said, looking into Nagi's navy blue eyes.
"Omi." Nagi said softly. "I love you."
Omi moved to kiss him again. "Everything leading up to us was worth it." he said softly, stroking the silver black hair.

"Those brats." Schuldig said, snuggling up to Brad, one arm spared to hold Yohji's hip so that his front pressed Schu's bottom harder.
Brad squeezed him and Aya closer, Aya so cold and Schuldig so hot.....
"Oh, this has got to stop." Yohji said. he freed himself of Schuldig to climb over and arrange himself on top of Brad between them, kissing him. "Me first." He said.
"Damn it, Yohji, NO!" Aya protested.
"What the fuck!" Schuldig said angrily.
Brad closed his eyes and prayed.

Nagi felt sick, sitting at Brad's desk the next morning, looking at all the paperwork. "I don't even know where to start!" He whined.
Omi picked over the piles. "Some where. Where are the forms?" They had until five o'clock to get everything ready for the filing deadline
"Aaahhhh!" Nagi put his head down hard on the desk. "I HATE being SCHWARZ!"

Chapter Seven
"A Touch of Forever"

"I don’t know, Brad, this whole thing gives me the creeps." Youji complained.
"Is it just me or do we spend a lot of time in elevators?" Nagi wondered aloud.
"This supernatural crap never goes right." Youji continued. "How do they know that figurine has the secret to immortality?"
"Who cares, they’re willing to pay to get it." Aya said.
"There’s something to it." Brad said. "But I’m not sure it’s what they think it is. It’s all fuzzy. I don’t think it’s important to us. Money is money and if we have to kick some ass to get it, all the more fun."
"MMmm, Bradley, beat some body up for me." Schuldig purred.
"Stop it, Schuldig." Brad ordered. "We’re here on business, not foreplay."
Youji snickered. "Breathing is foreplay with him."
Nagi and Omi started to giggle.
Schuldig glared at them. Nagi had been such a serious little mite before, completely tolerable. Now, the two of them together, were hell on wheels. Teenagers!
The elevator stopped and they got out. Thick carpet padded footsteps and they entered yet another tastefully decorated, over priced, Tokyo office. This one was done with ivory and middle eastern themes, two full tusks arched behind the head guy’s desk, quite illegal.
"Mr. Crawford." the man said in excellent english. "My associates assure me you are an excellent man for the job."
(He’s worried you aren’t) Schuldig conveyed to him.
"No need to worry, Kurihara-san." Brad stuck to Japanese. "My men and I make a specialty of...un-usual cases."
"So I’ve come to understand." Kurihara said in Japanese. "You speak quite well for an American."
"Thank you." Brad said.
(He’s got men in the police, he knows they call you in.) Schuldig leaned on a wall, hands in pockets, a disarmingly pleasant smirk on his face. (He also thinks I’m the epitome of the oriental demon.)
(You are.) Brad thought at him.
(He thinks Aya’s a fag.) Schu snickered mentally.
(I wonder why?) Brad glanced at Aya.
Aya wore eyeliner and lip stick now. Nothing over done, but then, he didn’t need to do any more to be beautiful with his feminine looks.
"You understand the nature of the object you are to obtain for me is rumored to be cursed."
(So don’t try to keep it for yourself.)
"Ah, well, perhaps I am part of that curse." Brad said pleasantly. "Surely the

soon to be previous owner will think so."
"I fully expect the object to be handed over to me with in the time frame."
"I pride myself on my team's efficiency." Brad said. "Don't worry, Kurihara-san. I don't want to live forever. That would spoil the game."
Kurihara frowned slightly. "You don't believe in the statue's abilities?"
"I simply don't want to deal with the implications." Brad informed him. "I'm dealing with what is real and obtainable to me. Money for a job. Do you wish to release me from the contract?"
"No, not at all. I simply wanted to know where you stood."
"Now you do." Brad said.
(He's wondering if you screw Aya.) Schuldig snickered mentally, his face still in a pleasant smile.
(Stick to business, Schuldig!)
(Now he's wondering what it's like to screw Aya...)
(Oh, look, a set of golf clubs...) Brad thought dryly, seeing them in the corner.
Schuldig shut up.
"The first payment will be in the holding account by noon." Kurihara stated.
"When that is confirmed, I will go ahead with the job." Brad said.

Nagi watched the laptop's screen. The clock in it said five past noon. "Brad, we have a lot of money, why this job?"
"I'm bored." He said. It was raining and had been for days. Had it been a year so soon?
Nagi inquired again and the account now registered five hundred thousand US had been transferred. "It's there."
"Back track the transfer." Brad said calmly.
"You're so evil." Schuldig smiled at him from the sofa.
"Just a precaution." he said. "The account it came from will probably be closed out now, but the one THAT came from....perhaps not? That type of power breeds arrogance." A hard lesson learned, he thought, remembering the abduction.
"Jei's not coming on this one either." Youji hung up the phone. "He said you don't need him for a petty shop lifting."
Brad sighed. "All right. I think we're going to have to face the fact that a sane Farfarello is not necessarily a good thing."
"We don't even need him, anyway." Aya said.
"He's part of the team." Nagi said, as if anyone would listen to him. And there were a few other people around here they didn't need....
(Eh, Brat, jealous?)
He glared at Schuldig, who was laying on the sofa, his legs up and dangling over the arm rest. (Such a natural position for you, Schuldig.) He thought at him.
(Get beaten enough and live long enough, your back will ache too, you

little....)
(I’m telling.) Nagi warned.
The presence in his mind was gone, snapped off like a light and Schuldig went back to looking at the ceiling, one hand idly twirling locks of his hair.
"If it hurts so bad, have some morphine." Nagi said, just to be a brat after all.
"I don’t want morphine!" Schu stated.
"Does it hurt?" Brad came to look down at him.
"Not that bad." Schuldig said, annoyed with the brat. "Don’t look at me like that. I’m not an invalid. I can do my job."
"I can make you stay home and order Jei to come."
"You know how he disobeys." Schuldig’s smile conveyed the dirty joke all by itself.
"Stop it." Brad said. "Perhaps I should order you in a masseuse."
"Hell no, I don’t want some stranger’s hands on me." Schuldig fussed, then realized what he’d just said and laughed. "Since when did *I* get so prissy?"
"That did sound weird, coming from you." Youji said from the glass wall over looking the living room balcony. "What a day to have to go outside more then once."
"So when ARE we going to do this?" Aya said, looking at his manicure.
Nagi was still working on the accounts.
Brad thought it over, seeing what would happen....."Two o’clock would be the best time to start.
Omi reached over to slide a hand over Nagi’s thigh. "Plenty of time for lunch." He said sweetly.
Nagi smacked the greedy hand. "I’m busy."
Omi laughed.
Schuldig smirked. How well he knew that phrase and tone. He looked up at Brad. "The child has a point." he said softly.
"I’m eighteen now, Schuldig, don’t call me a child." Omi said.
"Look in a mirror, you girly boy." Schuldig said, just to be mean. Then he got up. "Come fix my back for me, mien Mann." He slipped his arm into Brad’s, leaning on him.
Brad embraced him and kissed him. A whole year, so fast...."It’s our anniversary, you know." He said softly.
"Is it?" Schuldig asked.
Brad buried his face in the younger man’s neck and red hair with a sigh. "I was such an idiot..."
"This is my man, who doesn’t dwell on the past." Schuldig caressed his head. "Time’s wasting."
He pulled himself together, then took Schuldig’s hand and lead him to the stairs. Aya pouted, sulking in the arm chair.
Youji watched them go upstairs from where he was. Then he heard the door shut

and looked at Aya, who was now looking even more annoyed. "Why the face?" He said.
"Do you think he gives a damned about the first times he had me?" Aya said bitterly.
Youji laughed. "Not a bit. But it's nice of you to keep your mouth shut and not interfere with their little 'celebration'."
"I'll make his life a living hell later." Aya stated in a light tone of voice.
He would, too. On that count, Youji was glad he didn't have to deal with Aya all by himself after all. Maybe before, when he was 'Ran' most of the time. But not now. Still, Aya was the best pair of legs on maybe the whole planet.... screw it, he was horny. "Lonely, Aya?" He asked.
Purple eyes focused on him. "That wasn't long in coming, was it?"
"Don't be bitchy." Youji said. "Just say yes or no."
Aya pouted. Then he made up his mind and got out of the chair. "Yes." he said.
When that door was shut, Omi looked at Nagi. "Are you done YET?"
Nagi shut the laptop. "Yes." He looked at him coolly, his soo dark blue eyes sparkling with amusement.
Omi smiled, so sweet and innocent. "I'll race you." He stated and then cheated by getting a head start up the stairs.
"Cheater!" Nagi cried and ran up after him.

"Okay, so it's two thirty!" Brad was trying to get his tie on. "Shut up and go downstairs and wait!" He yelled at the shut door.
"DON'T yell at me!" Aya hit the door and then went down stairs.
Brad looked at Schuldig. "God, it's like having a woman in the house." He finally got his tie to knot as he wanted, and smoothed it down, putting the clip on. "What the fuck did you do to him?"
"How many times do I have to tell you? I didn't DO anything. He IS actually like that." Schuldig pulled his boots on. Then he fell back on the bed with a sigh. "MMMMmmmmm." He stretched. "Soooo much better."
"It should be." Brad said, annoyed. "Get off the bed, Schuldig. You know damn well what that does to me."
"Sah, you have such a problem." Schuldig teased.
"Incurable, I'm afraid." He grabbed his jacket. "Are you going to be warm enough in that get up?" Schuldig was wearing a thin shirt and loose trousers that also seemed thin.
"Silk is hot, leibe Mann." He got up and came over to kiss him on the cheek. "And I have you to cuddle up to."
"You can't hang on me through a job." Brad warned.
"Don't be a fussy ass, Brad." Schuldig patted his cheek. "I swear, I'll take my coat." He went to open the door. "Are you coming or not?" He said, then giggled.

Brad rolled his eyes. He didn't know what was worse, Schuldig's constant humor,

or Aya's constant ill humor. If it weren't for Youji, he'd get no peace at all.
(I'm insulted.) Schuldig said in his head.
(Stop it.) Brad thought back at him.
Schu smiled and went down stairs.
Aya was sulking at the bottom. When Brad came down, he put his arms around him and pressed his cheek to his. "You yelled at me." He said.
Brad slid a hand over his tightly muscled back. "You were being a pest."
"You said two o'clock."
"I know, but it's allright." Brad said. "Aya....Princess...."
Aya kissed him on the mouth. Then he whispered in his ear. "Are you my man?"
"You know I am." Brad was amused. "Don't I fuck you senseless and drape you in jewels?"
Aya shivered with delight at this talk.
"Now be a good girl and stop fussing at me." Brad smacked him on the ass. If it made Aya happy to be called a girl and treated like one, then he'd call him a girl and treat him like one.
As long as it kept the assassin under his control. Because while 'Aya' was often a pain in the ass, 'Ran' was still one of the best.
And then there was Youji, who handed him his coat, that soft silly smile on his face..."Eh, Kudoh, what's that all about?"
"Nothing." Youji said.

The 'object' they were after was a statuette from one of the ancient persian dynasties. It had been dug up and fought over since the late eighteenth century and had somehow ended up here in Japan, shipped in an exhibit of closely guarded treasures the government was negotiating the return of to Iraq when the war broke out and no one was giving the Iraqi's anything now.
The owner was an expert in Middle eastern archeology. And, since acquiring it, he had been rumored not to have aged.
Brad knew the statuette was in the man's house. He also knew he had body guards. Four experts in kung fu, world champions.
This was going to be fun.
That's why he was attacking in the day time, when everyone in the house would be wide awake, and he knew the owner was home. "Good old house invasion tactic." he said fondly. "Never fails."
"You're going to torture them, aren't you?" Youji asked. They were leaning on the MB parked on the street across from the house, umbrella's keeping the now slowed to a drizzle rain off them. Schuldig and Nagi had gone off one way, Omi and Aya the other, to hit the house from three sides when the word was given.
The evil light in Brad's eyes was a dead giveaway to his mental state. "Of course."
"You pick these jobs by how much damage you get to do, don't you?" The blond

accused mildly.
Brad didn't feel the need to answer.
"You're so sick." Youji smiled, amazed at his arrogance.
Brad looked at him. "Have you ever doubted it?" he asked, sliding a hand up the back of the tall slender man's thigh and buttock, then down his crack, enjoying the texture of the black denim and the muscles of that sensitive area.
"Damn, Brad!" Youji protested mildly. "You do realize you're feeling me up in public?"
"And it excites you." Brad accused, laughter sparkling in his eyes. "You're a whore, Kudoh. A whore's whore for that matter." he leaned to kiss him on the chin. "Allow me my fun, and you'll get yours."
Youji had to wonder what that ment. Right now, despite the rain, he was roasting. "If you don't quit it, I'm putting you in the back seat and I'll have it now." He threatened.
Brad quit. When Schuldig had said how fun it was to fuck Weiss, he'd been talking about Youji. Now he could agree.
Sometimes, he just couldn't help gloating. He'd cured Schuldig of his roaming, stolen his plaything, and had their worst enemy begging to be fucked. Life was good.

Aya sat at the desk, a foot up on it's edge, the statuette on his knee, looking at it curiously. "This thing is ugly."
Schuldig had the owner tied up pretty damned tight. He'd already dragged the information they needed out of his head. That and a lot of other things, like the combination to the safe and the bank account numbers. Now, Schu sat on the desk, smoking a cigarette. He was entranced with the systematic destruction Brad was wrecking on one of the body guards who had survived the first attack.
"Careful, it might wear off on you." He said absently and some what breathlessly.
Aya abruptly put the thing down.
Schuldig laughed. "When the incantation is invoked, it draws the life from people, and transfers it to the speaker of the incantation, if it's being touched."
"I can't believe in any of that stuff." Aya frowned. "It's just....so impossible."
"So is being able to read minds or see the future or move stuff just by thinking about it." Schuldig looked down at him. "Or Ran Fujimiya being such a uke bitch queen."
He said.
"I'll show you 'bitch'." Aya said coolly. "He's mine next."
"Not on your life. Mien gott, will you finish him, Brad, I'm loosing what little is left of my mind!"

Brad obligingly grabbed the man's head from behind and gave it a sharp wrench, snapping his neck. Then he went to grab Schuldig and kiss him hungrily, half bending him backwards over the desk.
Aya got up, taking the statue and putting it on a low table and sat down on the home offices' leather sofa next to the owner of the house to watch. The man was gagged and bound so tightly, he was probably not very happy. "Don't be so unhappy." Aya advised him. "After all, how many people have you killed before their time?"
The man glared at him.
"And such a waste. You're not even that attractive. Aren't they pretty together?"
"Kill him." Brad ordered, in a damn hurry to get into Schuldig.
Aya took out his dagger and put it to the man's ribs. "Now, go to hell." He said, and pushed it in, amused at the shocked look in the man's eyes before the life faded out of them. He shoved the body over, away from him and watched his lovers.
Aya knew from experience now it wouldn't take long. Schuldig was like a parasite, feeding off Brad's violence and aggression. Aya wondered at how he put up with the borderline brutal assault. No real lubrication, no tenderness, just adrenaline backed by a rush of lust.
But he apparently enjoyed it very much, gasping and moaning and clinging to the other man, coming so loud, it was a wonder the neighbors didn't call the police.

"You know, Brad, we could make a side fortune in sick porn videos." Aya said.
"You'd love that, wouldn't you, Princess?" He was too busy recovering to even care, kissing and caressing Schuldig, sharing things with him mind to mind that didn't need to be said out loud.
Aya jealously contemplated smashing the damned statuette against a wall. Then he realized not only would Brad kill him, he would kill him the way he had the guard. He also realized that if Schuldig were to smash the thing, Brad would probably just back hand him and not talk to him for a week.
He tried to come to terms with how he felt about this situation. And all he got was how much he just needed to have Brad that excited about him.
He left them to their moment, and picking up the statuette, went outside, careful not to step in the blood. Youji was smoking on the porch, just watching the rain come down. Nagi and Omi were who knows where, the brats.
"That thing is ugly." Youji winced at the statuette.
"It doesn't feel like anything special at all." Aya hefted it. "Just a lump of carved stone. But Schuldig says it works. Where are those two boys?"
Youji half smiled. "Where else? They got bored and went to play vid games on the lap top in the car. I take it Brad's happy now."
"Very." Aya said archly. Then he moved to take the cigarette out of Youji's lips and kiss him. "You love me don't you, Youji?"

"Duh." Youji said. "But you just want someone to hold you until Brad's got time for you, and don't think I don't know I'm being used." But he put an arm around him anyway.
Aya kissed him again. "I'm such a wreck today. I think this rain is getting to me."
"I think we all need a vacation someplace else." Youji said, taking back the cigarette. "Whine at Brad, Aya, and get us one. You're so good at it."
"Don't be mean to me." he protested mildly.
Youji held him a little closer. "And how mean are you to me?"
Aya laid his head on the taller man's shoulder. "It's not my fault you want me."

'Wanted you enough to turn us both over to Crawford.' Youji thought. 'Might as well have sold our souls to the devil.' "Nobody told you to be so beautiful, Ran...." He breathed against the maroon red hair, then had to catch the statuette as Aya almost dropped it, responding in a small fit of passion. "We'd better put this thing in the trunk." He tucked it safely under his arm.

Brad took the statuette from Youji and set it on Kurihara's desk, unwrapping the cloth.
"That was certainly quick." The man said, impressed.
"As I said, we pride ourselves on our efficiency." Brad stated
Kurihara gave the order to transfer the rest of the payment to his secretary and looked at the thing before him. "To have waited so long and so suddenly have it." He said, reaching to run his fingertips over it, caressing it. "The incantation?"
"In a moment." Brad said. "Nagi?"
Nagi set the lap top up on a coffee table and checked the account, waiting for the electronic transfer.
Kurihara glanced curiously at the attractive boy. He seemed so young to be with a team of mercenaries. Then at the one who's hair was so deep a red it had purple and pink highlights in it. He was breathtakingly beautiful....
"Payment in full." Nagi announced, shutting the laptop down again.
Schuldig came over and took a folded piece of paper out of his breast pocket.
"It's in the original language and Japanese." he said, setting it on the desk.
Once again, Kurihara was curious at so obviously a foreigner's ability to speak as well as write Japanese so perfectly.
"A pleasure doing business with you, Kurihara-san." Brad said politely.
"I have another proposal for you. Perhaps if you would have your men wait in the outer office...?"
(He want's to buy Aya!) Schuldig informed Brad, stifling a snort of laughter as a cough.
"No disrespect, but I've made it a habit not to be alone with anyone except my team members." Brad said. "And anything you have to say to me, they will hear."

"Then I'll be blunt. How much to hire the fancy boy, there." he nodded at Aya. "As a personal.....body guard?"
Brad smiled coolly.
Aya pulled his pistol out and aimed it at Kurihara, Ran in control now.
"Apparently, he's not for sale." Brad said in a light tone. "Put it away, Princess." he ordered mildly.

"What the hell was THAT all about?" Aya asked in the elevator. "The nerve of the man!"
"You should be flattered." Brad answered. " I kept you didn't I?"
"WHAT?" Aya was stunned.
"It's true." Schu said. "He was thinking of offering another million for you."
Aya let this sink in with a shudder.
Brad put an arm about his shoulders. "Not for a billion." He said. "And then there's the fact that I'm not ever letting you walk off with a king's ransom in jewels." Aya shivered again. "I'm going back up to kill him!" He tried to press the button to stop the elevator.
Brad wouldn't let him, pulling him away from it. "Be still and don't fight me, listen to me! Nagi's accessed his entire accounts with the codes Schu picked out of his secretary's mind. The money will disappear over the next week, drained out. And believe me, he won't be happy with that thing in his life."
"Brad," Aya chided, leaning back on him, "If you keep stealing from our customers, soon we won't have any at all."
"Only the ones who annoy me." he said. "Kurihara's friends in the police force will soon find him not so much to be friends with."
"You're cutting off their bribes!" Youji realized.

Brad had taken Schuldig out to dinner. Aya fretted on the sofa, trying to concentrate on the movie to take his mind off other things. But it was no use. Youji looked at him. They were alone. The boys had gone up to their room right after dinner, an occasional laugh or yelp filtering down the stairs with the faint sounds of rock and video games played too loud. He remembered times he had sat like this before, at the Koneko no Sumi Ie, on the sofa, at opposite ends, watching some stupid thing on TV, too tired or hyped up from a mission to sleep, so close to him, yet not daring to touch him, to admit what he had felt for him.

Now he knew exactly what it was like, to have him, to be in him, possessing him, to feel him writhing and moaning pleasure in his arms, beneath his body. "Aya." he said.
The luscious purple eyes turned to him. They were sad and Youji wondered. "What's wrong?"
"How can you still feel anything for me. Knowing how I feel about Brad?" Aya

said, looking back at the TV, but not seeing anything on it. His voice sounded slightly strained....
"What do you want me to feel? What do you want me to say? That you're sick, Aya? Totally cracked? You're involved in a four way relationship with a guy who used to be your worst enemy, his fucking sick assed lover and ME. Don't forget I'm in there, too."
"What are we doing here, Youji?" Aya looked at him again. "Sometimes, it seems like...one minute we were Wiess and fighting these guys with all we had, and now.....we're sleeping in the same bed, having sex with them, in love with them? And this...." He held up a wrist, the diamonds' shimmering in the dimmed lights.
Youji slid over to put and arm around him. "He is seductive and beautiful and knows how to wrap us around his fingers. He knows all our weaknesses and feeds and pampers them. And in return, we're loyal to him and let him do what ever he wants to us. He must have perfected the technique with Schuldig and the others. And what's so wrong with any of it? Why question it, Aya?"
He sighed heavily. "Sometimes I catch myself wondering what the hell I'm doing."

Youji laid his head on Aya's shoulder, thinking for a long while.
"You wanted him, Aya, you said so yourself. And now you're with him. I like seeing you happy, I like seeing you smile. So....you've gone little bats with the effeminate thing....It works, on you. What is it, Aya, what's brought this on?" He raised his head to look at him, playing with a dangle of maroon hair.
"I don't know. I just....don't." Aya said.
"He's out there trying to be extra nice to Schuldig." Youji said, running a fingertip behind his ear now, tracing the lines of his neck. "Feeling guilty in more ways than one, I'll bet....Or it wouldn't have ment so much to him." He laughed softly. "And you're jealous."
"Is it wrong to be so in love? With another man?" Aya asked quietly.
"You know what? I don't care." Youji told him. "I got sick of caring. People can call me what ever they want. I have more than they'll ever have. For all his bitching and complaining, Crawford's taken more care of us than Persian ever did. I'm beyond caring as long as I can sit here and know that there are people worth giving my life for to me and who would do the same, or at least, miss me."

Aya sighed again. "We're everything that's judged evil in this world and we used to fight for the light."
"I think we still do, in a twisted way. We're just getting better at it. I don't wreck innocent girls lives anymore..."
Aya had to laugh. "They knew exactly what they were doing with you."
"Don't interrupt." He pulled the ear tail. "Schuldig isn't going around raping anything with an ass anymore. Omi's not dating anyone he's related to..."
"That's just mean, Youji."

"Or he’s not going to grow up to marry some poor girl and then dump her after a few years and a few kids when he realizes he’s homosexual. And I’ve come to realize, we only seem to be dealing with people who deserve everything they get from us. So why all the angst, ‘Princess’?" He teased.

Aya stretched his legs and half turned to snuggle against the other man. "Because he’s out there with Schuldig and I’m here with you and too stupid to realize just how lucky I am." he said. "And Youji....you can call me Ran. I’m not one of your stupid girls."

Youji rubbed his arm muscle through the purple silk shirt. "Good thing, too. None of the girls I ever dated wanted diamonds for every time they got a little bent out of shape."

Chapter Eight
"Team Work"

"You're certifiably insane and I'm your power of attorney, as well as your legal guardian. You could be deported if I back out on that." Brad informed Farfarello. "I got you the psychiatric care you needed, I made the decision to put you on the experimental drugs. And this is how you repay me?"
"She's a nice girl from a good family, I can't be doin' that no more." He was sitting calmly in the arm chair, Brad was pacing the floor, having a fit.
"What else can you do!" Brad demanded. "You're a trained assassin! You have no other skills!"
"Unless you've skint me, I have me money." Farfarello said. "I can find somethin' before that lot runs out. "
"You know I've taken care of you! But the drugs cost a lot and without them, you're back where you started! Nagi, get him the accounts information! That and the stocks! Damnit, I'll show you how well I've managed to handle things, even before we sent Esset to hell! You don't think I spent two years keeping us all on a tight budget just because I was cheap!"
"Well, yeah!" Farfarello said. "You always had yer nice suits and fancy haircut. I knew Takatori had to be payin' something!"
Nagi's fingers danced over the keyboard, he was stressing. This was not good. Not good at all. Farfie pulling out of the team like this....Brad would kill his girlfriend....
"Nagi, hurry up!" Brad snapped.
"I'm hurrying!" Nagi snapped back! "He didn't cheat you, Farfie! I've been taking care of the banking!"
"Sign m' guardianship over to Hanako." Farfarello said, his one eye fixed on Brad. "The courts will say she's more qualified anyway if ye choose to be an ass about it."
Brad was incensed! "You'd take me to court over this? Damn you, Jei! I don't deserve this from you!"
"I know you too well, Bradley Crawford, you're a controlling bitch of a man who always wants his way, an' none of us can take a step out of line without you settin' up a howl. You made me sane, sane enough to want a life of m'own!"
"How do you know this woman isn't just going to latch onto you for everything your worth and then dump you like a corpse!" Brad countered!
"I'll thank you not ta bother me with yer visions if that's what yer seein'." Farfarello said evenly. "An' anyway, I don't believe it."
"And you're so wise in the ways of the world that you know enough to make that decision!" Brad said scathingly.
Nagi went to plug the lap top into the printer on the desk. He was near tears from the yelling.
"She doesn't know what I'm worth, I don't even know, ye daft tomcat! Make up all

the nonsense ye want, I'm leavin', I'm marryin' the girl and you can kindly get yer sticky fingers out of ma life!"
"Here, Farfie!" Nagi brought him the printed out data. "The accounts, the stock listing and all the access numbers. See! Brad wouldn't cheat you! There's the automatic payments for the hospital, and your insurance and everything else!"
Farfarello looked it over and then at the total of all the balances. "Well, it seems I may never have to bother with any skill but decidin' where to spend me next vacation now." He looked up at Brad. "I earned every penny of this, too, so don' think ye can use it ta make me feel bad about any of this!" He stood up.
Brad glared at him. "Don't come crawling to me when something goes wrong you can't handle, Jei. She's only a woman."
"Damn you for an un-natural conceited ass!" Farfarello said. "Where are you lackin' that you avoid half the species like the plague? I'll be sending the paper work through a lawyer. Sign it an' be done." He went to the door and got out.
Brad said down on the other arm chair, his face in his hands, never mind his glasses being messed up with finger prints.
Nagi bit his lip, then went to put a hand on his shoulder. "Brad....Don't be angry at him. It's the drugs. They've changed him..."
"How long will she put up with him!" Brad demanded. "What do we even know about her! I want her on paper! Everything there is to know, from her conception on! Her background, her personality, medical records, her education, her financial profile, her associates, her police records, I want to know if she's even sneezed in the prescience of a traffic cop! I want to know about her and everyone around her!" He ordered.
"But...Can't you See anything?" Nagi asked. Wasn't he getting any premonitions on this?"
"I can't spend my life watching for him!" Brad countered. "She could turn on him at any minute, and then where would he be! God, if she even withheld his medicine...!"
Nagi sat on the arm of the chair and put his arms around him. "Don't" he ordered. "You're freaking. Just....calm down. You're scaring me!"
Brad forced himself to breath deeper, to clear his mind of the conflicting images that were part vision, part imagination run wild.
Nagi drew off his glasses gently, getting up. "I'll clean these, you calm down. You want a drink? Tea? Water?"
Brad shook his head. "A loaded gun to blow my brains out might help."
"Don't talk like that!" Nagi ordered, upset. "Not even joking!"
"Why not! You have Omi and everyone else would be just FINE without me!" Brad snapped, holding his head again.
"Don't be a selfish PIG!" Nagi accused. "I'd miss you forever, and I'm not putting up with Aya's bitching! And you might as well kill Schu-schu first! Because you'd be condemning him to death without you to block his mind! For

fucksakes, Brad, YOU'RE supposed to be the GROWN UP here!"
Brad wiped his eyes and looked up at him. "I'm sorry, Nagi. Just go get me some tea." He said quietly, feeling as if he'd been beaten himself for a change.

He woke to hands un-buttoning his shirt. "Mmf, what time....?"
"Just after eight." Aya said. "Nagi told us what happened with Farfarello."
He'd gone up to rest his aching head after supper, simply falling onto the bed and passing out. He heard the rain splatter on the window as it was blown sideways. "Still raining?"
"Yes." Aya undid his belt. "Feeling any better?"
He thought about it. His head didn't ache anymore. But he was still feeling rather ill used. After all he'd put up with from Jei.....
"I'm not the one who can read your mind, Lover." Aya said after too long a silence, having moved to pull off his socks and now come back to undo his slacks.
"Where is Schuldig....?" Brad tried to sit up.
Aya put out a hand to gently push him back down. "With Youji. ARE you feeling better?"
"For the most part." he said, not voicing the thought that he would be much better if Schuldig was here with him, so he wouldn't have to answer questions.
Aya was already down to just his parure, his intent so obvious.
Brad sat up anyway. "Just wait, will you? I've been asleep for hours." He got off the other side of the bed and went to freshen up.
When he came out of the bathroom, Aya was sitting on the bed, pretty as a picture. "And where, exactly, is Youji?" Brad asked him.
"Well, Nagi said you were resting. Schuldig didn't want to bother you."
"I see. And you did."
"That was an hour ago." Aya said, purple eyes flashing dangerously.
It occurred to Brad that he had the temper of a western rattlesnake to go with the diamond patterning....He gave up and took off his slacks and briefs. Damn it, he wanted Schu-schu.
But Aya laid down, stretching out and reaching for him. He kissed the younger man and slid a hand down his chest and flat belly to his genitals, caressing them. Aya moaned and automatically drew his knees up to give access to his other charms. Brad indulged him, occupying his own mouth with a be-ringed nipple.
Aya ran his hands over the boxer's muscles, so defined and hard, and in minutes, was so hot he was about to use force to get more of Brad into him, pretty much abusing what he had.....
"Easy, Princess!" Brad warned. "I need those! It's rather difficult to shoot someone with your fingers in a splint."
"Mmmm, then get in me now." Aya half purred half growled the order, digging his nails in.

He got on him and slid in. He didn't care to think when Schuldig had taught both ex-Weiss that trick with the lubricant. It certainly made a difference, not having to go through all that mess in the middle of the moment. For a brief moment, he wished even more it was his Schu-schu he was in. Instead, there was only silence beyond Aya's breathing and murmured endearments and demands. And in a moment, he was quite all right with it being Aya writhing and moaning under him, that gorgeous face lost in lust, amethyst eyes half closed. Brad wondered what he was thinking, how he felt, what this was doing to him, he was so spoilt by Schu's telepathy. Aya held onto him, straining upwards to his thrusts. It seemed he was definitely enjoying it. Brad was lost in the sheer physical pleasure of it.

Schuldig woke with a start, sitting up. He pushed his hair back and looked down at Brad and Aya. As usual, he had wondered back to Brad as soon as he needed sleep.
He was still mad about Youji convincing him to let Aya go in alone last night. Aya slept face down, a very convenient position from Schu's point of view suddenly. He got up and went around to slip under the sheets again, spreading Aya's legs and positioning himself.
"Schu...no...get off." Aya said sleepily.
"Oh, shut up." Schuldig pushed into him. "MMmmm, Aya, you're so tight...."
Brad turned over and curled up, wanting more sleep.
"At least let me turn over." Aya complained.
"No. I like you this way." He slid a hand under him to pull on a nipple ring.
"These things do come in handy, don't they?
Aya took a chance and managed to spill them both off the bed, taking half the sheets with them.
"Ow! Shit, Aya!" Schuldig complained, sitting up, punching him in the ribs.
Aya managed to smack him across the face. "You started it!"
Yohji opened the door, looking at them on the floor and blinking. "What the heck are you two up to?"
"Good question." Brad was sitting up now, putting on his glasses. "What are you fighting for at this time in the morning?" he looked at the clock.
"I was trying to make love to him!" Schu pushed his hair out of his eyes, annoyed. "Bitch!" He told Aya.
Aya tried to smack him again, but he blocked it and twisted Aya's arm.
It took Youji and Brad to pull them apart, and by then Schuldig was giggling.
"All right, STOP it!" Brad ordered. "What's the problem here!"
"I don't like it face down!" Aya stated loudly.
"Is that all?" Brad complained, letting go of him and went to take a shower.
Youji released Schuldig just in case Aya wanted to take another swing at him now that he was loose. "I need a cigarette." He muttered. "Don't start without me."

He went back to the other bedroom to get one.
"Swine!" Aya accused Schuldig.
"Poor baby..." Schuldig made face at him. "I let you have Brad all to yourself and you won't let ME have any fun?"
"How rude is that, to make me just lay there!" Aya stated, shifting his pave belt back to his hips.
Youji came back, always able to get around Brad's no smoking in the house rule.
"Okay, who's where? I'm not wasting this morning hard on with you two honeys wanting some action."
They both looked at him as if he were some uninvited alien.
He grinned evilly.
(Get him!) Schuldig ordered Aya mentally.
They grabbed Youji and threw him on the bed.

Nagi put his plate down on the table in front of him. "Did you decide?"
"I'm signing the papers." Brad said. "I'm writing him off. That's all there is to it."
Nagi sighed in relief.
"Put it OUT, KUDOH!" Brad yelled at him as he wondered in in his pajama bottoms and yet another cigarette in his lips.
"Yes, Mother." Youji drawled and put the cig out in the sink and got out the orange juice, proceeding to drink from the carton.
Brad felt another head ache coming on.
Nagi saw that look and got the aspirin bottle out.
Omi ate his breakfast and thought how sweet his Nagi-kun was, trying so hard to make peace in this nut house. They were all insane, there was no doubt of that.
Youji sat down and stole a piece of fish off Brad's plate. "Why'd you leave?" He asked.
Brad looked at him. "It's a wonder you can walk."
Youji smiled. "Style and technique, Bradley, style and technique." He stretched languorously and slouched in his chair.
"Yeah, he lays there while we do all the work." Schuldig got his coffee. "Look at that rain."
Aya sat down, rubbing his unmade up face. He still looked more like a girl than a guy. "Damn it, I'm going to have a bruise!" his cheek hurt from where Schuldig had caught him a glancing punch.
"I catch you two Ever fighting again, you can both forget about me." Brad said, having had more than enough of their nonsense. "I mean it!"
No body said a word.

"So that's the cause of all this." Aya said, looking through the binoculars.
"Let me see." Youji grabbed them, handing the umbrella over. He trained them on

the hospital buss stop.
She was fairly even featured, nice eyes, sleek black hair cut in a typical bob if a little longer than usual for a professional girl. She was smiling and talking with a co-worker.
"Ikeda Hanako." Youji said. "Seems like the typical all Japanese girl. Must have a really sick sexual fetish there somewhere, don't you think? I mean....Farfarello?"
"I wouldn't know, I used to think the same about the girls you brought home." Aya stated coolly.
"Jealous?" Youji teased, trying to focus the binoculars on the other girl's very short skirted legs.
Aya realized something was up and pulled the umbrella out from over him to cool him off. "Get the damn camera take the pictures and let's go!" He ordered.
"Ah! I'm getting soaked!' Youji complained.
Aya put it back over them both. "Take the pictures." He repeated.
Youji took out the camera and screwed the telephoto lens on. "Reminds me of the bad old days." he said, aiming and focusing. "Before Kritiker ruined my life."
"You noticed that, too, did you." Aya said.
"What would you have done, before your parents were....you know." Youji wondered.
Aya sighed. "Gone to college. Drank a lot. Made a fool of myself, and probably ended up working in a bank or an accounting office somewhere."
"The regular little salary man, eh? Instead, you're standing on a roof in the pouring rain spying on some poor girl who doesn't know what she's in for."
"With a typical year's salary on my right nostril." Aya said coolly. "Though some how, I doubt my father would have been impressed. "
Youji put the camera away. "Did you talk to Brad about the vacation?"
"Um...no." Aya said slowly.
"Why not?" Youji looked at him over his sunglasses, which he wore despite the dull day.
"You'd better get Schu-schu to do it."
"Aya! You said you'd talk to him last night! That was the whole point of us leaving you alone with him!"
"I....forgot." He said. "Can we get off this roof and out of this rain!"
"Damn it, Aya, you know he takes one look at you and forgets how to say no! You're talking to him the minute we get back!"
"All right, all ready!" Aya snapped back at him. "I'll talk to him about a vacation!"

Brad looked at the pictures spread out on the desk. If he were a pouter, he might have been pouting. As it was, his mouth was a thin tight line.
Aya was glaring at Schuldig, who was slopping around the house in nothing but a

hapi coat with a loosely tied belt barely doing the job. When he'd sat on the desk and leaned over, it gapped, showing his firmly muscled pectoral and the tawny pink nipple, practically in Brad's face....!
Youji saw the look appearing on his face and kicked his foot discreetly.
Aya looked at him.
Youji barely shook his head and made warning eyes at him.
How the hell was HE supposed to talk to Brad when Schuldig was in full I'm-a-slut-fuck-me mode?
"Honestly, Bradley, she checks out fine." Youji said. "Perfectly normal career girl. Oh, she got a little tipsy at a friend's bachelorette party, but that was nothing. Excellent record at the facility. Though, they are a little concerned about her relationship with Farfarello...." He let it drop.
Brad took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.
Schuldig laid a hand on his shoulder. "See, it's nothing. Farf just want's a life of his own. Maybe he'll calm down when he knows you've signed the paper with out trouble."
"I suppose so." Brad sighed.

It was almost a week later when the papers came, a large envelope that had to be signed for.
Brad signed them and sent the boys to mail the damned things out again without even bothering to read them. One of the benefits of precognition.
"Fifteen kills this week alone and it's only Wednesday." Schuldig said, once again stuck with gun cleaning. "Over paid is one thing, but over worked sucks."
He shot Aya a meaningful look. (NOW.) He ordered mentally.
(Then shut up for once.) Aya thought at him, sitting on the arm of the armchair Youji was sprawled in.
Brad sat slouching on the sofa, for once looking not so entirely up tight, his jacket off, no tie, just his shirt and slacks. Heaven's, he'd even had his shoes kicked off under the coffee table where Schu had spread out the guns on news paper. He was watching the news on cable.
"Over worked...." Brad half sneered. "Last time YOU were over worked you were fourteen, and lazy then."
Schuldig drew a slow breath, keeping his mouth tightly shut and attending to the task he'd been given.
Aya almost moved....
Brad realized Schuldig wasn't responding to the taunt and looked at him.
Youji caught the back of Aya's pants by the waist band and held him back.
"What's wrong with you?" Brad growled at Schuldig.
"I'm just a little tired, that's all." Schuldig sighed. "All this rain, being in and out odd hours. It seems like when we're not in hurry it's just boring and I don't feel like doing anything."

Youji judged the potential fight was averted and shoved Aya discreetly.
Aya got up and slipped onto the sofa beside Brad. "Bradley." he ran a hand over the other man's chest, caressing him.
Brad froze. He had that tone in his voice. There went another near half million or so...."Mmm?"
Aya's hand slid down to take his on his thigh. Purple eyes looked into his.
"Couldn't we take a vacation, Lover? Somewhere where it's not raining? With no 'work'. Just....for a little while." he said quietly.
Youji couldn't help thinking Brad looked a bit like he was hypnotized.....
"NO." Brad stated, almost getting free.... "It's a waste of time and money...."
Aya leaned closer. "Paris? Or Rome?"
"Vienna?" Schuldig threw in.
"Shut up." Aya said without missing a beat. "Pleeaasse, Bradley." He cooed, caressing that hand for all it was worth.
"No diamonds?" Brad made sure.
Aya smiled. "Maybe later." He kissed him on the lips, ever so lightly, just a taste, lingering and sweet...."Please." He breathed, still that close his breath brushed like another kiss.
Brad made a squirming noise, but it was no use...."All right, we'll take a vacation." he complained.
Aya straddled his lap and kissed him with much more emphasis this time. "A whole month?" He said.
Brad was pulling Aya's shirt out of his waist band to slide his hands over the cool white flesh...."Two weeks." He said, impatient with the buttons, pulling off his glasses and setting them on the coffee table.
"A month." Aya held Brad's head back so he couldn't get his mouth to Aya's chest....
"Two weeks..." Brad tried to insist...
"A month." Aya said firmly.
The faint scent of his cologne.....that silken flesh...."A month." He gave up completely.
Aya let him go.
Brad ran kisses all over Aya's chest until he fastened on a nipple, and slid his hands into the back of Aya's pants as soon as he had them undone, the jeweled loop between his teeth incase Aya tried to pull away again.....
Schuldig closed his eyes and bit his lip, trying very hard.....
"You heard him, we've got a month's vacation." Youji got up and went to lean over the back of the sofa to murmur in Brad's ear. "But how soon?"
Aya grabbed him by the hair and drew him to him to kiss, driving his tongue into Youji's mouth, one hand in his hair, the other in Brad's.
Schuldig gave up on the gun and got up to sit on the sofa, getting to work on Brad's shirt buttons.
Brad left off Aya's chest and slid an arm around Schuldig to draw him closer,

kissing him, his other hand still busy in the back of Aya's pants.
Youji pulled away to catch his breath. "Okay, this is turning into an orgy." He said.
"So what else is new?" Aya asked and moaned as Schu-Schu reached into the front of his briefs to grab his hard on.
Youji pulled Brad away from Schu-schu and tried again. "How soon!"
"I don't know, soon?" Brad said, a little out of breath and not at all interested in anything but sex....
"With in a few weeks?" Youji said. "We start planning now?"
"Um" Brad said. Aya was squirming and Schuldig was nuzzling his neck and licking his ear.... "I think....we'd....better go....upstairs...before...."
"How soon!" Youji insisted.
"As soon as possible!" Brad said, agreeable to anything right now....
Youji forcibly pulled Aya off his lap by sliding his arms under the other young man's and hauling him backward. "Come on, Ran, up to bed."
"Oooh, but I'm not tired." He pleaded teasingly.

Chapter Nine
"One Long Day"

Farfarello was wondering what the hell Crawford was up to.
"He signed the papers, Jei." Hanako said. "Why were you so convinced there would be a problem?"
"I know the man, it's n'like 'im to give up anything once he's got his hooks inta it." He wondered what the hell he couldn't settle down for, then realized.....no knife to occupy his hands. It was like bein' a smoker an' out of cigs, fer crisake....He jamed his hands in his pockets, slouching further down on the couch, frowning.
"Jei." Hanako chided gently. "He's signed everything. He put aside money for you. He got you help in the first place and at great expense. I've seen the records, he stated that he could no longer care for you at home. Jei --- I've seen your scars. They are all well healed and obviously well attended to. Why are you so angry at this man?"
He couldn't tell her. It was one thing t'be ravenin' mad. Quite another to have butchered people for a livin' at the end of a leash...
He bit his lip, then quit. It hurt! "It's hard t' say, Hana. You'd 'ave t' know the man. An' I'd not let 'im near you, so put done t' it."
She looked at the paper work on the low table.
She needed to know. In order to understand Jei, she needed to know.
What kind of man would take on so much? And give so much, only to cause such.....fear.
She looked at him. Yes, fear. Jei was good, but not that good that he could hide it from someone who's field was the study of emotional imbalances. His body language, his avoidance, his aggression, all pointed to a deep discomfort about this man.

Aya grabbed the phone. "Crawford Investigations and Protection." he said politely. They had to cover, now that the police were on their backs most of the time.
"Hai, I would like to speak to Crawford-san." A woman's voice said.
"May I say on what subject?" Aya asked.
"It is about Farfarello Jei." She said. "Tell him Ikeda Hanako. I would like to present my respects and thank him personally for all he has done for Farfarello-sama."
Aya's stone faced frown fell into place. "Just a moment, I'll see if he's available." He pressed the hold button and looked at Nagi and Omi who were sorting the huge pile of back logged laundry on the living room floor to go to the laundry service, and having way too much fun with underwear not their own to make fun of. "Hey, knock it off! Where's Brad?"
Nagi pushed Omi away and pulled someone's paisley boxers off his head. "Damn it,

Omi, I’m going to hurt you! He went shopping with Schu-schu for clothes to wear on the trip."
"Yeah, to get us more laundry to deal with." Omi complained. "Why do we have to do all the dirty work!"
"You should be glad to have your hands busy with something useful, Omi-chan." Aya informed him.
"I’m not a girl so don’t call me ‘chan’, Ran, unless you’re going to fuck me." Omi sassed him.
Aya’s eyes went wide for just a second, then he pointed to Nagi. "That, I blame on you." He said, and took the phone off hold. "He is out at the moment. May I have him call you back?"
Hanako’s sigh came across the line softly. "No. I will call later. What will be a good time to reach him in?"
Aya thought it over wildly. "Around seven, I think." he said, then wished her good day and hung up. "Come here, Omi." His voice went from professionally polite to damned dangerous.
Omi blinked. "Hell no!" He protested.
"NOW!" Aya ordered.
Nagi got between Omi and Aya before Omi could even move. "If you think it’s MY fault, hit me!" He stated.
Aya considered it, but he knew what would happen if he even touched Nagi. "Omi, you’re old enough now to be a man, take your punishment!"
"NO!" Omi protested. "I’m SORRY, Aya! I’ll never say anything like that again! I’m sorry!"
Aya was satisfied with the regret expressed, but he pushed it. "I have to remember, you’re a Taketori."
Omi’s pink mouth opened slightly as he was hit by the emotional blow.
Nagi turned to put a hand on his arm, looking at him with concern. "Omi....?"
"Fine. What ever." Omi said quietly, hugging himself.
Nagi’s hand bunched up a grip on the sleeve of his over sized pink t-shirt.
Omi looked into his deep blue eyes, his own full of hurt.
Someone had to stop him from becoming so disrespectful. Ever since this whole thing started, he and Nagi had been causing trouble with their silliness. It wasn’t that they weren’t good on the job, it was that when they weren’t working, they got wild.
Maybe it was because they had no fear of repercussion, because no one could touch them, not school authorities, not the police.....Because they could simply kill anyone who crossed them. But they had to learn to behave, to know when to be quiet and not draw attention. And that meant not getting out of control.

In the italian restaurant, Schuldig got a bite of his sea food and pasta salad

at last and looked at Brad. "This rain, it's un-ending. Try not to look so happy, people will think you're insane." He teased.
Brad was not looking happy. "This whole thing is a waste of money."
"So is Aya." Schuldig said. "You pay him AND buy his diamonds for him? How fair is that to the rest of us?"
"Anything happens, the diamonds stay." Brad said coldly. "Call it an investment."
"Still, mein Mann, it's something anyone would question, with you complaining about this vacation costing sooo much, what with travel and clothing suitable and accommodations....you never fuss so much when we're on a job."
"The client is paying." Brad said. "This time, I'm paying, and I don't like it!"
"Sah! Be quiet, people will stare for a new reason." Schuldig warned. "Or at least switch to German."
Brad lowered his voice. "If the three of you EVER pull a stunt like this on me again...." He warned.
Schuldig smiled, his eyes sparkling with memory of the mischief. "Now you complain. Then, you laid there and moaned how much you were dying from pleasure."
Brad's cheeks pinkened ever so slightly. They had done quite a number on him.
"We're in public for crisake's." He muttered, stabbing a fork into his own salad.
"We earned this vacation ten times over already." Schuldig informed him. "Esset ran us like dogs, and you keep us like slaves. Relax, think of yourself. Don't you deserve to spend some money on yourself, indulge in some free time. Have you ever?"
Brad shook his head. "No. Free time is never free. I won't be poor again, Schuldig. Never. Ever since I learned to use this talent instead of get messed up in the ring, I've worked hard to get this far. You don't get this far by sitting around and doing nothing just to indulge yourself. None of you would be anywhere without me pushing you every step of the way. In fact, you'd be dead, so don't dwell on it. You'll all get your damned vacation and that will be that. Now shut up, eat and we'll go home. I don't understand why you all can't be content to just be home, where it's comfortable and there are no worries except who ate the last piece of cake or where the remote to the entertainment center is. Instead you want to drag us all off to some foreign country and stay there for a month and for what? To get away from the rain?"
"Are you done complaining now?" Schuldig asked, being very bored about it.
Brad kicked him under the table.
"Ouch!" Schuldig protested.

"Farfarello's girlfriend called." Aya hit him with it as soon as he'd hung up his rain coat to drip over the now almost permanent newspaper under the hook on

the wall.
"What's happened?" Brad said, wondering why he had not 'seen' anything.
"Nothing. She said she wanted to talk to you, to pay her respects and thank you. She insisted on calling back. I told her you would be in around seven. Do we have anything on?"
"Why should I talk to her?" Brad said, annoyed.
"It's up to you, Lover." Aya said.
"You should see what she wants." Schuldig said. "I don't trust her. Hell, I don't trust any female who can outlast twenty four hours with Farfie. It's just....." He shuddered. "Un-natural."
Brad sighed. "All right, Schuldig, you and Youji take out tonight's target. I'll talk to the woman."
"What about Aya?" Schuldig said, just a little suspicious.....
"You drag me all over Tokyo's biggest shopping centers the better part of a day, Aya's going to stay home and massage my feet." Brad informed him.
Aya gave Schuldig a nasty little look of triumph.
(Don't even think that at ME, Sweetie.) Schuldig warned him mentally.
Aya smirked even more and slipped an arm around Brad. "Mmmm, you need a nice warm bath to relax you first."
"He doesn't want to relax." Schuldig said archly. "You'd have to pay him." He went into the living room to sit on the sofa and find the remote. He wanted to check the weather. His guess was more rain....
"Where the hell is Youji?" Brad realized.
"Out with Omi and Nagi." Aya said. "They wanted hamburgers for supper, all three of them, and willing to go out in this down pour to get them."
"Call him and tell him to come strait back when they've eaten." Brad said, slipping free of him. "I'm taking a shower. Alone." He added.
Aya pouted and made the call, then went to sit sideways on the sofa with Schuldig. "Schu-schu." He said.
Schuldig looked at him.
Aya smiled, sexy eyed.
Schuldig pressed the off button on the remote and tossed it on the table. Then reached to undo the button and then the zipper on Aya's slacks, and drew him out, caressing him. "Someday, you're going to have to get this into more than a mouth." He said, admiring him.
"Are you volunteering?" Aya asked, caressing the arm of the hand that held him.
"Are you man enough?" Schu asked flirtatiously.
Aya thought it over. "No." He said softly. "Come upstairs. You know the rules." He drew free and got up. "No messing up the sofa."
Schuldig followed him and kicked the door shut behind him, grabbing the other young man and kissing him hungrily.
"Schu-schu," Aya looked into his eyes from inches away. "I love you." He said.
Schuldig kissed him again. "Aya, you love anyone who's fucking you at the

moment." He informed him.
Aya laughed, then wrapped himself around him. ‘Wrong, wrong, wrong." He kissed him fiercely. "Brad, you, Youji, no one else!" He pulled Schuldig’s hair, jamming his tongue practically down his tonsils.
"Mmmm." Schu sort of protested, then got free to look at him again with wild green eyes. "Fuck me, Aya." He pleaded.
"You know I can’t...." He said.
"Try!" Schuldig held him tighter, his waist so tiny in Schu’s arms.
"No." Aya tried to get free, but not very hard. "Don’t..."
Schuldig gave up. "Be that way." He let him go, so disappointed.
Aya moved closer to the bed to strip off his cloths.
"Take off that junk." Schuldig said, undressing himself. Those damned diamonds....
"No." Aya refused. He wasn’t taking the jewels off.
Schuldig sighed, kicking aside his slacks and pulling off his socks.
Aya laid down on the bed, impatient now for the feel of the other man on him. He put his arms around Schuldig as he laid down on him, kissing him.
"I don’t mind the rain so much." Schuldig murmured. "Are you ready?"
"Always." Aya said softly, meaning he’d already put lubricant in a little earlier.
Schuldig eased into him, pausing a moment to let him adjust. "When we were enemies, Aya, I used to wonder what it would be like....to have you. Youji cried, the first time I had him. I read it in his mind that he wanted you. I think that’s when my heart broke. How he wanted you and I was taking him....I was so mean to him. I wanted to make you hurt for not having him. The same way Brad wouldn’t have me.....And now, here we all are, for better or worse." He smiled, stroking Aya’s magenta hair as he looked down into his purple eyes. He kissed him tenderly, and sliding a hand under his lower back. "Much worse." he chuckled evilly and started to pump into him.
Aya arched his back and moaned, his thighs locked on Schuldig’s hips.
Brad came out of the bathroom, toweling his hair. "Now there’s a pretty picture," He smiled archly. "I always did love to watch you work, Baby." he patted Schu’s butt and went to get some things out of the dresser.
"Brad...?" Aya pleaded breathlessly, looking up at him past the mane of orange red.
Brad came to the side of the bed.
Aya reached up to him, his eyes seeming even deeper purple with need....
He sat down, leaning over to kiss him, sliding a hand down Schuldig’s back.
Schuldig pushed himself up, looking down at Aya, then at Brad, not stopping, moving slow and seductively, invitingly.
Brad kissed him as well. "It’s nearly seven. Curb your greed, Princess. " He soothed, stroking Aya’s cheek tenderly. "Make my Baby happy." He got up and finished dressing, his back to them.

Schuldig laid back down in Aya's arms and got very happy.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Youji asked, dipping a french fry in ketchup in the hamburger place. ''What's the big dark secret?"
"We were joking around and Aya told us to quit and Omi told him not to call him 'chan' unless....." Nagi gave up.
"I said, I'm not a girl, don't call me chan unless you're going to fuck me." Omi said, with mild annoyance. "So he got all mad and told me I was a Taketori!"
"Whoa." Youji said. "You told him to fuck you?"
"I'm tired of him calling me Omi-chan!" Omi stated. "I'm not his girl!"
Nagi looked at him.
"Omi.....Aya doesn't....um..." Youji was actually embarrassed. "Let's just say, you hit a nerve, okay? Now you guys have been acting like jerks lately, what's up with that? You never used to be such a mouth, Omi."
Omi frowned. It was true, he did tend to say things he shouldn't lately. "I don't know." he said sulkily, eating his food. "It's just that Aya's changed so much, he never acted this weird before."
"Well, maybe it's a good thing we're taking some time off then. "
"But it's not!" Nagi protested. "It's stressing Brad out to have to do this!"
"Calm down." Youji told him. "He needs to learn to do something besides work. And you, you need to, too. Have you Ever been a kid?"
Nagi blinked at him.
"Wrong question, hunh?" Youji said. "That whole thing with Esset pretty much aged all of you." Except...maybe Schu, who was definitely not ever going to act his age..."Look, eat up, Brad want's us home in good time."

He was sitting at the desk when the phone rang. He sighed and picked it up. Ten after seven. "Crawford." He stated.
"Crawford-sama, this is Ikeda Hanako." A woman's voice said.
"Yes." He said. "I had a message you wanted to speak to me about Jei."
"I wanted to thank you personally for all you have done." She said. "And..." She hesitated.
He frowned. "Something has happened." He said dully.
"No....nothing has happened. It's just that....after all you've done for him, I don't understand why he would be so afraid of you, Crawford-sama. I need your help to understand."
"What?" He said in disbelief.
"My field is the study of psychological disturbances, and no matter how well he hides it, everything points to the fact that he is afraid of you." She said. "I want to help him, and I have to be able understand what is happening to him to do that."
Brad thought this over. What on earth? "Is it the medication?" He asked.

"No, I'm sure it isn't. He's angry, hurting, and very afraid you are going to do something. It's as if....he can't believe he won't be punished."
"The scars...." Brad frowned. "Those were self inflicted...."
"I believe that." She said. "I don't want him to know that I've spoken to you. Is there somewhere we can meet tomorrow perhaps?"
Brad saw trouble coming. "No." He said. "The fact is, I signed Jei over to you. I can't have anything to do with him anymore, those were the conditions he requested. I'm honoring that request. If he is going through some bizarre mental issue over it, involving me won't help you. In fact....it might hurt you more than you could know. He can be....very violent."
She was silent a moment. "I understand." She said. "Good night."
He set down the phone, thinking about this.

It was simple enough from habit, get into the elevator, get a boost up, pop the cover, put a black sticker over the security camera lens, drop back down, take off the ski mask and press the button. Youji leaned back on the hand rail, looked at Schuldig and laughed. "Elevator."
Schuldig shook his head, fluffing out his hair, smiling at him. (The story of our lives. Parking structures and elevators.) He thought in Youji's mind.
Youji smiled lazily back at him. He was still a little weak kneed from Schu's having shared the rather vivid memory of his recent bout with Aya with him. The advantages or dis-advantages of being with a telepath....
(You know you love it.) Schu informed him.
(I can't believe you'd dare him like that. You know he doesn't.)
(Do I lie to you?)
(Hmmmm, only about my cigarettes.) Youji informed him.
(Humph.) Schuldig didn't look at him any more for a while.
The elevator stopped and they drew their guns, slinking out, pressing flat against the walls of the hall, moving along, one by one, toward their goal, keeping an eye out for guards or thugs, or witnesses.....

Aya brought Brad a cup of tea and sat down at the end of the sofa to take his feet up onto his lap. "You're cold." he said, feeling the marble-like flesh.
"Go easy, Princess," Brad sighed.
Aya worked at the muscles and tendons carefully, with a gentle pressure. There was something so comforting to him in such a domestic thing.
Brad relaxed into the cushions, sipping the tea. He closed his eyes and thought about things...
When he'd first laid eyes on the beautiful boy at his feet, trying so hard to be a hero.
And Schuldig....that skinny, love starved child of a man.
Farfarello, huddled in a cell.

Nagi.....His poor lost little boy.
Youji, those lovely eyes, the strength in that lanky body.
Omi Tsukiyono, who made Nagi whole.
His safety net.
It had seemed so selfish when he had first had the bizarre idea of going up against Esset, getting rid of them, taking the future into his own hands.
Had it really been a year now?
They'd been through so much....Esset taking his Schu-schu....Youji being what should have been fatally shot, Schu's holding on to his spirit a miracle in itself....damn near loosing Nagi to the protective services....Was loosing Farfarello from the team so great a loss, if it meant him being sane and happy with a new life?
He opened his eyes. Aya had stopped.
"I thought you were asleep." Aya said softly in that deep sultry voice of his.
He set the half drank cup of tea aside he'd been resting on his chest. "No. I was thinking about how we all ended up here and now." He looked at him with soft eyes. "Aya....come kiss me."
Aya obeyed, more than willingly, crawling over onto him and pressing his lips to Brad's.
Brad held him, loving him in that moment, more than anything....he gasped a little, then kissed him again....
It wasn't just Aya.....it was someone to hold him, someone who understood him.
It was....a friend.
He looked up into those wonderfully colored eyes and caressed the ethereally pale cheek draped in maroon auburn silk..."Don't ever leave me, Princess. Stay with me forever."
Aya moaned and held him so tight, burying his face in the brunette's neck.
"I don't want ANY of you to ever leave me." Brad said in a strained voice that made Aya raise enough to look at him curiously, a little shocked.
Tears had spilled from those chocolate brown eyes.
" I need you." Brad stated. "I need all of you. Aya...." He sobbed, unable to hold it back any more, and held him tightly down to him again.

Youji unwrapped the wire and wiped it on the man's collar, leaving a streak of red, letting it rewind into his watch.
Two other bodies now littered the office. Business as usual for the assassins.
Schuldig had stopped short, a strange look on his face...as if he had suddenly lost his breath.
"Schudig, what's wrong?" Youji asked, wierded out.
He put a hand to his chest, over his heart, slowly. Yes, it was still beating.
"You know how they call it....like someone walked over your grave?"
"What?!" Youji exclaimed quietly.

Schuldig pulled out his phone, turned it on and hit the instant dial number for home.
It rang a few times, seeming like forever, then Nagi picked up. "Schu-schu, what's up?" He asked, his voice a little strained.
"Nagi! Is something wrong!" He demanded.
Nagi sighed. "It's all right, Schuldig." He said gently. "It all just got to Brad that's all. He's just over tired and really sad. Is the job done?"
"Yeah." Schuldig said. "Tell him we're coming home. Nagi....Tell him I love him."
"I will," Nagi said.

What ever the weird panicky feeling Schuldig had had was, when they got back to the expensive two story apartment in one of Tokyo's vast housing buildings, Aya had gotten Brad to bed.
"I'm not sure....but I think he's having a nervous breakdown." Nagi told him, still stressed. "I wanted to call a doctor, but Aya said not to. That you'd be able to find out what it is. I figured well, Duh, yeah, you're a telepath."
He pulled off his rain coat and went up the stairs two at a time.
Youji picked up the discarded coat and hung it up along with his own. "What's he been doing?" He asked Omi who was worrying about Nagi's frame of mind as well.
"Just....crying." Omi said. "And he can't say what's wrong or why."
Youji went upstairs.
Schuldig sat on the side of the bed, one hand on Brad's head, the other holding his hand in the low light from a table lamp before the window. Aya was in bed with him, an arm about him, half asleep from having to lay still. The others back, he slipped into a worried rest of his own, just plain tired out.
(Come here.) Schuldig ordered in Youji's mind.
He went, sitting behind Schu, looking a little worried. "Hey." he said softly, to Brad, laying a hand on his blanket covered thigh. "What's with you?"
"I'm tired....that's all." Brad tried to protest.
"You sound it." Youji said.
"Brad." Schuldig spoke to him aloud. "We're not going to leave you."
He held onto Schuldig's hand tightly.
"Looks like that vacation's long over due." Youji got up to pull of his top.
"The job went well. We got in and out, no problem."
"Good." Brad sighed, not really sure he gave a damn.
Schuldig leaned over to kiss him softly, sweetly. "Mein Mann, you know you do. Nagi," He called to the boy in the door way. "Bring some water and a sleeping pill."
"No..." Brad protested. "I can't see with drugs...."
"I swear to you, no one will even leave the house until you wake up again. Brad, you have to rest. We'll survive without you seeing the future for twelve hours

or so." Schuldig caressed his black hair back, "You have to rest, you can't be doing this to us, worrying us like this. You're too strong, too dependable. You mustn't break down like this. If you don't rest now, it will only get worse, and then what good will you be, mein Mann, mein liebe Mann? For once do as *I* say and know that I love you and it's for your own good because I don't want to loose you being strong for me."
Brad freed his arms to reach up and hold him. "I'm sorry.....I don't want to scare you....."
"It's all right, it's all right." Schuldig told him. "You've over worked yourself. It's not so bad. You just need rest."
Nagi came back with the pill and water.
Schuldig freed himself enough to help and make him take the pill. "Now swallow it, don't hold it in your cheek, I saw that thought! Swallow it now!" He insisted.
Brad gave up and swallowed the pill, grimacing at it's half melted bitterness and drinking more water, shuddering. "No one leaves the house, you promised. Something awful will happen and I won't have seen...."
"No one leaves." Schudlig looked around at them. "Is that clear!"

For once they voluntarily smoked out on the kitchen balcony, in the dark and cold and rain, shoulder to shoulder under the awning. The city was a contrast of darkness and lights, smelling of wet concrete and battered plant growth.
"He's tired mentally that's all." Schuldig felt like talking aloud. His own thoughts needed listening too more than anything right now.
"Well, we've all been through a lot." Youji said. "I mean, look at Aya, he cracked right down the middle over that thing with his sister. "
Schuldig couldn't help smiling. Then he frowned again. Aya, too had tried to be the one who was always strong, always in charge of Weiss. And now look at him. As strong as he really was, he clung to Brad, depending on him to tell him what to do....to survive....If anything happened to Brad where would they be?
"Schuldig, are you cold?" Youji drew him closer to his side. He'd just shivered and got all stiff...
"Yes and no, I'm picking up on all the fear in this household." Schuldig had another drag on the cigarette he held. "I can't sleep without him any more, you know. I've been with him so long that my training is faltering. I need silence, I go to Brad instead of trying to focus my mind and shut everything out. Love, if anything happens to him....I'll end up back on heroin...."
"No you won't." Youji stated. "And we can't lock him away and just spend our lives keeping him safe if that's what's coming up in your silly red head. Brad would never settle for that. It's this thing with Farfarello. He's sane and on his own and Brad's freaking or something. God, we are all such cases! The walking wounded. If we weren't assassins, we'd be thoroughly pathetic. I mean,

can you see any of us with real jobs? Maybe Omi and Nagi would be working in some major computer company. But the rest of us?" he sighed. "I could go back to being a detective. But I can't do computers like those brats can."
"I can." Schuldig said. "I just hate it. It takes too long. I'm too hyper. And you're just trying to get my mind off things." He finished his cigarette and then lit another."
"Easy! We don't know how long before we can go for more!" Youji warned.
"Order out, you cheap bastard." Schuldig teased. "Put me to bed, Youji." he leaned on him, his face warming on the other man's neck.
"As soon as I'm done with MY second in row, you slut." Youji used the butt of his cigarette to light another despite Schuldig's crowding him. "We have to quit sometime, you know."
"We have too much stress to quit." Schu-schu whined. "Esset tried to make me quit and it was hell. That's why Brad doesn't nag me about it. He used to. Oh, god, where would I be without mien Mann?" He shivered again.
"Hush, Baby." Youji held him. "He'll be fine. People have nervous breakdowns all the time. Then they get up and go on. And all he needs is rest, and this vacation, and he'll be twice as mean and nasty when he gets back to work and you know how that gets you off." He teased.
"Shut up, Youji." Schuldig said. "Shut up and hold me."

Chapter Ten
"Slow Torture"

It was perfect. A view of the sea from a terraced pool at an exclusive hotel and spa, attentive service personnel, an excellent menu from a expert kitchen staff, and nothing to do all day but laze around, laying out on comfy lounges by the pool enjoying the balmy breezes in the gentle sunshine, and nothing to do all night but go for walks, dancing or screw their brains out.

"Can we go home now?" Brad asked, safely under the umbrella and plastered in sun block, the darkest prescription sunglasses money could by on.

"No." Schuldig stated. Brad could stay dead white, but he wanted a tan to show for this trip. He was laying out in the sun, having taste enough not to indulge in a thong bikini, but rolling the top of his yellow Speedo's down to a line across his hips that barely did the job.

Brad sighed. Last night he'd picked a fight in a bar just to liven things up. The Tenerife authorities were tourist oriented, a liberal bribe had smoothed things over. Of course, they were definitely not going back to that club. But Puerto de la Cruze had plenty more night clubs. And between his oh so attractive team mates, he had plenty of reasons to start fights.....

"Stop it." Schuldig said aloud. "You are not going to fight your way through every club in town."

"I'm bored. And laying around all but publicly naked in a pair of bathing shorts is not my idea of 'whoo hoo'." He said sarcastically.

Schuldig propped his chin up on his hand to look at Brad. "It is mine." He smiled, enjoying the view.

"Oh for godsakes." Brad complained mildly. And then there was the issue of having what he had come to think of as His property eyed by others.

Schuldig sighed and turned over. For the first time in forever, he didn't care about the scars on his arms and his back. He wanted to enjoy the sun.

Even Aya had unbent enough to take off most of that damned jewelry of his and lay out. He kept the ear dangle and nipple rings on, and the pave banded watch was in the pocket of his violet silk beach cover, but for the most part the only thing blinding about him now was an expanse of oiled white skin broken only by a pair of violet silk Speedos.

Yohji had occasionally laid out on the balcony back home, so he was not as bad off as the rest of them. And his scars were far more noticeable than Schuldig's. The starred puckers from bullets, the evil gash down the breast bone where they had opened him up to get to his heart. He didn't care, he just worked some more lightener through his hair, slapped on lotion, and flung himself down to get cancer one way or the other.

Omi and Nagi were down on the beach, opting to fly kites and play in the ocean, and unwittingly draw the attention of vacationing girls as well as other young men. They were having fun, oblivious to the people world.

Brad had spent a week in bed, much to his own annoyance, but every time he had tried to pull himself together, something had set off that uncontrollable melancholy again. It was there even now, at the edge of his mind, kept at bay forcibly.
He would not be weak again. He would beat it down, like everything else that annoyed him. Beat it down and kill it, even a part of himself.
Schuldig let him think in peace, letting his own mind slide over the others around them, keeping an eye out for 'interesting' thoughts.
There were so few. And anything pertaining to them was the usual garbage, men, women, eyeing them and anyone else half way decent looking. And more than one speculating on how the exotic oriental got the jewels he wore. Then there was the curiosity as to why they all spoke an oriental language, when at least two of them were identifiably european.
He ignored them, just feeling. The sun on his skin, the breezes drifting by, the afternoon sounds of a foreign world.
(Baby.) Brad's mind drew him instantly.
(Umm?)
(Call the boys back up here. NOW!)
He sat up, opening his eyes. He'd been half asleep, but there it was, Brad had 'seen' something and they had to know. He called to them, and because they were so susceptible to him from experience, he was able to find them and order them back with no problem.
It took maybe ten minutes for them to race up the steps the hotel had built to the beach level, disturbing a few guests with their unusual haste in this slow part of the world.
"What?" Nagi said, breathing hard.
"You were heading for a rip tide." Brad said calmly. "Stay away from that part of the shore from now on."
Nagi sat down on a lounge near his. "Is that all." He sighed.
"You like the idea of being swept out to sea and drowned, go jump back in, nice knowing you, Bye-bye" Brad didn't even look at him.
Nagi frowned. "I meant no one is attacking us. Damn it, why do you have to be so mean!"
Omi sat beside him, taking his hand. "Nagi." He admonished.
Nagi wasn't having any of it. "No! Ever since this vacation started you've been snapping at me and picking fights you know I can't finish! I'm sick of it! I'm going to loose it and hurt you if you keep this up!" He snarled in a hurt voice.
Brad looked at the boy now. "Do you think I LIKE getting visions of you being drowned?" He said. "I didn't keep us all from being killed just to have you torn away by the sea. I'm so sick to DEATH of all the things I see!"
"Shit, Nagi, you've set him off again!" Aya got up, pulling on his robe and moving to sit on the lounge, looking at Brad. "Don't." He hissed. "Not here, not in public."

"Why can't you be the way you were, Brad!" Nagi said, a hint of a wail in his tone. "Stop it, just stop it! I can't stand you like this!" He got up and headed for the hotel and their suite of rooms.
Omi looked at Brad. "Please....don't be angry at him...." He tried, then much more worried about Nagi's state of mind, ran after him.
Aya had his hand on Brad's chest, watching Omi go with a small frown. The fair boy had latched onto the dark one with a sort of weird desperation a year ago, and he had wondered about it then. It was like the sun and the moon. They were complete opposites, yet inseparable. He looked at Brad. "Don't, Brad, please don't. You were doing so well." He said softly.
"I'm not going to break down in tears out here." Brad said through clenched teeth.
"Schuldig, come with me back to the suite." He got up, grabbing his terry robe and putting it on.
Aya wanted to go, too, but he knew by now where he was in this stupid mess of a relationship. Crawford's tone of voice made it clear Schu was to obey an order. An order that didn't include anyone else. Suddenly he felt very uncomfortable. He took his watch out and put it back on. "Eh, Yohji. Wake up, you'll burn." He moved to shake his shoulder.
"I'm not asleep." Yohji said, under his sunglasses.
"Let's go in now."
Yohji sighed. "I like it out here. Ran, just lay back down. It'll pass."
"No!" Aya said, a sort of panic rising in his chest that was happening more and more lately.
Yohji sat up and pulled his sunshades down, looking at him. "I swear, we are all going nuts. Except Schuldig, Nuts is his home planet. I know that whine in your voice, Ran, you're wearing about two million UEC right now. Be happy about it!"
"Pig!" Aya turned and headed for the hotel.
Yohji sighed heavily and got up.

Schuldig followed him into the bedroom and locked the door, slipping off his beach robe, his sandals left by the front door. Too much time in Japan.
Brad, however did not take his robe off. Instead he turned to look at Schuldig, arms crossed, mouth a tight line. "Who was the one who once complained to Me about just grabbing?"
"What?" Schuldig said, slipping off his Speedos. "Can't I lock the door and get naked in my own bedroom?"
"Hunh, I remember when you used to get naked and leave the door wide open." Brad said dully.
"I was lonely, mein Mann." He moved to slip his arms around Brad's waist loosely, looking at him with only a faint smile on his lips. "I've loved you for so long."

Brad uncrossed his arms to put one hand on Schuldig's shoulder the other on his cheek, looking at him. How he'd grown up so beautiful, despite the abuse he'd endured.
Brad sighed. "I want to go home. I want to be myself again. I want this over with, and forgotten about. I want to kill someone." The last was a cold hard statement.
"Three...more...weeks." Schuldig broke up the sentence with kisses, lightly, on his lips.
Brad went for another, just the barest possible, just feeling him, tasting him, remembering who he was...."Baby." He drew him closer, holding him tight. He ran a hand into the red hair, and kissed him again, this time with passion. "I'm in hell and you know it!"
(Give yourself time.) Schu said in his mind. (Learn to relax.)
Brad pressed his cheek to his, loving the feel of him in his arms, against him.
He pulled back and took off his beach robe, tossing it aside, and then embraced him again, kissing him again. (How is it you can screw me into a vacation, but I can't screw you out of it?)
(Strength in numbers?) Schuldig slid his fingers into the waist band of the swim trunks and slid them off Brad's hips.
(Right now, it's just you and me, and I want out of this vacation.) Brad caught his wrists and made him stop.
Schuldig looked down. (More like you want in.) He purred.
(I can put you right out of this room and call for Aya.) Brad threatened.
Schuldig's eyes came back up sharply. Then he smiled even broader. "You can try." He said.
Looking at him, Brad gave up. Schuldig was worth the price of sanity.....and he wondered if he hadn't lost his mind a long time ago.

Nagi was at the writing desk, the lap top set up on it. The offers were back logging. Work was piling up even though the notice of being unavailable for four weeks was clear in any language.
"Nagi." Omi said, peeking and seeing what he was up to. "What are you doing?"
"Brad would be upset if he saw how much work was going begging out there." Nagi shut it down, annoyed. "He should be working, not this lazing around with nothing to think about but what's wrong with his head."
Omi had very quickly become aware of how Nagi felt about Crawford, how attached he was to his team mates, even though technically, they were evil. He'd respected that, even when both teams had been trying flat out to kill each other. "But Nagi, would he be this messed up now if he'd given himself time to think about things when he maybe should have, instead of letting them all pile up?"
"What things?" Nagi stated. "He can't even say what's doing this to him. If he

knew what it was he'd take care of it."
"Maybe he can't face what it is." Omi said gently, leaning on the back of his chair. He just wanted to make Nagi feel better. He'd been so happy, playing on the beach...."People repress things that bug them, you know. It's probably why I have amnesia. I just don't want to know who I was before or what happened to me. Hell, I don't care any more." Except when Aya reminded him....
Nagi's mouth twitched in a slight frown. "I've never known him not to face things head on and deal with them. I wish I knew where the hell this came from. It can't just be because Farfarello's left the team. Brad wanted to get him help."
"Well, it seems to be what broke the damn." Omi stroked his black hair, still damp from the ocean.
Nagi rested his face in his hands, elbows on the table. "I wish I could do something to help him." he said. "I just don't know what."
Omi leaned to put his arms around the younger boy's narrow shoulders. "He'll tell us when he's ready. But I'm sure loosing your temper doesn't help."
Nagi sighed. He'd apologize when he had the chance.
Sometimes he missed the time when they were just Schwarz. When he could curl up on the sofa and watch T.V. with Brad's thigh for a pillow, going off to school with a hug and a peck on the cheek, being bitched over about getting blood on his clothes and just tossing them into the hamper for the stains to dry in, instead of putting them to soak right away.
He tried to stay close, tried to stay useful, but the crowd around Brad now....there was hardly any room for him anymore. Aya so jealous and cold eyed, Schu-schu equally territorial. Yohji was okay, he didn't intrude. But Aya was always demanding attention when ever he could, and loving taking it away from anyone else. And ever since Schuldig had been taken by Esset, there was something different about him. Subdued, despite his outward behavior. He kept more to himself and when he wasn't hanging on Brad, he was hanging on Yohji. He seemed so far away, as if no one could really reach him. And sometimes, Nagi had caught him looking strange, his eyes haunted.
Maybe he missed the old days, too.
He rubbed Omi's arm. Then again, perhaps he was just being stupidly sentimental. After all, he was with Omi so much, what time did he have to spend with Brad? And maybe the look in Schu's eyes was from the pain in his back?
"Nagi...." Omi said softly. "Let's not think about all this for a while. Just a little while."

Later, Nagi was a little surprised to find Brad alone in the living room of the suite, having ordered coffee sent up. He saw that there was an extra cup provided. "Mind sharing?" He asked.
"Would you want to sit and drink coffee with a mad man?" Brad said.

"I think you know I do." Nagi sighed and sat on the sofa across from the one he was on. "So, how does this turn out?" He poured coffee into the empty cup.
"It's up to you." Brad said.
Nagi realized, he sounded as if he didn't care one way or the other. "I'm sorry I yelled at you down there." He said quietly. "I was....worried about you....and....I still am."
"You worry too much about me, Nagi." He drank his coffee. He was wearing another robe now, a black silk japanese house robe that covered him decently. "You always did pick up too much."
"Ha ha." Nagi said sarcastically to the reference to his straining his telekinetic powers.
Brad sighed and set his cup down on the little table. "I suppose we should make the most of this stupid vacation. Would you like to spend tomorrow with me? Leave the others. We could....look around the island? Check out the museums or something?"
Nagi thought it over. "Just us?" He rolled his eyes a bit. "No discreet tail? No phone? No tag marker?"
Brad smirked half heartedly. "Now who's nuts?" He said coolly.
"Okay, just us then." Nagi said. "No boyfriends."
"Deal." Brad said. "I'll explain at dinner tonight."

The restaurant was a good one, the meal had been excellent. Everyone was feeling pretty mellow from the wine. Well, except someone. Brad had drank more water than wine.
Yohji lit up a cigarette. It was an outdoor restaurant, who was to complain?
"Must you?" Brad asked.
"Yes." Yohji said, calm as ever.
"I wish you'd quit. You and Schuldig." Who, he could see, was jazzing for a smoke himself.
Yohji only smiled lazily. "I wish you'd kiss my ass." He said coyly, and blew a smoke ring at him.
Brad gave him an evil look, but there was a glint in his eyes that Yohji knew all too well by now.
"Ahem." Nagi noised.
Brad snapped out of it. "You've all been complaining I'm not 'enjoying' this vacation.
Well, Nagi and I are going to take a day out tomorrow. No plans, just where the wind blows. Like tourists. Just us. You lot can find something else to do, I'm sure."
Nagi had explained it to Omi already, but the other three had varying reactions. Schuldig looked at his dessert and pouted. He'd already read Brad's mind on the subject earlier. Aya looked like imminent death for someone. Yohji's eyes became

even more neutral.
"Don’t argue with me." Brad warned.
Aya looked about to explode. But he contained himself with sullen ill temperedness, making it very obvious he wasn’t at all happy without actually throwing something or having a crying fit.
"Are we going out tonight?" Schuldig asked quietly.
"Yes, but not to stay out late." Brad said. "Look at all of you. Anyone would think it was the end of the world. You wanted me to take a vacation. To take some time off. So now I am."
The uncomfortable silence at their table was battered at by a sudden intrusion of angry voices raised at another on the other side of the restaurant patio. Schuldig, curious as a cat, looked up, searching for the faces to go with the angry thoughts, and Brad saw ahead of time how an angry woman was going to try and walk away from a man. This was coming their way, as they were along the passage out.
Sure enough, the woman attempted to walk out, the man following her, grabbing her arm and she tried to shove him off her, causing him to bump against Aya’s chair, the woman yelling loud imprecations at the man in some latin based language.
Brad got up and as the man went for the woman with intent to strike her, hauled him around by his jacket and socked him one right across the jaw, laying him out flat. Brad flexed his hand, straitened his jacket and tie and sat down again while the waiters hurried to apologize for the disturbance and get the jerk out of their establishment, the woman throwing Brad a cold hard look and leaving.
"Well. That was a nice little diversion." Brad said pleasantly.
"Always the hero, mein Mann." Schuldig said.
"Are you all right?" Brad asked Aya.
"It was just a little jarring, that’s all." Aya said.
"It could have been a distraction to lift something off you." Brad took a visual inventory. Earring still there, pendant....
"Nothing’s missing." Aya said, amethyst eyes suddenly veiled with other thoughts.
"I am NOT more worried about the diamonds than you!" Brad stated to Schuldig’s conveyance of Aya’s thoughts. "I’m worried about how you’ll feel if anything disappears. And Schuldig, it doesn’t help that you immediately send me everyone’s thoughts all the time! You make a nervous wreck of me over nothing!"
"Nothing!" Aya exclaimed, glaring at him.
"I don’t mean it that way!" Brad snapped at him.
"I’m sorry, Brad!" Schuldig pleaded.
"My life would be so much easier without ANY of you!" Brad growled quietly.
Aya sort of quietly imploded. That was the only way to describe it. He shook his head, trying to throw off the stinging in his eyes and the urge to just scream, then took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. "Maybe you should have seen

THAT coming before you started this!" He got up and headed for the exit himself.
"Ran!" Yohji went after him.
Schuldig sat there. Both he and Nagi just looked at the table. Omi was incredibly uncomfortable, but they were long used to Brad's icy anger and hatefulness when he was really mad.

Yohji had calmed Aya down, reminding him that Crawford was not exactly in a sane state of mind. Now it was pretty much a detant, with Aya being utterly cold to Brad, but not refusing to remain in his presence.
The club they were in tonight was loud, crowded and purposely picked because either there was no rule or it wasn't enforced against under aged teens, so that Nagi and Omi could enjoy a little partying as well.
One thing about dance clubs these days. Things had gotten to the point where they were all frequented by people who thought nothing of same sex relationships as well as heterosexual ones. Nor did anyone seem to care about using drugs right out in public. Or having sex for that matter.
"Eugh." Nagi commented and averted his eyes from a couple.
"I don't know." Yohji commented, not at all minding watching the guy and girl go at it in a corner booth. "You ought to see it done right at least once in your life."
"Pig." Nagi said mildly disgusted.
Yohji laughed. "Little miss priss!" He teased. "Say, weren't you arrested once for indecent behavior in a public place?"
Nagi went bright pink. "At least we were behind a closed door, and that....that's a girl!"
"So what's so different?" Yohji asked, sipping his drink.
Nagi was very uncomfortable. "Girls...just...shouldn't do that...." He said faintly.
"What? They shouldn't have any fun?" Yohji pressed the issue. "You're raising him wrong, Brad."
"Leave him alone, Kudo." Brad said mildly, aware the man was getting close to his cut off level with the alcohol. "Baby, get him on his feet, he needs to work off all that booze."
"No, I want to dance with Ran." Yohji said, putting the glass down and looking at him. "Do you think you can tear yourself away long enough to remember I exist?"
Aya got up and moved out into the crowd on the dance floor with him. "You're drunk early tonight." He commented bitterly. "Don't make a fool of yourself."
"Who's going to notice me when you're being the drama queen?" Yohji asked.
"Oh shut up and dance." Aya said.
Brad looked at Nagi curiously. "Am I?" He said.
"What?" Nagi said, grateful for the wine spritzer to sip.
"Raising you wrong?"

"Like I needed ‘raising’." Nagi said sarcasticly. "I think I was pretty much done being raised when I was left on the streets."
"Do you ever regret Tot?" Brad had to wonder
"She wasn’t all there." Nagi said. "I just....for a little while....thought...."
He sighed.
"She would have never been sane enough to really know...."
Omi got up. "Eh, Nagi-Kun, let’s dance, too." He put on a cheerful smile.
Nagi got up reluctantly.
Brad made a mental note to draw him out about it tomorrow.
"I want to dance, but we’ll loose our table." Schuldig said softly, smiling at him from across it.
Brad looked at him. The night was so hot, Schuldig had worn a silk shirt of leaf green and tan slacks so thin, they might have been gauze, his copper hair in it’s perpetual state of sexually suggestive messiness, un-adorned except for a gold loop and two gold studs in his left ear.
Brad wondered how often a day he looked at Schuldig and thought how beautiful he was. Even before he had given in to the insane love he had for the predatory whore. Granted, Aya was glamorous, even without the jewels, like some unobtainable super model, and Yohji was almost as exotic with his mixed breeding and extremely fine bone structure. But Schuldig was....his first love. And always would be.
"Screw the table, Baby." Brad got up. "If we want it back, we’ll take it."

He woke to the sun lightening the room through the thin drapes. It was like heaven’s door standing open, so bright and ethereal. ‘And me a miserable sinner.’ He thought, entangled in the pile of young men. He sighed. Nature was screaming and someone’s leg was across his lower stomach. He abruptly disentangled himself and went to deal with the basics.
As he showered and dressed, he realized that he felt...okay.
Nagi was already up, having ordered more coffee and another breakfast when he heard movement from the master bedroom and the shower being run. He looked a little sleepy still and maybe would be able to use a nap later, but he was no where near as uptight as the day before at this time.
"So, what shall we do?" Brad asked him, over his plate of bacon and eggs.
"Just walk out the door." Nagi said. "Where ever the wind blows. See, I have a camera, like a real Japanese tourist." He smiled, holding the little thirty-five ml up on its neck cord. "We need pictures of you vacationing. So we can prove it actually happened at least once."
"Evidence can be destroyed, you know." Brad said coolly, his cocoa brown eyes teasing.
Nagi shook his bangs out of his eyes. "I don’t care. I miss school. I miss being asked ‘who’s that?’ and saying....my father..."

Brad nearly choked on his swallow of eggs. He recovered, sipping his coffee. Sometimes the slightest things could cut into him like Aya's damned katana. "I gave you that right from day one, Nagi. I may not have...expressed it properly. I had no idea of how to go about it. But for what it's worth....you're all I'll ever have or want for a son. Now let's get over this 'moment', shall we, and go waste some time." He wiped his mouth with his napkin and finished his coffee.

Schuldig woke up, annoyed. He rubbed his eyes and sat up. Brad was gone already. It wasn't that he resented Nagi for this inconvenience. The boy had had so little time with Brad lately. It was just that....he missed his morning kiss...missed waking up to his man...'Ach, now I'm loosing my mind.' He warned himself, and looked down at Aya and Yohji. "Choices, choices...." He smiled evilly.
"Anou...both!" He decided.

Brad had put a fine woven panama hat on. In his rolled up shirt sleeves and khaki pants, he looked like he might be comfortable. Not to mention the fact that his broad shoulders and muscular chest were shown to their best advantage when not muffled by a suit, however well tailored.
He forced himself to let Nagi lead the way, with only a minor warning once when they were heading for a pick pocket. For the most part, he kept his big mouth shut and let the boy enjoy the morning, paying attention and conversing mildly, allowing himself to be pushed into leaning on a low wall with a nice spread of red roses and a view of the sea to be photographed.
"Schu-schu will love this." Nagi said, taking a few different angles.
"I'm sure he will." Brad said dryly.
Nagi was looking at the viewer when he noticed something odd come over Brad's face. He looked up. "What?"
Brad tried to catch it again. A premonition....."I didn't get it." He said.
"Probably just a variable." He moved away from the wall. "It's getting hot. Let's get some ice-cream." he put his arm about Nagi's shoulders, an easy hand on one, and gave it a little squeeze. "It was nothing." He assured the boy.

As they walked away down the coastal rode, a pair of eyes watched them curiously from the patio of what looked like a small mansion, but was styled on the lease as a 'cottage' with a view of the sea.
The man from the restaurant last night, who had knocked out Guilermo in one hit. Hmm, so it wasn't her imagination. He was good looking....
But....who was he?
She snapped her fingers. Instantly one of the men was there. "You see that man. The one with the boy, walking down the road, just there."

"Si, Donya." It was Andre. "We keel heem..."
"No, idiot!" She snapped. "Find out everything you can about him! No one touches him, you understand!"
"Si, Doña." Andre stated.
She settled back in her chair with a predatory pout on her pink painted lips. Guilermo had pressed his luck once to often. It was time to take up a new hobby.

"Well, if THAT'S your fucking attitude....!" Schuldig was saying nastily.
"BITCH!" Aya slapped his insolent face!
"Oh, THAT'S IT!" Schuldig went for him, knocking him back on the sofa and scuffling with him.
"WHORE!" Aya went for the hair....
Yohji sighed and picked up the phone as it rang. "Suite 304."
"Kudoh?" It was Crawford.
"Hai, Boss." He said. "What's up?"
"Just checking in. They're fighting, aren't they?" Brad said dryly.
"Eh, what else is new?" Yohji's shrug came across in his voice. "Having fun?"
"If you can call it that. There's a nice little pirate museum here, with all sorts of big chunks of gold and rough cut stones...."
"Shame on you, Boss." Yohji admonished. "Leave the peasants their baubles."
"I was only saying." Brad said, amused. "Any ideas for dinner tonight?"
"You know, we've been everywhere here. Let's check out and go somewhere else." Yohji moved to avoid the petty cat fight's progress.
"Like where, Kitten?"
Yohji felt that little tingle he always got when Brad pet named him. It had been a while. "Well, the discussion WAS about going to Vienna. But Aya's put that on hold." He slapped a hand over the mouth piece. "Schuldig, you rip that ring out, Brad will beat you black and blue!"
Schuldig had Aya down on his back, a nipple ring in his teeth, a mad look on his face, the nipple stretched to it's limit. He growled and let it go, then slapped an already winded Aya as hard as he could.
Aya brought his knee up where it would count.
Schu turned green....and rolled off him to curl up in a fetal position.
Yohji took his hand off the phone. "I think it's settled on Paris." He said with an amused smile that was also conveyed in his mellow voice.
There was a sigh. "I suppose anywhere with a little faster pace would do. Tell Schu-schu I'll kiss it and make better when Nagi and I get back." he laughed a little, sadist that he was.
"Oh, I think he's going to be a little over sensitive there for quite a while, Boss." Yohji said. "But I had to watch it happen." His own equipment had drawn up tightly in sympathy.
"Poor you!" Brad chuckled at the sly offer in Yohji's voice.

Chapter Eleven
"Give A Little"

Leaving Tenerife behind had changed something. Brad was beginning to seem as if he were returning to his true self. Wanting the soonest possible flight, packing up, getting out, the sudden flurry of movement, of going somewhere, had stirred him up a little.

They were in Paris in time for a late supper.

All in all, it had been an enjoyable day.

He looked in on Nagi, asleep already, snuggled in Omi's arms. "Good night." he said quietly to the still awake Omi, whose eyes shined in the light from the hall.

"Good night." Omi responded softly, glad to have Nagi back to himself. It had been a lonely day for him. He'd spent it trying to ignore Schuldig and Aya's fighting, just knocking about the internet and playing a few desultory games, waiting, waiting. Now he held Nagi just a little closer and sighed happily.

Brad shut the door and went out to the living room of the suite. It was one of the old hotels, huge and comfortable rooms, but not a huge building. The view wasn't even that great any more since it had been built, but he didn't care for a view, he'd had enough 'views'.

Aya and Shuldig, had, as usual, made up.

It could get disgusting, how they could be fighting like wild cats one hour and clinging like lovers the next. Darling, vindictive, conniving red heads that they were.

He wondered if there were a way to get to the bedroom and lock the door before they were on to him in more ways than one.

But no, it was already too late, green eyes glinted at him from a curtain of maroon where Schuldig rested his head on Aya's shoulder, cuddled on the sofa, being bored by the world news in front of the television.

Brad sighed again and pulled the 'complimentary' champagne out of the now watery ice bucket and pulled the cork, pouring himself a glass. "Youji's out cold." He commented, looking at the tawny haired man sprawled in an arm chair.

Why did he always have to wear his pants so low and his tops so high? It was as if having his midriff covered was against his personal religion or something.

It was too tempting. He walked over and dipped two fingers in the champagne, dripping the chilled liquid on Yohji's flat tummy, where it trickled into his belly button, made a puddle and ran out.

Yohji stirred and wiped at himself, then looked up lazily. "Gees, Brad, you had me thinking I was bleeding!" he complained mildly.

"Time for bed." Brad drank down the champagne in a few gulps and set the glass aside, reaching down a hand to Yohji.

Yohji stretched lazily, then grabbed on and made him do most of the pulling.

"Lazy thing." Brad admonished.

Yohji put his arms around Brad's shoulders and kissed him just as lazily. "Carry me." he said playfully.
Brad kissed him back, running his hands over the skinny body. "Mmm, walk." He'd thought himself too tired, but now....'Weak, Crawford, really weak.' He admonished himself mentally. It was just too much, this desire to keep so many lovers. "Aya, Schuldig, bed, now." he said, and walked Yohji, who leaned on him heavily, to the room.
Schuldig sighed and nuzzled Aya, caressing his injured pectoral, careful not to touch the bandage covered swollen nipple. "You first tonight, Sweetest." He murmured.
"Schuldig, get off me or Yohji will beat us both to him."
Schuldig got up, pushing his hair back, then took Aya's hand when he was on his feet as well. "Eh, we'll throw him out if he tries it."
"I heard that." Brad said over his shoulder.

"You WHAT!" She yelled at the gangster.
"Doña Paola....he had checked out from the hotel. We are checking all flight and boat information now." He had put it wrong....saying they had not been able to find the man...
"Marco, you fool!" She spat at him.
"But Doña...we had to find where he was staying first...it took time!"
She paced the floor, angry, frustrated. "So...you at least found out his name? Where he is from?" She demanded. He had been one of her father's best men for getting information. She wondered how her father had survived as long as he had, surrounded by these idiots!
"Si Doña,....Bradley Crawford....An American who has lived in Japan for many years.
He has an agency....a detective agency." Marco said gloomily. "Crawford Investigations and Protection."
"He is guarding the Japanese?" She looked at him sharply. "The one with all the jewels? And the boy?"
He minded his patience. "Eh...it would seem not. The hotel staff was very clear on the boy....he is Crawford's son. He was not here to work. A vacation, for medical reasons. There is the son, another youth who is the boy's companion, and three men. Employees of Crawford's. No wife."
"That creature with all the diamonds is his *employee*?" She said in disbelief.
Marco mentally tossed a coin. "Si, mi Doña." He said with extreme politeness.
"Well....don't get any ideas!" She said, wondering at what all that must have cost. "I want to know as soon as possible where he has gone. You did backtrack the information to where he lives in Japan?"
"Si, Doña, Tokyo. We have the address of the office of his agency. He did not list his home address. It is possible that they are the same. The staff said he

is, apparently, very rich."
She thought this all over. "He is how old?"
"Twenty eight."
"Good, I am tired of old men. No wife? But....how old is the son?" she realized.
"Sixteen, according to his passport."
"He is twenty eight and the boy is sixteen?" She said in disbelief.
Marco shrugged. "We are still checking on him." he said in mild self defense.
She pondered what she had seen from the patio, the scene etched in her mind. He had seemed....desultory....apparently humoring the boy's wanting to take his picture, his eyes constantly roaming about, not really interested in any exact thing. She'd looked right into his face in the restaurant. A medical reason? "He seemed very healthy to me. My god, he took out Guilermo with one punch, as fast as a snake. Very strong." Her blue eyes lit up a little at the memory. "What medical reason?"
"They were unable to say, he had no appointments, no medication was ordered from the room, no special diet catered to." Marco shrugged a wide armed tossed up italian shrug. "We are working on it."
He did not think it wise to tell her that the suite all the men shared was a two bedroom with a very large bed required for the one room, the sheets of which, according to the maid, required daily changing and were quite the mess, and that the man had actually been seen in public with the others, caressing and kissing them. Oh, no, it wouldn't do at all to upset Doña Paola, she had her father's temper and was learning to run the 'family' with the same iron hand. Guilermo had thought to be the one left in charge, and when left only in charge of La Doña Paola, her right hand man, had done his best to seduce her into his control. But now....well, he was on a permanent diving excursion of the lovely coast of Puerto de la Cruse.
And if she wanted this Bradley Crawford, they would hand him over to her. Then let the fur fly where it would, they would be blameless.

"Van Cleef and Arpel."
"No."
"De Beers."
"I said no."
An annoyed moan. "Tiffany's then!" Hissed in disgust.
"Aya....NO!"
Aya turned away from him, totally angry now.
Brad rolled his eyes and went back to looking at the tourist guide.
"You don't love me." Aya said , resignedly.
"Not a bit." Brad said, unconcerned, trying to remain relaxed in the arm chair.
"Sah!" Aya glared at him.
Brad looked at him coolly. "We're wasting too much money on this nightmare to

bother with buying you more diamonds."
"You don’t love me!" Aya accused again.
Brad simply could not believe him! "Then what the hell was that this morning!"
Aya pouted. Well, it was a pout for Aya. He sort of glared more with a less thinner mouth. "Lust." he said, for lack of any better ideas.
"Okay, moving along." Brad said. "You’re not working, no diamonds."
"Just because we’re on vacation?!" Aya demanded in disbelief! "If I’m not working, then what was that this morning!" He hissed vindictively.
Brad tossed the book aside and looked up at him. "Oh, Princess, you have crossed the line there." He said mildly.
Aya let out a snarl of frustration and stormed off to slam himself in the bathroom.
Brad sighed again. If the lovely thing weren’t so damned good as an assassin....he turned another page, sick to death of luxury shopping adverts....
Casinos?
Gambling....
Money.
He made mental note of the addresses and folded down the corner of the page, tossing it on the coffee table, getting up to go tap on the bathroom door. "Aya! Stop sniveling and open this door!"
"No!"
He leaned on it. "Princess..." he tried softly.
"Go the hell away, Crawford!" Came the angry order.
Whoah. Ran. Not good.
"I’ve got an idea about saving this vacation." He said, dropping the romance crap. "Casinos."
After maybe two whole minutes, the door opened and purple eyes glared at him warily. "Gambling?"
"Yes." Brad said. "Gambling."
"You mean.....cheating." Ran stated.
"I mean manipulating the odds and making some money."
Ran thought this over carefully. "That could be considered working."
"Gambling?" Brad said, actually able to do the innocent thing quite well.
"People take vacations just to gamble. They go to Monte Carlo or Toronto, or Venice."
How like Brad to leave out his homeland and Las Vegas.
"I should have killed you in that hall way." Ran said coldly.
Light brown eyes glittered evilly. "The question is, could you have?" Then he shoved at the door and grabbed the younger man’s arms, pulling him close and forcing a kiss on him.
Ran struggled. Aya won, opening his mouth to let Brad in.
Brad finished the kiss and drew back a little to look at him.
How amusing to see such a look of complete surrender on his ‘enemy’s’ beautiful

face. He'd never quite gotten over that. "Now tell me again, what that was, this morning...?"
Aya gazed at him. "Let me...show you..." he breathed softly.

"Gott, it's good to eat again!" Schuldig said, stuffing another sashimi into his mouth, closing his eyes and savoring the flavor.
"It's not as if you were starving to death." Nagi commented. But, yes, it was good to eat 'real' food again, even if it were in an expensive 'gourmet' Japanese restaurant in the middle of Paris.
"Nope, he'll always find something to eat." Youji chuckled.
"That was just bad." Aya informed him.
"What? Now you're reading minds too?" Youji asked, amused.
"I know how your sick mind works." Aya said. "So, how are we going to work this gambling thing?" He looked at Brad across the table.
"Roulette," Brad said. "It moves fast enough and I should be able to see the outcome at least eighty percent of the time. Are you going to hog all of the tuna?"
Schuldig smiled and dipped another sashimi in soy sauce and fed it to him, a hand under the sticks to keep it from dripping.
Across the room in another sectioned off area a man discreetly made a phone call, keeping an eye on the assassins.

"They have found him." Marco reported to her.
"Where?" She said.
"The Hotel St. Seines, in Paris."
"Order the jet ready."
"Eh.....Pardon , Mi Doña...." He said with incredible care. "What exactly is the plan?"
She looked at him. Plan? Why.....hmmmm. She realized she had no plan. Except maybe to put herself in the man's way and then, take it from there. "Really, Marco! You are such an idiot! Do you think *I* need a plan?" She said arrogantly.
Okay, so she was an attractive young woman. Until you got to know her. "He is a detective, he works with the police. You're.....pardon, Mi Doña....a Mafiosa. Is this wise?"
She picked up a lamp and hurled it at him, swearing a blue streak.

Brad had been about to raise a glass of beer to his lips when he saw something in his mind.....
"What...?" Schuldig asked, knowing the erie sensation all too well.
"There it is again...." He said softly.....trying to sort it out....

But it was so elusive....he couldn't quite get it.
That was it. Something was brewing in the future. And all he could think was that it was so bad, he was picking up ripples of it from the very outer edge of the event. Like with Esset and the end of the world.
He shook his head. "Something very strange. I can't quite get it. It might not happen at all."
"Then eat and don't worry about it." Schuldig told him, a little worried about his state of mind. "It's not as if we can't handle anything fate throws our way, and you'll still see it before it happens."
"Well, he'll get plenty of practice tonight." Aya commented.
"It's too bad we can't come." Nagi said, not happy.
"But we're going dancing." Omi reminded him. "That rave is the hottest teen place in Paris, we'll have lots of fun."
"I'm tired of being under aged." Nagi fussed mildly.
"Patience, Nagi." Brad told him. "Soon enough you'll be tired of being over aged."
Nagi just frowned.

When they got back to the hotel suite, Brad caught Aya's arm. "Come into the bed room, we need to talk. Alone."
"Again, Lover?" Aya smiled.
"No." Brad said. "I mean talk this time."
Aya caressed his shoulder. "Mmm, after...."
Brad caught his bejeweled wrist. "No. Before. Before anything else, ever! Listen to me!" He gave the younger man a little shake. "Serious talk!"
Schuldig gave Youji a look. (Stay out of this.) He warned softly in his mind.
(What's he up to?) Youji thought back at him.
Aya looked at Brad, purple eyes stunned.
"Princess..." Brad hadn't wanted to scare or upset him...but this had to be done. He drew him into the bedroom and shut the door. "I need you to be....less obvious." He said gently.
"But why? It's a casino, lot's of people wear jewels..."
"I mean, all the time." Brad said.
Aya frowned. "You....you're ashamed of me."
Brad wished it were as easy as dealing with Schuldig. "No! Not ashamed." He tried to think of a way to express it. "Aya....I've been....wrong. To let you become so....divided. I think it's affecting your mind. The way you switch back and forth...you need to stabilize. I can't have you forgetting you're a man in the wrong situation."
"Have I yet?" Aya asked, really hurt.
"It's driving me nuts." Brad informed him. "I see how sane you are with Yohji....the way you act toward me is....an insult."

Aya looked away, eyes tearing.
Brad slapped him, hard, very close to loosing his temper the way he did with Schuldig. "Stop it! You ARE a man! How many times have we fought? I know what you're like in battle! Why this....charade!"
Stricken like that, Ran glared back at him now.
"That's it." Brad said. "That's what I want! Damn it, Ran, fight me now or accept what you are! Fight me! That's what it's about, isn't it! You can't face the fact that you gave in to me! That YOU surrendered!" He side stepped Ran's attempt to punch him, putting his guard up. "Let's have this out now. Once and for all! That's it, get angry at me, tell me! I want it out!"

Youji heard the raised voices. "Hey..." He started toward the door.
Schuldig caught him. "No, Love." he said, holding him about the waist and shoulders.
"He's trying to help Aya."
Youji wasn't so sure....
"It's hard for me, too." Schuldig said softly. "Come away. Just come outside. Nagi, Omi, stay away from that door, you understand?" He pulled Youji to the door. "We'll go outside and smoke. It'll be over soon enough."

Aya sighed shakily. He was past the pain now, just numb. It wasn't from being hit in any way, it was from the emotions he had been forced to face at last...
Brad handed him a damp wash cloth and sat beside him on the bed, putting an arm around his shoulders. "Are you all right now?" He asked.
"I think so." Aya said.
Brad kissed his shoulder through the silk of his shirt. "Will you be strong for me?"
"Yes."
Brad leaned closer to whisper in his ear. "You're beautiful, Ran. I love your eyes, your smile.....you don't have to pretend with me anymore. Just be yourself. Do what you like, but don't think that you have to overdo it. You're still my Princess, I hope you always will be, but you don't have to act like a cliché of a woman. I want you. I want you now. Will you let me?"
Aya looked at him. How could he ever refuse?

"Well, that took forever." Schuldig said, a little annoyed, when the door finally opened.
"I'm not as good as you are at dealing with minds, Schuldig." Brad told him.
(Now, remember, we agreed, no more encouraging that overly effeminate nonsense!)
(I'm going to be angry at you for a little while.) Schuldig informed him, and went in to get washed and dressed to go out.

Youji wasn't too pleased with him either.
"And what is your problem?" Brad asked him coolly.
"If you've left one bruise on him...."
"I didn't hit him more than a slap in the face to get him started." Brad said.
"Are you threatening me?"
Youji met his eyes. "No. I'm worried about Aya and what you're taking out on him just because you can."
"He means as much to me as you! Damn it, this team is falling apart because of all this emotional bullshit! And Aya is the source of it! I made him stop, that's all! I'm calling room service for supper before we go, any requests!"
"What ever." Youji said, and went to check on Aya.

Aya had toned down somewhat. He still wore his earring, and his nose stud. But for the most part, he'd managed to walk out the door with his 'security blanket' locked up in the suite's safe. One ring and his watch, glittering discretely. He wore a purple silk shirt and a charcoal colored silk suit. The effect was one of casual wealth. And he seemed for the first time in a long time, at ease with himself. More than a few eyes focused on him with interest.
The plan was to go into the casino, split up at the roulette tables, with Schuldig to transfer Brad's orders to bet, Aya was to remain at his side, because he would be concentrating on multiple premonitions and not quite on the ball when it came to reacting to situations. Youji and Schuldig would split up but be at the same table. It wouldn't do to attract another sort of attention than the one they drew for being new faces in a crowded gambling den.
After a certain amount of checking out the place, making certain of exits and how the crowd was moving, ordering a few drinks that would go basically un-drank, Brad chose a roulette table and bought in, taking a chair with Aya at his right side. (Any potential problems?) He asked Schuldig mentally.
(Unless you count quite a few women who are wondering if you or Aya want to spend some money....)
(Just get to that table.)
Schuldig used the mental image from his eyes and passed it along to Youji, casually moving to buy in and sit down, placing the first bet Brad gave him. It was a small one, no need to push this. He collected his winnings and prepared to be bored.
Youji moved in across from him. (All these europeans, now I know how you feel at home.)
(Mein Mann is still the most handsome thing in the room, isn't he?) Schuldig looked around, pleased with himself for having won such a prize as his American.
(Play the same as me every third time, the same color every first and second, that way it will look random enough and I won't have to keep telling you exactly.)

(What am I, ugly?) Youji complained teasingly.
(I'm not going to tell you what the women near you are thinking.) Schuldig teased him back. (It's not very pretty...pathetic, in fact!)
(Jealous?) Youji sipped his drink.
(Love, aren't you loyal to me? You did not answer my question.) He gave a vicious little stab of pain.
(Ouch, stop it!) He looked around as far as he could in the crowd and still pay attention to his betting. Brad and Aya were in eyesight in profile at the next table. Aya wasn't playing, his hand casually on Brad's shoulder, making it obvious they were there together in more than one way. He was there to keep off the 'flies' who would gather when it became obvious Brad was doing good at the table.
Youji sighed. He had gone looking for someone to fill the empty space Asuka had left, a girl with her wild attractions, her spirit, her intelligence and strength. She'd been his partner as well as his lover. His life had depended on her and her death had left him all but walking dead.
Schuldig had come along, and evil creature that he was, turned his life inside out. Was it possible he now had something.....better than Asuka? No. She was forever on his pedestal in his heart and mind. As good as Asuka. Never better.
He had given up his place in the scheme of things, never to have what normal people should have thought more than twice a day about. The easy business of life, marriage and having kids, seeing them grow up, grandchildren. Asuka and he had not had time to even talk about it. For but a brief flicker of light....he'd seen only the beginning of his existence in her eyes, and then....it was gone.
Now, he was checking out the guys in the room and comparing them to his lovers. Youji the player, always a new woman, heartless seducer, now willingly spending his nights in the arms of men.
Men.
Not just one aberration in his sexuality at a time of stress or just plain opportunity. A decision that was now so unconscious he thought nothing of kissing or caressing them in public, got hot at the sight of some small familiar gesture, a glance, a smile, a mannerism.
Ah, Brad was having fun. He had that evil gleam about him, a sort of black, hard edged shine, like an obsidian blade. How he enjoyed aggressively taking what he wanted. Anything that came easy...just didn't interest him.
Like Schuldig. And then Aya.....
(Sah, how your mind wonders.) Schu admonished, annoyed with his rambling.
(It's my mind.) Youji reminded him. (Give me peace, brat.)
(Lazy! Answer a simple question, don't go dreaming!)
He looked around again, then at Brad, chin in hand, totally pleased with himself....(He is definitely the best looking man in the room. But Ran, you, and me are the prettiest.) he smiled ruefully.
(Play the damned game.) Schuldig said, complacent.

Omi and Nagi danced in the crush of bodies in the rave. Well, made attempt to.
"It’s sooo crowded!" Omi yelled near his ear in order to be heard.
"I know! Fun, isn’t it?" Nagi was smiling.
"Still want to get old fast?"
"No!" Nagi exclaimed. "Never!"
Omi grabbed him and kissed him fervently and cupped a hand behind his ear to say into it, "Nagi, now!"
"Hai!" Nagi agreed, incredibly horny.

"Well, well, what have we here...?" A man glanced at a monitor, then looked again.
"Eh?"
"Stall four, men’s room."
"They are boys, aren’t they?"
"Oh, yeah." The first one said as the two in the bathroom stall got each other’s pants down.
"Sorry I asked."
The two men watched the security camera screens for a few minutes.
"Talented." The first one commented.
"I think we’d better let the boss know the trap has caught two more mice."
"Yeah, these two are special. Look at the muscles on those little devils. They have to be at least over fourteen."
"Uh....I’m not into little boys."
"Me neither, I’m talking aesthetics!"
"Sure." The other one said skeptically.

Brad was quite content with the pile of chips growing in front of him. Both Schuldig and Kudoh were doing just as well and still no one noticed anything unusual except perhaps a run of luck. There were no other japanese speakers at the table, so he could talk freely with Aya. "Look at Kudoh, surrounded by women."
Aya looked, then rolled his eyes. "Like flies on shit."
"Princess!" Brad admonished mildly.
"He isn’t happy without women all over him!" Aya hissed meanly.
"You think that?" Brad wondered.
"I’ve worked with him for years now! He would turn down missions to go on dates! Anything in a skirt! He used to claim 'nothing under eighteen'! So useless!"
Brad looked again, and missed placing his bet as the dealer called closed play on this spin.
Youji did have quite a few women about him. Hanging on him, making certain their

breasts in their low cut gowns were where he would see them. One practically had a nipple in his ear....
(Schuldig!)
(Ah! Not so loud! I'm surprised people can't hear you out my ears! What, mein leibe Mann?)
(Get those women off of Kudoh. Now!)
(A threat?) Schuldig wondered?
(Yes. From ME. I want them off! Now!)
(Ah, but he looks so funny, the conceited swine!) Schuldig laughed mentally.
A wave of pure annoyance let him know the joke was over.
He played the next bet and then got Youji. (Hey, you. The Boss isn't happy.)
(Heh? Why?) Youji was distracted. He was getting quite the massage from all those greedy hands and....other things, the money piled up in front of him as well as his exotic looks drawing them. His cigarette were kept lit, three drinks were piled up on the railing for them before him.....
(You're going to be sleeping on a park bench tonight if you don't loose those witches.) Schuldig warned.
Youji looked over at Brad.
Okay.
For a man with such gorgeous eyes, they could sure get ugly and threatening.....
He had been smiling at Schuldig across the table and winking at him every now and then as they raked in their piles of chips and brushing hands as they placed their bets. Now, he went flat out. He gave Schuldig a look that wasn't missed by his admirers and crooked a finger at him.
Schuldig smiled flirtatiously and gathered up his chips in the bag provided, then moved around to Youji's side, mentally ordering the guy in the next chair to suddenly want to change sides to see if his luck would change, too.
He settled in next to Youji, and smiled again.
"Come here often?" Youji asked in his heavily accented english, nearly laughing and spoiling it.
"Not often enough." Schuldig said meaningfully.
"Would you be interested in coming somewhere else?" Youji smiled wider.
"Hmmm, blond orientals must be pretty rare. I like rare things."
Okay, the pick up lines were flying fast and heavy and the girls got the message. This guy was gay.
Brad's temper faded as the women left Youji and Schuldig to themselves in disappointment.
And as his temper calmed and his mind cleared, he got a sudden red tinged alarm in his mind.....
Aya felt him stiffen under his hand. "Lover?" He inquired.
"Someone....is watching us...." Brad said, dazed by the image unfolding.
Men....armed....tailing them....one dialing a phone, reporting to someone....closing in on them. (Schuldig!) He relayed the vision to him.

Schuldig forgot all about both games he was playing and searched the room for the minds involved....leaving a wake of sudden headaches behind him. He located the mind of the one who had used the digital phone....
The gangster reeled on his feet, the sudden pain and dizziness making him nauseous. He blacked out, collapsing.
(Damn it! I over did it, he's blacked out!) Schuldig told Brad.
(Get to him!)
But it was no use! There were too many people and the man's companions had grabbed him up and were taking him away.
Schuldig read their minds more carefully this time. The Paris Hilton.
He left it at that.
Youji had stayed with the roulette wheel, watching the chips. "What's going on?"
(Premonition. We're being stalked, but I over did it and knocked the guy out. Okay, Brad is right, this vacation is over.)

"Yours?" Omi asked, pulling his dart out of the body.
"Dead." Nagi confirmed.
They'd deliberately run into a dead end alley way, to then turn on their would be captors.
"Tell me what that was all about?" Omi looked at him.
Nagi shrugged. "I'm not Schu-schu. And he can't read dead minds. It doesn't matter, they're dead."
"Damn." Omi said.
Nagi looked at him. "What?"
"I'm hard again." Omi said, smiling like a fool at him.
Nagi sighed. "Teenage hormones. Not that I'm complaining...."
"You'd better not." Omi said, putting an arm around his shoulders as they walked out of the alley way.
Another two pair of eyes, hunting, seeing them again, focused.
"So that was where they got to."
"What do you suppose those guys were after them for?"
"Who knows, those brats are obviously into each other, maybe they attracted perverts. Hunh, wonder how they slipped them?"
The two gangsters walked over to look down the alley way, only to see that it was a blind end, and that there were two bodies strewn in the shadows and trash at the foot of the wall it ended in.
One of them squatted to check. "Dead." he said, dropping the wrist.
"What? How?"
"One cracked skull, and this one.....nothing I can see without stripping him. Karate maybe?"
"I thought this guy was a private detective. How come his kid just flat out gets involved in a murder?"

"We’d better tell Marco." He stood, pulling out the phone.

Chapter Twelve
"Don't Wish Too Hard"

Brad paced the floor slowly, hand on chin, thinking.
It was near midnight and they were all tired. And what had been reasonable fun had turned into work, despite efforts.
Some one was stalking them. Someone had tried to grab Nagi and Omi.
Perhaps because he'd been so focused on the gaming, he had not seen what was coming.
"Brad," Schuldig said. "Let's get some sleep. We know where they ran back to. We can find them and kill them in the morning."
"Just wait." Brad said. "The men in the casino were spying on us. And the men after the boys were trying to catch them, not kill them. This isn't that simple."
Schuldig sighed, leaning on the arm rest of the sofa, head on hand. "We should have gone to Vienna."
"Vienna, Vienna, Vienna, what the hell is in Vienna?" Aya said, annoyed.
"What the hell is in Paris?" Schuldig looked at him.
Brad stopped his pacing and looked at them. They were gearing up for another fight.
"What did I tell you two?"
Youji got between them on the sofa. "It doesn't matter where we go any more." He said. "Omi, did you get any idea of what those two were chasing you for?" he rubbed his tired eyes and tried to focus on the problem, despite being ready to pass out.
"No. They just tried to grab us in the club, and we got free and ran out. They chased us, we killed them."
"You left nothing on the bodies?" Brad asked sharply.
"We're professionals." Omi said gently.
Brad had to accept that. "Of course. I was merely concerned. Well, we're on the tenth floor of a building with sub-standard fire escape systems, so security shouldn't be a problem that way. They'd have to try a direct attack. I believe they know where we are staying and followed us to the casino, there were too many of them, and they were prepared to get out too quickly, that means they didn't originate there. Next time, try to get answers before you kill." he told Nagi.
"It's hard to ask questions when someone has their hands on your throat choking you." Nagi said calmly.
"Then knock them off and not so hard you kill them. Schuldig over used his power as well. This is what comes of 'vacations'."
"Stop your complaining." Youji said. "It was for your own good. All this proves is that we live too fast a life to slow down and be able to even pretend to be normal." He got up. "I'm going to bed. To sleep."

Schuldig got up as well, stretching and wincing, trying to cover it up, but Brad noticed immediately.
"Nagi, where is the morphine?"
"No..." Schu protested.
"You're hurting again, you know if you let it go it will only get worse." Brad told him.
Nagi went to unlock the suite's safe and take out the little case with the emergency supplies in it. They rarely had to use it any more, without Farferello on the team. He prepared the hypodermic.
"It doesn't hurt....." Schuldig protested.
"Liar." Brad pulled the red head's shirt out of his pants and undid them, lowering the waist band, holding him. "Get him, Nagi."
Nagi jabbed the needle into the area near the spine where Schuldig had hurt ever since Taketori had taken the golf club to him, the disks there obviously damaged, the white dent of a four inch scar.....
"OOoooo, you little...." Schuldig complained threateningly through clenched teeth, eyes squeezed shut against the pain, digging his fingers into Brad's upper arms. "Fuck! That HURTS!"
"Hush." Brad drew his pants up again and kissed him. "Nagi, Omi, you bed down out here, keep your guns ready. I don't see them trying anything, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious. To the side of the door where you'll be behind anyone who might come in. Aya, come to bed."
Aya got up. "Youji's right for a change, we all need sleep."
"I wasn't the one who wanted a vacation." Brad reminded him, his arm about Schuldig's waist. "All these mad hours, partying...."
"Oh, shut up, Brad." Aya said.
Schuldig giggled at his nerve.

At noon, the club was still closed, but the clean up crew were working and Schuldig and Brad just walked right in. "Where is the manager's office?" Brad asked one of the workers in french.
"In there." The man pointed.
Schuldig leaned on the door before opening it, checking out the situation inside. Two men, and oh, the thoughts.....He opened the door and walked in, holding it open for Brad, keeping an eye on the two men.
"Who the hell are you!" The man behind the desk demanded. "I have no appointments!"
The other one took out a gun.
"How rude." Schuldig said to Brad in japanese. (Now what would an honest business man want with a bodyguard.) He commented mentally, grinning.
"You have one now." Brad told the man behind the desk. "Two boys were here in your club last night. They were approached by men who attempted to abduct them,

and had to escape from these premises."
"I'm not responsible for these kids." The owner said. "Their parents should keep an eye on them. Who knows what kind of perverts roam loose."
(My, oh, my.) Schu thought to Brad. (He's running this place as a hunting ground. Those brats should be flattered. They only take the best.)
"If you want to play this game, I know some rather nasty people who would love to have YOUR three little girls to....play with." He smiled ever so coldly.
The man went white. "How the hell did you know....!" he demanded, shocked. His own daughters were safely away at a private catholic boarding school.
"Heh, heh" Schuldig chuckled, smiling serenely.
"Who are your buyers?" Brad asked calmly.
"Shall I get rid of them, Boss?" The man with the gun asked.
Schuldig moved to disarm him, using his power to slow the men's minds, thus appearing to move more swiftly than he actually had.
This brought a gasp from the other man. "Who are you!" He demanded, all his superstitions surfacing.
"The wrong person to irritate." Brad said. "Schuldig."
He slammed his palm up under the body guard's chin and the man's neck snapped. He let the body drop, then looked at the club's owner, leaning on the desk to look him right in the eyes. "My, what a messy little mind you have. And....it's too late to pray." He smiled.

(We're being watched.) He informed Brad as they stepped out of the club.
(Where?)
(Mmmm, pretty much surrounded. The one doing all the ordering around is over there, in the black car behind the beige one to the left.)
"I'm hungry. Do you want lunch?" Brad said aloud.
"Yes!" Schuldig said, sliding and arm about his waist.
"Let's give them something to look at." Brad put an arm about his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek.
"Ha! You're awful, mein Mann." He slid free to unlock the car and get in on the driver's side.
Brad walked around to get in on the passenger's. "I want the one that's in charge. Everything you can get on him. He'll probably stay well back. The strange thing is I'm not getting anything. That must mean they have no intention of doing anything. So why follow us?" He put his seat belt on.
"Maybe later you can get into a nice little fight." Schuldig patted his thigh and started the car. "Or, do what I do. Pick one with Aya." He snickered.
"Schuldig." Brad warned.
"Oh, but making up is so much fun! How much trouble do you want them to have following us?" He got the car into traffic.
"As much as possible." Brad said. "If we force their hand, perhaps I can pick up

what they're up to."

Marco closed the phone and put it back in his jacket, frowning. This man was not at all what he had seemed to be at first. Thankfully, Paola was at her salon appointment, he had some peace and quiet to think about this further information.
Crawford's apparently adopted son and the other boy manage to kill two grown men. With in twenty four hours, the owner of a dance club for teens and one of his men was killed by this Crawford and one of HIS men, quiet frankly, to face the facts, one of his lovers.
So how the hell did that line up with him working with the police in Japan?
And what the heck were those kids packing? One body had been found by the coroner to have most of the bones broken, the other, a puncture wound with a deadly dose of synthetic curare.
The phone rang again and he scowled and pulled it out. "Si?"
"We've located the information, Signiore." One of his men announce. "Crawford isn't police. He's Schwarz. In fact, he and his men are the ones who wiped out the rest of the entire syndicate."
"Schwarz? The Germans?"
"Si, Signiore. He was their top man in some pretty bizarre doings. Some attempt to use the occult to take over the world."
"Well....that might explain a few things...." Marco thought aloud. "Get as much more on him as you can. I have to warn the others." He reset the phone and called the ones in charge of tailing Crawford. "Hey, what are you doing?"
"Still in the restaurant, watching these two fags." Was the answer he got.
"Armondo, those two fags are Schwarz. Back off to a safe distance until further notice.
"Schwarz? I thought they were all dead!"
"Si. You're *looking* at the ones who wiped out the rest! La Doña has effectively put our hands in a nest of vipers with her obsession over this....pretty boy." he said in disgust.
"Dio! What are we supposed to do now?"
"She wants him that bad, we're going to have to find a way to put her in his path. Then....she is on her own. I wash my hands."

There it was again, a sort of low grade white noise sound/feeling.....Brad was having a premonition.
Schuldig could rarely make sense of them, they were something that occurred in Brad's mind and yet....weren't part of it. When the thing had passed, he asked. (What?)
(Something's made them back off. New information. There's been a decision made. I think they've finally figured out exactly who we are.) He had another bite of

his steak, smiling happily. Back in business.

"Well, how is the investigation going?" She demanded the minute she was in the door, tossing her hat on the hall table.
"Crawford seems to be enjoying his stay in Paris." Marco said quite easily.
"Doña Paola, we have so many people following this man right now, perhaps it is time to simply do what ever it is you are going to do. We know his routines, he has none, this is a vacation. We know everything there is to know, until he returns to Japan and his normal existence.
She thought it over, examining her reflection in a mirror. "Very well then. I shall."
He allowed himself a small smile of relief. Let her find out just what she was getting herself into. Then it would be her decision alone.
"Hmm, I wonder what to wear...." She pondered.
Marco refrained from muttering something about trousers.

"I want everyone holding back until we know what's going on. No one kills without my order." Brad informed them. "Something about this situation hasn't set right from the start and I admit, it's new to me and I want to find out exactly why. Usually I can sort out my premonitions and determine what the next step it. This...." He made a frustrated face. "This isn't doing anything for me.
I don't like being watched and there's no one about us to hold back and spy on us to get to. Either they are incredibly incompetent....or police. If they are police, I want to know what set them onto us and why. So we're going in low key and to put the fear of....well.....us...into them." he smiled wickedly.
Schuldig smiled too. When Brad was like this, it made him feel so tingly, so warm and happy.
He read the minds of his lovers automatically and found that they, too, were thinking sultry cozy thoughts. Sick, sick, sick, they were all perhaps certifiably as nuts as Farfarello. They just expressed it in a much different way.
(You realize, mein Mann, that right now, we could all just jump you....?)
(Yes, I'm getting that raw meat in a pack of starving wolves feeling. So quit it!)
"Sah! Stingy, stingy man!" Schuldig chided him aloud.
The other two heard this and looked at him oddly, then realized what had to have been going on. Aya frowned and Youji sighed, putting their emotions on hold again.
"This is going to take cool heads." Brad warned. "I don't want any mistakes. Omi, make certain you change the loads in your darts, tranqs only. They've backed off for now, but who knows how long. We'll leave separately and meet at the Hilton in the hall way just below the target's suite. Be on your guard, all

of you."

"One more ‘elevator’ crack and I am going to shoot you ALL in the foot." Brad warned as the service elevator door shut.
Nagi giggled. Omi elbowed him sharply, trying not to giggle himself. Nagi grabbed him by the head and pressed his mouth over the older boy’s, jamming as much of his tongue in as could be until they both had to come up for air.
When the elevator opened half a minute later, they moved out. Aya was back in Ran mode, black cut off sweat shirt, black jeans, big ass sword slung on his hip, along with a shoulder holstered gun and a smaller knife at his belt under his black trench.
Youji had ditched the white crossed trench and moved on to a knee length traditional one in black. Under it, he wore a shoulder holster and the inevitable crop top and hipsters. Moving cautiously past him with a gun ready in his right hand, Brad could not resist drawing his left hand across that expanse of tawny flesh.
Youji drew a hissing breath, a wave of something very close to lust running through his chest and sending nasty ideas to his nether regions.
But Brad flattened back against the wall and head motioned to Schu to check the hall around the corner.
Schu found a guard in a chair outside the suite, reading a porn mag. He stifled a snicker and relayed the info to Brad, who gave him an evil look for having given him an exact picture of what was going on in the man’s mind.
Brad pointed to Omi and motioned him foreword.
Omi moved up, drawing out a dart and pressed to the wall. He stilled himself, took a slow breath, and in one fluid motion, turned out into the next hall, targeted and threw the dart, getting the man in the neck.
The would-be guard winced with a gasp, tried to paw at the dart, then slumped. Omi caught him and propped him back up in the chair, pulling out the dart and putting it in his other pocket. The man looked as if he had fallen asleep on duty.
Beside Aya, who had pulled his coat open and buckled it behind him to give better access to his weapons, Schuldig looked at him being all Mr. Serious Professional Assassin and reached out to catch the hilt of his sword.
Ran looked at him sharply. Schuldig grinned and ran his hand up the hilt suggestively, running his thumb around the tip and licking his upper lip slowly, green eyes half veiled but still wicked.
Ran blushed and pulled the hilt away from him.
Schuldig damn near laughed out loud and bit his lower lip on one side to keep from doing so, still looking at him sultrily.
(Schuldig!) Brad snapped at him mentally. (FOCUS!)
He rolled his eyes and gave up.

(What's on the other side of that door?) Brad demanded of him.
He checked, lightly skimming over the minds behind it. (Two more men just inside the door, one man five feet further and a woman, with a real attitude for herself...) he made an odd face.
(What now, Schuldig?) Brad had to ask, resigned to having to 'see' something else he didn't need to.
Schuldig just looked at him in the strangest way, as if something had never occurred to him before.
(Damn it, Schuldig!) Brad was upset with him. (Have you gone too far into someone's head again!)
Schuldig swallowed, then took a deep breath and shook his head. (No, mein liebe Mann. I.....I'm fine. Let's do this. I'll take the door and the first two, then you deal with the man and woman. Aya, Youji, cover our backs and be menacing. Nagi, Omi, you cover the hall and the elevator....) he drew the orders from Brad's mind as swiftly as he thought of them.
They all braced, guns and sword ready. Then Schuldig put a hand on the doorknob. He knew the door was unlocked. He counted down from five, and whipped it open. The plan went like clock work, a psychic crack to the brain taking out the two guards, then Brad moving in with gun aimed and Aya and Youji swarming in behind him, Schuldig shutting the door again and leaning on it.
Marco barely had time to put his hand in his jacket, then froze as Crawford held a Walther automatic six inches from his heart in a two hand grip with a strange gleam in his eyes that the italian had only seen a few times before, and in men who were basically rabid killers.
"What are you doing here?" Paola said, unable to believe this whole situation.
It had all happened so fast....almost as if a scene had been skipped on a film, her mind unable to fill in the missing pieces....
Aya held his sword ready to gut her at Brad's order.....something he would have never even thought of before this all began....But he had learned the hard way that women were not always innocent.
(Schuldig?) Brad wanted to know what was going on in their minds. Why wasn't he telling him!
No answer....
(Damn it, Baby, answer me!)
There was a feeling of being totally ill at ease, something he didn't often get from the obnoxious red head, even in the old days. (Mein Mann, just kill them and let's go...)
"Youji." Brad ordered.
Youji moved to take aim at the man. By now he was used to the silences that meant Brad was thinking with Schuldig.
Marco looked at the mix bred japanese and saw in the leaf green eyes maybe not so much of the same thing he had seen in Crawford's, but he saw the slightest move would get him shot. What ever was going on, the man had his team trained.

‘Please, Dio, don’t let her start screaming....’ he prayed silently.
But Paola was quiet for once, her eyes on the man she had become so infatuated with. She, too, could appreciate his control.
Brad moved close to Schuldig where he still stood at the door. "What is wrong with you?" He demanded, naturally, in japanese.
Schuldig went in to his best act ever. "Nothing. Kill them. They are nothing. Flies."
"Then...why kill them?" Brad said.
Schuldig looked down at the carpet. "Leibe Mann, you don’t want to know." He smiled a little.
"What’s the joke?" Brad raised his voice a little. "I’m not killing anyone without a reason and I don’t want to end up with repercussions just because you get it into your silly fucking head you want to see someone die!"
Schuldig looked at the woman over Brad’s shoulder. "She is some mafia leader. The woman in the restaurant in Puerto de la Cruze. You slugged her boyfriend. Well....she liked what she saw." He looked into Brad’s eyes. "She’s been.....planning to seduce you. Her men have been gathering information on you. What they haven’t told her, because they are afraid of her....is that you are homosexual."
Brad let this sink in. "She....?"
Schuldig nodded, biting his lip again.
Brad turned, looking at her in a very puzzled way.
Paola was curious as hell as to what they had been talking about that had him so shocked now. She realized her position was precarious and that they could very well be killed. She was ready to duck when the shooting started. But she was also ready to have the guards killed if somehow, any of them survived.
She gathered her pride. "What is this about?" She demanded in English.
"Oshii desu ne..." Brad commented. "That you cannot understand the joke." He smiled.
"De suka?" Youji asked.
"Eigo, Youji." Brad said. "English, everyone." he looked at the man. "You didn’t tell her. I would disembowel my men for withholding information. Especially....such embarrassing information...." He looked at the woman again.....and laughed. "Iki masho!" he ordered.
Aya and Youji backed off, still ready with their weapons. Brad moved to run his hand into Schuldig’s hair and kiss him full on the mouth, tongue and all, then drew him to his side, an arm around him, and opened the door. He looked back at the woman, and laughed again.
Aya and Youji followed them out, Aya using the hilt of his sword to bash the door knob off and taking the key out of the dead bolt, locking them in as Youji braced the door in case they tried to rush it.
Brad couldn’t help it, he started laughing so hard, he nearly doubled over. Schuldig, relieved, laughed as well. Brad kissed him again and they made for the

elevator, collapsing against the back wall and hanging onto each other until the doors opened on the garage level and then making a run for the car like silly kids, still laughing. He threw himself in the back seat, Schuldig following and Youji getting in with them, Aya, Omi and Nagi in the front.
"Hey!" Nagi asked as Aya started the car. "What was that all about! Tell us!"
"This mafia woman....." Schuldig said. "The one in the restaurant on the Island....Brad punched out her boyfriend....she fell in love with him!"
"Why is that so funny?" Omi asked.
"There were all her men, following us around, spying on us....and no one told her.....I'm gay!" Brad took his glasses off to mop the tears streaming down his face, he was laughing so hard.
"She's totally in love with him!" Schuldig buried his face in Brad's shoulder.
"We went through all that, just because some woman has a crush on you?" Aya said, frowning.
"Oh, you can't even begin....." Schuldig went into peels of laughter again.
"I don't want to know!" Brad said. "Oh, god!" he wiped his face again and put his glasses back on. "That's it! Let's go home!"

Paola drew a deep breath and sank onto the sofa of the suite's living room. The two guards on the floor were stirring and moaning. Marco was staring at the door as if he wasn't quite sure what had just hit him. "What the fucking hell was that all about!" She demanded.
"Well, apparently Mr. Crawford.....is not attracted to women." Marco said.
"That was what you KNEW and did not tell me?" She said venomously. "And just how did HE know?"
He shrugged, throwing his hands up. "Maybe the man's a damned mind reader! They could have picked up our phone transmissions! The fact is, he knew, he was on to us. Now will you give this up, Mi Doña?"
Her blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "Oh, on the contrary, Marco. Now...it is war." She hissed. "I want that man groveling at my feet! And you WILL get him for me, Marco!"
The 'or else' part unspoken was clear as a bell, none the less.
He sighed heavily. "Si, Mi Doña." This was not going to be easy....

Eighteen hours later, they were back in Tokyo, having given the tail immediately put on them the slip by simply killing the men.
"Well, at least it's not raining." Nagi said as they left the steps from the jet.
"Home." Omi said happily, drawing in a deep breath of the familiar scents.
The ride home was a quiet one, the trip had been long and jet lag was taking it's toll. The fact that it was just night fall in Japan made it easier to deal with. And Brad found it somehow fitting that they returned to the land of the

rising sun as the sun set.
He kicked his shoes off just inside the door and sighed. A little dusty, and nothing perishable in the fridge, but home.
The luggage was left in a pile to sort the next day. All any one seemed to want to do was have coffee or tea and just settle down.
"I'm too tired to sleep." Youji said, arms crossed on the kitchen table.
Aya was tired of sitting, he stood, leaning against the counter, sipping his tea. "Well, there's a cure for that."
At the table, chin in hand, Schuldig grinned at Brad. "After all, it's been nearly two days."
"I remind you all that I did not want this vacation. And I blame my little nervous set back on the whole idea of this vacation." Brad said dryly.
"Oh, well, too bad." Aya said. "It's over now and there is plenty of work piled up."
"He's playing hard to get." Schuldig still smiled at Brad, announcing it to the others.
"They're going to be rude." Nagi got up and looked at Omi. "Let's go to bed and leave them to it."
Omi got up from his chair and stretched. "Oooo, I am tired!" he followed Nagi off to the bedroom.
Brad sighed. He was tired, too. The problem was, he knew they wouldn't leave him alone. And he wasn't sure he could say he wanted to be left alone. He drank his coffee.
"What am I to do with you three? You run me ragged and then expect me to perform on demand. Can't you take it out on each other? Does it even occur to you how bizarre this whole mess is? The four of us in bed together?"
"No more bizarre than our lives have been up until this arrangement." Aya said.
"True." Youji commented. "And anyway, what is your problem with it? Getting old?" He teased.
"Don't press your luck, Kudoh." He warned. "Or you may never."
Schuldig sighed. "Can't we just go to bed and argue about it later, mein Mann?"
"I'm not arguing, I'm just asking." Brad said gently. He didn't have to read minds to know his love was thinking this was his big idea and why was he complaining now. He could see it in the green eyes looking at him warily from a perfectly composed face. One thing he had realized a long time ago, the expression in those eyes rarely matched the expression on that face. The warmest smile from Schuldig could mean eyes so full of hate they were carved gems. The most angelic expression, the most devilish eyes.
"That woman falling for you didn't do something to your mind, did it?" Aya asked coolly.
"As if it could." Schuldig said, annoyed with his thoughts. (You're not that tired, you're worried, why?) He asked Brad mentally.
He sipped his coffee. (It's just.....strange, that's all.)

(You were the same way with me and then Aya. Why don't you like being found attractive?)
He sighed. (It's not something I set my mind to, you know that.)
"It's too quiet, you guys are cutting us out of the conversation." Youji said, setting down his cup and getting up. He laid a hand on Brad's shoulder. "Come on, irresistible, off to bed to get what's coming to you."
Brad had to smile. Youji could be so annoying in his tactless way. And so endearing.
"You, most of all. I wonder about. Schuldig, tell me what he sees in me. He's never told me, not in all this time."
Youji blinked. "No!" He warned. "Don't you dare!"
Schuldig laughed. "Why not?"
Youji looked flustered. "It's private, that's why!"
"Why shouldn't the rest of us know?" Aya said. "God, we're practically all married to each other, why keep such a harmless secret? Unless....it's not harmless." he was suddenly all suspicion.
"Damn it, Ran!" Youji said, annoyed. "Don't put me on the spot like that!"
Schuldig didn't care. He looked at Brad. "Don't worry, mein Mann. He will tell you some time."
Youji closed his eyes in relief, his hand still on Brad's shoulder, squeezing ever so slightly more.

Again, he wondered just exactly what it was that made them so eager to be here now, caressing and kissing him.
(Sshhhh, don't think, just enjoy.) Schuldig hushed him mentally.
Hands and mouths and flesh....was this heaven or hell? He was so hard, he felt as if he would burst, but they avoided his genitals, only coming as close as the crease where hip met leg....his arms pinned down by Aya and Schuldig's bodies beside him. "Please..." He breathed.
"Please what, Lover?" Aya asked, and licked his ear.
"Let me in...."
Schuldig caressed his chest, Aya his flat muscular belly, Youji his thighs, half laying-kneeling between his legs. He raised his head to look at the sandy blond pleadingly.
Youji smiled, propped up on one elbow and kept massaging his leg, teasingly coming oh so close, but then not touching his balls.
"Baby..."
"Patience, mein Mann." Schuldig kissed him ever so lightly.
"You're torturing me!" Brad protested, trying to squirm loose somehow.
They held him down, gently and firmly. Aya put his mouth over a nipple, he could feel the younger man's hard on against his hip, Schuldig's against the other, Schuldig was licking him behind the jaw in that oh so sensitive spot.

"Youji...." he looked at him again. "I'm begging you...."
"Hmmm, for what?" Youji traced circles on the inside of his thigh with one finger tip.
He tried really hard now to free himself....But they bore down on him and seriously....his heart wasn't in it.
"Who's first?" Schuldig asked archly.
"Who was first last time?" Aya looked at him, twining his fingers into Schuldig's hand on Brad's tummy.
"I don't remember." Schuldig said after a moment.
Brad made a noise that sounded surprisingly like a whimper.
"Choose, Lover." Aya nuzzled his ear. "Who first?"
"Unnnhhh....." Brad was suffering so. "Not starting....a fight."
"But you have to choose." Schuldig said.
Brad thought like hell to figure that one out as quickly as possible. "You were first, Baby. Always. You, my love. Youji, come let me hold you." He tightened his arm on Aya and kissed him.
Schuldig moved to straddle him, and Youji did as he was told, snuggling into the vacated spot with a sensual kiss.
Brad gasped as Schu-schu grasped him and positioned the tip against himself, then eased himself down with a terrible professional familiarity. Brad groaned and moved his hips, the sensations sheer ecstasy.
With his hands braced on Brad's shoulders, Schuldig 'rode' him, every thrust eliciting a gasp of pleasure from the noisy creature, until with a groan and an even more desperate thrust, Brad filled him, his own orgasm mentally picked up, making Schuldig come as well.
"Oh, mein Gott, jah! Oh, Brad! Himmel!" Schuldig let the world know.
Aya giggled. It really was the funniest thing to see Schu-schu come.
With a delicious shudder of after shock, Schuldig drew off and lay back in Youji's arms, sighing deeply, totally spent.
Youji wasn't waiting any more. He moved Shcu-schu to a better position and slid into him, once again a thought crossing his mind that made it all the more pervertedly delicious....
Aya was forced to work twice as hard to cox Brad into another erection, but by now, he had it down to a science and when Schulig was right beside him being screwed, Brad could recover pretty damn swift. "Mmm, on top of me." Aya said, laying on his back fully now.
Brad got up on him, and caressed his hip and thigh, then got into him. Aya immediately wrapped his legs around him and got very physical.
Youji bit Schuldig's neck as he came with a greedy snarl of orgasm, holding him so tight, it was all Schuldig could do to draw breath.
It was a sensation Schuldig savored, being completely dominated for those few seconds. Then Youji loosened his hold to grab Schuldig's hard on and work it, bringing him to climax.

Brad couldn’t help it, Aya was next to come under his increasing excitement, then Brad finished and kissed him, Aya responding to his tongue.
Brad broke it off. "That’s enough." he said, moving to lay down. "I mean it. I’m tired."
Youji pushed Schu off and half sat up, looking down at Brad. He ran a finger through the mingled sperm of the other two on Brad’s stomach and sucked it off. Then he half laid on Brad, kissing him, putting his arms around him and sighing deeply.
"Youji?" Brad said softly.
Youji held him tighter, burying his face in Brad’s neck and shoulder. "Just say you love me." He finally whispered.
Brad stroked the blond mop. "You know I do." he said at last. "Best of all."
"Liar." Youji hissed. Then kissed him again. "But I’ll believe you anyway."

Chapter Thirteen
"Routine Acts of Violence"

Youji drew his shades down and peeked over them, focusing on the suspicious looking kid on the skate board cruising down the side walk across the street with a paper bag in his hand even though he had a back pack on his back. Sure enough, as he came to the wire basket trash can, he slammed it in and went on his way.
Youji pushed the sunglasses back up and reached up to his ear under his hair, unhooking the mic on it's wire looped up over his ear, speaking into it.
"Delivery arrived. White paper bag, south side of can."
Omi and Nagi, messing about on roller blades, split up and went for the can from two directions. Omi got there first and passed the bag off to Nagi who double checked it. "Hai." he responded.
Youji lit another cigarette and then got his butt off the wall he had been leaning on. Yet another day of criminal underhandedness. The illegality of guns in Japan didn't mean squat. This was the third and last ammo pick up of the morning. Time to break for lunch.
He walked over to the car and got in, driving up the street and turning the corner, where he pulled over for Nagi and Omi to get in the back seat. "So, where to for lunch?"
"Hamburgers?" Omi asked as Nagi grabbed him and slid a hand up the maybe a little too high cut shorts to grab his butt. "Nagi!" He protested, blushing.
"Well! Don't dress like that!" Nagi protested.
"He's right, Omi-chan, dress like that, you're asking for it." Youji said.
"What about you!" Omi accused and gave Nagi the kiss he was trying to get.
"Oh, just great." Youji glanced in the rear view. "Horny teenagers in the back seat. Knock it off or I'm putting you both out and telling Brad!"
"Can't....Stop...." Nagi gasped as Omi pushed him down on the seat and pulled off his shorts.
Youji tried to focus on driving but then Omi's shorts hit him in the head and fell down on his shoulder. He brushed them off hastily and turned to yell at them at a stop light and then regretted looking....
He turned right back around and drove strait home to the parking garage under the building, got out and with shaky hands drew out a cigarette and lit it, leaning on the back bumper. Somebody had to stand guard in case someone came.....
"Okay, Kudohh, wrong choice of words...." he muttered, blowing out smoke.

Brad was trying to watch the international kick boxing match. It was pretty much down to the line and the contenders had been narrowed down with intense competition.

The problem was.....
"Mmmmm! Oooooh! Yeeesssss!"
He punched the volume button on the remote and turned it up more.
"Aya! Don't stop....! Oh, Gott, yessss!"
Damn it was hard to concentrate on NOT seeing the outcome of the match before it happened with all that going on.
"MmmmMmmmMmmmm! OoooooooH!"
Brad scowled.
"Oh, Gott, I love your fingers....So strong....I can't take much more.....!"
Brad turned off the TV and tossed the remote on the table. "Damn it, must you be so.....excited about it!"
Schuldig looked up at him from where he was on the carpet with a pillow under his torso, shirt off, his pants slid down to his hips, Aya massaging his back.
"But it feels SO good! Aaaahhhh!"
Brad took off his glasses and put his head in his hands. They were killing him, these two.

"Why do we have to do these stupid jobs?" Nagi complained. They were in position on a roof top, overlooking an alley in the warehouse district, near the docks.
"Because Somebody's little libido was in the wrong place at the right time." Schuldig said. "And the police can't do theirs with their hands tied by the law."
"They don't pay us!"
"They don't deport us, either."
Nagi scowled. "We break up Weiss and get stuck with their job, that's what it is. It's no fair! It's black mail!"
"Calm down, Nagi." Schuldig told him.
"It's like working for SZ again."
"Hey, quiet down!" Schuldig warned, meaning it. "It's just breaking up a drug importing ring. It won't take more than a few hours and it's like we're doing our civic duty or some stupid thing. Ah ha, here comes the party." (Head's up everyone, our guests are here.) He relayed telepathically.
"I can't believe the russians are trying to infiltrate Japan." Nagi commented.
"To go up against the Yakuza when they can't even make it in their own country."
"Politics and propaganda." Schuldig reminded him. "The government will always make the news media make it look like they are not as successful as they are. It's too embarrassing to say, yes we have a major gang problem we can't even begin to control. Them and their drugs and 'mail order brides'."
The cars that had pulled up turned off their engine and people got out. They were all wary eyes and armed, looking around, for all the good it did them. Schuldig easily identified the one in charge and got into his head. He relayed the plans to Brad, and then Brad's decisions to the team.

They moved in quietly, when the two carloads of people had joined and gone into a warehouse.
The gangsters had no idea that as they hauled out their crates and excavated the blocks of pure cocaine from the packing materials to test and weigh out and bargain over, that they were slowly, carefully being surrounded by shadows in the night even darker than their own.
No idea until a wire snaked out into the air and wrapped around the neck of the guard with the UZI. He dropped the gun and grabbed at his neck, unable to breath or even gasp.
The other stared at him, not seeing the thin filament, unable to grasp what had come over him.
Youji gave a final tug and the man died, blue lipped, eyes bulging.
The others had their guns out, but a barrage of bullets cut across them, carefully leaving the top men out of it for now. They cowered as best they could behind the table and crates, looking around, unable to see past the one light's glow.
"You're in the wrong territory, Gentleman." Brad announced in English, as Schuldig had informed him they understood well enough.
"What do you want?" One of them demanded.
Six men came out of the shadows into the light, surrounding them. "To send a warning to your masters." Brad stated. He also had an Uzi, a mini nine millimeter. "You see your dead men all around you? How easy it was to take you down? We knew you were coming three days ago. That you had rented this warehouse and sent your cargo to be stored here. We even know that your wife doesn't know about your two mistresses, or why she has to work so hard to pay the bills when you disappear for days." He smirked.
The man's jaw dropped open at this.....
(I love doing that, don't you?) Schuldig snickered in Brad's mind.
"And that you have a problem with little girls." Brad looked at the other one.
"One I intend to solve. Omi."
The darts went to their mark, as always. The two men stiffened then slumped, the drug the sort that numbed the nervous system enough to make them unable to move, not to knock them out, or even stop them from feeling.....
"Baby." Brad invited.
Schuldig holstered his gun and took out of his pocket an interesting piece of farm equipment, holding it up into the light. "Pig castrator. You got love it." he said, working the clamping mechanism. "You just grab the scrotum, tug it out, position the tool at the base and shut it till it clicks. Voila! No fuss, no muss. One castrated pig."
"Ouch." Youji said.
"Aya, Youji, hold them up and drop their pants while I do the honors." Schu-schu said sweetly. "Of course....I'm not aiming for the scrotum."
There was nothing the two russians could do. They were limp as puppets and all

they could do is scream horribly when the tool clamped down, crippling them. Aya took his knife and put a scarring cut on each of the drug runners' faces in lieu of a branding, and used the butt of the blade to strike them on the base of the skull, knocking them out.
"That should get the message across loud and clear." Brad said. "Throw them in the trunk. Then call the police and tell them we've done our job. The usual nonsense about how we had to defend ourselves and why there aren't any prisoners."
"You got it, Boss." Youji grinned.

The room was traditional with a vengeance, the mats, the sparse furnishings, the floor pillows, the very low table. It was a wonder no one had insisted on taking their western jackets and providing them with over kimono.
Aya and Youji automatically made note of the floral arrangement, so spare and elegant in it's niche, with the seasonal scroll behind it.
And Schuldig automatically made fun of them. (Flower boys.)
Aya shot him an evil look.
Schuldig smiled at him, daring him.
Youji laughed softly. "I'd be careful with that patented Fujimiya glare, if I were you, Ran-chan. You know he doesn't care where it happens."
Aya pinkened.
"Stop it." Brad ordered quietly but curtly. Sometimes...
They had been directed to wait here, and now, the doors were slid open by a maid while another brought in a tray of tea and a plate of sweets and set it down on the low table and the man they were here by invitation of came in. He saw to it the refreshments were taken care of and then they all sat down in the traditional manner, on the floor cushions. "Crawford-san, it has been some time since we have met face to face. You are well?"
"Yes." Crawford said. "Cut the crap, Araki-san. Tell me what this is about."
The Yakuza was a powerful man, second in this particular gang. Second, but obviously in complete charge. He was not accustomed to being spoken to like this by people who knew him, but the American was soft spoken and only implying that he had no time for the high flown traditions of his adopted country. But Araki Masanori was a stubborn man and he liked his traditions. "How impatient you always are. Have some tea and refresh yourself."
Brad pushed his glasses up with a weary look of resignation.
Schuldig fixed him one of the handle less cups, with one sugar in it from the bowl thoughtfully provided to take away the bite of the green tea.
Araki noted this with interest. The other two got their own, but Schuldig, what an odd name he had always thought that, even for a foreigner, handled his task as well as any geisha, offering the cup on his hand to Crawford. It seemed he had been part of Crawford for as long as Araki had known him, but this was

something new.....
Crawford took it and swallowed some. "Happy now?" He asked.
Araki laughed a little. "You haven't changed, for all your gain of power. Still an impudent puppy. More power should bring more grace."
Aya was up on his knees, hand to katana hilt, purple eyes like disturbed wasps' nests.
Araki could have killed him then and there for such a threat in his own household. But instead, he laughed again. The maroon haired boy wore eye makeup and dressed like a peacock, but he had the heart of a samurai.
"Ran, sit down and behave! NOW!" Brad ordered.
Aya sat back down, bitter. He had grown tired of being called a dog, and to hear Crawford called a 'puppy' rankled him no end.
Araki was aware the two native japanese had been Crawford's enemies once, had been in Kritiker, and a real thorn in the side of the Yakuza under the former police chief's guidance. But in the past year or so, he had heard that Crawford had formed a team that was so efficient, should he chose, he could topple the government as easily as sweeping chess pieces off a board. Offend him in even the slightest way, and you would end up dead, or worse, everything you had, gone.
He wondered if he'd just crossed that line.
"You have news for me, Masanori." Crawford said, and in the use of his given name, reminded him of their long standing detante if not exactly a friendship. "And we are both busy men."
"All the more reason to enjoy the peaceful moments when they come." Araki informed him. "You remain an American in Japan."
Brad frowned. He finished the little cup of tea and set it down. Schuldig had been ordered not to ever read Araki's mind years ago, a courtesy Brad had given him when he looked into the man's eyes from the business end of a katana and realized that while Araki wore his dragon on his skin, his lived under his, and they were of the same blood, those dragons. "Maybe when I'm old and have more time for such luxuries you might be able to teach me some better manners. But for now, you called me here as your guest, not your student."
"Always using the rules to suit your self." Araki smiled a little. "I don't think you'll ever be old enough to sit still." Truly, he still looked a boy, despite his suit and tie. "I'm glad you refused to join Shouryuukai. It would have been bad for both of us after all."
Brad lips smiled a little, but his eyes glittered. "I think you suit your position much better than I would."
Araki chuckled. "There's been a contract put out on you." He sipped his tea.
Brad blinked, mildly unconcerned.
"Not for your death." Araki said. "You, or any of your men, alive. Two million dollars UEC, for the capture and delivery of."
Ah, that did it. Schuldig looked right at him, green eyes deadly as ever, teeth

bared in a feral grin. Araki knew how loyal he was to Crawford.
Crawford actually reached to catch the redhead's wrist, though he didn't look at him. "La Mafia Gianetti?" He stated.
"Hai. So you knew?" Somehow, he always knew.....
"No." Brad said. "Simply the only ones who might have the nerve."
(You should have killed her!) Schuldig hissed at him mentally.
(And ruin the game?) Brad shushed him, squeezing his wrist. "They approached the Yakuza?"
Araki smiled. "No one will touch it. But you should know, there are people coming to Japan, we see them, here and there, and they are known to us from outside ventures. 'The hunter has become the hunted', to quote a much over used saying."
"I have never been the hunter." Brad said coolly. "I am the predator." He un-gripped Schuldig's wrist and rubbed it, moving his hand to take the red head's.
Ah, Araki thought, so he was 'that way'. He'd suspected it, a few years back, but there had never been any real evidence to possibly take a chance.....
Brad got to his feet, the other three following suit. "Thank you for the warning. I appreciate the neutrality of the Yakuza in this matter."
"It is between foreigners." Araki said. "But....I would not see you injured, Crawford-san. You have been honorable with me, and I hope you may say the same of me."
Brad thought this over. "Yes." He said.

"Okay, can so now we kill that Yakuza bastard?" Aya said when he'd started the car and they were driving out of the compound of Araki's small mansion.
"Princess." Brad said in mild warning.
"This is too bad." Youji said, up in front next to Aya. "You let her live and now she intends to attack you? Hell hath no fury and all that, you know."
Brad wasn't concerned with Paola Gianetti. Schuldig leaned against him, pressed close and clinging to his arm, silent. He put his free hand over Schuldig's on his other and spoke against the bright red hair. "What's wrong, Baby, why aren't you in my mind?"
Schuldig sighed. Then came to him. (I don't want to loose you.)
(WHAT?) Brad was shocked.
(I know you. If she tries really hard, impresses you with her command and persistence.....)
Brad pushed him away, suddenly too upset to even want him in the same car! Schuldig mad a small noise of anguish and turned away from him, looking out the window, wiping his face on the back of his hand.
"What did you do to him!" Aya demanded, distracted from the road, not a good thing.

"Aya, watch it!" Youji warned as the car wavered too near the median line and on coming traffic.
He got it back in control.
Youji turned to look at Brad. He didn't look too happy himself. What ever had passed between them in those few seconds, Schuldig was in tears and Brad was wearing one hell of a sour puss. "Eh, Boss, somebody should die." He commented, then laid a hand on Aya's shoulder. "Ran's got his vengeance up and I wouldn't give two cents for all our lives right now if you don't tell us why you two are suddenly fighting back there."
"Sometimes....YOU two are too many!" Brad snapped. "What passes between Schuldig and me privately is none of your business!"
"Stop shutting us out!" Aya ordered. "We came to you at your will! This mess is all YOUR doing! You drew us to you and made us love you, AND your whore! Don't expect us to just be your mindless slaves! How many FUCKING times do I have to have sex with you before you realize I'd die for you?! That I love Schuldig and I don't want to see him hurt any more, especially by you, the only person that CAN hurt him?! DAMN IT!" He pulled the Jaguar sedan over to the side of the rode with a jerk and killed the engine, slouching in the seat and crossing his arms, a sullen scowl on his face.
"O-kay." Youji said, truly embarrassed now, pushing his shades up over his eyes.
"Tell them!" Brad said curtly, not even looking at Schuldig. "Tell them the complete IDIOCY you just dumped on me!"
"Well isn't it true!" Schuldlig demanded, completely gone now. "What am I to you when you could have an entire criminal network at your feet just by fucking some WOMAN! "
"I'm not staying for this nonsense..." Brad tried to get out of the car.
Aya vindictively hit the lock button. The damned Jaguar was a luxury sedan, with child proofs on the back seat!
Brad slammed a fist down on the arm rest. "Damn it, Fujimiya!" he swore, completely angry now!
"I'd swear to god it was PMS if he didn't have balls...." Youji muttered mildly.
"Eh, Schu-schu, have you been sneaking progesterone shots? That stuff will fuck up your head as well as make you more girly, you know."
"Shut up, Kudoh!" Schuldig snapped, completely offended.
Brad looked at Schuldig with narrowed eyes. "You WOULDN'T." He hissed in accusation and disbelief. Surely, he would have seen that.....
"HE's an idiot!" Schuldig accused.
"Well, then so are you." Youji said calmly.
Schuldig screeched in rage and frustration.
The rest of them winced. The car's acoustics were quite good.
An evil silence descended as everyone stewed in their own juices.
Then Brad relented and looked at his dear demonic red head. "Baby....I would never trade you for all the power in the world. I told you even before I knew

that I loved you....together we can rule the world. And as long as I have you.....I don't need the damned world." He took out his handkerchief and held it over to him. "Now wipe your face and pull yourself together. You KNOW I can't take that shit!"
Schuldig took the handkerchief and did as he was told.
"This stupid woman!" Brad said angrily. "ME have more grace?! Can't she take a hint with a sledge hammer?! Aya, get us home or let Youji drive! Schuldig I told you to STOP sniveling!"
"I can't help it!" He complained. "You're so mean to me!"
Brad suddenly got a very certain idea of how to shut him up. He took his wallet out of his jacket's inner breast pocket and took out a small amount bill.
"Hey...." He held it up. "How much will this get me?"
Schuldig looked at him, then at the bill. He bit his lip and smiled a little, wiping off the last of the sad tears, the most wonderful memory of his life coming back to him....
"Well, all right, then." Aya muttered and started the car, prepared to concentrate fully on driving.
Youji turned on the radio and found a nice noisy rock station to distract him.

Nagi had taken a big chance, and he knew it. Brad would be yelling at him, but he had had to know. "Omi, I have to do this alone." he said, leaning on the side of the car, looking in at him.
"I know." Omi said. "Just go."
Nagi bent to kiss those pink lips. He was so understanding, so sweet, his Omi-chan. Sometimes, he couldn't believe how lucky he was. They'd both been through so much, and then to find each other....and despite their differences and affiliations, to have each other.
"Go!" Omi urged.
He turned, crossed the narrow street and went up to the gate. He drew a deep breath and let it out slow, then opened the gate and went to ring the bell.
She opened the door. "Yes?"
"Is Jei here?" Nagi said. "I'm Naoe Nagi. We....were coworkers....and I think....friends...."
She smiled. "Wait just a little. I'll tell him."
In a moment, she was back. "Come in."
"Thank you...Ikeda-san." Nagi said humbly.

Youji slammed the petty gangster against the wall of the gambling den. "Pretty stupid of you to hold out on your boss in the first place, don't you think?"
The man was already bleeding from a split lip, but now, the tall skinny half breed had him face to the wall with his arm up behind his back, half beaten unconscious. "I'm sorry! I'll pay it all back, more than all!"

Youji leaned on him and put his lips to the man's ear. "I think that's an excellent idea." he said in a low whisper, knowing exactly how this position would creep the man out. "Or we'll come back." He knew the hard on he'd gotten from the adrenaline rush wasn't exactly the most assuring thing a strait guy could have up against his back sides either. "And see to it you're even more sorry."
"Please....no...." The man said, his mind filled with horror.
Youji ran his free hand down the man's side and his hip, then reached in front of him to grasp his belt buckle. "You sure?" He asked, pulling him back against him, doing more damage to his shoulder's ligaments in the process.
"Aaahhhh! I'm sure!" The man protested in a hiss of pain.
Youji laughed and let him go, kicking his feet out from under him so that he fell to the floor and then kicking him in the ribs, just enough to crack them.
"Just a little warning, heh. Things are always black and white. No gray. You can't play this game and cheat."
Aya got his butt off the man's desk and moved to kiss Youji without touching him in any other way, looking into his eyes. "You're terrible." He murmured sultrily.
"Mmmmm, let's go fuck." Youji kissed him back.
Aya smiled, cheeks pinkening. God, he loved it when Youji talked trash to him.

Nagi walked into the apartment with Omi behind him, ready to be torn up. Sure enough, Brad was at the impressive mahogany writing desk in the living room, like a tiger among the potted palms and vines that decorated the wall behind him. Nagi had already told Omi to go to their room and wait for the shit to hit the fan. Omi reluctantly went.
"Well." Brad said as Nagi came to face him.
Nagi sighed. "I had to warn him."
"This, by the way, is a phone." Brad tapped a finger on the sleek black instrument.
Nagi frowned a little. "I didn't do it to make you angry."
"But you did it." Brad said.
"I wanted to see Farfie." He ran a finger along the carved trim of the desk's edge. "To see how he's doing."
Brad simply sat there, looking at him, unreadable except for his disapproval and that was in his cold eyes and the tight line of his lips.
Nagi trailed his hand across the desk top to put it on the man's. "He's actually enrolled in a veterinary course. He says...it's very grueling with all the anatomy and stuff, but....animals aren't people. That they got the worst end of the deal."
"And what did he have to say about our 'little problem'?"
"He laughed." Nagi said, tracing the lines of the blue veins on the back of

Brad's hand. "He said you brought it all on yourself, and that more than likely, you were enjoying every minute of the trouble it's causing."
Brad drew his hand away sharply. "Maybe. Maybe not. Go to your room. Omi will hold you and tell you nice things about how justified you were to disobey me." He said cruelly.
Nagi looked at him. The silence was so terrible. "I'd rather you beat me and got it over with!" he exclaimed. "Don't hate me, Brad!"
And somehow, he was surrounded by strong arms and pressed to a strong body, held close and comforted. "I don't hate you, Nagi." Brad said, kissing the top of his head. "I'll never hate you."
Nagi grasped his shirt and tried hard not to cry.
Brad rubbed his back and squeezed him lovingly. "Don't disobey me again. Come to me first and tell me your reasons, talk to me."
"I will!" Nagi promised.
"You won't be a child much longer." Brad realized. "I won't treat you like one. You know how to think for yourself, now. How to make decisions and face the consequences. But I'm still here, Nagi. I'm still here."
Somewhere deep inside him, something small and still lost cried out and Nagi couldn't help echoing it. "Papa..." he said softly, barely audibly.
And Brad smiled. Hey, some things were easier than a good beating.

He drew a hissing breath through his teeth, the pain sharp as razors under his flesh.
"Damn." Youji said, gun ready, wondering if they had half a chance of getting out of this mess....
Aya knelt and pulled his knife out, cutting his jeans and tearing them up to the gunshot wound, cutting off the fabric and ripping it into strips.
Youji was sweating, waiting for him to tie it up, but when he looked down, he wasn't tying it up, he was digging into the wound! "Ran!"
"I gotta get it out." Aya stated, clicking the knife's point against the metal..."Damn!" He put a wadded up strip of denim in his mouth and bit down on it hard, then dug in under the bullet, closing his eyes and feeling....
"Shit!" Youji heard footsteps and braced himself, listening with everything he had, trying to ignore the fact that Ran was butchering himself!
The bullet clinked on the tarmac. Youji moved out and aimed, gunning down one of their attackers.
Aya drew a deep breath and let it out, then pulled the rag out of his mouth and used it to pad the wound. He wrapped it up as best as he could. He sheathed the knife and tried standing. The damn thing throbbed, but the pain was mostly gone. Shock had to be setting in. But at least he could move now. He pulled his gun again and changed the clip then pulled out his phone and hit the dial button.
Youji saw another of them coming from the other end of the alley way and shot

him. Two more to go? How many? He'd lost count. "Switch guns!" He tapped Ran's arm.
Aya gave him his fully loaded one and holstered the suspect one. "Brad! We got a problem." He said when the man answered the phone.
"I know, but right now, it's too fluid I can't see what's going to happen, I'm getting too much!"
"Just tell me we're not going to die!" Aya ordered.
"You're not." Brad's voice said flatly. "Trust me. We're on our way."
He sighed and put the phone away, then pulled out the gun and fished for another clip. Damn! "Youji, gimme a clip!"
"I'm out!" Youji stated.
"Shit." He holstered the gun and pulled his sword.
Youji looked at him, then pulled him close under one arm and kissed his cheek, keeping his eyes searching the street, gun ready. "We're going to be okay, you understand!"
"Hai." Aya stated.

The bodies lay on the street, covered in black plastic, waiting for the crime scene lab people to finish their jobs.
Masanori stood by Brad. "This is too much of an insult." He stated. He had come as soon as he had heard of the skirmish on his end.
Brad's fists were clenched in the pockets of his overcoat, the police car light's flashing off his glasses. "I just can't believe this. I can't."
The Yakuza boss looked at him. "It hurts the first time." He said. "We've all been there. You just go on from now. Lesson learned."
"I want them all dead!" Brad snarled. "Every last one of them! Hunted down and slaughtered like mongrels! Two million Yen to every man who brings me the head of a Gianetti Mafioso!"
"Iiye! That's only your pride speaking!" Masanori admonished.
"I'm going to fucking start World War Three!" Brad yelled for the damned world to hear! "NO ONE attacks ME and LIVES!"
Masanori put an arm around his shoulders and turned him away from the now staring officials of the government. "You listen to me, Brad. You're not a spoilt teenager any more, you're a man with a man's job to do, having a public tantrum is hardly saving face in front of these flies. Go home. There's nothing more you can do here except make the cops more curious."
Brad forced his rage to get back in control. "Damn it, Schuldig was right! I should have killed her!"
Masanori let him go with a gentle slap on the back. "That's the past, this is now. Go on. Go home. I'll find out what the hell the police want and give them a load of garbage."
Brad walked back to the Jag and got in the door Schuldig held open for him. He

was shaking with rage still. "FUCK!" He swore as Schuldig got in the driver’s side.
"Put your seat belt on." Schuldig said.
"Why! I don’t see myself dying any time soon!" Brad snapped.
An arm reached across him from behind to pull the seat belt over and click it in at his waist. "Don't be so stubborn, Boss. Or you might end up on another vacation."
"Youji, don’t make things worse!" Aya said, the pain from his leg coming back now that he was having time to rest. "Let’s just go home. I want morphine and hot tea."
Youji put his own seat belt back on and put an arm around him. Gees, Brad was pissed.
(He’s never been hit like this before.) Schuldig moved the car carefully around the police vehicles

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Chapter Fourteen
"The Politics of Life"

They'd taken on the wrong people. And they were going to learn that lesson. Araki, true to his word had dealt with the police. Brad wasn't too sure this wasn't even more of a humiliation. He didn't care if it happened to everyone. He'd paid his dues. This shouldn't have been in the picture at all!
He stood, leaning back on the desk, sulking, thinking, trying to see which choice to make.
"The files are in." Nagi said in the chair behind him. "We've got an army after us." He added quietly, impressed at the array on the screen.
"How the hell are we supposed to do our jobs with these idiots on our asses?" Aya complained, stuck on the sofa with a leg numbed by morphine and propped on the coffee table with a pillow under it. He was pissed, so pissed he was in full Ran persona.
Brad moved to look over Nagi's shoulder, laying a hand on the back of the chair, taking the page control keys. A few names were familiar. The ones who had attacked his kittens were mediocre. The top level boys and girls would be more wary, especially now.
"I'm putting the business on hold." He decided. "We took out the rest of Schwarz. These are petty gangsters and mercenaries. We'll hunt them down, and wipe them out."
"This isn't the same." Nagi said. "We knew Schwarz. So many independents....."
Brad ruffled his dark hair. "Against us?" he said. "Remember who 'we' are, Nagi." he looked at the living room window, the curtains starting to show light faintly...."Sun up so soon? It's been another long night." he sighed. "Ran, where will you be comfortable?"
"Beside you." Aya said sullenly.
"Don't snarl at me. I was only asking what you wanted to make you at ease." Brad informed him, walking over to look down at him.
Aya fingered the bandaging on his thigh. "Are you mad at me for getting shot?" Schuldig, half asleep beside him, looked up at Brad curiously.
"Of course not." Brad said curtly. (Schuldig...)
(I'm being careful, mein Mann.) He'd learned his lesson. No more blurting out his lover's first impressions to each other....He stretched and sat up, and was suddenly sorry he'd done it.
Brad saw the hesitation, but also made no comment as the flame red head put on a lazy smile and got up off the sofa, trying to cover the twinge he'd had. "What are we going to do with this ruined boy?" he looked at Aya.
"I'm coming." Aya sighed and managed to get to his feet.
Brad gave him an arm. "Schuldig, get Yohji, or he'll stay out there smoking and sulking until he freezes."

He went to look out on the balcony. Good god, it was cold!. The sun rise was so pale. Yohji had his trench on, but that couldn't be enough against this winter chill.
"Come to bed, Love." Schuldig said softly.
Yohji had one last deep drag on the cig, then put it out on the railing and tossed it away.
Schuldig read his mind. Yohji didn't even protest. He was used to it by now. It was something he just simply gave Schu-schu now.
Schuldig put an arm around him as he came inside. "So cold! We'll warm you up." He promised, pressing against him.
Yohji kissed him. "You always do." He murmured.

Yawning, Nagi turned on the air vent and put the bacon in the pan. Once in a while, he could get Brad to eat fish in the morning. But most of the time....cholesterol hell. Darned silly to be making breakfast at sunset. And there'd be damn few places open for 'lunch'. He went to yell up the stairs.
"Brad! We need groceries!"
"Call, then!" Brad yelled back from the bathroom over the noise of the electric razor. "And make sure the delivery person's covered by security!"
Of course. He couldn't 'see' until the person was chosen to deliver the order.
Nagi turned the bacon over and sighed. They just weren't normal. And never would be.
"Normal sucks." Schu hugged him impulsively, an arm about the shoulders from behind. "Cigarettes" He said. "And sugar. And god help you if I don't' get cream for my coffee." He shook the near empty carton and put some in his cup.
"Write it down, then." Nagi told him, annoyed.
"Then what is the point of You?" Schu asked meanly, teasing.
"Brad loves me better than you." Nagi said, just to get him back.
"Oooohhh?" Schu-schu said, all amazed. "How on earth do you come up with that?"
"Hmm, seems to me like I get off easy compared to you guys. You work sooo hard, just to get used. Bed pan." He stuck his tongue out at the red head.
"Why you little...!"
"Brad said he's going to kill you both if you don't stop it now." Omi relayed the warning, getting a glass of orange juice.
"Who's he screwing right now?" Nagi asked.
"Nagi!" Omi exclaimed.
"Well, Schu's down here..."
"That's enough out of YOU!" Schuldig warned, getting his 'morning' cup of coffee.
Yohji came into the kitchen, always the last one to get washed and dressed. He'd at least put on pajama pants and actually tied them. "Don't go in the bedroom." He stole a piece of bacon off the paper toweled plate. "Aya's gettin' it good."

He winked at Schuldig, smiling wryly.
Nagi snickered at Schuldig, who went into a hissy fit. "Shut up!" He ordered.
"What's going on?" Yohji asked, still a little dazed from being kicked out of bed.
"Nothing!" the red head spat. Then he went to the sandy haired man and tugged on his pant's fly coyly. "Mou, give me a cigarette, Lover." He wheedled.
Yohji looked at him. Nagi had been 'getting' to him again. It amazed him how easy it was for the kid. "What's the matter, Schu-schu?" he put an arm about him and took away his coffee to drink. "Little boys with little 'toy's' being a nuisance again?"
Nagi glared at him.
"Yohji-kun!" Omi protested.
Schuldig leaned on Yohji and took his coffee back in a kiss.
"Get a room." Nagi told them.
"Fuck you, bishonen." Schuldig tossed over his shoulder as he and Yohji went to get their coats out of the closet.
"What a mouth." Omi said, slightly annoyed.
"Better put this in the oven." Nagi sighed again, turning it on to the lowest setting and putting Brad's breakfast in to keep warm.
Omi was looking at him in a sweet speculative way when he straitened. "What?" Nagi said.
"Your 'toy' is not small." Omi smiled.

One cup of coffee and one cigarette. Amazing how fun it could be to share. With night falling on the city and being on a twenty two story high balcony that ran the length of the building, in the cold beginning of winter, they huddled together to enjoy their lethal habit.
"Its Cold!" Schuldig shivered.
Yohji had no shirt on under his coat. He opened it and drew him close, holding it about him, taking the cigarette from his lips and putting it to Schuldig's.
He took the coffee cup from between them and drank a swallow. "You're not kidding." He said, looking at the sparkle of multicolored lights and silvery strips of building in blackness that was Tokyo.
Schuldig leaned his forehead on Yohji's jaw and drew in a breath of warming smoke. Gott, it took him back. Those days had come back to haunt him now, in the aches and pains of his still age-wise young body. He worked out, but it seemed only to help so much. The cold got to him. Still, right now, he wanted to be here. Yohji was so warm, his skin so soft. He caressed his bare chest, the smooth curves of his pectorals, the tiny hard nipples.
"Eh, Baby, you're making me a little too warm." Yohji warned softly. "Trade." He gave him back the cup and took the cigarette to draw deeply on it.
Schuldig drained the cup and set it aside on the patio table. Then he slid his

arms around Yohji's thin body and pressed as close as he could, feeling his lengthening hard on against the other man's.
"Do you want to do it out here, in front of all of Tokyo?" Yohji offered.
Schuldig laughed softly. "Who's to see us?"
"Anybody who's looking." Yohji tossed the butt aside and kissed him fervently.
"Yes." Schuldig whispered.
"Mmm, awful cold."
"I don't care! You'll keep me warm."
Yohji undid the German's slacks and pulled his shirt up, feeling his chest briefly, then diving his hand into Schuldig's shorts to fondle him and reach behind him to work a finger into him. As usual.....slippery and wet....."Schuldig, how long can you go without having someone come in you?"
"Not long." Schu-schu admitted with a laugh, arching his back to better feel the invasive digit.
Yohji kissed him again, taking his coat off and then turned him to the wall, slipping behind him, wrapping one arm around him and guiding himself into the shivering man, then bracing himself against the wall. He kissed Schuldig's neck despite his hair and began to pump into him.
Schuldig closed his eyes and was lost in the sensation. Yohji moved to reach down and grasp his hard on, milking him. Suddenly the cold didn't matter.
"Brad's in there with Aya and I'm out here with you." Yohji said in his ear.
"Who really won? Weiss or Schwarz?"
Schuldig rested his cheek on his arm to keep it from the cold molded concrete of the wall. "Who the fuck cares." he said in very slow clear syllables.
Yohji laughed and started really loving him.

"Your breakfast is in the oven." Nagi informed him coolly. "Probably all dried out."
Brad had gotten dressed for the second time that night and was not inclined to be too happy about it. "I'll live." he said, getting the plate out and putting it on the table.
"Isn't Ran coming down?" Yohji asked, finishing his rice and eggs.
"He needs to rest." Brad said. "He didn't sleep well. I'm sorry he insisted on putting you out."
"So. What was his problem?" Yohji asked.
Brad sighed. "He just.....wanted re-assuring."
"You're out another diamond, aren't you?" Schuldig snickered.
Brad glared at him. "If it weren't for the fact that that stupid woman wanted prisoners, I might have lost them both!" he looked at Yohji. "And yes, I am angry Aya was shot! No more going at it in public places!"
"It wasn't that public..." Yohji protested mildly. Well....it hadn't been, and Aya had been so....irresistible....

"Public enough to be caught with your pants down by the enemy!"
"How...public is....oh...say...our own balconies....?" Schuldig asked.
Brad gave him the evil look again, then the question that had been bugging him had to be answered. "Kudoh, you know so much about women...what the hell do you think this is all about?" He demanded. "What the Hell can she be thinking! That I would be somehow... forced into giving in to her!"
"Hah!" Omi had to interject. "Yohji? Knowing women....? That's like a dog being an expert on fire hydrants!"
Yohji shot him a look, then shrugged at Brad. "Hey, just because I can get them in bed doesn't mean I understand them." He kicked at Omi under the table, but Nagi used his talent to stop him making contact.
"Which is why you're here." Schuldig smirked at him.
"When are you ever going to get over having raped and seduced me?" Yohji asked him wryly.
"Hmmm, let me think about it....Never." Schuldig said, quite pleased with himself.
"Don't." Brad warned Yohji, having seen what was about to happen.
Yohji chuckled. "Okay, so maybe I won't."
Schuldig pouted.
"I'm serious, Love." Brad said to Yohji. "I don't....understand people." he admitted with difficulty. "And I don't want to. I just want to know how to deal with this problem. What to look for."
Yohji found this a little hard to figure. Brad had always seemed to know exactly what he was doing with people. "Haven't you ever been....around a woman?" He asked, suddenly wondering.....
"I wasn't paying them to converse in the interests of social insight." Brad said coldly.
"Oh." Yohji said, getting the point. Okay. "Well, I can honestly say....women don't think like men. And there is simply no knowing what they are up to. Except that they can be very single minded and really, really vindictive. It's just that....it's hard to say the woman should be killed just because she's got a massive crush on you. But since she's decided to have us attacked....well then....she has to go." He almost visibly squirmed at the next thing he had to say about the whole mess. "I don't like this. What makes her think she can just....do this?"
Schuldig saw the look on Brad's face, as imperceptible as it was. "We're all a little 'bent' over this, mein Mann." He sipped his coffee.
But Brad wanted more from the man. "Yohji...?" He said.
Yohji looked very uncomfortable.
"Tell him." Schuldig urged gently.
Nagi got up. "We're out of here." He informed Omi.
"Oh, but I...." Omi protested.
"Now." Nagi said.

And Omi sooo wanted to see the great womanizer loose face! "All right, then!" He pouted, getting up.
"I'll clean up later when this soap opera is over." Nagi told Brad icily.
Brad nodded, not concerned with mere dirty dishes right now.
When they'd shut the kitchen sliding doors, Brad looked at Yohji again, meeting his eyes and making it clear he wanted the answer this time.
Yohji didn't care. "I need a cigarette." he got up. "This is bullshit and we need to just find her and be done with this." He opened the doors again and went up to get dressed.
Schuldig sighed.
"What the hell is he hiding from me!" Brad demanded of him.
"You didn't answer me." Schuldig said smiling. "How private are our own balconies considered?"
Brad did not punch him. He wanted to. But he did not.

All right, using the two boys as bait might have been....immoral. But Nagi was their most powerful member. And Omi was, admittedly, a born killer.
They were tagged with tracking chips, carefully set into their left ears with surgical tweezers. Brad had made a decision. They were going to get caught. He only hoped that she would not be able to harm them because of their seeming youth. Both were small for their age, with still childishly androgynous looks.
"The problem is they've been watching." he told them, continuing his thoughts aloud. "More than likely, they know who you are and that you're capable of killing, as well as just defending yourselves. Surrender immediately.
Co-operate. I don't want either of you harmed. I trust you'll make it look as if you're merely giving in to superior forces and not too easy. You're job is too lead us to them."
"Understood." Nagi said.
Brad regretted this. The omens were okay so far, the worst expected and prepared for. He simply regretted it.
"You take care of yourself!" He ordered. "I don't want any stupid mistakes."
"Hai." Nagi said. He knew what Brad really meant.

"Little birds out of the nest." Aya commented, stuck on the sofa with doctor's orders to let his leg rest at least three days for the wound to start healing.
He'd had to have a lot more stitches that night then might have been necessary if he hadn't made things worse by cutting himself. And Brad was dead set on doctor's orders being followed.
Brad shot him an evil look from the writing desk, keeping an eye on the computer, set to track the boys. "Infant vipers." he said. "They can handle themselves, they're professionals."
"Still, it's not good." The Japanese commented. "I never liked having Omi run

loose with Weiss. Persia had a nerve, making him a killer so young."
"And how young were you? Omi's age now. You don't know, do you?" Brad suddenly realized something.
"I know I should get up and at least work out." Aya said sullenly. "This is stupid!"
"You can't force your body to heal faster." Brad told him. "I mean about Persia and what happened to Omi."
"What, Omi's Reji Taketori's bastard the son of a bitch refused to ransom." He shifted his sore leg on the pillow. Even with pain killers, it was making him nuts not to move about.
Brad frowned a little. "No, Princess. It's not that simple."
Those incredibly purple eyes focused on him. "He wasn't screwing him was he? Persia and Omi?" He frowned.
Brad snorted. "No! Persia's real name is Suuichi Taketori. He was Omi's real father. Reiji took his woman away from him. Reiji put two and two together and figured out the timing was off and didn't pay for his brother's bastard, he left Omi to be killed and Persia had him rescued when the kidnappers were going to sell him. Too bad he didn't tell him then. Omi doesn't even know."
"Persia is a Taketori!" Aya damn near yelled. "Why didn't you TELL me!" He demanded. "I should have KILLED him!" He winced and clutched his leg, the pain aggravated.
"What good would it have done? He lost his position in the police force. No one's heard from him since. He's as good as dead."
"Omi has to know about this!"
"I'd rather he didn't find out too harshly, Aya." Brad said gently. "Calm down, you're hurting yourself..." He got up and went over to make him sit back on the cushions and fixed his leg on the pillow on the coffee table. "Don't make things worse." He chided.
"I hate this!" Aya exclaimed in frustration. "I don't want to sit around and do nothing! That stupid bitch needs to die!"
Brad sat down beside him and put his arms around him. "Aya, my Princess." he murmured, kissing Aya's soft white cheek tenderly. "Calm down."
Aya held the arm that was across his chest closer, lost in the sensual touch of his American and the comfort it brought. "I don't want to just sit here. I don't like just doing nothing."
"There's nothing else to do, precious." Brad kissed him behind the ear, half a million in diamond earring brushing against his chin. He smiled, licking it. "My treasure."
"Bradley...." Aya smiled. "What are you up to?"
Brad held him tighter. "Getting turned on by how much you cost me." He purred.
Aya slapped him lightly on the cheek. "Don't be rude!"
"Don't slap me. I'm not Schuldig." Brad warned, suddenly not so cozy.
Aya leaned away a little, upset. "I'm sorry..."

Brad pulled him back. "It's all right. Smile. Smile for me again." He coaxed.
Aya wasn't exactly in the mood. His slip up had put him in a precarious position and he knew it. Schuldig liked the rough housing. Brad got angry. "My leg hurts." he said quietly.
Brad kissed his neck again. "Aya. Stop squirming."
He froze instantly.
Brad gently turned him by his chin to look at him. "Do you want me or not?" He asked.
Aya sighed and leaned on him. "Yes." He would always want him.
Brad kissed him again, on the mouth and then the cheek and on down his neck to the collar of his silk shirt. Aya gave in to it. His leg ached dully, but his libido ached more. That woman, she would die for daring to think she could possibly take this man away from him. He'd waited so long, without even hope, for Crawford, each glimpse and then each battle making it worse, until his dreams were less of his imouto and more of the American, making him ashamed of himself and more determined to kill Taketori to prove he was still dedicated to Aya-chan's revenge.....until that night....when Crawford had offered him Taketori's death....and then Schuldig had offered him Crawford..../(Surrender, Wiess, and I'll give you all you desire.)/ The voice had said in his mind as jade eyes looked into his, knowing exactly what that desire was.
And he'd surrendered.
Now he was Here. God.....it felt so good!
"Princess, why are you crying?" Brad noticed the tear slipping down from his eye and caught it on a fingertip. Was he hurting him?
"I love you!" Aya breathed.

Nagi and Omi did what they usually did on a night when there was nothing else to do. They went to the arcade and played vid games until the place closed, then went to a club where the owners didn't mind the age problem much as long as they didn't cause trouble and paid the extra entrance fee. They met up with a few acquaintances and danced until neither one of them could hold out anymore and went to make out in the back seat of Omi's nice new Lexus.
The night quickly ended in frustration as a gun appeared at the window, and, after too long a time of being ignored, a loud rap of knuckles.
"Shit." Nagi breathed. "Omi...."
"Duty calls." Omi said, just as dismayed. "One more, Nagi....just one more...please, Koi...."
Nagi drew out just enough and then pushed back into his lover. Omi shivered. Then Nagi pulled out and put his hands on the roof of the car.
Omi sat up, doing the same. "This sucks." he said.
"Not as good as you." Nagi said.

"Aww, poor brats." Schuldig snickered.
"Eh, I know how they feel." Yohji frowned at the embarrassing memory. "It's hell to just let them take them away like this."
"Brad just about cried when he made up his mind to send Nagi on this mission." Schu told him, watching the two men and one woman get the boys out of the car and order them to get their pants on, hand cuffing and roughly shoving them into a van parked not far away.
Yohji itched to pull his gun and shoot out the tires from their roof top advantage.
Something else flickered in his mind that Schuldig caught a brief taste of. Ooo, it was sweet, that sensation.....
"Why won't you tell him, Love?"
Yohji looked at him. "Shut up about it!" He ordered.
Schuldig shut up. But the knowing smirk on his face was a hell of a lot louder than words.
Yohji pulled out his phone and hit the dial number.

Brad sighed and answered his own phone, which was laying on the coffee table, close to hand, just in case..... "Yes?"
"The boys have been taken." Yohji reported. "Now what, Boss?"
"They didn't get hurt?"
"Nope. Well....only their egos." He laughed a little. "They went right along, like good little fellows."
Aya moaned and used his good leg to push up...
Brad closed his eyes at the sensation this caused...and held the phone away to kiss his beautiful prisoner lustfully. Then he forced himself to focus and drew the phone back. "Follow them. Just in case."
"Brraadd!" Aya pushed again, tightening his muscles.
"What the heck are you doing?" Yohji said, the amusement in his tone letting Brad know he knew exactly.
"Screwing your girlfriend." Brad informed him in a low purring voice. "And when you get back....I'll do the same to you."
"Okay.....Do we really need to get the kids back?" Yohji asked.
Brad laughed. "Yes! So hurry it up! I'm waiting." He shut the phone and got back to work with a vengeance that made Aya laugh as he kissed his neck and shoulders fiercely and pumped into him roughly.

Yohji shut his own phone and tucked it away. Suddenly it was a little hot, despite the cold. He was glad his waist was bare. "That man's insane." he said.
"Tell me about it." Schuldig said, tossing away his finished cigarette. "Come on, Yohji, let's do our job." he grabbed him by the waist band of his black leather hipsters and pulled him along up on the roof's parapet.....

"Schu....No!" Yohji protested.....
It was too late, the idiot had hopped off, taking him with him. He flung his wrist up, the wires catching a roof corner ornament just in time to stop them hitting a car roof a little too hard.
"Idiot!" Yohji quickly cut the wires and followed him to the ground and their car. "Well, you're cooler now, aren't you?" Schuldig smiled at him, starting the car as he piled into the passenger seat.
"Why the HELL do you do that!" Yohji demanded, putting on his seat belt.
"Because I can." Schuldig said. "Turn on the tracking program."
Yohji hit the buttons and the screen flickered on a luminous green. In a few seconds the bugs responded to the satellite relay and the program set up a directory route. "Take a left up here, quick."
And the chase was on.

"Airport!" Brad roared.
"We got the flight information." Yohji said. "They're heading for Los Angeles, in the United States."
"How the hell did they get them on board a commercial flight! They've got no passports with them!"
"Loaded them into coffins." Schuldig stated. "Alive. I read their minds, they were turning the kids over to go-betweens for the Mafia. And the coffins have air holes, but Nagi and Omi were doped to the gills. You told us to follow and not interfere, Bradley! Don't get mad at us now! We did just what you told us!"
He tied the belt on his robe and forced himself not to hit either of them or the wall....."She'd better not hurt him! Either of them! Nagi would Die if anything happened to that boy! This was stupid! So STUPID!" He pushed his hair back with both hands and glared at them. "Were you followed back here!"
"Yes." Schuldig said, serious for a change.
"We're going to have to go to Los Angeles. We're going to need back up. As much as I fucking hate it!" He snarled, thinking of Araki Masanori.....
"Back up? WHY?" Yohji exclaimed.
"Because Aya is injured!" Brad informed him as if he were an idiot child. "I can't just leave him here alone!"
"But...." Schuldig said.
Aya stood on the stair case. "I'm not staying, Brad. And I'm not going to hole up somewhere while you three go off and take a chance on getting killed. It's only a hole in the leg, not a heart operation!"
Brad looked up at him. Damn his split personality! This was the stubborn one!
"Let him come or I'm not going." Yohji stated.
Brad's eyes shifted evilly to the sandy blond. "You'd dare defy me?"
"Please, Brad." Yohji said quietly. "Don't force me to."
"You won't have to. I said, I'm coming with you." Ran stated.

Schuldig made a small noise, starting to say something....then not.
Brad looked at him and saw a possibility....."Damn it!" He said angrily.

Farfarello had at last been coaxed into wearing a false eye. It was quite a shock to see him and realize it. And it matched the other one's amber color perfectly. The reconstructive surgery had filled in the neglect damaged eyelid and it looked quite normal now, except for the scar running down across it pinkly.
Oddly enough, he looked even more deadly sane. He wore full punk leathers now, and the past months had filled him out with more muscle as he matured.
Brad looked at him with a bitter arch ness that said it all.
"Y'the one called me, Crawford." Jei stated.
"I'm surprised she let you off the leash." Brad said, feeling it necessary to get in his two cents.
"I'm doin' this for Nagi, not you!" The Irishman said coldly. "An' yer a right bastard for playin' him like chum ta sharks!"
"Farfie...." Schuldig said. "Brad may be quite the man, but that's not God your yelling at."
Farfarello glared at him. "Ah, but he set himself up to be, didn't he? Playin' wi' our lives! Makin' Himself the beginnin' an' end of us!"
"I'm sorry!" Brad said loudly and hating having to do it. "Do you hear me! I'm SORRY!" he kept his hand in his trench pockets, but anyone could see he was aching to hit out. "I cared enough to give you the truth and now you hate ME for it as well! Well, so be it! Go home to your woman! You're not needed!"
Jei looked at him. "Well. That certainly took a lot, didn't it?" He said litely.
"Damn near killed ye. Look at ye, all white and tied up in knots, shakin' over admittin' y' mistake. Maybe y' can come down t'earth after all, ye devil." he looked at Schu and Yohji. "I'm coming with. An Himself can just get over't."
Then, he looked over at Aya, scowling in the arm chair. "Next time, don't get shot, 'Princess'." He said with faint snideness. "An yer boyfriend won't have to lower himself t'my level."
"I liked you much better when you were mad." Schuldig pouted.
"You keep your bloody hands to y'self." Farfie told him. "Y'nasty little creation."
"Ah!" Schuldig pulled out a handkerchief and pretended to be all affronted, turning to lay his head on Yohji's shoulder.
"Oh for...." Yohji rolled his eyes.

Chapter Fifteen
"Strange Interlude"

"Nagi?"
Unh....sooo sleepy....
"Nagi-kun, wake up!"
He opened his eyes, blinking slowly. He drew a deep breath. "Omi?"
"Are you okay? For a little while...I thought you were dead." The sweet slightly husky voice said softly.
He stirred drug numbed limbs. "Where are we?" His mouth was so dry. Natural, under the circumstances.
"In a cell." Omi said. "We're chained to the walls. I can't reach you."
"I can barely reach myself right now." Nagi sighed. "Want...to sleep..."
Omi laid back down, an arm behind his head on the cot. At least Nagi was alive and responding. They must have over dosed him with the sedative. He closed his eyes. There was nothing to do until someone checked on them. And even then, they couldn't do anything but play along until their lives might actually be threatened. Then....these bastards would be sorry.

"Hold still." Yohji ordered, carefully checking the wound. There wasn't any infection and no swelling, but it was a nasty looking thing. He daubed on the ointment to try and prevent a scar and put a gauze pad over it. Absolutely carefully, he placed the bandage and began to wrap it on. It had to go on as tight as possible and still allow circulation if Aya was going to insist on walking on it.
Aya drew in a hiss of breath as the ache kicked up in response to the pressure. That fight back at the airport had made him put more strain on it.
"Sshhh." Yohji said softly. "I'm going as quick as I can."
Aya sighed and looked out the window. The clouds were so white, the sky so blue up here. Who would ever think the world was so corrupt below such beauty.
Schuldig looked at him oddly from his seat across the private jet's cabin, having caught that thought. "Hey." he said. "Are you still so innocent?"
Aya didn't bother to look at him, concentrating on staying very still until the ordeal was over. "Is your heart so black you don't see any light?"
"Romantic." Schuldig sneered mildly.
"Shut up the both of you." Brad said with no malice. He took out his digital phone and waited.
It bleeped. He opened it. "Crawford Investigations and Protection." He drawled in English."
The other four looked at him, suddenly all ears. Normally he wouldn't answer in English.....
"I have your boys." She said.
"I could be trite and tell you that if you harm so much as a hair on their

heads, I'll see you dead." Brad said, his smirk evident in his slightly japanese accented native tongue. "But you just don't know who you're dealing with."
"My, what an egoist you are." She said, impressed. "I don't take being laughed at so lightly."
"I can't help but laugh." He purred. "It's not my ego at stake here, but yours, Madam."
"Surrender." She said. "Or you will loose not only your 'son', but everything you have."
"Really?" He said teasingly. "And just how would fulfilling that threat accomplish your plan?"
"Perhaps it wouldn't. Oh, but I bet it would make you sorry, Crawford." She was getting close to loosing her temper now.
"Don't bore me." He said coldly. "I want the boys back. Your people will tell you, I'm coming to get them. You'd better change your plans."
The phone clicked loudly. He smiled coldly and put it away.
"Are they all right?" Aya asked, wincing as Yohji got back to finishing the bandage.
"She thinks she can threaten me with harming them." Brad answered him. "Nagi won't hesitate to kill her."
"If he's conscious, mein Mann." Schuldig said. "If they keep them drugged...."
"Then they will die peacefully and I will still wipe this annoying woman off the face of the Earth." Brad stated very coldly.
Yohji secured the bandage and took advantage of his position to plant a kiss on Aya's goods through the thin purple silk of his bikini briefs.
"Stop it!" Aya protested, pushing him away so he fell on his butt, and pulled up his slacks.
Yohji laughed, sitting there on the cabin floor and looked up at Brad. "You must have something planned by now, Boss."
"Not yet." Brad said. "I want it to be...perfect."

Nagi had been woken up finally and handcuffed then unchained and hauled up to a spanish colonial style living room. Through the arched windows, he could see a desert. That would explain the constantly running air conditioning. The cell was below ground, a basement? And there was another level, a stair case.....Vents?
There were three men, two flanking him, one standing off to one side, and a woman, sitting on a sofa. She had long gold blonde hair, a willow body and a perfect tan, set off by a simple dress that had to be worth a thousand. No wonder she thought Brad should like her. "Do you speak english, little boy?"
"A little." Nagi said calmly.
She studied him. Small, fragile boned, he didn't look much over fourteen. His eyes were a child's still, large for his features and framed in velvety lashes, not black but the darkest Navy blue, and so serious. As if the mind behind them

was wise beyond their years.
"Do you know why you're here?"
What a time to miss Schuldig. "You....want Brad." Nagi responded.
The child was well dressed, his black shirt had to be silk, the trousers fine wool, it had been winter in Japan. "You're adopted, aren't you?"
Nagi hesitated. "Yes." Why was all this necessary? Why not leave him in the cell?
"He's good to you?" She asked.
"He is....my father." His bare bones english was coming to mind more readily now. The words were difficult to form in his mouth and throat. But he though maybe he didn't sound like a total dumb ass at least.
She smiled pleasantly. "I'm very curious about your 'father'. He seems to be very lax in your keeping. Allowing you to run loose at night, and keep a lover, at your age."
Nagi said nothing. It was no one's business what he did.
"The men in the alley way in Paris. How did you two manage to kill them?"
So. She knew about that. "We're trained." He said.
"In killing?" She was a little disbelieving.
"You...doubt the results?" Nagi asked gravely.
This obviously made her think. She frowned slightly. "Take him back to the cell. And see to it they get fed. I don't want a bruise on them unless they try something. Is that understood, Andre?"
"Si, Mi Doña." one of the goons beside him said.

"Well, this still sucks." Omi said when they'd chained Nagi back to the wall on the other side of the cell and left. "You have to wonder what she thinks is going to happen if she were to find a way to seduce Brad."
Nagi looked at the blood stains on the cinder block wall and the concrete floor.
"Somehow, I don't think being sent off to private boarding school is an option."
Omi giggled.
Nagi sighed. So close and yet so far...

Getting through customs was a simple formality. Brad tucked the documents back into his brief case and closed it. Officially, they were in the United States under the auspices of the Japanese government, to retrieve a cabinet minister's sons.
The customs officers bought it easily, Schuldig didn't even have to try.
"So easily impressed." Brad said quietly in japanese as they headed for the terminal's doors and a waiting rental luxury car, making note of the two very curious men watching them. (Baby?)
(Give them a scare.) Schu urged. (Look strait at them and smile.)
Well, Brad smirked knowingly at them at any rate. They acted as if their eyes

had been else where, but Schuldig snickered at their thoughts.
The luggage was loaded into the trunk and Schuldig took the keys from the driver.
Another car cruised after them a minute later, two more hunters in it.
"Let's break some eggs." Brad said.
Out in the airport parking area, on the way to one of the rather confusing exits, Schuldig slammed on the breaks.
Aya and Yohji got out and went to hold guns on the two in the other car. "Out!" Yohji ordered, Schuldig telling him the words to say in English. "Now! Or die!"
They got out cautiously, keeping their hands in sight, but not so high as to call attention to the goings on. They didn't want to get caught any more than their supposed prey did. Aya and Yohji grabbed them and shoved them to the bigger car's open doors. "Get in!" Yohji ordered.
The found themselves crowded in across from Brad. Yohji got in beside them and Aya retook his seat beside Brad. Farfarello was up front with Schuldig, who's green eyes watched them in the rearview.
"Gentlemen." Brad said smoothly. "It seems you've caught me." He smiled.
It was a smile the devil might have envied.

Brad wiped the blood from his hand on a towel. "Shall we try again?" He asked calmly.
The two mercenaries were securely tied in chairs in the hotel suite.
"I told you...I don't know!" The man protested through split lips.
Brad whacked him again, this time across the right ear. "Maybe you can't hear me." He said. "How do you contact the people who offered the reward!"
The man was getting light headed from the painful beating. His partner was already unconscious. He gave up. "There was a number on a card...It came in an envelope....the hotel room...."
Schuldig reached into his mind and repeated the number aloud. That was all they needed. Their ticket into the close vicinity of the damned woman.
The man blinked at him with blackened and swollen eye lids.
Brad knocked him out. "Dispose of them." he ordered.
Schuldig grabbed him before he could even turn, and kissed him hungrily. "Make love to me." He ordered sensually, caressing him.
Brad thought it over. They did have time.....
"Let's get this over with." Farfarello told Aya and Yohji, moving to help cut the unconscious men free of the chairs. "I've had enough of the bitch's howlin'."
Schuldig looked at him with evilly narrowed eyes. "You're no fun any more, Farferello."
Brad held him close, more than aroused. "Then again, Baby....You can be too much fun." he kissed the flame red hair. Then he got him by the upper arm and drew

him off to the bedroom.
Aya frowned. "He would get out of the dirty work!"
"Be quiet, Ran, and don't strain your leg! Go make sure the elevator is free." Yohji said.
Aya dropped his end of the soon to be corpse. "Fine!" he said, a little ticked off, and went to do as he was told.
"An they called me the mad one." Farf commented. "Crawford still gettin' his rocks of beatin' people up, Schuldig still a damn slut. An you two. Yer gettin' worse, ye know. Hangin' round them."
"Ah, the voice of reason." Yohji said with light sarcasm. "That big drainage ditch they call a river?"
"S'what I'm thinkin'." Farf dragged the one he had over near the door. "He could'a just took it right outta their heads, but oh, no, he had to get his 'Mann' all worked up, the devil."

Schuldig held onto him, fingers of one hand clenched in the coal black hair, the other on his lower back, his own mind tangled in his. The pressure of Brad's strong muscular body, the feel of his flesh, just beginning to slick with the sweat of exertion, the feel of him moving deep inside him.....
So many men, so many years.....
"What's wrong?" Brad asked, a little breathlessly.
"What?" He said, not understanding, despite the mental connection, he'd been thinking something else.....
Brad looked down at him. "Your body is here, but your mind's not." He'd stopped now.
Schuldig nuzzled his neck. "Don't be silly, mein liebe Mann. All of me is right here with you."
Brad moved to kiss him, then drew back a little and pushed in again. "You feel me in you. I want you in me. What's going on, Baby?"
(I'm here.) Schuldig assured him. (Right here.)
(You're so tense....)
(I'm sooo excited....)
(No.) Brad bit his neck warningly. (Don't lie to me.)
Despite their position, the love making had stopped.
Schuldig looked up into his eyes. They were so angry. "Do you ever still hate me?" He dared to ask aloud.
"Hate you! I never hated you!" Brad said, annoyed as hell.
Schuldig gave him the memories of their fights...
Brad shook his head as if to clear them away. "STOP it! Why bring all that up now?" He kissed a velvety cheek tenderly. "Now, when I love you more than life?" He caressed back the flame colored strands from the face he found so beautiful. "Who are you thinking of when you make love to Aya and Yohji?"

Brad held him tighter and dug into him. "You!" He kissed him on the mouth hungrily.
"Liar." Schuldig turned his head away, breaking off the kiss.
Brad couldn't believe it.
What the hell was going on here?
"What's wrong with you?" He said, truly confused.
"I'm a whore." Schuldig said flatly. "That's all I am. Just a whore."
"Oh, god....." Brad sighed, and laid his forehead to the red head's temple.
"You've been in Farfarello's mind. Come back to me, Baby. Just come back to me."
He kissed his cheek again. "See yourself in my mind." He whispered softly.

Marco hung up the phone. Something didn't ring right about this. The man on the phone had spoken with a slight accent, British maybe? To catch him, the minute he stepped into the country? It couldn't be that easy, not the way he and his crew had moved.....
"Well!" Paola demanded. "When will they have him here!"
"Some thing is wrong here." Marco said, then looked at her. "It's too soon, too easy."
She frowned. "You think he's playing with us again? But how? Everyone in the world is after him for the money. Shooting fish in a barrel, you said so yourself, that there was no way he could escape, no where he could go."
"Exactly." Marco stated. "He takes out nine men in Tokyo, then gets off a plane in Los Angeles and they just pick him up? It would take a small army, with his people. They move like the black ops I saw in the army. Those guys don't just give up."
Her eyes narrowed. "He wants to come here. He said he was coming to get the boys. What better way than to turn himself in?" She realized.
Marco frowned. "He's coming here on his own terms, than. And that makes this the barrel, and us, the fish."
She frowned again, thinking it out further. "Then....why not simply surrender?"
He thought this over as well. "Perhaps....he thinks if he just surrenders, you'll have not further use for the boys."
"Then why come at all if he thinks I'd have them killed the moment he agrees!" She demanded. "For all we know, this IS just what it looks like! Maybe someone DID have a small army! The only thing I intend to do is wait and see! Call in more men. I want a small army of my own here and ready, just in case!"

Nagi half sat up as the door opened. She came into the cell, looking at him, then at Omi who was also awake now. "We have reason to believe Crawford has been captured by my hired people." She stated. "On the other hand, it could be a trick." She focused on Nagi. "Tell me something, little boy. How honorable is your father?"

"I...don’t understand..." Nagi said, wanting to be very sure of the tricky concept. He knew Americans did not hold honor high at all, but Europeans might. Still.....not as highly as Japanese.....
"Does he keep his word when he gives it? When he agrees to something?" She said curtly.
Nagi let this sink in. "He does what it takes to meet his plans." He said honestly. "And his plans change."
"Yet you trust him? You believe he will come for you?"
"I know he will." Nagi stated.
"Why?" She demanded. "Why are you so important to him, why did he adopt you?"
Again, he wondered what this was all about. It really was none of anyone’s business.
"To keep me to work for him." Nagi said coolly. "To gain custody of me. We decided the arrangement was comfortable for us. Certain needs were met." How he wished he could just blast them all! But if talking was going to make her let her guard down or give her ideas she thought she could use, then that was the course he would have to take.
She couldn’t really get this. "What could a child do that he would want you to work for him?"
Nagi smirked. "Use a computer. Look too young and innocent to be a killer."
She looked at Omi. She saw a blond japanese boy, odd enough in itself, save that his eyes were so blue it was weird. Him and the other ones, the red head and the other light haired one. Obviously the red haired one had to be dyed. But this one...."And him?" She looked back at Nagi.
"The same." Nagi said calmly. "We were rivals, then a deal was made, to combine the two teams."
"So in reality, Crawford is not a detective, but a mercenary." She stated.
"Protection and investigation." Nagi replied. "Some times....that involves....the death of someone."
"Has he ever killed a woman?" She asked.
He saw something in her eyes. Oh, yes....otherwise, why ask that question....?
"Yes." He said.
She frowned. So....Crawford had no problem with that. "Then....why didn’t he kill me when he found out I was spying on him?" She countered, as if thinking out loud to herself.
Nagi remembered how Brad had laughed over it. "He thought it would be more amusing to humiliate you and have you suffer." He might not be able to kill her just yet....but he could certainly cause a lot of damage. What did it matter how much she learned. She would be dead soon enough. "He’s a sadist." He smiled.
She probably wanted to back hand him at that moment, the way she glared at him. But instead she turned and walked out angrily, leaving her men to get a clue and lock up and follow her.

Farfarello helped Yohji to lift the first body out of the trunk of yet another rental car, and carry it over to the large drain tunnel. In silence, they took it in as far as they could see with the daylight from the entrance and then some.
When the second one was ‘laid to rest’, they went back to the car and Yohji drove it back up the access ramp to the gate they’d picked the padlock on and Farfarello got out and shut the gate and re-locked it. It would be some time, no doubt, before the bodies were discovered. The clothing and ID would be disposed of down a gutter further along, and more than likely, never to be connected to their owners again, in what was a city full of unsolved homicides and sudden disappearances.
Aya looked around as they drove back to the hotel. "So dirty and old." he commented.
"They brag so. But this is what you get." Yohji said. The last time they’d been here, it was at night and in a hurry. This time, they were able to see it in broad daylight. The graffiti, the trash. The homeless. "Like any other city in the world."
"I’ll be glad t’ get back to Japan." Farfarello said.
"You are remembering to take your medication?" Aya said.
"Course I am." The irishman said, annoyed. "I got a reason to now. Or hadn’t y’ noticed."
Aya smirked.
"She seems like a nice girl." Yohji said, remembering her sitting at the bus stop.
"That she is." Farfarello stated.
And he wondered how this was going to affect things with her? How coming back to this life when he’d put done to it.....He hadn’t told her the truth....but he hated hiding it from her. Curse this sanity and the pain it brought! He wanted to be home with her! To the peace she brought him.
He laid his head back on the seat rest and closed his eyes. And though he was blind in one, he could not help but feeling he saw much clearer than these creatures did. ‘God....help me.’ He thought. And then laughed softly at himself.
Aya and Yohji heard him and were a little relieved. At least one thing hadn’t changed. Who the hell knew what amused him, but he always had held his tongue on his private jokes.

Yohji opened the door. "Hey, you going to spend all day in bed?"
Brad sighed and stretched. It was an idea. But then he found his glasses and put them on. "We’ll be out in a few minutes. Call and make a reservation for a plane to Los Vegas." He moved to rub Schuldig’s chest. "Wake up."
"I’m really going to have to hurt that woman." Schuldig grumbled, drawn from his nap against his will.

Brad kissed his shoulder. It had taken some work, but he was pretty sure he had him back to normal. His love hadn't slipped like that in a while. Perhaps because Farfarello's mind was so different now and Schuldig had thought it the same old familiar place. "Yohji, what are you waiting for?"
He was still standing in the door way, leaning on the frame, smiling pleasantly. "Just enjoying the view." he said. Then went to do as ordered.
Brad laughed, then groaned and forced himself to get out of bed. "Come on, lazy, we've work to do."
"Sah, you work me too hard, Bradley." He complained with a bit of a whine in his voice, and sat up, stretching his arms.
Brad couldn't look. He knew what it would do to him to see that wonderful body flexing naked. "Hurry up and get your clothes on." He admonished.

As ready as the gangsters were for them, there was a sort of let down as the car simply drove up to the gates and Crawford got out to lean his backsides on the front fender, arms crossed, letting everyone see he was there and that he wasn't going to put up a fight.
Marco made the decision to open the gate. But he ordered the men to keep their guns on it and all it's passengers.
Brad got back in the car and Schuldig drove it up to the big fountain in the middle of the circular drive.
It was a very nice 'little' mansion, spanish colonial adobe and tiles, with a mediterranian influence, the water from the fountain making a refreshing sound in the desert stillness, the garden of cactus and roses and a few citrus tress well organized and tastefully laid out.
Marco came out to look at them. "Remove your weapons." he said.
Brad opened his jacket wide and unsnapped the Walther, taking it out carefully and laying it on the hood of the car. Farfarello followed by putting his knives on the hood and then a small pistol from the back of his waist band. Aya's katana and dagger, then his pistol, and Yohji's pistol joined the pile. Schuldig was last, taking out his gun and laying it down.
One of the gangsters stepped forward with a metal detector and ran it over each of them.
Schuldig looked him in the eyes with full intent to mean it as a brazen come on. "What, no body cavity search?" He purred.
The man glared at him.
Schuldig added to the insult by pouting in disappointment. The ugly son of bitch had no sense of humor at all.
Of course the darned metal detector went off. But only for jewelry and watches and belt buckles.
Once again, Marco was amazed at the amount of jewlery the vermilion haired japanese had on him. Even Paola didn't spend that much money on diamonds.

Aya sullenly closed his shirt, not happy with being told to half undress under this sun. At least he'd had the revenge of seeing them wince as the light hit his skin and the diamonds. He'd deliberately worn the entire parure, his insecurity picking up again. Like Schuldig, he was having issues.
"Come inside." Marco said to Brad. "Don't try anything, or your men will be shot down."
Brad looked arch but did not comment. Schuldig had already relayed him everything he needed to know about the set up and the plans for them. He told the others in japanese. "He wants us to go inside. Don't do anything unless I personally order you to."
(Eh?) Schuldig looked at him. ('Personally'?)
(I'm serious, Schuldig. No tricks.) Brad warned him.
The german pouted yet again.
(I know your hair trigger and I want this to go smoothly the way I want it to.) Brad told him. (Just obey me without question for once.)
Schuldig's mental sigh was like a soft breeze in his mind, but it was clear he would obey.
They were herded up the shallow steps and into the cool foyer of the house, carved walnut furnishings and hand painted tiles, an oriental rug on the polished floor adding to the feeling of quietness and coolness. A canary sang in it's cage by the stairs that lead up to the second story.
They were moved along into the main room where she was waiting.
"So. It was a trick." She said. "And a pretty shallow one at that."
"I did warn you." Brad said coolly.
"And still, you are now a prisoner." She said with a spiteful smirk.
"I was thinking more of a truce." Brad said. "Where are Nagi and Omi?"
"Safely locked away." She looked at the other men. The 'punk' she had not seen before. What a fright he was with his intense yellow eyes and scars and that spiky silver white hair. But the two red heads and the very skinny dirty blond were etched in her memory. Especially the flame haired man. She looked at him curiously, sizing up the competition.
Schuldig looked back. She wasn't that hard on the eyes. He could see where she would be used to having men interested in her, and that she was arrogant because of it. (Ah, the typical American beauty.) He conveyed to Aya and Yohji. (Should we fall to our knees and beg forgiveness?) he added sarcastically.
(She's nothing.) Aya snapped with his own incredible arrogance.
(Normally I prefer a girl with some back bone, but this one is just too cold.) Yohji added his two cents.
She saw the look in the man's green eyes. Defiance. She looked again at Crawford. Was it just her stupid heart romanticizing or did he look more handsome each time she laid eyes on him. The sharpness of his exotic eyes, the sardonic smile that played at his mouth, the heart shape of his face with it's widow's peak and unruly strands of hair. "A truce?" She said with a laugh. "What

could you possibly offer me now, after humiliating me? Besides your body?" She added coldly.

He looked around the well appointed room, making note of the expense and taste on display. Then he looked at her again. "I did not begin this game." he said. "And you've made all the wrong moves. I want to see my son and his friend. Then.....we will discuss what has passed between us."

She thought this over. He wasn't behaving anything like she'd expected. He wasn't angry and raging, he wasn't nervous and begging. He simply stood in her house as if he owned it and she was no threat to him, despite all the automatic weapons aimed at him. She looked at Andre. "Bring the boys up." She told him in italian.

Chapter Sixteen
"Action-Reaction"

Nagi was relieved. He and Omi had been beginning to be tortured by the sheer boredom. He glared at the goon taking off his handcuffs. He was that close to spitting in his face.
The man saw the look in the boy's eyes and thought he'd get to deal with the brat later, right now the boss lady was up to something.
Omi noted all the fire power aimed at the guys. He wished he had his darts.
"Ogenki desuka?" Brad asked them.
"Speak English," Paola ordered.
Brad closed his eyes, and made and effort to control his temper, drawing a breath. Then he opened them again. "Are you all right?" He repeated in English.
"Yes." Nagi said. He looked around. "This isn't good."
"Schuldig." Brad stated.
The men surrounding them suddenly were in agonizing pain, their minds invaded by the telepath. Guns were drooped as hands went to clutch at heads and their owners fell to their knees, unable to think....
Paola was shocked. "What's happening!" She demanded, thinking perhaps it was some kind of poison....
Yohji put the grab on her, a wire to her throat. "You loose." he said in her ear.
Brad grabbed up a gun and held it on Marco. "Tell your men to disarm and put all the guns on the table here." He indicated the coffee table between the two sofas.
'Here we go again.' Marco thought. "Do as he says." He stated. What ever was going on.....
"Disarm them." Brad ordered. Schuldig was getting more accurate at that mental attack thing, they were pretty well beyond anything but the pain.
Aya, Farfarello and the boys gathered the guns from the agonized gangsters, arming themselves with what was most to their taste in weaponry.
"That's enough, Baby." Brad told Schuldig.
The german released them from the pain by knocking them out with it. Then he looked at the woman, trapped in Yohji 's deadly wire, an incredibly evil leer on his face. "Now, what do we do with you? He purred.
"I say we kill her." Aya stated.
"Jealousy doesn't become you, Princess." Brad informed him. "Nagi, get those hand cuffs. Don't kill her." He pointed a warning finger at Yohji, having a sudden premonition....
Yohji frowned and let up on the wire a little. He was shaking, the temptation had been that great.
Paola drew a deep breath and swallowed.
"Foolish woman." Schuldig said in English and then back handed her, just enough

to rattle her. "This is MY man!" He snarled in her face. Oh, he was going to beat her black and blue.....!
Brad could see the situation was going to get out of control very easily. He caught Schuldig's arm. "Easy, Baby." He said calmly as possible. "Just calm down, all of you. Nagi, put the handcuffs on her."
Nagi found the man with the handcuffs and took the keys as well, giving him a good kick in the ribs to wake up to. Then he went to catch her wrists and clamped the cuffs on good and tight.
"Yohji, take the wire off her!" Brad ordered.
He hesitated, wanting to disobey....But then he unwrapped it.
Brad had kept his eyes on Marco all along. "Now. We will talk." he said. "Who had the bright idea of putting a bounty out on us?"
Marco drew a deep breath and let it out in a huff. "She did." He said honestly.
"And....you let her do this?" Brad said coolly. "Having seen what her nonsense lead to before?"
"She is her father's daughter." Marco said. "I swore to obey her on his death bed."
Brad hissed through clenched teeth in annoyance. "How do you serve her father's memory, letting her have her way though it leads to the death of your men? I don't understand at all!" He looked at Schuldig. "What is this fool thinking!" He demanded in japanese.
Schuldig got inside the man's mind, very careful not to go too far, just to skim his thoughts. (He's resigned to serving her, to keeping his word. He swore to her father never to let her being a woman influence him, to serve her just as he served him, with out question.)
Brad looked at Marco again. "You sold your soul cheap." He informed him in english.
"You had no idea of how fortunate you were I took this all as a joke the first time around. I let you and your men live, and yet, you did this to me."
Marco was silent. What could he say? The man was not only right, he was rabid. From every thing he had discovered about this man, this entire matter was a bad idea. But he'd gotten into the habit of letting Paola have her way. And some where along the way, he had managed to convince himself that it would somehow be possible to just catch this fellow and lock him in a room with her and let her deal with it. He frowned now, seeing how his self delusion had cost them all.
Brad smiled cruelly. Schuldig had told him everything the man was going through. "You've been a slave all your life." He said, realizing it. "A slave's debts are his master's. You made the decisions. Look at her. She is a woman. You were made responsible for her. You failed your promise."
Marco sighed. "What ever you're going to do, get it over with."
(Is he willing to pay the debt for her?) Brad thought to Schuldig.
(He is resigned to dying.) Schuldig informed him.
(Sah, that's no fun!) Brad laughed softly. "Nagi, hold him."

Marco at first didn't understand what the man meant. The boy was so small, so delicate looking. But he made not move toward him. He simple stood there, looking up at him with those strange eyes.....And Marco felt a force grip him....as if he were clenched in a fist, only able to draw breath.
"In Japan, when you have a debt you cannot pay to....certain people....they don't bother to kill you." Brad said. "Schuldig, Aya, hold her down. Yohji, collect the payment."

Aya lay across the seats of the private jet with his head pillowed on Schuldig's thigh. He'd put too much on his injured leg and it was aching.
"You sure you don't want a shot?" Schuldig asked, his arm resting across Aya's collar bones, hand on his shoulder.
"Yes. I want it to heal. The pain killer slows it down. And it makes it numb and hard to walk."
"The doctor told you NOT to walk." Brad said wearily, knowing it was pointless.
Aya sighed. "Schu, tell him I'm not listening to him."
Schuldig snickered. "He's not listening to you."
Brad gave him a look that said he was not playing that game.
Yohji had been looking at Aya, stretched out and cuddled with Schuldig. He needed a little comfort, too, damn it!
An internal chill caught him. God, he'd never done anything like that before.....the screams.....
He shook his head and then looked at Brad, sitting all by himself in the two row seat with their backs to the pilot's cabin. He moved to the empty seat and sat half sideways to look at the American.
"Kudoh?" Brad said coolly.
"I kinda messed that up, didn't I?" he said quietly.
"There Is an art to it." Brad allowed. "Still, you did the job."
"Amateur." Farfarello commented in mild disgust.
"Can we not go into the details again?" Nagi complained sleepily. He just wanted to curl up and sleep the whole flight home. Omi was all ready out, it just wasn't fair how he could sleep so easily.
"Yes, let's not." Brad warned the irishman. They'd been on edge with each other thru out this, and he couldn't be certain why Jei had even agreed to come if he was so through with the life.
Farfarello sighed and leaned back in his seat to get some sleep himself.
Yohji looked at Schuldig and Aya again, damn it, he was jealous sometimes.
Brad looked at him. Too bad this wasn't one of the better appointed jets, but he'd had to take what they could get at short notice. "What's wrong, Kitten?"
Yohji smiled. Such a silly thing to be called. He carefully moved the man's arm off the arm rest and pushed it up into it's slot, to be able to move closer.
Brad didn't need to be hinted at. He put his arm about the slender japanese and

kissed his cheek lightly. "We'll be home soon enough. Patience, Love."
He sighed and tried to be content with what he had.

Paola winced as the nurse practically jammed another hypodermic into her arm. "Damn you! You butcher!" She swore at the poor woman, trying to slap her with her free hand.
Marco caught it before she could and held her back. "That's enough." he told the nurse. He looked at the doctor, who was cleaning up. "Are we through here?"
"Yes." The doctor said, turning, drying his hands, looking at the blond on the bed like table. "But this has to be reported to the police."
"Report away!" She said, annoyed. "I don't care! I have nothing to say!"
"But the men who did this to you...." The doctor tried to reason with her.
"Are long gone!" She snapped. "I'm not some weakling who's going to cry and need counseling, Doctor! Marco, take me home!"
He sighed. "Is there anything else?" He asked the doctor.
"The nurse will write out the prescriptions, you can pick them up at the desk. It's just a pain killer and some antibiotics. And you'll need to make an appointment to have the wound redressed. It's really too bad you couldn't...."
"Enough!" Paola fairly yelled, getting off the table. "NOW, MARCO!" she ordered.

He gave up. "All right!" he said.
Outside in the waiting room, she fidgeted while he took care of things. Stuck in this place, with these....people! She looked in disdain on the waiting patients, drug addicts and street people. Marco had brought her here because it was closest, but she could have stood to loose more blood than go through this....humiliation! The way they stared at her!
Damn that man! She thought angrily. To cause her so much pain.....!
Marco took her arm and drew her to the door. Outside it was still fairly warm, the desert not even cooling yet despite night fall. "How is it?" He ventured to ask.
"How do you think it is!" She snarled.
He drew a deep breath and let it out slow, something that had become a habit around her. "Still, you are alive. We are all alive. Be grateful for that, will you?"
"Oh, yes, I am sooo grateful!" She exclaimed sarcastically as he opened the door of the car for her. The chauffeur had started the engine when he had seen them open the door of the clinic. She got in and sat petulant while Marco shut the door and went around to get in the other side.
"Well, you should be." He took the chance to say quietly.
She glared at the back of the seat in front of her, mouth trembling with injured pride. Of all the things he could have taken.....why this!
She looked down at her bandaged left hand. It throbbed dully. But she was no longer screaming from the pain.

She had gone after a man she could never have. And now thanks to him, she would always bare the scar of that mistake, for the whole world to see. And even if she were to find another....
That punk had said something she vaguely remembered now. It was from the Bible somewhere.....
‘Thou are’t a bride groom of blood.’ he’d laughed at Crawford, a laugh so cruel she remembered it even now and shuddered.
Yes, it was true in a terrible way. No other man would be able to put a wedding band on her finger now, she thought bitterly.
There was no finger there to put it on.
In her own special, horrible way, she was stuck with Crawford for life!

It had been sunset when they left Vegas, they arrived early in the morning in Tokyo. They’d only been gone a few short days, but it seemed like forever. Farfarello’s girl was waiting for him, he’d called her to let her know he was coming home. It made the rest of them feel odd, to see her greet him by throwing her arms around him and him kissing her. It was just.....weird, somehow. They went off with his one suitcase, arm around each other’s waist, talking and smooching.
"I can’t decide whether that is disgusting or weird or just....romantic." Nagi said.
"Don’t then." Omi told him.
Nagi smiled at him. Omi was so smart, he always knew how to deal with things. It was one thing to be smart about computers and weapons and all that, but Omi knew how to stop worrying about things that didn’t need worrying about. Like when they’d first got together, and he had been afraid....that Brad would be angry, that Weiss would find out and hurt Omi, or worse, try to kill him as a traitor....Omi had told him how angry Aya had been about the whole Taketori thing. But he’d also told him that until they actually got caught, why worry about it?
But now, Aya leaned on Brad, his leg hurting him, his pale, pretty face always falling easily into a cold mask like thing, but that was just his bone structure. He’d turned out to be actually quite playful and very emotional. Maybe a little too.....?
And Yohji, Yohji was fun. He always made fun of the others when he was with him and Omi. Not in a bad way, just.....he was fun. He joked around and teased them about pretty girls, making them both blush and curse him. Sometimes, it upset Nagi to see him look at the women who went by. But it didn’t seem to bother Brad or the others that he still looked at women, still flirted with them mercilessly.
In the car, Nagi realized why the idea of leaving Japan had been unthinkable to Brad. This was home.

He also decided that Farfie and his girl were....romantic.

Brad had decided to deal with the messages in the morning. He'd slept a little on the plane, but he wanted more sleep, and he made that very clear, to the dismay of his lovers.
In the morning, things were different.
He wanted Yohji.
That meant angering the other two. "Schuldig, I expect you to keep these two in line!" He snapped at him in German, one, so that the other two wouldn't understand and two, to shock him out of his fit of anger. "Now deal with this....girl with balls!...." was the only way he could put it in the language, "So that I can have what I want for a change!"
Schuldig was upset. But he had to concede to his man's wishes. This was they way they had chosen and agreed to live, and sometimes what he thought were his rights turned out to be just privileges after all.
"How fair is it that I never get to have him! You two never give him a chance!" Brad threw in, willing himself not to smack Aya's hand away or shove the persistent younger man away completely. As much as he cared for him....He wanted Yohji. Now.
"All right, all ready!" Schuldig shot back at him, then moved to get over to Aya's side. (Aya.) he said in his mind, running his hands over the supple back side, and then a hand into his crack. (Aya, come here.)
(No!) Aya answered stubbornly, pressing closer to Brad.
Schuldig pulled him away and forced him down on his back, getting onto him, kissing him, though Aya dug his fingernails into him angrily.
Schuldig slapped him and looked down into his purple eyes.
Aya drew a deep breath. He knew when to quit now.
Schuldig stroked the cheek he'd probably bruised and then kissed it. (He wants Yohji. Stay with me.)
Aya sent him a wordless mental complaint of mixed dismay and hurt pride and just plain fussiness.
Schuldig kissed him again and got out the lubricant. Aya wouldn't even look at him as he eased in the applicator and squeezed the stuff into him, his mind coldly blank to Schuldig.
Schuldig was very much aware of the fact that Brad had Yohji under him and was kissing him with a warmth and passion that should have been his alone. He hit him in the arm. "Here." he snapped meanly, holding the lubricant up.
Brad shot him a dirty look and took the tube from him. Then he just plain forgot about the other two and concentrated on the lanky blond he wanted so bad.
Yohji tried to relax, knowing the other's were mad at him. He had to. Brad could be a brute when he thought someone was not all with him. They'd get over it, they always did.

He rested his arms on the man's shoulders, eyes closed in sensual pleasure while Brad expertly spread his crack and worked in the tip of the tube of lubricant.
It was cold, but followed with warm fingers, working up into him, opening him.
He moaned and rubbed against the american and looked into his eyes, his own half closed still. "You do that so well." He whispered.
"You're so easy to please." Brad said, putting the tube aside and getting a tighter grip on him, digging into him, kissing him.
"Ahhh!" Yohji squirmed, wanting more, deeper.
Brad left him aching for only a few moments, getting his hard on into him.
Yohji spread his legs and arched his back, so used to this by now that it was automatic. Brad, pleasure...one and the same...."Aahh!" he gasped as the man filled him with a thrust.
"Brad..." he breathed into his ear in bliss as he settled onto him.
"Like it?" Brad purred.
"Fuck me!" Yohji ordered. "Come in me!"
Instead, Brad pulled out and smiled evilly down at him from up on his hands and knees.
"Damn it, Crawford!" Yohji snarled, grabbing at his hips, trying to draw him back.
After a brief scuffle, Brad relented and got into him again. Yohji went limp, a tear running.
Brad kissed it away, moving slowly in and out of him, enjoying every minute of it.
Enjoying it more because the younger man had wanted him so badly....
"Unnh, grab my dick....Please!" Yohji begged, clinging to his shoulders.
Not drawing out but moving so that he could, he grasped Yohji and worked his swollen penis. Yohji rocked his hips, suspended entirely for a moment between Brad's cock and hand....he came, shuddering.
Brad savored the feel of it quivering tightly on him. He licked his fingers and then got back to the job of pleasing himself, kissing Yohji, sharing the taste with him, coming into him with an almost angry shove of lust and domination.
Schuldig deliberately took extra care to be as soft and tender with Aya as he could. He coaxed him out of his fit of pique with lingering kisses and caresses.
Aya went for the gentle stuff. Schu had found out, the lighter he was touched, the hotter he got.
"Mmmm, now." Aya sighed, forgetting his anger.
Schu got into him, keeping up the kisses, slow and ever so lightly, until Aya moaned and wrapped his arms around him tight as could be, basically taking over all the work!
Soon enough it was all over with. The arguments and the love making.
Yohji held onto Brad, pressed against his side, head on his shoulder. "Let's not get up today." He said hopefully.
"There's too much work to do." Brad said, not exactly feeling like it himself at

the moment.
"Later. What's the point of being your own boss if you can't put things off?" Schuldig said complainingly, backsides against him on his other side, cuddling Aya to himself. Brad sighed and ran a hand over his hip and thigh, just thinking how he felt about him, not exactly words.
(Mein Mann.) Schuldig smiled mentally, reaching to caress his arm and take his hand.

Somehow, he'd screwed up. This nagging sensation got more insistent as he got his first cup of coffee, sadly, after nine A.M., and went to sit down at the desk, turning on the computer.
One message out of quite a few red flagged in his mind. He knew that number. Araki Masanori.
Damn it!
And he knew exactly what it was about.
The vision was of something shifting, as in an earthquake, but this rippled out from where he stood, the waves causing increasing problems, and in turning back to cross themselves, danger for him and his flashing at every point.
The incident with the mercenaries. The word had gotten out.
He could be attacked. He could even possibly be taken down.
It amused him, really. He was no longer the 'new guy', the upstart. Now he was the one all the young ones out to make a name for themselves would come after. He laughed and tapped the key to bring up the message from Masanori.

"Okay, we have a problem." He said when they'd all gotten their butts into the living room.
"Now what?" Aya said.
"Quite a lot of the head hunters aren't going away. They came to this country to make money." Brad informed them. "Now that the contract if off from the Mafia Gianetti, they're going around to our....competitors....and offering to do the job anyway. Only with the result being our deaths. So far, quite a few have hired them.
"Shit." Yohji stated.
"Precisely." Brad said. "Who's up for some fun?" He grinned evilly.
"Just....what are we dealing with?" Ran suddenly dropped his 'Aya' personality again, inflection, body language, changing instantly.
"We've been cutting down anyone with connections to the police. No more bribes....no more protection. That has left us with some very unhappy ranking officers who don't know what hit them. Japan is in a recession, everybody's scrambling to make money. It's not going to get any better for a while, the recession has yet to run it's course and things aren't getting any easier in comparison to previous economic dips. There are going to be jealousies and

disagreements among the politicians and the Yakuza, and the politicians are moving to cut them off, despite past relations." He tapped the printouts on the desk. "We've got forty three requests for politicians alone. This will put the Yakuza in a better position to deal with the resulting re-elections. You can bet your asses, they'll get the popular votes, they've rubbed shoulders too long with the idiots not to have learned the tricks of the political trade, and this recession hasn't made the 'little salary man' at all happy, he'll vote for his wallet. If we don't establish ourselves now as a still dangerous force to be dealt with, we'll be lost in the shuffle. We don't get lost in the shuffle." He stated coldly.
"So the loose guns in the country are competition." Omi said.
"Precisely. We're going to have to be on our toes, gentlemen. That means no more splitting into smaller teams again, and herding the prey into bigger groups whenever possible for maximum kill per hit. It mean's checking the damned cars every time we go near them so we don't get blown to Hell. That's going to be the main problem. Unless we split by having someone stay home, we're going to be an obvious target in a large car. We stand out anyway. Nagi's the only one among us who can blend in to the population norm outside of the major cities where a lot of foreigners are the usual sight. But that's not going to be too big a problem, our preferred targets see foreigners every day. The main problem is going to be identifying the hyenas on our heels. That mean's you're going to actually working for a living again, Baby."
Schuldig pouted. "I work!" He protested.
"It also means bullet proof vests." Brad ignored his complaint.
This caused them all to groan.
"Quit your bitching, at least it's winter. Dig them out and put them on. I won't have anyone out of this house with out one. Is that understood?"
There were no more remarks, although it didn't take Schuldig relaying their minds for him to know there was a lot of internal bitching.
"And I MEAN this." Brad stated firmly. "NO SEX ON THE JOB!"
"Then I quit." Ran stated, instantly 'Aya' again.
"I need a cigarette." Yohji got up off the sofa abruptly.
"Me, too." Schuldig started to follow him.
"Forgot to upload homework." Nagi got up.
"Um...me too." Omi said.
"SIDDOWN!" Brad roared.
Butts hit cushions so fast there was an audible 'flumph'.
Brad glared at them. "This is a business, not a movable orgy."
"Can't we just go into the porno business?" Yohji asked meekly.

"Hanoko Ikeda?"
She finished signing the paper work and turned. Foreigner. The way he'd said her

name. "Hai." She smiled. "How may I help you?" She deliberately spoke slowly and clearly so he would be able to understand better.
"I was told you know a Mr. Crawford." he said.
Then and there, she knew something was wrong. The big european man had a scar on his cheek that was an ugly cut, not cared for properly. His eyes.....she did not like his eyes. There were no faint lines around them in the area there would be at his apparent age if he were good natured.
Hanoko was an expert in her field. Soon enough, she would take her degree.
She knew a psychopath when she saw one.
"There is a Mr. Crawford who is.....a previous employer of a friend of mine."
He took her arm. "Can we take this somewhere more private, Miss Ikeda?" His voice was calm and easy enough, but the grip on her arm was frighteningly tight.

She punched him one in the upper diaphragm and moved to hit the alarm button as soon as he wuffed out the air in his lungs. "Everyone, down!" She yelled. "GUN!"

And he did pull one, aiming at her shakily, still unable to draw a breath, his solar plexus paralyzed.
Good thing this was an asylum for the criminally insane. Apparently he had not noticed that because it was so politely concealed so as not to upset the inmates and out patients families.
The security guards wore white coats just like doctors. They had him down in minutes, and Hanako slumped to the floor, trembling, the wall the only thing holding her up.
The adrenaline rush over, she shook like a baby.
"Are you okay, Hana?" One of her co-workers asked, shaking herself.
She swallowed and nodded once. You saw these things on TV. You never thought they could happen to YOU.
Her friend watched her close her eyes and slowly slide over into a restful unconsciousness.

Ken had thought he'd left the killing shit behind when the others had defected to those bastards in Schwarz. It had been bitter enough to find out Fujimiya had paid off the shop and signed it over to Sakura as a gift. He hadn't wanted to have anything more to do with the fucking jerk, but there was nothing else he could do.
At least he'd had the joy of telling Persia to go fuck himself, and when the man went down in the political upheaval, he'd laughed.
Another damned Taketori dead and gone.
He drew a deep breath. At least he could still move and think fast enough.
But there was a body on the floor of the storage room and a smoking gun in his hand.
He couldn't explain the gun to the police. The body had to go.

"Ken-kun?" Sakura said, finding her voice.
He knelt to check the man over for ID. A foreigner. And he was carrying more than the silencer equipped gun. A knife and lock picks. This was no attempted robbery.
So what was he here for?
"Ken!"
"What!" He said, annoyed by her yelling at him.
"What are we going to do!" She damn near wailed.
"Get rid of the body." He said. "Lock up the shop and help me."
"Help you!" She gasped.
"Sakura....." He said, trying to be nice about it. "Dead bodies do more than stink. They get you into trouble. Pull yourself together and help me."
She felt tears running, but she didn't feel like crying. She felt like screaming.
He was such a.....such a.....man! Always ordering her around, condescending to her! Her mother liked him, so respectful, so good with children, such a business man. A traditional japanese gentleman, not like these new boys with their crazy ideas, oh no!
She went to lock up the shop and put the sign in the window. If only he weren't so....
She turned.
He stood in the door way. "Are you all right?" He asked.
She wiped her face on the back of her hand and looked at him, at his brown eyes and nice face. "I guess I will be."
"You're a tough girl, Sakara." He said, approvingly, and went back to find a tarp.
She pouted when his back was turned. He might have well as said 'nice game' and smacked her on the shoulder.

Chapter Seventeen
"Full Circle"

"You know, this sucks. We're the ones who everyone else is supposed to be afraid of." Yohji complained, toweling his hair vigorously. "Not hiding out and watching our backs at every moment."
"It's scarring." Aya was looking at his thigh, his foot up on the closed toilet seat. "I'm going to be scarred." he rubbed more ointment onto the offending wound which was healing well now.
"Well, boo hoo, look at me." Yohji pointed to his own bare chest, marred forever by the surgery scar.
"You're not ME!" Aya informed him petulantly in damn near a whine.
Yohji looked at him in amazement. "Ran, you're gonna get if he catches you going 'there' again." He grabbed his electric razor and plugged it in.
"I don't care!" Aya stated. But he got control of himself, pulling his purple bath robe tighter and tying the belt.
Schuldig opened the door, having jimmied the lock. "That's it, out of the way, girls, I want my shower NOW!"
"You'll steam up the mirror!" Aya protested.
"Like you need to shave, Princess, when's the last time you grew anything on that pretty face?" He hung up his robe and got into the shower stall.
"Bitch!" Aya said under the sound of the water as it gushed out.
"I heard that!" Schuldig sang at him.
Yohji finished getting rid of his night's growth. What ever his father had been, he at least was one japanese who could do face hair. And he hated it. "I think I'll get that lazer thing done." He rubbed his now smooth again jaw.
Aya grabbed him by the hips and moved him away from the counter. "Put some clothes on, you distraction." He swatted the honey blonde's butt and grabbed a small tube off one of the glass shelves in an alcove on the wall and shook it down then unscrewed it. "Turn down the hot water, BITCH!" He called over it, leaning to try and put the eyeliner on in the already filmed mirror, wiping at it with a hand towel.
"Fuck me, you COW!" Schuldig called back merrily, filling the room with the scent of his designer perfumed shampoo.
Yohji rubbed his stung bottom and grabbed his own robe off the hook, put it on and got out. Cigarette! Now!
Aya caught the doorknob before he could shut it and fanned the room to let the steam the vent fan wasn't taking care of out.
"Shut the fucking door, PLEASE!" Schuldig complained in the sudden draft.
Aya shut it and finished his maquilage with a temporarily clear mirror. "God, I AM pretty." he said, not caring who heard it, admiring the sparkle of his diamond nose stud as compared to his purple eyes.

"Despite that hideously scarred thigh!" Schuldig shot down his ego happily. "We'll all have to close our eyes just to fuck you."
"SHUT UP, SCHULDIG!" Aya ordered him, putting on his ear dangle after making certain the sink stopper was closed.
Schuldig merely laughed maniacally and went on with his scrubbing.

Yohji handed Aya a cup of coffee and kissed him. That stupid lilac shimmer lip gloss was irresistible.
Aya slapped him lightly but smiled and went to sit down at the table. "Stop eating that crap, you'll get fat." He said at the sight of Brad's breakfast.
"Have I yet?" Brad said coolly.
"Well, you're not getting any younger." Aya informed him, sipping his coffee.
"Not at the rate you three are aging me." Brad muttered knowing perfectly well they would all hear, as Schuldig had just come into the kitchen as well.
"You're not going to talk sex at the breakfast table again are you?" Nagi complained.
"Did you turn in that paper?" Brad asked him.
"Well....."
"You have to take the online university just as seriously as the physical one." Brad reminded him.
"I'll do it, I'll do it! Right after I eat." Nagi promised. If he hurried, he could check it over one more time.
(Paranoid.) Schuldig snagged a piece of his fish cake.
"Yours is in the oven!" Nagi protested.
"Yours is on a plate!" Schuldig stole another piece just to prove he could do it.
"Schuldig!" Brad warned.
Omi rolled his eyes, then got up to pull the platter out and put the rest on plates, making sure Nagi had another one to replace the half of one the red head had filched.
Brad glared at them all until they were settled down to eat and then went back to his own breakfast and the stock reports. Mornings in this place could be a nightmare.
"Eh, Omi-kun, why are you wearing a skirt?" Yohji suddenly noticed out of the corner of his eye, then had a better look. "It IS a skirt!"
Down came the paper. Brad looked at the blond boy.
Omi blushed. "I just want to, that's all." he said. "Can't I wear what I want?"
Brad looked at Nagi.
Nagi tried to think of something to say, and then stuffed a portion of fish cake into his mouth.
"Nagi!" Brad said sharply.
He chewed quickly and swallowed. "What?!"

"Are you going to allow this?" Brad said in disbelief.
He took a deep breath. "Yes." he said, as if it were perfectly all right and very odd to be asked such a question in the first place.
Brad frowned at him. Then he frowned at Omi. Then he went back to looking at the stock reports with a snap of the paper.
Schuldig giggled at the cussing and swearing going on in Brad's mind.
Nagi kicked him under the table and gave him a nasty warning look.

In a way, it was a bizarre twist of fate. Less than two years ago, he'd been on the other side of this situation. Protecting a corrupt politician. Now, he was out to take as many down as possible. Not that he cared. Money was money. The amusing part of was that his erstwhile enemies were now his back up.
It was strange to see Aya stripped of jewel's and fancy clothes, in full 'Ran' mode for work. If anything, it made him want him more....but he couldn't break his own rules. It was going to be a long afternoon....
"In position, Boss." Yohji's voice said in his ear via comlink.
He had to fight to focus on 'now', a vision distracting him....Damn! Why was it the things he didn't want to think about were the first things he 'did'! He took a breath, the image in his mind still... "Keep an eye out for new arrivals."
Omi, the little devil, had worked a brilliant scam, as much as he'd had to suffer through all the politics. He'd gotten a good ten, at least, of their prospective victims to agree to a meeting, presumably at each other's behest. More politicians----more body guards. He was getting multiple visions now, every time he even grazed the question of what 'could' happen. That was his weak spot. "What might"...."what if"...."if I".....and then, wham. A little worry, a lot of trouble.
(Mein Mann...?) Schuldig.
(What?) He answered.
(I was just wondering....) a caress of mental assurance. He was not alone in his own skin....
(Keep your mind on the job.) He ordered.
"Target number three, Boss." Yohji's voice again from his position by the front entrance.
"How many?" Brad asked.
"Two." Yohji counted, looking at the two men who were obviously body guards, their eyes sweeping the area, while the politician and his secretary looked strait ahead, set on getting where they had to be on time for the meeting.
"That makes eight soldiers so far." Omi said from his position in the 'attic' with the electrical and central air systems. He was tracking the team via chips, so he could use their eyes to relay positions to the others on the building's architectural map.
"I've got target four." Ran said, by the back door. "One man, but extra

suspicious. Finger tip missing if that's any clue." He added dryly.
Brad smirked. Cheap bastard. He'd hired a thug, not a professional. "Not a good one, than."
(Here they come.) Schuldig reported, positioned by the ground floor elevators.
(In they go.) He laughed evilly. Brad hoped it wasn't aloud as well, but than again, Schuldig was pretty good at covering his real emotions while there was a riot in his head.
"Nagi?"
"What happens when I get older and can't hide in curtains?" The youth complained.
"I toss you out and get another boy." Brad teased in his most serious voice.
"Well, gee thanks."
"Well....a girl would stick out more...."
"Just shut up, Brad." Nagi said.
He smiled. "Let's take this easy, people." He murmured into the comlink. "There are a lot of factors involved here and the set up is perfect on our end so let's just relax and let the job come to us. I've got them." He pushed the comlink up behind his ear as the lights hit the floor number he waited on.
They got out....as expected, the two targets, two secretary's, three body guards. The two politicians were already arguing mildly. The body guards eyed him as if he were some species of nuisance, secure in their training. The thug gave him a cursory glance and wrote him off. He did not react to any of them, looking at his watch as if he were awaiting someone else at the meeting point. This played out for the rest of the next half hour. Two were late for the meeting and when the door opened up the hall way, he heard the sounds of arguing. He went to stand beside the double doors to the meeting room. "Close in." he ordered.
"Brad....we've got a yelling match in here." Nagi reported ever so quietly.
He let the vision come.....and frowned. "Get out on your own desecration. It's going to blow." Tempers were rising and the yakuza goon was going to pull a gun. There...."Move it!" Brad ordered. "Nagi hit the floor I'm coming in!" He pulled his gun, thumbed off the safety and kicked the doors in, firing at the yakuza and then the other guards who were pulling their guns. Damn it, he'd have to use his bullets on the guards, and let the targets wait. "I may have strays here!"
He snapped into the comlink.
"Covered, Boss. We're on our way up." Yohji assured.
"Omi?"
"Call going out to the police....I'm cutting it. But if I interfere with cell phones, the links won't work."
"Interfere, take us off line, we're off line, people!" Damn it, one body guard was playing hard to get...ah, got him.....Last bullet! Damn!
(I've got it) was Schuldig's answer, linking them mentally.
The remaining body guards held their guns on him, yelling at him to disarm. Such

good boys, they would detain him and wait for the police. He held the empty Walther and his other hand up to show he was surrendering.
Nagi caught them in the backs with his pistol.
Brad switched clips and surveyed the targets. "Take them." He ordered Nagi.
The other three showed up just in time to help him stop the noise the minor massacre was creating.
Omi came back on the links unexpectedly. "Boss, we've got police!"
"Shit." Brad stated. So that had happened after all. Damn computers! "Are they all dead?"
Schuldig did a mental sweep. "Yes." He said with a satisfactory smirk.
"New car." Ran commented, adding up the target bodies.
"Let's get out of here." Brad ordered. "Split up. If you're stopped and questioned don't panic."
"Oh, just great." Yohji said, knowing damn well he'd seen it happening and was warning them only because one of them would be.

It was Schuldig. They actually hauled him in for questioning. That damned hair was like a red flag to a bull.
They figuratively tore his papers up for two hours. How long had he been in Japan, why was he in Japan, why couldn't he go somewhere else. Why was he working for a detective agency, why was he wearing a bullet proof vest, what were all the scars and needle marks about, and worse, waiting for his records from other countries to come through from Interpol....those bastards were thorough and in Germany, there was no distinction between juvenile sealed and adult open.....
He sat there and answered politely and smiled, while they got madder and madder. But he wasn't expecting the rescuer that showed up.
Araki Masanori.
He almost gave away his annoyance, then grabbed his bullet proof vest, shirt, tie and jacket up after they un-cuffed him. "My wallet." He told the one cop.
The man handed it over with a hateful look in his eyes. (Damned foreign freak....) he was thinking...
Schuldig winked at him as sweetly as possible, making him even more angry and unable to do anything about it.
In the elevator, as he got dressed, Araki looked at him coolly. "I'm to convey Crawford's apology."
Schuldig snubbed him sullenly.
Araki looked at the elevator door and thought that Crawford's underlying nervousness, however well concealed in the process of making the request, was not unfounded. The red head was stiff with anger. "They're cracking down on all the foreigners with criminal records that have entered Japan recently. You know, you might tell him this would not have been necessary if he would consent to

join the organization."
Schuldig's jade green eyes focused on him with such spite it was as if it were a physical strike. "And if you weren't so obviously after his ass, he 'might' have considered it." He hissed through his teeth.
Araki raised an eyebrow. Obvious? Hmm. He laughed coolly and let it slide.
But he didn't know he was dealing with a telepath.
Schuldig looked at the doors, too and stepped out first when they opened, intending to go on his way, but Araki caught his jacket sleeve. "Not so fast."
He stated. "I agreed to get you out And deliver you safely. Do you want to be picked up again?"
Schuldig aimed right for his ego. "I'm a little old for a baby sitter."
Araki shifted his grip expertly, to the thin but wire muscled arm beneath the silk wool blend. "I was told you would need reminding who is in charge of you."
He said. What ever code there was between Crawford and the strange redhead, he'd been assured this would put him in order if he got out of line.
For a moment longer the green eyes were defiant. Then the glare faded to something....else. And the red headed demon of an assassin suddenly became a young man who was wanting only to go home. "Let go of me." he snapped quietly, yanking his arm free.
He was quiet in the car all the way back to the exclusive high rise building Crawford paid a fortune to live in.
Araki wondered how the American could stubbornly remain in Japan and yet still keep himself so aloof. He contemplated going up. But then changed his mind. He would wait for an invitation without the hope causing deferred desire. He was accustomed to keeping his soul on ice. "You're welcome." he said coolly sarcastic when the red head got out of the MB without saying anything.
Schuldig ignored him out of pure principal and got into the foyer of the building like a stray cat scooting back through it's own door in the morning. Careful not to get its tail slammed.
Araki chuckled again and ordered his driver to go on.

Schu punched in the code to the door lock after swiping his key card and when it opened, knew something was up.
Farfarello.
He quickly shut his mind away from the mad man's.
Brad came to tightly embrace and kiss him.
As usual, Schuldig forgot he was angry at him. He sighed and leaned into the moment, taking all he could get.
Brad broke it off. "Well, I suppose you're glad to see me." he murmured in german.
Schuldig smiled at him wickedly. "I should be very angry with you. But we pulled off the job."

Brad ran his hand into the red flame hair, pressed another kiss on him and then moved away, switching to japanese again. "We've got an interesting situation." He looked at Farfarello.
Schuldig read it in Brad's mind. Oh-oh. That explained all the tension in the room.
"We've always known that any.....'outside interests'....would become a weakness." Brad said, continuing the interrupted conversation.
"I quit, remember?" Jei stated. "How the fuck did they track me down and figure m'girl in it?"
"The police?" Schuldig said. It was so obvious. They'd been forced to pay bribes and do dirty work the law wouldn't allow the police to do, the records would be there, however minimal.
"We were the object of a hunt." Brad stated. "Where ever those records got to before we destroyed them, some one must have got into them. But they wouldn't have tracked you, unless....." He had a sudden idea. "They knew we were with Esset? Has someone survived?"
Schuldig looked at him. "Is it possible?"
"It's not impossible.... Nothing's impossible, we should know that by our own nature." he walked over to the bar and got a few ounces of scotch while he thought it over. Just enough to dispel the adrenaline going stale in his system from lack of any better release. God, he was getting as tense as he had in the 'old days'. He turned and looked at Schuldig. The concept of throwing Farfarello out and just getting back to his own pursuits was there.....but....'damn, I'm getting soft.' He accused himself and finished the alcohol off, setting the cut crystal glass aside. "The fact remains they've found you, and her, and targeted you both. You were coming back already, Jei." he looked at the scarred irishman coolly. For his years, Farfarello'd seen more than twice as much his own age, hell they all had, it gave the young man the air of an old soldier, ready for battle once more. "You're here now. Make a decision or get out."
Farfarello sighed, annoyed. Annoyed at the state of his own mind, annoyed at the position he was in and just plain.....annoyed! "I'm in. But I'm warnin' you. Keep your whore off me."
Schuldig frowned. "I can just feel the 'love' in this room." he said sarcastically and went to pour himself a drink.
"You needn't worry about him, Jei." Brad said.
Schu walked over to sit on the sofa, looking at Yohji and Aya. Or was it 'Ran'. Ran, he decided with out checking the mental condition. He was frowning something awful and no where near Yohji, still trashed out in his jeans and tatty sweat shirt. Obviously, they'd all been being wonderfully bitter over his capture when Farfarello had shown up and spoiled the pity party. Ran hadn't even taken off his gun holster, and his katana was laying on the uncovered coffee table, a big no-no with the mahogany surface. Yohji looked like he was deep in a funk and not coming out for a while.

Schuldig was too damn internalized right now to pry. Brad was right. Suddenly is was all too much like the bad old days. "Where are the brats?"
"Where else?" Yohji said.
"Ah." he sipped his drink. "At least someone's having fun." He looked at Ran again and changed his mind. (What's the matter, sweet?)
Purple eyes focused on him. (He left you behind!)
Schuldig looked again at Yohji. (Hey, what's going on here? Besides the shit with Farfie?)
(He wouldn't let us go back for you!)
Schuldig linked them both. (Is that why the big sulk? Brad took the long way around to getting me away from the police? You idiots! We can't just attack the POLICE! I'm just pissed he didn't come himself!) He finished his scotch.
(Sending that arrogant son of a bitch Araki to bail me out! Fucking Yakuza! They own this country, let them run it right!)
(Sah, you hate that creep!) Ran thought. (What has he got over Brad that he just.....lets him!)
('Lets him'?) Schuldig didn't understand the concept the schizo was mulling over in his pretty head.
(Push him around....touch him....) Ran got angrier and sulked harder.
Whoah, someone was jealous! (Well, what are you going to do about it?) Schuldig smiled evilly.
Ran looked at him again. (Shit! Kill him!) He stated.
(Well, Brad likes him and you can't.) Schu informed him ever so sweetly spiteful.
This raised such a look of hate and need for revenge in the japanese beauty that both Schuldig and Yohji were entranced for a moment. (The hell I can't!) Ran snarled in their minds.
Yohji and Schuldig looked at each other and it didn't even take a thought to reach a mutual agreement. They just got up and grabbed Ran by his arms, pulled him to his feet and hauled him off up the stairs.
"Let GO of me!" Ran protested and was muffled by a kiss.....Then a door shut loudly, as if kicked to behind someone....
Farfarello looked up at the landing with a disapproving smirk. "Look what you've done t'them." he said in English, looking at Brad. "They can't even last ten minutes without goin' at each other like dogs."
"This is my home." Brad said calmly and coolly. "I respected you when you were insane to the point where you endangered all of us. No one hurt you in this household. Whatever is going on in your head now....if you want to remain with....Kuro....(he could no longer call it Schwarz, truth be told)....learn to respect us the way we respect you."
Farfarello frowned. True, he was learning that he had issues to deal with and some of them just plain....useless to him. "I want Hanako kept safe since she can't be kept out of it. But she won't give up her work." he paced the floor a

little. He hadn’t sat down since he’s come in this ‘house’. "How the fuck did they connect her to this!"
Brad realized something he should have seen earlier. "We’ll figure it out. Right now...just go get her and take her somewhere safe. You might even consider telling her the truth. I need time to think this over. Call me if you need anything. Mind the police."
Farfarello got out, brusque and not interested in polite formalities.
Brad exhaled sharply. "Shit! Shit shit shit!" He almost hit the wall and was suddenly faced with the fact that there was a steel beam in that particular place and he was about to break his hand.....
He stopped short, and felt even more as if he were being thwarted.
Nagi came half way down the stairs, having thrown on his robe, holding it shut at the chest. "Aya’s putting up one hell of a fight in there!"
"I’m coming, damn it!" Brad headed up stairs, pulling off his jacket.

They had Ran on the bed, but not in the usual way....Yohji kneeling above his head, pinning him down by keeping his knees on Ran’s shoulders, trying to pry his jaws open, Schuldig straddling his midriff, trying to put something into his mouth that he was having nothing of. "Damn it stop squirming!" Schuldig swore through his teeth.
"What the hell is going on!" Brad demanded.
The distraction was enough....Schuldig stuffed the pill down Ran’s throat.
"Swallow it, you bastard!" He held his hand tight over his mouth.
"Schuldig!" Brad couldn’t believe it! "What the hell did you just give him!"
"Viagra." Yohji chuckled and got off Ran’s shoulders.
Schuldig got up with a silly grin on his face, his evil deed for the day done.
Ran tried to put his fingers down his throat to gag up the pill!
Yohji caught his wrists and held his arms behind his back. "Oh, no you don’t!"
Brad went to push him aside, Yohji letting go immediately.
Suddenly the two trouble makers realized they might be in trouble. They held their breaths while Brad made up his mind.
He sat down to take Ran by the shoulders gently and look at him. "Well, what harm can it do?" he said softly to him.
"What will it do to me!" Ran demanded bitterly.
Brad laughed softly at the premonition. He drew him closer and murmured in his ear. "Well, in about an hour, and for at least an hour....my precious princess is going to be a man..." He turned his head and kissed the japanese on the mouth.
Ran melted away, leaving only Aya, who leaned back and Brad responded by going down with him.
"Hey!" Yohji protested.
"You can have him when I’m done." Brad said, sitting up to pull off his shirt

and then his shoes and belt.
Schuldig sighed and pouted, arms crossed.
Aya started to pull off his sweat shirt, but Brad caught his hands, looking down at him with a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Leave it on." He purred.
Aya looked up at him.....and shivered.
"By the time that chemically induced hard on hits you." Brad informed him. "You'll know exactly who and what you are to me." He pounced on what remained of the leader of Weiss.
Schuldig rolled his eyes at the fantasies Brad was entertaining himself with at the moment. Then he looked at Yohji. "Eh....Top or bottom?" He asked coyly, twisting a lock of hair on his fingers.
"That depends." Yohji looked at him archly. "Who gets Ran's 'virginity' this time?"
"Ah...you're right!" Schuldig realized. "Me." he stated flatly, warningly.
Yohji thought about challenging him. But he knew it was no use, he'd loose and loose miserably. And he sooo wanted to make love, not war with the hot assed red head. "Then you should be on top, Schu-schu. You want to be nice and tight for the big event."
Schuldig laughed. Oh, so what if he'd had a bad day! The night wasn't even here yet and he was having fun.

Brad left them to it and went down stairs to see about supper.
Omi was sitting in the kitchen, having helped himself to a beer. He was sitting there, sipping and peeling at the paper label on the bottle.
"What?" Brad asked, getting one for himself. Sex was thirsty work.
Omi shrugged. "Just...restless."
Brad examined the contents of the refrigerator and then gave up. "Order in okay with you?"
Omi shrugged again. "Whatever."
Brad sat down and looked at him. "What the hell do you want to wear girl's clothes for?"
"I can." Omi said.
"Yes. You can. But that's beside the point. You're a boy. Nagi....loves you....the way you are. This isn't leading to anything.....drastic is it?"
Omi blinked at him. "NO!" he said, thinking about how that would.....hurt.....!"
"So why are you down here sulking and drinking, and I should not be letting you drink, you know."
"Get real." Omi stated.
Brad smiled. "Point taken. Talk, Omi. We know each other by now. Am I so big and scary?"
Omi had another sip of his beer then sighed and got to it. "Nagi kept Farfarello on the payroll." he said. "Only he put the money into the sanitarium as a

charitable contribution. In your name. I think that's how they traced the link between you and Hanako." He picked at the label some more.
"I'm aware of that." Brad said. "Now, what do you suppose they would all want to eat when they get their asses out of bed?"
Omi looked at him. "You're not mad?"
"I could care less if Farfarello's.....girl....has to learn to stay on her toes." Brad stated. "But I'm warning YOU. No skirts on the job!"
Omi let it sink in, then smiled at little. "Okay, Boss man. What about pizza?"
Brad sighed. "Ask a teenager....." He thought it over. "All right. But no anchovies. I hate anchovies, they look like shriveled up slugs and taste like....cat food."
"Just on half." Omi started to get up to make the call.
"No." Brad said, pulling rank. "None at all. Never again."
Omi sighed and went to grab the kitchen phone off the wall.

Aya lay on his back, between Yohji and Schuldig. At last the stupid drug was wearing off.
Schuldig sighed contentedly, smoothing the tightly muscled white skinned tummy. He'd even taken off the belly button stud. The drug had kept the japanese from having his usual psychosis induced deflation when forced to be seme.
Yohji kissed Aya's neck, just below his ear. "God, how I love you." He said softly.
"Don't do this to me again." Aya said.
Schuldig raised his head to look at him. "Why, Sweetheart?" he asked. "Was it so bad?"
"I don't want to, I don't!" Aya's closed eyes leaked tears. "Promise me so I can forgive you!"
Yohji's eyes flicked to Schuldig's. Then he sighed. "I promise, Aya." he said softly. While it had been heaven, it hadn't been worth this.
"I supposed once is enough." Schuldig said sullenly. "Mmmm but I can still play with it, hmmmm?" He grabbed Aya's genitals mercilessly.
Aya looked at him, a bit startled. Then relaxed again. "Always, Baby." he said, stroking the copper flame hair, all tangled with exertion. He managed a smile.
Schuldig kissed him. "Well....I'm up for another go." he said cheerfully.
Yohji abruptly got up. "Iiye, I'm hungry." he said, finding his abandoned pants.
Aya got up as well in a neat escape. "Starving." He stated.
"Damn it!" Schuldig exclaimed.
"Hah!" Yohji laughed, suddenly having an evil idea of his own. "Play with yourself!" He shut the door behind them before Schu could hit him with the votive candle off the bed side table.

Chapter Eighteen
"Backlash"

London. A Tuesday morning like any other, except for one thing.
This was the beginning of the end of the world.
Again.
An office in a Cambridge university. The window was the only source of light and that light was thin and gray.
The door was tapped on.
The man behind the desk was swiveling from side to side in boredom. He stopped at the knock, bright blue eyes focused on the wooden door. "Come in."
The door opened. A man came in with a wooden box about 18 inches long by 8 wide and 10 deep in his hands and advanced to set it on the desk. "There it is ." He said in heavily accented english.
The man in the chair rubbed at his lower lip thoughtfully, looking at the box.
So. Here it was.
He looked up at the man who had brought it. "Thank you."
The man was anxious...."The money?"
"Of course." The dark blond englishman said. He sat up more in the chair and looked about on the desk under the student papers and note books. He smiled a little, absently. "Seemed to have misplaced the darned thing....." He moved the chair back to look in a few desk drawers, then smiled...."Ah, here it is..." He reached down in the bottom drawer.....
He pulled out a gun and aimed at the delivery man, pulling the trigger. The silencer made it sound like a muffled thud.
The other man fell, a corpse with a bullet in his forehead.
The Englishman unscrewed the silencer and holstered the gun, then got up and picked up the box, stepping across the corpse to leave the room, shutting the door behind him and locking it.
The corpse did nothing, laying there on the old oriental carpet here in quiet academia, it’s only company.....the other corpse on the floor behind the desk.

He threw the knife again. It thudded into the wall, hitting the target he’d pegged up. He walked over and pulled it out, then walked back to the distance the hotel room would allow him and threw it yet again.
It was Jacob’s equivalent of pacing.
The door was unlocked and opened and the englishman came in, the box under his arm.
"I can’t believe it!" The young woman got up from the chair by the window to come and look at the box as he set it on the table. "They’re ours at last!"
"If they’re the real thing in there." The englishman said, going to stretch out on the bed, his hands behind his neck, looking up at the ceiling. "I refuse to

get over excited about it until we're certain that they are."
Jacob joined her to look at it, his heart beat rising just a bit. "Open it!" He said impatiently.
Liselle touched the box, and the images flowed into her mind. The workers, clearing the rubble.....hands reaching down to brush away the debris and touch the box, to dig it free, pull it up. She blinked and found the latch and undid it, the latch itself telling her it's secret. She opened the lid, the carving of which she saw having happened....the fabric inside it, being woven....and undoing it's folds.....
The tablets.
She drew back her hands hastily, staring at the tablets. "Nathan.....it is them!" She said in awe.
Jacob let out a low whistle and picked one up, holding it up to the light, looking at the minute etching on the surface. "So this is where all the power comes from."
"Put it down!" Liselle said, alarmed.
He looked at her curiously with eyes that were hazel. Then he set the tablet back in it's box. Sometimes, she saw too much, and others....she could be right on the nail. He had felt nothing....but she knew the power in that carved stone.
They looked at their leader who still reclined on the bed. "Well?" Jacob asked urgently.
"Now, we're ready to go ahead with the plan." he said calmly.
Jacob frowned. "And what good will it do us to try and kill Crawford?"
The englishman snorted in amusement. "Try? We will." he stated. "As for what good it will do....I'd kill him for the five minutes of warm, cozy glow it would give me to see him dead." He said coldly.
"We aren't ready yet!" Liselle exclaimed.
"We will be." the man on the bed said. "Once we've sacrificed Ran Fujimiya. Then we'll have all the power we need."

There it was again....another ripple, moving over him, the images shifting in his mind, forming new configurations...
Aya pouted at his distraction. "What!"
He focused again on the maroon red head. "Nothing..." he said. "And no." He added. "That's my final word."
Aya grasped his shirt front in both fists and gave a little pull. "I'm tired of being cooped up!" He fussed in frustration.
"We were out all day!"
"That was work! I want to go out!"
"Work him, Sweet." Schuldig said, lounging on the sofa again.
"Get him, Aya." Yohji drawled, sprawled in an arm chair. "We all want to go out. This is boring! What's the harm! We've been moving targets for years now! The

club’s always been safe...."
" ‘Always been safe’." Brad said icily. "Like a watering hole! Are you out of your minds?"
Schuldig whined, flat out whined. "I’m BORED!"
"What’s the next target?" Brad tried. "We can pick them off in their sleep or something, torture them.... Would that make you happy?"
"Work!" Yohji protested bluntly.
Aya got him by the belt now, long fingers slipping in between the wool silk blend and the leather to tug at him with each word. "I--want--to--go--OUT!" He said in a quiet hiss. "Take me out!"
Brad met those purple eyes again. He’d take him out....he thought evilly....
"Dance with me." Aya said.
"You just want to show off." he drew up the insanely obvious diamond pendant from the smooth white skin and gave the platinum chain a little tug. "Spoilt little....."
"Feed me lobster...." Aya purred seductively.
"....Princess....." Brad murmured
"while everyone watches...." Aya leaned closer.
Yohji looked at Schuldig, who was smiling archly.
(He’s weakening....) Schuldig thought to him.
Yohji smiled and winked at him.
"me lick your lips...." Aya said sensually.
"Oh....god...damn it!" Brad kissed him in desperation. "You’re going to get us all killed!" He said, holding him closer. "Die happy, you.....devil!"
Aya pulled away mercilessly. "I have to change! And for heaven’s sakes, Schuldig, comb your hair, you look like you’ve been used by a whole soccer team!"
Schuldig sat up, offended.
"He’s right." Yohji eyed him. "If that end is that messed up, the other end...."

"You shut up!" Schu ordered him.

The sight was lined up, it was just a decision as to which one to shoot first. Because the first shot was easy, but the rest would be difficult, the targets moving....
A sharp pain....a gasp...the thought in the assassin’s mind....’..how..’....no breath....a heartbeat froze....darkness.
Jacob watched the body fall. "Why not just have let him shoot?" The knife had hit home, as usual, right in the sniper’s neck, severing the spine.
"We want them alive." The englishman said, looking down in the darkness to the other building’s roof with the night vision binoculars. "I want to see the look on Crawford’s face when I cut his world out from under him."
Liselle leaned over the parapet to look down at the four figures heading from

the car to the club's entrance. "Nathan.....here are two red heads. Which one is the offering?"
"The short haired one. The long haired one is 'Schuldig'." There was a bitter hiss in the word.
She shivered, drawing back.
He looked at her. "What?"
"I...touched something he'd touched, once." She stated. "It was.....as if I'd been....He's....sickening."
Jacob laughed, a short bark. "The tablets gave him that much power, that he leaves so much behind?"
She shook her head. "No. Not the tablets.....not this one...."
The Englishman remembered the arrogant red headed teen, so thin and abused, yet all that power....Esset had been particularly proud of finding him. Naturally, Crawford had claimed him for himself. He could take anything he wanted, their darling boy, the head of the class. Teachers pet, even. He laughed.
Jacob looked at him. "Share the joke, Chapel."
He shook his head. "I'm gonna kill him." He chuckled. "I'm going to just kill him. Let him see that coming."

"Well, here we are." Yohji said, sipping his drink. "No one has killed us yet."
his eyes were caught by a particularly lovely female sauntering by on the arm of another man.
(*I* may kill you.) Brad thought.
Aya had changed, all right. Despite the bullet proof vest rule, he'd switched to a black sheer top rather like a too large, drapey T-shirt, that his jewels sparkled through when the lights hit them.
Most of the regulars were used to him by now, but there were a few new comers and tourist who were sneaking open stares at the strange combination of men.
Brad could tell by his just barely smile, Aya was aware of the effect he made.
Aya looked at him and then leaned to kiss him. "Come dance." he urged.
"All right." He slipped out of the booth like seat with him and they mingled with the crowd.
"Yohji, you were doing it again." Schuldig warned him.
"Eh?" Yohji looked at him.
"Checking out women."
"Old habit." Was Yohji's excuse.
Schuldig smiled. "Aya may go out of his way to attract him, but all you have to do is let your eyes roam and he's all over you."
"Then I should go find a lady to dance with, hmm?" Yohji said, smiling sexily.
"I wouldn't push it that far, Love." Schuldig wasn't smiling any more.
Yohji glanced around again. "Sah! We're safe in this crowd. We should relax and have fun. He's too picky."

Schuldig shook his hair back. "Personally, I agree, but don't tell Him. What ever he's seeing, it's too soon to be worrying about...as usual."
Aya was trying to have fun, but getting the american to loosen up in public was like trying to thaw out a glacier with a match book. "Seriously, have you ever considered ruhypnal?" He complained.
Brad swatted him across his leather clad rump in reprimand.
Aya drew in a sharp breath at the stinging hardness of it. Then smiled archly and started to grind against him to the beat, not an unlikely thing to be happening in this place.

Chapel picked up his drink from the bar and turned to survey the crowd, looking for Crawford. "My, things have changed." he commented, spotting him with Fujimiya. "So that's where that deviation of his lead him."
Liselle had drawn on gloves, to muffle the divination's she got from contact with objects enough for her to function almost normally. "The file photo wasn't very accurate." was her quiet comment. Seeing him in reality....Well....
"Deviant as in Fag." Jacob stated.
Chapel smirked. Was it that.....or was it the fortune in diamonds Fujimiya was wearing? When they'd been in training.....Crawford had blown every penny every damned pay week on the most expensive woman he could get. Poor boy living rich, for a few hours at the least. Now look at him, he thought.
"Get too greedy, Crawford." he muttered under his breath. "And you only end up with more to loose."
"Now?" Jacob asked, itching to pull out one of his knives.
"Don't be an ass." Chapel said. "He'd see it coming before it hit him. Then we'd be in for it. No. We're just here for a good look. Remember to keep your minds off the subjects! The other one can hear your thoughts loud and clear. His only failing is he hears everyone's. It takes a direct threat or thought connected with him to draw his attention."
Liselle wanted nothing to do with the creature that had left behind him a look into living hell....
Jacob frowned and sat back on the bar stool, sipping his imported lager. Japanese beer was godawful.

Hanako sighed, pillowed on his arm.
Jei looked at her. He liked to keep her on his right side, so he could look at her.
She was frowning ever so slightly.
"What t'is it?" He asked, shifting to press his nose to her cheek.
"That man today...."
"That was nothing....some damned fool pick pocket." he assured her. The idiot had tried to take him out in a public place, as obvious as it would have

been....
"Why didn't you want to call the police, Jei?" She asked.
"Why take the bother, they'd have never caught him."
"How can you be so casual about it!" She fussed. "This makes twice one of us has been approached by someone.....criminal. What are the odds?"
About two to one. "Hanako...."
She frowned more now. His porcelain doll.
He was going to loose her sooner or later. And if telling her meant now and sparing her any more trouble.....
"I can't help thinking your association with Crawford-san....is more than you would say." She said.
He looked at the ceiling. Hell. Perceptive woman, this.
He vaguely contemplated killing her.
Listen t'yerself, y'idiot....He thought.....still thinkin' like a mad man. He sighed. This is what comes of goin' back....
She sat up to look down at him, holding the sheet up over her self, a modest girl. "Jei! Are we in some kind of trouble?"
He looked up at her, her black hair falling around her cheeks like some egyptian temple painting. He ran fingertips over her flawless cheek. Tell her the truth now. And be damned. He was going to loose her.....
"Hana.....I'm not tellin' you this to hurt you. I'm tellin' you this.....because I owe you the truth. I owe you that more than anyone else in this world. I would never want to hurt you. But this.....this will hurt."
She bit her lip. Then let it go. "I'm listening." she said softly.

Chapel set the other two to move carefully about the room, mingle, fit in. He took up a space on a wall, near a group of noisy college students out partying. He sipped his drink and had a good look at Crawford when ever the crowd shifted. The bastard sat like a king at his table, holding court with his overly precious crew. It was sickening. He had them fawning on him as if he deserved some sort of special treatment. And for what? Because he could see a few seconds ahead? Because he was smart enough to use it? To parlay that one simple talent into the destruction of the very hand that had pulled him half dead out of a gutter in....where was it...Chicago? Because he knew how to butter up the big guns and to play subservient when it counted?
He remembered the first time he had seen Crawford do that. The arrogant son of bitch, he was capable of breaking a man's spine with one punch in training, but the elders had come into the barracks to meet the new recruits and Crawford had suddenly gone from snarling dog in the start of a territorial fight to shy and quiet with his eyes down, sort of nervous, even, pushing at his new glasses. A competent fighter to a sort of awkward.....well....nerd. There was no accounting for it.

And they'd focused on him, asked him a few question, him answering in halting german just learned....
"You're a precognitive." The taller male had said. "What do you see, Crawford?"
"Your success, mein Herr." He'd answered humbly with a little smile.
The elder had laughed. "A smart answer! And what will be your part in that success!"
"Only what faithful service can provide, mein Herr." Crawford had said quietly.
And that was the start of it. From there on there was no looking back for the son of a bitch!
When they were gone from the barracks, Crawford had turned to the fellow he had been arguing with and caught him off guard, sucker hitting him with a kick to the gut.
The internal bleeding had killed the man, he'd had a bad fall on the bars earlier. They'd blamed it on the rigorous physical training. Chapel was more certain that it was because Crawford had seen that one more hit would do the job on the man's damaged insides.
Everyone left the American alone after that.
Ah, but now he was fair game. And Chapel knew he could find a way to bring him down. Once the ceremony was complete. Once the tablet of endowment was activated.....he and the others would have the power to simply swat him like a fly.
Chapel smirked. Crawford's favorite euphemism. Well, his corpse would feed maggots.

Nagi pressed the stop button on the remote, looking perturbed. Always at the good part....."It better not be trouble." He grumbled.
Omi spared him and picked up the phone. "Moshi, moshi, Crawford Investigations and Protection."
"I....Um...." A female voice.
"Is this the number you wanted?" he asked politely after a moment.
"Does....Aya.....Does Ran Fujimiya work there?"
Something about her voice....He said it before he actually knew it, then was certain. "Sakura?"
There was a pause....."Hai....." she said hesitantly.
"Sakura, it's Tsukiyono Omi. Is something wrong?" He sat up on the sofa.
Nagi looked at him curiously. A girl?
"I need to talk to Aya!" She said. "Something is very wrong!"
Omi frowned. "Where is Ken-kun?" He stated, using the familiar term from old habit.
"He can't handle this all by himself!" She was getting frantic. "Omi...he's gone! Some strange men tried to harm us, last week, and then today.....Last week.....Ken killed a man! And today.....Where is Aya-san!" She was sobbing now.

"I need to talk to Aya!"
Nagi frowned at the noise from the receiver.
Omi shot him a warning look. "Chotto, Sakura-chan! How can I do anything if you won't make sense!"
She sobbed for a few minutes more. "Can you come?" She finally asked. "Will Aya come?"
"Sakura....I can't promise you Aya." He said firmly. "But I can promise I will. As soon as possible. You are at the shop?"
"No!" She said. "Ken made me come to this hotel! He said not to go back to the shop!"
"Hold on!" he looked at Nagi. "Pen and paper."
Nagi got up and got the note pad off the writing desk and a pen and brought it back, shutting off the TV entirely. There went the latest Godzilla movie, damn it!
Omi wrote down the address. "Calm down as best you can, Sakura." He told her. "I'll try to find Aya and tell him what you've told me. Then I'll come."
"Okay....thank you....Omi-kun..." She said.
"I'll see you." He pressed the reset button.
"What the hell is that about?" Nagi asked.
"Sakara....Ken's disappeared. And they've been attacked, same as us and Jei's fiancée!"
Nagi frowned again. "Eh, Aya's not going to give a damn, you know that. And we're not supposed to leave the house."
"I'm not leaving the house without permission, Nagi." Omi informed him. He pressed the quick dial for Aya's phone.

"You're buzzing." Yohji informed him.
Actually Aya was seething. He'd tried to get Brad off some where alone for a fuck and gotten only a verbal slap down for trying to push it that far. Now Schuldig was having all the fun. He pulled out the damned phone, looked at the caller ID and yanked up the antenna. "What fucking now!" he demanded.
******
Omi held the phone away from his ear and blinked.
Nagi laughed having heard it to. Just like Aya to be so.....frustrated.....
Omi put the phone back to his ear. "Aya, Sakura is trying to find you. Ken's disappeared. They've been attacked. He sent her to a hotel to hide out and hasn't been back since."
******
Yohji was just setting his drink down when he noticed the look come over Aya's face.
It was fascinating, that. In a breath, he went from spoilt bitch to all business, Aya to Ran.

"Is she all right?" Ran demanded.
******
"She's okay but shook up really bad. I have the address" Omi answered. "Will Brad let us help her?"
Nagi thought maybe not. After all, outside interests.....
"Right now, I could care less." Ran stated. "If he says no, we'll go anyway." He glanced at Yohji. "All three of us."
Yohji looked at him over his perpetual sunglasses. "What the fuck?" He murmured.
"I'll tell him now and call you back, Omi. Get the stuff ready." he hung up and put the phone away.
"What?" Yohji said again as Ran got up.
"Move your ass, Yohji. Sakura is in trouble and Ken's gone missing." He ordered.
"That dirty bastard!" Yohji exclaimed in disbelief.
Ran looked at him. "You idiot." He said in exasperation. "They were attacked! She's holed up in a hotel."
"Oh." Yohji said. And got up. "Well.....I guess that's better, then."
Ran pushed rudely through the crowd, leading the way, and tapped Brad on the shoulder with a good hard poke to get his tongue out of Schuldig's tonsils.
"Hey!" He said over the pounding music.
This did not go over well, but Brad saw the looks on his and Yohji's faces and the fact that they had to go and go now. "All right." he sighed, letting Schuldig go.
(I knew I should have killed them.) He commented mentally to Schu, meaning Sakura and Hidaka. (Loose ends always come back to tangle you up.)

Chapel and his crew observed the sudden exit. Liselle and Jacob came to meet him by the bar. "Something is up." Jacob commented, having noticed the odd change in the maroon red head's attitude. "Fujimiya got a phone call that seems to have upset him."
"Liselle." Chapel said. "See if there's anything on the table."
She frowned and went to push through the crowd, some people had already claimed the table, but she was able to stand behind the banquette seat and put her hand where Fujimiya had leaned on it. The scene replayed itself in her mind. She wondered momentarily at the odd shift in his sense of self. As if there were actually two people that had been here at once, and yet...the same person. She went back to report to Chapel.
He considered this information. "He cares for this girl? We may actually have a solution to our most difficult problem. Getting Fujimiya away from Crawford."

"You're mad at me." Ran said to him in the car from the seat behind him.
"Only a little." Brad said. He did the driving now. Lest someone think to pull the old car accident smash and grab trick on them.

"Well what do you want me to do!" Ran demanded.
"Hand me their ripped out hearts on a platter." Brad threw out as a possible solution.
"You let them live." Ran said bitterly.
"Only because I knew the suffering it would cause them." Brad said smoothly.
"You know they hate each other. But they have no where else to turn." He laughed softly, evilly.
"I don't care." Ran said. "I gave my word! I don't go back on it!"
"Hush, Sweet." Schuldig sat beside him. "We're going, aren't we?"
"I don't want him mad at me!" Aya was back, momentarily.
Schuldig took his clenched hand and held it in both of his, "You're not mad at him are you, mein Mann?" he said with a warning razor's edge hinting in his voice.
"Nooooo, of course not." Brad said flatly, keeping his eyes on the road. The most dangerous place would be in the sub-level parking lot. He'd had a glimmer of warning earlier, when they'd gotten out at the club, but it was as quickly gone as came. It had given him a strange, restless feeling all night.
Schuldig's mouth twitched. Then he turned his attention all to Ran. It was important not to let this sudden intrusion of old 'Weiss' sentimentalities into their lives any more than necessary.
Yohji, in the passenger's seat beside Brad, wanted a smoke. Badly. He looked at him.
"I'm dying here."
" Go on." Brad said, annoyed. "I wish you'd quit!"
"I like smoking." Yohji pressed the button to roll down the window half way and pulled out his pack.
The american's mouth hardened.
(Easy.) Schuldig warned him, seeing the gathering storm.
(What the FUCK is his problem!) Brad demanded.
He felt Schuldig's mind shift right away from the first thought that came to him on the subject. (Just let him smoke, all right?)
Brad glanced at the sandy blond. The things he put up with.

They sat in the kitchen of the little house. After such a revelation, Hanako had decided they needed tea. Good strong tea.
Jei sat with his chin in his hand, watching her move in silence until she had everything ready and sat down and poured the tea. She'd been very quiet. But he was used to that. She was a serious girl. Woman. She was, after all, a few years his senior. But still, under that seriousness, was a girl with eyes that smiled at him, and lips that laughed. Would he ever see her smile or laugh again?
She sighed and looked him in the eye. "Jei...." She said, then stopped.
Then she started again. "My father bought his way out of the Yakuza with his

hand. The whole hand, from the wrist. I know what it is. To live that way. My father worked hard to put me in a good school, I worked hard to justify it. I've studied 'criminals' all my life. You are clinically insane, you have a chemical imbalance caused by some minute damage to the brain. There is no way of knowing what caused that damage. A bump on the head, a sever and prolonged fever....who can tell. You will be on the pills all your life, and even though it has supported your system enough for you to go longer without them, and you are learning to think in normal patterns, you have a lot of 'baggage', as the americans say." She reached over to take his other hand....
He did not show how shocked he was....that she could still do that....her smooth fingers on his skin.....
"Jei....given a choice between a rock and a hard place, there is evil and there is evil. Good is something that rarely comes without evil. This man has chosen to put evil against evil. You have chosen the lesser of two evils. I wish....there was a 'good' offered to you. But I have yet to find that for myself. I love you. I trust you. I know you will do what is right. Drink your tea before it gets cold and we'll go back to bed, and tomorrow, will be a new day."
She took back her hand to hold her cup in both hands, and he could see she was shaking just a little.
"Hana?" he said softly.
"It's scary this world." She said after a moment. "When you stop and think about it." She had another sip and swallowed hard. Then looked at him again. "I'm glad I have a man like you, Jei. Someone who can deal with how scary it really is and still be 'good'."

Sakura stood up at the knock on the door. "Who is it!" She heard herself call in a startled voice, clutching both hands to her chest.
"Sakura.....!"
She ran to the door and unlocked, it opening it and Ken half fell in. She caught up what she could of him, careful to shut and lock at least one lock. "Ken....!"
He was bleeding....she wasn't sure from where yet. She got him to the bed and sat him down, trying to find out, shaking so bad herself she could hardly deal with it. He fell over on his other side, curling up, his face twisted in pain.
"Ken!" She yelped. "Where are you hurt!"
"Side....shot...." He managed, then passed out.
She knelt there...shocked.....Then she remembered to get up and fully lock the door.
She went back to stare at him. The police....she had to call the police....
She couldn't move, for some reason.....
It didn't matter how long she stood there, another knock pushed away that time and startled her again.

"Sakura!" Aya called sharply. "Sakura are you in there!"
She went to unlock the door. She stared at him. There had been....some changes...
He saw the body on the bed. "Ken?" He went in to look down at him. "Shit!"
Sakura stepped aside as Yohji came in, then two other men.....ah, the men he had left with.....the ones Ken hated.....
"Bakana Ken." Yohji looked down at him. "He managed to get it in the side, up under the vest. Sah, what rotten luck! Typical."
"My, my, she does look just like the little sister." Schuldig said, studying Sakura as if she were a painting and not a human. "That might have come in handy."
Brad smirked. "Nonsense, Schuldig. It would have never worked."
The foreign man’s strange green eyes made Sakura shudder. He tipped his head and smiled sweetly at her and she felt even more afraid, though...she couldn’t say why.....

Chapter Nineteen
"Past Indiscretions"

They'd taken Ken to the emergency room. There was nothing to do now but sit and wait until some doctor made up his or her mind.
Sakura was staring at Aya.
She couldn't help it. He'd been.....incredibly attractive before.....but now.....
"Aya?" She had to ask at last.
He looked at her. "What?"
"You've gotten very fancy." The girl commented, finally blurting it out.
He blinked. Then he remembered. They'd been in a hurry, he'd thrown on a decent shirt, and grabbed his weapons, but it hadn't even occurred to him to wash off his little cheat of eyeliner, or remove his diamonds.
"What happened?" She asked.
"Two years." He said. It was hard, seeing her, as well. She'd been two years younger than his imouto, and looked exactly like her, now, she was two years older, and he wondered at her longer hair done in two braids.....Aya-chan had not aged in the bizarre coma. But she would have been....almost nineteen now.
"Has Ken been taking good care of the shop for you?"
"Yes." she said.
Schuldig came back in from outside, having stepped out to smoke with Yohji. Yohji had elected to remain outside in the car. It wouldn't do to leave it alone. He walked over to take the seat next to Aya. "Nothing yet?"
"No." Aya said, looking at the carpet. He thought about it....how he couldn't care. He had left this behind. The shop was Sakura's, Ken was to help run it, they were supposed to be out of the picture. Happily ever after, so to speak.
Schuldig didn't really care that there were a few other people in the waiting room besides them and the girl. He leaned to put a hand on Aya's cheek, to press his lips to the closer one. "What's wrong, Sweetest?" He dropped his hand to take up Aya's on the younger man's thigh.
(Not here, Schu. The girl....) Aya thought.
Schuldig knew she was infatuated with Aya. He'd already been in her head.
(You're suddenly very careful.) He said archly in Aya's mind. (Maybe I should just take care of this problem my way.)
Aya looked at him sharply.
Schuldig's jade green eyes glittered with evil amusement a few inches from his, then he kissed him again, this time on the mouth, licking his lips with a teasing tongue.
Sakura was staring wide eyed at this display. Ken had said some things....but....she had thought he was just being mean in anger.....he had a pretty bad mouth at times when he was upset.
Aya-kun is homosexual? Her mind blared out.

Schuldig snickered, then sat back in the chair, crossing a leg over the other and getting comfortable.
Aya frowned. "Sakura-chan.....this is Schuldig. Schu this is Sakura. She was a victim of that doctor who was stealing organs from young girls. Weiss destroyed him."
"I remember the fuss on the news." Schuldig said, enjoying her mental squirming under his gaze.
Brad came out of the emergency room. He looked annoyed. "He's going to have to be admitted indefinitely. The bullet pierced his intestines and there's a mess of internal bleeding and contamination to clean out."
Sakura stood up quickly. "Is....is he going to....be all right?"
He looked at the girl. "They seem to think so." He looked at Aya. "What are you going to do about her?"
"We can't just leave her for...." Aya hesitated. Did he want to say 'to be slaughtered' or 'used as bait' in front of her? "Those people to find."
"This is what outside interests do to us, Ran." Brad stated, not happy.
Aya was at a loss. "I gave my word." he said softly, but meaning it.
"Don't...call me that right now." He pushed at his bangs, but didn't look up at him.
Brad looked at Schuldig, who for once merely smiled coolly up at him.
(Damn it! What are we supposed to do with her to make him happy?) Brad demanded of him.
(Oh, so you want to make him happy?) Schu said in his mind. (Why not just slap him and get us out of here?) He asked in a low growl, the smile not matching the evil glitter in his eyes.
Brad focused on the girl again. Damn it! If Aya replaced his sister.....Then it came to him.....
He pulled out his phone.
Schuldig frowned.
"Masanori...." he said smoothly. "Do me a favor..."
Ran scowled. "NO!" He stated.

"Aya...." Sakura was naturally concerned about being....just handed over to the men his boss had called.
"It's all right." Aya told her, somewhat curtly. "You'll be safe here." He glared at Araki.
"Of course you will." The yakuza leader told the girl with a gentle smile. Then he looked at Aya. "Your cousin is more than safe in my house."
Ran itched to cut him down.
Araki told the maid to show the girl to the guest rooms and make her comfortable. "After all, she has had a rough day. I'll make certain the hospital keeps us informed as to the young man's condition." He told Brad. "It's out of

your hands, put your mind at ease on this."
"Thank you, Masanori. I seem to have lost track of how much I owe you." Brad was, as usual, ultra polite to him.
"It slips my mind as well. The late hour." Araki said. "They have too much on you, to be so capable of hunting up these connections."
Brad shook his head slightly. "I don't think the wild cards are the ones we have to worry about. I think someone from Esset has survived, some how. But then, there were so many operatives. Some one.....inactive.....may have slipped through my net."
"My people are at your hand, Crawford. Consider letting me help you more than this."
Brad pushed his hair back. "No." he said ruefully. "You know I don't take second place to anyone."
Araki was aware of three other pairs of eyes glaring at him. "Yes....I know." He looked into those pale brown ones. "But waiting hurts nothing. And someday I Will see the dragon on your skin."
Brad backhanded Ran across his cheek as he attempted to draw the katana. It was a cold, hard, warning blow.
Schuldig stepped between him and Ran, having been the one to suggest it, now totally opposed. "It's late, let's go home." he said coolly.
Yohji took Ran by the shoulders from behind. "Come out to the car, Ran." he tugged at him.
Araki ignored the hatred in those purple eyes.
"Forgive his insolence." Brad said calming as quickly as flipping a switch.
"He's under a lot of stress."
"Obviously." Araki said. "Good night."

"How ungrateful are you!" Brad demanded in the car when they'd left the gates. He'd made sure to get Ran alone in the back seat. "He's guarding your little slut's life for you!"
Ran was stunned. "She's no slut!" He exclaimed. "She's just a girl!" Damn it, his face hurt. He could already fell it swelling.
"She's a good girl, Brad." Yohji said from the front passenger seat. "She's just had a rough time. She's not that kind at all."
"I don't want to hear from you." Brad informed him.
"What the fuck did I do?" Yohji exclaimed.
"The both of you and that brat! You'd have done this behind my back if I'd told you no!" Brad snarled with anger. "All it took was one scratch and you are still Weiss underneath! I've a good mind to throw you all out on your sorry asses! See how long you last without ME!"
It hit Schuldig's over sensitive mind like a wave of pain, but he quickly blocked it and kept control of the car. "Scheis! Mien Mann, calm yourself." he

snapped in german. He was shaking from the sudden assault of emotional pain and rage.
Aya muffled a sob.
"Oh, christ....." Yohji said, thoroughly depressed.

Nagi half opened his eyes to the noise, his still asleep mind registering it....the door slamming, the angry shouting that began the minute it was shut.
For a moment..he thought he was back....
"Crap." He said.
Omi stirred. "I wonder what's happened.' He said softly.
"Don't go out there." Nagi turned to snuggle to him. "It's no use. Not when he gets like that. Schu will calm him down."
Omi frowned. Yohji and Aya were yelling too....and from the sound of it, Aya was doing the most yelling.

"Do you WANT to be rid of us!" Aya demanded, beyond any self control now.
"God, wouldn't THAT be heaven!" Brad exclaimed.
He might as well as hit him again, the verbal blow was that solid to Aya's being, it took his breath away.
"NO!" Schuldig protested.
Brad looked at him.
"Don't do this!" the red head pleaded.
The american was too angry to even care, he just wanted to be rid of ALL of them, suddenly. It was as if his anger had finally solidified into one big over riding hate.
Yohji caught Schu's arm. "Come on." he stated. "I'm not leaving you. Ran. Let's pack."
"You son of a bitch!" Brad glared at Yohji. "Take him, then! All of you get out!"
Unable to deal with it any more.....Schuldig simply shut down. His mind had been overwhelmed.
Yohji caught the german as he blacked out.
It startled them all.
"Look what you've done to him." Yohji said to Brad. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" He didn't raise his voice, he didn't yell, he just stood his ground and asked.
Aya fell to his knees, a hand gripping Brad's pant leg in supplication.
A sharp pain in the back of his shoulder made Brad wince. Then he realized....what it was.....the mirror.....on the wall.....
Omi held another dart ready, just in case, Nagi at his back, a hand on his shoulder.
Brad shook his head. It didn't help. The room spun.....

He sighed deeply.
His mind collected itself. Started to work again.
Oh....shit.....
He opened his eyes.
Orange flame, too close to his peripheral vision, a slender arm and leg pinning that side....
The relief was overwhelming.
Aya, his cool skin flanking him on the other, a long fingered slender hand grasping the inside of Brad's thigh...a habit of sleeping the younger man had developed.
He breathed again. Yes, there was an arm around Schuldig's waist, a tangle of sandy hair.
All accounted for.
What the hell had hit him last night?
And why hadn't he seen it coming?

Liselle looked at the englishman across the table.
He was frowning.
"What?" She had to ask.
"I think he's onto us." Chapel said, sipping his tea. "Or at least, he's aware something is not quite right."
"Does....the other telepath suspect?" She frowned slightly.
"I'm not even going to take that chance to find out."
Jacob glanced at the box on the side table of the hotel room. "Too bad we can't make that work without Fujimiya. At least, to increase our powers enough to go right in and finish this."
"It was a start." Chapel said. "I don't need my talent to kill a man. None of us do. Remember that."

He didn't care if he was going to get raw and ache for a week, he made it up to them. He would never give up his beautiful little collection.
He ran his fingers into the honey brown waves and savored those wonderfully responsive lips again. Kudoh.....
There was a tap at the bedroom door.
He looked at the time.....nearly noon.
Yohji caressed his chest muscles, looking up at him with lash veiled leaf green eyes.
"What?" Brad answered.
Nagi opened the door enough to look it. "Have you been at the viagra?" he demanded mildly. "It's nearly noon!"

"Mind that mouth!" Brad admonished. "Go deal with business. I want a day off."
"Now I know the world is coming to an end." Nagi said dryly and shut the door.
"You and your stupid viagra...." Brad told Yohji.
The blond smiled. "No one forced you, Brad."
He moved in him again, making him moan, and looked at Aya beside them. Damn that bruise....But his eyes were closed, his lips parted, his breath shallow, his hands grasping the metal posts of the head board.
Schuldig had Aya in his mouth, hands grasping the narrow hips, torturing him by just taking in the tip of his erection, running his tongue over it lovingly slow.
Brad kissed Yohji forcefully again, suddenly wanting to just do it and feel the intense pleasure of orgasm.....he came, driving into the slick warmth of the rock hard, skinny body.
Yohji moaned and road it out, so spent he couldn't possibly come any more, but still able to enjoy a persistent lover.
"Finish him!" Brad ordered Schuldig as soon as he could think again. "Make him come!" He left Yohji to kiss his schizophrenic princess, pulling at a nipple ring.
Aya gave a muffled yelp of protest, then was lost as the pleasure on his organ and the pain at his nipples combined to send him into ecstasy. Brad kissed him, over his face and neck, careful of the bruise and bit his un-pierced right earlobe as Aya groaned in orgasm.
Then Brad drew Schuldig up to kiss him, wanting to taste the sweetness of Aya's sex on him, licking and sucking at the undeniably wide mouth of his favorite lover. "Schuldig..... Baby....." he murmured. "Don't ever leave me. No matter what I say or how stupid with anger I get."
Arms slipped around him from behind and Yohji pressed his goods right up against his crack, an other wise intolerable imposition. This time.....he took a breath and relaxed. Yohji was limp, he was just cuddling, holding him tightly. Brad reached down to rub the blond's hip and thigh caressingly.

Nagi looked up from the computer at the writing desk as he came down stairs in his robe and raised his hands to clap slowly and sarcastically. "You survived."
"I'm going to get a beer and then I'm going to paddle your ass." Brad threatened without intent.
"You should stick to water!" Nagi called after him. "We've got two major hits due today and you've put us way behind schedule!"
Brad sighed and got a glass out of the cupboard. He'd forgotten. He'd been drinking water all morning to make up for the sedative's depredation on his system, but damn it, he couldn't be impaired and do the jobs.
Omi was at the coffee table, his preferred working area, on a traditional floor cushion, the sofa at his back and the lap top practically on the end of his

little nose.
"If you're going to insist on wearing skirts, don't sit like that." Brad admonished him in mild disgust.
Omi looked down, then smiled ruefully. He was cross-legged. "Sorry about the dart, Boss. But you were freaking big time. What was that? It was as if you were already drugged or something. We should get you a blood test."
This struck Brad as odd.
What had hit him last night?
"Eh, Kiddo, who made you Boss?" He ruffled Nagi's hair and shoed him out of the chair.

Schuldig dragged on his pajama pants and stretched, flopping back on the bed to squirm briefly in the simple pleasure of being him.
"Damn, Schu-schu, make us horny again." Yohji commented, pulling on yet another crop top. He'd been indulged in a collection of silk knit ones and was now seriously addicted.
Aya half crawled back on the bed from the other side to kiss him while he was still down, then gave him a vicious pinch on an orange rose nipple.
Schuldig smiled. "Damn you!" he said in soft exclamation, feeling the stirring it caused in his balls again.
Aya got off the bed and finished buttoning his shirt. "Get up, you lazy thing."
He sighed. "I could get used to Brad being so repentant."
"I'm not sure I can." Yohji said.

The first job went well, they hit the second one near midnight. "Mien Mann?" Schuldig looked at him in the car.
"It's just a head ache." Brad said. "I'll take some aspirin when I get home."
The effects of that stupid darting, no doubt. Drugs always screwed up his talent. "Let's get this over with." He tried to 'see' if there were any potential problems ahead, but nothing showed. He frowned. He checked his gun for about the hundredth time. "The usual plan. Kudoh, you're with me." Keeping Yohji at his back made him feel a little better about the lack of visions the head ache was causing. Incredibly competent, his weiss kitten.

Damn the fool for having such a complicated landscaping.
Brad had put his foot in an ornamental stream, that for some reason, he had not even smelt. There was no moon tonight and the headache wasn't helping his night vision. "Shit." he whispered in english.
"Boss?" Yohji's voice said softly in his ear piece.
"Nothing." Brad said. "But make a note to find out who their landscaper is and kill him, too."

Yohji chuckled softly. Not that the man would ever really have that done. He'd long since learned Crawford never took out innocents.
"Big nasty alarm system, liebe Mann." Schuldig said over the link.
"Why are you talking, Baby?" Brad wondered.
"That head ache of yours is getting worse. Why is your foot wet?"
"I stepped in a stream, okay?" Brad answered. "No un-necessary chatter."
Ah, there was the first dog. Laying there sound asleep, Omi's dart in its shoulder blade.
(I know how you feel, fellah.) Brad thought, stepping over it, smirking in amusement.

The job was done. All they had to do now was get out. Omi had the down load from the office computer in his pocket as a matter of course. The target was a corpse, the rest of the household out cold from the ether slapped over their noses.
He was just heading for the patio door when Yohji joined him. "Where were you?" He asked, not looking at him.
"Nature called." Yohji said. "Everyone else out?"
"Apparently." Brad said. "Step it up, those dogs won't sleep all night."
"No." Yohji apparently found it necessary to comment. "Crawford...."
"What?" That was odd....he never called him that.....
The wires whipped around his neck so suddenly, so unexpectedly, it was a shock. As they tightened, he tried to get his fingers under them instinctively.
But it was too late, they were tight to the skin and digging in. He struggled, trying to hit the man....But Yohji was too good at this, too many had struggled, and his thin body was perfect for avoiding any attempts at disabling him.
The ache in his head was worse now.....the blood throbbing in his veins, it felt as if he were going to burst from the pressure building up, and his throat....the pain, unable to breath...."Yoh...ji....love..." He managed, a hand finding one of the man's at the back of his neck. (Baby...) He thought before his brain shut down.
Yohji felt the body go slack against him. He was about to tighten the wires one last time for the killing cut, but suddenly something let go of him.....!
He let go too, as if the wires were hotter than hell and had burned him.
Brad fell to the floor.
Yohji stared....what had he done....?
"Yohji!" Schu's voice yelped in his ear piece. "What's happened, where's Brad!"
He pulled the comlink off and let it hang by the cord, kneeling to hastily unwrap the wires from Brad's neck and feel for a pulse. "Oh, god, no no no no no.....!" He pushed the man flat on his back and got his mouth open to press his own over it, working to fill the starved lungs with air, then started the rhythmic count and push on his lower chest. "Just do me a favor and live, eh?"

He said distractedly. "You can kill me later, but live!" He bent to fill the lungs again.
It was already hard going because all he wanted to do was cry and he had to fight the lump in his throat. Damn it! Why was this happening again? What had come over him? Was he loosing his mind!
"Brad!" He snarled, shaking him. "Brad!"
Schuldig could move fast, that they all knew, it was a combination of long legs and his ability to mess with minds, but this time, it was just plain speed. He nearly fell over them. "What the hell!" He demanded in German....Then knelt to take over the pushing part. "Fuck!" he said.
Yohji was able to get more air into him now, and felt for a pulse.
It flickered faintly. "Harder, Schu!" He ordered.
"Okay, that thought was out of place." Schuldig said annoyed at his own dirty mind for once. Mind.....he concentrated on reaching Brad's mind, his body going on automatic with the pushing.
It was there, deep in subconscious, but there. He went deeper too, the muffling silence almost suffocating. (BRAD!) He yelled at the spark of life, having flashbacks to when Yohji had been shot in the heart. (BRAD, come back to me!)
Yohji got frustrated and tried slapping him a good brisk slap, as if to knock someone out of a trance, then groaned and tried breathing into him again.
(Schul...) it was a whisper as faint as a breeze, the impression was of being very tired....
(WAKE UP, MIEN MANN!) Schuldig yelled at him mentally.
(.....)
"Damn you!" Schuldig swore aloud, trying to think.
Yohji was crying now, not aloud but the tears running down his cheeks, his hands caressing the slowly cooling face in between bouts of trying to breath oxygen into him.
Then Schuldig got a very evil idea.
"Careful, Love." he warned, yanking open the belt buckle and nearly ripping open Brad's pant's zipper. "If this works, he's going to fight like a wild cat...."
he dug his hand into the pants, down under the man's scrotum.....
"Oh....shit...." Yohji said.

Chapel's eyes snapped open. "Son of a bitch..." he breathed.
"What?" Jacob asked, having been watching the telepath intently.
"Who the hell would have thought of THAT." He laughed suddenly. Oh, the bitter amusement of it.
"What!" Jacob got impatient. "Is he dead or not?"
"I wasn't aiming for dead, just a coma." Chapel said. "But they beat me to it. He's conscious again. Damn it." He got up and went into the bathroom to splash water on his face. Kudoh's mind had been a bizarre place.

He wiped his face and hands on a towel.
Using the man's complex feelings of guilt and revenge to get him to shut down and replay his killing scenario had been easy enough...until the memory of killing his female lover had balked him.
Damn Crawford! Of course his seduction of these men had bound them to him in a way no mere loyalty could.
"On to plan B." Chapel muttered.

"You again." The doctor stated.
"Miss us?" Yohji asked with a sly wink.
She glared at him and raised the american's chin carefully to examine the marks at his throat. She winced. "What the hell happened?"
"That's what we want to know." Schuldig commented.
"He was attacked with a guitar wire." Yohji stated.
She drew in a hissing breath. "It's cut into the skin pretty deep. It's not bleeding because the cut is so fine but it's worse than it looks. My god, it's nearly a tracheotomy." She called for nurse and a tray of implements and then started to scrub up. "Lay still and be quiet." She ordered her patient.
Brad was in no mood to talk. He was dazed and not sure what had happened really, the memory was gone with the black out....but he knew he had Yohji to thank for this wire cut and had no idea why....
The doctor noticed the strange red head was holding his wrist in his other hand, protectively close to his body. "What's wrong with you?"
"Fix him first." he said.
"I will, but I need the tray. Let me see that...."
"I think it's broke." He grinned like a little boy.
A very naughty little boy, she thought.
Yohji moved to the exam table side and looked down at Brad. He smoothed back the insistently stray strands of hair. "I'm....I don't....know what happened." he said softly.
Brad reached to take his arm and slide his hand down it to hold his. Then he closed his eyes and tried to be patient, glad to be able to breath.
Yohji took up the hand in both of his and squeezed gently.
Aya pouted, hating his surroundings, hating what was going on, hating that something seemed to be attacking them from the inside out and hating the fact that Brad was seeming so weak to defend against it. "You stupid shit." He told Yohji.
Yohji looked at him. Easy to see he was dealing with Aya, the eyes were soft and glistening with tears, the lips trembling ever so slightly, and he was hugging himself. "Hush, Aya." he said softly. "We have to fight this together."
And for once, Aya shut up and kept his crap to himself.

"You tried to kill him!" Nagi accused, so angry....
Omi held him back as best he could, an arm about his waist and shoulders. Good thing when Nagi got so angry he couldn't concentrate to use his talent.
"Nagi-Kun! Stop it!" he half begged half ordered.
"Nagi!" Schuldig yelled at him, using his power to make certain the boy was not going to start throwing anyone through walls. "This is something outside getting in! Yohji would never try to hurt Brad!"
"It's true, Nagi!" Omi stated. "You know that! Something is wrong here! Very wrong!"
"Nagi....." Aya said. "We need to let him rest. Damn it, we all need to rest."
Nagi stopped struggling, but the anger was still there.
Yohji looked at him. "I know this is going to sound impossible. But...I had some kind of weird shut down. I don't know what I was doing until I saw Brad on the floor with the wire on his neck." The....he paused, realizing something.....
He looked at Schuldig. "Schu...."
"Eh?" The red head looked at him curiously, having picked up a flicker of something on the edge of his mind.
"You remember when you....um...." Yohji wasn't saying it aloud in front of anyone. It had been technically rape, hadn't it? But....
Schuldig blinked. "Yeah.....?" How could he forget? That was the beginning of all of this.
"It was the same weird feeling. I wasn't in control. Someone else was."
Schuldig felt a very cold chill wash over him. "Another telepath...." He breathed.
Omi let Nagi go.
The black haired boy was stunned. "Another telepath?"
And Schuldig remembered...."Yes. That's the only thing it could be. Someone who knew Brad well enough.....to get to him."

Chapter Twenty
"Repercussions"

"Schu, are you okay?" Nagi looked at him as he drew the cup shakily to his lips. He had a swallow of the coffee, and set it down again. "No." He stated. He ached all over, especially his back and wrist. "Where is the morphine?" He just hadn't been able to sleep any more, despite the late night, with the pain waking him.
The youth blinked. "What's happening to you?"
"Eh?" Schuldig looked at him.
"Don't tell me something is getting to you now."
"Don't make me slap you, Nagi, get me something for this pain! There's nothing new wrong with me." He laughed softly and sipped his coffee. He hadn't even gotten that far....Should have known better to use his right hand, that was all.
Nagi put the case on the table. "Arm first." He got the stuff out and fixed a needle.
Schuldig winced. He hated needles now. He grasped the table's edge and turned his head away as Nagi managed to find the vein in the mess of his arm and slip the needle in. The stuff sting/burned and he swore vehemently, his other fist clenching.
Nagi rubbed it for him, then impulsively put an arm around his shoulders, hugging him. "Are you sure you want me to do your back?" He said into the flame orange mop of hair under his chin.
"One little sting verses hurt all day....just get it over with, brat." He shrugged the kid off and undid his pants. "Get as close to the nerve as you can, okay?" He pulled up his shirt and laid his head on his arms on the table.
Nagi did as he was told, using his power to hold the man still. "You should let the doctor look at this, Schu."
He shook his head. "No." He fixed his clothes. Damn....But the stuff was working.
Nagi put the case away. "Sooner or later you're going to have to." he commented, looking in the rice canister. "Is Brad having breakfast?"
Schu saw the worry in the kid's mind. "The stitches make it look worse than it is. He's groggy from the dope. Don't press him and don't let him see how upset you are." He sighed.

Aya woke from a bad dream, iris purple eyes opening with a depth of pain in them that would have struck anyone who saw it, an almost cry on his lips. He sighed and closed them again, then moved to turn on his side and put a hand on Brad's arm. He laid his cheek on the man's shoulder. He sighed again, opening his eyes.
"Bradley?" He said softly, rubbing the muscular arm.
Yohji leaned up on one elbow to look at him from the other side of the bed.
"Ran, ssshhh." He put a finger to his own lips in warning. "Let him sleep the drugs off." He whispered.

Aya moved to press a slow kiss to the sleeping american's cheek.
Brad stirred, frowning, flinching, then turning his head away a little.
Yohji saw the sudden hurt look on Aya's face and reached to lay a hand over his.
"He's asleep, he doesn't know. What's wrong?"
"I want him." Aya said, pressing closer to Brad, eyes closed again.
"Please....wake up, Brad...."
Yohji got out of the bed and came around to Aya's side, reaching to slide a hand under his lower shoulder and taking the other, pulling him away. "Stop it. Let him sleep."
A glare was trained on him. He ignored it. "Come on, Ran." He said gently. "Come to me."
Aya looked at Brad, who turned on his side in his sleep, settling more comfortably with a deep sigh, broad shouldered back to him.
Yohji tugged again.
He made a small sound of hurt annoyance and got up, to be pulled into Yohji's arms and held tightly.
"What's wrong?" Yohji caressed his back and hair tenderly. "Tell me."
Aya pressed his face to the curve of Yohji's shoulder and neck. "I was dreaming of imouto."
The sandy blond kissed his temple fervently. "Ran, my Ran." He breathed. "It was only a dream. Nothing can hurt her now."
Aya drew a shaky breath. "Yohji.....make love to me." He said softly.
Oh, he had every intention of it. His own dreams had been none too pleasant. He needed to feel...alive. And more than that, he needed the reassurance that he was still loved, forgiven....
Aya pressed his mouth over the blond's. "Yohji...." He breathed.
Yohji drew him out of the master bedroom and across the hall to the cold sheets of the spare bedroom. They were both already naked, it was simply a matter of getting under the blankets against the winter chill in the room and finding the tube in the bedside table's drawer.
Aya whimpered as Yohji pushed into him, the pain and pleasure and relief all in one sudden wave over him. He wrapped his arms around the blond and drew his knees up, letting him have all the contact possible. Yohji watched him in the morning sunlight filtered by the curtains, looking down at his beautiful, exotic face. Little gasps and sounds escaped Aya with each thrust, and he shivered again and again, until Yohji couldn't take it anymore and kissed him fervently, a tongue in his mouth. They came together, in desperation.
Yohji lay on him, catching his breath.
Aya held onto him lightly, not willing to let him go.
Yohji kissed him and pulled out, but stayed there on top of him.
Aya looked up at him with half closed eyes.
Yohji kissed one cheek bone, then the other, and nuzzled his ear. "Better now?" He murmured.

"A little." Aya said. He still couldn't shake the bad dream.
Yohji caressed him. "I'm sorry I hurt him, Ran. I.....I don't know what's in your mind like Schuldig does. Tell me."
Aya ran his hands down Yohji's back to the just beginning curve of his rump.
"It's allright, Yohji." he said softly. "I know you didn't mean to do it."
Yohji kissed him again. "And it won't happen again, now that I know what was going on." He promised. "I'm going to kill the bastard that did this to us." The bastard that had used his memories of Asuka to try to take away a man he perhaps....loved more than he ever had her?

They'd kept a careful watch on the house until there were the least amount of people inside it. The man was Yakuza, and obviously high ranking, the place was crawling with underlings, coming and going with gangland business.
Chapel found it amusing that Crawford would resort to what one might think for him such a step down. But in a twisted way, it was just like him, to use, to manipulate, to take every advantage of everything that came his way. Chapel easily slipped into Araki's mind and what he found out made him smile coldly. Traditional Yakuza, not even reaching the depths of depravity of the modern style gangsters. And with one potentially fatal flaw in his personality.
It could be used later, that. "All right, we're moving in." He said to his digital phone. "It's now or never."

Sakura was gone.
Chapel and his two had simply walked in and taken her. Right under their noses. He'd used his power to block their minds to a quick aggressive snatch of the girl, but he'd been unable to prevent their actually noticing she was gone or remembering vaguely what had happened once he was out of range.
Araki was in a total rage!
"We have to get her back!" He ordered his men. "Go after them! I want Tokyo turned inside out! Every district, every street! Find her!" Damn it, he had given his word the girl would be safe!
He would personally take a bamboo stick to the son of a bitch who had done this and beat the skin off him!
To loose face in Crawford's eyes.....He roared out his anger with clenched fists, sending his men scattering to obey!

Schuldig felt Brad's mind stirring to consciousness and went upstairs to go in and sit on the bedside.
Brad moved to lay on his back and rubbed his face, blinking and looked up at him. (What time is it?) He thought slowly.
(Just after noon.) Schuldig took the glasses out of the case and handed them to

him. (Can you talk?)
(I don't want to. My throat feels.....weird.) He put his glasses on.
(Where.....?)
(Down stairs, trying to act as if everything is all right. Yohji's pretty shaken up. I wouldn't give you two yen for Aya right now.)
Brad laid a hand on the german's thigh. (Come here.)
Schuldig moved to lean over him, kissing him.
(Stupid medication....) Brad thought. (Get me some water, will you? I feel like a dried up sponge. What exactly happened, Schuldig?)
He went to do so. (It had to be another telepath. Someone who got past our defenses and made Yohji think he was killing an enemy when he attacked you.) He thought to him as he filled the glass at the tap in the bathroom.
Brad stretched and scratched his scalp. He wanted a shower. He wanted food. And as Schudlig came back to the bedside with the glass in his hand.....he wanted that too.
(Get those clothes off.) he ordered, drinking the water. (Damn it, just when I had him near talking to me....Does he know who?)
(No.) He unbuttoned and pulled off his shirt. (Just that it felt as if someone else was in control of his mind.)

"Look who's alive." Yohji said dryly, as Brad came down the stairs. It was now well after noon.
"Get over yourself." Brad said, his voice a little hoarse. "You think you can try to kill the boss and get out of working?" He grinned at him.
Yohji smiled ruefully.
Aya got off the arm chair and came to embrace him.
It was then that Brad realized something.....
Well, it could wait. He held the younger man.
Schuldig had seen the thought in his mind and gave him a puzzled look.
(Shut up, Schuldig.) He ordered him.
(But.....?)
(Later!) He rubbed Aya's lower back and kissed him. "Look at you...." He fingered the diamond ear dangle and looked into the purple eyes. "My princess." He murmured.
Aya smiled in relief and caressed his cheek, looking into his eyes.
Brad slapped his butt and slid away from his grasp to go to the kitchen. "I'm starving. No, Schu, don't bother them. You get me something." He said just before Schuldig yelled for Nagi.
"I hate cooking!" Schuldig said, but opened the fridge anyway.
"It's going to be a long night." Brad commented. "Real food, Schuldig!"
He put the cooked rice back and frowned, pulling a package of sausage out of the freezer. "Yohji, don't stand there! Make fresh coffee!" He snapped at the

japanese.
"Why me!" Yohji protested, hauling his back sides off the door frame.
"It's your fault I have to cook!" Schuldig reached for the skillet and winced, remembering his wrist was broken as a jab of pain shot up it. "Shit!"
"Stupid," Yohji said. "That thing is heavy. Use your left hand."
"You're so kind to me, Love." Schuldig hissed at him.
"Hey, no problem." Yohji said archly.
Brad laughed softly. Then he glanced at Aya who'd come to sit beside him at the table. What to do about this?
He'd picked up that Sakura was not where she should be. He would have to call Masanori and find out what had happened. In the mean time, Aya was all his and obviously unconcerned for the girl. He smiled at him. "Were you so worried?"
"Yes." Aya said softly.
"I'm not that easy to kill." Brad told him.
"You could have died. If Schuldig hadn't heard you call out to him mentally.....if he hadn't been there. There.....was nothing I could do...."
Thick lashed eyes lowered in a frown. "But you were all there." Brad said. "End of story. Now cheer up. Pout or smile, but do anything but scowl at me like that."
"I'm not scowling at you." Aya protested with a frown.
Brad smirked. "Well, that's a start."
Aya had to smile at him now, even if it was in mild annoyance. "Do you think you know yet who could have done this?" He brushed his carefully cut too long bangs out of his eyes.
"I can't even think yet." Brad said. He was still feeling sort of numb from the sedative the doctor had given him. He hadn't needed it or wanted it, she'd simply jammed it in his arm before sewing up his throat. He needed that coffee. Yohji finally set it in front of him a few minutes later and he realized he'd been zoning. "Schuldig."
"What?" He looked harassed, trying to deal with the food and not hurting his arm any worse.
"You've shut down." Brad said, sipping the coffee. "Talk to me."
A quick sweep of the man's upper mind was all it took him to catch up. "That's what we were thinking....someone survived." Schuldig put the food on a plate. Ah well, better a little burnt than raw.....And put it on the table.
Brad looked at the results. And didn't think a thing. He was getting quite used to that. Quick....think something else...."A telepath, true, but with enough power to get past my defenses after years of you?"
"You've burnt the sausages, Schuldig." Aya pointed out flatly.
"I know that, Bitch!" Schuldig hissed at him, sitting down. "You cook next time!"
"Yohji, get me the aspirin." Brad said calmly. Might as well, since he was going to get a head ache....

"But you're used to me," Schuldig said, setting a hip on the desk, crossing his arms, wincing as the broken wrist was twinged. "Have you ever known another telepath?"
Brad was going through the records he had saved from when they were Esset's pawns. He was so certain he had tracked down everyone, every team, every sycophant. He thought about it. So many years ago. Things had moved so fast, it seemed he'd lived twice his twenty nine years now. Not normally prone to dwelling on the past, he didn't really keep memories that didn't mean something to him.
Ten years....
He looked up at Schuldig who was rubbing his wrapped arm to stop it itching. "That was quite a risk you took."
"It wouldn't be the first time you'd broken something of me." Schuldig replied.
He kept looking at him, thinking about when he'd broken anything else. He frowned slightly. Those memories were....confused.
Schuldig saw it. "Eh, mein Mann.....let me have a look at that better." He moved around the desk to put his arms around him from behind, pressing his cheek to the black haired head. He closed his eyes and focused on the memories he didn't really like to go back to even in his own mind.
But his mind hadn't been scrambled.
What the hell....?
He moved to slip into Brad's lap, taking his chin and looking into his eyes. "Bradley....I know you went pretty close to death....but there's a lot out of place that shouldn't be....It's as if everything is disconnected, nothing leads to anything else, just back there...." He'd never done this before, but what could it hurt? He picked up each memory thread and 'thought' it next to the other, in order.
He actually felt Brad's mind relaxing as he worked, and things started falling into place on their own. It took a few more resettings, and when he looked in Brad's eyes again, the milk chocolate depths were sharp with anger.
It turned him on.
"Of course it does, you slut." Brad pinched his nose for him.
"Ouch!" He giggled and rubbed it.
Brad pushed him off to get up to pace the floor, working it out in his mind now that it was clear again. His throat felt uncomfortable still. And he had an idea. "Schuldig."
"Yes." Schuldig said in a low purr, looking at him sultrily.
"Nice try. Call Yohji down here."
Schu stopped smiling at him. Then yelled sharply. "Yohji!"
Brad winced. He was loud.

Yohji opened his light green eyes and blinked. It felt weird, as if something had been taken off his shoulders. A stress that he hadn't been aware of was now gone. "What was that, Schu-schu?"
"Someone stirred up your memories." Schuldig was not happy. There'd been a time bomb in the sandy blond head, set to trigger the next time they were in a fight. 'Balinese' would remember suddenly that Crawford was his enemy again and again until he managed to kill him.
Brad looked at him from the chair behind the mahogany writing table. "I'm beginning to really hate this person." He said coolly.
Yohji wasn't so damned happy about it himself. He'd worked hard to establish a trust between them, for Schuldig and Ran's sake. He'd put aside a deep seated hatred of everything Crawford had seemed to stand for at the time. To accept something he never would have considered even a week before it happened. Schuldig was one thing, he was hard hearted and callous, it was easy to deal with his openly demanding personality. But Crawford was....a challenge. He had seen how the man had reacted to Aya. He'd learned how to deal with him. And now this....
Ran, and it was Ran, sulked in the arm chair, looking at him coldly.
Yohji knew the coldness wasn't for him. It was for their tormentor. Ran wanted blood, he was wearing his 'working' clothes.
"Mien Mann, think!" Schuldig ordered in frustration. "Who could do this! Who would have known! Damn it.....Who knew I was a telepath when Esset sent you to get me!" He was standing there, fists jammed in jacket pockets, annoyed as hell.

The girl was frightened. Liselle moved to look at her now that she was conscious again, tied wrist and ankle, gagged on the bed. "Hello." Liselle said. "So you're awake."
"Leave her alone, Liselle." Chapel said.
"Well I for one don't want the mess if she has to go." Liselle stated, unlocking the cuffs on Sakura's ankles. "Come on, get up."
"Don't drop your guard." Chapel looked at the young Algerian woman.
"Oh, please." Liselle said. Sometimes he got on her nerve, always acting as if she were a dimwit. She got the girl to her feet and off to the bathroom. "Move it, you!" She hustled the japanese teenager, who did not understand her english. Chapel frowned. When she brought her back out, he would have to do something to make her more co-operative.
He'd been trained to brainwash people. Esset had discovered his particular talent for manipulating the minds of others. It wasn't that he was so powerful as the german. It was that his talent was.....more subtle. He could slip in, a whisper here and there, a self doubt, a wrong take on a memory. He could mimic the mind he was inside. Use that mind against it's own self.
Crawford had been so easy. His own arrogance and lack of self doubt had been the

very key to his weakening.
Chapel had simple restored him to his younger mindset, into thinking he was capable of doing anything he wanted to on his own and that the world was his enemy, to be subdued at all cost.

The englishman sat quiet, looking at the dazed girl. Out side of her resemblance to Fujimiya's deceased sister, she was useless. But that resemblance alone was enough.
He rubbed his chin, thinking about it. About what he'd seen in the club, and what he'd discovered in her mind, and what he'd found in Kudoh's mind.
He needed Fujimiya for the ceremony. There was a chance his genetics were as clean as his sister's, and in any case the ceremony of empowerment could take any sacrifice, the quantity depending on quality. But now there was a better idea forming in his mind.
Crawford.....holding the maroon red head in his arms so possessively....the jewels the japanese was loaded with.
And Chapel smiled, nibbling on his thumb.
He knew how to 'get' to Crawford now. How to hit him where it would hurt the worst.

Omi grabbed the phone. Hearing Sakura's voice interrupt his spiel, he blinked.
"Aya-kun? Just a minute...." He put her on hold and went to find him.
Aya was in the living room, in one of the chairs by the windows, reading a book on kendo.
"Aya.....Sakura-chan is on the phone for you." Omi told him.
He tossed the book aside with a sigh and got up to answer it, leaning on the side table the phone was on. "What is it, Sakura?"
"Aya-san....the people who want to kill your boss have kidnapped me from that man's house." She said. "They said to come alone or they'll kill me. You're not to tell anyone and if you do, they'll know it! Their leader is a telepath. He says to tell you he knows all about Esset and Crawford and Schuldig and not to try anything. Your life for mine."
He frowned. Damn it! He'd known Araki was useless! "Where?" He said flatly.

Brad was working out when it came to him. Unable to take the sluggishness lingering from the drugs and pain killers, and the growing annoyance with the entire situation, he had decided to just go ahead and run through his routine session. If anything, it made him feel a hell of a lot better.
And in the midst of hitting the bag, he had a weird flash back. It was the strangest thing.....To have a memory hit him like a premonition.
Training, in Esset, back in Germany.

There was one guy, oh, what a jerk he'd been! He slammed into the bag, remembering.
He stopped and thought about it, catching his breath.
He whipped the sweat off with the towel around his neck, replaying the memories in his head.
Nagi hadn't found any record of the guy. But then.....there were no records on his own team either. None of the elite, paranormal, agents were on file.
It had to be him.
He was a low grade telepath. Useful for programming. Brad hadn't seen him since training, except maybe in passing. His name had never come up but he must have been the one who 'programmed' Jei to obey him.....
What was it....something to do with a church....Christian...Chalice....Chapel?
That had to be it, Chapel. English, if he remembered right.

Aya put down the phone and tore the paper with the address on it off the notepad. As he turned to put it in his pocket, Schuldig slipped it out of his hand and held it up with a cold smirk on his face. "Why, Sweetness, were you going to actually go?"
"Give me that, Schuldig!" Ran snapped, grabbing his wrist, which just happened to be the broken one.
Schuldig yelped an obscenity and used his good arm to grab him and slam him back against the table, glaring into his face. "This son of a bitch almost killed Bradley using Yohji! Are you going to walk right in to his hands as well?" He demanded in an angry hiss.
"I'm going to kill who ever it is!" Ran stated.
Schuldig saw the red hot hatred in his mind. It ran through him in a delicious wave, soooo sweet, spreading lust....."Mmm, Ran...." He addressed the personality he was dealing with. "If I let you go and you managed to kill our enemy.....would you....?" He ran his free hand down the japanese's chest to his waist band.....and showed him what he wanted mentally.
Ran turned almost as red as his hair.
Then he realized.....what chance he had of going alone with Schuldig knowing what he was up to.
He bent to kiss the german on the lips lightly, lingeringly. His passion for Schu was a strange thing. For two years, they'd been rivals and lovers, protecting each other from Crawford's anger, fighting for his attention, indulging sensually in each other. "Yes, Love." He said softly against his cheek.
Schuldig was surprised. In Ran's mind, he saw the desire to take him.....He let go of the japanese's other arm, which he'd had in a painful lock hold, and pressed against him, kissing him fervently, his hand going to Ran's crotch.
Ran brought the butt of the dagger's handle right up into the lower left side of

Schuldig's skull, knocking him out. He caught him and lifted him up in his arms. Damn he was heavy. "Shit, Schu-schu." he dumped him on the nearest sofa, then hastily arranged him as if he'd simply decided to take a nap. "I'm sorry." he said softly, caressing the pale cheek.

"Damn it!" Brad swore. "Where were you when this was going on?" He demanded of Yohji.
"You know, there are some things a person just has to do in private!" Yohji retorted.
Brad glared up at him from sitting beside the unconscious Schuldig. That had been his excuse last time....
Yohji's cheeks reddened in angry annoyance. "I mean it this time!" he stated, realizing what must have been in the american's mind.
Brad tried again, patting Schu's cheek. "Come on, Baby, wake up!"
Schuldig groaned and his eyes flickered under the lids.
"God damn it! I think he's concused him!" Brad punched the cushion beside Schuldig's head in a flash of anger.
Yohji moved to put a hand on his shoulder. "Careful...." he warned.
Brad leaned down to kiss Schuldig's lips fervently. "Wake up, Schuldig. Wake up enough to tell me...you must have seen....Where did Ran go?"
Schuldig opened his eyes woozily. He sighed, the pain in his head....
"Where did he go, Baby?" Brad coaxed persistently.
He muttered the address on the piece of paper....Then passed out again.
"Morishima-sensei is not going to be happy." Yohji said, thinking of their last run in with the doctor.
"You get him to the doctor." Brad ordered, getting up. "I'm going after Ran."
Yohji caught his arm and pulled him back into both of his, pulling his head to his for a fervent kiss. "You know this is as bad as Ran going off by himself, Boss man." he said.
Brad put a hand up behind his blond mop and kissed him back. "I'll be more than careful, Kitten." He murmured. "Take care of my Baby." He let go and hurried to get his weapon and his coat.

Ran walked into the night deserted parking lot. It was a small dye factory, a high wall around it. Not a good place to be. He stood where he could be seen, his coat back off his sword handle, and his shoulder holster visible. "I'm here, where the fuck are you!" he demanded with a samurai's bravado.
Jacob come out of the shadows from one side of the building, Liselle from another. Both were holding guns on him.
Ran's chin went up in defiant pride. "Dogs! Where is your master?"
(Here.) A voice said in his head, incredibly strange for not being Schuldig's.
He looked around for it's source.

The fair man came forward, Sakura, her hand’s cuffed behind her back in front of him, an aimed gun in his hand as well.
(Unlike Crawford, I have no need to learn Japanese.) The man’s voice moved in his mind again.
"Let her go!" Ran ordered aloud arrogantly.
(Very well....) Chapel holstered the gun and took out the key to un-cuff her, then shoved her aside, toward the gates.
Sakura stumbled then stopped, looking at Aya.
"Go!" He ordered her.
"But Aya-san....!" She protested.
"Stupid girl, I’m giving you your life!" he snapped angrily at her. "Get out of here now!"
She caught her breath, and turned to run to the gates. Outside, she paused again to look back, then ran away.
(By the time she gets anyone to come, it will be too late.) Chapel said in the young man’s angry mind.

Chapter Twenty One
"Revenge"

Ran had wanted this kill for himself. To keep Yohji out of it. To keep the others safe. Something was wrong, the way they had all been acting. It had been too easy for this enemy to get close to them, to use them against each other.
The dream of Aya-chan....nightmare.....
He'd seen her, on the beach....He'd found himself on the beach, soaking wet and shivering....kitana in hand, the waves washing up under the full moon. He'd been so disoriented. So alone.....And he'd looked around, not knowing what for, but certain he should not have been alone. The emptiness was incredible....the longing....
And when he looked again, she was there, in the water, it lapped around her ankles, as if trying to draw her back into it's depths. Aya-chan, pale, tortured, her clothes tattered, things clinging to her, seaweed like chains on her. She'd reached out her arms to him. "Oniisan." She'd called weakly.
He'd staggered back, raising the sword.
She was dead! Dead and gone to ashes!
How could she be here in this all too vivid world, where he could feel the shift of the sand beneath his feet, feel the icy chill on his skin from having somehow been in the water. He 'remembered' suddenly a fight for his life....falling, things crashing around him....the water and fighting hard not to drowned and to keep hold of his sword at all costs.....Alone....
"Oniisan!" She called to him piteously. "Help me!"
He'd shaken his head to try and clear it, shivering from the wet clothes clinging to him, weighing him down.
This night mare world of moon, sea and sand.....And being alone.....
Alone because that thing was not his imouto.
Someone should have been there.....
And he'd woken to find he was not alone. He'd been safe in bed, with Brad beside him.
That dream was stupid.
Someone had put it in his head to frighten him. And that same someone had done things to Brad's mind and to Youji's.
Even now, he was not alone. He'd come here on his own. He would fight this battle on his own. But he was not alone. He would explain to Brad later. He would make it up to Schuldig for having lied to him and hurt him later. They would still be there. And this man would not have a chance to hurt them again.
(So defiant, little boy.) The englishman said in his head. He was sure that was what he was for some reason....Though he didn't know why.
Pulling the sword would do no good. They had him at the center of a triangle of bullets. Well, they could either shoot him or stand there all night out of his reach or do something about it.

(I intend to.) The voice laughed softly in his mind.
(Fuck you!) Ran thought coldly.
(Oh, but Crawford wouldn't like that.)
The man was somehow closer now. When had that happened?
Ran braced himself. Like Schuldig....a telepath, capable of playing mind tricks....
(He wouldn't like it at all, his precious Princess with someone else.)
He looked into the pale blue occidental eyes. The man was maybe no older than Crawford, but he looked ill used by time. His english features were rough and plain, his light hair shorn in an unexceptional way. He was a man, that was all.
Ran realized his hand was on the hilt of his katana, ready to draw it. And he expected to again feel the stinging punch of a bullet at any minute. But he was not going to let this bastard get the better of him. He knew how Schuldig worked.
He knew that he was in trouble.
He also knew that he was just going to have to deal with each step of it one at a time. Sakura was free, the others were out side this. He was in the middle of it.
He would fight it from the inside, knowing they were on the outside.
He took his hand off the sword hilt. He deliberately remembered Crawford laughing at some stupid enemy who had thought to defy him, dwelling on the image in his mind. How beautiful and arrogant and cruel he was....
Chapel grew angry.
It got to him, that image.....
He shut the boy down.

Brad pulled the car over and got out, looking around, making sure his jacket hung free so that he could go for his gun.
They were gone. Of course. He looked around, for bullet casings or spent misfires. Nothing. He got back in the car and put on the tracking program, setting it for the chip implanted on Aya.
It took some time for the relay to pick it up....
Then just when he was about to put a fist through the useless thing, it blinked on faintly, the map coming up.
He looked at the address.
"Damn it!" He said. "The museum?"
He should have blown the place up. But he'd gutted it instead, taking every thing, the armaments and explosives stockpiled there, and dumping them on the black market. It was just an old relic, a local tourist trap abandoned as far as anyone was concerned.
He swore profusely and tore the car back onto the road. That was the focal point, where the plan had been to hold the ceremony. If he hadn't wrecked their plans two months before the conjoining.

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Kudoh." She said through clenched teeth. "What now?"
"Eh," Yohji said a little startled by her animosity. "Schuldig's been hit in the head. He won't wake up."
Dr. Morishima had since learned that they were part of some sort of protection agency. But that didn't allow for the blond eurasian's constant flirting or sexual remarks.
She went in to where the nurse had the red head laid out on the table and hooked up to the monitors. His heart rate and pressure were a little off, but nothing serious. She checked the broken wrists' wrappings and made sure there was good circulation and flexibility in the fingers of that arm. She got out her penlight and opened his eyes. "His response is a little slow but not indicating concussion yet. Where was he hit?"
"There's a nice big knot just on the lower left side." Yohji said. "You're sure it's not a concussion?"
"Not all head injuries lead to concussion." She checked the swelling. "He was hit in a nerve center. By someone who either knew what he was doing or got really lucky. A little further to the right and it would have killed him. I want to keep him overnight for observation. I take it this doesn't get reported to the police either." She said, looking at him coldly.
"I wouldn't." Yohji said. He knew Brad had had a talk with her. "You have no proof it was anything but an accidental fall. Besides," He smiled at her conspiratorially, moving a step closer and turning on the charm. "You wouldn't want to get us into trouble, now would you?"
She backed away. "Don't you ever quit?"
He frowned slightly. "You know, Doctor, I somehow get the feeling you're having a little hostility towards me."
"And I somehow get the feeling you'd screw anything that moves." She said icily.
He blinked. "Now that was harsh." He said, mildly offended. "Now....Schuldig here....I have my serious doubts about, but....."
"OUT!" She indicated the door to the examining room.
He gave her a look over his perpetually low worn sunglasses, (at nine o'clock at night???) and then huffed a little. "You need to work on your bedside manner, Doc." he advised, then turned and sauntered out.

Brad felt the phone vibrate against his chest and pulled it out to answer it quietly. "What?"
"Schu's in the hospital for overnight observation. The doctor said he's not concussed, just hit really damn hard. You know....I think she doesn't like me for some reason."
Brad smirked. "Maybe she's a lesbian." He said smoothly, successfully not snickering.

"Yeah, that must be it." Yohji said. "But still...."
"Kudoh! Were you calling to complain to me about some woman rejecting you?" Brad stated icily.
Yohji smiled, remembering what Schuldig had said....."Where are you? Have you located Ran yet?"
"Yes." He stated. "Stay with Schuldig, I want him home as soon as possible."
"But...." Yohji protested.
"That's an order, Kudoh!" Brad snapped and turned the phone off, putting it away.

Ran woke. He was woozy, and had a weird time sitting up, his mind seemingly wrapped in cotton.
"So you're awake, Abyssinian." the woman next to him purred.
He stared at her.
She was in the bed beside him, tanned skin, black hair, but not japanese, more.....exotic, the sheets held up over her breasts, but it was obvious she was naked. She smiled at him languidly. "What's the matter, lover?"
He swallowed. Suddenly his mouth felt very dry. Abyssinian.....? He tried to think.....
And then remembered.....oh....god.....
Liselle sat up, frowning as he leapt out of the bed to find the bathroom and be sick.
If the drugs and the programming hadn't worked.....she'd worked her ass off for nothing....
Still, he was a very pretty boy...it hadn't been a total loss.
Ran had wrenched up every thing but his stomach, and stood gasping, then rinsed his mouth at the sink.
He looked in the mirror. The image he saw was wrong. His nose jewel was gone, and his pave diamond ribbon had been replaced with a simple gold strip. It looked just like the one.....
He was still frozen there, staring at it when she came in to lay a hand on his shoulder.
Are you all right, Ran?" She asked him.
He looked at her. She stood there, as naked as he was, looking at him as if she knew him. Did he know her?
"You've been acting so weird since Esset kidnapped your sister." She said.
Esset.....
His mind reeled again.
"Ran." She said. "Kritiker has found out where she's being held."
"Aya...." he said. His sister....he had to find her.....
But he felt so sick....so....dirty....
The woman still stood there, obviously unashamed of her nakedness.
He couldn't think.....He needed a shower. "I need to wash." he stated and

turned to get into the shower.
Liselle frowned again. Nathan had assured her this would do the trick, but the way he was reacting....

He moved quietly along the deserted corridors. Spiders had moved in and the floor was layered with disturbed dust. He had a fleeing premonition, and pulled his gun....
(Bradley Crawford.) the voice said mockingly in his mind. (God's gift to money.)
(Chapel.) He thought, putting up his defenses. He knew that the silence Schuldig found so wonderful in his mind was actually caused by the precognitive phase of his brain's thought process. He actually opened himself to the full impact of the 'vision' process always going on in his mind. Even Schuldig could not get past that.
When he was young, it had caused him all kinds of problems, but now....he knew the difference between reality and presumptive reality, and could move in it's eerie dreamlike state. He could 'see' himself moving before he did, a step taken before he took it.
He was able to make it as far as the huge main hall before Chapel was forced out to deal with him instead of hiding and tormenting him.
He stopped, gun held up and ready.
Chapel had a gun too, but he held it down at his side. "It's been some time, Bradley."
He smirked. He'd hated to be called by his first name. He holstered his gun. Chapel wouldn't shoot him just yet. And if he tried to.....then he would shoot him first. "Nathan." He said icily. "Couldn't you have been satisfied with simply having survived?"
Chapel hated the way the bastard always gave the impression of having the upper hand. "I want more." he stated. He took something out of his pocket.
And Brad froze his features before he could react to it.....He had to remain aloof, undisturbed by what he saw.....
Chapel held it up.
It sparkled in the weird lights.
A fortune in diamonds.....
Aya's ear dangle.....
"I've got your fuck toy, Bradley. Frankly, I always knew you were queer." He looked at the way the light hit the diamonds himself. "For money." He looked at Crawford with an evil smile. Then tossed the earring to him.
Sure enough, the hand came up before his own muscles tensed for the toss. Crawford picked the earring out of the air. Aya.... He put it in his shirt pocket, over his heart, his knuckles brushing the holster of the Walther PPK.
"If you're thinking that if you shoot me my people will kill him.....you're right." Chapel said. "So....here we are. Life has been....good to you, Bradley."
He smiled coolly. "Still bitter?"

"Oh, but now....I'll have my revenge." Chapel stated. "You may have destroyed Esset, but you didn't destroy the tablets."
The tablets....
He took a deep breath. He'd spoiled their sacrifice, the calling up of the old one. The end of the world as man now knew it had been forestalled. But the tablets...of course they'd have kept them, put them away, safe and sound.....
Healing. Endowment. Resurrection.
Those had to go.
There was no way he would leave that kind of power in this world.
"And just what is that to me?" Brad said.
Chapel hated not being able to read him. But it didn't matter. He had the upper hand, no matter what. "Not a thing, when I get done with you." He brought up the gun. "Put your hands up. And keep them up. We're going somewhere....more congenial to conversation. Remember the torture chamber?"
Brad turned away from him, smiling cruelly. "Hardly. It never got any use out of my assignments."
Chapel frowned even more. No. Of course not. He was the executioner. None of Esset's targets for him had been less than flat out erasures. "Just move along, Bradley."

Yohji had made certain Schuldig was safely assigned into a room, and then did what he was best at. Got into trouble.
He turned on the computer the minute the car was on and set it for the tracking program. He keyed in Brad's code and waited at the exit to the hospital parking lot until it flicked on. The one on Brad wasn't registering. Something was blocking it. But the one on his black MB was clear and bright.
He pressed the button for directions and pulled out into traffic. "Sorry, Brad."
He muttered under his breath. "But sometimes, you are the most selfish thing on the planet. Thinking you can cut me out of rescuing Ran."

The torture chamber was more medical looking than macabre. But things had gone on here that would make a psychotic shudder. And had, as he recalled....
He looked up at the observation platform through it's medical school like windows.
It gave him a weird sensation, that view.
And when he saw the girl laying on the gurney....it got even weirder.
Sakura lay there, her braids on her shoulders, a sheet up to her neck.....
He looked at Chapel. "You can't perform the ceremony of resurrection at the wrong time." he said calmly. "Surely you know that."
"As well as I know that girl isn't the proper sacrifice." Chapel said just as calmly. "But then, you saw that coming, didn't you, Oracle?"
Now Brad frowned, crossing his arms. That name, he still hated. "Why do telepaths always have to play games? Can't you just come to the point, Chapel?"

Chapel was pleased to have got a rise out of him at last. "I'm afraid I've broken your toy, Bradley." He moved to pick up a remote control from an instrument tray cart and aimed it and pushed the play button.
On the vid screen operations would normally have been displayed on in progress, a scene flickered on that took Brad few seconds to comprehend.
Not because of camera quality or any slowness of mind on his part, but simply because....it was so....implausible.....
Chapel's smirk broadened to a grin as he watched Crawford's face. Liselle had perhaps enjoyed the assigned task a little too much?
Crawford's heart shaped face went from cool neutral to hardened ice.
It was easy to see...Aya was drugged. His reactions were slow, and only to the stimulation forced on him.
"I've had real whores fake it better than that slut." Brad said, looking again at Chapel. "So you drugged him and played with his mind." He sincerely hoped that bitch didn't have anything....."Your point?"
Chapel frowned.

Yohji got out and checked the MB. It was all right, nothing indicative of Brad's having had any trouble at this point.
He looked up at the odd statues. Whoah, talk about the worst of being human.
He walked up to the entrance. The padlock that had been holding the gates shut over the front doors was hanging, broken. He drew one of the gates open, careful not to let it squeal on the concrete after the first squeak.
The smell of the ocean was strong tonight. The waves were washing gently in the distance, a quiet hush and hiss of water moving on sand.
It might have been quite the romantic setting. If not for those damn ugly sculptures. He threw his cigarette away and reached to open one of the doors.

Aya still felt wrong. All wrong.
She kept talking at him as he dressed, but he didn't listen. His mind was so clouded.
He put on his sword....
Something in the back of his mind stirred.
Liselle kept telling him what Chapel had told her to, to reinforce the programming. But they had not had days to work on him. The tell tale scar had been there, he carried a tracking chip in his neck. They'd had to do a weeks worth of work in mere hours. But Nathan had been so certain that with the young man's fragile mental condition and strong emotions, he would hold the programming long enough to kill Crawford.
She ran her hand down his arm. "It's important you do this, Ran. For your sister's sake. For the sake of those who dwell in the light."
Incredible purple eyes focused on her.
Damn it, he was still dazed. But she'd done all she could.

(Chapel!) She called out mentally. (He's as ready as he'll ever be. Get this over with before he snaps back!)
Ran put a hand to his sword handle.
The nightmare.....it was wrong.

Chapel had turned the screen off abruptly. "It's time we set the stage." He said. "You know where to go, don't you? We're going to have a final contest. Your ability against mine."
Yes, he knew. The premonitions caused Chapel's words to be as echoes in his mind, and everything around him to flicker like a moving screen. Possibilities faded with each step, each decision he made to take a certain route through the time line. It had been a while since he let it take him like this. Yet he was in complete control.
He had to be.
He'd realized.....this wasn't just about the old rivalry with Chapel.
He had to get Aya back, before his mind really was broken. They were playing on Aya's trauma over his sister. Schuldig had swore he had done nothing to him. He had faced it and dealt with it alone.
All Aya's choices had been his own. He'd come to him willingly. He'd chosen him over his sister, in the end.
Brad walked along the familiar main corridor that lead out into the sea and time carved cavern. This place had been built back in the heydays of the world exhibitions. Esset had used that as an excuse to set this place up. Something about it's position on the planet had made it the most advantageous site for their supernatural plans.
The cavern might have been an incredible setting, if not for the very hideous sculptures.
The causeway lead past them and to the tunnel out to the tower set on the continental shelf. It was originally meant to be a modern art museum and restaurant/observation platform. Esset had made it their main head quarters in this part of the world.
He was lead by his visions and herded by Chapel into the main room, the platform.
It was about the floor space of a good sized ballroom. But there was nothing now to observe, it being night. The stars, the strip of lights from the road along a bit of the shore, and the inky black water that looked icy cold below.
Brad saw/felt him before he actually 'knew' he was there.
Ran.
And it was definitely all 'Ran'. He stood there, sword ready, determined.
You had to love the Japanese, Brad thought. They were capable of expressing such terrible rage, and yet such incredible self control. It gave them an aura of concentrated power no other race could match.

Chapel stayed by the exit, certain he had the upper hand now. This was going to be exquisite.
Brad met Ran's angry eyes and saw the darkness in them.
It was magnificent.
The only thing to compare it to....was being stalked by a tiger. The incredible beauty of the feral intelligence of the specialized predator in that gaze, the breathtaking grace and perfection in the skill of the hunter, the knowledge that the razor sharp mind behind it was set on one thing and one thing only, tearing this victim to shreds with fang and claw.
Brad damped his power down to the immediate future, knowing that Chapel would still not be able to sort out his thoughts easily or interfere with them. He kept his gaze on those purple eyes. He slowly opened his jacket, and with two fingers, lifted out the Walther and carefully set it down on the floor, then straitened and used the toe of his loafer to send it sliding across the wooden boards.
He smirked. "Remember, Ran." He said coolly. "I'm the one that pulled the plug on your sister."
Ran rushed at him, in trained samurai style, his fierce cry of challenge deliberately pitched to make the skin crawl, yet stopping just short to maintain defensive distance, his eyes hard as rock, his jaw set.
It might have sent anyone not used it into a fit of confusion. But Brad knew the fighting style too well. He stood his ground, in defensive stance, totally at ease with the situation.
Ran came at him a second time, this time, following through.
Brad side stepped and caught his arm and the back of his neck, sending him rolling on the floor, only for Ran to regain and get up, bracing again into stalking position, eyes always focused, mind wide open to any move that might expose a weakness.
Chapel was certain now that this would work out the way he intended. And if it didn't, he would simply shoot Crawford in the head and be done with it.
It wasn't his fault really.
Anyone observing the battle would have thought it was a fight to the death.
But Schuldig would have known better.
Brad smiled genuinely now, always dodging, always managing to 'tag' the younger man, enjoying the sparing match.
Aroused by it.
And soon Ran was a little flushed from exertion, his muscles fully warmed up, his mind totally focused on the fight, a light sweat on his incredibly perfect masculine face.
Brad knew Ran's temper was getting the best of him. Technique, natural grace and youth had got him this far, but in the past two years, Brad had seen Aya's ability to be a detective mature. His cool aloofness allowed him to make observations a mind too close, too emotional might not see, and yet he would go

off the handle at the strangest times, making him an interesting challenge to control.
"Remember, Ran." Brad said. "I'm the one who threw her ashes into the sea."
Ran stood there, panting slightly, now even more determined to do something about the american.
Brad grinned evilly. Chapel was an idiot. He'd never been able to resist bragging. Either through word or something that would give him away.
Once again, Chapel's ego had screwed him.
Brad dipped his fingers into his shirt pocket and drew out the ear dangle, letting it hang by the post in the light.
"Aya, my sweet. Look at what I have for you" He said softly.
Ran saw the incredible white flash of crystallized carbon perfection. And froze.
"Take that morbid thing off, and wear this, for me." Brad turned it slightly, to catch the light again.
Chapel frowned. What the fuck was he up to....
The strange feeling had taken hold of Ran again, as if he'd stepped out of reality somehow, and this was all a very bad dream.....

It had been just after the confrontation with Kritiker. Persia and Manx had tried to reason with him, and then to threaten him. Crawford hadn't even pulled his gun, he'd taunted them with his sarcasm and knowledge of the illegal goings on in the police department. They'd gone away angry.
Aya had been in living hell for days, having to attend to the settlement of the payments to the hospital and doctors for his imouto's bills, and then to deal with the lawyers about the signing over of the shop to Sakura. There had been the fight with Ken. And learning to face his situation with Crawford. Being a lover to what had been his worst enemy, dealing with Yohji's resigned disappointment, as well as Schuldig's intense jealousy. He hadn't even thought about Omi. That was just one step to far for him.
All around him his supposed companions in Weiss had been traitors in the worst way possible, except Ken, and Aya sincerely doubted his mere 'friendship' with Kaze....sleeping with the enemy.....And now.....
He'd been standing by the sliding glass doors to the living room balcony of the luxurious new apartment, looking out over the city in the yellow glow of the late afternoon, thinking how strange it was to be so far above the streets of Tokyo. The new furnishings had come only a few days ago, further adding to the incredibly expensive change of his lifestyle. He'd been feeling so disconnected, as if he had actually stepped out of reality and onto a strange new plane of existence.
A hand was gently laid on his shoulder, when he'd been too focused on his troubles to hear anyone come up behind him.
He'd glanced a little behind him, and seen the pretty flash of light in the

western sun.
"Aya, my sweet," Crawford’s rich, mellow voice had said softly. "Look at what I have for you."
He’d looked. It was a strip of pave diamonds, nine millimeters wide, and seven point five centimeters long. It’s brilliant perfection hypnotizing.
The hand had switched to his other shoulder and Crawford’s lips had brushed his cheek, sending a thrill down his spine. "Take that morbid thing off, and wear this, for me."

Ran lowered the sword with a little gasp.
Chapel blinked. This wasn’t happening. Son of a bitch....this wasn’t happening.....
Crawford just stood there, holding that damned earring up.
And the japanese lost his anger....his features softening, his purple eyes no longer angry, but confused and hurt.....
Crawford looked at Chapel. "You loose." he said archly.
"NO!" Chapel raged, raising the gun to aim at him. "You loose!" He’d started to draw the trigger.....
A different kind of flash sparked in the light from the modernist chandeliers.
Chapel’s wrist was jerked and his shot went wide, hitting one of the window panes and shattering it.
The second shot that rang out was from Yohji’s Hauer.
Chapel was dead, shot clean in the heart.
"My kill." Yohji said smugly, looking at Crawford.
Aya sheathed his sword. "Damn it, Yohji!" He declared angrily. "You owe me!"

Chapter Twenty Two
"Resolution"

Brad went to retrieve his gun, checking it and putting the safety on, holstering it.
Aya took the plain earring from his lobe and tossed it away. He looked at Brad as he came to stand in front of him.
The man's hands were so calm and sure as he took the back off the diamond earring and slotted the post into Aya's pierced lobe. He fit the backing on and traced the neck behind it with a finger tip.
"You hit Schuldig pretty hard." Brad informed him.
Aya lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry...I just wanted to keep everyone out of it....I didn't want them to...."
"Are you all right?" Brad asked.
Aya sighed. Was he? He wished Schuldig was here, to take it away, to wipe it out.....He turned away suddenly
Yohji frowned. What had happened to him....?
Brad took him by the shoulders. "I know you were drugged out of your mind." He said gently.
"I shouldn't have disobeyed." Aya said quietly.
"But you took the consequences. And we have still have work to do." Brad said, shaking him gently. "So lets go."
Aya half turned to look at him over his shoulder. "Just let me kill her." Ran was back.
Brad smiled. "Of course. Let's move now, before they realize he's dead." He headed for the doorway.
Yohji was perplexed, but from the warning look Brad gave him as a passing glance, he figured he'd keep his mouth shut.
"They have your little girlfriend in the laboratory, Ran." Brad mentioned casually as they walked swiftly along the causeway, keeping an eye out for their prey. "Drugged out cold."
"Just stop it, Brad." Ran stated.
"I just thought you might want to rescue her." Brad informed him.

There were advantages to being....too close....to team mates.
For one thing, Chapel had apparently not been in mental contact with his two.
They were surprised as hell to see Crawford walk though the door to the lab with his gun aimed at them. "Freeze." He said. "Hands up where I can see them."
Liselle and Jacob did as they were told.
They were in the lab, actually.
Ran moved to check Sakura, then un-strap her from the gurney. Yohji had his gun out and trained on the two surviving Esset members. Brad slid a cold glance Ran's way as he gathered her up, sheet and all, into his arms.

Yohji saw it and a little smile played about his mouth, but he controlled it as always, looking merely pleasantly and lazily amused at the whole situation in general. Damn, Brad could get up some major jealousy....
"Where are the tablets?" Brad asked, looking at them. "And don't bother to lie. I know they have to be here."
"Abyssinian." Liselle tried the code word that Chapel had used to 'program' Fujimiya.
"Pathetic." Brad said, having 'seen' it coming.
Ran glared at her.
She frowned and tried something else. "It doesn't have to be this way. We could join forces, use the tablets to take over the world....."
"Oh, well, since you put it that way..." Brad said, lowering the gun as if totally changing his mind. But then he smiled cruelly and brought it back up again. "You must be out of your fucking mind. I have the world. Now, where are the tablets?" He shot Jacob's hand before he could throw the surgical knife he had picked up.
Jacob yelped and grabbed the injured hand, cursing and trying to stop the blood.
Liselle started to panic, breathing faster, thinking harder. "Let us go." She stated. "We'll tell you. Just let us go!"
"It's really too bad Schuldig isn't here." Yohji said.
"I've worked without him before." Brad said calmly.
Ran put Sakura back on the gurney and moved to Brad's side. "She's mine, Brad." He stated. "You agreed!"
Brad looked at him again. Then at them. He shot Jacob, through the heart, neat and clean.
Liselle moved away in shock as her partner tried to grab at her, then fell dead.

She looked at Ran pleadingly. "Abyssinian!"
It was no use. The programming was completely gone.
"Wait, Sweet." Brad told Ran. "Tell us where the tablets are and I'll let you live." He said quietly to Liselle.
"Under the girl!" She blurted out. "On the shelf, under the gurney!"
Yohji went to lift up the other sheet. There was a carved wooden box on the equipment shelf.
"Look in the box, Kudoh." Brad ordered calmly.
Yohji knelt to open the lid and unwrap the contents. "Three tablets, all carved with weird stuff." He confirmed.
Brad holstered his gun.
Liselle breathed again, and realized, she'd been holding her breath....
Ran took two swift steps, pulling his sword and cutting her down right across the middle, the blood splattering off the blade and to the side as it traveled through the powerful arc of the blow, and as she fell to the floor nearly on top of the dead man, something compelled him to raise the sword again and bring it

down on her neck, letting her head fall free to roll just a bit, facing away from them, the blood pooling out of it to join the puddle already forming from the throat of her corpse.
"I'll be skipping supper tonight." Yohji said, taking out his cigarettes.
Brad came over to him and took the pack and the one Yohji'd taken out away from him and tossed them aside. Then he grabbed the blond eurasian and kissed him sensually. "I told you to stay with Schuldig." he said, biting him on the neck and undoing his belt with hurried fingers.
Yohji was a little reticent to be on the receiving end of this particular sudden passion. Why the hell him, why not Aya? "Well....I....Is this really the place?"

His pants were yanked down off his hips and his genitals roughly grasped, a tongue forced into his mouth.
"Brad.....!" Ran moved to get Sakura off the gurney again, making sure her face was covered by the sheet in case she managed to wake up to this going on.
Brad put Yohji up on the gurney's side and yanked the pants down further, his cocoa colored eyes focused on Yohji's leaf green ones. "Come on, Kudoh." he said, his lips a bare inch from Yohji's. "Just take it."
Ran decided to get Sakura out to Brad's car, putting her in the back seat. Damn it, his brand new Porsche was still at the dye factory....if anything had happened to it....and his nose jewel and nipple rings had gone missing.....good thing he'd left the rest at home! He touched his earring as he sat in the passenger seat to wait....if he'd lost this...!
He just wasn't going to let himself think about what else he'd lost.

Sakura went in and pulled the chair over to sit beside Ken. "How are you?" She asked gently.
"Stuck in a damned hospital room with an IV in my arm." He scowled.
She sighed. "Better, then."
He looked at her. "You look tired. What's been going on?"
"Ken....we have to leave Japan." She told him.
"What?" He couldn't quite take this in.
"I can't take any more of this. Either you come with me or I'll go alone, and I'm selling the shop."
He frowned. What a decision for a girl of almost nineteen to be making! "You can't just pick up and go off to another country all alone, what are you thinking!"
She was determined to be firm. "I'm thinking for myself! Are you coming or not?!"
He frowned. He'd had this chance before....
And he'd had a reason then, for not going.
That reason was long gone now.
"What will we do?" He asked her quietly, a little lost at the idea of it all.

Sakura looked at him. "Survive, you idiot. It's what we're good at isn't it?"
"I can play soccer, arrange flowers and be an assassin. And you have school..."
He started thinking of reasons not to....
"Ken!" She snapped. "Aya-kun is giving us the money to do this! I can transfer my classes! And you can go back to school! No excuses!"
He blinked at her. "Sakura! How bossy you are getting!" He said in a soft voice.

"And I think we should get married!" She blurted out. "No more nights out at the bars for you!"
He blinked again.
She got up and kissed him forcefully.
He liked it.

Down stairs at the hospital admissions desk, Schuldig signed the papers to check himself out, impatient to be gone! Then he turned to glare at Aya.
Someone had had to bring Sakura, and Brad had wanted him to be the one to get Schu out, since he was the one who put him in. Aya was not happy. He stood there, holding his elbows, black cashmere winter coat folded over his arms.
"You're taking a pill when we get home." Schu informed him in a low hiss.
"No. I won't." Aya said, looking away from those angry green eyes.
Schuldig picked it up almost immediately, now that he was focused. The anger faded. He couldn't believe it....
"Aya...." He said softly.
"Just shut up about it." Aya said. "We're waiting for Sakura to visit Ken and then taking her back to that Yakuza bastard's house."
Schuldig took his arm and drew him aside to a quiet corner of the waiting room, looking at him, into his black line accented purple eyes. "Aya?"
"It's over and done." Aya stated. "I'm not taking any pill, Schuldig. Never again."
Schu closed his eyes, leaning on the wall. So many minds babbling around them, and this, made it hard to think....
He remembered the day he'd brought this beautiful creature into the bedroom....how shy he'd been....how he'd been unable to fight them....
He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he looked at Aya again. "I'm sorry. Get your girl and let's get out of here."
Aya frowned. "She's not 'my girl', Schuldig."
"I really need to get home, Sweet. My head still hurts and I'm picking up everyone in a five mile radius!" Schu informed him. "I've seen things that'd give you screaming nightmares, break your mind even. You have no idea how sick people can hallucinate. I'll just hurry her up!"
"Schu..." Aya protested.
But it was too late. He'd already gotten hold of her mind and given her the notice to move it or loose it.

Brad snipped another knot and pulled the stitch out. He was using the mirror in the bathroom where the lights were bright over the double basined counter.
Yohji frowned and leaned on the door frame. "You're supposed to leave those in until the doctor takes them out."
"They chafe on my collar." Brad said, taking out the next one. The bruising was an evil yellow now, but the cut was sealed. "Besides, I heal fast." He glanced at the tawny blond. "What's really wrong, Love?"
"Nothing." Yohji said.
"Things have changed so much." Brad continued working on the stitches. "A year ago, if this had happened, it might have torn us apart. Chapel might have won...."
"No, Brad." Yohji shook his head. "Try further back than that."
Light brown eyes glanced at him again. "You sound so certain."
"I am." Yohji said, then looked at the bedroom doorway, hearing the door open down stairs.
Brad felt Schuldig's mind brush his, like a cat up against it's owner's leg, soft and demanding.
And then he was up the stairs, coming in to be embraced and kissed.
(Mmmmm.....) He sighed in Brad's mind. (I missed you so.)
Brad held him tighter, a hand on the curve of his lower back, to where it always hurt if he didn't get taken care of....(Did Aya apologize?) He looked at him, brushing the red hair from those green eyes.
(It's all right, I'm not mad at him.) Schuldig pressed his cheek to Brad's. (My poor pretty. He's hurting so bad, mein Mann. I had him bring me home, then take that girl to Araki.)
"Schu-schu." Yohji complained, having been brushed out of the way when the red head had come in.
Brad squeezed him and kissed him again, then pushed him free. Schuldig took the hint, going to Yohji.
Yohji made it clear how glad he was to have him back. Schuldig smiled, and warmed himself at the blond's thoughts.
(I wish you'd been there when we got those bastards.) Yohji informed him.
(If only to spare yourself mein Mann's passion for violence?) Schuldig teased.
(Mmm, such nice memories, share more with me, Yohji.) He delved into them, the sensations, the painful pleasures his abusive past had left him addicted to....
"Okay..." Yohji held him off suddenly, shaking his head and smiling ruefully at him, then over his shoulder at Brad. "What do you say we welcome him home, Brad?"
Brad looked at them. "I think we should wait for Aya. I don't want him coming home to find himself left out. Not now." He looked in the mirror and got the last stitch out. Aya had stayed away from him last night, sleeping as close to

the edge of the bed as possible, and in pajamas. "Besides, aren't you hungry, Baby?"
"Ravenous." Schuldig purred. "I want chinese take out. Yohji, come with me. " He grabbed the japanese's hand in both of his. "Where are those brats?"
"On a job." Brad stated. "We're not hiding any more. It was getting ridiculous."
He put the antiseptic cream on the wound carefully, making sure it all got rubbed in. He didn't want this to scar. Yohji didn't need to have a reminder every time he looked at him.

Nagi frowned.
Omi was too fucking good at pretending to be a girl.
But it wasn't that. It was the fact that their prey was yet another damned pedophile and interested in Omi because he was coming across as an immature girl ripe for the taking.
'Damn it, Omi....' Nagi thought angrily.
Omi continued to smile and flirt with the man.
But then he nodded in agreement to something and gave the signal he and Nagi had agreed on. He ran his hand into his golden streaked hair and fluffed it out.
Then he allowed his would be rapist take him by the arm and lead him to a car parked in an alley way.....
Nagi sighed, sitting in their car. The man's own wife wanted him dead. No wonder.
Omi giggled as he was pushed into the seat and a hand was slid up under the pleated skirt.
The guy stopped short. "Hey, you're not a girl!" He said in anger.
"I never said I was." Omi pouted, grabbing his wrist and rubbing against the intrusive hand.
His victim considered this...
Omi licked his glossed upper lip slowly with just the tip of his pink tongue, pure china blue eyes half veiled by thick lashes.
The man ran his thumb over the boy's white panty covered hard on.....
Omi couldn't wait any longer. He ran a hand up the blouse he wore, uncovering his flat little tummy, shifting his bottom forward on the seat invitingly.
The man's eyes went down to the bare flesh there.
And Omi plunged a dart into the side of his neck and shoved him away.
He counted to ten, slow, watching the creep die from the poison that was a chemical version of curare. Then he pulled out the dart and got out of the car, fixing his clothes and walking swiftly out of the alley way.
Nagi started the car and looked at him when he got in. "You drive me fucking nuts, you know that?"
"God, I'm so hot! Let's park somewhere safe...." Omi breathed.
"No." Nagi stated. "You know the rules!
"You mean the one everyone breaks?" Omi asked him pertly.

Nagi frowned again. "The one if we get caught breaking it, we get beaten half to death and locked up for a month in separate rooms." He said icily.
Omi pouted. "Then hurry home!" he said impatiently.

"Aya....I...." Sakura began after they had been on the road for a few minutes. She'd kept her mouth shut while Schuldig was in the car. He just....scared her. There was no way it could have been his voice she heard in her mind....."I asked Ken if he'd marry me."
"That's taking a lot on yourself." he said, his eyes on the traffic.
"I thought it would be easier.....to get him to go with me...."
He was silent.
She sighed. "I also told him you were giving us the money to immigrate."
"Was he upset?" He'd thought that would set the man off.
"No. He was....a little lost seeming. Aya, I don't think Ken has been happy since he was kicked out of the league."
"He holds onto too much." Aya stated with a frown for a driver that had come a little too close to his Porsche. "A step this big might shake him loose again from all that."
"I hope so." She said. It was no use....Aya was not interested at all. She sighed.
"Sakura..." Aya glanced at her at a stop light. "Are you sure you want to commit yourself to a man who can't make up his mind about....about his preferences."
She looked at him. "I don't think it's his preference that's the problem. I think....he needs someone to just be with. Why else would he have stayed? He seemed.....relieved when I told him."
" 'Told him' ?" Aya said in a little bit of amazement.
"Yes." She said, a little more sure of herself. "I told him. Stay or come with me, but if he came, we had to be married." She looked at him again, at his strange perfection and maroon hair, his eye liner and diamonds...."Aya....are you happy? With your lover?"
What an interesting question. No one had ever asked him that. "Why do you ask?"
"You never smile." She said softly. "And you're always angry at him."
He did smile, then and there. "You just don't watch me that often." He said, amused. "Sakura....." He sighed. "Schuldig isn't my only lover. He and Yohji and I are all with Crawford. And yes, I'm very happy." He was, now that he thought about it.
"Aya-kun!" She exclaimed with a rueful pout, amazed at his brazenness. "You've been very busy these past two years."
He laughed softly. That, perhaps, was what his imouto might have said. "So. Where are you going to go off to?

Nagi and Omi came in the front door.

"Did the job go well?" Brad asked from the writing desk, occupying his mind with the stock market on the computer.
"Hai!" they both ran upstairs in a major hurry.
"Obviously." Schuldig said in mild sarcasm, lounging on the sofa, running through every channel on the remote control and still not finding anything of interest.
"Lucky them." Yohji said dully, slouching in an arm chair. "For shit sake, Schu, find a channel and stick to it!"
He rolled his eyes and put it on a music video channel and tossed the remote on the table.
Aya came home about ten minutes later, shutting the door and locking it, then walking into the living room to look at them, hands in his pockets. "What's going on?"
"There's mongolian beef in the refrigerator, if you're hungry." Brad told him.
He shrugged one shoulder. "Not at the moment." He said.
Brad shut down the computer and got up. He walked slowly over to Aya and looked at him. "Is she leaving Japan?"
"Yes." Aya said. "And Hidaka is going with her."
"The further away the better." Brad said.
"Are you so jealous?" Aya asked calmly.
"Yes." Brad told him. "I am."
Aya looked into his eyes for a long moment. Then he took his hands out of his pockets and reached to start unbuttoning Brad's shirt. He saw the stitches were out. He saw the look in his eyes...."You shouldn't be, you know." He said softly. "You're my world."
Brad kissed him and moved to put an arm about his shoulders. "We've been waiting very patiently for you." he murmured in his diamond adorned ear.
Aya smiled wickedly and blushed a little. "Have you?"
Schuldig and Yohji got their butts off the furniture.

Aya lay across Brad's chest, lightly cradled in the american's arms. One of Schu's legs was resting on the back of his thighs and Yohji's fingers were twined with those of his right hand. Brad was putting up with Yohji's damned smoking in bed.
Schuldig shifted to reach over and swipe the cigarette and take a deep drag on it, then handed it back, sighing happily and laying his head on Brad's shoulder, caressing Aya's back sides.
"You're going to have to quit smoking someday, Love." Brad said, totally wiped out and too relaxed to care at all.
"Let me know when you foresee me getting cancer." Yohji said, using his thumb on the hand with the cigarette in it to move his sandy hair out of his eyes, so he could look at Brad unobstructed.

Aya moaned as Schuldig got ambitious again and slid two fingers into him. Schu laughed softly and half sat up on one elbow to kiss Brad and dig deeper into Aya.
"Don't you ever quit?" Brad protested mildly.
He gave Aya another shove, only to be met with an arching of Aya's back to take it.
"No." He said.
"Well I do." Yohji said, freeing his own fingers to lay on his back and blow smoke at the ceiling.
Aya put his mouth over Brad's left nipple and ran his tongue over it, moaning as Schuldig toyed with him.
"Better do him, Baby, now that you've got him all upset again." Brad said, caressing the heart's blood red hair.
Schuldig moved to get into him, smiling at Brad as he worked on Aya. "Is this better, mein Lieblingsmann?"
Brad was ever so content. "Yes." He said, putting an arm behind his head to pillow it up higher. "Youji?"
"Umm?" He said sleepily.
"Do you love me?"
"What a question to ask." Yohji complained, moving to put out the spent cigarette and lay back down. "Let me sleep."

Brad opened the lid of the box. He'd set it on the coffee table. Everyone was pretty unimpressed with it, it looked so rough and 'native'. He flicked back the pieces of cloth and slid his hand under the first tablet, lifting it out to examine it. He set it down and took out the other two, one at a time.
So how do we know which one does what?" Yohji asked, leaning with his elbows on his knees to look at them.
"Or even how to get them to do it?" Schuldig was sitting beside Brad on the sofa.
"Only those old bastards know what was up with them anyway." Nagi said sullenly.
"We should just smash them." He hated anything to do with Esset. Yohji nearly killing Brad was still a sore point with him.
"No." Brad said. "There was a rumor. Destroying the tablets will unleash into the world the power locked in them by the engraved writing. We have no idea what that power is or how it would affect us."
"Lock it up and toss it in the ocean." Aya suggested from behind Yohji's arm chair.
Brad considered this. He ran his fingers over the engraving on one tablet. "This is supposed to be in plain language. I suppose we could have it translated."
"Is that wise?" Nagi asked, looking at him.
"You and Omi split the text of each into sections and we'll find some linguists

to translate them." Brad decided. "Easy enough to make sure no one has everything they need to figure it out, or even where the text came from."
Omi bent to look at the intricate work. "What a pain in the ass this is going to be."
Yohji was on the receiving end of the view of his miniskirted bottom, He put a light set of fingers on the boy's hip bone to get him to move it out of range.
"Omi....not a good thing, to bend over in short skirts."
Omi straitened up immediately. "Is it that short!" He tugged it down in back.
"Very much so." Yohji said dryly. "Omi, why the hell do you have to cross dress?"
"Because I want to." Omi said coolly.
Brad looked at the boy. He'd let his hair grow out to just shoulder length, and wore a pink, v-neck pullover top and a brown mini-skirt with ankle socks and of all things, mary-jane shoes. Being small boned and still undersized for his age, he looked like a skinny girl.
(Careful, mein Mann...) Schuldig growled in his mind.
(Damnit, I am NOT checking him out!) Brad snapped back at him mentally. (I'm just wondering how hard he's been hit on the head one too many times.)
Nagi was looking at the tablets. "Do you realize that these are the cause of our being enslaved by those old fools? Esset would have never survived without these. Aya is right. We should just throw them in the ocean and be done with them."
"Things like this have a way of being found, Nagi." Brad said. "Of arranging their own course through time." He put his spread finger tips on it. He could feel the power in it, like something....alive. He opened himself to the time line.....
And yanked his hand away.
"Inadvisable." He stated, annoyed. "We'd never make it to the coast."
Omi plunked down beside Nagi. "You mean.....they came to us deliberately?" He said in shock.
Brad frowned. "It would seem so. But for us to use them....or for them to use us?"
Schuldig shivered. "I feel as if someone just walked on my grave." He said quietly.

Nagi put the rice paper rubbings of the tablets on the scanner and brought them up on the screen. It didn't take much work to clean them up and erase all trace of the stone work behind the foreign writing and symbols. He broke it up into odd sections, as if it were taken off pieces of something broken. Then he printed out the copies.
Omi changed the rice paper sheet on the scanner. "I don't like this, Koi."
"My training in Esset nearly killed me, how do you think I feel?" Nagi stated.

Omi moved to put his hands on the other youth's shoulders. "As if....your chains have come after you?" He said softly and bent to hold him, his cheek on the soft hair. "I'm sorry I made you mad at me." He whispered. "If it's the clothes...."
Nagi put a hand to one of the arms about him. "It's not the way you dress...Omi....it's the way you....don't seem to care about being with other men."
"It's just a tool." Omi told him. "An act. It works, doesn't it? I get such a kick out of fooling them....the look on their faces when I kill them....they think they can have me, and they can't! Only you, Nagi." He kissed his cheek and nuzzled his ear. "All my life people used me until you. You're so sweet and kind to me, Koi. I've never been happier, never felt as if I belonged anywhere until you let me into your life."
Nagi thought about it, then sighed. "Will you stop being such a whore, Omi-chan?"
He asked quietly. It reminded him to much of Schuldig, how bad he'd been when Nagi had first been assigned to the team.
"I'll try." Omi said. "But you'll have to remind me. Is that all right?"
"Yes." Nagi looked up at him. "Let's get this done, I don't like even the rubbings being around. We should burn them."
It was weird, but when they did, the paper flared up in strange colors and sent sparks flying, and the tile under the iron brazier cracked with a startling bang, sending Nagi backward with wide eyes into Omi's clinging arms.
"Okay, that was freaky." Nagi said, a little out of breath.
Omi swallowed. "Yeah."

Chapter Twenty Three
"Forewarning"

The computer chimed, the program complete. Professor Kirchner finished the notation he was making on a thesis by one of his more brilliant students and then turned in his chair to look at the computer screen.
Good Tibetan translation programs were a rarity. and ancient Tibetan even rarer. Fortunately, he'd helped create this one. It saved days of work the old way.
He read the fragment and blinked. He looked at it again, closer, as if this would make it even more comprehensible.
"....power of the mind and body beyond mortal limitations...the sacrifice of a well bred, flawless human being.....bestow the power within..." He murmured. "Is it possible....?" He sat back.
He got up and rummaged on the bookcase. Ah--there it was. A rather beat up old volume, missing it's dust jacket.
He opened it and checked the index, muttering, "Tibet--Himalayas..."
"...enclosed in a wooden box, three carved tablets of iron laden stone, such as might come from a meteor, each detailing a special ceremony, healing, endowment, and resurrection..." He stood, staring blankly for a few minutes.
The tablets? They had turned up? But.....how?
He'd thought them lost forever when Crawford had pulled his little stunt and wiped out Esset.
Perhaps it was time to reconsider his decision. Now that there was a possibility of getting hold of the tablets again...and Schwarz....

Corrupt politicians, drug dealers, slavers, you had to love them. So predictable.
At a point in time, they all got nervy. They all began to think they were invincible.
This one actually had decent security.
Brad had to consider the job twice before taking it, but the guy was into some major shit all around. It was a case of nagging morals and a tidy paycheck, verses survival. And in the end, he always chose the challenge if he thought he could beat fate. He just couldn't help it. He wanted to outsmart the damned universe, if that was what 'it' was. Sure enough, they'd gotten into one hell of a gun battle in the office building their quarry had leased. Good thing the target didn't want the police any more than they did. It was the classic hall way stand off, everyone in door ways or at corners, peeking out and taking shots, hoping one would hit fatally or someone would run out of bullets. He was just considering letting Schuldig use his power, when a vision hit him that was crucial.
The trick was...human events were easily seen fairly well in advance, after all, he was human, those were what he focused on, paid attention to the nuances of.

Natural events, things people tend not want to think about.....like earthquakes...he could only brace himself and call out "Earthquake!" maybe ten seconds before it happened.
Unfortunately, at the moment it hit, one of the guards took aim....
Brad moved to shoot back, the guard's bullet punching into his upper left chest as the building rocked.
Schuldig had been distracted by the warning. The bullet would have hit him in the side of the head, killing him instantly. Instead, it hit Brad, the vest stopping it, but it punched into a nerve center, his left arm going numb. He gasped at the pain, then swore. "Fuck fate..." He muttered, the guard was down, the tremor passed. He fell back on the wall, bracing until the pain passed, his arm useless. "Get the bastard!" He ordered into the head set. "Ran, Kudoh, get in there!"
Schuldig recovered now, the earthquake passing. "You okay!" Stupid fucking urban war zone, why did it seem like things were getting so much worse lately? They'd never got shot up so much before. He ignored the gunfire and yelling as the other two made a rush play for the main office.
"Don't yell at me in stereo." Brad said, having heard it in his ears and his mind. "It's okay...I don't see myself dying any time soon!"
"Shit, don't talk like that!" Schuldig said. He'd never realized it before.....that Brad would actually see it when the time came, if he were conscious.
The earthquake had shaken things up pretty good, but there were still a few body guards on their feet and things got messy again pretty fast, when some woman started screaming, and then stopped, abruptly.
In the office, Ran found a broken window and a blonde caucasion woman with a bullet hole in her chest, blue eyes wide open in shock and glazing. The mistress, no doubt.....the window....he moved to it cautiously.
"Weird." Yohji said, over his shoulder, as they looked down at the mess on the street, made surreal by how far down and away it was, like a little broken toy tossed down by a petulant child. "She must have known something he didn't want to get out, but then....why kill himself by jumping if he had a gun?"
"Shit, there goes our money." Ran said, annoyed.
"Hey, the target's down. Who can say he didn't choose suicide over us. Or that we didn't throw him." Yohji said. "Don't worry, Ran, we'll get paid. Sirens. Let's go." He tugged on the back strap of the red head's shoulder holster.
"Job's done, Boss." He reported to Brad via the head set.
In the hall way, Brad tried flexing his arm and hand. It sort of responded. Schuldig was keeping him covered, but there didn't seem to be any more guards left to be that ambitious.
"Time to go." Brad said, feeling the bruise big time now that sensation was coming back.
The corpse Yohji had left behind at the cellar parking security desk didn't look

too happy to be there. Schuldig had to laugh at the look on it's face.
"That's my Baby...the worst sense of humor...." Brad said wryly. "Odd, I didn't pick up any clue the target would suicide." He commented to Yohji and Ran as they walked to the car. "Must have been the earthquake."
"Suicide?" Schuldig said curiously.
"He shot his fancy import and went out the window." Ran stated. Then he saw the hole in Brad's jacket. "Ouch." he put a hand to it. "That suit's ruined."
Brad moved to kiss him. "Stay up front with Yohji, Aya." He handed the sandy blond the keys to the car, and got in the back seat. Schuldig smiled and got in with him. He knew Brad was glad to have him unhurt, and exactly what he had in mind.
"Hey, " Yohji protested. "No funny stuff while I'm driving!"
"Live with it, Kudoh." Brad growled and pushed Schuldig down on the seat.

Jei glanced up as she came in, then looked again. "Hana---what happened?" He shut the text book and got up to look at her cheek.
She was trying to get her coat off. Her cheek was swollen and bruising up. "That earthquake...it upset some of the more unstable patients. I just happened to get caught by a flailing fist."
He took her coat and hung it up on the peg. "It wasn't that much of a shake up."
"I know. But it was strange. A little before it hit---the patients in the secure ward started getting very restless."
He got out some ice and put it in a clean dish towel. "Well I hope ye gave the miserable fuck what for."
She took the ice pack. "Jei.." She said in disapproval.
"Sorry, love." he said, smiling at her.
She gingerly touched the ice pack to her cheek. "Have you taken your medication?"
"You know I always do." He said mildly.
She looked at him seriously. "Those patients....they'd just had their sedatives maybe half an hour earlier. Before the earthquake, do you remember what you were thinking or feeling?"
He frowned.
Yeah. He remembered. "I don't believe in all that superstitious crap." He said. "But I did suddenly feel very angry. I took an extra pill, and it went away right after the quake."
"We've been doing studies of such occurrences for centuries here in Japan. Keep on the extra dosage, Jei."
He looked at her for a long moment. "Maybe you'd better put me in the lock up."
She shook her head. "Not unless you think it's advisable. You know your mind. You've learned to recognize the aberrant thought patterns."
He thought it over. "I'll let you know."

She moved to give him a kiss and caressed his cheek. "I trust you, Jei."
There was a lot to that, for him. He wanted to make her promise to stay out of the secure wards from now on, but he knew that was not going to happen. "I wish you wouldn't, love. Not that much at least."
"And let you off the hook?" She said seriously. "No, Jei, you accept responsibility and keep my trust."
He smiled ruefully. Sometimes, in her own way, she could be as devious as Crawford.

"We're missing a piece." Nagi laid had laid the papers out in order on the huge mahogany desk. He was sitting in the chair, Brad leaning a hand on the back of it.
Brad looked them over. Trouble. But ever since they'd gotten hold of the things, they had given him premonitions of trouble. "Endowment?"
"Part of the explanation section." Nagi frowned. Then checked his numbered list and matched it. "University of Chicago, Professor Kirchner of Oriental Studies."
"Bother him, Nagi." Crawford said lightly. "Some people don't move until you bother them."
"It just seems odd that all the other's have responded and this one hasn't....and it's the description of the offering."
Brad thought of Aya....despite all his life induced flaws...."I don't like this, Nagi. I don't like the way these things keep coming back to us."
"You mean...to Aya." Nagi said coolly.
Brad looked down at him. "First his sister, now him."
"Your tastes were always too expensive."
"You think I'm spending your inheritance?" Brad said coolly, with a slight smile.
Nagi frowned. "It's not for me to say what you do. Besides, I run the accounts. But I am saying these things 'know' us. They've somehow....arranged themselves...." he looked at the papers all over the desk. "Found themselves some new suckers." He said coldly.
Brad smoothed the boy's hair fondly. He was loosing that baby look. But his shoulders were too thin and narrow. "You should in put more time in the gym. There's not enough muscle on you. You shouldn't let yourself be physically weak, Nagi. You're growing up."
"Note to self, find more time to beef up." Nagi said sarcastically. "We need a house keeper! You guys think you can just order us around! Nagi, when's supper, Omi, where the hell are my socks! Nagi take this job, it's a pederast, Omi change the bed!"
"Sucks to be the youngest, doesn't it?" Brad said, completely unconcerned.
Nagi looked up at him, completely mad.
"All right, we'll have a house meeting about the chores." Brad relented. "Now

get on the computer and send this.....what's-his-name...a-get-on-with-it notice. And then get your butt in the gym and lift some weights. With your hands." he added with emphasis. "I catch you cheating, I'll smack you so hard, Omi will bruise."
"Ha..Ha..Ha..." Nagi said sarcastically. "Jealous."
"And what do you mean by that?" Brad loomed over him ominously.
"You need three guys to do for you." Nagi held his ground in the chair. "All of them missing a sizable chunk of brain." He said smugly.
"Omi's turning into a girl." Brad said, lowering himself to a school boy's level of insult.
Nagi just smirked. "And your point?"
Brad laughed. It was fun to see him play the little man. "Just for that, you can go get us lunch. And take your 'girlfriend' with you. And get those suits to the dry cleaners, brat."
"Slave driver." Nagi grumbled.
Brad went upstairs to find Schuldig, who was frowning in the mirror at his hair. Brad grabbed him, turning him around to pull him close and nuzzle his neck. Then he kissed him. "These stupid tablets are already causing trouble again. But right now....I'm happy, Baby." he looked into those green eyes.
"Mmm, that's obvious." Schuldig pressed his hips closer, getting pretty happy himself.
Brad zoned out on him....He could hear it, like a wave moving in the distance...a wash of faint static as the vision played out....
"Earthquake." Brad stated. "Warn the others.....Hold on." He braced them against the door frame...
Schu barely had time to before it hit.
This was a real one.
"Oh, god...." He put his head to Brad's neck and held on. It was frightening, this shaking of things that should never, ever, never move.... And he was glad he couldn't hear the thought's of the people around them, the fear and terror increasing with the length of the quake, feeding into his brain and overloading his own sensibilities. All he had to do was hang onto Brad and let it pass, no matter what, he was here with Brad. He could die here and now and be content.
Things crashed, Brad winced. Damn it.....
It seemed to just go on and on! Of course the lights went out. And then something big shattered in that horrifically musical way....
"Oh, shit..." He said in english.
The windows....
Then it stopped.
"Is Nagi still here? I sent him....."
"Yes." Schu said, not moving just yet. They all knew enough not to trust the first few minutes after a big shake up.
Brad sighed and leaned his head on the german's. "That was bad."

"No power, no water,....." Schu sighed.
"No lunch." Brad growled. "And no bedroom windows. The price of plywood alone just went sky high."
Schuldig moved to press a kiss to his lips. "Maybe....we'd better make sure....the door frame isn't warped....."
Brad took the hint and shut and locked the door. It was the usual battle of how fast the clothes could come off and yet still be able to kiss and grope each other. (Are the other's okay?) Brad thought.
(Just....fine.) Schu informed him. (They're....um...busy....like us...) He stopped thinking as Brad's hands roamed over his torso and down into the waist band of his briefs.
Brad laughed. It always happened after a bad earthquake. People just....had to.

The workmen were clearing out. The bedroom windows, the big glass plates that lead onto the balcony, had burst. The room was so dark now, shuttered by too damned dear plywood until the insurance company could get around to having the glass replaced. Downstairs, the living room's wall of glass panes had suffered less, the sliding doors there, and in the kitchen, had burst, but only one crack across another plate, that was seriously taped. The balconies themselves were intact, it had simply been the harmonics set up by the quake that had taken the doors, because of their loose frames they had acted like the skin on drums, and shaken out of sequence with the rest of the building. The plywood cast it's pall over the huge room, making it seem colder than it was.
"It's screwed up the feeling of the place." Schuldig said to Aya's thought's.
Aya put his arms about the other red head from behind, feeling chilled suddenly.
Schu held his hands where they crossed his front. "I'd be really paranoid if I didn't know half of Tokyo was going throughout the same thing."
Aya sighed. He could smell Brad on him. He watched him paying the workmen's bill. "Schuldig." He murmured, lips brushing the german's ear.
"Mmm?"
"Those tablets have to go." Aya told him quietly.
Schu patted a long slender hand. "They, will, Sweet." He assured.
Yohji frowned. "You do realize we can't go out on the balconies now?"
"Shit!" Schuldig said.
"Back to smoking in the bathroom with the vent fan turned on again." Yohji sighed.
"Now would be a good time to quit." Omi said brightly.
Yohji looked at him. "I will quit smoking....When you quit dressing like a girl!"
Omi frowned, petulant. "Shut up!" he ordered impertinently.
Yohji hissed at him and made clawing fingers mockingly.
"That's enough!" Brad said, having shut the front door. "It's bad enough you're

both right." He muttered in annoyance. "I hate days like this! Nagi! Who needs to die?"
Schuldig grinned, leaning back a little on Aya.
Yohji shook his head, and smiled ruefully. (The man just has no concept of how twisted his mind is....) He caught Schu looking at him archly and gave it right back to him.

Dawn in Tokyo. What a time to be coming home. The earthquake had put everyone out of sorts, the targets were sitting at home, nice and cozy and not expecting the trouble thier chosen life styles had brought them on a night like this. How much worse could it get, after an earthquake?
Well, they'd found out.
Brad tossed the keys on the tray on the entry way table and took off his coat.
All evening the stupid visions had kept him on edge. The muscle in his arm still ached where the bullet had bruised it up and made it swell. Yohji had damn near gotten killed by a nervous wife with a gun and a lucky set of circumstances. And Omi.....Omi was not happy.
"Put him on the kitchen table." He said tiredly.
Schuldig took him in and laid him out, Nagi turning on the lights and getting out the medical kit.
"He's unconscious." Aya commented. "Good."
"Why couldn't we take him to the doctor!" Nagi demanded.
"He's not hurt that bad." Brad said, cutting open the boy's bloody slacks and underwear and looking at the wound. "They don't need us cluttering up the emergency room with bullet wounds when there are earthquake victims. You know.....this is going to be sore for a while...." He just had to smile, it was funny....
"Don't laugh!" Nagi warned him through clenched teeth.
Omi had taken a bullet in the butt cheek. Fortunately for him, the angle had been so that it simply cut across and lodged in the muscle.
Brad tried not to let the tiredness induced case of the sillies get to him and got the forceps out of the case. "Somebody sit on him. I don't want him kicking." He waited while Nagi put about four good shots of morphine around the wound, then mopped up the blood and got to work while Aya and Yohji leaned on Omi's shoulders and lower back just in case, and Schuldig held his legs.
Nagi sighed when the bullet came out. Packed up, wrapped up and stripped of the bloody clothes, Omi didn't even wake all through it. It was amazing how he could just sleep...
"At least he still wears pajamas." Yohji said, having gone up to get a pair of bottoms to put on him. "Not baby dolls."
"They're pink." Schuldig commented. "In fact....they are Hello Kitty pajamas."
"So?" Nagi said. "Help me, Schu, I can't carry him."

"I'll do it." Yohji said. "Schu's back's had enough." He could tell by the tightness around the German's mouth that it was hurting again. It was a good thing he never even considered holding the boy's blood against him for that beating. Yohji slid his arms under the nineteen year old and lifted him up, sore side away from him so he wouldn't bump the wound. Good thing he was so small boned.
Omi took a deep sigh of breath about half way up the stairs.
When Yohji put him down on the bed he sighed again and winced, then looked up bleurily at him. "Yohji-kun...?"
"Home at last, Kid." Yohji informed him. "Let's hope we don't get any after shocks the next few days."
"I'm sooo sleepy...." Omi sighed and passed out again.
Nagi was stripping for bed himself. "I feel like I could sleep through anything."
"Yeah, well, sleeping's all your going to be doing in here for the next couple of weeks." Yohji winked at him and went back down stairs. Served the little devils right....teach them some self control. "I could use a cup of coffee. Hey, I just realized, we've got electricity...."
"And water." Brad stated. "Though I wouldn't use it strait from the tap for a few more days." He debated between coffee and bed. Then realized he'd have to get up the staircase to go to bed and sat down at the table. "Coffee sounds good." He sighed.
Aya put his arms about Brad's shoulders from behind the chair and leaned on him to murmur in his ear. "Would you ever consider sacrificing me for the power in those stones?" He asked.
Brad thought it over. He was quite content with his power. If anything, they had too much. "It's a possibility, but right now....I find you more useful alive." He said coolly.
Aya bit him, just below the ear, just enough of a nip to make it hurt.
Brad laughed.

Two nights later, he woke up with a start, heart pounding, short of breath. It was so dark....
Schuldig sighed on his shoulder, too deeply asleep to be woken by such minor things as bad dreams. Aya didn't move.
But a hand reached to lay gently on his chest. "Brad?" Yohji asked softly.
"It's so dark..." Normally the curtains were left open for the light's of the city to shine through at night.
"The boards." Yohji reminded him, Brad feeling the bed shift as he moved to sit up more. "Vision or bad dream?"
"I don't know." Brad admitted. "I'm sorry I woke you." He took the blond's hand in his.

"I couldn’t sleep." Yohji told him. They were both whispering so that the other’s wouldn’t wake. "If it was a dream....what was it?"
Brad was having a hard time assimilating it. He had thought this was over and done. That he had destroyed the sequence of events that would have lead to this. But now he was seeing it happen again.
"The end of our world." He held the hand tighter. "It’s happening again."
Yohji realized something.
All along, he’d never talked about what had brought this on in the first place. All he knew was from Schuldig, and that day in the hotel room, when he’d said that Crawford had seen something terrible, and was determined to do what it would take to avoid it. And things had changed so rapidly, gotten so damned wildly improbable, that he hadn’t ever had a chance to remember and ask.
Brad was gripping him so tightly now. It was strange when the wall cracked and the big, normally self-sufficient american showed signs of being....well.....just human. "Ah, well, just a dream." Yohji said softly, as if to brush it away. "Go back to sleep, Boss. It will be light in the morning and all this dark nonsense will be gone."
"The light just covers it up." Yohji heard him whisper ever so faintly. "The darkness is always there."
It was a long time before the grip on his hand loosened....

Omi frowned. It hurt. Even if he sat with just half his bottom on the coffee table, bracing his leg made the muscle tense and the damaged one hurt.
The news on the big screen was awful. Between the earthquake, which had been centered in the Tokyo area, and the damage that alone did physically and financially to the metropolis, people were doing the dumbest things.
Job rage, people going nuts and beating up their coworkers, people committing suicide all over the city, slamming their cars into each other, the Yakuza and speed gangs suddenly attempting to wipe each other out, it looked as if the whole country had gone mad. Japan was somehow....at war with it’s self.
Araki had made an appointment to come talk with Brad about it. Ran had managed to go a shade even whiter with rage by the time Brad set down the phone. "I don’t want Him in this house!" He’d announced. It was in a tone rather like he’d used to say ‘Buy something, or get out!’.
Omi had watched him loose his resolve on the matter as Brad simply looked coolly at him and calmly, quietly said, "Who put you in charge of my house?"
Sometimes he felt rather sad for Aya. For all of them, really. Brad kept them all under his control and made his decisions without consulting anyone else, though they all had to live with them. The night he and Omi had come down to stop the bizarre argument when Brad was under that other telepath’s control.....seeing Aya on the floor at Brad’s feet like that, helpless with heartbreak, clinging to him like a beaten wife....it was a hard image to shake

from the mind, even when Ran was swinging that sword in a killing blow.
Aya took a deep breath and let it out in a huff. "I should think by now this would be OUR house." He said.
Schuldig moved to back him up. "Never mind that bastard Araki." He said, a hand on Aya's shoulder. "It's wrong, Brad for you to be so imperious. We should all be able to have a say in things like this."
Bradley blinked. Then redlined.
Schuldig pulled Aya back behind him sharply, keeping his hands behind him on Aya, presenting a non-defensive front, yet meeting Brad's light brown eyes.
Omi sensed Nagi stiffening beside him with the stress of situation.
But Ran wasn't backing down in this. He moved Schuldig aside, making it clear he was not to be protected. "Why must he come here, into this house?" He asked.
It was odd.....Schu might have gotten hit, but Ran somehow managed not to. Perhaps it was his calmness, the lack of fear in his purple eyes. That eerie emptiness that was inside him.
Brad dragged his hair back in that gesture that was a distraction / time to think thing. He frowned ever so slightly.
Nagi's hand was on Omi's arm as he peered around him to keep an eye on things. Yohji came in from having gone out for a smoke and stepped into the living room in time to sense the tension in this standoff. He froze, watching Brad.
"Because....it is time I returned his hospitality." Brad said. "I've been rude to the point of vulgarity to my first friend in this country. Will you act civil and not embarrass me. Will you make me proud to show you off, Aya?" He added quietly, almost on the edge of an apology.
Schuldig slid his hand in Aya's, looking at him. Aya glanced at him. He had to think....He frowned, not looking at either of them now, chin slightly down. He was definitely at odds with his own pride.
"Please, Princess." Brad said even more softly. "You all are my home."
Omi felt Nagi's fingers un-grip from his arm where they had tightened enough to leave white marks. He looked at him, and saw the blue black eyes were still wary, but not tense now. He knew that if worse came to worse, Nagi would use his power on them. But that holding them still so as not to hurt each other would not stop Brad from retaliating once he was free.
They were all predators. They had to deal with the snarls and growls of clashed egos and stepped on toes and having to live in the same territory in order to function as a unit.
Aya relented, in full pride again. "I will 'act' civil." He said coolly.

"We're loosing a lot of harmless people." Araki said, accepting the cup of coffee. It never ceased to make him think, to have the foreign red head play the woman's roll. He had the gestures, the respectful movements and subtleties, but he did them with no loss of his position as a man. It was as if he were both and

there was no defining him by exactly either roll. He didn't act homosexual with the exaggerated feminization. But it was very clear he was more to Crawford than a lieutenant.
Fujimiya, on the other hand....was the homegrown version of the same. He was completely neutral, neither here nor there, and while he was obviously a man, the guarded look in those bizarre purple eyes was of a hauteur only a woman could usually achieve. The dislike of his presence was almost palpable.
The only one of Crawford's men who didn't seem to care at all was the half breed. He sat relaxed, but ready, eyes like a cat, watching, able to move swiftly, yet aware that there was no need to just yet....
He sipped the coffee. It was good. He'd had little sleep. There'd been so much to do, so much damage to assess. "We're in a season of madness, Bradley." He sighed.
"I was hoping it would pass as just the earthquake making people stressed." Brad said. "But it's only getting worse."
Normally, they avoided discussing Esset. It was an ill subject to both of them. Araki's master had somehow gotten into debt to them. They were good at arranging such things. And Araki had been stuck with the foreign youth with the bad attitude. But as Crawford had settled down and realized the seriousness of his internship, he had opened up and voiced his hatred of his own masters. The bond between them had formed. So here he sat, well aware of the unpleasant reality of the darkness just a step to the left of so called 'reality'. And of the underlying ancient reason for the tattoo on his body.
The warding off of demons from hells only hinted at in the imagination.
The superstitious savage under the immaculate white shirt and black Italian tailored suit.
He looked at the american. "Tell me what is happening and why, Brad."

Chapter Twenty Four
"Waiting For Disaster"

Sometimes...he wondered if this wasn't just too damned much. He knew damned well there were worse things to be into. But--every now and then, he'd get a little twinge of--guilt? Remorse?

Ah well, it was too early in the morning to be philosophical. Better to be....physical.

Brad sighed contentedly and ran a hand over Schuldig's hip. "Wake up."

"Mmmph...So early, mein Mann?" He complained.

"I have an appointment." Brad reminded him.

Schuldig made an incoherent noise of complaint, but moved closer.

Brad worked on waking him up, kissing his neck and shoulder, then moving down an arm an inch of flesh at a time.

Yohji, feeling Schuldig move away and then hearing his voice, woke up himself.

"All ready?" He grumbled.

Aya sat up, pushing the bangs out of his eyes, which weren't quite open yet. He looked down at Brad making amorous moves on Schu, down to the side of his waist now with his kisses.

He decided to go for it.

He pressed himself against Brad's back and murmured. "Don't I get a kiss, Bradley?"

Brad sighed, laying his head on Schuldig's hip. How long could he keep this up?

A cool hand trailed down his side, to slip under him and grasp him.

Brad sunk his teeth into Schuldig.

"Ouch!" Schu protested, squirming.

Aya let go of Brad and slapped him across the bottom. "Don't be mean!"

Brad turned to look at him. Sometimes, Aya could surprise him.

Yohji laughed and grabbed Schuldig making an attempt at claiming him first.

"Oh, no you don't!" Brad pulled the red head back into his arms. "Mine!" He laughed and pulled up one of Schuldig's thighs to get him into a position that he could get at what he wanted into.

Aya, watching the look on Schu's face as he was prepared, shivered in lust.

Yohji was still half asleep, but Aya looked good and ready for some action.

"Ran. Come over here." He invited, stretching and then rubbing his scalp.

"Lazy bastard, you come over here." Aya sulked, laying back down with a huff of annoyance.

Yohji considered it. He rubbed his eyes and sighed, watching Brad go at Schuldig with everything he had, Schu's nails digging into his shoulders, the red head biting his own lower lip. The both of them were making enough noise about it. God, it sounded so good.....but he was not moving.

It took about five minutes of having to lay there while Brad sent Schuldig into a fit of ecstatic moans to make Aya give up being stubborn.

Yohji smiled, wrapping his arms around him as he laid down with him. His skin was so smooth and cool, Yohji pressed him closer kissing him tenderly. "Ran." He breathed in his ear, and ran a hand over the hard muscles of the younger mans' rump, slipping his fingers between the two mounds.
Aya kissed him back hungrily.
Satisfied, Brad rolled onto his back to cool off. Schuldig sighed deeply and drifted in empty headed bliss.
Yohji ran a hand over the german's slippery wet tummy and used it to lubricate himself.
Aya smiled sultrily at him.
Yohji pulled him into position and slipped slowly into him, watching his purple eyes roll up and close in pleasure. It was good.....it was so good.....He kissed him, loving the taste of him. There was a reason they all called Aya 'sweet'.
Brad sighed and looked at the ceiling. That crack in the plaster didn't look too good. The earthquakes were not as bad, but the island was moving every few hours now, like a horse's muscles flickering under the skin to dislodge flies.
Could Araki be right? Was the earth irritated with them?
Old legends, superstitions.....he'd learned too much about them in Esset. He'd seen the tablets work....and at one point....even managed to convince himself he was better off on the old fools' side....but the gratitude had soon bittered to annoyance. But the tablets.....
Aya's whimper made Brad shift up on one elbow to watch. Schuldig had gone back to sleep. His face relaxed, he looked younger....almost...innocent.
"Harder....." Aya begged/ordered, holding onto Yohji.
Brad smirked. "Yohji, stop." He said, a lightly spoken, but firm order.
The blond swore and stopped, breathing hard, his skin wet with sweat.
Aya whined in annoyance.
"How obedient you are, Kitten." Brad purred, thinking himself a terrible pervert at the moment, but enjoying it immensely.
Yohji closed his eyes, putting his forehead to Aya's temple, waiting.
"Go on." Brad said. "Finish him."
Yohji kissed Aya desperately, moving again, a few moment's torture making it all that much better.

It stung like hell. Like someone putting little coals on his flesh and letting them burn while he lay on the padded table.
It was silly, really. But what the hell, a debt was a debt, and if this worked....two birds with one stone? He wiped his face on his handkerchief and sipped at the ice cold beer and closed his eyes again.
Araki sat rather comfortably playing cards with three of his 'soldiers'. "I must say, you're putting up less of a fight than I thought."

"What makes you think I'd 'fight'?" Brad asked.
"It's a sensitive area."
"Did you?" Brad said, coolly baiting him.
"My eyes watered a bit. And...I had to step outside for some fresh air a few times. But then, I was younger than you."
"I don't know whether that's an insult or a brag."
"Maybe it's true. Maybe westerners don't feel the way we japanese do." Araki looked at him archly.
"Maybe." Brad had another sip of beer. Ouch, damn, the guy was hitting a nerve...."Then again, maybe I just have a certain amount of 'inner strength'."
"Or maybe you're just a thick skinned gaijen who wouldn't know pain if it stepped on his balls."
Brad laughed sharply and the tattoo artist swore, jerking up the electric inking needle. "Knock it off, Masa. You'll have me marred." he settled down again. Normally he wouldn't drink in public with out at least one man with him, but he trusted Araki. He had to. Wasn't this proof enough? But it made him a little shaky on the self control issue.
"And your 'lovers' wouldn't like that." Araki commented carefully, laying down a few cards.
Brad opened his eyes again to see what he was up to. Araki's face was pure poker. It had to be, that was what he was playing. "Jealous, Masa?" He asked evenly.
Araki pondered the question. "Perhaps." he said.
His own men, not anywhere near what Crawford's were to him, looked at him, waiting to be perhaps be told to shut the gaijen up once and for all....
Araki shot them a cold look and demanded more cards from the dealer sharply.
"Interpret that as you like." He told Brad.
Brad closed his eyes and relaxed again as best he could under the circumstances.
"I should let you and Fujimiya Ran go at it. See who's the better swordsman."
"Will you be the prize?" Araki asked calmly.
"Hell, no. You won, I'd give you the blond." Brad smirked, thinking of the look on Yohji's face if he'd been here to witness that. It might have actually got a rise out of the lazy thing.
"He's deadly, that one. It might be worth it."
"I forget. You like the eurasian fair ones don't you?"
Araki frowned slightly. "Shut up and get your tattoo, Bradley. You're upsetting the artist."

Aya turned him around roughly by the shoulders and pulled the shirt tail out of his belt, biting through the rolled seam edge and tearing it right up the back to pull it over and down off Brad's shoulders. He stared at the bloody-colored spectacle before him on what had been a pristinely cream colored back.

The technique was excellent, presenting a flash of gold touched green and blue scales, a dragon, chinese more than japanese, and not just any dragon, one with five exactly detailed toes and claws on each foot.....and seemingly leaping up and across from left hip to right shoulder, a fearsome glare turned on the viewer with slit pupiled golden eyes.
It was like some alien thing.....clinging to Brad's back, it was that well done, even under the haze of dried blood.
"WHY!" Aya moaned.
"You can buy me a new shirt." Brad said, flipping the pieces back and undoing his tie. It hurt. He felt like he'd been skinned. "Bitch later, Aya, get a basin of water and throw some painkiller in it and sponge me down." Something to stop the nerve ends from driving him mad.
"I can't believe you let him do this to you!" Aya snarled, but obeyed.
Schuldig looked at it carefully. "Very pretty." Was his comment, and not in a nice tone of voice.
Yohji sat in an arm chair, head phones on, nose in a book.
He'd been smoking in the house, too, Brad could smell it. "Kudoh!" He yelled at him.
Yohji looked up at him coolly over his lowered sunshades. "Boss." He replied, not taking off the headphones.
Brad walked over and plucked them off, getting in his face. "Why are you wearing sunglasses in the house, and why is there cigarette smoke reeking in here?"
"They are prescription and my only pair, I need them to read. I smoked in here." Yohji said. "Little naked there, Brad." He commented, reaching up to tweak a pink nipple.
Brad raised an eyebrow, looking at him, then snapped the earphones back over his ears for him and moved to stretch out on the sofa where Aya could soothe his raw back.
(Score.) Schuldig thought to Yohji, impressed.
Yohji rolled his eyes and went back to his book.
Schuldig sat on the arm of the sofa. Brad's thoughts were very black at the moment. "It's not like you to be superstitious, mein Mann." He commented.
"I pay attention to my premonitions." Brad reminded him.
Aya sat on the edge of the sofa and gently sponged the dried blood off with the solution. "Getting a tattoo is going to help us somehow?"
"We're dealing with the supernatural. The design is made of protective configurations. It's supposed to stop anything supernatural from messing with me."
"Then why can I still read your mind?" Schuldig said, skeptical.
"You, Nagi and I come by our talents naturally." Brad informed him. "Hard as it is to admit, you are perfectly natural."
Aya was frowning. The skin was so red, welted up slightly. He worked carefully. "Is that better, Lover?" He asked softly.

Brad drew a deep breath, allowing himself to feel. "Yes. Thank you. I'm supposed to put anti-biotic cream on it for a week."
"Hell of a lot to go through on a superstition." Schuldig said sulkily.
Yohji drew his earphones off. "Bet that smarts." he commented, looking at Brad's back. "So.....what now?"
Aya went to get the tube of anti-biotic from the kit. "You know....Schu-schu's the only one left without one now."
"As if I need any more marks on my body." Schuldig said dryly. "And you're forgetting the brats."
Aya took off his rings and set them on the coffee table, then put the cream on his hand and rubbed both together to warm it up. He laid his hands carefully over the design, making sure every part of it was treated. "I suppose it's not so bad." he said grudgingly, whipping his hands clean with a towel when he was done. Then he bent to kiss the side of Brad's waist in a sensitive spot.
"Don't start." Brad warned.
Aya frowned again, and caressed a firm muscle of Brad's black cotton slacks covered butt. "You wouldn't ever...." He started to say, then changed his mind.
"Sweetest---don't." Schuldig said, having already picked up the worried thought.
Aya fought with himself. He looked at the Yakuza tattoo Araki had finally forced Brad to get. A debt...."What else do you owe him, Brad?" He said coldly.
Brad knew that tone of voice too well. He moved to sit up. "Put your rings back on before you loose one...." He reached to collect them....
Ran caught his wrist, looking into his brown eyes coldly. "What else do you owe him?"
"Nothing." He informed him. Then kissed him, meeting that glare head on. "Nothing at all."

Kirchner looked at the purpled, waxy corpse on the mortuary tray. "Yes. That's him." He said unemotionally.
The morgue attendant laid the sheet back over the corpse's face.
Kirchner went through the motions, signing the papers, arranging for the cremation....It was difficult to believe...that after all this time....he could still care a little. Just a little.
Not that he'd ever known the boy. Nathan....that had been his name. 'Kirchner' changed to 'Chapel'. That was all they had left him, some strands of DNA and a vague connection to the name....
It just....He shook his head to clear it.
Esset. He'd escaped them.
He'd left his son in their hands. His price for freedom.
Bred, like cattle....
Maybe they'd done the same to the others.
He had to find the remaining team, retrieve the tablets, and set things back on

their course.
Only this time, he would be the one in control.
Temblor.....everyone froze as the building rocked.....then it passed.
He winced, then shook that off as well. Their fear....and the waves of supernatural influence from the earth...it had nearly made him loose his grip on his mental blocks.

Farfarello grabbed the knife up off the counter.....
Then he dropped it, his hand trembling, the shaking moving up his arm to take all of him. "My god..." He grabbed onto the counter, realizing what he'd just almost done.
Hana looked at him, wide eyed at this sudden change. She'd been using that knife to slice up the vegetables, and was in the process of cooking supper. "Jei? What's wrong?"
"Hana, I've gotta go..." He said with difficulty. He licked his lips, unable to catch his breath. "I'm not safe to be around!"
She turned off the fire and went to take his arm, firmly leading him to a chair and making him sit down. "Stay put. I'll call the hospital."
She went to pick up the phone and press in the number.
But he was up and out the door before her hand had reached it.

They held on, waiting for the quake to pass. It wasn't an easy sensation to deal with, out here on the balcony.
Brad had given in to letting the glass door off the dining room be replaced. Smoking in the house had pretty much accomplished it's intended effect.
Yohji took a deep breath and let go of the railing. "Good thing they built this place over and above the new regulations." He said around the cigarette in his mouth.
"The plaster is cracking." Brad commented. He was still a little stunned from all the visions he'd just received of the minor destruction the temblor had caused just now. Something.....about a man in a mortuary....What ever it had to do with him...he would keep an eye out for a sign of it. It reminded him somehow of Esset.
The city settled down below them, traffic beginning to move again, people going on about their business.
Yohji looked at him, turning to lean his backsides on the railing. "What you told Araki....that wasn't all of it was it?"
He thought about it. No. It wasn't. "It was....enough.".
Yohji finished the cigarette, looking at the almost down to the filter butt in annoyance and putting it out on the railing, tossing it in a planter.
Brad frowned, but he knew it was impossible. He'd sat at the patio table, to enjoy the rare sunshine of a late winter day in Tokyo.

"You've never told us what it was all about. Ran, Omi, and me. You just....took us over, and never told us the truth."
He traced the pattern in the thin marble table top with a finger. "I thought Schuldig had. I wasn't hiding anything from you. And it's certainly taken you some time to ask."
"I thought it was over, what ever it was! And then they took Schuldig and we killed them. I thought it was all over." Yohji said, sounding just a bit annoyed. "Now it's back again and with all this superstitious bull shit. There are always earthquakes in Japan. What makes you so damned sure this isn't just.....some sort of really bad time with the faults under the islands? We've always known it wouldn't last forever."
Brad looked up at him. "You don't know what it's like to feel things....the way I do. I can't explain it to you, and Schuldig can't show you, he can't even go there in my mind. You'll just have to take my word for it, that none of this is natural. The tablets are a focal point. We don't even really know who created them. The 'why' is obvious. To control what could be controlled. The side effect of that is, when you control things un-naturally....like a dam, it builds up until it bursts. In preventing the ritual.....I think I may have built a dam." he frowned slightly, his eyes focused elsewhere.
Yohji came to pull out a chair to sit down, to be closer to him, as if it would make him easier to understand. Crawford looked a bit strained, when you looked behind the glass to his eyes. The faint darkness under them in the pale skin, he was tired. Running on reserves actually. And in the depths of his cocoa colored eyes, there was another darkness. Yohji frowned. A despair he'd seen before.
"Brad." He said. "Tell me."
He looked at the blond. "How's your world history?"
Yohji shrugged. "It's in there somewhere."
Brad smiled slightly. "Did Ran ever tell you how--his sister ended up in that coma?"
"Not much. Takatori wanted his father dead for some reason, there was a bomb, the kid was thrown out into the street and would have been all right.....if Takatori hadn't had his driver run her over. Fucking bastard. Ran never would have seen who it was....if he hadn't seen the car and tried to flag it down for help."
"Nagi killed Takatori." Brad said. "We all wanted to, but he had the coolest head about it. So I gave it to him."
Yohji thought about that day....how they'd all come to a halt in that hall way, the battle over. "It was so strange that day. Ran.....I thought he just wanted Takatori dead any way he could get it."
He remembered Ran's pinkend cheeks....how curtly he'd spoken in answer to Brad's offer of truce after Schuldig had read his mind. Yohji had known Schu had done it. He'd seen Ran suddenly go blank, then the look Schuldig had given Brad, that amused, smug smirk. He'd also seen the way the american had reacted, suddenly a

bit flustered, fixing his glasses, clearing his throat, then recovering enough to be coolly professional again.
Well, now he knew why.
"Takatori made some bad deals. He needed more money. Fujimiya wouldn't loan him any more. He'd been siphoning off bank funds to Takatori's accounts, he wanted to put it back and be done with him." Brad stated. "Takatori had him killed. He'd hoped to get the whole family, but when he saw the boy, he decided to do something else about him. It never happened, Kritiker snatched him up and made him one of their little pawns, finished his training and threw him into Weiss. The girl.....when Esset looked into the situation, and they were angry about it, too much publicity and Takatori was getting out of hand....they discovered she was the perfect host body they had been searching for. They put doctors into the hospital to keep her in the coma, to prepare her, until the alignment."
Yohji stared at him. "That's....horrible....!"
Brad shook his head slightly. "At the time, I could have cared less what they did. Now.....it can't be changed." He traced the veins in the marble again. "So much can't be changed."
Yohji caught his hand. "No. Tell me about this. Never mind that."
Brad remembered a time when no one would dare do that.....touch him, attempt to comfort him. And he'd certainly would have not allowed it. Now....He accepted it for what it was. The concern....of a loved one.
Sometimes he stood back and looked at all this. And his mind chided him for being so weak, so pathetic.....But his heart needed this.
His back burned painfully suddenly and the earth shifted again, just enough to be noticed. He felt Yohji's hand tense. He caught it up in his. The tremor stopped. He let the visions pass, set his mind to ignore them as nothing important, and focused again on the very present.
"Over fifty years ago, they set up a pawn, just like Takatori. Except.....more of an acolyte. He came out of practically no where and he was just what they needed. It almost worked. But then they moved too fast, got too greedy and things fell apart. The man committed suicide. In other words.....he got away. They were going to use Ran's sister's body to form a new one for his spirit, to sacrifice her to resurrect him. To make him one of them. And then they would try again for their 'New Order'. To set up a world empire and stop what they considered the 'chaos' we live in now. They'd been gathering people with certain talents from all over the world, in the countries that were taken over in the war. Testing them, running experiments, attempting create a new, refined human race, into which they could renew themselves and the members of their ancient order. It failed because of this 'chaos'" He swept his free hand to indicate everything, an amused look on his face. "In other words, what they just couldn't control, even with their powers. They always hit a snag. The fact that no one strong will stand to be a slave."
Yohji frowned. No, you had to be pretty beaten down and helpless to be a slave.

He'd never thought of it that way before, but wasn't that what Persian had done to them? Taken beaten down young men and enslaved them to do his dirty work in his fight against his own brother? One of them.....his own son.
The air had begun to chill. Brad stood up. "It's cooling down, and near supper time. Come on, let's go inside."
Yohji stood and was a little startled to have Brad slip an arm around him and quickly kiss his cheek. Normally he was not this demonstrative toward him, but then, Yohji always kept a safe distance from Schuldig and Ran's constant battle for attention.
"But....you didn't actually tell me what IS happening now." Yohji said as they went into the apartment.
"The dam is cracking." Brad said, moving away from him to get a cup of coffee in the kitchen. "And we're sitting right on it."

The doorbell rang. Brad frowned. He had rather hoped....but still.....he sighed.
"It's Farfarello." He said, saving the file he'd been working on at the desk.
With the present situation, he'd decided to confine the 'jobs' to the daylight hours, not willing to risk being caught in a powerless elevator or sudden black out.
Nagi went to unlock the door.
Farfarello came in, looking haggard. The double doors to the foyer were always kept open, he stood looking across the excessive room to the 'office' at the other end where Crawford sat at the carved mahogany writing desk. The rest were sprawled about the living room's two sofas and arm chairs, with the huge television on it's platform blathering about the news, thankfully with the volume down low.
"The pills aren't workin' any more." he stated. "I damn near killed Hana."
He stood there, hands jammed in the pockets of his coat, shoulders tight.
"It's over riding the pills?" Nagi said. He shut the door, looking at him.
Jei nodded.
Brad sighed. "Let me guess....when there's a temblor, you get the old urge again."
"Right as always. Ye coulda told me, Crawford."
He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jei, the same thing is happening all over Tokyo. I'm getting so much input from it, I can't sort it out. One thing though, now that we're all here together....Schuldig."
Schu got up off the sofa and went to stand beside him, a hand on his shoulder.
Brad gave him the image in his mind....of the man in the morgue. (Show the others)
Schu looked up, focusing on Farfarello. (He won't like it.....)
"Jei, let Schuldig show you the image in my mind." Brad ordered.
They all saw it, a man, fair hair, blond and white mixed, blue eyes.....

"Chapel." Aya said, puzzled. "But.....he’s dead....and this is.....older....."
Brad looked at him. "Chapel?"
Schuldig immediately went into Aya’s mind. He compared the memory of Chapels’ face to the one from Brad’s vision. He looked down at Brad. (Do you see it?)
He did, now.
"That....would explain it." He said softly.

Chapter Twenty Five
"Decision"

Crawford hung up the phone. At least the woman had some sense in her head. She'd been relieved to hear Farfarello was safe and mildly disappointed to hear he wanted to stay away from her for her own safety. But he could not decide whether or not her resigned confidence in their ability to deal with Jei was annoying or flattering.
"I'm tired of waiting." he sulked in mild anger at the whole situation, then made up his mind. "Damn it, now that we have a lead, let's move. Aya, Yohji, check out the all the morgues in Tokyo for a gaijen of that description picking up Chapel's body. You can't just have a murder victim's body cremated without a trail of paper work and police questioning. Omi, Nagi, coordinate with them to track the records electronically. Jei.....You're welcome to stay here until this is resolved." He looked at him. "But I don't want you out with the team."
Farfarello shook his head. "I don't think I want to be out ma self. I'd take it kindly if you'd just go ahead an' lock me up. I'd rather be here then in that place again." He frowned. "I thought I'd never have to be in that place again when ye got me out the first time. Now there's a place in ma head I don't want to be as well."
This was so awkward, Crawford thought. "Nagi, Schuldig, lock him up." He said quietly.

Yohji was very quiet, Aya noticed, in the Porsche. "What's with you?"
The blond looked at him. Once again it struck him how odd this all was.
"Ran....what goes through your head when you think about the past, before.....before this?"
Aya blinked, then glanced at him. "What a thing to ask." He said coolly.
Yohji pressed the button to roll down the window and took out his cigarettes.
"Don't smoke in my car" Aya said icily.
"Answer me, then." Yohji said, a challenge, pure and simple.
Aya frowned.
Yohji pulled a cigarette out of the pack and put it between his lips.
Aya made an annoyed noise. "Why do you ask? Probably the same thing that goes through yours, when I think about it at all!"
Yohji took out the lighter and held it up, waving it a little.
Aya nearly missed a red light and jerked the sports car to a stop with a swear for his precious new toy's break pads. "I think how fucking glad I am to be here and now!"
"You never think of your sister? Of your parents?"
"Why the hell should I!" Aya was shocked. "Yohji is your mind totally gone now?" he demanded.
The blond frowned mildly. He put the lighter and cigarette away for later when

they were out of the car. "I was just wondering." He said. Then he sighed. "I feel as if something is going to go terribly, terribly wrong, Ran. I....." he closed his eyes. "I think Brad's not telling us something about this whole thing with those damned stones."
Aya glanced at him again. "Maybe because you tried to kill him."
Yohji looked at him sharply. "You said you forgave me for that!" He snapped. "I mean you're just making yourself feel bad over it!" Aya kept his eyes on the road. "You just don't give up do you? Torturing yourself over Asuka, and now this."
Yohji sat back again, the anguish coming back like a raw wound instead of one long healed. Why was he feeling like this? He had thought this was gone. Was it because Schuldig had had to go through his mind and undo what Chapel had done? It was as if all his memories were so brand new now. So intense.
So painful.
He reached over to lay a hand over Aya's bejeweled one on the stick shift. "Ran.....what if this is the end?" He asked quietly.
Purple eyes blinked, pinkened lips opened slightly. His mind dealt with the stop light and the traffic, but the rest of him went numb...."What?" He said.
"You asked him if he'd sacrifice you for the power those things have. He said no, right?"
Aya remembered. "No....he said.....I was more useful alive....but....." it had been a joke.....
"He said....'Right now', Ran. Not forever." Yohji stated.
Aya shoved his hand away then grasped the stick shift again. "Damn you, make sense!"
"What if he were planning to sacrifice us all?" Yohji found his thoughts on the subject suddenly very clear.

Nagi was sitting at the desk now, Omi leaning over him, propped on the back of the chair, trying to get comfortable without having to sit down. The black haired boy's fingers stirred on the keys, his eyes moved, but otherwise, he was frozen in his task, all his mind into searching for the one thing that would link them to their quarry.
Brad stood looking out the west facing wall of glass that had just cost so much to replace. He'd wanted the afternoon sun....Most people didn't, but he did. That was a plus in the lease negotiations. Part of him was seeing Nagi's progress, part was glimpsing the two in the car, and yet another part.....reached to accept the offered coffee cup. "Thank you, Schuldig." he murmured and sipped it, looking at the city lights. He'd wanted to leave the drapes open half way, exposing a third of the view. The night was beautiful, with only a faint haze from the dust thrown up by the earthquakes.
Schu stood beside him, so close he could feel the heat of his body even through

the suit jacket he still wore despite the hour, yet not touching him. The red head was much more at home, down to his shirt and slacks, stocking feet, comfort, more than japanese tradition making him kick off his boots the minute he came into the house. There was always a scent of something about the german he'd never considered much as anything but Schuldig, until now.
What was that scent? Cigarettes, silk, soap.....a memory of a hand sliding over a shoulder and neck, brushing into the orange flame hair....."Baby.....what is that you put on?" He asked quietly.
"Hmm?" Schu was tired, it had been a long day. He looked into Brad's mind. Then he leaned on him. "Almond milk." he said softly.
"Why haven't I ever noticed it before?" Brad asked.
"I don't know, want me to find out?"
"Why that scent?"
"It's not for scent." Schuldig said. "It's for freckles."
"Freckles?" Brad was mildly surprised.
"Hai, spots. So I don't get them. I don't get many, but I don't want to. You're suddenly very strange, Bradley."
He smiled a little. "Am I?" He sipped the coffee again. "I suppose I've been thinking way to much for your liking." He added wryly.
Schuldig looked deeper into his thoughts. And what he saw made him blink.
"Sshhhh." Brad looked at him, into his eyes. "Just be quiet, Baby. Just....be quiet."
"Ah!" Nagi said, triumph.
They looked to see him smiling broadly, his fingers moving even faster now as he pulled up the file he was after and downloaded it. Omi grabbed up the digital phone on the desk and pressed the number for Yohji's phone.
Schuldig had looked, now he felt an arm come around him, about his lower ribs, to pull him close, warm lips on his temple. He heard it in his mind and in his ear. "Come upstairs." in a soft, deep murmur, so tender it melted him.

Yohji repeated the address aloud to Aya. "Thanks, Omi." he put the phone away.
"Quick work." he commented as Aya changed direction from the main morgue to the third on on the list, further out near the docks, on the other side of Tokyo.
"That's just stupid!" Aya stated.
"Is it?"
"SchuSchu would tell us." he scowled as being upset caused him to shift before the rpms were quite up to it and the gears clashed a little, but just enough to hurt and hurt deep.
Yohji winced mildly....oh, that would cost him. Ran messing up his new toy because of him...."Would he? Not if Brad ordered him not to. And got him so confused he wouldn't believe he was on his way out as well."
"Nani! You're crazy!" Aya informed him loudly.

"That tattoo.....if it's supposed to protect him from this.....why doesn't he have us get it as well?" Yohji asked as carefully as he could. "Why only him?"
"YOHJI! Will you shut up!" Aya flat out ordered him.
He frowned and shut up. Ran was about to have a major fit if anything more upset his driving, that was loud and clear.

Brad caught Schuldig's wrists, careful of the broken one, moments before the redhead could press his hands onto the sensitized skin of his back.
(Sorry!) Schuldig thought to him.
Brad kissed him. "It never happened." He said softly. "Don't apologize."
Schul leaned his forehead to the taller man's jaw with a sigh while Brad undid his shirt. This was one of the rare times Bradley wanted to undress him rather than ordering him to strip. He wanted to take it slow, to make full use of a private time they rarely found these days. In return, Schuldig undressed him.
(You wear too many clothes, mein Mann.) He complained in teasing annoyance as the cotton under vest was slid off.
From working out, from sparring, from hitting the punching bags, from the job itself, Brad was in excellent shape, as they all were. Schuldig ran his hands over the muscles, so well defined without being at all over done. Brad pushed aside a handful of flame hair to put his mouth on the other's neck.
Schu closed his eyes and leaned into it as his love proceeded to set his teeth into him and run now demanding hands over his chest, to take him by the shoulders perhaps a little too tight and really bite in his growing lust.
"Ah!" Schuldig exclaimed.
Brad stopped biting to press a forceful kiss on his mouth, then pushed the un-zipped slacks off the redhead's hips. "Look at you." He said, smiling, gazing into the green eyes he knew so well. "After all this time, still so interested?"

Schuldig felt very warm. "Always." He smiled.
Brad grasped him there, then caressed him, kissing him. "This may be the last time we have together for a while." He said softly.
The green eyes came up sharply, looking into his. "What?"
Brad kissed him again. "It's going to get....very busy soon." He held him closer with one arm, still caressing the copper curled genitals. A few more kisses, then he stopped the foreplay and turned him toward the bed, giving him a slight pressure of a hand to his rump.
Schuldig stripped off his slacks and briefs to lay down. Brad did the same and, putting his glasses on the nightstand, pulled Schuldig into his arms.
"Mmmm." Schu sighed, bare flesh to bare flesh, full length.
Brad laid him on his back, kissing him passionately, caressing him. He just wanted to feel him, his skin, his flesh. To look into his eyes and taste him, to feel him there in his mind, always so close, so familiar, part of him.
"Baby....." He drew him into position and got into him. He was spoilt by now,

always expecting them to be ready for him. He was rarely disappointed. Never with Schuldig.
Schu groaned and pushed up to him, taking him inside as deeply as possible, reaching into his mind....
For a while, it was only them in the whole world. This was what Brad wanted, what he needed, despite the pain as hands clutched his back and nails dug in, despite the visions, despite what he was having to plan on doing, and what it might cost. He kept his lover distracted, away from his troublesome thoughts. It was heart breaking, that trust, that loyalty. He warmed himself at it, and set aside his problems for later.

Araki had problems too. The speed gangs, their activities always an annoyance with their wild attacks and selfish lack of discipline, were now fully out of control. Smashing everything in sight when they attacked, raping and stealing en masse like barbarians. Stupid futureless children, that was all they were, mindless in their rage against the social structures they could for some reason not understand, not even the criminal one. All they cared for was their drugs and their violence and the power of terrorizing at the moment.
They had no souls it would seem, just rabid animals, out to make everyone else suffer for the pain they thought only they felt. As if adolescence and failure to be taken ‘seriously’ were something new they had just invented, and no one else could feel. They just didn’t have the mental skills to deal with reality without the help of mind numbing drugs. They some how were not able to cope with society, unable to interact, useless psychopaths who did not even try to learn.
"Gun them down!" He ordered over the noise of the gun fire. "They’ve already forfeited their lives by defying the Yakuza!"
Crawford had said it would grow increasingly worse, but he now wondered how much so before it could be stopped. Those damned tablets and the nightmare forced on Japan by foreigners!
A bullet damn near caught him and he flattened against the car, closing his eyes, remembering to draw breath, his heart stepped up it’s pace even more.
He’d been in gunfights. He’d been in sword fights. He’d fought hand to hand, and with anything at hand.
How could he fight something he couldn’t see? When opening his eyes didn’t help. When the enemy was an un-natural demonic power controlling weak minds, feeding on violence and un-reasoning violence at that. There was only superstition, talismans and.....ammunition.
He checked his clip on sudden impulse. Good thing, too. He pulled out a full one and pocketed the empty to refill later-----if there was a later.
Crawford was right. It was time to deal with matters now. Not put them off any more. Kai.....he would deal with Kai now, and put aside his disappointment.

"You're mad." Aya said as they walked into the building. "Where the hell is this coming from. Araki talked him into that damned thing and it apparently works. That doesn't mean anything. It just means with his power he needed something to off set the bizarre effects of what's going on."
Only minutes ago, they'd had to defend themselves from an attack in the parking lot. It wasn't that late at night but the intention had apparently been to kill them and take the car. Aya had hated like hell to put the two bodies in the pristine new trunk, but damn it, where else were they supposed to put them until their business here was over? If Schuldig had been there, they might have had a chance of slipping the damned things right into the morgue. Rotten luck!
Aya didn't like the line of thinking Yohji was taking at all. For one thing.....for one thing....."You need your head examined!" he snapped at the man.
Yohji could only think of what he'd been told earlier. And that perhaps their lives were no longer as important as setting right what had been somehow set wrong. "Ran....Just promise me you'll keep your eyes open. That you'll watch for anything weird."
"You're the only weird thing I see." Aya sulked. He wanted this over and done with, he wanted to go home.....
Yohji drew in a deep breath and let it out slow. "Sah, this is too much." He looked around. The halls were quiet, only the night shift on duty. To receive the dead. Waiting. Expecting them. A cool drawer and a grooved table with ice water running on it waiting for them, to drain and open and pick apart their bodies, their souls departed. "So this is where our victims end up when we don't have time to do the job right."
"Shut up, Yohji." Aya hissed at him.

Kirchner had set the container with the ashes in it on the dresser of the hotel room. When he'd first received it from the crematorium attendant.....it had meant nothing to him. But now it's presence had managed to intrude on his life. Some faint sense of sentiment had made him think to take it home.....to lay the dust to rest in native ground. But now.....now he found himself thinking thoughts of how this had been.....his son.
What had he been like? What had he been as a child? What might he have become?
Instead of this.
Instead of Esset.
Instead of Schwarz.
He couldn't think any more and lay down on the bed, tired. It did no good not to think himself, the thoughts continued, not his own but those of others. He sighed and took the pill vial out of his pocket. The drug was incredibly strong, but he was safe here and he needed the rest. He took one and let it slide down his throat, sitting up again to take water from the carafe on the bedside.

As he drifted in and out among the noise of the minds around him, he thought again. Of what he was going to do. Of the plan formed in his mind, so long set in just ignoring what had happened, as long as he was well and clear of it.
The training was still there. And deep inside his mind, so far down, he might have forgotten it, the urge was still there. The young man he had been.....ambitious, powerful, wanting to rule.....stirred.
So, his son had failed his potential.
Sad, really.
He would not. He had been dormant too long in the world.
And with Esset out of the way, it was time for a new ruler. First Schwarz to control, then....

Farfarello had taken his pills. They weren't working. The rising feeling of paranoia and anger was proof enough of that.
It had been a long time since he'd been strait jacketed. He would be unable to hurt himself or any one else he'd reminded himself as they'd slipped it onto him.
As the earth moved again ever so slightly, he heard the voices. Whispers, accusations, cries all malevolent all geared to his psychosis.
"NO!" he yelled, his real eye searching wildly despite knowing he would see nothing in the room. "NO, I won't let ye at me again!"
Still the voices continued, weakening, fading only a little as the earth settled.
His heart was racing, his breathing labored. "No. I won't." He looked at the floor. The industrial carpet so gray. Crawford had spare nothing on this room in it's utilitarianism. A room to lock a mad man in. Walls, blocked in window with bars over the remaining bullet proof Plexiglas, a futon so there was no furniture to pull apart for weapons, the lights behind more bullet proof Plexiglas.
Until the tablets had come into Crawford's possession, the pills had worked. He'd been stable.
Now, he could hear them----the voices. 'he hates you.....he wants to destroy you.....!'
"NO!" Farfarello stated. Facts. Hang onto the facts.....
'lies!' they claimed, surging forward as if physically closer to him now, so close he might feel their breath....
"FACTS." he countered.
Laughter, like a thousand imps...He closed his eyes and leaned back on the wall. Enemies.....his enemies.
Fact. He was here. Fact. Hanako. Fact. He could be sane. Fact.....
"The lord is my shepard....I shall not want..." He whispered faintly..."I shall not want..."

‘mad mad you’re mad!’ the voices shouted gleefully. ‘he hates you, he always has!’
"SANER THAN YE FUCKIN’ BARSTARDS!" He yelled back at them angrily.
Fuck it was going to be a long, long night.....even after the sun rose.....

The boys had gone to bed. He checked Farfarello through the glass. The irishman was ranting at his demons again.
He sighed. Schuldig was asleep, worn out. It had taken some doing, but with his problem, it hadn’t been too much of a strain. He smirked to himself. His problem.
One man’s problem, three other men’s satisfaction?
"Crawford. you’re an ass." He told himself quietly, padding down the stairs.
He got a beer out of the refrigerator and went into the living room / office to pull the box off the floor from under the desk and put it on the top, then sat down and had a deep swallow of the ice cold brew, looking at the box with another sigh, this one....heavy with remorse.
He found the engraved brass and cork coaster and set the bottle down on it. If anything, he liked his furnishings....His car, his clothes, his home. It had taken hard work to get to this luxury. His life laid on the line nearly every damn day and many times at least twice a day.
Except for that damned breakdown.....And that was his sanity there.
He frowned at the box.
If it hadn’t existed, if the stones had never been carved, would he be here? In this little palace of a Tokyo high-rise ‘mansion’? The damned living room big as a car show room?
Would the one piece of jewelry he now allowed himself beyond tie tacks and cufflinks be on his finger? A plain platinum band, seven mm wide, scratched ever so slightly from the abuse of being on when he’d slammed his fist into the dash of the car in frustration.
He had a premonition, one of many tonight when he paid attention to them. Sad violet colored eyes, so hurt.....
"I’m sorry....." he whispered, and opened the box.

Yohji pressed his computer cardlette into the lock to the elevator. As the doors slid open he looked at Aya. "Don’t be mad at me."
"I’m tired, Yohji. If I wasn’t we’d take the stair well" Aya stepped into the elevator. "I just hope we don’t have a big one and get stuck in here all night."

Yohji moved in beside him and pressed the button for the 23rd floor. "Would that be so bad?" he slid an arm behind the fuchsia haired love of his life and leaned over to kiss his cheek lightly.
Aya looked murder at him and put a hand up to his chest to push him away. "With

you....Yes." He stepped aside to sulk at the numbers rising too slow for his liking.
"Ran..." Yohji protested.
Aya looked at the wall.
Yohji sighed and gave up. He'd really done it this time. But.....it was there. Something had changed in Brad lately. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on but it was there.
Nothing stoped the power and they had nothing to worry about after all. In the entrance hall from the elevator, Yohji again was the one to unlock and open the door. Aya took his own coat off and hung it up.
The low lamp from the desk showed Brad sitting there in his black silk robe, an empty long neck beer bottle on the desk and the translation print outs in his hand, the Tablets laid out before him on the table. He looked up at them as they came into the living room, pushing his glasses up with his index finger.
Aya frowned, the sense of betrayal evident in his eyes. "What are you doing?"
"Studying the enemy." Brad said calmly, and cast a cool glance at Yohji.
The eurasian sighed and took out the paper with the information written on it, laying it on the desk before him. "That's the name he gave and the address. We checked it out. He checked out this morning, before the hotel's computer records updated. He was already out of there when he picked up the body and gave that address. The forwarding address went to one he never checked into, the reservation was canceled. He's covering his bases before we even find them."
Aya tried to fight the rising panic in his heart. Damn Yohji for his paranoia!
"I thought you knew already what those things could do. Put them away."
Brad ignored the paper on the desk, still looking at Yohji. He held his hand up to Aya, to beckon him to him, and moved to take him onto his lap when he came to him, holding him as if he were a child in need of comfort, never taking his eyes of the tall blond. "Are you tired, Princess?" He murmured, stroking the expensively tinted hair.
Yohji frowned. He didn't know what to think now. Except.....that Brad knew. He had to.
And he wanted to be the one being held and reassured. To be told it wasn't at all true and that it would never happen.....
Brad got up, easily lifting the japanese off of himself and setting him back on his feet. and then still holding him close, walking him to the stairs and up them.....leaving Kudoh standing there by the desk, without looking back.
"Shit." Yohji said and went out to have a cigarette on the balcony.

Nagi put down the kitchen phone on it's base, frowned and grabbed the shopping list off the pad. "They're not delivering!" He called to Brad. "They say the delivery boys won't go out it's too dangerous for them! Omi!" He went to get his coat out of the closet.

Omi came to lean over the railing of the stairs. "Hai?"
"Put some pants on, Omi!" Nagi ordered. "We have to go shopping!"
"Sah....! Why pants!" Omi demanded.
"BECAUSE I SAID SO." Nagi told him loudly. "Damn it Omi, looking like a girl right now just makes you more of a target! Now do as I say!"
Omi blinked. Well!
He turned and went to get changed.
He decided he like it when Nagi ordered him around. As long as he didn't give up his contacts for glasses...

The two boys, yes, the blond one was, after all, a boy.....drove out of the parking level in a little dark blue Nissan two door.
Kirchner pulled into traffic after them. Naoe Nagi. The telekinetic and the youngest. The youngest, but more likely to be the most alert. Teen-agers always took things more seriously. It was their elders that got jaded.
Yes, these two were still far more a-tuned to the 'fight', alert, covering their bases, watching their backs. Tokyo in the day time was still a fairly safe place, like a war zone during a cease fire. But still.....you never knew when some mad man was going to dash out into traffic, try to grab a car or rob someone.....He had to remember to keep his eyes open for his own safety while stalking them.
Grocery shopping. Such a mundane thing. He smiled to himself. The cares of killers put aside for such simple domesticity.
He delved carefully into the boy's mind. And almost gave himself away with a start of recognition.
He'd yet to see the red headed one, the telepath.....
Anna....

Schuldig looked at Brad. He'd paused in the middle of their sparring to allow a vision to play out. And the immediate thought right after the 'white noise' effect of it had passed was one Schuldig had caught loud and clear.....
"No." Brad stated, looking into his green eyes. "Trust me, Schuldig, this has to be."
"But..."
Brad took a sharp jab at the red head that he barely managed to block to emphasize his point. "I said it has to be. Take my word for it." He told him.
Schuldig went for his jaw then shifted at the last moment to his left rib cage, managing to fake him out just until it was too late despite his talent. "It still sucks." He said angrily.
"Focus, Schuldig." Brad told him, kicking him in the hip. "You're going to end up with more than a sore back if you don't concentrate."
Schu frowned and did as he was told. He knew damn well the man never held back

in practice. But it still hurt to think that he could just do this so damned easily.
"It’s all right, Baby..." Brad soothed, taking another vicious jab at his jaw.
"I wouldn’t let anything happen to you, not for anything in the world." He took another jab with the other lightly padded fist before Schuldig could finish reacting the first and caught the side of his jaw this time.
Schuldig frowned dangerously at him and backed off. "No, you’re the only one allowed to do the damage to me, right, mein Mann?" He said icily.
Brad had to smile cruelly. "That’s right, Baby....me and only me." Damn he looked so sweet, his hair just beginning to damp with sweat, flushed from the exertion. Brad motioned to him. "Come here."
"Iie." Schuldig said, keeping his guard up.
"I said come here." Brad repeated slowly and lightly.
Schuldig frowned, trying to read him. But he was blocking him mentally. "Nine, Bradley. I’m not in the mood for this game."
God that white muscle shirt and red shorts looked so good on him.....he grinned and let him read his mind after all.....
Schuldig unpeeled the velcro tabs on the fist pads and tossed them aside. "That game.....yes." He said.
Brad sucker punched him in the stomach.
"Shit!" Schuldig complained, but then let himself be caught up and kissed.

Chapter Twenty Six
"Rising Fire"

Ah, the routine tasks of life. Brad finished writing the last check for the last bill for the week and signed it. Some things, you just didn't do on line. This mundane account would never be traced back to the big ones.

He'd already seen the enemy's odd shock at something he'd found in the boy's minds. Another telepath. But Schuldig had assured him that Kudoh's mind was not being affected in that manner. Brad sat back, re-considering the situation.

A telepath, like Chapel. But how strong? The vision he'd had of the man in the morgue had made him suspicious.....this one had confirmed it. He was too accustomed to seeing Schuldig's odd little reactions to things not to know a telepathic shock when he saw one, no matter how subtle.

Yohji.....

The blond came over to the desk and looked down at him. "I'm getting a little tired of being ignored, Brad." He said.

Brad thought it over, and then, changed his mind. The man didn't deserve this. He tortured himself enough as it was. There would be another way to take on the enemy. He took of his glasses and sighed, rubbing an eye, then putting them back on and looking up at the blond. "Sit down."

Yohji drew the other chair to the side of the desk, not wanting much of it between them. He wanted to see the man's eyes behind those lenses. "I asked you the other day and you gave me a nice pat little story and no real answers except that 'the dam was breaking'. Then you go and get that damned tattoo. It hurts you, Brad, I see it, before every temblor, every quake. Why did you do this?"

"I told you. It keeps the paranormal phenomena attracted by the tablets from affecting me. You've seen how bad Farfarello has gotten again. That's with the medication."

"He's fighting it well enough, and he hasn't had any damn.....spell put on him." Yohji made a face of annoyance.

"He's in an environment he's secure in." Brad said quietly. "He knows he can't hurt anyone tied up in there. It leaves him free to fight the influence. That strait jacket and locked cell is his protection."

"What the hell was that all about last night, cold shouldering me? And don't tell me you didn't, even Schuldig went stiff when I got into bed beside him. You think I don't know you own him body and soul, that he lives on your whims? I'm so used to holding him....that damned problem with his back....and he moved away from me? That was cold, Brad."

Yes....it was. He frowned at the desk top. Then he looked at Kudoh again. "I had an idea of fooling the enemy by making him think....I would be rid of you and Aya to keep my power. The man's a telepath, it would work if you and Aya believed that I would do that. That I would betray you. Now....I see what it would cost me in the end. Even if I were to continue with the plan and have you

both hate me.....a later explanation would never be totally believed. The damage would be.....irreparable."
Yohji let this sink in. "Yeah. It would. But what do you know about this guy you're not telling us?"
"Nothing, Love." Brad said. "I'm finding out as we go along, same as everything else. I do know though, that he wants the tablets. And that to me, means he's far too knowledgeable about them to be taken as lightly as we normally do an enemy. This is one of us. An Esset trained operative. Older, experienced, and.....I suspect.....very powerful, to have escaped Esset."
"And you were going to take him on all by yourself? Break your own damn rule?" Yohji demanded without raising his voice. "And shove us out of the way, drive us away, in fact?"
Brad almost frowned. He hadn't foreseen Schuldig telling Yohji the truth.....no. When had the man become so perceptive? "Yes." He said simply.
Yohji looked at him for a long silent time. "We're the bad guys, remember? The one's who don't give a damned about anyone else's ass as long as we save ours. What the hell were you thinking? To take all this on yourself? For what? Who cares if Japan sinks into Hell! Let's just get out of here and leave the damned tablets to rot!"
"You don't mean a word of that." Brad told him.
"Don't I!" Yohji said. "Since when do you read minds?"
Brad smiled slightly. "I was just wondering when you developed the ability. You see, it's getting worse. The paranormal phenomena are creeping up all around us from every break and crack in the real world of Tokyo over the mystic one beneath it. And the power in the tablets was supposed to contain it. But it only gave it a focal point to aim for. First in Tibet, then Germany, now Japan. Esset wasn't created by those tablets, but the tablets made Esset what it became, what made Schwarz. I can't just walk away from this. I've said over and again, I won't be driven from my home. And I won't surrender to another version of Esset. Because I think that that's what this Kirchner has in mind." He frowned.
Yohji had a very clear thought suddenly. A revelation, one might call it. His world hinged on this man. He'd still be Kritiker's lap dog, or dead, if not for this man. He'd gone to the enemy and the enemy had given him his life. How fucking ironic. He got up and moved closer, to take him by the shoulders and hold him close, sliding his fingers in to the black silk hair as he held Brad's head to his chest. Strong arms closed around his hips, holding him tight. "Fuck you if you think I'm going to leave you just because you say so." He stated.
Brad moved to take his glasses off and put his mouth over that oh so tempting belly button.
"Oh....god...." Yohji pulled away. "Don't start unless you mean to finish this."
Brad held him by the hips, looking up at him, wryly smiling. "Do I ever not?" He stood up, locking his mouth over the blond's, kissing him and pressing his tongue into his mouth to make his intentions very very clear.

Kirchner was shaken. The shock of seeing the red headed man in the boy's minds had temporarily set him back.
The hair, the features, the eyes....what he'd seen of the memories of the man in their minds was all to convincing.
Anna. The devils had used her as well.
Perhaps he'd been empty too long, because this new information filled him with pain.
Anna....her eyes, her smile, her laughter....it played out in his mind as surely as if he were recorded on film. She'd worn her bright auburn hair cropped and curled to the time's fashion. No one could afford the small luxuries then, the war had taken everything, and women had cut their hair.
The last time he'd seen her, she'd been smiling, incredibly happy.....before.....
He shook his head, saying aloud. "No. No, I won't think of her. She's long dead."
Oh but it hurt.
Before he'd never seen her again.
He had to pull himself together....to do what he'd set out to do. Follow the two youths, find out all he could. Even if it meant....
He drew a deep breath and tried not to deal with it, but it came to him again. And when he managed to get past it, he realized there were tears on his face. He whipped them away, and quickly located the boys again and followed.

Nagi had a headache. He and Omi put the groceries away and he got the pills down to take two and swallow them with water. Omi looked at him. "What's wrong?"
"This headache" Nagi frowned. "Its not going away. And I didn't even use my power." Normally he only got them from using the talent.
Omi slipped an arm around him gently. "Maybe if you lay down?"
Nagi leaned on him, his head on his shoulder. "Maybe."
Omi walked him up the stairs to their room, and left him to sit on the bed as he went to draw the blinds. "Just get under the cover and relax." He said coming back to draw it back from the pillows. "I could use a nap myself. I didn't think I was this tired this morning." He yawned.
"It's weird..." Nagi laid down and sighed as Omi got in beside him and got comfortable. "So tired....."
Both were almost immediately asleep, drained.

Schuldig looked at the two on the bed and sighed. "Bradley! You said there'd be no time for this and now look at you!"
Aya crossed his arms, frowning, beside him. "I'd just like to know what the hell

is going on around here."
Bradley sat up, having been yanked from his post coital nap by that non subtle method of speech and telepathy Schuldig used when he was truly being a pain in the ass.
Yohji had made it very clear.....how he felt about him.
Damn it he was getting hard again just remembering. He glared at Schuldig....and put his glasses on. "Schuldig....." He warned....
The flame red head smiled like a bad boy caught. The maroon one frowned even more.
"What?" Schuldig said, all innocence. "So....the plans have changed?"
"What plans?" Ran stated.
Schu glanced at him. Oh yeah. It was Ran. He felt a shift in Brad's thinking and looked at him again. That little smirk. Bradley loved having Ran at his mercy...knowing he could simply flip a switch with a word and make the assassin his bitch in heat. (Bradley....shame on you!) He smiled more sweetly now.
(You woke me rudely, what do you expect, Baby.) Bradley thought at him. "Changed plans." He answered Ran. "That little argument last night....did it even begin to occur to you that Kudoh is susceptible to the influences of the rising tide of evil mania?"
Yohji sighed, pushing his hair out of his face. and felt about on the bedside for his cigs and lighter. "S'that what that was?" he mumbled, lighting the cigarette. He took a deep drag, tossed the lighter back on the bedside and then turned to lay his head on Brad's thigh. He'd knocked himself out to please the man, to make up for that. Nice to know why.
Ran glared at the blond. "I said he was being stupid." he stated.
Schuldig, teased earlier in exercise, now made up his mind to get some. "The brats are home." He unbuttoned his shirt. "What happened?"
Brad looked at him again, having been distressed by the smoke in his face from the cigarette being smoked in his lap. "They got groceries?" He said. He hadn't 'seen' anything besides that weird little quirk of Kirchner's when he'd tailed them.
"I checked, they're out cold." Schuldig said, throwing the shirt on a chair, unlike Yohji, who's things were all over the floor.....
Brad frowned. "Go check on them again, Schuldig. Kudoh! Enough!" He took the cigarette away and put it out. "How many times do I have to tell you! No smoking in the house!"
Yohji sighed, deprived. He sat up, looking at the man, then looked at Schuldig who suddenly looked upset and went to obey. "What's wrong?"
"I don't know." Brad said. He tried again. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. One way or the other. He checked other things. Yes, he could see Schu opening the door quietly before his had reached it....He could see Ran softening back into.....
Aya walked around the huge bed to sit down on the edge at Yohji's side. "I'm sorry, Yohtan...." He said, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek and then

looked worriedly at the door for Schuldig's return. They'd spent the last two hours tracking Kirchener...and he realized now....they might have been sent on a wild goose hunt? He looked at Bradley. "This will cost you." He warned.
"When doesn't it?" Bradley said, his eyes still on the doorway.
"I want a new katana." Aya stated.
"Yes, Princess....." Brad said absently.
"I want three big fat diamonds set along the grip."
"Mmm hmmm."
"I want a blood ruby on the end of the grip."
"Very pretty...." Brad was still not getting anything from the boy's future.....
"I want to shove it up your ass to break it in."
"Thats nice....." Brad looked at him sharply suddenly.
Aya smirked. "You weren't paying attention to ME at all."
Yohji laughed.
Schuldig came back in. "They're out cold! I tried to wake them and there's not an ounce of conscious thought!
"Fuck!" Brad threw off the sheet and got out of bed, hurrying to find his clothes.

Ran shuddered. Hospitals.....
"There's no sign of drugs." the doctor reported, puzzled. "You said they just....came home from shopping and passed out? What transportation were they using? If they were in a car....perhaps exhaust fumes...I could check for carbon monoxide residuals specifically
...but it would have traced in the blood tests."
Crawford frowned. "I'm certain the car is fine. What exactly is wrong with them?"
"Comatose." She stated. "And how often does that happen to two healthy young men at the same time in the same circumstances and at the same level with no apparently physical damage being involved?"
Ran was not happy. He wanted to run from this....he wanted to hold on to Crawford. Comatose.....like his sister...
Schuldig reached into his mind and attempted to soothe him. (Hush, Sweet. It will be alright...)
(Not if they die!) Ran informed him.
(They are not going to die.) Schuldig insisted.
(My sister did!)
(She was thrown from an explosion and then hit by a car! Omi and Nagi are just.....shut off....)
Ran glared at him.
"Kudoh, take Ran outside." Crawford ordered. "Morishima-san, I want the boys'

room guarded. No one under any circumstances is to go near them without medical need and not alone. Do I make myself very clear?" He'd taken out his wallet and was holding up quite a large sum of money. "This should cover the extra trouble taken."
"But....." She protested.
"My son and his friend are to be kept safe." He put the money in her lab coat pocket. "And by the way.....Tsukiyono has a bullet wound on his right buttock. You might want to keep an eye on that. And yes, this is not a matter for the police."
She looked very annoyed. "What exactly do you have against the police, Mr. Crawford." She said in perfectly good english.
"Do you seriously want to see the files?" Brad asked her.
She blinked.
"I thought not." He said and turned to lead his people out .
She took a deep slow breath and let it out. Then took the money out of her coat pocket and made sure it was safely in her work slacks pocket. It was best not to know too much in this business. "Orderlies!" She called. "I want 24 hour guard on room 416, the one with the two boys in it. Someone has attempted to poison them and may try to come in and finish it." Well, who knew....and it was as good a reason as any. "And don't complain, I have your bonuses waiting for you."

"What's happened to them, why are they in a coma!" Ran demanded in the back seat of the car.
Bradley leaned to kiss him on the cheek tenderly. "I don't know but it will be fixed." he said gently.
Ran wanted to pull away and sulk...Aya wanted to be held and made to forget...
"Bradley....how can you tell someone is being influenced by that...those.....things?" he asked.
Brad looked at him. "What's wrong?" He asked.
"I....feel like I'm being torn apart..." Aya said, feeling very dizzy suddenly.
The car seemed to disappear around him for a moment and he was suspended over and in nothingness....then suddenly back in the car....."Ahhh!" He exclaimed with a start, eyes wide, panting, hanging onto the door handle and to Brad's arm. "What the fuck was that!"
Schuldig turned to look at him from the driver's seat. "Eh....Bradley.....he just had a weird sort of flash..."
Yohji shivered, as if someone had poured ice water.....into his grave....."Shit!" He said, his teeth chattering.....
"It's starting." Brad snapped. "Schuldig, get us home now!"

He hauled out the box and put it on the desk, tearing off his tie and throwing it aside. Right now he had one thing to do. He pulled open the lid and yanked open the folded cloth, then braced himself as another earthquake hit. His back

was on fire.....as if every detail of the sigil dragon were writhing into his flesh....and for a moment his eyes rolled up as the claws dug into him...
And he saw it.....Aya had described the frightening vision to him, but he was able to see more with his perception...the dimensions overlapping...Hell on earth. He heard and saw everything at once, an incomprehensible babble made comprehensible....he heard / saw the elements tormenting Farfarello, the agonies working on Kudoh, and warring elements in Ran-Aya, the...thing....waiting behind Omi....
He did not see anything for himself, Schuldig, Nagi, or Farfarello, oddly enough, and it was very clear to him that he did not, despite the insanity of it all. Why were they not affected? Why couldn't he see their future?
The earthquake passed and he came back to full consciousness, suddenly back to holding onto the desk, Schuldig gripping his arm, looking into his eyes in concern.
"What is it Brad, what's happening?
He shook his head. He could only pass along what he'd seen in the vision.
Schuldig drew a deep breath, then let go of him, looking at Aya and Yohji. Yohji could not stop shaking, he was so cold. Aya was very very quiet, his eyes the eyes of a drugged man. "What can we do? What good are those things now?" He looked at the tablets.
"Not much we can use, but they are the gate." Brad said, taking them out and laying them on the desk in order. He took out the translations and found the one thing they could do for now. "I can re-inforced the blocking spell." He read it silently over again. "Bring Aya here to me."
Schuldig went to draw Aya off the arm chair he'd curled up in, holding himself. The japanese moved as if in a daze.
Brad caught his arm and pushed up the sleeves of his jacket and shirt, picking up the obsidian chipped blade letter opener on the desk.
Schuldig gasped as Brad sliced at the younger man's wrist and held it over the tablets, letting the blood drip on each one in turn, reciting the spell.
Even worse.....as it hit....the blood did not splatter or sit on the solid polished stone....but was swallowed up by it....disappearing as if into a sponge with no remaining trace.
Brad took his handkerchief and tied up the wounded arm tightly, pulling Aya to him, kissing him and holding him.
Lightening struck outside with a sudden crack...and everything grew still.
Yohji stopped shivering.
Aya moaned and moved to hold onto Brad.
He looked at Schuldig over Aya's shoulder. "That should buy us some time."

Kirchner had felt the dimensional shift as well. Being as over sensitive to it as he was, he saw every damned move it made. And the sudden change of the small

sacrifice.
"Oh, you are smart, Crawford, very smart." He murmured, having a much better idea of what Crawford was about, now that he'd been through the boy's minds. He'd seen how Crawford had plotted and planned and gone against everything Esset stood for, his revenge for being made a slave.
And the red head.....'Guilty'....Anna's son. It could be no one else. A telepath with extraordinary resistance. Crawford had taken full advantage of every weakness he had. So like his mother....full of weaknesses. Her overweening need to please, her wildness, her insecurities.
Given what he did know, he had a good chance of winning. But he wanted an absolute one hundred percent chance.
Crawford's using the japanese to feed the spell was unexpected. Now he knew how far the man would go to save himself. The guards on the boys were no problem. He was done with them for now. He wanted to spare the young telekinetic anyway. If possible, he wanted all of the remaining Esset trained members intact.
The three others.....Weiss they had been called....He had yet to decide upon. If he used them to control the team...they would be a weakness. If he removed them.....Crawford might possibly be resentful. Damn the man's unpredictable greed.
He sat back in the chair in the darkened hotel room and rested his over taxed powers as best he could. The battle was won for now. He had to rest.
If only he were young again, and yet had such control of his power. They would be no match for him at all. As it was....he needed rest. He sighed and got up to get the pills and take them. Again he had to allow himself to live through the feeling of letting go...of damn near dying to get the rest his body desperately needed. The poison had yet to kill him....he knew he'd wake again.

Nagi opened his eyes. "Nani....?"
He sat up and looked across the room at Omi in the other bed.
"Doko...." He looked around, disoriented....then realized it was a hospital room. He got up, feeling somewhat stiff.
He moved to shake Omi gently. "Wake up."
"Mmmnnnnn....." Omi turned and stretched then winced as his wounded bottom twinged at the muscle being tensed. "What? Where are we?" He blinked.
"The hospital, Koi." Nagi said. "Damn it. why?"
Omi rubbed his face sleepily. "Mmm....find out?"
Nagi grabbed the telephone and pressed the buttons.

"Too many things are happening too fast to understand." Yohji complained.
"Just keep on your toes, Love." Bradley advised, signing the release forms with an all too practiced speed.
Schuldig grabbed Nagi's chin and looked into the navy blue/black eyes, into his

mind, sifting and searching.
Nagi was at first reticent as ever but then realized he'd better open up. Schuldig wouldn't hurt him.
Oh, but it did hurt....the tracers Kirchener had put there to cover his tracks came out like thorns and he nearly collapsed again, Omi having to catch him before he went down. Schuldig held onto him mentally, not willing to give up his search for information.
"Shit, Schuschu, next time kiss first." Nagi cracked at him, annoyed for the pain but not exactly resentful of the help. Once again, his head didn't have that wrapped in cotton feeling that ment his powers were at full force.
"Omi would shoot me, bishonen." Schuldig slapped him lightly on the face, giving Omi a grin.
Omi pouted, doing a very good imitation of a jealous girl. "Mah...Schuldig, don't tempt me!"
"Omi, behave." Aya told him.
Omi shot him a look. If anything, Aya treated him more like a kid now than he ever had when they were in Weiss!
Dr. Morishima tried not to let the whole incident get to her. Where these men were concerned, there were never any answers that made any sense. She looked at the flame haired gaigen. "How is that wrist?"
"Hurting." He said curtly.
"While you're here, we should ex-ray it."
"No." he said. "Mein Mann, let's go."
"Later, Doctor." Crawford told her in that smooth, dark voice of his. "We're in rather a hurry. After all, all hell is breaking loose in Tokyo, and you'll have more than enough work before sunrise tomorrow to keep you busy."
She frowned. Damn him. The last time he'd said something like that they'd had a twenty-four hour emergency staff stance. "What are you, a fortuneteller?" she said wryly.
He smiled slightly, those odd light brown eyes dangerous in that moment. "Hai." he said softly, then took the red head in his arm like one would a woman and lead him out, the two boys following them and the other two men behind them. She shivered. How.....strange.....

"What now?" Schuldig asked, finally, a cup of coffee in his hands. They were all in the kitchen, the night dark outside. It seemed later than it was because of how odd the day had been...
"You feel it?" Brad said. "It's affecting time."
Schuldig shook his head. "It's hard to remember what happened today....Like it wasn't today at all."
"Weird." Aya said, while Nagi re-bandaged his wrist. "I can't remember this happening."

"I’m sorry, I had to reinforce the spell of the tablets." Bradley said.
"Anything, my darling, anything you want." He shook his head. "When this is over.....I’ll buy you the whole counter at Boucheron. In Paris. But only for a few hours. Not to stay." He realized....he might get trapped again in to yet another vacation.....
"Some one’s feeling guilty." Schuldig said in a sort of sing song undertone.
Yohji smirked at him, cigarette in hand, sitting beside him at the table. The window was open and the stove vent fan was on behind him. He’d made that much concession to Brad’s damned rule. "Eh, what about me, Boss? What if I want something for a little souvenir, hmm?"
Brad looked at him coolly.
Aya swatted the blond with his free hand, just enough to muss his hair. "Yohji, you have me. What more could you want?"
Yohji looked up at him. "How generous of you, Ran."
Brad laughed softly. "Him, I’d sacrifice, Kudoh, you, never."
"Sah!..." Aya protested.
"Hold still!" Nagi froze him, still tying the bandage.
"Yohji’s blood’s too dirty." Schuldig sniped. And stole the cigarette from him to inhale and blow the smoke at him with a wicked grin.
Brad plucked it from him and put it out in Yohji’s cup. "I should liberally spank you all." he said, sipping his own coffee. "But it’s going to be too busy a night for nonsense. Will that be alright for fighting, Aya?" He looked up at him.
Ran flexed the wrist in it’s finished bandage. "It stings a little, but it’s no bullet wound. "Thank you, Nagi."
"What will happen, Bradley?" Omi asked.
"We’re in for one hell of a night." Brad said, seeing things already. "Get yourself as awake as you can, and make sure you all have as much ammo and back up weapons as you can carry comfortably. First it will be the phenomena drawn to the tablets. Then it will be Kirchner when he wakes up."
"Wakes up?" Schuldig asked.
"I had a vision....when the boys woke....Kirchner has to take curare to sleep. He’s going to be immune to your darts, Omi."
"Why curare....?" Schuldig asked.
Brad looked at him and there was worry in those brown eyes. "He’s a telepath. Maybe more. I’m picking up little hints of something else behind that. But things are too hectic right now. Aya’s blood only bought us time, not respite."

Chapter Twenty Seven
"Cold, Cold Heart"

It was strange to go about the business of preparing for a siege, and against an unknown enemy. They had no idea of how it would come, only that it would. Weapons, ammunition, Kevlar vests, only to sit and wait? The living room was eerily quiet for all the sounds of final checks being run through.

"Make it come after us." Brad stated. "It's stronger at night, when people are tired, and free from the day's distractions. Night is when people prone to evil feel safer, less inhibited. The speed gangs for one thing, though they wouldn't be ambitious enough normally to try and take a maximum security housing tower." He holstered his Walther, having gone through the routine check so mechanically it was like breathing.

Ran had stripped down to his 'blacks' again. Granted the jeans were newer, expensive, and the old cut off sweatshirt was now spandex over kevlar, and the old trench was replaced by soft tailored wool when it was cold, but one might have from a distance mistaken him for the Weiss hunter he'd been. And even then, not for long. The kitten was now a full grown cat. His awkward temper losses and frustration were now full concentration and determination. There was a gun holster against his left rib cage and he knew how to use the gun. Practice had made damned near perfect, especially up against a precog. His speed and accuracy and ability to 'read' his opponent's moves by a mere muscle twitch or eye movement had increased to almost an un-natural talent level. There was a steel-like confidence to him now that had replaced the defensive glower of youth.

Yohji couldn't even be bothered to zip up his kevlar. It hung outside his spandex top, which was, Brad noted with an annoyed glance of resignation.....cropped. "What good is that thing if you don't close it over your self?"

Yohji grinned, wrapping the elastic on his hair to tie it back in a pony tail. "When trouble shows up I'll zip it up, I swear."

Nagi snorted. "That sounds so unlike you, Kudoh. Usually you're the first to unzip when 'trouble' shows up." He looked archly at Schuldig, who glared at him for being mouthy.

Brad gave the youth a cool look. Granted he had grown only a little taller but he was filling out a bit after all. More time in the gym would take care of that.

Schuldig sighed and holstered his gun. "Why the hell can't we just meet this thing head on?" he said impatiently. "Just go out and make targets of ourselves and draw it out?"

"Because we can't." Bradley looked at him. "If we were out in the streets, it would hit us from all sides at once. We'd definitely go down. If we somehow managed to escape all it threw at us, it would only find more to throw at us. My

concern is Kirchner." He frowned. "When he wakes, we'll have a defined enemy to deal with. I believe it will focus on him, it's very hard to tell."
"What good will knowing who one enemy is when this paranormal crap is after us?" Yohji asked. "There must be something we can do."
"We're doing it." The american said quietly. "We can make a stand here, but when Kirchner moves, it will be strait for us. And he may well be very susceptible to the paranormal influence. My visions are getting so confusing, the only recourse I have to is to damp my talent down and stick to the very near future." He was scowling out-right now. He hated not seeing what was going to happen, being uncertain, taking chances.
Schuldig picked up his mental frustration and went to him, reaching to run a hand up his arm to his shoulder, looking into his eyes.
Brad leaned to kiss him briefly. "Still having the problem with remembering?"
"It's coming and going in fits, as if I were just dead tired, which I am. Stop frowning, mein Mann." Schuldig caressed his cheek. "You'll give yourself wrinkles." he moved closer to kiss him back.
Omi came back to the living room. He'd gone to check on Farfarello. "He seems calmer now." He said quietly.
"Now." Brad said, a hand on Schuldig's shoulder. "But for how long?" The frown was not going away any time soon.
Ran rubbed the bandage on his wrist, lip twitching in annoyance.
Yohji moved over to slip his arms about the japanese red head from behind and kiss his neck. Ran looked annoyed. "Yohji.....stop it..." He protested, trying to shrug him off.
Yohji wasn't having no for an answer. "Why should I?"
Ran drew away from him. "Just don't." he blushed fiercely.
Brad had watched this little scene with interest. (What's going on, Baby?)
Schuldig checked. (Ran's in control. Aya is recessive now. Very recessive.....)
He frowned himself, now.
Brad slipped from Schu's grasp to go to Ran. He looked the younger man in the eyes. Ran didn't flinch or look away but there was something in those eyes, very close to defiance.....Brad's went to the left earlobe....."Where is your earring?" He reached up to smooth the lobe between his thumb and finger, looking down into those purple depths again.
Ran tipped his head away from the light caress. "It catches the light, it's too obvious at night for stealth."
Brad frowned. Then he grabbed the younger man behind the head and forced a kiss on him. The response was negligent, and when he looked again Ran was even cooler.
"My perfect beauty..." Brad breathed, and then punched him in the solar plexus, sending him crumpling down.
"What the fuck!" Yohji exclaimed, catching him and letting him down slowly, to kneel beside the fallen red head.

"It's gotten to him." Brad stated.
Yohji checked to make certain he was breathing. A punch like that could kill a man. But he was only out cold. Yohji looked up at Brad then Schuldig. "How could you tell? I thought he was just being 'Ran' for a change."
"No matter how 'Ran' he gets, have you ever known him to take off all his jewels?" Brad said.
Yohji caressed the lily-white cheek. "Schu?" He looked up at the german.
Brad caught Schuldig's arm before he could move a muscle to kneel. "Don't. It might get into you as well."
Schuldig looked at him. "But..."
"No." Brad ordered. "Yohji, get the hand cuffs and restrain him before he comes to again. I didn't hit him that hard."

Aya dreamed fitfully, images playing out in his mind.
It was a nightmare. It was as if he were forced to watch as he was sent through things that were impossible, that never could have happened, and yet.....felt as real as if they were actually happening to him. Vividly and surreal, as if in another life. And it all came down to one thing over and over again, convincing him of it.
Crawford was his enemy. He had to kill him to survive.
That smirk, the evil in the man.....he'd stolen his little sister.....she was alive and he was going to kill her in some bizarre evil plan.....
He sat up suddenly, eyes wide open and with a yell. "NO!"
Five pair of eyes turned toward him, two pair those of his Weiss team mates. He looked down.....his wrists were handcuffed, his ankles too.....He looked around, disoriented, breathing hard.
He swallowed hard, looking at Yohji and Omi. The memories....
Crawford walked over to look down at him, hands in the pockets of his slacks, jacket off so that the gun in it's holster was very evident. "Bad dreams, Aya?" He said quietly.
Aya frowned sullenly, noting his katana was right there in it's sheath on the low table before him, that and a gun in it's holster....
Yohji came to stand beside Crawford.....beside him.....hell, he leaned on him, an arm up on his shoulder in a very familiar manner. "Eh, look at him, Bradley. That's not 'our' Aya." He didn't exactly frown but his normally smiling lips were a hard line, his eyes concerned. "That's the old Aya."
"So I see." Crawford said. "Don't----try it." He bent to up the gun and sword and handed them to Yohji. "Put these out of reach, Love." He looked again at Aya as Yohji took them from his hands.
'Our Aya'? 'Love'? Ran scowled now. Kudoh was the traitor.....Manx had warned him, one of them could well be a traitor when the time came.....It wasn't unexpected. Kudoh was to much of a sensualist to be trusted.....

"Mien Mann." Schuldig said. "I have to, now, I can't let this happen to him."
Crawford almost got a chance to protest, but Aya lost notice then and there as something brushed his mind like a chill wind.
"Ahhh!" Schuldig yelped and physically as well as mentally backed off in pained shock.
"Schuldig!" Crawford exclaimed.
Nagi moved to steady him. "Schu?" He said, worried. "Schu!" He snapped when there was no response.
"What ever the fuck that thing is....it's in good and deep." Schuldig, dazed, actually shuddered in Nagi's hands on his lower back and arm.
Crawford sighed heavily. "I was afraid of this. I never should have given it his blood. That was a mistake, a bad chance taken."
Kudoh having set the weapons on the side table, moved around the coffee table to put a hand on Aya's shoulder to push him firmly back down on to the sofa . Aya was too cuffed hand and foot to fight it. "Better just give it a rest, Samurai." Kudoh stated.
Aya could have killed him, then and there. "Traitor!" He hissed angrily, hating this defenseless position.
"Is there ANY way we can get it to let him go?" Yohji asked Brad, hurt by the hate coming off Aya at the moment but not exactly able to blame any of it on him. That was still his Ran there, despite the behavior induced by demons or what ever it was.
"Yohji is right, he's acting just like he used to." Omi pouted.
Aya was outraged to see the Schwarz kid step to Tsukiyono's side to slip an arm around him and give him a kiss on the cheek.
'We'll get him back, Koi." Nagi said in soft assurance.
"We'd better." Omi stated. "I don't like him this way. He was nuts. More then now." He added. Then realized what little sense that made now.
"Eh, what about the earring trick?" Yohji said to Brad. "You know, just show him the damned thing and hypnotize him back, like before?"
"If only it were that simple." Brad said, looking down at the prone red head. "I don't know what it's done to him, and Schuldig can't find out. Fujimiya, do you know where you are and how you got here?" He asked coolly.
"I'm here, aren't I?" Aya snapped back coldly. "What does it matter what you've managed to pull, Schwarz." He glared again at Kudoh and Tsukiyono.
"It matters very much to me." Crawford said. Something seemed to come over him, a rage of anger, as Aya watched him warily.
The german, Schuldig, suddenly reached up to press splayed fingers to the side of his head. "Temper, mein Mann, you're red lining again." He murmured.
(I need to kill something, to feel it's blood on my hands!) Brad snarled internally. (Let it inhabit someone I can KILL!)
(Yohji, help me keep him calm.) Schu called to him quietly.
"Bradley, he's okay." Yohji said. "His head's fucked but he's still here and

safe. Why get upset?"
"That fucking THING is trying to take away my life!" Brad snarled. "I wont serve it, so it wants to destroy me!"
Aya tried to take all this in. ‘Here and safe’? What the hell?
Schu and Yohji were working on keeping Brad quiet.....Nagi kept an eye on Aya. Part of it was habit, acting as the restraint on any victim. But more than part of it was concern for the man he’d come to know as family.
"What if it goes for me?" Omi wondered.
Nagi put both arms around him now. "We’ll fight it." He promised.
Yohji looked at Aya in helpless frustration. "Ran, think for godsakes! How else would you be here? Fight it! Look around you, this is home, we’ve been here for two years, you agreed to the deal! You sold us out for Takatori’s death! For an attempt to save your sister!"
"Yohji!" Brad yelled at him sharply. "That’s enough!"
"No!" Yohji stated. "I want that thing out of him now!" He half knelt on the sofa’s edge to grab Aya by the shoulders and shake him. "Damn it, Ran, remember, will you! Remember WHO you are!"
"Go to hell!" Aya retorted, wishing his hands were free and his sword was in them. "I’ll send you there myself!"
Crawford grabbed Kudoh by the arm and pulled him away, moving to slap Aya’s face in a sharp crack. He was barely under control of himself and this was damn near the last straw! "You listen to me, Fujimiya! What ever that thing has done to you, you’re mine! It’s eaten into your mind and locked up everything that would allow you to know how much you’ve mean to me! But I wont stand for you abusing Kudoh that way. You answer me! How the fuck do you think you got here! What is your last memory of being free?"
The blow was harsh and stung. He gasped and lost his half sitting position again that Yohji had pulled him into, prone on the leather again.
But it made him think.
He opened his eyes again and looked at the high ceiling of the fancy ‘mansion’ as such apartments were called in japan.
"Answer me!" Crawford barked the order at him.
He tried to think.....but he couldn’t! He couldn’t remember a thing of how he had gotten here! In fact it made his stomach cringe in vertigo-like reaction.
He turned his head to glare again at the American looming threateningly over him.....
Brad put a cupped a hand over his mouth, fingers bent to avoid being bit. "Don’t even consider spitting on me, Fujimiya." He growled. "This thing has made the worst of you, made a snarling gutter dog out of a proud, beautiful man!" he shoved Aya’s head back into the sofa and let go of him angrily to get up, turning away, unable to stand the sight of him right now.
Schuldig sighed, arms crossed about himself. "Omi, let go of Nagi long enough to make some more coffee. Nagi, guard Aya so he wont hurt himself." he looked at

Brad, worried and somewhat helplessly. "What can we do?" He asked again, at a loss for any ideas.
Brad took a deep shaky breath. Then looked down at Aya again, frowning.
Yohji reached to touch his arm. "Bradley? The tattoo?"
Brad frowned more. It was getting to be a permanent thing that frown. He looked at the mantel clock on the side table. Almost nine at night. Damn it why did the day seem so long!
He moved to pick up the phone and dial the one number he always hated to, but when he did, knew it was his only recourse.

Araki Masanori woke to the phone's quiet buzzing. Kai shifted with a sigh in his arm. He took the time to come to full conscience and slipped a hand into the short copper mop to hold close and kiss the youth he'd helped to raise. He'd broken his master's trust. If the old man weren't now so decrepit, this might have cost him a whole hand and his balls.....
He broke of the kiss and moved to turn on his back and pick up the phone. "Hai?" He said, with a resigned sigh.
"I'm sorry to wake you, Masa."
Crawford.....the voice so calm and composed, so richly familiar to him.
Okay, fucking Kai one evening hadn't done a thing to relieve a desire years in the forming. "What is it, Bradley?" He asked quietly.
"Your shaman artist." That voice said in his ear, and in view of his circumstances, making him turn back to old fantasies.....
"Hai?" He drew Kai to his side, the boy was waking up now, aware of the phone conversation.
"Masa, whoever it is, tell them to shut up and call tomorrow." Kai said in sleepy annoyance, rubbing his eye with a fist, so reminiscent of the child he had been, it made Masa's insides chill. He had to remember this was a nineteen year old man.....
"Hush, Kai." He ordered. "What's wrong, Bradley? Isn't the sigal working?"
"Yes, it is, quiet well." Brad said. "That's why I need to have another worked on each of my men. Now, as soon as possible."
"He wont leave his residence, you'll have to go to him." Masa said. "But I'll let him know you're coming. And Bradley.....be careful. I've lost two dozen men tonight alone. I expected this call to be another death count. I don't want to add you to that calculation."
"Thank you, Masa." Bradley said calmly and hung up.
Masa sighed and set the phone down again.
Kai was half sitting up, on one elbow, looking down at him. "Why wont you tell me what's happening?"
"Because it's none of your concern, go back to sleep." he reached up to turn off the lamp he had left on when they had fallen asleep earlier.

But Kai was not to be put off so lightly, and having the libido of a nineteen year old was prone to wanting.....more.

It was very quiet. That was the odd part about it. The night was black, most of the streetlights out and the ones that were still working were blinking caution. Hardly anyone was on the street. Most of the light came from the building windows higher up, the ground floor ones boarded and fenced up. It was a war zone. The most civilized city in the most civilized country in the world, a war zone.

In the back seat of the sedan, Brad held Aya close, the japanese drugged into submission. There was still a bit of fight about him but he was too strung out to do anything more than faintly protest. Brad took full advantage of it to hold him and comfort himself in the feel and smell of his now recalcitrant lover.

Yohji sat in the front passenger, looking out the window, his gun ready, just in case. Tokyo at night. Once he had loved and found it full of romantic adventure and excitingly dangerous challenge. Now it was just another dirty city in a dirty world. He frowned, wanting a cigarette. "Drive faster, Schuldig. Don't be such an old lady, no one cares about the lights any more."

"I can't take that chance." Schuldig said. "Now be quiet, I'm listening. You don't want us caught in a good old fashioned double slam ambush, do you?"

Yohji's lips twitched. "No." He said, forcing himself to keep his eyes out the window.

"Pull over! Quake." Brad said aloud so that the others would have the warning too.

He didn't bother, he just put on the breaks.

It rumbled pretty good this one, lasting all of five minutes.

Brad swore. The windows again. Damn it. Certainly the insurance would cover it but he was sick of boards! He was sick of this whole damned nightmare.

Aya whimpered, inside his mind the evil digging deeper, separating his psyche completely. But in one brief instant, he was whole again and in that instant he realized what had happened. That caused him to cry out, but then it was too late. The connection was torn away and his true self was buried too deep to even register any more.

Brad held onto him, eyes closed, kissing his temple and cheek, not wanting to loose him, having a premonition of just that happening. "Hold on, Aya, hold on." He begged softly.

The quake passed. Schuldig sighed and started the car forward again. He didn't reach into Aya's mind, but he could hear the confused and tormented thoughts, the fear the need to escape, the betrayal. It hurt. He tried to shut it out but the evil was making it very damned loud. "This had better work, Bradley." He stated, through clenched teeth.

The tattoo parlor looked as if it never closed, really. The same sycophants were hanging around, the same late middle aged tattooist and his shifty looking son in their dirty vests, their own skins clearly showing the full yakuza ‘suit’ of ink, the smell of stale smoke and saki and beer all pervading, and something else underlying it that Schuldig knew damned well was cooked heroin. It still made his heart race a bit to pick up that scent.
Aya struggled just a bit, as he was stripped of the spandex top and kevlar vest, and lifted onto the slanted table used to do back work on. The tattooist didn’t concern himself. He’d been warned the young man was ‘possessed’. He simply spotted the top of the past tattoo with a professional’s eye and lifted the tight jeans with a finger hooked in the waste band to examine the work. He grunted. " ‘Expensive’, eh?" he looked at Crawford wryly. "Worth it?"
"Keep your mind on your work." Brad said calmly. "What can you do, now that he is already ‘infected’?"
The artist examined Aya’s eyes. "Hmm, he’s pretty damned doped to the gills. What I do isn’t affected by what is in the skin. What is in the skin is affected by what I do. He may need holding down. Right now, it’s secure, but when the work starts, it might decided it needs him to fight, doped or not."
"He’s got horse tranquilizers in him." Brad said. "He couldn’t fight if he tried."
"That’s what you think, gaigen." The artist said. "I’ve seen them break chains with spirits less powerful than the ones outside now in them." He ran a hand over the young man’s back, admiring the color and texture of his ‘canvas’. Then he laid both hands on Aya and closed his eyes, leaning to ‘listen’ it seemed, muttering something under his breath that was soon identified as a chanting.
He straitened and motioned for the tray and table with the equipment and inks on it. "He’s not easy to live with, eh? That duel nature of his?" He nodded at Yohji and Schuldig. "And those two?" He sighed. "It’s going to be a long damned night." He picked up the first set of chains from the concrete pillar under the table and latched them on the prone youth’s wrists, making sure the other end was latched tight to stretch the muscles out.
"We might not have all night." Brad looked at Schuldig and Yohji. Kirchner may wake up close to dawn or after it’s hard to tell. We’re safe in here from the rising, but Kirchner is a different matter."
Yohji watched the tattooist wipe down Aya’s back with the disinfectant. "We’ll just have to deal with what ever comes up." he said calmly. "It’s not that difficult, you know, not knowing what’s going to happen next." He decided with all the smoke in the place already he could light up now with out Brad even bothering to complain.
Schuldig watched him do so and pouted slightly, then moved to help himself to the cigarette package in the blond’s inside coat pocket. Yohji held the cigarette in his own lips steady for the german to light his off of. Even under the circumstances, their eyes met for a moment and a spark of lust passed

between them. Schuldig moved away now, blowing a puff of smoke out, his eyes promising ‘later’.
"What is it going to be? The tattoo?" Brad said quietly, not happy about ruining the pristine whiteness of Aya’s back.
"A tiger." The artist said succinctly. "Those demons won’t like that, oh no, not at all. Not with his nature." he put the clip of black ink into the tattoo needler and took one more good long look at Aya’s back, then began to lay out the design, each piece of the pattern marked out in it’s place, to be joined and hidden in the pattern of the tiger’s stripes and lines.
Brad closed his eyes a moment, the premonition hitting him hard. Two paths. Both lead to Aya. One to his lovely looking over a bare shoulder, his own hand on that shoulder, purple eyes smiling coyly, the other to an angry warrior with his sword posed to strike him.....and himself reaching up to try to block the strike and missing the moment.....
A hand on his arm. "Mein Mann?"
He opened his eyes.
There was a gasp from the table, Aya trying to writhe away from the needle, fighting the chains faintly.
Brad went to take a chair and put it where he could sit down and at least try to comfort the struggling man. The tranquilizers held but it was evident there was more than the pain of being tattooed going on. He caressed Aya’s cheek and then bent to kiss it, stroking the magenta hair.
Aya moaned and fretted, but the drug had too good a grip on him.
They were all startled when something hit the barred and boarded storefront hard. Yohji had his gun out and was beside the door faster then the yakuza toughs hanging around. Schuldig took the other side, listening for the working of the minds who had done it.
"Ah," the tattooist said not looking up from his work. "That will be the beginning of it. Have no fear, the place is protected." he said calmly.
A woman screamed outside, blood curdling and horrifying.
Aya opened his eyes but they were rolled up showing the whites.
"No heroes here, mama-san." One of the yakuza commented, lighting a cigarette of his own with a slightly shaky hand missing two fingers. Apparently he’d learned his own lesson the second time.
Schuldig giggled somewhat insanely and put his gun away. "That’s funny, trying that trick on us."
But Yohji was frowning. He hesitated, trying to decide, then sighed heavily and put the safety back on his gun and holstered it. "Yeah. Real funny." He muttered, not amused at all.
Brad put his hand over Aya’s eyes and gently brushed the lids down. "Stay with me, Princess." He whispered in the ear beneath his lips, then kissed it lightly.

Schuldig walked over to watch the man work. Already the blood was welling up and

had to be wiped off with disinfectant soaked cotton pads. "What exactly will that do for him?" he asked.
"Strengthen him." The artist stated.
"Is that all?" Schuldig said in rather a demanding tone.
"Yes. That's all he needs." The artist glanced up at him coolly. "And what do you need, Devil?"
Schuldig smirked. "Ha! You're the magician. You tell me." he said, annoyed.
"I will soon enough." the man said, concentrating on his work. "Your impatience rules your life."
Brad looked up to warn Schuldig off with a glare. He knew damn well what Schu was going to do. "Schuldig." he growled.
The hand about to reach for the gun again stopped in mid-muscle twitch. A bit of red flushed his cheek bones from the suppressed anger of the impulse and he lowered his eyes from Brad's immediately, backing away. He turned and walked over to the wall of designs Yohji was boredly looking at, leaning on it to get between him and the view. Yohji looked at him now, which was what he wanted. He reached up to play with the unzipped tab of the kevlar vest. (Was it good? Show me.) He smiled evilly, meaning the bout of sex Yohji had had that morning with Brad.
"Oh, no." Yohji said, catching his up that hand and holding it, knocking the ashes off the cigarette with the other one, looking into the jade green eyes. "Not the time or the place, remember the rule?"
Schuldig looked at Brad, taken up completely in worrying over Aya's exorcism. "What is above us here?" He demanded of the artist.
The man paused to lift the needle and look at him. "My home." He stated.
"And the room where you let the drugs come and go?" Schu smiled coldly.
The man looked at him in silence a long moment. "This is a night for the mind to rule the body.....not the body the mind." He said quietly.
"I'll worry about my mind when my body is happy." Schuldig snapped. He had the information he wanted, turning the hand Yohji held to grasp his wrist and pull him into the office/storage room with the steel reinforced back door. There was a decrepit couch that might have seen more then it's share of what was about to happen on it again. Schuldig left Yohji to shut the door, pulling off his over coat and tossing it on the sofa. Better to injure the silk wool blend then risk tetanus on a broken spring.
Yohji shut the door and second thought pushing the lock across, then did it anyway. When he turned, Schuldig had his shirt off already and his flame red hair about his shoulders. Yohji just had to grab him and kiss him, wanting to feel that nakedness against himself.
Schuldig ran a hand over the eurasian's cheek and brushed the fingertips over his lips, eyes lowered sultrily. "I don't know whether I want in you or you in me right now, Yohji-kun." he breathed.
"Not again. You're getting it this time." Yohji said. "I'm still sore from this

morning."
Schuldig laughed softly. "Aya better survive this or I'll never get my dick in again." He stepped back to kick of his loafers, then undo his belt and slacks.
Yohji put out the end of the cigarette. Schu had already finished his. He took off the vest and laid it aside on the desk, along with the gun holster. Schu had dropped his on the floor under the shirt and now the pants and his socks. It was amazing how fast the german could strip. He undressed not so fast himself. There were still strange things happening outside and a thud against the back door made him freeze and consider the gun.
"Never mind that, Yohji." Schuldig very nearly whined in that nasal voice of his, getting on the sofa and arranging himself with one leg off it, his arms crossed under his head to pillow it. "Come make love to me."
Yohji wasn't about to argue with that picture presented and off came the rest of his clothes. "Schuldig.....nothing to use....." He realized. Damn it....that stupid rule, he'd taken the lube out of all his jackets.....
Schuldig laughed low and sexy. "My slacks, Love."
Yohji bent to grab them and dig in the pockets. Sure enough there was a little hard plastic bubble pouch with a twist off corner thing. "Damn it Schu, you've been holding out on me." He knelt between the red heads legs and tore the little container open, squirting it on his hand.
"Not me, Love, I confiscated that from Omi." Schuldig laughed softly, then gasped as Yohji dove two fingers into him long enough to slick him up.
"Why the hell is making out with you any place but a bedroom the biggest turn on?"
Yohji murmured and grabbed his hips to position him better.
Schuldig just closed his eyes and went for the ride as Yohji slid into him and started pumping at him.
The smell of cooked heroin was stronger in here...

Chapter Twenty Eight
"At Any Price"

"Keep him steady." The tattooist said. "It's going to get worse."
The pattern was having it's effect, as it was joined one symbol at a time. Aya was fighting harder, able to get the strength up to flex his muscles now, straining on the chains. Brad took the offered damp towel to wipe the sweat off Aya's face, and tried to somehow reach him through the damned evil that had taken him over. "Throw it out, Aya, love, don't let it have you." He urged quietly. He was afraid the younger man would tear his muscles, he was pulling and straining so hard. "How much longer?" He demanded.
"With him squirming this bad, hard to say." The artist said. "One wrong move and the pattern is ruined."
Brad stood to hold Aya's shoulders down. The pattern was almost complete now. A tiger, walking down a rocky mountain side, obviously prowling for prey.
Aya snarled in frustration.....or was it him?
"Hold still." Brad begged.

In a nightmarish subconscious, Aya was in the shop. In the basement to be exact, the recreation room that was the meeting room for their missions. He was sitting on the sofa, while Manx briefed them for the next mission.....He realized he wasn't listening to her, his mind miles away. He remembered something just then....something he was supposed to tell someone, something important.....He blinked and tried to think, then looked at the video on the television screen.
He backed into the sofa, trying to get away from the tape playing out on the screen, his heart racing.
"Can you deny the evidence!" Manx demanded.
Suddenly realizing she had been talking to him.....
The video.....
A night scene, outside a building, half shadowed.....him.....and Takatori's bodyguard.....Crawford...
His guts wrenched. "No....." He barely whispered.
"Aya!" Manx was very loud now, angry as hell, fist clenched. "CAN YOU DENY THE EVIDENCE?"
The screen.....
Crawford was leaning back on the wall of the office building Takatori's suite was in....and he, Aya, was standing there, arms about Crawford's shoulders, kissing the man....
Crawford had his hands on his hips, holding him, kissing him back.....
"It's a lie!" Aya said, cold as ice inside. "It's a trick! I'm Weiss! What the hell is this!" He glared at his team mates. "Who set me up! Who made this.....atrocity!" He tried to get up, but he couldn't. It was as if his

body could not leave the couch. He tried again, but nothing would happen, he was forced to just sit there.....
"Traitor!" Manx accused.
"NO!" He protested.
"CAN YOU DENY THE EVIDENCE?" She demanded again.....

Omi had the stereo on quietly. It was rock, though, and it was an artist they both were fond of. Something to soothe the tension, after the earthquake and the window breaking again. After the workmen had put up the boards and left, Nagi wasn't interested in doing anything but just sitting on the sofa, elbow on knee, chin in hand, tracing patterns in the glass coffee table top with the condensation ring from his coffee cup.
"Nagi." Omi said, sitting down across from him. "Why can't we get a little sleep?"
"Brad said not to." Nagi sighed. "Anyway I'm not tired."
Omi sighed too. "Are you scared? About what might happen?"
"Seriously?" Nagi looked at him. "No. I can't seem to feel anything right now. Just sort of like....numb."
"Everyone acting weird, Aya being possessed." Omi frowned slightly. "This Kirchner jerk. I'm a little scared."
"What good does being scared do?" Nagi asked. "All we can do is fight it."
Omi slouched back against the cushions. "This is what Brad wanted to stop in the first place? This thing taking over?"
Nagi shook his head. "It's not exactly 'a thing'. It's an up-welling of power that is evil. Esset wanted to harness it by giving it a host body, then control it that way. This is more like the flue. If you're weak, it gets you."
Omi thought this over. "Aya--always hated himself before---." he let it fall silent.
"Maybe that's why it's done this to him." Nagi sat back, crossing his legs on the sofa. "Reverted him back to when he was 'just' Weiss."
Omi frowned. "He called us traitors. Way back." He looked at Nagi again. "If I start to act weird, will you tell me?"
Nagi smiled. "Of course I will. Will you tell me?"
Omi rolled his eyes. "Stupid question. I guess I'm that tired."
Nagi got up off the sofa he was on and walked around to sit next to his lover, looking into his eyes. "I know a way to keep you awake." He slipped a hand onto Omi's lap.
"Mmm hmm?" Omi smiled at him.
Nagi moved closer and pressed a kiss on his mouth, which was met in sensual return. He ran two fingers into the blond hair, to smooth it from the pale pink cheek and kissed that as well. Then he murmured in Omi's ear. "Let's break a rule and do it right here."

"Oh, yeah." Omi agreed.
Nagi undid his shorts for him, and drew him out to stroke him. Omi shifted forward so that he was half laying back and put his hand over Nagi's, encouraging him to the right spots. Nagi leaned to kiss him again. "This should keep us awake for hours."
Omi nodded, then pulled him down for another kiss.

Yohji blinked. He'd fallen into a post-coital nap, lulled there by Schuldig's 'afterplay' could it be called? He sat up, pushing his hair back and looking around the grubby little office. That smell.....something metallic and chemical burning.....
God damn it!
Schuldig sat at the desk, a rather evil smirk on his face, eyes a bit too bright, holding a very tarnished silver spoon, the candle near by still burning.
"What the hell are you doing?" Yohji said, his blood literally running cold.
"None of your business." He picked up a hypodermic needle and slipped it under the molten heroin to draw it up into the tube.
Yohji made an instant decision. Naked or not, someone had to stop Schuldig from injecting himself with that damned shit!
Before he could move the jade eyes focused on him with an evil he hadn't seen in years.
He froze....How the hell was he going to deal with this situation. He moved cautiously, reaching down to pick up his pants. "Schuldig.....don't take that shit. You've been clean for years....."
Schuldig jabbed the needle in to a vein in his arm and pushed the plunger.
"Oh....shit." Yohji stated.
His eyes rolled up as the drug got to him.
Yohji dove for the desk, swiping the stuff off the top of it and grabbing him.
"Schuldig!" It was a good thing the candle went out as it fell.
Oh, shit.....
After years of being clean, he'd taken a major dose!
"Damn it, Schu!" Yohji slapped him to try and bring him out of the initial reaction to the drug suddenly coursing through his system.
This resulted in the german's eyes snapping back into focus, and with an incredible anger in them.
Before Yohji could realize it, Schuldig had stood up, getting him by the throat, squeezing.
Yohji brought his knee up almost automatically. Some how Schuldig missed the thought and was hit square in the goods. He let go.
Yohji gasped and slugged him in the gut, trying to wind him as Brad had Aya, but this time it didn't work so easily, Schu was getting some control of himself apparently and managed to go back with the strike, lessening it's effect. He

tried to tackle Yohji against the desk, but the skinny eurasian shoved the piece of furniture aside and managed to get a grip on his upper arms. "Shuldig! Stop it!" He yelled at him.
Schuldig only snarled something at him in german and tried again to throttle him.
Yohji somehow fought off the attempt once more and got away from him, backing up, trying to locate one of the guns in the mess of clothes on the floor.
It was no use.....Schu got into his head, the room spun.....
"Crawford!" Yohji yelled, "Help! God damn it!"

Brad looked up sharply almost a minute before the yell. Aya was struggling with all his might now. "Get your men to hold him down, I've got a problem....."
The yell from the other room proved that true.
The tattooist nodded to his son. "Hold him, don't let him move. It's almost done."
Brad glanced down at Aya, the japanese was snarling like an animal in a terrible rage, his face twisted almost beyond recognition. "Aya....." He said in dismay.
"Crawford! Get your ass in here!" Yohji's voice came again in a panic, as something that sounded like a chair hit the wall and shattered.
Brad moved to try the door. It was locked from the inside. He pulled his gun and shot the lock out, then yanked it open.
Yohji was still butt naked, and Schu was wearing only his shirt.
Brad drew a deep breath and put the gun away, forcing himself to go dead calm.
Schuldig was glaring at Yohji. obviously high as hell. He looked at Brad and laughed, speaking in german. "Oh god, I missed this!"
Brad shook his head. "Baby....calm down." He replied in the same language.
Schuldig blinked then laughed again, this time with a certain arch sarcasm, a hint of wariness in his eyes. "Eh, Bradley.....since when do you call me cute names?"
"Kudoh, clothes, now." Brad ordered him in japanese then switched back to german. "Schuldig. You're on heroin. It's affecting your judgment. Listen to me. Calm down as much as you can. That's an order!"
"Fuck your orders." Schuldig giggled.
Yohji wasn't moving. "I think it got to him." He said quietly. "He's full of heroin and he took a hit in the nuts without even a yelp."
"What surprises me is that he took it without raping you in revenge for it." Brad said quietly in japanese.
Schuldig moved like lightening flashes, in one spot, then suddenly in another, his gun in his hand, aimed at Brad. "Maybe.....I'll rape you." He giggled again, then suddenly he frowned, putting his other hand on the gun to steady it.
"Fuck this! You'll take me back.....you let them hurt me! I'm not going!" He yelled the last words, pulling the trigger.

Brad ducked as the bullet flew and threw himself at Schuldig's legs.
Yohji caught on fast and helped him, the struggle quickly over with, another shot sounding as they wrestled the gun from Schuldig.
"Schuldig!" Brad yelled in his face when he had him pinned down under him. "Stop it!"
A godawfull howl from Aya distracted Yohji.....he looked up, shocked and worried. "Ran!" He got up to, leaving Brad to deal with the drugged up german.

In his mind, Aya had somehow gotten out of the Koneko and was running in the streets, but they kept switching around, and he kept finding himself in different places he hadn't meant to go, but were so familiar. He fought off attacker after attacker, growing more and more exhausted and despairing, until he found himself in the weird museum on the coast.....
His sister....on the table, about to be sacrificed.....Crawford putting a gun to his head out of nowhere, an evil smile on his face.....pulling the trigger.....
"Noooo!" He screamed, aware now he would be unable to ever help his sister.....

"Make me." Schuldig said sultrily, taking advantage of his position to rub his new erection up against Brad.
"Not the time, my baby boy." Brad said, very much reluctantly and gently.
Schuldig looked a bit confused at this reaction to his baiting the american.
Looking into his mind, he saw the emotion.....This man loved him after all?
Gott.....
Brad kissed him hungrily, then cracked him across the jaw with his fist.
Apparently the thing had taken him so far back in his memory that he'd forgotten they were lovers, but the shock of requited desire had stunned him long enough for Brad to really stun him.
He got up and reaching down, grabbed Schuldig's wrist and hauled him up and shouldered him like a sack of grain, taking him out of the wrecked office.
He looked at the tattooist. "That heroin will cost you."
"I'm doing this for you, you keep your mouth shut to Araki-sama." The man stated.
Brad frowned icily.
Aya was unchained and Yohji helped get him to a chair to set him up and check him over. He was groggy and seemed feverish, head rolling and muttering 'no...no...' as if still in a nightmare.
Yohji knelt before Aya, working his black shirt back on to him like dressing a groggy child who did not want to wake for school. "It's over, Ran. It's over, Sweetest." He was murmuring to the red head, caressing him. "Its over you can relax now, the night mare is over...."
Brad looked at them in relief. "Is he clean of it?" He asked the tattooist.

The man was looking at him skeptically. "Yes. Do you want to put that half naked one on the table first or the totally naked one?"
Brad gave him a sarcastic smirk and put Schuldig down carefully. "Yohji, for crisakes, clothes!" He ordered. "And get Schuldig's pants. I should beat the both of you for this!"
Yohji made sure Aya was propped up on the small table the chair was at, head down on his arm. "If you could say no to Schuldig, I might have considered not fucking him, Brad."
Brad sighed in annoyance. "Just shut up and get dressed." He drawled.
Yohji went to put his pants and slack boots on, then brought out the rest of their clothes, including the now rather messy over coat.....Not that Schuldig would ever complain about dried cum on his clothes....
Putting pants on a totally limp, unconscious Schu was somewhat of a crime. Brad's glaring at him was the only thing that kept Yohji from taking a few liberties with that white and dusty rose flesh and those tight, coppery red, if sticky, curls. Zipped and buttoned, the shirt removed, Schu was put on the table, and chained down.
The artist examined Schuldig's scared back. "This is bad, this one. So many flaws...."
Brad turned cold brown eyes on him again. "The scars won't ruin the pattern will they?"
"It will take more work to make it hold." The man said, touching a few places as if delineating the necessary design. "Hmmm. This one.....so many contradictions. The design is one I've never seen before.....not in this combination."
"What's so damned odd about it?" Yohji said. "Just put the ink in him and get it over with. That dope must be playing hell with his system. We should have taken him to the doctor, not be doing this!"
"Hush, Love." Brad laid a hand on his shoulder. "He can take more dope in more amazingly deadly combinations than anyone else on record. He'll be all right. He needs this protection more than he needs to be clean right now."
Yohji met his eyes. "He nearly killed you. He aimed for your head...." He realized.
"Nothing new." Brad sighed, giving his shoulder a squeeze then leaving his side to go to Aya. Someone had thought to put a steaming cup of strong china tea in front of him. Brad smoothed the magenta locks back from the perfect face and then shook him gently. "Aya, wake up."
Aya sighed deeply and raised his head, opening his eyes, looking a bit confused. "Doko.....?"
Brad caught his chin and made him look at him.
Aya smiled sleepily.
His Aya.
He bent to kiss him and held him. "Welcome back, Princess." He sighed.

"Where was I gone?" He asked, sort of amused and disoriented still.
"Hell, I suppose." Brad smiled. "Try the tea. We have to make do until this is over. Schuldig got into some heroin. He's not going to be easy to deal with when he comes to."
"What? How!" Aya was still lost as heck.
Brad shook his head. "Don't even try to figure it all out." He had a brief moment of weakness, thinking of the office and the sofa himself.....then forced it back into the depths of his mind.
Aya's hand suddenly went to his side....."My katana...!"
"Is home and safe, dearest." Brad informed him, not caring one bit now that he had suddenly switched to Ran.
Ran scowled, not liking the yakuza enjoying the show and making rude comments in whispers about homosexuals and pretty boys.
"Rest." Brad said. "Your back's going to be hurting in a little while. Save all your annoyance for that."
"Hunh....?" Ran blinked. "What the hell.....?"
"The tattoo." Brad said. "A tiger, for my kitten." He kissed him again.
Ran blushed fiercely at this public display of affection.
Yohji lit a cigarette with a shaky hand and moved to look down at the beginnings of Schuldig's tattoo. The lines were being quickly sketched in, and for a few minutes more, looked just like a series of sweeping arcs. "What is it?" He said finally, pushing his hair back. He wished he had a rubber band.
A yin/yang symbol trailing ribbands was now centered in the lower right quarter of the frame of lines....
"Houou." The artist murmured. "This is going to be a pain in the ass."
Brad had to laugh, he was that tired and feeling a bit silly now after all the trouble. "Ho-o." He enunciated the words syllables. "Now that's just got to be too damned much of a coincidence."
Yohji remembered the english word it sounded like and laughed too. "Why a phoenix?" He asked.
"Why a horse?" The man looked at him briefly.
"Sah....." Yohji complained, taking a drag on his cigarette. "Is that what I'm getting? A boring horse? Just answer me and no riddles."
The man continued working. "In tradition, a pheonix represents happiness and freedom, yet to have them.....the bird must be trapped. A paradox. Not a riddle. In order to seal this man's soul from the harm.....It has to be defined as free to go where it will."
"And the yin/yang?" Yohji said archly.
"The freedom to pursue balance."
"But isn't the phoenix female?" Yohji asked.
"No. That's just because it's a woman's symbol. It's a male bird."
"He'd better like it." Yohji reached to stroke Schuldig's cheek.

Nagi had Omi on his lap, back pressed to him, deep inside him, holding him with one arm about his waist, working his hard on with the other hand. Omi held onto the edge of the coffee table, moaning and clenching Nagi's knees between his.
"Ooo, Nagi....harder!"
"No." Nagi said, smiling. "See how long you can last."
"Not long..." Omi gasped.
"You'd better." Nagi said.
"I can't...."
"Get it on the carpet and Brad will beat the hell out of us both." Nagi warned.
"Oooooo....." Omi bit his lower lip and tired not to think about the peaking urge in his genitals as he was hit over and over in the prostate. "Nagi....." He gasped....."I CAN'T!"
Nagi pulled him backwards jamming him on deeper and got the resulting spray on the both of them rather than the damned carpet, cumming himself and then collapsing with a contented sigh.
Omi sighed too, a soft purr of relief.
"Mmmm." Nagi ran his hands up the other boy's torso, enjoying each smooth curve and hard muscle.
"I'm sooo tired....." Omi said.
"Don't fall asleep." Nagi was tired too. It was just to much, this lovely sated feeling.....
"A little nap....wont hurt..." Omi sighed again, deeply.
Nagi thought about agreeing but it was too late.....he was only able to pull out of his lover and snuggle him into a spooned position.
Omi smiled and passed out.

Kirchner woke up. The drug had warn off. It was impossible to sleep any more, with all the noise in his mind. He had to wake up and focus on blocking it out.
He sat up, sighing. It was at this time that he most felt his over sixty years, waking up from the poison. He ran a hand through his cropped grey blond hair, not needing a mirror to know how old he looked or that there were hollows under his eyes.
The tablets.....one of them was for 'restoration'.
Hah! He would put the little blond to sacrifice for the spell of restoration.
The younger the better.
This idea alone was enough to make him a bit more cheerful at still being alive.

Yohji rubbed his eyes, looking at the crack of gray light above the boarded up shop window. He checked his watch. Dawn. After a night that had seemed to last days. Go figure. He looked at Brad, pacing the floor, hands in slacks pockets, down to rolled up shirt sleeves in the funk of smoke and stale bodies. It had

turned out the yakuza here were under sanctuary. Waiting their turn to be decided on by their lords. A finger, a payment, a restitution.....confined under sentence, actually. Biding their time until the knife came down. But as long as they were here, some hot head wouldn't shoot them for a chance at reward or the honor of the clan.
Schuldig was coming out of the drug induced black out that had been assisted by Brad's punching him. Now that he was being wipped down and sprayed with anti-biotic lotion, he was just a drugged out Schu, not some demon infested super being.
Unchained and hauled up into a sitting position, he lolled drunkenly. Brad moved to smack his face to try to bring him around. "Schuldig?"
"Leave me sleep...." He protested.
"Get over here, Yohji." Brad ordered.
Yohji sighed and pulled his top off, moving to replace Schuldig on the table as the red head was hauled to his feet. He pulled his wrist away at the attempt to chain him. "No." He stated. "I'm not 'infected'. Just do it." He settled down to get more comfortable.
Aya was drowsing with his chair now tipped back against the wall. He opened his eyes to look up as Brad walked Schuldig, with an arm about his waist and Schu's arm over his shoulders, to the other chair and slid him down into it.
"So that's what our 'devil' looks like when he's in his own little hell." Aya sniped.
"Useless." Brad agreed.
Schuldig put his head down on his arms on the table and went back to what ever 'trip' he was having on that crap.
Yohji frowned. If he'd only woken up earlier...or been able to stop him. Poor Schu, messed up on that junk. He ignored the pain of the needle dragging along his back.
Aya got up, restless now. Finding his jewelry removed and his katana not on him had made him more nervous. "Can't we get some food? I'm starved." He complained.
"None of us can leave the others." Brad stated. "You can wait."
Aya moved to look out the peephole of a knot hole in the board over the door's window. "It's daylight now. Won't we be safer? I don't want to be here anymore!" He hated the smell and the poverty of the place....
"I'm not taking chances, Aya." Brad snapped. Then instantly regretted it. He walked over to take his arm and look at him. "I'm sorry, precious, just wait, please. Only a few more hours and Yohji will be ready to go as well."
Those incredible purple eyes met his. "I'm sorry, Bradley, I don't mean to make it worse." Aya said quietly. Damn it, if only those yakuza apes would stop watching them like a damned floor show.....
"I will buy you the best tuna sashimi to be had for breakfast." Brad promised.
"And feed me with your fingers?" Aya said.
Brad's expression grew archly amused. "Make a geisha of me, would you?"

"Yes." Aya said, daring now to flirt coolly with him, meaning...with disaster.
"We'll see." Brad stated, then went to take the chair he had been sitting in and look over at Schuldig. He reached across to toy with a lock of copper red.
(Schuldig.....Baby....can you hear me in there? Or are you far away from me somewhere?)
Schuldig sighed, but didn't respond.
Brad ruffled the red mop fondly. The design was very pretty, with all it's colors. It covered the scars.....that would make him happy, he hoped. His little work of art....He smiled slightly, still running his fingers through the strands.
Yohji sighed and thought about this mess they were in. "What sort of horse is it?" He asked, not really caring just wanting it over with.
"Rampant." The tattooist said. "A war-horse."
"Hah." Yohji smirked. "How far from my personality can you get?"
"I know what I'm doing." He replied calmly.
Brad looked over and thought about that choice. Yes, the man knew what he was doing. If there was anything he had learned about the eurasian, it was that he would go until he dropped, was loyal as hell, and very obedient. Probably the one reason Aya had been put in charge of Weiss. Yohji might have been older and more experienced, but he was no leader.
Aya walked over to look down. His own back was protesting now. But he ignored it.
The lines were classic, the view from the side, a rather sassy animal, well fed and sleek. "It's nothing like you, Yoh-tan." He looked at Brad. "I wonder how the boys are."
Brad realized he hadn't given it a thought for hours now. He took out his digital phone and pressed the button for the auto dial.

Nagi woke to the phone's buzzing and got up, prying himself free of Omi to go answer it. "Moshi Moshi." He muttered.
"Nagi." Brad stated. "What's going on? What took you so long to answer the phone?"
"I'm sorry." Nagi said. "I fell asleep."
"Is everything alright?" Brad's voice was calmer now.
He looked over at Omi, still sound asleep. "Let me go check on Farfie." He set the phone down and padded barefoot over to the door to what should have been a storage room in the grand apartment.
The irishman appeared to be asleep. Nagi had let him out once last night to have him use the restroom. Precautions taken didn't mean letting the man go without some simple dignities. He'd seemed a bit twitchy but able to deal with his needs. And just as happy to get back to the confines of the cell.
Nagi went back to the phone and picked it up. "He's okay. He was a lot calmer

when we took him the restroom. But he wanted right back in the cell....."
Something stuck him in the shoulder, just behind the blade bone.....he felt numb.....and the phone slipped from his hand to clatter on the table. As his knees gave out, he turned a little in the weirdly slow motion seeming slide down to the floor.
Omi stood there, looking very much like an enemy.

Brad caught his breath at the vision that had come too late. "Yohji, Omi's been taken. Aya, come with me, Yohji.....look after Schuldig, don't let him get any more dope. I mean it!" He told the tattoo artist. "He gets into any more heroin, I'll see your head on a plate!"
"Hai, Crawford-san." The artist said calmly.
He knew his son's drug dealing would cause more trouble than the money it brought in. Still, there was nothing he could do to stop it. He gave the young man a look. "Go clean all your crap out, I don't want any of it where the gaijen can get at it."
The young man scowled. What did he care if the fool choose to take the drugs, except that he had not paid for the hit of pure grade stuff. More money lost that should have gone to pay his mother's bills for chemotherapy. "Hai, Otôsan."
Brad went to lean over, a hand on Schuldig's shoulder and kissed his cheek. "You'd better be all right, damn you." He caught Yohji's hand in passing and squeezed it, then let it go and went out the cautiously unlocked and opened front door with Aya a step behind him.

Chapter Twenty Nine
"More Than This"

Brad's hand was shaking as he put the pass card into the electronic lock and grabbed the doorknob to the apartment. He had no idea where Omi had gone, only that he had.
Nagi lay crumpled, naked, on the floor by the side table where he had fallen....
Brad moved quickly to kneel and feel for his pulse. It was faint, but there, thank god! He pulled him up into his arms and held him tightly for a moment.
Thankfully, Brad remembered warning Omi not to use the curare and to switch to a strong muscle tranquilizer instead. The dart had been a tranquilizer, not a curare load. He found and pulled out the dart....Nagi already had a nasty puncture wound and bruise there, the dart had bent under him and done damage. He gathered him up and went to lay him on the sofa, putting the throw blanket over him, brushing the hair back from the seventeen year old's still childish face.
Ran had grabbed his gun holster of the table and put it on, then his katana. His back was hurting but he ignored it.
Brad looked from where he was to under the writing desk for the carved box and swore. "He's taken the tablets with him. Kirchner has him by now."
Ran looked over at him. "Do you know where he is?"
Brad sat down in one of the arm chairs, realizing suddenly how very tired he was. "No." He said helplessly. "I don't know anything any more. Damn it I'm tired, too tired to think, too tired to do anything. How the hell do we fight this?" He took his glasses off and rubbed his face, just not wanting to deal with anything any more.
Ran walked over to lay a hand on his shoulder. "He must have taken the car, his keys are gone." he said quietly. He didn't like seeing Brad this way. It went against the grain, him being weak and tired and uncertain.
Brad looked up at him. "The tracer.....Kirchner might have been so busy leading him against his will, he might have missed that memory....."
Ran went to the writing desk to get the lap top, then swore and smacked his fist down on the desk.
The lap top was open, the LCD screen shattered.
"The spare one for traveling...." Brad said, his mind recovering a little.
Ran took the stairs two at a time. The boards on the windows again made it dismal in the apartment. Broad daylight and he was having to switch on the lights. He opened the mirrored doors to the walk in closet and looking up on the shelves, grabbing down the aluminum case. He could only hope that the battery was charged as it should be. He spared a glance for the bed that had been tidied up half heartedly. Had it been so long since he'd lain in it. No, there was no time to think of being tired.....of how good it would be to relax, to just lay down for a minute or two, or better yet, with the others.....but he brought himself back to reality. There was no time.

He went down the stairs to put the case in front of Brad, not happy with how worn his american was looking. "I'll make some coffee while you find the car, we can at least have that much time." he said, heading for the kitchen.
Brad unlocked the case and opened the lap top inside it, switching it on. It immediately flickered to life and began booting up. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, allowing himself to be relieved for this small favor, and to calm down. He needed a clear head to work. If there was anything Esset had taught him it was to put aside emotions and feelings and weaknesses. He had to do that now to be able to think.

Omi walked into the hotel room, the box in his hands.
Kirchner looked the boy over and shut the door to the room. He'd made the boy put decent clothing on so as not to draw attention, but the kid was as androgynous as could be, even in long slacks and a shirt.
It disgusted him, how Crawford had allowed the sexual deviation in his team. The man had to be so damned bent, he was beyond reason.
The fact that Anna's son had been allowed to become a sybarite was only further proof that Esset had been too old and too weak to control their slaves.
He scowled. Anna's son. But who was the father of that mis-begotten atrocity?
"Sit down." He ordered the youth, taking the box from him.
Blank eyed, no will of his own, Omi obeyed, going to sit in the chair by the window.
Kirchner set the carved box on the little table provided for writing purposes and looked at it in perhaps....a bit of awe. After all these years, he had it in his possession. The power to rule the world.
He opened the lid and carefully drew back the cloth, looking at the polished and carved stone. The top one was the one for empowerment, or endowment. He looked at the boy sitting there like a life sized doll. "Your friend Fujimiya for this one, and you for the one of healing. But who for the resurrection? And under the circumstances, shall I even bother? Because once I have youth again and more power, what do I need with the beast?" He shut the box and got his suitcase, putting it up on the bed. Time to move again. He put in his lap top and what few things he had laid out on the dresser, then closed it up and set it on the wheeled luggage carrier. The box went on as well, wrapped in a department store paper bag and strapped on neatly and tightly. Just another tourist in a hurry, with a souvenir....
He left the boy sitting there. It would be so easy to reclaim him later.

Yohji put his coat on. This time, the kevlar was zippered closed. "Come on, Schuldig, party's over."
"Unnhhh.....no." Schu refused to move his head up off his arms on the table.
"I don't care what Brad said." Yohji pulled him to his feet, drawing an arm

about his shoulder and getting a grip on his waist. "Walk. I'm taking you to the doctor."
"Nooo...." Schuldig complained, limp, a dead weight.
"Oh, shut up." Yohji ordered him. "Fuck, I'll have to carry you." He hefted him up in his arms.
The tattooist's son had consented to take them to the hospital. Yohji got Schu into the back seat of the car and slid in next to him, taking the over coat off his arm. In the state he was in, Schu as usual, looked younger than his years. Anything that made that face of his relax made him look boyish. He was a mess, but no less attractive. In fact, his being a mess made him more so.
Yohji gave the man the address of the hospital they used and settled back to keep a wary eye out. While daylight, there was still little traffic on the streets. Everyone was holed up, waiting, hoping the authorities would be able to protect them from the night mare the city had become. The car's owner smoked, so Yohji lit up as well.
He thought about everything he knew about the situation. Brad was tired, hurting, he'd been hit at his weakest point. That Esset guy was after them to try and take the tablets. Schu was full of heroin, and they had all been somehow protected from the effect of the unfocused evil the tablets were supposed to control by these damned, and at the moment, stinging tattoos. He was tired, hungry, and probably the only thing that had made this night not a total failure was the fact that he had made love to Schu and gotten maybe an hour's sleep entwined with him.
He wondered, not knowing Aya was doing the same at that very moment, if they would ever sleep together again, in that comforting tangle of limbs and heartbeats. "K'suo, we're all going to hell." He sighed, dragging his fingers through his hair to try and detangle some of it.
"Welcome to Tokyo." The driver muttered.

"You again." Dr. Morishima hissed, just about ready to murder him on sight.
Yohji smiled. "Miss me?" He wouldn't let the orderlies take Schuldig from him. He lifted him onto the table himself, gently reassuring the doped up, grumbling and fretty-child-like german that all was well and he would be fine in no time.
"He's full of heroin." he informed her. "Is there something you can give him?"
"HEROIN!" She exclaimed and quickly got her stethoscope to the gaigen's heart. "How the hell did he get heroin in him?"
"He injected it himself." Yohji said honestly. "He was a drug addict as a kid. All this crap going on, it sent him back to the dope."
She sighed heavily. "Why can't people leave themselves alone? Isn't nature hard enough on us as it is? The only thing I can do for him is give him a shot of adrenaline and let him sleep it off. Then he'll need to detox, because these addicts never really quit. Like alcoholics, they are never safe from their

addiction. He'll go through withdrawals."
"Shoot him up and I'll take him home." Yohji said. "Crawford wont leave him here."
She frowned. "Well, last I heard there were no more empty beds anyway. We're having to leave them on gurneys and stretcher cots in emergency ward. What has hit this city that you and your employer are so well aware of, Kudoh?" She looked at him suspiciously.
"Ah, now that would be telling." he said. "Are you superstitious?"
"No, but I can get that way." She said coldly. "I'm starting to believe in bad luck and curses." She went to get the artificial adrenaline and prepare a hypodermic.
"Then consider it that." Yohji said, pulling out his digital phone at last.

Ran hadn't wanted Brad driving, but there was no arguing with him about it. When the cell phone rang, Brad took it out and handed it to him, not wanting to spoil his own, at present difficult, concentration on his talent.
"Hai?" Ran said, knowing it could only be one of his team mates, hoping it was Omi.
"I'm at the hospital with SchuSchu, the doctor is going to give him an adrenaline shot for the dope but that's about it. I need a lift."
"We're on our way to find Omi." Ran said coldly. "It got to him. He left the apartment with the tablets. At least he didn't kill Nagi or Farfarello before he did. You'll have to see if you can get a lift home somehow."
Yohji's sigh was very clear on the line. "I'll try to get a taxi. Be careful. Make sure nothing happens to that man. I can just hope Omi is all right."
"Hai." Ran said. "We'll let you know as soon as we find out. Call me when you get home."
"I will. If and when." Yohji said. "Ran....." He stopped.
"What, Yohji?" Ran prompted him.
"Never mind, it's not important." The line clicked.
Ran frowned and closed the phone to hand it back to Bradley. "Aggravating man."
Brad smiled a little, putting the phone back into his inside jacket pocket.
"I've picked up something at last. Omi's there still, Kirchner took the tablets and left."
Ran's mouth twitched. "What good are the tablets by themselves to him?"
"I'm sure we'll find out." Brad said dryly. One thing he was not ever going to allow to happen was the sacrifice of any of his team to those damned things.

Omi blinked. He looked around himself. He frowned. Despite long custom. the things that happened to him were sometimes just damned hard to let slide. How the hell had he gotten here!
He was just looking for the phone when the door opened.

"Boss." He said in relief. "How the hell did I get here?"
"Kirchner." Brad stated, Ran right behind him in the doorway. "Are you all right?"
"I think so. Are you?" He said, suspicious suddenly.
"Yes, damn it." Brad didn't like the concept that he might ever be taken over again. "He slipped up or he was just to conceited to care. The car was still on the tracking device. That's it, I'm putting permanent subcutaneous tracking devices in all of you!"
Ran looked around the room. It was empty of anything personal. "Don't you remember anything, Omi?" He asked quietly.
"No." Omi said, a bit worried. "Is...Nagi all right?"
"He had a dart stuck in him." Brad said. "And my computer was wrecked. I told you two not to sleep."
"We tried...." Omi protested.
"Mmm hmm." Brad said, taking him by the shoulder and pushing him toward the door, taking out his phone. "Tell that to Nagi when he wakes up with that pain in his shoulder."

Yohji had yet to get a cab company to respond. They were all busy, the ones that were running, and apparently the fees had gone up.
His phone chirruped and he pulled it out again. "Hai?"
"Kudoh." Brad's voice said.
He sighed and looked at Schu who was sitting beside him in the entrance to the hospital's bank of chairs. "He's fine, Boss."
"I told you he would be. It's mother's milk to him, the insane little bastard. We've got Omi, he's unharmed. The tablets are gone. Kirchner's skipped out again. How are you holding up, Kitten?"
Yohji felt that pang under his heart. Oh, yeah, it had been a long night and day. "Miserable. I want to be home, I want to be in bed. Asleep. Bradley, when this is over, promise me I won't have to get out of bed for a month. Promise me you'll keep me there."
Brad laughed softly. "No, Kudoh. No such promise. We're on our way. I've got Omi with me in the MB and Ran is driving the Nissan. He's not happy about it, so be nice to him when he gets there."
"Where are you going?" Yohji asked.
"Home. We need to regroup."

"At last!" Yohji pulled back the spread and blankets. "Hello, you big, beautiful bed." he said with relief. "I missed you."
Ran slid Schuldig onto the bed and looked down at him. Then he sighed heavily and took off his sword belt, and with, it putting aside the part of him that he 'wore' with it. It was good to be home. Behind a locked door, safe from the

world. It didn't matter to him that it was still daylight outside. He wanted sleep. Now.
Yohji sat on the bed to undo Schuldig's shirt. Schu fussed and curled up on his side.
"Sleep in your clothes, then." Yohji said, taking his own boots off.
"He won't be comfortable. And we'll hear about it later." Aya said, rolling the other red head back on to his back again and smacking him lightly on the cheek.
"Schuldig!" He called gently. "Wake up, Baby."
"M-no!" He tried to curl up again.
"Yohji, help me." Aya sounded just a bit on the fussy side.
Yohji looked at him in mild annoyance. The same guy that had practically carried Schuldig upstairs now needed help to undress him? "I wish you wouldn't do that."
"Do what?" Aya snapped at him.
Yohji shook his head. "Never mind." he sighed and grabbed the german's ankle to pull off his boot, nearly getting kicked for the effort. "Well! Hold him down!" He told Aya.
Aya sat on the bed and tried again to undo the shirt buttons, ending up holding Schuldig's wrists while Yohji undid them.
"Leave me alone!" Schuldig said loudly, squirming like hell.
"For someone that can fight like he does, he's certainly not up to it now." Aya laughed softly, almost enjoying his struggling.
Bradley came in and surveyed the scene. Then walked over and looked down at Schuldig as Yohji worked to get the slacks off him. "This is why you should never, ever, get back into that crap, Schuldig." He punched him again, knocking him out.
"Bradley!" Aya protested.
Yohji now easily skinned the pants off the unconscious man. Then he leaned over to slip his arms around the now yielding hips and lay his head on Schuldig's smooth, flat belly. It felt so good to just hold him. He kissed a bare hip bone and then reluctantly sat up from this perfect 'pillow' to undo his own pants.
"So that's it? The tablets are gone and we just sleep it off? It can't be that easy, Boss."
"It isn't." Brad said. "But I'm tired and right now, I don't care." He pulled off his shirt, looking at Aya, who was glaring at him. "It worked didn't it?" He said coolly, referring to the punching.
Aya pouted evilly and got up to go find his lacquer work jewel case.
"I was getting used to him being 'Ran' again." Yohji confided in an annoyed whisper to Brad.
"Christ, Yohji, as long as he spreads his legs, who cares what mode he's in." Brad tossed his slacks on the pile on the floor, mouth twitching in annoyance. It was all laundry now anyway.
Yohji gave up. It was beyond arguing to say that 'Ran' was his Aya. The Aya he'd fallen for when they were nothing more than lost souls. The Aya that came out of

the bathroom a few minutes later, having put back on his nipple rings and nose stud, and of course, that precious eardangle of his.....that Aya was all Brad's, going strait to him to be embraced and kissed, without a glance for anyone else.
"Itai!" He hissed as Brad's hand grazed the raw tattoo.
"Sorry, Lover, sorry." Brad murmured, shifting his hand carefully and kissing him along the jaw bone and then on the neck.
Yohji gave up. Schu was out cold, he was tired and quite literally did not give a fuck. He just wanted to sleep, he walked around to the other side of the bed,
.
"Aya..." Brad said softly, pushing him back a little. "Yohji, get the antibiotic lotion. Dead tired, he kept his mouth shut and went to get the bottle. Brad sat on the bed and rolled Schuldig over to look at the tattoo, stroking aside the long red strands of the german's mane. Yohji came back out and handed him the bottle with the cap snapped open.
He poured some into his hand and set it aside, carefully and gently smoothing it over the raw skin, then leaning over to kiss a bare shoulder lovingly. "Come here, Love, you're next." He moved so that there was room for Yohji to sit down with his back to him.
Yohji breathed deeply at the caress of hands, soothing his back with the cooling lotion. When he'd covered the area, Brad slipped his arms around him and drew him back to him carefully, pressing a cheek to his. "I haven't forgotten yesterday morning." He whispered and kissed him below the ear. "But I'm just too tired." He let go slowly, giving a very gentle push on his hips.
Yohji got up and walked around again to his side of the bed, feeling a little less like an intruder in his own life. He grabbed Schuldig by the arm and thigh and pulled him over to make room for the other two and laughed a little, softly, laying down next to him.
Brad did Aya's back for him next. The tattooed tiger was tawny orange, against the background of mossy rocks and bamboo and ferns. There was something about the intensity in it's inked green eyes that held his for the longest moment, until he felt as it was actually looking into his soul. He blinked, then drew a sudden breath. It wasn't looking a him now.....but down the mountain side.....from full face to now profile.....
"What the living hell....." He murmured, stunned.
"What?" Aya said softly.
"Nothing, just a passing vision. Nothing at all." He kissed this shoulder too, and took the diamond eardangle's end in his lips, giving it a little tug, reaching around to cup Aya's chest in his hands and run his thumbs over the once again jeweled nipples. He let the earring slip free and kissed Aya's neck.
"Would you do my back for me, Princess?"
"Yes, Bradley." Aya murmured coyly. "If you trust me behind you with a handful of lotion....and both of us naked...."
Brad drew back and slapped him on the hip. "Behave, you." He looked at Yohji who

was watching him with sleepy eyes, having slipped an arm under Schuldig to draw him half onto him, pillowed on his chest, stroking the long copper red silk of his hair.
Yohji smiled and kissed Schuldig's forehead, content.
Aya switched places with Brad, putting the lotion on him, not lingering much as it was scabbing over. That done he got up and slid off his jeans and added them to the pile as well. "So when we're done saving Tokyo from going strait to hell, we then do the laundry?" He said dryly. There was quite a lot of it in the hampers.
"Mmm, we do the laundry....in Vienna." Brad smiled, laying down to rub Schuldig's hip and kiss his back where it wasn't sore from the needling. "Poor Baby, you deserve a little rest." He murmured to his unconscious lover.
"Vienna?" Aya made it sound like a curse word. Then sighed in obvious annoyance and got onto the bed, hauling up the covers. "There better be something nice there for ME." He stated coldly, his back to Bradley and as far away from him as possible.
Brad turned to pull him into his arms. "Go to sleep, Princess." He ordered mildly.

Stuck once again with having had to check on Farfarello, Omi sighed and looked at Nagi's shoulder wound. "I'm sorry, Koi." He kissed it as near as he could to the very black and blue bruise."
"It's all right." Nagi said. "I know it wasn't your fault. How did he get to you? That's what I want to know. You said it was all the way across town...."
"It won't happen again." Omi said. "Brad said we're not splitting up again until this is over." He dabbed the painkiller on and then put the cotton gauze patch over the puncture wound. "I'm sorry." he whispered again.
"I think with that kind of power, we might be in trouble." Nagi said, biting his lower lip. "But the tablets are useless without a sacrifice."
"So....what would he do with them?" Omi asked.
"Find a place to set up the ritual?" Nagi turned on the bed to look at him.
Omi thought this over. "That stupid abandoned museum?"
Nagi blinked. "Yeah!" He said. "That would be just the place wouldn't it? Who the hell knows why they don't just blow it up or something." Then he frowned, looking into Omi's naturally guile-less looking eyes. "Unless.....that thought was put in to your mind to lead us there."
Omi blushed. "Nagi!" he protested. "If Schuldig weren't drugged out of his mind we could have him check me, damn it!"
"Maybe that was the idea all along, too." Nagi said. "With SchuSchu incapacitated, that son of a bitch can just waltz into all our minds and take over. Except maybe Brad's. He's got to be pretty immune to telepaths by now."
"I don't know, he wasn't immune to that Chapel guy and this man is supposedly

Chapel's father? I wouldn't be to certain of anything right now." He kissed the dark haired boy's lips lightly. "Nagi.....I'm hungry." he complained. "Let's make supper and then when they all wake up at least something will be ready and we won't have to listen to them bitch."
"Hai...." Nagi said, kissing him back....."In a little while...."

He was walking down the corridor of the museum again. Except.....this time it seemed to go on much further, or he was getting no where....
It was a dream.
Brad stopped in his tracks, putting his hands in his slacks pockets and looking around coolly. His mind, his memories of the place, but sharper. Who ever was projecting this.....was there, projecting his surrounds with his ego.
"Kirchner." he said icily.
"You're very adept, Crawford." The voice was similar to Chapel's, except for the slight german accent behind the american one. Chapel had been british accented.
"Why bring me here?" Brad said.
"It was built for the tablets. A place of power." Kirchner said calmly. "If you block me out, you won't hear what I have to say."
Brad frowned. He'd been about to allow his talent level to go up to full power for the first time in days. "If I block you out," he said ruefully. "I won't have to listen to you."
"It would be to your advantage to listen."
Kirchner sounded perturbed. Was he like his arrogant son? Had he been expecting lesser opponent somehow? Chapel in the long run had only been dangerous at a distance. Close up, the man had been a fool too full of himself.
"Why not use the tablet's power, Crawford?" Kirchner said.
"I have all I want." He replied, , letting his power rise, slowly oh so slowly, enough to further shield his mind.
"Ah. But how long can you keep it?"
A scene change, the 'dream' being directed by Kirchner.....
Cold bodies on metal tables in a cold room.....the ice water running along them.....
Brad's fists clenched, in the dream and in reality.
No...
He got hold of himself and remained calm and cool as possible. "You're already dead, old man, you just haven't got the sense to let go."
"Oh, but I know all too well. I held on, once. I had to let go of 'life', to gain freedom." Kirchner said icily in his mind. "Can you be as strong? Can you see all you love die around you to survive?"
"There's no life, no challenge, in giving up and running like a coward." Brad stated.
"Then why not use the power or the tablets? Why not take over and control the

destiny of the world? To protect those you.....'care' for." The last bit was sarcastic, disapproving.
Feeling perverse, Brad walked over and drew back the sheet from the image of Schuldig dead on a morgue autopsy table. It was incredibly vivid, he felt the chill, smelt the antiseptic cleansers, the formaldehyde, the faint scent of dried blood and dead meat. He caressed the cold, stiffened cheek, his fingers feeling it.....then bent to kiss the frozen lips lightly. "I think you never loved anyone in the first place, Kirchner. With no one else to live for, freedom is nothing." He let his fingers fall from the image, straitened and put the sheet back over it. Having no place else to look for his enemy in his own mind, he didn't bother to look anywhere.
"Why are you so concerned what I do, Old Man?" He said coolly.
"You destroyed Esset, and nearly all of Schwarz. Was it merely for freedom? And when the tablets came to you, it never occurred to you to use them? Were you not tempted? Not even once? Can your meager powers prevent this?"
The room rearranged itself around him, all three bodies now half uncovered so that he could see their faces, see their wounds.....
"I destroyed Esset and the organization because I wanted to." Brad said with all the hate in his heart for all they had stood for in his life. "Because I'd rather be the devil in my own little hell then serve a self-proclaimed god. Make your point, Kirchner. I need my rest."
"Rest. A very mortal weakness. Why not.....be a god yourself?"
Brad laughed softly in derision. "Does it hurt, being alone, Old Man?" He let his power level climb, his normal perception of the timeline overlaying the projected dream scape, blocking out the telepath. His last perception of the intruder was a back flash along Kirchner's own mental link.....Then it was gone as his own power came into full use.
As with Schuldig, he'd caught a glimpse of the man's near future thoughts.
He knew where he would be. He knew what he was attempting.
And he knew that parting shot had hit home.

Kirchner swore and pounded a clenched fist on the arm of the chair he sat in, in a what had been an office in the mueseum. "Impudent bastard!"
In all his years of dealing with students, he had never quite learned to deal with the idiocy of the younger generations. Their lack of respect, their failure to see that there might be another way than their own!
"You will learn, Crawford." He said through clenched teeth. "You will learn to obey me. I will break you simply because you are there!"

He opened his eyes, drawing a deep breath.
The scent of lotion, and warm bodies in linen sheet.
Alive bodies.

It was black in here, all natural light blocked by the boards over the window frames. But it only took a touch to know Aya had turned to sleep on his stomach as usual, and Schuldig was pressed as close as possible to his side....Yohji's arm still about him...

Brad pulled Schuldig even closer and feeling for his shoulder and his chin, kissed him. The lips in his dream had been like ice. These were warm, and parted with a small sound.

(Mein Mann?) The sleepy voice said in his mind.

(Are you alright?)

A shiver.....(No. Fucked up. Heroin....)

The down swing had hit. Brad held onto him. Damn it. now along with everything else he had to deal with a telepath going through withdrawal.

He reached over to run a hand up Yohji's arm. "Yohji? Yohji wake up."

"Mmm, what the hell now?" Yohji complained.

"I know where Kirchner is."

"Who gives a flaming fuck." Yohji wanted to sleep!

"Schuldig is coming down. I need you to make coffee, twice as strong, and get some more blankets.

"Oh shit." Yohji complained, but got out of bed.

Aya had woken and half sat up, Brad felt a cool hand come along his shoulder from behind. "What can I do?"

"Help me keep him warm and in place. He gets violent."

Chapter Thirty
"Unburnt Bridges"

"I'm alright, Damn It! Leave me alone!" Schuldig snapped in a fit of bad temper. Yohji looked at him skeptically. Clean and dressed, he still did not look 'all right'. His face was bruised from being hit, he was shaking and holding himself and barely able to tolerate having anyone near him.
Was this a man to trust with a gun? Yohji wondered.
Brad got the coat off the hook in the closet and came to pull Schu's right arm away from himself and stuffed it into the sleeve of the coat, looking him in the eyes. "Pull yourself together and lower your voice." He stepped around him to take the other arm and slide the coat up it onto the narrow, trembling shoulders, and slid his hand under the copper red mop to free it from the collar, letting his thumb brush the unbruised section of cheek as he made certain he had Schu's attention, meeting his eyes again and buttoning the coat for him. "Understand now that I won't have this out in public, Schuldig. And not in front of an enemy." He said coldly.
Schu drew a deep breath and tried to compose himself. He'd not had any of the stuff for so long, and even with his tolerance for morphine.....that had been a damned pure hit of the crap. "Jah, jah, mein Mann." He said. "I'm fine." And shivered again.
Brad sighed. He knew Schuldig could handle it. It just wasn't pretty to watch.
Nagi was not happy at all. "You said we weren't to split up again, now you're leaving Omi and me home again?"
"There would be no one to defend Farfarello if anything happened." Brad stated.
"Then leave Schu home with us." Nagi said. "He's a mess!"
"You shut it now before I knock it off your face!" Schuldig threatened through clenched teeth.
Nagi stepped back further away from him.
"Sorry.....I'm.....sorry....." Schuldig realized he'd just slipped up again.
Brad frowned. "I'd rather keep an eye on him myself, Nagi. Just take my word for it, nothing will come here if we do it this way. Just keep an eye out for anything odd, and be ready to back us up only if you're called. Got it?"
"Hai." Nagi said.
Brad patted his cheek and opened the door. "Gentlemen. Let's go kill someone, shall we?" He smiled coldly.

Sunset. Beautiful. With everything that had gone wrong, and how the past few days had been a disorienting nightmare, there were still something's in the world that were uncompromisingly beautiful.
The speed-gang hanging around the gates of the old museum were not one of those things.

"Of course." Brad said sarcastically, parking the car facing the building, so that when they got out the car doors would shield them. "He wants us in there, this is just muscle for show. He would need a small army. Why not simply take it? A telepath, and the weak minds involved? Without Esset to track him down, he's getting bold in his old age."

They got out of the car, calmly, coolly, efficient in motion and confident in ability, though in Schuldig's case, it was a major act, the grin on his face no where near his eyes.

"You can use your powers, Schuldig." Brad informed him. "The tattoo will ward off the influence of the entity. The only thing we need to be careful of now is Kirchner's power. Just remember, anything he does is in your mind, not reality. Other wise, why the muscle?"

The punks eyed them, having been told what to look for. They postured and looked tough, but as the men walk past them, they didn't do anything but make rude comments. Brad caught something, and just in time....(Schuldig, NO.)

Schu's grin didn't flicker from his lips but his mind was frustrated. He'd wanted to just punch one of the little bastards in the crotch. Instead he changed it to making a kiss at the little shit and winking at him. It wasn't like he could just let such things pass unattended.

Ran smirked, ignoring the comments, glad for his lack of ornament for once. He'd kept only the earring, that would never leave him, if he could help it, from now on.

Yohji was worse. He sized all the boys up as if they were women, coolly deliberately passing judgment on each one in the most deliberately predatory way possible. If one of his old girl friends had seen this from him, even with his reputation, she would have been shocked. Of course, not one of the gangsters passed his exacting standards and each was left with a very creepy feeling....

Brad kept his eyes strait ahead and opened the damned gate the padlock had yet again been cut off of. The glass of the boarded up doors was broken now, the police having replaced the old boards with new ones.

(The gang was here, he just took them over.) Schudlig informed Brad.

(How convenient.) Was Brad's curt comment.

Inside, there were no gangsters. Just an eerie silence and the sound of their own footsteps.

For once, no one had anything to say.

Brad knew what Kirchner wanted. He couldn't revenge himself on Esset, but he had the guts to try to take over what was left of Schwarz. Desperation in his old age? What was it that made 'old fools'?

Brad had never thought about his own passing years. He wanted to avoid the syndrome. Die in battle or age gracefully, but not end up like this, a bitter old fool, who'd life had been wasted.

(You think you know it all, Crawford.)

He damn near stopped short but kept walking. He was not used to being startled.

(What am I getting wrong then?) He thought back at Kirchner.
(Not wasted, spent in patient waiting. If you'd used the tablets yourself, they would have never come to me. There are such things as 'young fools'.) This was followed by a laugh in his mind.
Brad's face was just a bit perplexed, his lips a bit thinner. He'd stopped walking at this...
Schuldig was beside him, a hand on his arm, looking at him with concern.
"Bradley, why have you shut me out?"
"I didn't." He stated. "Kirchner did."
The hand on his arm tightened.
He caught Schu's wrist and pulled him off. "No." He looked into those jade eyes. "Play it by caution, all of you." He glanced back at Yohji and Ran. "You're each on your own here. Double think everything, even my orders." He gave Schuldig's wrist a little squeeze, looking into his eyes again, then let go of him.
Schuldig sighed and fell back a step behind him and to one side as they continued into the 'building's' depths.
Brad didn't need his foresight to tell him where to go, Kirchner was leading him to the cavern. The tablets were already laid out. The ritual was prepared.
(That's right, Crawford.) The voice came again. (With power like mine, even your talent can't block it out. I can tap right into it and use it for myself. Interesting, the way it works.....)
Brad felt the old nausea suddenly as his power level was unleashed to go to it's fullest extent and all realities were thrown at him. Vertigo, weakness, despair.....
Another hand caught him, the overload stopped as quickly as it had come.
He blinked and focused on the present....
Yohji had him by the upper arm, looking at him over those idiotic sunglasses.
"What's going on, Boss?"
"He over loaded my power on me." Brad said, stifling his discomfort at having to be 'rescued'.
Whether Kirchner had left off because of the overload hitting him as well or his curiosity was satisfied, his power was back at the level he himself had set for it. He frowned, tight lipped, angry, eyes shifting ahead down the corridor again. "We're in for it. Shit." He hissed.
"Then why the fuck walk into it?" Schuldig said, angry now, but under control. "Let's turn around and walk out now. Fuck that old bastard."
"Because you've seen what unfinished business leads to, Schuldig." Brad stated coldly. "And I don't run away."
Schuldig frowned, but resigned himself to it with an annoyed sigh. "For gott sakes, Yohji, give me a cigarette."
Yohji very much wanted another himself. He looked at Brad, making sure he wasn't going to black out or what ever it was that had been going on and then let go of him. Then he took out his pack and let Schuldig have one.

Brad pulled himself together. He knew damned well he was walking into a trap. But how else to get this over with? "Hurry up, you two, this isn't a walk in the park."
Schuldig inhaled deeply of the smoke, shivering as the residual dope messed with his nerves. What fun, being 'down' and in a life or death situation. Joy. "No, but his sorry ass can wait!" He snapped mean as a snake. "I thought we were done with old jerks ordering us around!" he looked around the corridor. "You hear me, you old son of a bitch! I'm going to cut your shriveled up old balls off and feed them to those little shits outside!"
Ran smiled a little, wondering how Kirchner would take that threat from the german. Considering he'd seen him do almost exactly that to men quite a few times.
(You let them rule you.) Kirchner's voice came into Brad's mind again. (That is your greatest weakness.)
Brad wasn't letting this get to him. He damned well knew his weaknesses. (What the hell do you want from me, Kirchner? Why drag me into this at all? The one they meant for the resurrection is dead and ashes. Fujimiya is not good enough for the sacrifice. And if you think I'll just let you kill him, you're out of your mind.)
(He's good enough to draw the entity, Crawford. And you will do exactly as I order you to.)
Brad felt his insides lurch again. He fought it, but then he found.....he had to obey. His mind was over come with an extreme tiredness.....he moved as if in a dream, ordering them to hurry up and continuing again the walk down the corridor.
Yohji put his lighter away, puffing on the cigarette he'd lit for himself and gave Ran a cool look.
Ran had his hand on the hilt of his sword.
Schuldig frowned. He felt it, too. Something was very wrong with Brad right now. He resented like hell being shut out of Brad's mind. He met the other two's looks with a nod and followed his man, hating this place more with each step. They'd reached the cavern.
On the platform with the alter on it, a little ways back from the alter, a man dressed in white sat on a chair like a throne, a leg crossed over the other, comfortable. His sixty odd years did not weigh so heavily on him as one might expect. He looked like Chapel.....and yet.....not. He was lean, but not scrawny as you might expect an older man to be. There was still strength in him physically. And more than that mentally.
"Come down here, all of you. Your 'leader' is now in my control." He said calmly, knowing that with the acoustics of the place, his voice would carry easily.
Schuldig scowled. How often had he been hauled up on the carpet by Esset, not to know this feeling? How often had Brad warned him not to be disobedient openly,

not to give vent to his true hate of the elders, for him not to have that old 'brought up before the principal for being a bad boy' sensation creep over him. Then he threw it off with the finished cigarette butt, and spoke in german to the man, as proud and arrogant and sarcastic as could be, fueled by the crappy feeling being 'down' had left him with. "Then what do you want with us, if you can control us so easily? You have them outside, those mindless fools. Why not be content with the stones? Find some little bitch's throat to slit and leave us alone. Because this won't go well with you."
The man smiled coolly.
And Yohji frowned. He looked at Schuldig surreptitiously, and then at the man. While you could see Chapel was related to him.....
He had Schuldig's smirk and the same shape to his eyes, the same arrogant body language...
"Don't try it, Fujimiya." Kirchner looked at the japanese sharply. "I have Crawford's powers under my control."
Ran scowled and the corner of his mouth twitched angrily, his purple eyes full of hate for the man, but took his hands off the hilt of his katana.
Schuldig looked at Brad. Then he pulled his gun out and flipped off the safety with a sad look in his own eyes. "Forgive me, mein liebe....." He aimed it at Crawford's head.....
The shot went wild as Yohji grabbed his wrist and slammed him with his hip. "God Damn it, Schuldig!" He'd wrenched the gun loose from him and put the safety back on. Brad had not even flinched, just stood there, like a mannequin.
Schuldig half collapsed. Ran caught him up, stunned at this behavior.
Yohji glared at Kirchner, wishing him with all his heart to Hell and damned. How the fuck were they going to get out of this!

Omi was startled by the building front door buzzer. Nagi came out of the kitchen, giving him then the intercom a 'what the heck' look. Omi went to answer it. "Crawford residence."
"Ikeda Hanako." The woman's voice said. "May I come up?"
He hit the button to let the guard know she could come into the building. Nagi went to get the guns and passed one to Omi. Normally it took five to ten minutes to get from the front door to the 23'rd floor, depending on how busy the building was.
The door bell tinkled in about seven minutes.
Nagi looked out the peep hole, and used his powers to freeze everything in the space. He felt only the young woman in his range. He released her, leaving her with a fleeting odd sensation of being some how.....'stopped'...that passed quickly as it had come.
He unlocked the door and opened it carefully, then quickly the rest of the way.
"In. Quick." he said curtly, keeping the gun ready but aimed upward, away from

her, and locked the door behind her.
Omi raised his gun as well, putting the safety back on. "Konbanwa, Ikeda-san."
"Farfarello-sama?" She inquired, looking slightly nervous, all the guns.....
"He's locked up." Nagi said gently. "You took a chance, coming out at night. Are you all right?"
She relaxed just a little, sighing heavily. "No...our house.....I went home from work...it was ruined. Everything. The whole street on our block was hit. The police wouldn't let anyone in."
Omi put his gun aside and moved to take her arm gently. "Come sit in the kitchen. We'll get you some tea and something to eat. You're more than welcome to stay here. It's just that....There might be trouble. The same thing that's affecting Farfarello.....may affect one of us."
She shook her head. "It's everywhere. When will it end!" She burst into tears, burying her face in her hands.
Nagi frowned a little, not really sure what to say or do. He helped Omi get her to the kitchen and set her down. All any of them could do now was wait it out.

Brad knew his mind was being used....he just couldn't seem to connect with the part of it that would let him control it again. He became sharply aware of Schuldig's words....
(Forgive me, Mein Leibe.....)
And something slipped.....for a brief moment, he was able to take control again, just briefly. Then his mind was smothered again.
Ran shook Schuldig, trying to get some response from him. He recovered, apparently it wasn't Kirchner's doing that had affected him, it was his own despair. He leaned for a moment on the slighter japanese and then pulled himself together to look at Yohji with haunted eyes. (Why, Love? Why stop me....?)
"What the fuck were you doing, Schuldig!" Yohji demanded. So what if the old fuck heard them, he'd hear everything any way!
"His misguided sense of loyalty." Kirchner sneered. "Or weren't you made aware of their little pact. There's quite a lot you two ex-white hunters aren't aware of." He took advantage of the disarray of their minds at the moment to make Crawford walk around to his side, behind the stone alter. Fools. He laughed. Young fools. No age limit on that.
Yohji wasn't having any more of this. He now aimed Schu's gun at Kirchner. But when he tried to pull the trigger.....he couldn't.
His body wouldn't obey his mind.....
(What's the matter, Kudoh?) The voice said in his mind. (Aren't you used to it by now? Having your mind taken over, your body used?)
Yohji's eyes went wide as his memories were rifled and everything that could possibly have, at one time, hurt him beyond repair, was thrown at him, putting him through it all again as vividly as if they were just happening.

Schuldig raping him, his own wire on his neck.....the pain.....the shame.....
When he regained himself.....Ran was there, fingers digging in to his arm.
"Little Weiss kitten....." Kirchner hissed evilly. "So desperate for any love at all, you sold yourself to the enemy, like a common whore."
Schuldig was looking at Yohji now, well aware of what had just gone on.
Yohji took a deep breath and looked back at him. He didn't regret one moment of his life and he'd be damned if he'd regret even that. "It's all right, Baby." He said quietly, still trying to pull the trigger with the finger of his outstretched arm. "You slip one second and this gun goes off, you fucking son of a bitch!" He yelled at Kirchner.
Ran tried it anyway. He pulled the katana and with a yell of rage, went for it, charging at Kirchner, hoping he'd flinch and Yohji could shoot the gun, or better yet.....that he'd connect steel with flesh and bone.

He woke slowly....his head aching. He sighed....then tried to move. He was laying on his back, his wrists.....pulled above his head....cuffed.
Amethyst colored eyes flew open.
"Shit." Ran stated. He pulled on the cuffs, but it didn't do any good. He scowled, huffing in frustration and letting his already aching muscles rest. He looked around his own biceps as best as he could.
Crawford stood there, still looking like he'd been shut off by a switch.
"Bradley!" He tried.
"Do shut up." Kirchner ordered. "It's not midnight yet and I don't want to weaken the spell by killing you too early."
Ran closed his eyes and tried to think. He worked his wrists in the cuffs.
Kirchner caught him by the jaw, bending slightly to look into his eyes angrily.
"Don't you know when to quit, little man?" He growled.
Ran looked away from those hateful blue eyes.
All he could see was the distant roof of the cavern, the strange lighting subdued. Where the hell were Schuldig and Yohji.....
"Get your hands off him!" Yohji snarled from somewhere nearby.
Kirchner looked, obviously at him....."Make up your mind, you half breed weakling! Which one are you willing to die for? Your mind is a garbage can of useless and confused emotions!"
Ran felt the grip sliding.....And BIT.
Kirchner hit him in the head, hard enough to make it ring. And definitely hard enough to make him let go, pulling his bleeding hand free. He swore something in german and hit Ran again with his uninjured hand.
Ran let it slide off, used to the pain.
At least he'd got that in.
Then Kirchner got into his head again.
(YOU murdered your sister. She died of shame.) He was forcing him to see

Aya-chan's last hour again.....(She wasn't going to die until you killed her, Fujimiya. You believed the enemy when he said she was brain dead. She was ALIVE.)
Ran looked up at him, cold as ice. "She was dead." he hissed through clenched teeth.
Kirchner smiled cruelly. "You'll believe that to your death. In all of a few hours."
Yohji swore vehemently. "What about Crawford! Do you think he'd just take being ruled by you!"
"He has no mind of his own." Kirchner stated.
Ran closed his eyes. (Schuldig!)
Nothing....
He hadn't realized...how he'd become so accustomed to the sensation---of just thinking and having him there.....
(Schuldig!) He tried again.
But there was nothing.
It felt so empty without that answering presence, the mental voice and caress....
(unnnnh)
Ran felt a flicker of hope flare up again.
A brief moment, but there. Schuldig, warm and strong, almost like---safety.....He grabbed at that connection. (Schuldig, snap out of it! Fight him off!) Then it was gone.
Ran looked up at Kirchner. "LIAR!"
Kirchner was having a fine time amusing himself. Fools. Precious little fools.

Yohji was chained to the base of one of the supporting pillar statues. When Ran had gone on the attack, Kirchner had hit him mentally, knocking him out, he too had woke chained. He was able to see Schuldig and Brad both from where he was. Schuldig had been set in the chair, cuffed to it. Brad was still forced to stand.
Yohji looked over at Schuldig. He was slumped in the chair, unconscious. Kirchner's power had to be strong. The fact that he was somehow related to Schuldig made that obvious. And yet, he was able to harness Brad's power, when that power shut Schuldig's down.
Ah.....But Schuldig would never try to take over Brad's mind. He just wouldn't. While.....Kirchner had no problem with subjugating the man.
(Schuldig?) He tried.
There was a faint stirring. Like some small rustling in another room of a house.
(Baby, answer me.) The pet name might get to him when anything else wouldn't.
(...brad..ley....?....)
(Sorry, you pest, but no.) He looked in time to see Kirchner strike Ran.....and

he hated him even more....but Ran was keeping him occupied.....(WAKE UP, YOU FUCKING WHORE!) Yohji mentally yelled at him.
Schu opened his eyes, unfocused but open....(...fuck...) He pulled at the cuffs.
Then he focused on Brad.
(Yohji?)
(Behind you, chained to the pillar.....watch it now.....Ran's keeping him busy.....but if you mess with Brad....he'll know it for sure.)
Schuldig saw him back hand Ran again as Ran yelled "Liar" at him. God, he wanted to kill the bastard! (Take over Crawford's mind, Schul!) Yohji ordered.
Schuldig frowned.
He'd never done that before.....never.
For one thing.....it frightened him. The damage he might do, the delicate balances he might destroy with his clumsiness.....
But Yohji was right. If he could.....somehow.....
And he had a way in.....
With an evil grin.....he sent the one thing Brad most feared right up along the back of his brain....vivid and in what you might call.....4D.....and couldn't help a snickering laugh.....

Kirchner turned sharply and caught the look in the red head's face....."Boy, what are you up to?" He demanded angrily.
Schulidig looked at him in defiance. Then attacked HIM mentally.
Kirchner staggered back against the alter, as for the first time in twenty years he came into contact with a telepath capable of matching him, of fighting back.
And in that one moment of shock, Schuldig was able to get in and go strait to his weak spots.....
And lost his grip on the man's mind as suddenly as he had taken it.....
Kirchner stablized and looked at him coldly.
"Maman....." Schuldig said faintly, his emotions totally out of his control.....
Kirchner laughed. "Weakling!"
Yohji scowled again. Damn it! From the sound of it, Schul had some real problem with his mother....well, hell, he was about as screwed up as could be, what was the shock in that? "Schuldig don't let him get to you!"

Hanako couldn't sleep. She hadn't really slept for days now. Even when Jei had been home. She leaned on the door, wrapped in a warm robe and borrowed pajamas, looking in the little room at him, cocooned in his strait jacket.
And it occurred to her she was just as cocooned. She smiled wryly, no humor in it. "Jei-Sama, my Jei.....who's more sane, you or us? You know when to go to safety, the rest of us deny it and go on as if this were impossible, what's happening to us all."

She sighed deeply. It didn't matter if everything else was gone. Maybe some things could be salvaged, maybe not. What mattered was that this strange foreign man with such a complex problem, and so much in his heart, was safe here. What on earth, she wondered, had brought him here, to her. A psychotic, and a psychologist. This time she smiled at the insanity of that. He'd asked her once, late one Sunday morning, it didn't seem so long ago as it was, still lazing in bed. He'd looked at her and said, all of four inches away from her on the same pillow....."Ye know I'm fucked out of ma mind, don' ye?"
She'd smiled back. "Yes, Jei."
And that had been that.
She put her hand to the thick little window, a perfect copy of the ones in the asylum. "Sleep well, you crazy man." She said softly, then finally went to the room to go to bed, maybe not so comforted but at least.....able to allow herself to rest at last.

Kirchner gave the eurasian misbreed a stabbing headache for his interference. He'd been waiting for the red head to waken. "Just as weak as she was." He said bitterly cruel.
Schuldig actually blushed with shame. "You fucking miserable bastard." He said icily.
"You think me heartless?" Kirchner asked, amused. "Where is she? Dead. Where am I? Alive."
Schuldig looked down at the floor, unable to meet those eyes for a moment. Bury it, he told himself. Bury it deep.....
But no, Kirchner dug it up and threw it at him, and Schuldig was crying brokenly in moments.
Yohji blinked, unable to believe the heart wrenched sobs that the man had wrung from Schuldig of all people.
Then again, knowing his passionate nature, was it so hard to believe he would not feel sadness just as deeply? What ever had happened, to his mother.....Kirchner was pulling him to pieces with it.
And Crawford moved.....
Yohji saw him shift slightly and his brown eyes focus behind the lenses of his designer glasses. But that was it.
Ran was still yelling at Kirchner, calling him every filthy and foul thing he could come up with and Yohji was rather shocked at the incredible repertoire his beautiful love had for that sweet mouth of his.
Kirchner turned to silence him by back handing him again, splitting his lip and sending a splatter of blood flying. "BE SILENT!" He ordered in a rage.
"Old man, you're so brave when your dealing with tied up and helpless ones!" Yohji got into it, staring his own tirade at him.
Ran swallowed and answered Kirchner back with some of the foulest imprecations

of a supposed sex life he could come up with.
Kirchner turned purple red with rage.
And Brad took two steps to chop him on the back of the neck, sending him down in a bundle on the concrete floor.
He pushed his hair back and taking a deep breath to still himself, took out his gun and aimed it at the old man on the ground and shot him in the heart and the head. Two small cracks of sound, neat and clean. He put the gun away and resettled his jacket.
The blood from Kirchner.....oddly enough.....seemed to run out much faster than was normal.....
It ran like water and puddled strangely.....
Brad frowned.....something tingling in the back of his mind and then in his back as the sigils were triggered.....
A tremble in the ground.....
A crack in the concrete.....
The blood ran down into it as if in a hurry to go, not a drop left behind.....
"Oh FUCK!" Brad took out the gun again and grabbed Ran's wrists up, shooting the chain off that bound him. "Get up, get Schuldig free!" He ordered as the whole place began to rumble around them, and went to shoot the chains that held Yohji. He missed the first time, swore, set his face, took better aim and fired again, this time the chain snapped off.
Ran found his precious katana and gun holster laying near by and used his own gun to free Schuldig. "You okay?" He asked a little more pale, if it could possibly be, helping him up.
"Yes." Schuldig said bitterly, glaring at the corpse on the ground.
"OUT!" Brad yelled. "NOW! MOVE!"
"HOW, MEIN MANN!" Schuldig yelled over the noise of the destruction.
"DOWN, THE WATER! SWIM FOR IT!" Brad gave up, throwing off his jacket and kicking off his shoes, running to dive in.

Chapter Thirty One
"Broken Glass"

A strong hand caught him by the arm and pulled him to his feet, out of the sandy water close to shore. He was shivering cold and his back stung from the salt water on the freshly tattooed skin. He wiped the water out of his eyes as best as he could and pushed his bangs back, gasping for air. If it had been any darker a night, he might not have made it to shore, despite the city lights. He shuddered, teeth starting to chatter, walking out of the pulling waves, looking to see who else had made it.

"You breathing okay?" Yohji asked, a hand on his shoulder.

Ran nodded. Brad and Schuldig were on the dry sand already, sitting down, re-covering. He plunked down next to them to let some of the water run off his cloths and loose the heaviness of being soaked.

The tunnel had lead out to the rocks and deep water quickly. It hadn't been a experience he wanted to have. He looked at Bradley. How the hell had the man managed to keep his glasses on?

He raised his hand to his ear....and felt the earring still there, then checked the backing. It was dangerously loose, but still there. He secured it again, relieved....

"I'd kill for a cigarette right now." Yohji complained, frowning at the ocean, hands on hips.

"We are sooo screwed." Brad said quietly but with an amazed emphasis.

Yohji sat down to look at him. "Why?"

"The blood." Schuldig answered for him. "It's like it knew where it was going."

"What now?" Aya asked.

Brad sighed heavily. "We go home." He pushed his wet hair back and his glasses up. "I want to go home, have a hot shower, screw someone's brains out, and sleep for a fucking week!"

They all blinked at him.

"Whoah." Yohji said. "There's a concept."

"And by the way. We're walking." Brad added dismally. "That batch of little shits stripped the car and torched it as soon as they were out of Kirchner's control."

"Can it get any worse?" Schuldig complained.

"You don't want to know." Brad informed him dully.

"Don't say things like that." Yohji said, trying to wring his long hair out. "Coming from you of all people that's just not....reassuring."

Brad half frowned. "Just trust me on this, we're stuck with waiting again. Something's always going to happen, it's just that this is not what it was before and it's difficult to see, but no less of a threat."

"It's this life, Yohtan." Schuldig said, with a shiver, being ice cold slopping wet not exactly ruining his recovery. If anything, he was getting more and more

back to his senses. He knew that hit of heroin had dulled his ability. Shit, that was what he'd started doping for in the first place!
Aya reached over to lay a hand on Brad's arm. "You owe me that new katana after all." He said quietly, in a half hearted attempt to be coy.
Brad gave him a cool look.
Aya lowered his eyelashes a bit, not wanting to push his luck, but still wanting that reassurance....
"If I'm putting that much money into something, no throwing it at helicopters!" Brad growled.
Aya turned bright red, staring right at him now.
Yohji laughed.
Aya got up, too embarrassed at the memory to even say anything back. "The sooner we start walking, the sooner we dry off!" He stated almost angrily, the subtle shift occurring again.
"Ran's back." Schuldig muttered, but go to his feet with a sigh. "Let's go, mein Mann, I want that fuck. My head aches and my back is killing me." He stretched, rubbing his lower back.
"Who says you get it!" Yohji asked.
"I do." Schuldig informed him.
Brad just got to his feet, knowing by now protesting anything would only get him no where. "Weapons?"
Ran had thrown off his holster, the better to swim in wet jeans, all he had was his short blade. The others had their guns, still.
Brad brushed the sand off himself as best as he could and looked toward the roadway further up the beach. "I swear to god, I'm going to hunt them down and splay them gutless in a public street. Fuck up my car...."
Schuldig rolled his eyes. "Buy another one. The insurance will cover it."
"The insurance isn't replacing my suit OR my shoes." Brad said sullenly.

Voices.....in his mind....
Not again.....
He breathed in, trying to orient himself. It was always like this. Who was he, where was he....finding himself in that mass of bleating sheep that never shut the hell up....
Blue eyes snapped open.
Gott in himmel.....
"Shit!" Was his first spoken word.
Rubble, half piled on him, a huge boulder inches away from his head.....a head that for some reason he was surprised he still had. He freed a hand to push the stuff off himself.....and stopped.
His....hand.....
He held it closer, looking at it in amazement.

Young, supple skin and bone.....strong....
He shoved the rocks off and staggered to his feet, feeling somewhat dizzy from the fact that the rubble had cut his circulation. He felt his head.....the hair thick and full again....and something tinkled to the ground from being lodged in it.
He looked down.....
A bullet slug?
"Vas....." He said....
Then realized....He was thinking in german again. He had left that behind long ago, with his life.
He looked at his hands again, both of them this time, palms and backs, then his arm and the skin over the muscles. Every part of him.....
The tablets.....He looked for the table he'd laid them on....but it was crushed too. He stepped over the rubble to dig it out and after some minutes work....found them.
Broken.
All three of them.
Neatly in half.
Not erratically, not with jagged edges, in perfect halves.
He frowned. What had happened here? How had it happened?
Another rumble and a fall of rock changed any ideas he had of just sitting there figuring it out. He had to get out and fast.

Brad leaned on the elevator wall with a sigh. Home at last. The sunrise had been a bore. His feet hurt, he was sticky with dried salt water, he was hungry, he was cold and he was damned certain Kirchner had survived. The vision he'd gotten as he'd hit the water had nearly cost him to loose his lung full of air.
Yohji was ready to just howl by now. He was that jazzed for a cigarette. "Damn it, Schuldig if you smoked them all up again behind my back...."
"Did not." Schu said. "Can't you go a few hours without a smoke!" He snapped, pretty bad off for it himself.
Yohji looked at him with the coldest look he'd given him in a damned long time. "About as long as you can go without sex." He said in a low, slow and dangerous voice.
Brad opened his eyes and did not look at either of them, but at the elevator's ceiling tiles. "If...you two...do not...stop fighting.... I will lock you up, in strait jackets, chained to opposite walls, in Farfarello's cell, with the television and the vcr set to play nothing but fuck videos and cigarette commercials for a week."
"Kami-sama, you're cruel." Yohji said in almost breathless shock, staring at him.
Schuldig snickered. "Gay, Lesbian or Strait?"

Brad looked at him. "Pigs, Schuldig. Fucking.....pigs."
Schu pouted. "Mein Mann.....you went there." He said with a wince.
Brad smiled sweetly at him.
Ran just scowled, arms crossed, ready to drop from exhaustion.
The elevator stopped and they got out. Brad lost the fake smile as he saw yet another damned plywood board on the window that was meant to let light into the small foyer. He pulled out wallet and took out the small computer chip card to insert into the lock slot and when it quietly beeped, turned the knob and took the card out.
He hadn't wanted to wake Nagi and Omi, who were passed out on the couch. But the young men were too well trained, and Nagi sat up sleepily to look at him over the back of the couch, pushing his hair back in a familiar, learned guesture.
"What hit you guys?" He asked, managing to extract him self as Omi insisted on turning over to go back to sleep, having a hard time getting his left leg loose and nearly falling over onto the coffee table.
"A sea cave, a tidal change, and probably every damned cop's spot light in Tokyo." Brad said. "Coffee, Nagi, hot and strong." He took off his shirt and threw it at the wall where the coats normally hung, and made his tired legs take him upstairs. "Bring it up to me, will you?" He called down from the landing.
Yohji went to the side table and pulled one of the two drawers in it, grabbing the carton of cigarette packs and spilling one out to grab it and slammed the door shut, peeling it open with a slightly shaky hand. Of COURSE his lighter had been lost in the ocean! He looked around.....And Schuldig held up his with a grin.
Yohji went to him, pulling out two cigarettes and held both in his lips while Schuldig held the lighter, inhaling deeply, then, reluctantly, and with a bit of hesitation....giving one to the red head.
Ran winced as they filled the air with smoke. When would they ever stop smoking in the house?
They peeled off their clothes and tossed them down with Brad's shirt as well.
The salt water was going to make things stink pretty soon. Nagi had the kitchen light on because the broken windows were boarded up. All in all, it had been a dismal night.
"I don't want to go upstairs." Yohji said, looking up at them.
"Go!" Schuldig slapped him one across the behind with the back of his hand. "Or get out of the way."
Ran sighed, looking at the stand for his katana on the side table, as he put the dagger in the lower holder.
Omi half sat up. "Aya? Where is your katana?" He said with some concern.
"Gone." he said flatly. He felt like he'd been beat up ten times in a row. He turned to go up stairs and caught sight of himself in the mirror over the table....
Tired, bruised and mussed. He half heartedly smoothed his hair and then, turned

to look over his shoulder as best as he could.
"It’s very nice." Omi offered, coming to look at the tattoo.
"I look like a damned criminal." Aya complained.
Omi kind of made a little face. "Aya....you are a criminal." he reminded him quietly.
Aya gave him a look that would freeze fire, then walked over to the stair case.
He looked up at them. All twenty six of them. Then he sighed and started the trudge up them. He was NOT getting out of bed for a week. No matter what Brad said.
Schu and Yohji were outside the bathroom door, smoking up the hall way. Brad had locked it. He did not like to share his showers.
"If he takes all the hot water...." Yohji started to threaten.
"He can’t stay in there THAT long." Schuldig reminded him.
"You think he wont?" Yohji said, squinting through the smoke. Then he looked at Aya, standing there in his bikini briefs. It was a nice view. He let his eyes rest on it, a small smile on his lips.
Aya looked annoyed. "Stop it."
"Why should I?" Yohji said.
"He’s got a point." Schuldig said, smiling too. "Why should he?"
"Because I want a shower, not a fuck." Aya stated.
Schuldig, unlike the other two had had no problem with tossing his own briefs in the pile downstairs. He stood there, looking happily at Aya with lazily speculative eyes, his hard on rising....
"Pig." Aya said, leaning on the door frame to the bed room.
"God, don’t remind me!" Schuldig said in a scoffing laugh, moving to his side of the hall to flip his salt water stiff hair off his shoulder and run his fingertips down Aya’s chest slowly, looking into those purple colored eyes with an unmistakable spark in his own jade ones.
"Pig." Aya said again, defying him, just a little sound, but meant with all his heart and not as the noun it was listed in the dictionary as.
Schuldig’s fingers ran down that flat tummy, tracing around the belly button and then down across the elastic and the silk of the briefs....brushing the burgeoning hard on in them.
"Schuldig....." Yohji said in a warning voice.
Schu knelt to press his mouth over the silk covered prize, setting his teeth just enough to draw it back and forth in a sudden fit of passionate abusiveness.
Aya’s hips drew up and forward in a thrust to get more of this and grabbed Schuldig’s head.
Schu drew back long enough to pull the briefs off Aya’s now fully hardened cock and swallowed it whole with a greed that belied his being up all night, having walked quiet a few miles, and up a stair case...
Aya moaned and half fell against the door frame, holding Schu’s head right there where he could just get it....

"You two..." Yohji said, entranced with the look on Aya's beautiful face as he just stood there and let Schuldig have him....
The door to the spare bed room opened and Hanako came out.....and stopped short, looking at this spectacle.....eyes wide opened....lips parted in shock.
She turned red and pulling her borrowed robe closed at her neck, hurried to run down stairs.
A giggle of nerves floated up from behind a stifling hand along with a mutter comment of someone having been right.....
Yohji blinked. "A woman?"
Brad opened the bathroom door, a towel around his hips, steam covered glasses in hand. "Ikeda-san." He said grimly, looking at Schu and Aya. He stepped aside and held the door open, looking at Yohji. "Your turn, then." He said.
Yohji ducked in and locked it, not one to miss a chance at anything.
Aya came, unable to hold off against Schu's relentless assault.
"Kami.....ch'k'suo
.....ah!"
Schuldig drew off him, catching his breath and swallowing, wiping his mouth and looking up at Brad sly eyed.
"I should beat you both." Brad said.
Schuldig was still lost in Aya's orgasmic frame of mind, and only leaned his cheek on Aya's white, scared thigh and sighed while long fingers played in his hair.
Brad moved past them to go in and flop face down, spread out on the bed with a sigh.
Schuldig stood up, taking Aya's hand to put around his own hard on.
"Mmm.....sweet as rice candy, my beautiful kitten..." He purred, nuzzling his nose with his own and kissing him lightly....about to go in and....
"Do NOT come near me until you have had a shower." Brad ordered. "EITHER of you!"
Schuldig sighed and looked at Aya in mock helplessness, amused. Aya took pity on him and smiled cruelly, pulling him close and slipping his hand up and down over the smooth skinned shaft.
Nagi brought the mug of coffee up the stairs, looking at them coolly.
"Where's mine, brat?" Schu demanded.
"Downstairs, in the coffee pot." Nagi said, going in to set it on the beside table. He looked down at Brad's back, still not used to seeing those things.
"The tattoo doesn't look as red."
"It's had a good soak." Brad answered tiredly. "Oh god, can't you just hook me up intravenous." That cup was awfully far away.
"You've been hanging around Kudoh too long." Nagi stated and left the room, not sparing a second glance for Schu's naked ass, bird tattoo and Aya's busy hand.
Half way down the steps, he snickered. "COW!" And ran the rest of the way down.
Schuldig glared down the hall at the stair way, still playing with Aya's

pectoral muscle, biting his own lower lip as Aya ‘milked’ him.
Yohji come out of the bathroom five minutes later, toweling his hair with a satisfied sigh. Schuldig grabbed Aya by the bikini and pulled him into the bathroom with him, shutting the door.
Well, he needed another cigarette, Schu needed another fuck.
Addictions.
He went into the bedroom to get a pack out of one of his drawers in the long dresser.
Brad was propped up on the pillows, cup on his lower chest, glasses off, eyes closed.
‘Asleep?’ Yohji wondered, finding a spare throw away lighter in the drawer as well.
But as soon as he lit up, Brad sighed and opened his eyes. "Damn it, Kudoh...." He protested tiredly.
Yohji went to lay on the bed beside him, sprawling his long legs, which ached like hell. "My feet hurt." he stated, looking at them.
"Poor you." Brad said quietly, sipping his coffee.
Yohji turned onto his side and pulled ever so slightly at the towel.
Brad slapped his hand sharply.
"Eh?" Yohji said, a bit arch.
"Schuldig will throw a fit." Brad said tiredly. "Screw Aya."
"I’m tired, I don’t want to do all the work." He reached to tug again at the terrycloth.
Brad smacked him again. "NO." He said firmly.
Yohji gave up, and blew smoke at the ceiling.
He was half asleep when Brad took the cigarette butt out of his hand and put it out in his own empty cup. "Are you trying to set the bed on fire, Kudoh?"
"There is more than one way." Yohji said sleepily.
By the time Schuldig and Aya got out of the bathroom, both the men on the bed were sound asleep.
Schuldig sighed. "It’s no good waking him now. He’s down for the count."
"Even Yohji is good for nothing." Aya said.
"If you’d use that cock of yours for it’s intended purpose....."
"Don’t make me throw up." Aya stated, hating him for a second.
"Not that way, you lovely moron." Schuldig said, patting his cheek condescendingly and going to crawl onto the bed on Brad’s left side, same as always, head pillowed on his shoulder and with a heavy sigh, was out cold himself.
Aya pouted, and then went to smack Yohji on the belly. "Get up! You’re on my side of the bed."
Yohji groaned. "Damn it, Ran!" He got up and hauled himself around to the other side, flopping down next to Schudlig.
Aya laid down and settled himself, his hand sliding under to towel to the inner

side of Brad's thigh. He closed his eyes and sighed, happy now.

He looked in the mirror, to see a face long gone. The shock of blond hair, skin tight on the bones again, eyes no longer tired and surrounded by wrinkles. He had forgotten the good looks of his youth.
And youth it was. No older than twenty at most. The muscles as thick as they had been then, the glow of youth again...amazing.
And he frowned.
Remembering Anna's damned brat, he frowned evilly. For there, in the mirror, the coloring sunny nordic germanic blond, not pale southern european red head, was the same face. Arrogant almond eyes, strait nose, wide mouth and fine jaw line. His sister's bastard had taken after his side of the family.
All the more reason to exterminate the 'guilty' one.

"Jei?" Hanako had opened the door.
He looked up at her, his mind clear for the first time in days. "Hana? What're ye doin' here?"
She sighed and sat down on the matting beside him, a worried look in her eyes. "We have no home. The criminals destroyed the entire block, bottle and pipe bombs."
"Ye shouldn't have come here." he said, looking worried. "Christ, this is the last place ye should come."
She reached to undo a buckle on the strait jacket. "Well, it is a bit eccentric....." She allowed.
"A 'bit eccentric'?" he exclaimed. "And don' be undoin' me, Hana....."
"How do you feel, Jei?" She asked, medical voice now.
He thought it over. "I feel.....normal." He said with some surprise. The boys had made sure he took the pills, working or not. But he hadn't expected the medication to ever work again....
She kept undoing straps with practiced little hands. "It was like something just rose up off the city and was gone. One could feel it. Like there was a deep sigh and it was all gone, just after the last big quake last night. I went down to the grocery store....and quite a people were out and smiling again. Everyone is just dazed.....as if it never happened."
He slid the jacket off his arms and flexed the muscles. Then he drew her into them, for a tight hug and a kiss. "God knows I've missed ye." he informed her. "Wasn't a sane second I din' miss the hell outta ye."
She smiled. "Jei.....let me go before someone comes....." She blushed a little.
He muttered something under his breath in english that was apparently amusing to him. She blinked at him.
"I said...." He tapped her on the nose. "Some one not coming around here would be the unusual." he got up and helped her to her feet. "Well, we can' stay,

that's for cert. I won't 'ave ye in this den of iniquity."
"Grow up." She told him. "I'm not an innocent school girl....."
He kissed her to shut her up. "We're leaving. Now. Before something bloody awful goes on....."
She put her hand over her mouth and giggled.
He blinked at her. Then realization dawned on him. "Hana....." He said, then was at a loss for words, visualizing the worst.....
"Never mind, Jei. It was an accident. They obviously didn't know I was here. Nagi-san let me in last night when they were gone....."
"Bloody fuckin' Christ!" He exclaimed. "What the 'ell were they up to? I'll beat t' livin' daylight's out'n 'em! Maner less bloody dogs....!"
She put her hand over his mouth, then let her fingers trail off his lips. "Hush, Jei. We'll find a hotel. You're 'friends' can have their home to themselves again."
He smiled, relaxing a little.

It was disorienting, waking up a whole day later. Brad was glad to have Farfarello and his woman out of the house. It made him.....less nervous. He was still groggy and hungry, and they were all on the not so bright side.
In fact, he might not have got out of bed at all, if it weren't for the glaziers coming to replace the window panes again. He sat in the kitchen, annoyed at the sunshine streaming in, drinking coffee and waiting for his breakfast. Nagi had been experimenting again. Brad wasn't sure he liked quiche.
The workmen had replaced the downstairs windows first....he'd slept right through that. Then Nagi had had to let them upstairs, there was no turning them away to come back later, not and get it done this month....
He frowned up at the ceiling. "I'll 'rich American bastard' them....." he muttered.
Yohji stood blissfully smoking at the open door to the balcony. The sunlight hit his chestnut blond locks like a halo.
Brad wondered if he didn't just know it, too, the poser.
Aya was cranky. He always was when woke up when he didn't want to be, but this time he'd been made to get up and get down stairs without even a kiss, having to throw on his cloths and vacate.
He had his tea and just made it obvious he was hating everyone and the world.
Yohji finished his cigarette and went over to slide an arm around him and kiss his cheek. "I know what you need." He murmured, stroking Aya's bare arm under the short sleeve with the back of his hand, just the tips of his knuckles grazing the white skin.
Purple eyes glared at him. "Another katana." he stated.
"Ran..." Yohji said softly, looking at his neck, anywhere but in to those eyes...."Farferello's cell is empty....and the window didn't break in there...and the floor is padded..."

"And there's another katana in there?" Aya stated with icy evilness.
"Aya!" Brad said sharply. "Let Yohji have his fun!" It was an order, and NOT to be disobeyed.
"Bradley!" Schuldig protested the suddenly loud noise waking him from his semi-unconscious state on the other side of the table.
"Don't whine at me, Schuldig." Brad said.
Nagi sighed and got the aspirin down and tossed it to him.
Brad caught it and opened the bottle, taking out two. "Am I so predictable?"
"Yes." Nagi said, taking the quiche out of the oven, it's scent filling the air even more now with eggs and cheese and tomatoes and spinach....
Yohji's nose twitched.....Ran.....food.....Ran.....food.
Aya's eyes narrowed, seeing this going on.....then decided to add to the dilemma. "Yoh----ji----kun." he cooed.
Ginko leaf colored eyes flicked back to his. He smoldered his purple ones at them.
"Have a piece of quiche, Yohji." Brad said flatly, attempting to foil the plan. "You'll need your strength."
Aya caught him by the shirt front, whispering in his ear. "Yoh-tan....Koi"
"Save me a piece." Yohji said and caught Aya's arm, hustling him out of the kitchen.
"I might make the same request." Brad said archly.
Schuldig raised his head from where he'd been resting it on his crossed arms on the table. "In which case, where is my piece, Bradley?" He looked at him skeptically.
"Shut up and eat your breakfast." Brad told him.
Nagi put it in front of him. "I'm sorry it doesn't meet your low standards of protein requirements, Schul." He said archly.
Schuldig tried to smack him but he blocked and Schu jarred his broken wrist on the boy's telekinetic shield. "Owwww! You little....."
"Schuldig!" Brad ordered. "Shut up!"
He made a fussy noise and shut up.
After a few minutes, Brad relented. (Very funny.) He thought at him.
(What now.) Schu thought back grimly.
(What you did to me to get Kirchner's hold on me to snap.)
Schuldig grinned, slow and wicked eyed, looking at him, chin in hand, the other hand picking at his food with his fork.
(I know what it did to me.) Brad couldn't help smiling just as evilly back.
(I'll bet it sent him up the damned wall.)
(I do my best, mein schöner Mann.) He purred.
(You're an evil little bitch.) Brad informed him.
Schuldig just glowed at him like a smoldering fire.
Nagi and Omi looked at each other, then grabbed their plates and got out of the room. The silent thing and the looks being passed....it was not exactly

indicative of them being able to enjoy a ‘quiet’ breakfast much longer.
Brad laughed softly watching the door shut behind them. Normally, it was left open. "They think we’re going to...."
"I know what they think." Schuldig said. "And I agree."
"Oh, no, the workmen will come down right in the middle of the best part. Slam it into neutral, Baby."
"It’s bad for the gearbox." the german sassed him.
Brad frowned, reminded of his BMW.
"Ah, now, don’t look back, remember?" Schuldig chided. "Mmmm, a new car. That new car smell....." He closed his eyes and shivered.
"Being done in the back seat of a new car?" Brad asked dryly. "Now who’s living in the past?"
Those eyes opened again and gave him a cool look. "I never said no having fond memories."
Brad got up and got himself another cup of coffee and then leaned back on the counter with his ankles crossed, and looked at his first love. "You never told me about your parents, Schuldig." He said softly.
It was as if a door had slammed shut. Schuldig broke the mental link between them and went expressionless, intent now on eating his food.

Chapter Thirty Two
"Walk That Road"

Yohji shut the door and locked it. He wanted Ran all to himself. He caught and pulled him close, kissing him, wanting into him, starting with his tongue. Aya relaxed, leaning into the embrace with a sigh. Yohji let him breath, looking into his eyes. "Do you have any idea of how much I want you?"
"I'm getting pretty good at reading your mind." Aya said coolly, running his hand down to Yohji's hard on behind the thin pajama pants.
Yohji realized something...."K'suo!" He unlocked the door and shut it behind him.
Aya blinked, and then frowned.
Yohji ran up stairs and nearly slammed into a plate of glass being carried into the bedroom, apologized profusely to the startled workers, went to the beside table, yanked open the drawer, grabbed what he was after and then, narrowly avoiding the pane again, ran back down the stairs.
He got back into the cell, shutting the door behind him and leaning on it, panting a little, looking with a silly grin at Aya, holding it up. "Lubricant."
"Oh." Aya realized it now himself. Then blushed. He hadn't had time....
"Quit it." Yohji said. "Over two years of screwing like a rabbit and you still blush!"
"Just get it over with!" Aya said, suddenly mad at him.
Yohji came to slip arms around him again. "Ran." He said, his lips so close to the other's that it was a whisper of a kiss. "Why don't you admit you don't mind this at all?"
He turned his head away. "Because I do mind." He said faintly. "I mind being ordered to just.....whore out to you."
"No you don't." Yohji smiled.
Aya looked at him again. "What makes you so sure of yourself?"
Yohji sighed deeply. Then kissed him on the cheek and nuzzled his throat. "Why do I always have to convince you?"
He thought it over and shrugged a little. "It's just me, Love. Convince me."
Yohji pulled the T-shirt off him and tossed it aside, looking at him. "Convince me, Ran." he said, suddenly feeling a bit off kilter. "Some times I need convincing, too."
Aya looked at him for a long moment. Then he reached to take a lock of the blond's just past shoulder length hair in his fingertips. "Always there for me." he said softly. "Always....there for all of us. Good, old, dependable Yohji." he made a little joke of it.
He let this sink in. Him? Dependable? Hunh....more than a few things must have changed....
He pulled off his pajama bottoms and kicked them aside, kissing Aya again, then he tugged a little at him, signaling him to lower himself to the padded mat

covered floor.
Maybe Aya was expecting him to just get on with it, but he had no intention of rushing things. He laid the maroon headed lovely down and looked down at him, tracing his fingers over the smooth flesh and muscles of his chest and stomach, kissing him lightly. All that pale, lovely skin.
He saw Aya's mouth twitch, then remembered. "Turn over, let me see."
Aya rolled over and stretched out with a sigh, his arms crossed under his head.
Yohji looked at the tattoo.
And it looked at him.
He fell back, blinking.
"Yohji?" Aya said, at this sudden movement.
Yohji swallowed hard.
The ink on Aya's back shifted subtly and eerily back into position even as he watched.
But.....But.....
He touched it. Very hesitantly....very carefully.
Nothing happened. It was just a tattoo of a tiger on his lover's back.
But....he'd SEEN it!
It had looked at him, with two feral, green eyes, inspecting him.....as if he were potential prey.....but now it was in profile.....
"I really must need more sleep." he murmured.
Yohji cupped a hand over a firm buttock, still keeping an eye on that tattoo. He gradually relaxed enough to caress the flesh under his hand. Aya made a soft, purring noise of enjoyment. That was what he wanted to hear, his Ran giving in, allowing himself to be loved.

Brad sipped his coffee, waiting. But Schu was stubborn. He didn't see him giving into the request any where in the future yet. "He used it to get to you, Baby. That's a liability."
Schuldig shook his head. "He won't again."
Brad tilted his head a little, not really happy with this reticence.
"Schuldig....I don't expect to be disobeyed when I ask for information that is important to this team's safety." He stated quietly.
"I said he won't again!" Schuldig stated not quietly. His hand shook as he raised his cup to drink. then was startled as one of the workmen upstairs dropped something evilly heavy sounding.
Brad got a dish cloth and moved to whip up the slight spill and then the rest of Schuldig's hand, gently taking it up to do so....
The red head caught at his hand. "Stop it!" He stood up and put his arm around Brad, still holding his hand, a strangled noise coming from him, his face buried in Brad's neck.
Brad got free enough to toss the dishcloth in the kitchen sink and then put his arms around Schuldig. It wasn't often Schuldig gave into tears. Maybe a handful

of times in the past nine years. He knew he'd fight it. He knew pressing him on the subject now would destroy his attempt. So he just held him, letting him have peace in that head of his so he could get a grip on his emotions.
Schuldig gradually calmed down, then with a sigh, backed off, enough to look at him with slightly reddened eyes. "He made me see her again, mein Mann. He made me see her as a child again. He threw me back into that time and I haven't gone there in forever." He swallowed and sniffed a bit, then moved away to grab a napkin off the table and wipe his eyes. "He knew what he was doing. To make me see her walk away again for the last time." He said shakily, voice almost cracking. "She left me with.....these people. No one she really even knew. She just said, no matter what happens....this is for your own good, and then walked away. She wouldn't even look back when I called to her, wouldn't even think of me. And they kept me from going after her....."
"Christ." Brad said. So that was it. How had he not ever known this? Why had he not ever asked?
"Gott, I hated it! I hated the work, I hated the food. I hated it!" Schuldig spat it out angrily. "I hated them and their dull, dirty minds! So I ran away. And here I am! Esset got me anyway!" He finally turned to look at Brad again. "End of story. So you see, it won't happen again. I HATE her! I hate her for what she did to me!"
"What did she do to you, Schuldig?" Brad said softly. "Here we are."
The redhead drew a another deep breath slowly. "Yah." He said after a long minute.
Nagi came into the kitchen with the plates. "Is this war zone safe to pass yet?" He said coolly.
"Yes, Nagi." Brad said just as coolly. "And look, the table is clean."
"Is that why Schu-schu is crying?" Nagi said sarcastically.
And Brad realized he'd had two of the same problems on his hands all these years. Fucking bastard Esset and their damned games. "Just take care of your dishes and start on that laundry."
"Can't we hire a maid, damn it!" Nagi snapped.
"So you and Omi can goof off even more?" Brad inquired. "No."
Nagi opened his mouth....
"NO to that as well." Brad told him.
Nagi gave up and put the dishes in the dishwasher. Then he looked at Schuldig's plate of barely touched breakfast. "Oh for...." He grabbed it and practically flung it in the microwave and hit one minute then took it out when it beeped and put it back on the table, pointing to it, looking at the taller man. "Eat it!"
Schuldig rolled his eyes and gave up, sitting down again.
"Drug addict." Nagi stated.
It was true, after that hit, it was all he wanted, not food. He took a forkful and put it into his mouth, forcing himself to eat.
Brad gave Nagi a soft look as he went past. No words needed.

Yohji looked around the bedroom. Again, through new windows, the sun came in, warming a room that was beiges and light wood, sparsely furnished, with a few large potted plants at the joins of the tall paned windows. He knew Brad had to be paying a fortune for this ‘mansion’.
Aya put the last bit of his parure back on, probably adding about ten pounds to his bodyweight with all that. He caught Yohji watching him shut the clasp on his jeweled watch and smiled a little, cool as ever.
Schuldig caught him by the waist from behind, kissing his cheek and tugging an eartail. "Quit primping, this is a job, not a social occasion."
Yohji sighed. Ah, yes, back to work. Brad had made the decision to just say fuck it and take on work again, not a moment to rest. Maybe he was right. Plod plod plod, just keep moving. Other wise....they might as well be dead.
The street gangs had done a real number on the organized crime territories. Too many people were having to deal with traumas and clean ups of their own. The lords of the yakuza were forced to have to hire outside labor. Exterminators. Brad, with an evil smile, had agreed to do the job.
Because of his car. Revenge was sweet, but even sweeter when it came paid for. Time for some door bursting, ass kicking, gunning down and torturing.
"What pretty thoughts you have, Yohtan." Schuldig smiled at him, the epitome of the oriental devil, red mane, green eyes, sharp white teeth....over Aya’s shoulder.
"You’re just happy because you know He’s going to be hot as hell with the rush from sadism." Yohji accused archly.
"Gott, yes!" Schudlig said, incredibly happy with the idea, letting go of Aya to head for the door.
"Sick, sick, sick." Yohji shook his head, unable not to smile.
"And you like it!" Schuldig breathed at him, making sure he brushed his crotch against Yohji’s hip as he moved past very close, despite the amount of room to go by.
Yohji sighed again.
Aya was smirking at him. "He’s right." He said quietly. "You and I both know it."
Yohji walked over to him, and reached up to flick a finger against the diamond band hanging where the plain gold one once had. "We all have addictions now." He murmured, then kissed him briefly.

He stood outside the building, looking up at it. He’d been here before. But this time.....he’d had time to think. This time the situation was not....what he now realized had been desperate then.
Now....he had time. He’d gotten what he’d come to Japan for. The tablets. The power. He was young and healthy again. It was what he had wanted after arriving he had not gotten. His revenge on Esset. His control of their pawns, the last

remaining ones, at least.
Crawford....the oracle. All that talent going to waste. And Naoe. The telepath was nothing to him. An error to be eradicated. The other two.....well, he no longer needed the sacrifice. Once Crawford was under control....the rest would fall into line. But this time, he would be subtle about it. Work his way in so smoothly...it would be too late before Crawford realized it. That he had been trapped.
Kirchner smiled, blue eyes glittering. Then sauntered off to have a look at this city Tokyo had become.

Araki put a hand to Kai's chest as the young lord started to get out of the car, pushing him back into the back seat. "Stay put, Kai."
"Why!" He demanded. "Damn it, Masa, I'm in charge now!"
Araki frowned. Enjoji had refused. But Kai was more than willing to flex his young claws now that the old man had passed away. "I know this man. You don't."
Kai scowled. "Then introduce him to me."
Araki sighed heavily. It was a decision he had to make. Kai would have to someday call on Crawford. "I want you to know that this man is my friend, Kai." He said firmly. "He was sent to me to learn how to survive in Japan when he was only a year older than you. You will address him as an equal. He is not a servant to the Yakuza. Do you understand?"
Kai did not stop scowling. "We're paying him aren't we?"
"Yes, but only because we know he can do the job faster than we can right now."
"How!" Kai demanded. "How many men does he have that the Shiryukai would have to
call on HIM!"
"Kai!" Araki snapped. "You are no longer a child to throw tantrums as you please! Don't embarrass the men your father and grandfather never lost dignity in front of!"
Kai fell back into the seat, slouching, arms crossed.
"Stay in the car then!" Araki shut the door and composed himself quickly, resetting his jacket on his shoulders and smoothing a hand across his gun holster.
Bradley leaned on his new car casually, hands in pocket, ankles crossed. It was a pleasant night, without the domestic war going on that had been raging in Tokyo. "Masanori. I hear you're a free man."
Araki raised his chin a bit, hands in his own pockets. It was an arch and comfortable look of recognition and amusement. "I'm no ronin, Bradley."
The american smirked. He'd seen the trouble Araki had had with the young man. Trouble all together, that one.
Red heads.
Schuldig was in the back seat of the car, smoking, a satisfied smile on his face, Aya and Yohji in the front seat, thinking about other things as best as

they could.
It was hard not to be completely relaxed after being sucked dry only five minutes ago, before this meeting. In fact, he leaned up against the car because his knees were still a bit shaky. He wondered if it showed....the silly look he felt in his face. "I am." He said calmly. "You can buy me, but you can't own me."
(oh ho...who's the whore now...?) Schuldig's mind snickered inside his.
(Shut up, Schuldig.) He smiled coolly, straitening up and walking over to meet Araki by a few steps. "Problems already?"
"Nothing I can't handle." Araki said, making note of the purple eyed one giving him the icily hateful look from the driver's seat of the new MB. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out the disk. "This is all we have. Locations, modus operandi, witnesses reports, a few shaky security cam pictures. Not a job for 'salary men' yakuza. This takes professional hunters who can do it in short time."
Brad smiled a bit more at that.
Araki was tall for a japanese, able to look the man in the eyes. What ever the man had going on inside his head, he seemed to be more relaxed and self assured than he had been in quite some time. "We want them wiped out. This insolence is intolerable."
Brad took the disk. "Good to do business with you again, Masa." he said calmly, as if it were just a pleasant exchange between colleagues, not a plan to start a war by organized criminal to professional assassin. Then he looked past him to the car with it's casual surround of suited guards. "Redheads..." He gave Araki a knowing look of amusement, and then turned and went to get into the back with Schuldig again.
Araki sighed and watched the MB drive off smooth and quiet. It was a very pleasant night.

Omi frowned, a bit worried looking. "Speed gangs, Bradley. We're not used to working against whole gangs."
"No, just defenseless sexual predators." Yohji chuckled around a cigarette, slouched on a sofa with his leg across the other, an arm about Schuldig's chest as he lay with his head on Yohji's thigh.
He was laying with his legs over the arm of the sofa, the position he usually went into when his lower back was bothering him.
Brad frowned. "Nagi." he glanced at Schuldig again.
"NO." Schu stated.
Nagi waiting, arms crossed, sensing a fight in store.
"I want you to let the doctor check your back!" Brad stated. "You're going to have to have your arm checked, I want the back checked as well!"
Schuldig scowled. "NO."
Yohji rubbed the red head's shoulder under his hand. "Eh, Schu, it's just a

check up. What's wrong with you that you don't want to find out if there's a way to fix that pain?"
"He'd loose his excuse to have morphine, for one thing." Nagi said cruelly.
Schuldig gave him the evil eye. "There's nothing wrong with me that can be fixed! Just leave me alone, I can do my job! Even with a broken wrist!"
Aya looked across the coffee table at him from the sofa he lounged on. "You're a wreck, Baby, let the doctor look at you."
This had the effect of making Schuldig so mad he sat up in anger....and winced, biting his lip as the pain hit him. "OH...Shit!" He laid back down again side ways, curling up.
Yohji stroked the red hair back from his face and then ran a hand down to his back. "Aya, help me." He moved carefully to get off the sofa and tried to get Schuldig to straiten out on his front. It took some doing, but Aya got up and came over to help, sitting down side ways to pull up his shirt and feel across the muscles and spine.
Schuldig let out a yelp of agony and got to hell away from them both, getting up and pulling his shirt down to tuck it back in, face red with fighting the agony.
"Just leave me alone!" He ordered, then caught his breath. "Nagi....." he pleaded.
The youth went to get the morphine.
Brad went to lay a hand on his shoulder. "Schuldig?"
He put a hand up to Brad's chest to steady himself. "Not the woman." He said. "I want a male doctor."

He'd put Omi and Nagi on the speed gang thing to start with. It was better to send in the boys to check things out. The gangsters were young thugs, some pretty damned young. Yohji and Aya were running back up for them.
All he'd wanted to do was stay with Schuldig and wait. He stood by the window looking out. Like everything in Tokyo, the hospital went way up.
If he'd only taken him when it had happened....If he'd only interfered sooner.
If he'd only taken that god damned golf club and shoved it up Taketori's ass so far it'd gave him a brain hemorrhage...
He smirked coldly, looking out at the black night full of bright artificial lights, his jacket over his crossed arms, leaning on the window frame. They'd put Schuldig on a gurney and taken him to be x-rayed. Checking in and getting him the initial examination, the call in of a specialist this late in the evening....
If only.....
A chirp from his jacket brought him out of his reverie. He unfolded it and found the digital phone, opening it. "Hai?"
Yohji's voice. "Anything yet?"
"No." Brad sighed, looking at the clock on the wall. "They only just took him into x-ray maybe ten minutes ago."

There was a faint sigh. "Looks like our boys are making friends fast." Yohji said dryly. "Just a little push and shove match, they're holding their own."
"I don't like Omi dressing as a girl in this situation."
"I wouldn't be to fussy Brad....these kids are all dressed weird. You can't tell what's what to look at them."
"All right, just keep me informed. When I know, I'll call. Keep your phone on vibe, instead of sound."
"Hai, Boss." Yohji said.
Brad put the phone away and looked around. He'd paid for a single room. He wanted Schuldig to be as comfortable as possible. But he doubted he ever could be comfortable here in this place. He sighed. Nothing to do but wait. He didn't want to see the future in this instance. He just didn't want to know until it was absolutely certain.
He'd wanted to take him to Vienna. Maybe after this, they'd go.

Omi and Nagi having carefully extricated themselves from their new found 'family' on pretense of knowing where to score some meth from a very skittish dealer, were glad to be getting their asses home. They slipped into the car, wary to keep an eye on their surroundings. Who knew how many eyes were really watching them under the circumstances?
"Any word?" Nagi asked.
"Not yet." Yohji said, driving the car back into traffic again.
"They took him to x-ray his back." Aya stated. "What could be wrong with him? That wound was right over the spine. Wouldn't the damage have been bad enough then?"
"I don't know." Yohji said. "That dent alone is ugly enough. It's probably just a nerve that's been damaged."
Nagi sat back and thought about it.
He remembered the look on Schu's face when the club had caught him in the back, how he'd just smiled it off like everything else and got up, refusing help. Brad had lost it, grabbing Taketori's arm, stopping him.
That was when they'd had to put the plan into effect full force. From that one moment. To undermine Esset and destroy them. To let their political pawn in Tokyo be taken down. There was no way at that moment to deal with Taketori, it had to look as if they had been doing their job, not as if they had been the ones to kill him.
Schuldig had made it all the way down to the car, as casual as could be, despite the bruises and the pain. Brad had been the one driving. He was angry as hell that the girl's death had lead to this problem. There was no excuse for Schuldig's attack on Omi Tsukiyono. But again....he'd been playing silly games. Picking on people out of boredom. He'd deserved what he'd gotten. Farf too. Brad had made that very clear.
And in the car....he'd crumpled with a whimper.

Brad had nearly smacked into another car, he'd been so startled by this sudden display of weakness. He'd been concentrating on the road and the visions of how this would affect the plan, not on Schuldig. Schu was a bloody nuisance most of the time anyway, he didn't have to actually pay attention to him at all to be aware of him. He'd demanded to know what the hell Schuldig was whining about when he was trying to drive. Schu had told him to just shut the hell up and drive then. Brad had gotten even more angry and done just that.
When they got back to the house Esset had bought and paid for, Brad had ordered him left in the car if he couldn't get out himself.
Nagi remembered. He'd stayed there a long time, curled up on the back seat....
"I think we should go the hospital, not home." he said quietly. "I want to see how Schu is doing myself."
Yohji changed lanes and set the car heading that way, away from home.
Aya slid a hand over to lay on his thigh.
"Ah, he'll be allright. It's just a pain in the back." Yohji said, wanting a cigarette but deciding not to because of Aya's dislike of them.
Aya frowned. It couldn't be that simple, not after all this time. Odd how they'd all subtly arranged to cope with that pain in the german. Yohji keeping him warm on cold nights, Aya giving him back rubs, Nagi becoming an expert with the hypodermic needle and dosages of medication. There was no stopping him from doing what he wanted to do, like lifting heavy things or sparing with Brad. What ever it was, something had made it worse.
"Maybe it's just from being chilled the other night." Omi said softly.

The doctor came into the room. Brad looked at him.
"May I ask who are you to the patient? Friend? Family member?"
"Family." Brad said.
"Has he a wife or someone legally able to sign papers?" There was a ring he'd noted, on the man's hand.
"Why?" Brad asked curtly.
"I really do need to speak to someone who can make a decision legally for him....." The doctor persisted.
"You listen to me." Brad said very quietly and clearly. "I have power of attorney from him. He is my lover and don't ask me if I can get hold of anyone in his family, you're looking at the only person who has any right to claim to be legally responsible for him."
The doctor blinked.
"Now you tell me what the hell is wrong with him." Brad said.
"He needs to have an operation on his spine." He went to the light box on the wall to put up the sheets of black plastic. He turned on the light and pointed to it with a pen as he spoke. "This area here....at some point.....the bone was broken, pieces chipped. Rather than be absorbed into the body, they've calcified back onto the spine itself and continued to build up nodes, fusing the bones.

It’s pressing on the spinal nerves. It’s a wonder he can even walk." He looked at the american. "It’s a very delicate operation, we have to go in and cut out the excess bone with a laser if at all. One fractionally wrong move....and there’s a chance he may become paralyzed. This isn’t an area to be playing lightly with. Do you know what the injury was caused by? A fall? This looks like a serious impact wound. I’m surprised the doctor didn’t see the danger then." He frowned at the x-ray.
"He was attacked with a golf club." Brad stated.
"Well, I hope the attacker went to jail. This kind of injury is attempted murder." The doctor said, blowing out a puff of breath. "Your....friend is very lucky. Let’s hope that luck holds."
"The son of a bitch who did it is dead." Brad said. "Too bad. I wish right now I could kill him all over again."
The doctor looked at him oddly, not knowing how to take this either. Gaijen.....strange people. No matter how good their japanese was.....they didn’t always say things with the same meaning.
"Can I talk with him?" Brad asked. "Why isn’t he back in here?"
The doctor took a deep breath. "He’s anesthetized. We’re readying him for surgery now. If this isn’t done right now.....he will be paralyzed. The bone nodes are wearing through the nerves, cutting them in effect. Every move he makes...comes closer to severing his own spine. It’s very close. Even lifting something a bit heavy or....strenuous movement...." the doctor had almost said something....else....He cleared his throat to cover the hesitation.
Brad felt dizzy suddenly.
When Schuldig cried out during love making.....
"Oh christ." he muttered in english, sitting down before he fell down.

Aya could not possibly go any whiter, but damned if he didn’t, silver lilac’d lips parting slightly....
Yohji swore and went to have a damned cigarette. He’d never quit at this rate!
Aya watched him go out the door, stunned at being left in this hateful place....
Brad caught his arm. "Aya." He said softly. "Stay with me. I need you."
Aya looked at him and his brain slipped back into place. Sometimes his hate and fear of hospitals made him that crazy. Brad....Bradley was here. He pushed a bit of bangs out of his eye and then put his arms around his lover tightly. Brad held onto him, so tight he almost cut his breathing off for a moment then loosened his hold a bit.
Aya looked up at him again, and saw the haunted look in his brown eyes. "Will he be all right?" He could barely whisper. Surely.....Brad would know.
"I can’t look." Brad said, a catch in his throat. "I.....can’t."
Nagi put a hand on his arm, looking up at him. He spared that arm to put around the young man as well.
Omi stood close by, looking grim despite his pink cotton shift and hello kitty

stockings.
Brad, somewhat sardonically under the circumstances couldn’t help but wonder why the boy didn’t at least dress like a girl his age!

Chapter Thirty Three
"Clipped Wings"

He sighed deeply. That was when his mind became aware again. Awake. Consciousness. Silence.
He tried to move, to stretch and feel his body against someone's.....
A rustle of movement, a quiet "mph" , then someone moving beside him.....the wrong side he realized immediately. Why was Brad on that side?
He opened his eyes, incredibly disoriented.
Brad was putting on his glasses with his free hand. He'd been asleep, sitting on the chair beside the bed, with his head pillowed on his arm, a hand on Schuldig's arm. He looked at him gravely.
"What?" He said softly...then realized how dry his mouth was. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. "Why are we still here?"
"You've had surgery." Brad said softly, gently rubbing the arm under his hand. "How do you feel?"
"Fucked." Schu said. "And not in a good way. Thirsty...."
Brad let go of him to get him a glass of water from the pitcher on the bedside table.
He tried to sit up....
"You can't move." Brad said, sliding a hand under his head to raise it, placing the plastic cup to his lips, careful not to spill it.
He drank thirstily. Then looked at his lover. "What?" He said. It just hadn't sunk in. He wasn't sure he'd heard it.
"You can't move." Brad put the cup aside with a heavy sigh.
"The hell I can't..." He tried.
And encountered the straps across his chest. "What the fuck!" He spat out.
"Schuldig. Listen to me." Brad said, laying a hand on his chest, looking at him in that very grave way again. "You've had surgery. On your spine. Baby....."
"What the hell did they do to me!" Schuldig demanded, in rising panic.....
"I'm trying to tell you." Brad said with difficulty. "Listen to me!"

Socializing didn't come naturally to Nagi. Omi on the other hand.....Nagi watched him with cool eyes. Even among a bunch of teen aged gangsters, Omi could find a way to be friendly and outgoing. Even in a dress. Maybe....even more so.....in a dress.
The video gaming club was noisy as hell, between the music and the game's noises, and kids yelling over the noise. In the middle of the club was a moderately sized dance floor and in order to 'fit in'.....Omi was 'making friends'.
Nagi could have choked him.
He could have also used his talent to back some of the bastards off. But that would be causing a worse problem. One he was too well trained to cause.

Instead, he went over and cut in. "You're having fun." he said.
"About as much fun as if someone had thrown me into a tank full of sharks." Omi said with a big bright, cheery and very fake smile.
Nagi took this all in. Then he pulled him close so he could speak into his ear under the noise. "Don't try so hard."
Omi put his arms around him. "Nagi...." He held him tightly. "This is a job."
"I don't like it. I don't like seeing you with other people." Nagi said, and kissed his cheek.
"Hmmm, how often on a job do we get to dance and snuggle?" Omi asked, distracted.
"Maybe too often?" Nagi said, thinking that this wasn't the way to do any job.....
Omi held him a bit tighter for a moment. "It's a job, koi...I wouldn't do anything to make you jealous....."
Nagi sighed. "You always do. I can't help it. I hate these jobs. I'm sick of having you used as bait, I'm sick of you being put into situations like this. The guys never have to do this. They can just.....work....and not be put in these messes."
"It won't be for much longer. We aren't going to be this young looking forever." Omi said, with a bit of exasperation himself.
Nagi caught his mouth in a kiss, holding him, making it clear this was HIS property. Omi had to respond...to become aroused....He broke it off, looking at the brunette..."Nagi...."
The silent agreement was mutual. Nagi practically dragged him off the dance floor and into a restroom.....
Three of the boys in charge of the particular gang they'd infiltrated watched them. They laughed and nudged each other. Those two gave them no suspicions as to anything. What they were up to was obvious.

"OOooo---Kay." Yohji said, taking the head set off.
Aya looked at him, then at the screen showing the two tracking devices. "They're at it again." He commented, coldly.
"Yeah." Yohji said, attempting to try and stretch his legs a little in the car, and failing....Tilting the seat back and managing that way. "Why don't they make cars with longer leg room in this country?"
Aya looked at the screen thoughtfully. Then at him. They were in the parking lot beside the club, in a generic navy blue Nissan. It was night time and dark, but he could see Yohji by the light of the computer screen and the faint street lighting. For once the sunglasses weren't on his face. "Do you think Schu's going to be all right?"
Yohji sighed. "I haven't wanted to think about it."
"Well, we are going to have to think about it." Aya said, not comfortable with the idea himself. "It affects business...." he frowned. "It affects us." He

added softly.
Yohji looked up at him. It was always easy to tell when Aya was switching back and forth between his two personas. The fact that he had two was probably something that should have been looked into by a specialist....but in the course of the madness they had all become involved in, Aya's little problem wasn't much to deal with at all. It was just a sort of defense mechanism....against himself?
"I know." He said gently. "But we can't even begin to think until we know what's happened, and that won't be for a while. So I'm not thinking about it."
Aya thought about it. He thought about Bradley being at the hospital and waiting, worrying. "Well I want to know." He pulled out his phone.
There was no answer. He sighed and put it away.
"Not answering. Well, he knows it's not an emergency, right?" Yohji said dully. "He's probably got it set on vibe and just doesn't feel like dealing with us right now."
Aya was aware of this, but he still wanted an answer. Bradley had never refused a phone call before. Something had to be very wrong. "Well as far as I'm concerned, this just became an emergency!" he took the phone out and punched the re-dial button with a fingertip again.

Brad frowned and took out the phone.
Schuldig looked away from him, not wanting to deal with anything right now.
"Aya." He answered softly. "Calm down."
"You knew I wanted to talk to you and you ignored me!" Aya's voice accused.
Brad looked at Schuldig. He wanted to wipe away the tears, to somehow comfort him...."Not ignoring, Aya, dealing. I'm sorry--I was busy." He'd almost said Schuldig had needed him more....but at this point.....He looked at the pale, pained and betrayed face....he was the last thing Schuldig needed.
"What's wrong!" Aya demanded.
"I can't--talk right now." Brad said. "Are the boys okay?"
"Yes. Is Schuldig okay?" Aya stubbornly persisted.
"Aya----please wait a while." Brad closes his eyes. "Just--let me rest a little while. Then I'll talk to you both--at home."
You're not leaving him there!" Aya's voice deepened in panic.
"I have to!" Brad managed to say despite the growing weakness in side himself.
Now, Schuldig's eye turned to him, cold and hard.
"I'll be home soon. Tell the boys back up is cut for six hours. I want you and Yohji home."
"Don't leave him there!" Aya yelled.
Brad turned off the phone and met those eyes. "I'm going home. I'm going to rest, have a shower. Talk to them.....I'll be back. Whether you like it or not."
He said shakily and moved to press a kiss on his cheek.
Schuldig turned away. "Got to Hell!" He snapped
"Don't think I haven't been there for the past two days!" Brad nearly lost his

temper.
He wanted to strike out---to knock some sense into that red flamed head. To beat him into getting out of that bed....
He got up, grabbing his coat, and got out.
Schuldig didn't watch him leave. For one thing, his eyes were to blurred with tears.
In a little while, the nurse came in to take care of things. "Your friend went home to rest?"
"Hai." He wasn't going to argue or talk any more than he had to.
She started to tidy up and her eyes caught a bit of color on the floor. She bent to pick it up. "He dropped his tie...." she folded the sky blue silk. "I'll set it here until next time." She was going to put it on the table.
Schuldig looked up. "No. Let me have it." He said, softly.
She looked at him. She'd seen such eyes in the children's ward, and in the geriatric ward. Something from home....something from 'life' to hang on to. 'Let me hold it--please nurse....' the same request in so many words.
She put it in his left hand, wrapping it around once so he would not loose it.
"He'll be back." She said with a gentle firmness. "You just rest."
He closed his eyes with a deep sigh.

Yohji was looking at him when he finally calmed down enough to notice.
"What's the word?" Yohji asked.
"He wants us home. He said he needs to talk to us at home. This can't be good, Yohji. It can't be."
"What about the kids?"
"Six hours no back up. They're on their own. Tell them." Aya was not doing too well in his attempt to sort himself out. Brad was clearly upset, but he was upset too and wanted to know what the hell had happened. But Brad was too torn up about it to talk....and most likely.....not in front of Schuldig? But he was tired and making excuses for Brad's behavior was just not to his liking at the moment. It was easier just to be as angry and upset as he was!
Yohji put the head set back on. "Omi, Nagi, Brad's ordered Aya and me home. He said you're on your own for six hours. It's about Schuldig. We have no information yet."
Nagi swore and then breathed. "Hai....we're...okay. Go."
"Right." Yohji cut the link and turned off the head set and took it off. "You okay to drive?" He asked Aya.
"Yes." Aya stated, starting up the car.

Bradley had only just walked into the kitchen when he heard the front door open again. He didn't go to look. He got the coffee out. He set it on the counter.
Aya came in and catching his arm, pulled him into a half turn to embrace him.
He shifted to put his arms around the japanese. A kiss that lasted what seemed

like minutes was broken by Aya's mild protest of whisker burn from two days growth. "What's happened.....tell us!" the purple eyes burned into him.
Brad carefully set Aya aside, letting him be aware that he was not being shoved away, just moved for convenience sake and went back to making the coffee. "The operation went as well as it could." He sighed. "They cut out the over growth and put in some flexible pinning to reinforce the spine for now. But there was some question of nerve damage. And they had to removed some scared tissue." He pressed the 'on' button on the coffee maker, and leaned back on the counter, looking at Yohji now....how tired the eurasian looked. Of course.....Yohji loved Schuldig.....How often had he seen that? How often had he taken it for granted?
And how had the man been dealing with his grief over this?
He looked at Aya. "I had to leave him in there. He's going to be strapped down for a few weeks, then he still can't move much until the doctors say so. It's going to be a while before...they even know if it helped. If it was in time.
He's not to move until the tissue has recovered. Then, they'll test to see if he has....if he's not....."
The words failed him now. And it was as if the weakness inside had caught him up and now ruled him.
He was vaguely aware of strong arms, and then....nothing.

Aya settled down beside him. They'd had to carry him up to the bedroom. Stress had increased exhaustion and just shut him down.
Yohji set the alarm to buzz quietly. They had at the most, three hours to get some rest and get back to the boys. "So that's it...we just wait." he said softly.
"I suppose so. But I want to go see him." Aya said, sliding his hand along Brad's thigh to his habitual hold on him.
"If he's paralyzed....." Yohji said.....
"No, he can't be." Aya protested in a very soft voice. He closed his eyes. So many things....dancing with him....chasing him around the house.....sparing with him. So many things about Schuldig were his ability to move.
"If he is paralyzed." Yohji said again. "I'll take care of him."
"Nani..." Aya said in mild surprise. "How can you say that as if....as if he were a burden? Do you think I wont? Do you think Bradley won't?"
"You don't understand, Ran." Yohji said. Kami-sama, he wanted a cigarette. "It's not just.....It's the fact that he might not be able to...you know. Body functions."
"Fuck, Yohji." Aya whispered. "Do you think I'm so fragile I can't fathom that? That he might need...that kind of care?"
"He might not want you or Brad caring for him that way." Yohji said.
"You and not us?" Aya couldn't believe what he was saying. Damned if Yohji didn't come up with some of the most bizarre things!

"I'll take care of him, Ran. So he can keep his face in front of you two."
"Just shut up and sleep, Yohji." Aya was too angry to argue any more. He didn't want to wake Bradley. He'd punch Yohji later, when they were back on the job. Right in the gut, to teach him to be so.....bloody ignorant!

Nagi paid for the sodas. Yohji's notice had dimmed the 'party mood' of this damned job even more.
Omi drank his, his face not so childish when he was really thinking about something.
In fact, Nagi mused, it was an incredibly surreal situation, the both of them here....at the bar-like counter, in a place for kids, acting as kids, Omi dressed as a girl, drinking sodas, when in any other place and time....this would be alcohol and they would be acting as adults...
He shook his head to clear if of the bizarre comparisons going on. "Omi....do you think we can get away from this long enough to go see Schudlig?"
"I think so." Omi looked at him. "I really don't see why we had to get this close in the first place."
"Brad wants to make certain when it goes down, it goes all the way down." Nagi said. "And you usually don't mind getting closer to prey." He added archly.
"Oh sure, helpess child molesters." Omi said making a cold joke about Yohji's remark. "But not whole gangs of drugged out little psychopaths with no sense of right or wrong..."
Nagi looked around carefully over the rim of his coca cola glass. "I want to see how Schuldig is. Now." He stated. "They think we can just be shunted off to a side track and not be worried about him, too? That's so unfair, Omi-chan. We have to go see him. Even if it's the worst and he didn't come through okay, he's still SchuSchu." He set his glass down and got up.
"You two are all quiet suddenly." The biggest of the gang members said, having come up to them.
Nagi gave him a slow sleepy smile. "So?" He said.
The guy looked Omi over.
Admittedly.....Omi looked rather 'pretty' with his shoulder length blond/brown hair and that pink shift dress. If you didn't look close enough at first, you might think he was a girl. But his hands were a bit on the bigger side...and he had no hips or bust for a girl 'his' age. The only girl that would look that androgynous would not be outside a fashion magazine.
"Your point being?" Nagi asked.
"Is there a pussy under that skirt?" The gangster grinned obnoxiously.
"No." Omi purred at him. "A tiger." He pretended to snap at the other boy's nose playfully.
This surprised the gangster. He hadn't been expecting a 'friendly' answer.
Nagi laughed and grabbed Omi's arm, pulling him around the gangster, normal as could be, two kids, having fun, in a club.

One of them a telekinetic capable of freezing someone in their tracks long enough to just walk away.
They made their getaway quite cleanly, in fact.

Schuldig opened his eyes.
Nagi stood there, looking at him.
"Hey." Schuldig said with a soft smile.
"I screwed up a job to come see you." Nagi said. "Be flattered."
"Not at all." Schu said.
"So, what have they got you on?" Nagi looked at the length of him, strapped down and wired and hosed up.
"Damned if I know. Something to keep me from moving." He was seriously unable to move. The nurse had said muscle relaxers. "Now if my head would stop picking up every thought in the world, I could be very, very happy."
Nagi leaned over on the bed to kiss his cheek and rest his forehead against the red mop, already looking like it needed a good soaking from lack of care.
"Schu---are you going to be okay?"
"I dont' know, brat. I feel okay. What I can feel."
Nagi saw the tie. "Brad isn't dealing well, is he?"
"Nagi. tell him I'm sorry." Schuldig said quietly. "I yelled at him. Tell him I'm sorry..."
Nagi caught his hand and held it. "It's okay, Schu. You guys fight all the time...
"No. I told him this was his fault." Schuldig said. "I...." He gave up.
"Well, if he'd taken you to a doctor..."
"I know, but....just tell him for me, okay?"
"I will." Nagi promised. "Hey, cheer up. You may get to spend the rest of your life on your back. Whore."
Schuldig's eyes flashed dangerously. "Very funny, bishonen."
Nagi kissed his cheek again. "See, you still can kill with looks. 'Cause you are soooo ugly!"
Schu had to smile. "Believe me, Nagi, if I could get up and beat your ass I would. Nice try."
Nagi squeezed his hand. "It's going to be all right, Schu."
"Better get back to work." Schuldig said.
Nagi straitened up. "I'll tell him." He said, letting go of the german's hand.

Bradley woke to the alarm going off. It's quite buzzing had been going on long enough to reach into his tired mind and annoy him into waking.
Yohji pushed his hair back with a sigh and moved over to reach for his cigarettes on the bedside table.
Aya let his hand slide up Brad's thigh.
Brad moved to kiss him, then got the coverlet off and got up and over him to go

take a shower and shave.
Aya frowned at the ceiling. Yohji's smoke drifted over, annoying his nose and his stomach.
Another day.
There was a tap at the door and Nagi peeked in. "Just thought I'd let you guys know we're home. Nothing was happening so we went to see Schuldig."
Aya sat up. "Is he all right?"
"He doesn't know. They have him on muscle relaxers so that he doesn't move. When Brad gets out, I need to talk to him."
"We should go see him." Yohji said. "Did he say.....anything?" He looked at the boy in the door way.
"They have him so drugged, he didn't even complain about all the noise in his head. Well, not much." He had an idea of what the man was hoping for. Sometimes he wondered if they knew how secondary they were to everything.....well.....maybe not. That was being too harsh.
Aya stretched out and sighed heavily. He wanted food, and to have Bradley make love to him. And he wanted Schuldig home. And for Yohji to quit his damned smoking! "So what's for breakfast?" He asked.
"What am I, the room service?" Nagi snapped.
"Breakfast in bed would be good." Yohji allowed.
"Come down and get it yourself!" Nagi shut the door.
Aya looked at the blond. "I'm hungry."
"Then let's get breakfast." Yohji said, getting up and hiking his briefs back up over his hip where they had slid down in sleep's restlessness, going to relieve himself.
Aya sighed again and got out of bed as well. He found his house kimono on the back of a chair and put it on. His back itched from the healing tattoo. He looked at the pile of laundry that had spilled over onto the floor from no time to do it.
Schuldig's dark green silk shirt was on top.
He looked at it for a few moments, remembering Schuldig putting it on in a hurry that night....how nice he always looked without a shirt on....the hallway sex, the bathroom sex....How he'd taken him in the shower, the strength in the man's thighs and buttocks under his hands as Schuldig had pushed into him, filling him, supporting him when his knees went weak....
He turned away and walked out of the room.

Schuldig opened his eyes yet again.
Hatred.
The man standing at the foot of the bed looking at him speculatively smirked.
"So helpless." He said.
Not.
Schuldig lashed out at him mentally, using his power with intent to make the man

hurt for that. Hurt a lot.
Kirchner winced but then blocked, though, with some difficulty. He blocked but did not strike back. He just stood there, amused it would seem, at the red head's efforts.
"So you have that left, do you." He said smoothly. "Other than that....you might as well be dead. Laying there, unable to move, unable to do anything for yourself."
"What the fuck do you want?" Schuldig hissed. "Kill me and get it over with, if you dare try."
Kirchner laughed.
"I think you're in more of a mess alive." He said cruelly. Then reached into Schuldig's mind.
Schuldig blocked, but the power level he was dealing with.....it strained him....he lashed out with everything he had, but Kirchner backed off on his own, leaving him with a pain in his mind from the sudden backlash of no target....He nearly blacked out for a few seconds. "You fucking shit!" Schuldig hissed.
"Do you have any idea of what you are?" Kirchner snarled at him in a low voice. "How disgusting and vile, and depraved you are? If it weren't for those old freaks, you'd be dead long ago! Another boy whore on the filthy streets with needle tracks and diseases! The only thing you're good for is the talent in your mind! It's fitting that the rest of you be useless! "
"Kill me now, you bastard or regret it!" Schuldig warned him.
He laughed. Then walked out, still chuckling over it.
Schuldig watched him go with cold hard eyes.
Round two to the 'boy whore', he thought with a self satisfied smirk.
People who thought they were so much better for not having had the courage to have a life, to fight to survive with something more than just 'survival', to be jammed into a living hell and trapped there because they were too cowardly to take a chance to get out, those were the ones who were disgusting! Living their flat, boring, little two dimensional lives and thinking themselves good enough!
"Pah!" He breathed in annoyance. "See what you get with that new body of yours, you old fuck." He muttered. "Enjoy it while you can because you will loose it again and regret it twice!"

Brad stopped short, toweling his hair dry. Damn it, how had THAT slipped past him! He watched it, horrified, the vision in his mind, then slumped against the counter with relief as the danger passed from Schuldig. He pulled himself together and got his briefs and slacks on as quickly as possible to step out into the hall way. "Aya! Yohji! We're leaving, right now!"
It took five minutes at best to get to the car.
"What the hell is wrong?" Aya demanded.
"Kirchner was in the hospital. He threatened Schuldig." He gunned the engine too much and nearly hit another car in the opposite parking stall, getting it turned

around to go out, the sound of breaks shrieking echoed through the building.
"Be careful!" Aya admonished.
"It's not your Porch so hold your tongue!" Brad ordered him, slamming to a halt at the barrier to the street level. He hit the horn in annoyance to get the security guard to open the gate. "Why is that not working!" He demanded.
The guard came over. "Where is your laser pass for this vehicle, Crawford-san!"
"Shit!" He'd forgot to put it on the grill of the new car. "I'll get it later!"
He snapped, pulling the car out onto the street.
"Is he all right!" Aya demanded.
"I don't understand why it never occurred to me that he wouldn't be safe there! I must be loosing my damned mind!" He swore as another car cut in front of him and then stopped short. He'd seen it but it was nearly too late. He let his mind open a bit more to the visions he had been blocking, careful not to allow himself to see Schuldig's future. There....that was why! He'd been blocking him out entirely, avoiding even accidentally seeing....what might be.... "Damn it!"
Yohji looked at him in the rearview mirror. "Bradley, a little less self recrimination, a little more safe driving?" he drawled.
He glared at the blond's reflection, then took a deep breath and toned down his temper, letting it out slowly and concentrating on the road.
Never. Never again would he shut out the visions. Not when it had nearly cost him more than he was ever willing to loose!

He looked up at them as they came in, Brad bending to kiss him and look into his eyes, stroking back his hair. "Are you all right?" He asked.
"Mein Mann...." Schu said, wanting to touch him, to hold him.
Brad sat down to take his hand, then looked and smiled, unwrapping the tie and taking the hand in both of his. "I'm sorry. I should have never left you alone..."
Yohji had gone around to the other side. "One of us will be here all the time now, until you can come home." He stated.
Schuldig looked up at him. "Gott, I look like hell." he was in Yohji's mind just then....seeing what he was seeing. "Kiss me anyway."
Yohji smiled and did so, not minding a bit. "If this is you after a few days....We'd better get someone to come and deal with you. Other wise, you're going to look like a displaced yeti.
Aya stood with a hand on Brad's shoulder lightly. "How are you, lover?"
Schuldig looked at the japanese, his immaculate grooming, his diamonds and perfect clothes. (With that at home, why come to me?) He sighed into Brad's mind.
(Because I love you more than anything.) Brad thought to him. (Look, Schuldig I know you feel bad, and you're messy and you want out of here, but that doesn't change how I see you. I want you home, safe and sound, I want you in my bed, in my arms, not here. But until you can come home, there's nothing I can do about

it.)
Schuldig looked at Aya again. "I've missed you." He said honestly.
Aya smiled gently.
"You'll be sick of us when we finally get you out of here." Yohji stated. "You watch and see. How is the back? Itching yet?"
"Oh, gott, yes!" Schuldig said.

Chapter Thirty Four
"To Be With You"

Bradley had his gun to the youth's skull, having slammed him into the wall so hard, it had probably concussed him. He looked into the guy's eyes from twelve inches away. "Remember me?
The youth's eyes flickered to Aya, then back to the gaigen's. "Yeah," He said.
"But we didn't touch you..."
"You touched my car." Brad stated.
The guy knew he was dead. It was just a matter of going fast or slow. "Fuck you, Gaigen!" He sneered.
"No, fuck you." Brad pulled the trigger.
He let the body drop and put the gun away, pushing his hair back, breathing hard from the adrenaline rush.
Aya laughed as he was caught up and kissed. "You're insane. Not here...."
"Why not here?" Brad was pulling his belt out of the buckle, keeping an arm about his japanese rose, but knowing Aya's protests were not all that serious.
Aya looked into his eyes, hands on his shoulders. Brad kissed him again. The purple depths were lit with an evil sort of gleam, the smile on those pink lips.....'wanton' was the only word for it. Aya in lust, was a beautiful Aya.
"Princess....." Brad breathed, and kissed him again.
Aya held him off with some difficulty. "NOT here!" He insisted, still smiling wickedly.
"Where?" Brad asked, not very willing to wait.
"It's disgusting in here. The car." Aya stated.
Brad was annoyed but he knew that Aya would protest until shut up. He turned him around and keeping him close, walked out into the hall of the slummy building.
He wanted him so badly, he wanted him NOW. But this was Aya, not his Schuldig, and sometimes.....he just didn't get what he wanted right away.
Oh, but it was worth it when he did get it....Aya half undressed and sliding into his arms on the seat of the car in a darkened alleyway. Taking Aya, pinning him down and driving into him so hard he was almost afraid of breaking him. But from the sound of it, Aya was loving it.
Too soon, it was over. Too soon.
He kissed him, wanting to take the life out of him in that moment with one kiss.
Aya whimpered and drove up against him just a bit more, then collapsed with a moan of complaint of his own.
Brad rested, breathing so hard now, he was hot and sweaty.
Aya reached down to caress him as he slipped out.
Brad kissed his shoulders and chest then made him stop by catching his hand.
"Enough,....." He kissed his lips again.
Aya sighed heavily. If Schuldig and Yohji were here, he'd certainly be able to go again.....

Brad grabbed him by the penis and bent to kiss it's now sticky tip. "Later." He promised, then sat up to push his hair back.
Aya moaned another complaint but moved to sit up and find his slacks. "Are you happy now?" He asked.
"Very." Brad said, wiping the sweat off his face with a handkerchief.
"Seven years you didn't touch Schuldig?" Aya asked out of the blue.
Brad was struggling to un-sort his own shirt buttons. "What brought that up?" He frowned.
"You always want sex after a kill. What did you do before?"
Brad scowled.
Aya looked at him. Then decided not to press the matter.
Decent, if they could ever be that, and in the front seat of the car, Brad started up the MB and let the engine warm a little. Aya put his seat belt on.
"When I won a fight.....they brought me whores." Brad said quietly. "I always won. Until the day they couldn't find anyone to fight me any more. And my 'owner' got mad. By then Esset was onto me. They'd been watching me fight, saw how I knew where the next blow was going to fall. They bought me from him."
"Bought you?" Aya said, surprised.
"I was brought to Asia illegally, to fight." Brad stated. "I wanted out of Chicago, away from a life I hated. I was stupid. I didn't care where I went as long as it was anywhere but the United States. I could fight, I could win, the local chinese gangsters were looking for fighters, so I went." He took the parking brake off and let the car move onto the main street. "I was seventeen, fucking stupid, and just did not care." He said bitterly.
Aya laid a hand on his thigh, sorry for having brought up a past pain.
"It lasted a year. I was good. I was their precious pet. I won every fight, no matter how much of a killer I was up against. You know the fights are set so that the opponent goes down and stays down, or is killed, don't you?" He glanced at the man who had been a banker's first born son, spoilt, the prince of the house. Surely he had never known this before coming to Weiss.
"Hai." Aya said softly.
"I was given anything I wanted, as long as it didn't interfere with my training. The best of everything. I was a kid, I'd never seen such wealth." Never seen a girl decked in so much money and so touchable.....the 'jade women' of Hong Kong.....but Aya didn't need to know that. Not to be compared to the silken whores decked in jewels that he had been fascinated by.....
"What happened?" Aya asked after a long silence of just driving. "How did Esset get you?"
"There was no owner willing to put his fighters up against me. I went from being a big money maker to my owner, to fucking useless over night. I still think.....Esset had something to do with that. That fat bastard had me hauled out of bed in the night and dragged down to his 'throne' room, and sold me to Esset. By then.....I'd taken so many hits to the eyes and head in the fight,

because I couldn’t always duck every blow....that would be to obvious...I was loosing my eyesight. The nerves were damaged. I couldn’t even focus on my new owners. All I knew was that they had spoken german. And that I was sold naked like a slave. So I stood up. I let them know that if I was blind and naked, I still didn’t give a fuck who they were."
The hand on his leg pressed more. He didn’t look, not now, not at that beautiful face....
He was going to tell this to one person and one person only and be done with it. Let Schuldig find out this way, he didn’t care.
"They decided that my ‘talent’ was being interfered with by my ‘lusts’. They trained me.....not to let my emotions interfere with my job. To put it all aside. It was learn.....or be castrated." He stated flatly. "I learned."
Aya made a small noise of shock....
"The night I picked up Schuldig for them.....was the first time in two years. And the last in seven. They told me they would not tolerate my disobedience. That Schuldig would be the one to suffer if I.....touched him again. I begged them to let me have him on my team. I swore I wouldn’t touch him. I just.....wanted him there. Seven years of watching him, not being able to touch him, not being able to tell him. Fighting him off, because I was afraid they would take him away from me. And knowing that if I did tell him, he would do something stupid and get us both killed. Until I could not stand it any more. Until I saw him leaving me for Kudoh.....And Esset ruining the world with their new order, their fucking fourth reich."
Aya moved the hand up to Brad’s shoulder. "And.....me?" He asked softly. "If Schuldig means so much to you.....what am I?"
Brad sighed. What was Aya, really? "I own you, Princess, and don’t ever forget it." He said softly.
"No." Aya said in barely a whisper. "I won’t."
"You accept that?" Brad asked, glancing at him at last as they pulled into the hospital parking-lot.
"I love you, Bradley. What more do you want from me? What else can I do?" Aya said, a catch in his voice. "I belong to you."
"Accept it then." Brad stated, pulling on the parking brake.
"And Yohji?" Aya asked.
Brad thought this over. There really was no reason he should tell Aya what he felt about the other one.
(Mien Mann.)
He closed his eyes at that brush of Schuldig’s mind to his. (Baby....)
(Stop fucking around and get up here to me.)
He smiled. (I’m not ‘fucking around’, Schuldig, I just got here.)
The incorrigible german checked over his mind, prying and testing him as a cat would it’s so called owner, and found what he’d been up to. (Hmmm.....) Came the purr in his mind. (Not fucking around, eh? Shall I tell him?)

Brad was uncomfortable briefly as Schuldig's pryings renewed vivid memories of only moments past, dwelling on his orgasm and the feeling of Aya under him.....(Will you stop it!)
(Tell him. Trust is everything in this game, Bradley.)
He sighed again. (I will. Let me get out of this car.)
The mental contact backed off, so that he could stop thinking bout the past half hour or so.....with relief.
He looked at Aya who was aware something was going on. He knew that look on Bradley's face by now. Brad reached over to caress the soft and carefully cropped hair. "You both belong to me, Aya, you and Yohji. And neither one of you will ever get away from me. No one will take you, and you won't escape on your own. And if either of you try, I will kill you both. I won't be played with, Princess. I'm too fond of my own comfort to let either of you go."
Aya smiled at him now. It was a very knowing smile. He took him by the wrist and kissed his palm and looked into his eyes behind the lenses again.
"Bradley.....why don't you just say you love us?" He asked quietly.
"I've said it before." Brad answered him. "But you asked what you were to me. Not if I loved you." He slid his hand free and got out of the car. "Come along Aya. Schuldig is getting impatient."

Yohji sat in the chair close to the bed side. The room was full of cigarette smoke despite the rules and the window being open to let it out.
Schuldig looked a bit less miserable, now that he was allowed to have someone from the salon come and deal with him, his hair clean and despite it's perpetual unruly looks, cut. He had had a wonderful time cursing out his hair dresser for not having come the week before and sending an underling, but paid twice as much for the service cheerfully just to be luxuriously washed and massaged until at least his head felt like his own again. She had cussed him right back, as usual. It was an ongoing fight that made them both quite pleased with themselves.
Yohji had brought him cherries. Big, lush, ripe cherries, in a package from the most expensive store. Quite the gift of luxury, and now was feeding them to him as he lay with his hand behind his neck, the only amount he dared to be propped up.
There was to be absolutely no pressure on his spine at all for four more weeks and the past two had not been pleasant.
"Bradley, how can you be so mean to me, having all the sex in the world with me stuck in here unable to do anything at all?" He admonished. "I swear it's wilting, it's not going to work any more at all!"
"That's the medication." Yohji said. "I asked the doctor. He said not even a wet dream for you." He tapped Schuldig's nose with another cherry that he had bitten half of and the pit out of. For all the price of his gift, he was getting half of it back.....
Schuldig nipped at the fruit and smiled at him evilly.

Yohji got the message loud and clear. This could be you, Love....."K'suo, Schuldig, don't be so mean." He grumbled around the cigarette.
Brad ran a hand along the blond's shoulder and bent to kiss his cheek. "Time to go home, Kitten." He murmured.
Yohji felt his heart do that weird little thing.....He knew it was just from where the bullet had hit, but it seemed to only happen when Brad said that one word to him.
(Yoh-tan...) Schuldig thought to him. (I'm sorry.)
(It's all right, Baby.) Yohji got up, caressing his cheek and bending to kiss him. (He's all yours for the night.)
(Not as much of him as I want.....)
(Stop your fussing, Schuldig. Think of what a state you'd be in if you couldn't read our minds and see and feel everything second hand?) He moved aside to let Aya have his turn.
Aya kissed him and let him have the memory. Schuldig moaned for a moment and held him to him to finish the kiss.....
"Schuldig." Brad said sharply.
Aya pulled away, worried that he might have done something that might ruin Schuldig's chances of recovering.
"Yohji take Aya home and get some rest." Brad said. "Tell Nagi and Omi I want them here in eight hours."
"Are you okay?" Aya asked Schuldig, holding his hand.
"I'm fine, stop worrying." Schuldig said.
When they were gone and the door was shut behind them, Brad sat down in the chair.
"Don't be so mean to them." Schuldig told him.
Brad took his hand, and felt him relax a little more as his talent canceled out the redhead's talent. "Is that what you got from Aya's mind?"
Schuldig looked up at him. "They're starting to feel disoriented, mien Mann." He said quietly.
Brad thought about this for a few moments. "Why? I don't treat them any differently."
"They miss me, poor things." Schuldig smiled.
"I miss you." Brad informed him firmly. "They can fend for themselves."
"Well, Aya certainly can." He smiled even more evilly.
Brad put the cover on the cherries that remained and got up to turn out the lights except for the small one over the bed. "Time for you to sleep." He said softly, very carefully moving him over by drawing the whole sheet over with him on it so that there was room for him to lie down equally carefully beside him.
"I'm worn out myself."
"That will teach you to screw Aya in the back seat of a car." Schuldig said jealously. Then he sighed deeply. "I dreamt I was home, and when I woke up, I'm here still. Can't you get me out of here, Bradley? Can't you have someone come

to the house to take care of me?"
"No." Brad said. "You stay here where they can keep an eye on you. You stay here where no one is going to jar you accidentally or stupidly let you talk them into letting you move too much. And where the nurse can shove the medication in your arm so you can't spit out the pills or just not take them."
Schuldig frowned. "How well you know me, mein Mann." He said dryly.
Brad put an arm across his chest, where the rib cage would support it...still not sure how much could ruin the work of the surgeons...."Sleep, Baby. You need rest to heal."
"Ich liebe dich, mein Mann." Schuldig said softly.
Brad smiled a little and let sleep claim him.

Kirchner watched them drive away. Crawford was up in the room with Schuldig now. The two of them together. Such an easy target. And the fact that Crawford's power shut down the red head's.....even better.
He let his mind slip over the American's, checking carefully, oh so carefully.....
The man hadn't suspected the japanese' questions about his past. Of course, Crawford might not have been.....entirely truthful. This would take time, working through each one of them, until he knew them, inside and out, their deepest secrets, their weaknesses, and how to play them against each other. Until he had control of them.
Complete control.

Schuldig hadn't fallen asleep when he became aware of the sensation of being.....watched. Not in his own mind.....but.....
He put a hand to Brad's hand on his chest. And did something he did not often dare to do. Not even since he had learned how to do it.
He slid into the shielded area deep beneath Brad's unconscious mind. It was an area of not much use to a telepath, unless one intended to kill. The area that controlled involuntary body functions, like the heart beat and breathing. He had to be very careful in here. Not a thought on his own of anything upsetting or out of synch could be transferred to this area.
(Bradley) He thought as softly as possible.
(Yes.) Was the faint response.
(You feel it?)
(....yes....)
(Fail safe.)
(....Yes....)
Schuldig very, very carefully exited the link, sighing in relief and closed his eyes, grateful now for the muscle relaxers.
The fail safe in Brad's mind.....was Esset brainwashing. They all had it. A particular pattern of thinking....like a virus scan program....that would

repeat, like said virus scan.....and wipe out any other attempts to brain wash them.
Now all he had to worry about were the ex-Weiss members of their little menage.

Aya was drinking his morning tea and looking very unhappy.
Yohji looked in on him. "You all right?"
"I didn't sleep well." He said quietly.
Yohji frowned. He'd had some incredibly strange dreams last night. Very vivid, compared to his usual manner. And not so much dreams....as memories. Strange because.....his dreams never went back beyond Asuka....
And this had been from his childhood. Remembering things he hadn't thought of in years.
He had a mild headache, but nothing he thought about taking anything for. He drank his coffee and looked at his watch. Almost time to get going. Omi and Nagi had hospital duty, and they were to meet Brad for breakfast and move on to the next phase of the speed gang wipe out.
"I'll drive."
"All right." Aya said, not willing to fight about it. Another unusual thing for him.
Yohji had a bit of an intuition. "Ran.....did you have strange dreams last night? Like your mind wouldn't shut off and was going through old memories?"
Purple eyes met his.
"I had some really weird things going on. Like someone was playing with the reverse button on my mind....." Yohji said. "It's hard to explain."
"I saw my parents house blow up." Aya said quietly. "I saw it, in my mind. My memory was never that clear...."
The boys didn't look any more thrilled to be alive then their elders. Nagi headed for the aspirin and coffee. Omi looked the worse. He sat down and rubbed his hand on the side of his head as if wanting to rub away the memories.
"Omi." Yohji said. "Do you feel like you've been run through for information?"
Omi looked at him. "Yeah." He realized. "Like my brain has been fucking hacked!"
Aya's mouth twitched. "Kirchner."
"Fuck." Nagi said. "How the hell can he get to us so damned easily!"

Schuldig winced in annoyance. Being carted around like a piece of meat, poked at, examined, hauled off to x-ray, the stupid impertinence of a hospital gown. Not able to do a thing for himself. Hooked, unhooked, forced to eat food when the meds ruined his appetite, stuck with needles.
Brought back from x-ray and settled into the changed bed, glaring at Bradley for everything and anything just because he was there, the further impertinence of having tubes changed. "ITTTAAAIIII, god damn it!" He swore at the nurse. "It's not a fucking tampon you can't just JAM it in there! That's a sensitive organ you COW!"

"The quicker the better." She said calmly, putting the used catheter in the container. Men!
Brad just sat there and grinned at him.
"You shut up, Bradley!" Schuldig ordered.
"Big baby." Bradley said anyway.
"One of these days, YOU will be stuck in a mess like this and then see how sympathetic I am to you."
Brad smiled even more. "I never intend to be in a mess like this."
Schuldig glared at him, thinking evil thoughts at him.
Brad blocked him quite efficiently.
The nurse collected her equipment and rolled the little cart out, shutting the door. A minute later it opened and the others came in, looking more than a bit grim. Brad took note of the fact that once again.....Aya was in Ran mode.
"We have a problem." Nagi stated.
"Besides that one?" Brad indicated the bed ridden red head.
"Fuck you." Schuldig said, enunciating slowly and clearly.
"A real problem." Yohji stated.
"I'm not a real problem?" Schuldig said, in mocking disbelief.
"I have an idea." Brad said in a smooth but warning voice. "Let's start at the beginning without interference. Nagi?"
"Kirchner." Nagi stated. "Last night all four of us had no rest, our minds being hacked for information."
"And who discovered this?" Brad asked.
"Yohji." Nagi said.
Brad looked at the blond, who stood with his arms crossed, looking a bit tired and worn at the edges. "Explain this, Kudoh?"
"I never dream of my past before Asuka's death." He stated. "It's something I've had to live with for three years. Last night.....I dreamt of things that had happened....before that." He shook his head in disbelief. "Way back in my past. Things I'd totally forgotten about, things that couldn't possibly matter any more."
Brad looked at Aya. "Ran....?" He said quietly.
Aya was looking at Schuldig. It was not a warm look, nor his usual spoilt and angry look. It was cold and hard and angry.
"Ran." Brad said again softly.
Cold purple eyes shifted to him arrogantly .
Brad stood up. Time for a little dominance tactic in body language here, to remind the younger man of who was bigger and badder and basically.....capable of beating it out of him. "What's the matter, Princess?"
"The explosion that killed my parents." Ran stated.
Brad was unfazed by this. "Yes?" He asked calmly.
"Schuldig was there." Ran hissed.
"Well of course." Brad stated. "He set the bomb. Under Takatori's orders. Did

you ever doubt it was Schwarz that set that bomb?"
"You killed my parents. You killed my sister!"
Nagi had him under control physically, stopping him from moving.
Brad swallowed, his throat a bit dry suddenly. "Yes." He said.
"And you never told me!" Ran demanded.
"Ran....." Yohji tried....
"Shut up!" Ran snarled at him. He might be in Nagi's damned telekinetic grip but he was not going to tolerate being silenced, not while he was still conscious.
Brad took a deep breath and let it out slow, then pushed his glasses up in that nervous gesture. "Let him go, Nagi."
"No!" Nagi protested, incredulous.
"Let him go." Brad said softly, but it was even more of an order.
Nagi hesitated.....
"Now." Brad said.
Nagi frowned. What ever was going to happen, he knew Brad must have seen it. Good thing the maniac had lost his damned katana....he let him go.
Ran looked at the man laying on the bed, unable to fight, unable to even fight. The memory was so vivid in his mind. That smirking face in the flames light.....The car hitting Aya-chan....Takatori's face in the rear windshield.....
Schuldig just looked up at him, no smile, no arrogance, nothing. Not even remorse. Just.....shut down.
"Why?" Ran asked.
"Orders." the german said. "Those kills meant nothing to me."
"Innocent people.....!" Ran got a bit louder.
"Orders." Brad stated. "Not innocent.....Guilty of letting Takatori corrupt them. Your father waited too long to say no, to make a moral decision. He laundered money for Takatori for a price. He allowed crimes to take place for that money to keep flowing."
"Was that a reason to kill them!" Ran demanded.
"It was then." Schuldig said, much against Brad's wishes, but too quickly for him to stop him.
Ran was enraged. "How can you be so cold! Just a kill! Meaning nothing to you! My parents! My sister!"
"Ran....." Yohji said softly....but didn't dare try to touch him.
"Who cares about them!" Schuldig said impertinently, annoyance showing at last. "Dead meat! You are alive, Ran, alive because you were smart enough to get out! You survived! You.....I love." He fell silent, the anger gone as fast as it had come. He sighed and looked at the ceiling. It was no use....Kirchner had screwed him royally. There was nothing more to say, he wasn't a liar, he had told the truth.
Ran looked at Brad, and surprisingly.....gave up.
One minute he was about ready to kill Schuldig....the next....he just gave it

up.....
Brad moved to take him by one shoulder, looking at him. "Aya...." He moved his hand to caress the white skinned cheek. "I know it hurts. But it's over and done with, a long time ago."
"Yes." Aya said, tiredly, looking down at Schu, who would not look at him.
"We can skip the job today, or do it later." He instantly regretted his impulsive decision....Work was work. "Nagi, Omi, keep him from killing the nurses." He glanced at them, then at Schuldig.
"Better yet, lure them in here and we'll see how many bodies fit in the closet." Schuldig said bitterly.
Aya slipped past Brad to put a hand on Schuldig's cheek and make him turn his face toward him, then bent to kiss his lips. "Heartless bastard." He said softly.
"Aya....." Schuldig said softly.
"I want you home." Aya pressed a firmer kiss on him. "I want you home."

So, there were some things that had went un-addressed. He'd never given such things a moment's consideration. Perhaps.....taken it for granted that they had come to terms with things on their own. Or that Schuldig had somehow managed to twist their minds subtly or deliberately.
He rubbed his hand on Aya's silken haired head, caressed his cheek, and let the long strands of that insane japanese hair invention, the ear tail, slide through his fingers.
Aya sighed and nuzzled his shoulder.
He had one arm about the red head, one about the blond. No matter how long this had gone on....he still had to laugh secretly at the situation.....Weiss....completely surrendered to him.
Yohji ran a hand over his chest, tracing the muscles....."What are you smiling at?" He asked quietly.
"You two." He said.
"Eh?" Aya said. "Why?"
Brad tightened his hold on them. "I just am." He said, smiling broader now. "And while we are at it, is there anything else you two need to get out of your systems?" He turned a bit to kiss Yohji's forehead.
"I think that about covered it all." Yohji said, very much ready to go back to sleep.
"Speak for yourself, Yoh-tan." Aya said sullenly. "I still have no katana!"
"Is that all you love me for?" Brad stroked his hair again. "You could have bought yourself two gross of the damned things by now."
"Come with me to pick one out." Aya said softly.
"No." Brad said. And shoved him out of the bed.
Aya landed on his ass with a wuff of air out of his lungs and a look on his face of pure bloody shock.

Brad sat up, looking at him, smiling. What a pretty little mess he made there, naked on that beige carpet....
Yohji protested the loss of his ‘pillow’.
Aya went from shock to viperish anger.....
"While you’re down there.....Look under the bed." Brad told him coolly.
Aya frowned.
"Just do as I say." Brad said smoothly.
Aya looked. There was something.....He bent to look closer....
And reached under to pull out a silk wrapped package, that by it’s shape and weight could only be one thing....
He sat up and long fingers tore in a very un-japanese manner at the ornate traditional wrapping cloth.
The first thing that caught his eyes was a gleam of pure color.
A blood ruby...
He looked up. And grinned evilly....."Now. Where is that tube of lubricant?"
"To hell you will!" Brad got up and scrambled over Yohji to get off the bed to go lock himself in the bathroom.

Chapter Thirty Five
"Distraction"

Omi had been some what distracted since that strange night. He'd been all right at first. But then--he'd seemed to grow quiet.
No one had really talked about it, except to have the opinion that Kirchner had been behind it. Outside of Aya's little explosion, they'd all just kept it to themselves. But things had back logged during the 'strangeness', and jobs came as fast as they could deal with them. Brad's penchant for living life too fast and too hard was nothing new. But at times it precluded much personal life but the basics.
It took being stuck in a car in a stake out on a drug deal location for Nagi to find the time to ask.
"Omi." He reached over to pull a stray lock of hair from the other youth's face so that he could see him. "What's been distracting you lately?"
"Distracting?" Omi said, blinking. He'd been focused on watching for heat signatures on the computer screen. "Everything! Brad's working us to death, Schuldig is going nuts and taking us with him. And Aya----Aya is getting worse."

Well. Yes. That was all true. Brad scarcely let them sleep more than six hours. He could hardly be convinced to allow anyone time off not spent with Schuldig. It was eat, sleep, work and Schuldig.
"I mean you, Omi." Nagi said softly reaching over to lay a hand over his. "You've never been this....quiet." Normally, he was fairly cheerful, even around the nutcases that they lived with. Now--he was just--quiet. No perpetual smile. No laughter at the bizarreness going on.
Omi frowned a little, looking at the computer screen. Normally stake out didn't bother him, but being forced to sit and just wait now meant time to think. Usually---he could think. What to do in off time, vid game problems, hacking codes.
Now, he couldn't think about anything but the mess of his past. The bout of amnesia he'd suffered, and the memories that had come back when he'd been on that mission. Ouka being killed. Finding out that Persia was in reality, his real father. Those things that he had thought dealt with were now haunting him constantly.
What was bothering him now was that in looking back, having all his memories brought back, was how confused his feeling were, and how shaky his sense of self really was.
"I'm all right." He looked at Nagi seriously. "I just need to sort some things out. When I do..." he put his hand over Nagi's. "I'll talk about it, okay? But right now...I have to figure it out myself."
Nagi smiled a little. "Okay."

Aya was getting worse. Yohji's first thought as he was shoved up against the

wall in the elevator was that Aya was getting worse.....
A long fingered hand hit the stop button.....While a greedy mouth covered Yohji's with an almost growl of demand. Because of the hand railing, he was kind of bent back a bit, making his hips jut forward, a better target for the insistent redhead's grinding against him.
"Ran.....five more floors....." He protested.
"Now." Aya said.
"But...."
"NOW." Aya stated.
Between the greedy hands prying at his clothes, the demanding mouth sucking at his, the invading tongue, and the hard on under the expensive slacks rubbing against his own increasing erection.....now was good.
Aya set his teeth against Yohji's neck where the muscle was behind the juggler vein and pulled open his tight leather hip huggers, sliding his hand in to grasp the blond and stroke him to make sure the message had got across...
"Mmmmm....." Yohji moaned. "Ran...."
Aya kissed him again and mauled him lovingly, caressing his cock and balls just rough enough to make him tense up, but not to discourage him. Then he backed off a little, his hand still cupping Yohji's balls, to look at him with a sly, sensual smile. "Now?" he inquired coolly?
"Now." Yohji said. Then grabbed him and turned him to the wall, swiftly undoing Aya's belt and zipper, to play some rough games himself.
Aya gasped and then purred, arching his back so that Yohji would get the hint. He got it.
Holding onto Aya and the railing as if he were afraid Aya would somehow get away, he made love to him, the urgency of the moment slowing to pure self indulgence as he worked in long sensual stroaks, stopping just short of Aya's prostate, caressing and pulling gently on Aya's hard on.
"Yoh-tan....." Aya complained lovingly.
"You want it?" Yohji asked, moving a little closer to that spot...then away just as he felt Aya's muscles shift...
"Yes!" Aya hissed, sparing a hand from the railing to work Yohji's hand over his cock more.
Yohji pushed in again, again stopping short of it. "Do you?" He laughed softly.
"Please?" Aya said, a hint of begging in his voice.
Yohji let him have it.
Aya gasped, throbbing with pleasure.
Yohji pulled back again.
"Yohji, god damn it! Fuck me!" Aya ordered when he realized Yohji wasn't going to thrust in again.
"Yes, Ran." Yohji laughed softly....and fucked him.

Kirchner sat down, making himself comfortable and looked at the man before him.

Araki Masanori sat at his desk, his face a blank, his mind totally under the control of the man who had somehow just walked into his office right past his guards.....
Kirchner considered him. His life, his crimes. And oddly enough.....his sense of justice and fair play. If not for the fact that the man was technically, by all counts, a total criminal....he might be a hero.
This annoyed him.
Black was black and white was white.
Crawford had so destroyed the lines between good and evil....it was a wonder Tokyo hadn't been torn apart beneath him years ago!
This man. This traditional Yakuza, this gangster, with his honor and dignity and decency....and yet....his criminality and perversion....had complicated matters ten years ago.
Esset had sent Crawford to Japan, to prepare for the take over. They had sent him to this man's 'lord', a satellite pawn of theirs. And the man had assigned Crawford to Araki. To take him under his wing and train him. To transform the gaigen into a resident japanese.....at least, in spirit.
In the memories of this man, he saw Crawford as he had been all those years ago. The tall, slender, younger man of nineteen, arrogant chin up, taking in the man who had come to meet him at the airport, sizing him up with the eyes and mind of a fighter. Eyes made clear again behind new glasses, giving them a rather cold look despite their being a strangely light brown.
His grip for a handshake had been sure and firm. And a sudden smirk had crossed his face. As if the man had looked strait through Araki and seen it all.
Araki had become guarded just then. But in letting go of that powerful hand, he had gotten a sudden sense of.....rightness....about this young gaigen.
"Welcome to Japan, Crawford-san." He'd said, in english.
"Thank you." the young man had glanced about at the insides of the terminal, looking at the signs and listening to the sounds of what was to be his new territory. Then he'd openly grinned, sly as a wolf. "I will like it here." He stated in japanese, then turned those brown eyes back on the Yakuza. "Correct me when ever I'm wrong on something. They've been filling my head for the past six weeks until I dream in japanese."
Araki had smiled too. "Your accent is British?"
"My teacher was British. I was American."
"Was?" Araki had laughed slightly in his tone of voice.
"I live in this world." The gaigen had said coolly. "Make me japanese."
Araki's lord had a gaigen concubine. He was used to the idea that foreigners could be fitted in, no matter their strangeness. The blond woman and her desire to be a kendo champion, this young man who might fit in quiet well if not for his height....
And beauty....
Kirchner scowled. Never mind the japanese's feelings about the man! Had Esset

known they were sending Crawford to further corruption of his already disastrous mind set?
No....nothing had occurred between the two, despite the subtle signals. Crawford had kept aloof from that level, maintaining only a congenial friendliness toward the yakuza, intent only on learning from him to live in his new country, immersing himself in the japanese underworld and it's traditions, yet always politely refusing the offer to join the yakuza brother hood.

Bradley sighed. "I do love you." He insisted.
Schuldig had shut him out again. Angry and unstable, he'd been cooped up too long in this hospital bed. Now he had accused Bradley of being glad to have him gone.
"I spend every night with you." Brad said softly. "What makes you think that, Baby? Don't tell me Kirchner is up to his shit again. Why do you accuse me of something so untrue?"
"You have them! What good am I to anyone now!" Schuldig hissed. "Look at me! I can't fucking move! I can't be touched or I might break! Fuck this shit, Bradley! We had a deal! Shoot me and get it over with, you bastard! I won't be held here any longer!" He tried to fight the straps.....
Brad back handed him sharply, his temper flaring up and then dying down just as suddenly as he realized the blow across the man's jaw might have jarred his entire body.
"Kill me you miserable bastard!" Schuldig yelled at him.
Brad put a hand over his mouth, leaning over him to hold him and kiss his temple. "Be quiet, Schuldig." He begged. "Stop it before you have the orderlies in here!"
For Schuldig had yelled in japanese....so accustomed to the language for anything but their most intimate moments....
The german squirmed, trying to free his mouth, accusing him of being everything shitfaced in the book and quiet a few volumes at that.
"Baby, please." Brad breathed. "Calm down!"
Schuldig finally tired of fighting him. Four weeks of being bed ridden had made him weak, his unused muscles going lax. A few tears rolled from the corners of his closed eyes and he was having trouble breathing with Brad's hand cupped over his face.
Brad kissed his temple again and whispered, "I love you, I'll always love you. Don't do this to me. I'd follow you to hell, my angel, my darling....You know I'll never give you up."
He let him go carefully, and then kissed the trembling mouth.
Schuldig responded now, kissing him back, choking a little on the tears in the back of his throat.
He looked up at his lover. "I want to go home! I hate it here! Please let me go home!"

"Not yet, Baby." Brad took a tissue out of the box and wiped his face for him. "A few more weeks. That's all, just a few more weeks. The x-rays are showing healing, the doctor is very confident that you're right on track. He said you were even healing faster than most patients do after operations like this. Will you calm down and stop this nonsense?"
Schuldig just laid there, looking betrayed.
Aya and Yohji came in, Aya's face flushed with pink. Yohji looked a tiny bit stressed and as usual....that meant....Yohji looked like he needed a cigarette.
"Out of the way, U.S.A." Aya ordered Brad in his heavily accented english.
Brad rolled his eyes, and annoyed, let Aya at Schuldig.
Aya took Schu's face in his hands and kissed him tenderly, fervently, offering him the present he had brought.....
Schuldig took in the memory.....feeling every touch, every caress, every bit of Yohji's little game of torture....Shared Aya's orgasm.....
"All for you, Baby." Aya said, flushed with the memory himself again.
"Aya..." Schuldig breathed.
Aya kissed him again.
(Beautiful Aya.....) Schuldig caressed his mind.
Aya was never more aware of how wonderful it was to have a telepath for a lover. The emotions and sensations the man could replay in him...awaken in him....These past weeks, he'd done everything he could to make his bedridden love happy. To keep him a part of the world outside the hospital.
Schuldig opened his eyes and looked at Yohji, smiling at his discomfort. "Eh, Yoh-tan, spare me a cigarette as well." He said in a low tone of voice that meant he wanted it for a more exacting reason than just addiction to tobacco.
"When you get out of here, I want a blow job for every pack of mine you smoke up, you leech." Yohji stated.
Schuldig laughed a little. It was knowing that he might jar his spine that kept him from laughing with more enthusiasm, but Yohji got the point. "Then by all means.....give me a few cigarettes. I can chain smoke."
Brad decided his lungs were not going through this. "Aya, let's leave them to it. You shameless slut."
Aya looked at him in icy defiance, quite proud of himself. "You shut up, Bradley." He said quite boldly. "You never complain when you're in my ass."
"So beautiful and such a filthy mouth." Brad said coolly.
"You were the last to get it dirty." Aya taunted.
Brad rolled his eyes again and sighed heavily, then grabbed him by the upper arm and shoved him out of the room. "I should beat you senseless...!" He stated as he shut the door.
Yohji smirked jadedly and took out the pack of cigarettes, moving to sit beside Schuldig and taking out two to put in his lips, fishing in his pocket for the lighter and puffing them to burn in it's flame. He put one in Schuldig's lips for him, looking at him. "Why the tears, Schu?" He asked in his mellow drawl.

"I was being stupid." Schuldig said. "Being tied to this bed is driving me out of my mind and you know it.
"The doctor said...."
"The doctor said!" Schuldig mocked in annoyance. "When I'm out of here, I'll kill him, just for the hell of it!"
"No you wont." Yohji said mildly. "Besides being a spoilt shit getting a vacation, being waited on like royalty, what's up in that head of yours?"
"Nothing but bullshit." Schuldig frowned. "How are you and that psycho-bitch today?"
"I'm run ragged. Ran is just having a wonderful time." Yohji pushed back with his thumb some hair from his ear where it was tickling him. "Strange, I vaguely remember him being a cold son of a bitch.....must be my warped imagination working over time."
Schuldig smiled, enjoying the cigarette and attempting just a bit of a stretch with his arms over his head.
"Carefull!" Yohji ordered.
Schuldig sighed. "Only my shoulders, Yohji-koi. What I meant was.....any more trouble from Kirchner?" He said seriously.
Yohji considered this, looking at him. Just letting his eyes rest on the familiar lines and curves of Schuldig's face, the way the locks of his hair framed his head. He reached over to trace a cheekbone with a fingertip. "Nothing anyone can put their finger on..." He ran it over those pink lips..."Omi seems to have taken it the hardest. He's gone very quiet and no where near as annoyingly cheerful about everything. You don't have to be a mind reader to hear the little gears whirring away in that head of his."
"I should check him more thoroughly the next time they are here." Schuldig said.

"Ashtray..."
Yohji picked up an empty cup and held it for the red head to knock his ashes off the cig's end with, then leaned on the edge of the bed tiredly. "Long night. That stake out. No sign of our target yet. Then Aya takes everything he can get out of me in the elevator on the way up here."
Schuldig smiled in warm remembrance. "You're sooo good, Love." He purred.
Yohji caught his freed hand and twined fingers with him. "Perverted." He accused mildly.
Then Schu went suddenly all serious at something he had glimpsed in the blond eurasian's mind. "What's this, Yoh-tan? Missing a woman?"
Yohji shook his head. "No." He said. "Not missing. Just....thinking."
Schuldig waited for him to make up his mind to talk.
Yohji blew out smoke in a sigh. "If Asuka had lived....I wonder...would I have been happy now?"
Schuldig looked at him. If that woman had lived, would they have ever crossed paths? Bradley was right. Never, never speculate on things that didn't happen.

"Yohji....
"What if she had been alive when I.....took you?"
Yohji pulled his hand up gently for a kiss on the back of it, keeping his fingers twined in the german's. "That.....would have depended on you. You were very persistent, despite all my rejections and attempts to kill you."
Schuldig smiled wickedly. "And if I had killed her?"
"That's not funny, Schuldig!" Yohji exclaimed.
"I seem to go around killing everyone." Schuldig said seriously. "Aya's parents, Omi's stupid little cousin-half-sister-whatever. Kirchner must be having a wonderful time digging up all that dirt. I can't stop him, you know. You have to be aware of it going on, and stop it yourselves."
"What do you suppose he means to do? He can't be just playing with us for the fucking fun of it." Yohji frowned.
"He wants Bradley under his control." Schuldig stated. "He want's to re-form Schwarz under his lead. He resents our power, our ability to survive. He wants us at his feet. His ego demands it. Fucking old school Nazi.....soo superior." He scoffed bitterly.
"But...what good would that do him?" Yohji asked.
"There are still people in this sick, twisted little world that would welcome the fourth Reich." The red head informed him. "He's been a professor in colleges....he probably knows all about the movements and racial hatred groups out there. Hitler rode them to power, and Esset on his back.....It would be too damned easy for Kirchner to set it all off again."
"Too much politics for me." Yohji said.
"Pay attention!" Schuldig insisted. "He had Brad under his control once. And you saw how easy it was for Chapel as well as Kirchner to take a few of us over. You have to be on your guard, Yohji. Even in your dreams."
Yohji took the almost burned down cigarette butt from him and put it out, along with his own. "Believe me, koi, I triple and double check my mind these days after what happened last time. And for some reason.....I don't think Ran's mind is that interesting to Kirchner..."

Aya set the cup down beside him on the desk and leaned on the arm of the chair to look at the computer screen, sipping his own cup of tea. "Any luck?" He asked.
"Only what I can make for myself." Brad said, concentrating on the task.
"Why didn't he stay dead?" Aya said, pissed off.
"That 'thing' saw an opportunity and took it." He frowned mildly.
"So he's supernatural now as well as telepathic? Then why don't these tattoos keep him out of our minds?"
"They may to some extent. I think he would be more trouble than he is now, if that weren't the case."
Aya looked down at him and raised a hand to stroke the black hair lightly.

"Don’t even try it." Brad said, not even looking at him.
"You have such a short fuse, Bradley." Aya laughed softly.
"Don’t play with matches, then." He tried another tactic on the computer....Bank accounts, hotels, taxi records, car rentals, credit card reports, the man couldn’t remain invisible forever. Or could he? A telepath.....could simply take what he wanted. Something Schuldig had been trained not to do....lest he call attention to himself was the reason given...but more to the point....lest he suddenly realize how much he really hadn’t needed anyone to survive....And Esset would not have tolerated that attitude.
Aya slid a hand down his arm and in the process, leaned over to take his earlobe in his lips....
Brad closed his eyes. "Princess, not now." He said.
Aya smiled and ran his tongue over the bit of flesh between his teeth.
"Keep that up and the only thing you will be taking to Schuldig is a very vivid memory of a good beating." Brad stated.
Aya stood up, frowning.
"Now behave yourself!" Brad ordered.
Aya pouted.
Brad saw what he was going to try next.....
.....okay.....
NO! He had work to do! Finding Kirchner was more important than.....
Aya started to unbutton his shirt....
Much more important than....
Sulky purple eyes sent a message of anger and determination, buttons making almost imperceptive little pops as they left their holes.....
Fucking this over sexed bitch senseless.....
He took off his glasses with a sigh. "Schuldig....you’d damned well better appreciate this....." He muttered.
Aya leaned over to kiss him under the ear in a very, very sensitive spot. "Call his name when you come, Lover..." He murmured.
"You’re so sick, Aya." Brad sighed again.
"And you love it." The japanese laughed softly, then nipped him.
That was it. Just it.
He got up and grabbed him into his arms.

"They’re here." Omi said.
Nagi woke, blinking, and looked at the screen.
Drug runners, dealing methadrine to the ‘speed’ gangs. "Are we still clear enough?"
"Very." Omi went through the cameras, checking every face he could get a good visual of and making certain that they had a record of it.
"They really haven’t got a chance." Nagi commented, yawning and rubbing his cheek. "Between us, the police and the Yakuza."

The only reason they've survived this long is sheer numbers." Omi said coldly.
"Hai." Nagi had to agree. "Amateurs."
Omi glanced at him with a smile.
What they were really waiting for suddenly came through....
"How much have you got?" A voice asked.
"100 liters."
"Tonight?"
"If you like. Do you have the cash?"
"We will by then."
"What time?"
"Midnight?"
"Be here then. You miss this appointment, we will not be back again."
Omi's smile was an open grin now. "Got them." He whispered, though there was no need to whisper.
Nagi laughed suddenly. He was going to love seeing the faces of the gang leaders when he and Omi confronted them on the other side of automatic weapons.

Kirchner sat on the bed in his hotel room, his back on the pillows against the head board, legs stretched out, to do some comfortable thinking, a bottle of good whiskey on the bedside, a glass of it in his hand. He had to think about everything he had gotten from their minds, every piece of the puzzle that was now the remains of Schwarz. To carefully consider every angle of the situation.
Crawford, fully trained by Esset, a mind of his own much before they had him. His strength of will was a problem. He was not one to be controlled long by another. Even now, any further attempts to reach his mind subtly were impossible, his barriers were up. And the one point when his barriers were shaky, when his mind faltered in it's self control.....it was impossible for Kirchner to withstand the process going on in that mind without being ill.....It was that disgusting to him.
Interestingly enough, it appeared Crawford controlled the others by charisma alone. Apparently, once he put his mind to the task....he could seduce any one he chose to. Naturally, his physical presence was a factor. Being tall and attractive did no man any harm in the eyes of others. He had a commanding voice, a calm and in control manner. A natural leader.
Control him....and you could control anyone.
Kirchner frowned.
His unwonted nephew.
Guilty.
Even strapped to a hospital bed with the possibility of being paralyzed from the waist down, the man was a vortex of hate and viciousness, defiant of life, and frankly, quite prepared to die, he was that callous of his own existence.
He was selfish, vindictive, destructive and just plain careless. It didn't concern him the least that he had murdered a lover's parents and the other team

member's half sister. He could look them in the eyes without remorse and think only of his own comforts. No devil in hell could be more heartless in so many ways.
But beneath all that, he was weak, totally dependent. Without Crawford, he was nothing. He was prepared to kill him and then himself, should anything ever threaten their freedom permanently. He followed Crawford unquestioningly, even to the point of orders that made no sense or threatened his life or those of the other two he was so....intimately...involved with.
If Crawford ordered him to, he would kill them.
The 'child'.....after all, he was only seventeen. Seven long years in Schwarz, little better than an infant when indoctrinated. Naoe Nagi. Of all of them, with his telekinesis, he was the most dangerous physically. Mentally, he was a very self contained young man, his wants fulfilled simply, his judgment system intact. Pragmatic, sensible, obedient to Crawford, seeing the man as his father figure, and very comfortable with that relationship. There was a trust there that went very deep. That Crawford would not seriously harm him, ever. Interestingly enough, he saw Schuldig in much the same light, a trusted adult, harmless, if annoying. He had fit into this arrangement by setting himself to be the caretaker, the one who made certain that things were as they should be and ran smoothly in the enforced household.
Then there was Farfarello. Totally insane. The only thing saving him was the medication he was on. The man's fragile mind had been snapped long ago, as a child. Perhaps.....he had never been meant to be sane. A total psychotic, unable to function as a normal human being, having had to learn how to imitate 'normal'. His religious mania ran the gamut from hating a very personal god, to understanding in his heart that this war between 'good' and 'evil' was the only thing that mankind existed for. A total paradox in thinking. Yet programmed by Esset to obey Crawford.
It bored Kirchner. If there was such a god as spoken of in the Bible.....he wouldn't be here. He snorted in derision and poured himself some more whiskey. The other side of the puzzle.
Weiss, they had called themselves, set up to fight Schwarz, even though they had never known this was the actual reason for their naming.
The perfect one. The japanese red head. Fujimiya.
The balance of power residing in him was much more evident to Kirchner now. The transformation had made him sensitive so such things as 'perfect sacrifices'.
And Fujimiya definitely set off his share of the evil that had consumed him. It hungered for the japanese, almost as if he, Kirchner, could taste the blood it had sampled.....
But he would not sate that need so soon. If the japanese was Crawford's weakness, then he would spare him, in order to use him. A creature so perfectly balanced between the two sides of the universe that he was irresistible to the ancient ones. His destruction and consumption was longed for....but Kirchner

would resist
Fujmiya was worth that much more to him alive. Let the demons rage and howl, he would not feed them their sacrifice. He could do quite well with out them, anyway, no matter how they tried to lay claim to him, to his soul.
His tie to Crawford was one of total and unreasoning worship.
Kudoh.
The eurasian breed.
This one....was.....annoying. His mind was so easily entered, yet he shrugged off all attempts to control him just as easily. Short of a telepathic lobotomy, he was liable to just simply decide not to follow any subconscious suggestions.
The incident with Chapel had done something to the contact points in his mind. He simply did not take any more suggestions telepathically input to him.
And there was the added factor of constant contact with Schuldig's mind. The other man practically lived in the eurasian's head. He knew the touch of Schuldig's mind as opposed to another telepath's.
His loyalty to Crawford was so intense, Kirchner had to wonder if it was Schuldig's doing. His attachment to the other two men was just as nearly intense.
He was so dependent on the three of them, that like Schuldig.....it was impossible to destroy them without destroying him. He would not willing survive the loss of any one of them.
The other youth. Takatori Mamoru, Tsukiyono Omi.....
One used to resisting thoughts he simply did not want to think. The self induced amnesia, the refusal to even bother with coping with his traumatic childhood....to even hate those who had destroyed his half sister despite his love of her....
His attempts to work with the little freak had only led to further blocking on the boy's part. Tsukiyono's inner mantra seemed to be....'I will not think of it, I will not consider it, I will not deal with it.' And he didn't.
He saw himself as part of the group. First as part of Weiss, he allowed Fujimiya to lead him, though he had been the one in control of the technical details of missions and Fujimiya an unstable youth prone to explosions of behavior that endangered the team.
This way of thinking had now transferred to Crawford. Crawford lead, Tsukiyono followed. It was that easy for him to give up his sense of self in order to be able to simply concentrate on obeying.
His connection to the other youth was sickeningly dependent. He would not think, not make a move without his 'partner'. He looked to Naoe for approval to anything, not making any decision without consulting him, no matter how subtle that consultation was.
Yes, the puzzle pieces were all there.
It was a matter now of how to arrange them into their new order.
He smirked.

New Order.

He raised his glass to the nothingness of the hotel room. "To New Order." He laughed bitterly, then drained it.

Chapter Thirty Six
"Re-Arrangements"

Therapy sucked. From weakness and incredible pain, to being forced to sit up, stand and walk--he'd been tortured before, but never so lovingly by people who were interested only in his recovery.
A deep breath, and standing up shakily. The only pain now was in muscles not used to working. The always expected pain in his back was gone. But five weeks of laying on one's back was not conducive to fighting gravity. He felt dizzy and almost sat down again as the vertigo hit him.
To be this weak!
Brad put an arm around him. "Easy, Baby."
"I want to go home now." Schuldig stated.
Brad looked at him. Yes. Anything to fuck up Kirchner's plans. The slender body in his grasp felt so fragile. Ten years....."Yes." He said. "I'll take you home."
The back brace was supposed to support the repaired spine, let it earn it's price. He would take Schuldig home, where he would be safe.
He pressed his cheek to the pale one close to his softly. "Just hold onto me and walk slowly."
"I hate feeling so weak!"
"Just take it slowly." Brad said again. "We'll get you dressed and get you home." He kissed Schu's cheek. "I want you home."
"I want a hot bath." Schuldig said. "And real food. And real coffee. And a real fuck...."
"No, Baby." Brad admonished.
"If I don't have sex soon, I'm going to kill someone!" Schuldig snapped at him.
"Good." Brad said. "You being an assassin, that works out just right."
"It's not pretty when you make jokes, mein Mann." Green eyes narrowed at him.
Oh god, to have him out of that bed, in his arms again....he kissed him.
Schuldig enjoyed the lingering pleasure. "Well, look what's still alive...."
"I'm not looking." Brad said. "Now be careful. One step at a time."
"Mah...just a little blow job, Bradley? For all the one's I've given you?" Schuldig wheedled evilly.
Brad frowned ever so slightly, raising an eyebrow. "You really are feeling far too well rested for your own good aren't you?"
"I think the lack of blood in my brain from standing up after so long is making me drunk." The red head said honestly, but grinned, guilty as could be.
"There seems to be plenty blood reaching at least one of your heads." Brad said dryly.
"You said you weren't going to look." Schuldig teased.
There was trouble involved in being so close to him.....as always. Brad took a deep breath and made up his mind. "Stop it now, Schuldig." He said warningly but

softly.
"Just take me home." Schuldig said.

It was strange to be outside...as weak as he felt, the sun was strange, as if he had never really seen it before...and the breeze on his skin... for a moment he felt strangely lost, then he looked at Brad, holding his arm to steady him.
Of course....He was touching him.
"Let me go a moment." He said.
"Why?" Brad asked.
"Just....do it." Schuldig said.
Brad made sure he was steady, then stepped back, and let his hand slide off his arm.
It hit him, the static roar of babbling minds. He closed his eyes and let it flow through him, and around him---using it to locate---himself.
He opened his eyes and smiled at his lover. "I'm ready now."
Brad carefully lead him to the car. "Be careful when you sit down." He said opening the door and holding it for him.
Schu hesitated. "Mein Mann, tell me before I hurt myself?" He said, a little pale suddenly.
"You won't hurt yourself." Brad said, realizing he'd scared him in this vulnerable state. "Just---be careful."
"I don't like being this weak." Schuldig said, annoyed.
"You won't be much longer. Just be patient, Baby." Brad told him. "Now get in the car." He had to have him out of here within the next fifteen minutes.....
Schuldig got into the MB and settled himself carefully. Brad got into the driver's side and got the other buckle for him, making certain he was strapped in securely.
"Bah!" Schu complained. "I hate straps now."
"Now we are going home." Brad started the car. "I want you to remember, no sex until the doctor says that your back is completely healed up. You will keep the back brace on, you will do as little as possible and you will not instigate fights that will lead to you being hurt."
"All right then, can I drink heavily and walk around in a stained old bath robe in worn boxer shorts and house slippers?" Schuldig said meanly.
"No!" Brad snorted.
"I might as well, I feel so useless!"
"No, Baby, not useless." Brad told him. "You're still handsome to look at."
Schuldig broke into real laughter for the first time in five weeks.

Kirchner scowled at the five gangsters standing before him. It didn't take a mind reader to know they had failed.
They were gone, Kirchner-san!" Their leader said humbly. "Crawford insisted on early release."

"Damn him!" Kirchner struck the man across the face.
The gangster let it roll off, fighting the pain. He'd sold his soul for a price, need that money. In the aftermath of the strangeness---things had not gone well. It was deal with the Yakuza---or no deal at all. Rumors of a gaigen clean-up man had proved to be all too true. This gaigen was that man's enemy. Yoshida could not say why he'd risked this arrangement. Only that he was no bound by honor.
Kirchner kept the Japanese things mind in his grip. He had counted on Crawford not taking the risk to his precious piece of trash, waiting until the little beast was at least partially mobile to attempt an abduction. He didn't need a helpless cripple to deal with!
(Stake out the apartment tower.) He ordered in their minds.
"Why don't we just go in." Another asked.
(Because, you idiot!) Kirchner snarled. (All that would accomplish is your instant death! They are vulnerable in the open! Take hostages and demand their surrender for the hostage! Now, get out!)
He sat down, irritated. Damn Crawford's premonitions!
It was becoming increasingly difficult to get near their minds.
The rising swell of the ancient ones roiled in his mind. He ignored them. The tablets were gone, but his power was greater than theirs over his own mind. Esset would rise again. And this time, without the further aid of old ghosts and dead gods!

Home.
He breathed deeply of the scent of it. The moist dirt of the plants along their wall where the sun would hit them, the smell of colognes, leather furniture and wood polish, gun cleaner, rice in a cooker in the kitchen.
The afternoon sun brilliantly lit the living room through the wall of windows. How he had missed this world, he realized.
"No one is home?" He said in surprise, looking at Brad.
"I didn't tell anyone you were coming home today." Brad said. "Come into the kitchen, I'll make you that coffee."
Schuldig followed him, feeling more at ease with his body in each step, regaining mental ground in his own territory. Sitting down in the kitchen, amazed at how strange it was to be.....just.....home.
The coffee was soon set in front of him and Brad sat down across from him to just look at him.
"What?" He said after a few moments of this.
"Kirchner had men ready to go to the hospital and drag you out of there today. They missed us by fifteen minutes. Right now, he is raging mad." Brad smiled meanly. "And I have you here, safe at home, with me."
"It would be even better if you would take me upstairs and make love to me." Schuldig said.
"I want to." Brad said. "But I can't."

Schul frowned.
"But I can run you a bath."

The sword slashed through the on coming gangster and Ran winced at a splatter of blood crossing his cheek and shirt, quickly wiping it away from his right eye.
"K'suo!"
Nagi kept his focus, firing only when he knew a shot would kill, not worrying about team mates or Omi, who was holding his own quite well, as usual. The advantage of training.
There were about forty plus of the young gangsters, some of them so drugged, they didn't know when to quit, the dope making them insanely fearless.
Ran might be termed a bit insane himself, taking a bullet bruise on the lower left side that nearly knocked the air out of him, the Kevlar vest making him a bit too bold as he took an opportunity to run through a gang member, coming face to face with the youth, close enough to watch his eyes go dull and the blood trickle from his lips before sliding the katana out of his corpse to let it fall.
"Ran!" Yohji barked. "Use your gun! Get down!"
A passing whine near his ear proved the warning. He hit his knees, pulling the gun in time to take down two more gangsters with Yohji's cover fire taking out another.
"Too much fun!" Omi called somewhat sarcastically.
"Isn't it?" Nagi spared him a brief grin.
"Too much work!" Yohji complained, ducking behind a pallet of boxes to re-load, quickly.
"The more of these jackals we take out, the better for Japan." Ran commented grimly. "What the hell happened to this country!"
"Who knows?" Omi said. "Over crowded society, lowered standards, communism, cults, blame it on anything but these losers themselves if you try to analyze it the popular ways."
Ran glared at him. "I wasn't being philosophical. I was complaining! "
Yohji laughed and missed a shot, then swore. "Shut up and work!" He ordered mildly wishing for just enough time to light a cigarette.
Which he did, with slightly shaking hands, as soon as the eerie silence of a finished gun fight settled.
Nagi quickly put a fresh clip in and snapped the safety on his pistol, holstering it. He looked to Omi, who smiled an 'Okay' at him.
"Itai!" Ran breathed, finally allowing himself the pain and to pick the slug out of the vest. He checked the numbly aching area. Close call, maybe a cracked rib?
Yohji drew in a deep drag of smoke, the nicotine calming his nerves.
Ran picked up the jeweled katana and wiped it on a convenient corpse, then with a handkerchief he discarded, sheathing the blade. He pulled off his skin tight gloves and pocketed them, breathing deeply to slow the adrenaline rush. "Lets

get out of here."
Sure enough, as they got in the cars, the sirens began. All in all, it had been a good thirty minutes work.
In the Porsche, Yohji considered the man he'd known for maybe a year before Crawford. This Ran. His Ran. The angry young man he'd found tumbled on his bed one day.
Ran relaxed as the police cars faded behind them. Timing was everything, and their timing was from hard won experience. There was also the sneaking suspicion that the temporary alliance of the main Tokyo Yakuza clans had influence on the police department's timing.
Yohji smiled. Ran was beautiful. "I'll call." He took out the phone.

Brads hands shook a little as he slid the shirt off Schuldig in the bathroom.
The huge japanese style tiled room was so intimate right now, the warm water scented with a bath 'tea'. Hospital bed baths were not exactly the most helpful way of soothing a skin used to being very clean. He'd wanted to make this special, somehow. A rather helpless gesture from an all to practical heart. It only made thing worse!
He had to step back a moment to collect himself.
"I reek of hospital." Schu hissed, hurt.
"No." Brad said. "I just--can't hurt you." He forced himself to continue, knowing that one wrong move, would lead to another--and another. But he wanted to be loving, he wanted to linger....
He felt Schu's hand on his shoulder as he half knelt to help him step out of his pants, eyes averted. "Hold onto the counter, Baby." He said.
When he stood, he looked into those green eyes. Mistake. He sighed and stepped around him to undo the back brace. "Get into the water. You wont fall, just---go slow." Schuldig obeyed, settling in with a happy sigh, the warm, scented water feeling so good. "I always knew you were a romantic, Bradley." he closed his eyes and relaxed.
"Bull shit." Brad said.
"Liar." Schu looked up at him. "Now. Get me another coffee and a pack of cigarettes. And my lighter. No getting out on details. And if you value the tiles, something for an ashtray."
He didn't want to move, to leave him, but he knew it was just being stupid.
"Okay." He said with a slight smirk. "But don't get used to this."

They hit the door in a rush, tossing keys down, dropping vest and weapons.
"What kind of idiot runs at a bared katana?" Ran said in disgust, peeling off the blood stained shirt."
"A drugged one." Nagi said. "Soak it in cold water now or loose it."
Bradley was on the stair landing. "It went well?"
Yohji looked up at him. "Eh.....you're home. You didn't say you were home. Why?"

"He’s home!" Aya exclaimed, dropping his shirt and running up the stairs to grab and kiss Bradley. "Thank you, Lover." He murmured, and ran to look in the bedroom then the bathroom.
Schu smiled at him.
Aya sat on the edge of the tub to kiss him.
(Are you trying to break my back?) Schu had to ask mentally, his mouth prisoner.
Aya broke it off. "Are you okay?"
"As good as can be."
Downstairs, Yohji met Brad at the bottom with an embrace and a pat on the back, then went up to find the german as well.
"Is he all right? Out this early?" Nagi asked.
"Yes." Brad said. "Kirchner had a raid planned." He pushed his hair back with a heavy sigh. "We can move now. With him safe home, it’s time to hunt that bastard down and finish him."
Omi smiled sweetly. "Good."
Brad patted his cheek in passing. "Put some pants on." He went to get Schuldig’s coffee.
Omi pouted. He’d broken the no crossing dressing on jobs rule again. It was just that the undercover assignment..... most of the speed gangs knew him as a cross dresser. "It’s not fair!"
"Never mind, come on!" Nagi pulled him upstairs.
"Join the party." Schuldig said, having got a cigarette from Yohji, as the boys came to the bathroom door.
Aya stripped off his boots, socks and slacks and slid into the water, taking the bench opposite Schu. "Yohji!" He admonished. "Open the window!"
Nagi smiled. "Welcome home, slut."
"Brat." Schuldig said with affected graciousness.
Aya sat across from him, smiling.
"Don’t even think it!" Schu warned.
Yohji sat on the edge of the tub, legs crossed, looking at him. "How’s your back, Baby?"
"It aches a little. The nerve is twinging as it reforms. But----I’m not paralyzed. Just castrated." He frowned. "Aya, Aya, I love you but stop!"
Aya pouted. "I can’t help it!"
"I can!" Schu threatened. "Change your mind or I’ll change it for you!"
Yohji laughed softly. "We’re all home. This is good."
Brad came back up with the coffee, and the cigarettes and lighter in a flower bowl and stood looking at them from the door way.
Nagi moved to let him in.
He went to sit on the edge beside Aya, handing the cup and to Schuldig, setting the bowl on the edge. "Aya, wash the blood off your face."
He sunk under the water and came back up, pushing his hair back, eyeliner wrecked, but still smiling.

Schuldig laughed and looked up at Bradley. "It’s good to be home."
Brad had spent so much time with him in the hospital room, but it was never comfortable. Always being interrupted in everything, the helpless feeling of seeing Schuldig imprisoned and in pain. If he had not been a telepath, it might have gone much worse for him, a mind so set on freedom.
He looked at the three of them.
Not often did he allow himself to think backward, unless it involved something he needed for a job. But at this moment, he felt like taking some stock of the situation.
//You’re going to have to live with this, you know.//
He smiled a little. The fights, the jealousies, the expenses, the injuries, the confusion, the lack of peace and quiet, of any privacy unless he demanded it.
He had lived with it for over two years now.
Thirty.
How had he lived this long under the circumstances?
He’d had too much of his share. Too much luck, too much money, too much.....love?
Only in the past two years had he come to terms with an emotion that he had been told was useless all his life and would get him killed.
It had kept him alive.
Esset had attempted to train them to be heartless individuals and them put them in teams. They had not counted on the human factor that sooner or later, anyone would need something else in life. Or that being in a team, and responsible for other lives, would hasten the process. Perhaps if they had keep them all loners, he would have taken longer to form any sort of bond, given his mind set and background. But they had taken youths and expected them to have no emotion. The old fools had forgotten what it was like to be young, having lived long past their times, themselves.
Kirchner’s first attempt to break bonds he had no concept of had failed. Then he had tried again to use their past differences against them, in an even more subtle way, attempting to form distrust.
Not knowing that in this game, performance was everything.
Brad would never not hurt the ones who sat there, showing so much concern and affection for Schuldig, despite all he had done to them. And if at the moment, there was a residual distaste for them as members of Weiss, it would pass. None of Kirchner’s attempts to influence his mind would last long.
"Bradley...." Schuldig waved his empty coffee cup. "Down to earth, mein Mann...."
He sighed and got up to take the cup and steal a kiss from Yohji. "Don’t let Aya rape him." He warned.
Aya giggled and splashed Bradley. "Tattle tale!"
Yohji swore as the water put out his cigarette.
Schuldig backed into the corner. "See! I don’t start all the fights!" He whined.

"Infants." Brad said, with a slight smirk none of them could guess at.

He woke to a whimpering noise and the grip on his arm.
Damn it!
He sat up turning on the light.
"Aya!"
"No....don't stop him..." Schu begged, his other hand twined in Aya's hair as he sucked on Schuldig mercilessly.
Schuldig had tried to keep him from waking but the pleasure had over ruled his self control.
He caught Aya's hair himself now, hauling him off.
"Gott no, Bradley!" Schuldig protested.
Aya winced, breathing hard but not meeting angry cocoa eyes....
Bradley looked at Schuldig.....pleading green eyes.....
He let Aya go back to work with an angry frown.
Schuldig caressed Aya, moaning....
And came.
Aya held his hips down on the bed, willing him not to move.
Yohji snored softly through this insane drama.
"Oh Gott!" Schuldig moaned, relieved at last.
Brad slapped him soundly and got out of bed to go down stairs, too angry to remain.
Aya sobbed, moving to caress Schuldig's reddened face. "I'm sorry, Baby."
Schuldig put an arm around him. "It's all right." He insisted. "Hey, this back brace works." He held him tighter. "Thank you, Aya." He murmured, kissing him. "Don't worry, don't worry so. I won't let him hurt you."
"I don't care if he hurts me. I just didn't want to hurt you!"
"It's okay, I'm fine." Schuldig smiled. "Look at that worn out thing, snoring away."
"Well, he has been busy." Aya said, with a sniffle, the tears over. Then sighing, he sat up, wiping his eyes. "I'm going to face the music."
"Don't....." Schu tried to hold him.
"I'm not afraid of him." Aya slipped loose.
"You are, liar." Schu accused.
"In my mind." Aya stated. "Not my heart." He got his robe and slid it on. "I can't leave him like that. He needs to rest. Besides.....You're in no position to finish what you started."
Schuldig sighed.
Aya went down stairs and found Brad in the kitchen, beer in hand, angry as hell. He slowed down to lean on the door frame, looking at him in the one low light from over the stove.
Brad glared at him.
"He's all right. That little metal cage thing won't let his back bone crush his

spine." Aya said softly. "He's not going to break."
"You deliberately disobeyed me!" Brad stated.
"No, I didn't." Aya said, sliding a bracelet down his arm to get it off his wrist bone. "I obeyed you, Lover." He spoke softly. "I obeyed your command. You said if I loved you, I would respect Schuldig."
"Don't play lawyer with me, you spoilt little bitch." Brad said icily.
Aya met his eyes with no fear. "Do what you will to me. But Schuldig is okay. No harm done. How could you think I would hurt him?"
Brad was trying to keep his temper, trying not to go berserk.....too much for too long, too much stress. He had to let it go.
He finished the beer off in a few gulps and threw the bottle in the recycling bin, then slammed his fist down on the counter.
Aya came to take it in his hands and look at him. "Don't hurt yourself, Bradley." He said softly. "Forgive me?"
Brad caught him up and kissed him brutally.
Aya melted into his arms, knowing that to respond with as much passion would be to calm him down. Besides.....he needed this.....
Brad regained his senses in a few minutes. By then Aya was practically up on him and breathing hard again. "I forgive you." He said to those beautiful lips, and lifted him up onto the table.
"Bradley....not here....." He protested mildly.
"They're my rules, I can break them." Brad stated. "Everyone else does."

At breakfast, Schuldig met Aya's eyes and broke into a fit of snickering.
Yohji still on his first cigarette and cup of coffee looked at them in annoyance.
Brad calmly ate his bacon and frowned at the stock reports on the lap top's screen.
Nagi reached over to tip it shut on him. "It's Sunday morning. Nothing you can do." He took it off the table and put it on the counter. "Hey.....the tile is cracked....." He looked at it.
"Yes, and I screwed Aya on the table last night, so let's not have a lecture about using the punching bags." Brad said coolly.
Yohji looked at the table, then his toast, then shrugged and ate another bite.
Brad smacked up the back of his head lightly.
"Hey....! What did I do!" Yohji protested.
"I don't want to know what you just thought, but don't ever think it again." Brad said.
Aya joined Schu in the snickering until they were laughing too much to sit still.
Brad smiled ruefully. At least the tension around here was finally cracking.
Omi had a pink ribbon bow tied in his hair.
Brad contemplated it archly.

Omi noticed the look he was getting and kept his eyes on his plate until he was blushing.
"Would you like a sex change, Omi?" Brad asked, reasonably calmly.
"NO!" Omi exclaimed.
"Brad....." Nagi said.
"I was just asking." Bradley said. "They will do anything for the money these days. No five years of reassignment counseling....."
"No. I do not want a sex change, thank you." Omi said firmly through clenched teeth.
"Who the hell would want to have to pee sitting down anyway?" Yohji said as this idea hit him.
"Some one hand me a bed pan so I can hit him." Schuldig said sweetly.
"Sorry, SchuSchu." Yohji said.
Brad sighed contentedly. All his boys, a sun lit Sunday morning, fresh coffee and not a care in the world.....that couldn't be shot and left in a shallow grave. "Would you gentlemen care to take a little trip?" He said.
"Where?" Yohji looked at him.
"Germany." Brad said, looking at Schuldig calmly.
"No way, I'm not going back there." Schuldig stated.
"This is business, Baby." Brad said gently. "But then we can go to Vienna and fill you up on coffee and pastry and cream and waltz you senseless, because you have not waltzed until you have waltzed in Vienna. And you have not lived until you have put that town to bed. And I will buy you the fattest amber diamond on a thick gold chain to wear on your neck for being my 'Schuldig'."
Aya was outraged. Yohji kicked him under the table.
"Vienna. No Germany." Schuldig said.
"Sorry, Baby. But there are some bones I have to dig up." Bradley said. "Or we will never be rid of Kirchner."
"You seriously mean that." Nagi realized after a moment. "We're going to rob a grave."
Omi shuddered as if someone had walked on his. "Gross."
Yohji kicked Aya again because the first one hadn't worked.

Chapter Thirty Seven
"Chain and Bound"

"No one wants a piss colored diamond anyway." Aya said, fixing the straps on the back support.
"Leave it to you to call such a pretty color such a dirty name." Schuldig said. "Jealous?"
"If you're smart , you'll make him get you a white one, not settle for cheap colored crap!" Aya looked at him in the mirror they were facing.
"Mah, I like amber." Schuldig said, trying to see if he could breath, the way he was strapped up so tight. "It's the color of dark beer and honey and.....brandied orange peel. I want what Brad gives me."
Aya pressed his nose to Schu's temple to whisper in his ear. "You know nothing of diamonds, SchuSchu." He kissed him on the cheek. "Is that too tight?"
"Yes!" Schuldig said, feeling dizzy.
Aya quickly loosened the straps.
Schuldig had a sudden idea. "This damned white thing is.....too hospital."
"It's a therapeutic back brace." Aya informed him. "What do you expect? Gaultier?"
"I'm sure the things in the kink shops are just as well made and a hell of lot sexier....."
Aya smiled sensually, and put his hands over Schu's chest from behind, kissing his neck.....
"Aya!" Brad snarled, just walking in the door, trying to knot his tie.
He sighed and moved away to get dressed himself.
"Bradley." Schuldig looked at him. "Face the fact that I am not going without just because you are being paranoid."
"You look tired." Brad informed him. "Lay down."
"I'm fine." Schu said, not convincingly.
"Lay down now." Brad said.
"I'm fine!" Schuldig stated, not having this happen to him right now. If anything he needed to feel back in control of himself. Able to cope instead of be a cripple. It was one thing to be hurt and needing loving concern, but quite another to be treated like a child who didn't know better! "They didn't cut off my balls, Bradley." He stated with a scowl.
Brad sighed.
Schuldig walked over to him and put a hand to his cheek, looking up into his eyes. "I know, mein Mann. We're both on edge here. Let it go. And help me get my pants on.....before I dog your leg." He smiled wickedly.
Brad contemplated this for just a second, then got a grip on himself. Then had to remember not to deliver a stinging smack to that bare bottom. "Do it yourself, the doctor said you have to exercise."
"Hah!" Schuldig snorted. "Apparently only when it's convenient for you! "

"I told you not to get used to being waited on." Brad fumbled with the tie some more.
Schuldig smacked his hands and tied it for him. "Helpless." He said in a low annoyed voice. "Why can't you tie your own tie?"
"Because you make my hands shake."
Schuldig looked up into his eyes.
Brad cleared his throat and moved away to find his cufflinks. "Put your clothes on."
Yohji came back in from taking his shower, wearing pants, but not a shirt, his hair roughly toweled dry and brushed, but still wet. Brad looked at him and at the cigarette in his lips. Yohji smiled around it and went to get a shirt out of the drawer.
It was the curve of that tight, honey colored body as he leaned over to open the drawer that broke Brad's resolve. He put the cufflinks down and moved to stop Yohji putting the shirt on any further then up his arms to pull it over his head.
Yohji looked at him.
"Can I have you now?" Brad said quietly.
Schu's response was a 'hunh' of annoyance.
Aya sighed and put his shirt on.
"Well, you've lasted what, two days?" Yohji said with a good natured smirk.
Brad ran his hands up the sleek sides of the man.
Yohji put his arms up and around Brad's shoulders then took the cig from his mouth to murmur into the black strands over Brad's ear. "Sure, Boss Man, what ever you want."
Brad kissed him, damn the taste of nicotine, and held that slim waist.
"At least take it in the other room, please!" Aya said, trying to get his shirt buttoned.
"Make him work for it, Yoh-tan." Schuldig said meanly, having a hell of a time maneuvering his pants on with his back so stiff and weak.
"He's worked hard enough." Yohji said, tossing the shirt on the bureau and taking Brad's hand.

Stripping each other, kissing, the american and the eurasion working in silence until Yohji was picked up and laid on the bed, Brad straddling him on hands and knees to look down at him.
Yohji reached up to caress his face and remove his glasses, setting them on the bedside table.
"Ready?" Brad asked.
"Mmm, no." Yohji said, turning to get the lube out of the drawer.
Brad sighed and sat down between the long legs, taking it from him.
"No time." Yohji explained in mild protest. "And when was the last time you....."

Brad bent to kiss him. "I'm sorry." He murmured, looking into the light green depths, working the applicator into him.
"Aya's making up for Schu. The only thing you needed me for is to keep him from wearing you out."
"Don't you start acting imbecilic." Brad set the tube aside. "My Kitten." He murmured, kissing him as he worked to relax him. "I have been neglecting you..."
Yohji drew his knees up. "Yes, you have." He ran his hands up Brad's sides and held his rib cage, looking at the perfect muscles, only closing his eyes as the man eased into him.
Bradley kissed his neck, then his collarbone and let him rest a few moments, resting on one elbow to just look down at him, tracing the scar on his chest with a fingertip.
Yohji smiled up at him and rocked his thighs against him. "Forget how?"
"Not bloody likely!" Brad snorted, and got down to business.
Yohji sighed and dug his fingers into the man's hips.

"You saw?" Aya inquired, looking at the various offerings in the third shop they'd been in this morning.
"Like a freaking lighthouse on high beam." Schu said calmly. Flies...buzzing....
They were being shadowed. Two very obvious wanna be yakuza toughs, amateurs and nervous. Probably little more than house breakers and purse snatchers trying to move up.
But Schuldig knew that behind them was Kirchner. Not daring to attempt their minds any more, he was resorting to third party eyes on legs.
Their purchase chosen, Aya calmly stared down the giggling shop girl behind the counter, who was staring at him.
"Are you in a band?" she got brave enough to ask.
"Did you count the change properly?" Was his response.
She blinked and looked a bit insulted suddenly. She'd only asked. What a mean one! And his eyes.....so pretty.....
Schuldig grinned. He looked at Aya, then at the girl. The he took out a business card case to tap a card onto the counter. "No, no, pretty, we are body guards, detectives. Call us if your little body ever feels....unsafe." He deliberately leaned over to look strait into her eyes, into her mind, letting her feel his presence just enough to make her feel a frisson of fear. "Keep the change." He purred.
She hastily packaged the garment and shoved it at him.
If looks could kill.....Aya would save a fortune in dry-cleaning and ammunition.
Schuldig looked at him coolly. "Come along, Aya."
The girl behind the counter watched them leave with relief!
That strange gaigen.....
"In a band!" Aya snorted in disgust outside the door.

"Well at least she didn’t look at you and think, 'What a male whore' like most of them do." Schuldig said, walking over to where the porsche was parked.
Aya’s mouth opened.....then he blinked and gave up. Having Schuldig read minds and tell was something he had never quite gotten used to. The last thing he cared to know was what people thought when they saw him.
"Not so fast, Sweetest." Schuldig said as Aya yanked the car away from the curb. "We wouldn’t want to loose our tails."
"Why not!" Aya was annoyed.
Schuldig looked at him at the stop sign. "Because. I want to play with them."
Aya looked back at him.
Then grinned maliciously.

Kirchner frowned, but let them have the two useless idiots. It was quite an insight into the minds he was dealing with, to ‘see’ them take the two gangsters apart, Schuldig their minds, Fujimiya their bodies. It was an attempt to show him, he knew, what they were capable of.
He’d been trained by Esset. But he had not actually ever bothered to ‘see’ how the techniques affected a human victim.
It was a grim education.
It rearranged his assessment about them being ‘weak’.
The flash of recklessness he had seen in Schuldig in the hospital, the seeming disregard for his own existence.....was now explained. The man would obviously prefer a clean death to the death he had given others.
Even more surprising.....was the sadistic pleasure the japanese took in torturing the two men. Like a cat with a mouse, he caught them up and dropped them again, let them escape and then blocked their paths, aided by the german in his ability to get ahead of them, leaving them cut from so many wounds they were unable to run any more in the warehouse district. He liked to watch them die, to look into their eyes....He liked to kill, close up and personal. To be certain they knew he was their death.
Interesting. That alone.....could be used as a weakness.

Brad sighed, Yohji in his arms. He was inclined to linger, long thin muscular limbs in his embrace, soft silken hair on his lips. He kissed a tawny shoulder, and stroked the bicep on the arm below it. "Those two." he murmured, the vision making him mildly amused.
"What now?" Yohji asked.
"It’s not important." Brad said, not wanting his quiet time ruined. He’d needed this. His little present to himself. He moved his hand down to stroke the blond’s flank. "Nothing is important...." He pulled him close, wanting more. "Right now, only you."
Yohji wondered, about what Schuldig had said. If Asuka had been alive.....would he be here now? Then he wondered.....If Kirchener wasn’t messing with his mind

again.
He caught up Brad's hand and held it to his chest, over the scar again. "Liar."
"You doubt me, why?" Brad kissed his shoulder again.
"When you close your eyes, who are you making love to?" Yohji could barely believe hearing that from him self. He'd heard it from so many women, but now, hearing it from himself?
Brad laughed. "Stop smoking and maybe your senses will return, Yohji." He said into the honey colored hair. "Can't you tell the difference?"
Yohji stretched against him to get more comfortable. Perhaps, it was just his own warped mind. Thinking of the times when all women were Asuka, and the first time Schuldig had surpassingly switched rolls on him, when he'd thought of Ran....Of making love to Ran. And of Schuldig's reaction to this.
It was the first time he'd realized.....his 'insane stalker' was in love with him. That was the night Schuldig had left him alone, until the day he had shown up at the shop, supposedly beaten and kicked out by Bradley. Something he was well aware of by now had been total deceit.
"Shower or another round?" Brad asked, already half way to making up his mind about the matter.
Yohji managed to turn in his arms to look at him, then kissed him. "What do you see?" He asked archly.
Brad smiled wryly and abruptly got up. "No way in hell."
Yohji sighed. Then reached for the cigs.

Masanori came out of his office in the suburb set mansion, shutting the door behind him. He had taken off his jacket and tie, the shirt open just enough, a flash of color in the flesh of his chest. He looked just a bit amused...
Brad looked at him archly. He knew damn well what he'd interrupted.
"You look better than the last time I saw you." Masanori commented. "Your partner is out of the hospital?"
"It was either take him out or have him go through a window." Brad said.
Masanori spared a moment to look at the eurasian. Kudoh, placing him.....weapon of choice, garrote wire. Weakness women. He was still under a price in many lessor circles of Tokyo's Yakuza.
Hazel green eyes coolly regarded him back, the sunglasses hooked in the neckline of his knit shirt.
"The clean up. How much more?" Brad stated.
Masa sighed, and then remembered to button at least one more button. "No one has commented on the expenditure yet. Some houses are still having trouble dealing with the insurance's. This hasn't been as easy on the rest of us mere mortals, you know." He said wryly. "I will let you know when the limit has been reached."
"I need to leave Japan for a few weeks." Brad said. "On personal business. Tell the lords I regret the interruption, but it is very necessary to deal with this matter immediately.

"Esset?" Masa said, realizing nothing less would make the Crawford he knew halt a job in progress. "I thought you had cleaned that up?"
Brad sighed, hand's in slacks pockets, his annoyance showing. "No matter how dead and gone they are, I'm still having to dig up and destroy the pieces. If it is a problem, I can leave Tsukiyono and Naoe to deal with the speed gangs."
Masa blinked. They were no more than Kai's age! Still.....the job was in progress.....and he knew that for all their immature appearance.....
Brad shifted a little in his custom hand made italian shoes. "I know they look like escapes from high school, but they are trained assassins. I don't want to loose the contract....or let you down. It's the best I can offer. And I'd rather leave them here then risk the entire team in this matter."
Yohji was a bit startled by this, giving Brad an odd look.
"If you have confidence in them, I have no objection." Masanori stated. If anything the two little vipers were better trained and behaved than Kai.....
"Thank you." Brad said. "I'll inform them to consult with you as if you were myself. They will respect your orders."
"Hai." Masa stated.
Brad smirked ruefully. "Just....keep the little lord away from them, Masa."
Masa's mouth tightened. "He'll do as he's told....about the third time. Have a safe trip, Bradley." He held out his hand.
Brad freed his right hand to shake with him, looking into his black eyes. "I'll be back."
Masa reached up to slap him on the upper arm. "Yes. You will." He nodded a perfunctory bow to the blond from professional courtesy.
Yohji barely returned it, eyes as cool as that color could mimic. Ran was right. There was something about Araki that just made him want to haul Brad out of here.

Schuldig had insisted on dinner out before leaving Japan. Brad sighed, relaxing just a bit. The club. The pounding music, the crowd. It was impossible to let the barriers down, but it was at least possible to just slip into defensive only mode.
Damn this place. First dragged here, his nerves had been so on edge he could barely stand it. Now, he realized, he had no serious problem with the public displays of affection Schuldig and Aya forced on him. In places like these, it was best to make very clear your alliances.
It was pure evil, the way he allowed himself to so damned proud. Until this, he had never considered the advantages of being.....Him. The impact it had on people around them, curiosity seekers, players, tourists looking for something to scandalize them for their trip back to their boring little lives.
Entertaining the monkeys.
He glanced at Yohji.
The blond was calmly sipping a beer and watching the crowd, an arm along the

banquette behind Aya, who was busy feeding Brad tidbits off the hors d'oeuvres platter.
Schuldig sat on Brad's other side, his attention between the crowd and his partners. As much as he wanted to get up and dance, it was out of the question. The day had already worn him out, and he wasn't happy with the reminder that he was not recovering fast enough to suit himself.
Brad kept an arm about him, sparing his other hand for his beer. He had not sunk so low as to be made to drink as well as eat from Aya's hand.
Once again he had to be amused at the situation.
How the hell had he ended up here? It was one thing to just have lived up to this point....but the place he had come to....sometimes he wondered.
Aya traced his lower lip with a shrimp, distracting him. He did a fair job of trying to bite the fingers as well. Aya laughed and kissed his cheek, snuggling, if possible, closer.
"Are you so hungry, Lover?" He purred.
Brad sipped from the bottle. "Not with you stuffing me."
Schuldig was looking at him oddly. "Bradley." He said in that odd tone of voice that was half question, half accusation. "What are you hiding in there?"
Brad skipped his mind right off the subject. "Not a thing. My mind is simply not working at the moment. Off the hook signal bothering you?"
Schuldig looked skeptical.
Aya smiled at him from under Brad's chin, head on his shoulder. Then offered him a sashimi.
Schu leaned over to eat it, licking Aya's fingers. Aya looked at him with black lash veiled eyes and bit his own lower lip, smiling.
Yohji leaned over on the other side to nuzzle Aya's neck. "Come dance, sticky fingers."
Aya sighed, looking at Schuldig. Then let Yohji pull him to the floor.
"Alone at last." Brad said, looking at the german. "Tired."
"No." Schuldig said. "What are you up to?"
"A good night's sleep and making it to the airport on time in the morning." Brad sipped his beer again.
"I have warned you not to make jokes." Schuldig said dryly.
Brad looked into his eyes, then pulled him closer for a kiss.
"Nothing.....that.....concerns.....you." he said in between kisses.
"And you are certain that the grave has been undisturbed?" Schuldig said, for once taking the major hint for the subject change.
Brad frowned, returning his eyes to the crowd and past it, to the door. "Fairly certain." He said. "I'll know when I'm closer to that point in the timeline." He sought out the site of Yohji and Aya in the squirming crowd. It was never difficult to find them. Look for the cluster of women, then the flash of lazer lights off diamonds and the magenta hair. In this place, dancing was having sex with cloths on and no minding having anyone else join you.

He smiled. You can touch, but you can't have.
Schuldig laughed softly. "Maybe you're up to more than you think, Bradley...."
He ran a hand up the man's thigh and then caressed his hard on under the silk blend linen khaki slacks.
Brad looked at him again and slid his hips foreword just a bit. "Maybe." He said.
Schuldig smiled and undid his buckle.
Not even minutes later, he sipped his beer and watched Yohji and Aya dance, Schuldig half lying on the padded bench seat, giving him a blow job under the cover of the table. They were beautiful. Schuldig was beautiful. "Happy Birthday to me." He muttered.
Under his hand, Schuldig smothered a laugh and worked a little slower to make it last.

The alarm went off too soon! He could swear.....but no. He knew it before he even sat up and found his glasses. It was eight A.M.
He sighed and reached over Aya to swat the off button.
Aya whimpered a complaint and snuggled closer.
Brad looked at the ceiling. He'd lost track after the club. God, he was worn out. Marathon sex before an international flight? What the hell had he been thinking.
Oh yeah.....he hadn't. Been thinking.
"Not with your head at any rate." Schuldig commented sleepily. "And you can quit again now if you please. So noisy!" He too, snuggled closer.
Yohji sprawled on his now half of the bed, face down in the pillows, snoring lightly, and Brad noted.....drooling just a bit in his sleep.
He laughed softly. "God, Kudoh, wake the fuck up." He sat up himself, leaving his red heads complaining of tweaked necks and pulled hair. He sighed and rubbed his face then blinked, looking for his glasses. Right bedside table, hard case.
He put them on, yawning again and looked at the clock, just to be absolutely sure it wasn't (hopefully) lying.....
He crawled over Aya, who complained more and got up, grabbing his robe.
"Come back to bed, mein Mann....." Schuldig fussed.
"I know you don't mind wet spots but I DO." Brad said, heading for the bathroom.
Schuldig laughed softly and turned over to half lay on Yohji. "Wake up!" He murmured, running a hand down to squeeze his ass.
Yohji's first reaction was to reach and feel for the cigarette package.
Schuldig began kissing his back and looked at the tattoo. It had healed well.
Yohji managed to light the cigarette in his half sleep and drew in a deep breath.
Schuldig slid a hand down to grasp him.
"Schuuuulllllllldig!" Yohji complained.
"Mmmm?"

"Get off me, you over sexed fiend. I want to wake up."
Aya sat up with a groan of annoyance. "Let him have his smoke, Schu, you know how cranky he is before he's ruined the air for the rest of us to breath." He got out of bed, fumbling for his purple robe. "Besides we have to leave. Don't waste time."
Schu sighed. "You are not a waste of time." He kissed Yohji's cheek and took his cigarette, getting out of bed himself, scratching his bare bottom and stretching with a deep sigh and groan.
Yohji scowled and got another cig out of the packet. "Go make the coffee, Schuldig. I'm not getting out of bed until I have a cup of coffee."
"Lazy ass." Aya said.
"Greedy bitch." Yohji said in mild retort.
"Cheap slut!"
"Expensive whore!"
Schuldig sighed, leaving the room, and in passing, banged noisily on Nagi and Omi's bed room door, then went down stairs.
The new 'back brace' had gotten tossed over the back of the sofa....he picked it up and put it on, stiff and sore. Thank god Bradley had finally lost his worry about hurting him last night. He smiled, savoring the memory and using it to drowned out the noisy Tokyo morning, flipping on the stereo remote to help as well, the pounding beat of techno-disco certain to wake everyone the fuck up.
He let his mind wonder up to Brad's in the shower. (OH YES, Bradley! Mmm, rub it! Oh oh...right THERE! Gott, jah!)
(Cut it OUT, Schuldig!)
He snickered. He could feel Brad's angry embarrassment at being harassed in the shower....
Aya came down as the coffee was just beginning to dribble into the carafe. "Why does it take so long!" He complained, sitting down at the table, crossing his legs and leaning his head on his hand. Schuldig looked good in nothing but a black leather waist cincher. He smiled, thinking of how he had once despised the arrogant gaigen. "This thing Brad think's is buried in some grave in Germany. Do you know what it is?"
"No." Schuldig said, bending over to get the egg basket out of the refrigerator....
Aya smiled....
Schuldig straitened up and looked at him with an arch smirk.
Nagi came in, saw Schu all but naked and sighed, rolling his eyes. "Give me that." he took the basket. "No one wants your crotch hairs in their breakfast."
"Tell me, does it bother you that Omi has a bigger penis than you?" Schuldig said terribly seriously.
Nagi looked at him. Just looked at him.
Schuldig cracked after about two seconds of this, and ruffled his hair laughing.
Still.....Nagi frowned.
"Ass hole." He finally muttered.

Schuldig touched a finger to his tongue and then his bare hip, making a ‘sssiiiisss’ noise. "Too hot for you, little man."
"Hot enough to fry bacon?" Nagi said archly, mentally picturing him being ‘mounted’ by a full grown boar. "Bet you’d make a hog squeel!" He said with a vicious smile and clenched teeth
"Argggh! YOU LITTLE....! " Schuldig tried to grab him by the throat.
Nagi easily fended him off with an invisible shield of sheer will power.
Schuldig gave up in exasperation.
"Does it ever occur to you not to bait someone?" Aya asked coolly.
"Occasionally." Schuldig said, getting out the coffee cups. "I manage to suppress the idiotic idea and go on with my life."
"So, I’ve noticed." Aya said.
Nagi sang along with the stereo, not a care in the world, despite Schuldig’s brief attempt to strangle him. "Oops, I did it again.....I played with your PIG.....got lost in your HAM! Oooo, PIGGY, PIGGY....."
Schuldig muttered something obscene in german.....then said in japanese..."I’m going to kill that girl....."
Aya laughed until he gasped for air.
Schuldig tried to swat Nagi on the back of the head and then snarled in frustration as his hand struck only a sort of resistance in the air a foot away from the youth.

Brad clasped on the seat belt with a small sigh of satisfaction. They were right on schedule. He hated to change flight plans just because of bickering and last minute sex. But somehow they had all been dressed and ready to go out the door on time.
Despite Nagi’s attempts to get slaughtered.
Schuldig was still seething in anger. Yohji drowsed under his head phones. Aya looked out the window.
There was always something exhilarating about the warming up roar of the engines of the sweet little jet. The sudden thrust forward always caused his talent to rush at him, the possibilities scattering before him like sparkling spilt crystals....flashes of safety and disaster....
Then they gained air and the visions regrouped. He wondered if the physicists ever realized that in that one moment, a jet could slip time?
He looked at Aya, who now closed his eyes, prepared to rest. Schuldig keeping warm at his own fires....Yohji, like a cat, able to sleep anywhere, but move like lightening when he had to.
He had thought before that the time had come. But he was mistaken. He’d gotten ahead of himself. Of course, his confession would have by now sunk in and been set aside. They wouldn’t have much of a clue to what was happening now when it did, their minds already firmly fixed against such an event.
And in that innocence was safety, though they would not appreciate that until it

was over.
"Bleep bleep bleep bleep.....off the hook again, Bradley?" Schuldig complained.
"Just doing some personal introspection." Bradley said smoothly. "After all, I'm an old man now..."
Schuldig looked at him, seeing the evil twitch of a smirk. "Mein Mann," he said softly. "Mein großer, starker, schöner Mann."

Maybe not, but right now, he felt as if the weight of the world were on his shoulders, and that all his past had lead him onto path he could foresee, but not escape, only to work like hell to survive.
Survival, it seemed, being the only reward.

Chapter Thirty Eight
"Addiction"

Note: A return to Rosencreuz, and the nightmares buried there.
Brad was sleeping, lulled by the sound of the engines.
‘Mein Mann, mein Mann, what goes on in your mind?’ Schuldig thought, looking at him.
He’d taken off his glasses and put them in the case in his pocket, only slightly reclined in the jet’s comfortable seat, his face totally relaxed.
‘You still look twenty to me.’ Schuldig smiled slightly. ‘Time hasn’t touched you.’
He was still beautiful. Still sleek and deadly as the night they had met...
Schuldig couldn’t sleep. He was too damned strung up about this trip. Germany. Perhaps he was as un-patriotic to his home land as Bradley. Here, he had been a slave. To drugs, and then to Esset. To come back here.....
Brad woke, opening his eyes. He blinked, and drew out his glasses, putting them on.
Yes, the jet was dropping altitude for the landing. The seat belt warning chimed discretely.
Aya, also having slept, sat up and, annoyed, pushed Yohji off his shoulder.
Yohji swore and woke. Aya frowned at him.
"Why so mean, Ran!" Yohji protested.
"I am not your pillow!"
"What are you of mine?" Yohji said coolly, pushing his hair back.
Aya drew a deep breath. It was true, sometimes he was just....he put his hand on the man’s arm in silent regret.
"Aya." Brad said smoothly. (Schuldig?)
Schu looked at the situation. (Nothing unusual, Bradley, just our princess being a bitch....)
(He’s not having induced issues again?)
Schuldig double checked. (No. He’s clean. We all seem to be fairly able to reject any of Kirchner’s mental stumbling blocks now.)
Brad could agree. (I do believe the resurrection has cost him his human standing in this. He’s nothing more than a pathetic ‘boogy man,’ now that the protective sigals are dealing with anything ‘magical’ attacking us.)
(I wonder about that. How long can he hold onto his humanity against that force?)
Brad looked grim. (As long as Esset? Or as short a time as it takes to wear him down underneath his determination to take us over. While he concentrates on us, I’m sure it’s eating him up. It feeds on power lust and greed. It was one thing to have it blocked by the spell of the tablets, but he’s been absorbed by the damned thing. I don’t think he even realizes that despite that being his genetic form and material, it’s the physical re-creation of the entity. It owns him, not

he, it.)
Aya looked at Yohji. It was obvious, he wanted to smoke after the four hour flight. He rubbed the arm under his hand gently. "Quit smoking, Yoh-tan." He said softly.
"What, take away the last thing I have left of my own? Hah! And even that I have to share with Schuldig." He gave him an arch look across the small aisle. (No offense intended.)
"Kudoh." Brad said. "Stretch a bit and have some water. I think you're running on stale adrenaline."
Yohji sighed. Yeah. He hadn't worked out much lately. This dammed stress of waiting to be attacked by that mad man couldn't be just shrugged off with a few dances, sex, and little sleep. And yes, he smoked! More so lately.
"Fuck." He said, rubbing his dried up eyes. "I need more sleep."
"You need to quit smoking." Brad said.
"When we get home....." Yohji drawled.
"No." The man stated quietly. "Now. I want you clean in three days. That's as long as it takes to detox from the nicotine."
Schuldig's blood ran cold. "Mah...mein Mann, you said I could....." He'd quit the drugs...but the smoking....
"Forget it." Brad said. "If Kudoh can't smoke, you can't. End of the matter, here and now."
"Great, now the both of them will be strung out on too much caffeine to make up for it." Aya remarked. He knew what they were like if deprived.
"I'm sure by day three, our blond menace to the female population will be ready to put his wire to my throat again." Brad said with wry amusement.
Yohji frowned. It was one thing to know that the man was teasing, another to know that he was also damned well aware of how that hurt. 'Yes and Crawford is a sadist, Kudoh, get a grip on yourself. You know by now if it will hurt, it will amuse him.' Well....two could play that game....
"I'll make a deal with you, Boss." He said smoothly. "If I can go a week without a cigarette, you go a week without sex. Just one week. And I won't smoke any more."
"Bull shit, Kudoh." Bradley purred. "In two days, you will be begging me to take your mind off the cravings."
"I think it's an excellent idea." Schuldig said, resenting like hell the fact that HE had to suffer for Yohji's addiction. "Count me in on the deal."
Aya's purple eyes widened.
"You want us to quit, don't you, Sweetest?" Schuldig dared him.
Aya mentally squirmed. He looked at Bradley.
Brad was not happy.
Schuldig wasn't backing down. "Well, there it is, then. No smoking, no sex for a week, starting now. The minute anyone breaks that rule, Yohji and I are lighting up and smoking a whole pack. Agreed, Yoh-tan?"

"Agreed." Yohji said icily.
Aya let out a small whimper.
"If you insist." Brad said coldly.
"Oh, I do." Schuldig smiled at him, all teeth and cold eyes.

They had gone backwards....arriving four hours before they had left Japan.
At the customs desk, Schuldig slapped down his passport and glared at Yohji.
(What the hell were you thinking!)
(He'll break, you know he will.)
(I'll break!) Came the telepath's snarl.
Yohji winced, almost reaching for....
Brad looked at him. "You can't be having spasms already, Kudoh."
Schuldig sighed heavily. Oh, yes he could!
Ran glared at the other red head.
It wasn't very pretty, Schul considered with dismay. Gott, how well he could do that...that combination of soul felt injury and lust for revenge. Good thing the katana was packed away with the baggage.
After landing, Aya had tried to put an arm around Brad and steal a kiss before disembarking.
Brad had caught his wrist and quietly said, "No."
He had Yohji and Schuldig to thank for this. And he was royally pissed off.
(If you help out--he'd break.) Schuldig wheedled.
(No!) Ran's angry response thought reminded him of a cell door snapping shut.
(But....!)
(No more smoking!) Ran's eyes were the most evil he'd ever seen them now, an angry cat's would be more loving...
Schuldig moaned mentally to himself.
Brad was in the process of accepting his stamped passport back from the customs agent and glanced at them coldly. "Just stop it. All of you."
The agent found that very odd. As far as he had seen, they had merely handed over their pass ports to be inspected and stamped, without a word, calm as could be.
It was odd enough that they were all Japanese nationals.
Ran headed for the baggage pick-up with a determined face.
Schuldig shot Yohji a look.
(He wouldn't...) Yohji thought back. (You're loosing it all ready.)
The both hurried to make certain, Yohji grabbing the custom made case before Ran could. "Let me carry that for you."
Ran gave him the evil eyes this time.
"I need something to keep my hands busy!" Youji insisted.
(Fast thinking.) Schu commented.
(It's fucking true!)
Ran refused to let go of the case's handle. "Are you out of your mind! Let go of

it. I don’t need you dropping my katana in some nicotine withdrawal fit!"
Yohji looked wounded. "I’m not the one who throws things at helicopters." He grumbled.
Ran’s mouth twitched.
Schuldig snickered.
Ran went cold again and held onto the case with both hands--so that he wouldn’t have a spare to slap Yohji senseless!
Brad sighed silently. So much for mixing pleasure with business. This trip was going to be living hell.

"Tired?" Nagi asked when they had finally gotten home at nearly three a.m.
"No..." Omi said. Well, not really. Just...
Nagi looked at him, putting his gun holster on the hook in the closet. "It’s going to be empty here for a week or two."
"Hai." Omi said.
Nagi went over to rub his upper arm gently, looking at him. "Is it still getting to you?"
He frowned slightly. Then he took Nagi’s hand and drew him over to one of the sofa’s. Only the secondary lighting from the art deco style wall sconces was on and the room had a warm glow that belied the late hour.
Nagi sat down half sideways, looking at him. He wondered if this was going to be it, and then was certain it was, judging by the serious face before him.
"It’s hard, what we do." Omi said. "You know I tried to be strong for you when we first came into this. But I’ve realized, you are strong, am I--I need to be--weak." He said hesitantly. " I don’t mean--physically--or maybe even mentally. I just need--not to be ‘Omi can do anything’, ‘Omi, the computer expert’, ‘Omi, the mission coordinator’. In fact, I don’t want to be anything Persia trained me to be. You knew what is was like! Being put in with people older and physically stronger than you. Having to find a way to care for a wounded team member too heavy to even carry--well maybe not that, with your power--but to be a kid and deal with war..."
"My power wasn’t always as strong." Nagi interrupted the brief silence mildly.
"I know." He remembered not only the assignments gone wrong, but the in-fighting--Brad and Schul at each other’s throats.....having to keep Farfarello from killing one of them at any given time the pressure got to much on him...
Omi held his hand tighter. "Nagi, it’s been past two years. How to you feel about this? About-- us?"
He had to ask?
It was rather incredible to him that Omi actually had to ask...
He sighed, trying to think.
Omi leaned over to kiss him and look better into his eyes.
"I--want this to last forever." Nagi said, stunned.

Omi put his arms around him tightly.
Nagi really wasn't up to someone crying on him. But Omi didn't seem to be over doing it or anything. Just....getting something out.
And somehow, despite the rules, Nagi had to smirk, they were prone on the couch and he was sliding into his lover with a thrill of relief.
Omi shivered and held on tighter about his shoulders. "Nagi..."
Nagi kissed him and began to move slowly. Dead tired as he was, this was good, this was worth it all.
Omi moaned as he felt Nagi's power grasp him, drawing him up to each thrust.. He let his mind empty of all his troubled thoughts...to just be there in Nagi's grasp.
Ever since the younger but so serious boy had seduced him into the hall closet at school, he'd been content with being this loved.
Some how all his worries had faded to insignificant when Nagi took over. To have someone else in charge, someone else to make decisions...
And just be 'Omi'.
Not Takatori Mamoru.
He opened his eyes.
Nagi's were closed, his lips parted, concentrating.
Omi kissed him.
Moaning in each others mouths, they came.

The bags off the hotel hand truck, the bell hop gone, there was a general annoyed silence in the elegant sitting room of the expensive suite.
"All right, people." Brad said. "This is not the end of the world."
"Well, thank god for that." Schuldig said in exasperated sarcasm.
Brad looked at him coolly.
Schul grinned fakely.
"Five hours without smoking and you're all going insane. Stop thinking about it. We have work to do...."
"Mein Gott! It's the 'focus' lecture!" Schuldig plunked down in an armchair and damn near started biting his fingernails.
Brad looked at him again.
Schuldig sunk further into the chair and tried to achieve a state of small harmlessness, despite his hyperactivity giving him non-nicotine suppressed jitters. He realized he suddenly had to repress a scream.
Yohji had switched gears an hour ago. He wanted a drink. There was an elegant liqueur set on a butler's tray/trolley by a mirrored wall. He went to grab the carafe silver tagged 'whiskey' and uncorked the stopper, pouring himself a shot. Downing that...he poured another.
"Kudoh." Brad warned.
He swallowed it and set the cut crystal shot glass down. God, that felt good, burning it's way down on his empty stomach.

Ran was wavering emotionally. It took a lot to maintain that side of his persona when there was no enemy to deal with. He let go of it.
Unfortunately....Ran or Aya....Brad was still off limits. He could tell by the further tightening of the man's lips and colder look in those cocoa colored eyes. "This is idiotic! Why should I suffer just because those two want company!" He demanded.
"The bitch is back." Yohji muttered.
"Hai..." Schuldig said, his mind full of buzzing thoughts because he was too distracted to bother to try to block. He was seriously close to just shutting down and letting go.
"That was un-called for." Brad said. Name calling in a moment of playful passion was one thing, but Kudoh was being plainly mean. "Schuldig!" He realized...
"Ah!" The german jumped, blinking.
"Block! You're zoning!" The last thing he needed now was a 'checked out' telepath!
Aya had a momentary panic fit. "This is the worst time to do this! Break the agreement!"
"No." Brad said. "I find it very difficult to believe that after all we have been through and survived, you three are all in fits over quitting smoking and having to go without living for your penises one lousy week!"
He realized he had gone from talking to yelling. He un-clenched his fists and pushed his hair back in annoyance at the dangling strands. "God damn it, you are all driving me mad!"
Aya was not giving up.
He walked over to him, as close as he dared, and turned on the charm.
A little shift in body language, a little lowering of eyelashes, a slight parting of the lips and just a touch more emphasis to the depth of his voice.
"Lover....I can't go even an hour without you."
Brad looked at him. Damn it, it was hot in here!
Aya unbuttoned his shirt just one button. Exposing the brilliant flash of the diamond pendant nestled just below the cupid's bow of his collar bones. Of course he knew exactly how to stand where the light from the window would catch it....
Schuldig held his breath.
Yohji wasn't sure what annoyed him more, the look of predatorily gleeful anticipation in Schuldig's eyes, or Ran pulling his femme fatale routine so well it would put an academy award actress to shame.
Aya made certain his sleeve cuff slipped down as he raised a hand to brush a lock of hair into another place in an apparent nervous move, the pave bracelet on his wrist peeking out of the mauve silk, he let Brad have the full affect of his purple eyes beside the jewels...
Schuldig resisted the urge to cheer him on aloud.
"Has anyone got a match?" Yohji said smoothly.

Brad blinked. Oh.....god..... Then he frowned. "Go take a cold shower, Ran." He moved away to get a damned drink himself.
Aya let out a strangled, and somewhat higher pitched than one would expect, snarl of frustrated rage. Then he went in and slamed the door to the bedroom. And locked it.
And then let out a blistering roar of swearing, and judging by the sound of it shattering...threw a lamp at the door.
"Eh, now this might be the end of the world." Schuldig muttered darkly. He looked at Bradley.
Brad had an uncorked decanter in his hand, never mind the damned little glasses. He took a deep swig of the whisky and glared at the bedroom door. "We have work to do. The sooner, the better."
Schuldig looked at Yohji coolly. (Rat!)
Yohji gave it right back to him over the designer shades. (Haven't you heard that saying...'All is fair in love and war'?)
(I HATE you!) Schuldig bit his thumbnail, fretting.

The last time they had been here....
The old gothic building, once a monastery, was now a flame scorched ruin. Esset had not been very happy with the destruction of the old dump. But no one had bothered to come and bulldoze it down. No one left to care. The old fools had been too busy, scrambling for their lives and their holdings as their agents were tracked down and slaughtered in Crawford's vengeance.
"So where is this grave?" Schuldig asked. If he'd been ordered to quit smoking on his own, perhaps it might not have been so bad. His habit was not to bad, alone.
But Yohji....
Yohji would not shut up. It seemed his every other thought was of smoking....he could taste and feel it in the man's mind...
(WILL YOU STOP IT!)
"Schuldig!" Yohji protested at the stabbing pain in his skull.
Brad looked at Schuldig. "No more of that!" He warned. Damn them and their bickering!
Ran kicked at a chunk of brick work laying on the ground. He remembered the night they had done this. He looked at the ruin. Destroying everything Esset owned had been part of his revenge for the massacre of his family.
So why did he never feel free of that obligation?
Schuldig looked at him, picking up the unusual change in emotion. It wasn't often that Aya, or Ran, felt....pensive. He walked over to put a hand lightly on the japanese's shoulder. "Why so glum now? We laughed that night." He smiled.
Ran looked down at the broken bits of rubble again. "There are too many pieces. We keep hunting them down, and more turn up."
Schuldig considered this. He reached up to caress his cheek. "Life sucks,

doesn't it, my orchid? We all survive in this jungle, clinging on as best as we can." He leaned over to kiss that petal soft skin. "Kill something." He murmured. "You'll feel better."
Ran smiled. "Schul...."
He moved away, slapping him on the shoulder. "As long as it's not one of us!"
Ran smiled more ruefully now. "I'll think about that."
Brad had kept a careful eye on this. Perhaps the initial uproar over the situation had finally died down. He glanced at Yohji.
He, too was standing there, hands on hips, gazing at the battered remains.
Brad frowned a little. Okay so somehow he looked wrong with out a damned cigarette in his hand or mouth. But how lanky and shop worn he appeared....the cigarettes were cutting into his health. Such a waste of such a handsome man....
Sooner or later, the life would get to all of them. They were all living too fast. And he was the one pushing them.
He needed to reconsider some things, it was getting obvious.
"A bit of a hike from here." He said, answering the question at last. "Up that way." He pointed to the north where the mountains looked somewhat...more threatening, despite the golden sun now bathing them. "In a sort of hollow. And just to make it interesting...un-marked."
Schuldig thought of something. It was a vague memory, but one....he was certain of. "Where they disposed of the failures." He said softly.
Yohji looked at him, then at Brad. "Failures?" There was something more than just....trainees taking a wrong step to that word...
"Failures." Brad stated.
"What....sort of failures." Ran asked quietly, the wind blowing his bangs about his face, veiling his eyes.
"Eugenics." Brad looked at the particular spot he knew by heart.
When you needed unusual discipline.....they made you work the disposal unit. A warning of how you would be treated...should you....fail.
Schuldig looked at him. For once he had no joke to make, no comment on the subject.
Yohji.....wanted a cigarette more badly than ever before in his life.

"They're just kids!" Kai exclaimed. "And one's a girl!"
"Kai," Massa warned. "You should know well by now how appearances deceive."
Kai looked closer at the security monitors. "Eh...something...."
Masa laughed softly.
"Stop laughing at me!" Kai protested.
"I'm not laughing at you." Masa smiled. "I'm laughing at how right Crawford is about those two."
Kai looked again, but it was too late.
Their guests were now shown into the very spare and elegant office. The brunette cool and confident with a serious demeanor, the blond equally confident, but

with a pleasant smile and gentle eyes. The gamin haircut and blouse and skirt---total camouflage for the deadly assassin.
Both bowed politely to the traditional greetings.
Kai frowned.
Nagi regarded the older youth archly.
Omi was used to it by now. He grabbed Nagi's arm and hung on it, the epitome of cute-girl-ism, daring the eurasian red head to say something.
Kai frowned a bit more.
"Omi--quit it." Nagi said.
Omi immediately 'quit it'. "Yes, I'm a guy." He said.
"I knew that." Kai stated. "I just wasn't sure you did!"
"Kai!" Masa exclaimed. "Out of this office! Now!"
Kai's chin went up just enough to make it very clear how stubborn he was. Then he got out, slapping the door shut behind him.
Omi wanted very much to make a comment, but sulked mildly instead.
Nagi was well aware of who Araki Masanori was and what he was up to. Schuldig never was one to stint on information. "Now that the drama is over." Nagi said smoothly. "The north east quarter of Tokyo is level. I doubt it will stay that way for long."
"This is good news." Masa said. "Please, sit down..." He offered.
"I prefer to keep this brief." Nagi said. "We normally don't handle the client contacts."
Masa liked this bluntness in the boy. It was obvious Crawford had trained him. And that the training had set well. "Certainly. And the next section of the re-development plans?"
Nagi found it amusing how the yakuza in general insisted on using construction business terms for murder. Of course you never knew who might have set a listening device anywhere. Households like this with servants, men coming and going....It was best to simply be safe at all times.
So they spoke in oblique terms and of contracts and residuals and profit margins and Nagi and Omi bid their farewell with the south east quarter of Tokyo to deal with next.
Kai was in the garden waiting for them to come out on their way to the gate.
"Hey, you two!" he called over the ripple of the domesticated little stream in it's black river stone paved bed.
Nagi stopped, not looking back at him, Omi halting beside him almost immediately, and almost immediately worried that there would be trouble.
Kai walked up to stand almost but not rudely in front of them on the path.
"That's a lot of mean work for you two to handle all by yourselves." He said.
Nagi considered the still childish young man's dark brown eyes. They were hard to read. What was he up to?
Kai tried again. "It's kind of embarrassing to be...well, you know. And not know a thing about any of it. Masa runs everything. But..." He sighed and rubbed the

back of his neck. "Damn it! Shit, how do I say this!" He got mad at himself. Then he looked at them. "My bother and his friend got hurt in that bullshit. Your guys got the bastards that put them in the hospital. You're doing what should be OUR work. It's not the money, it's gratitude, okay?" He said, annoyed.
Omi held out his hand. "You're....welcome?" he said.
Kai grasped it and shook it. "Yeah. And seriously...you do look like a girl." He drew free, but naturally, not in any ill way.
Omi laughed.
Nagi smiled a little. Then offered his hand as well.
Kai didn't hesitate to shake with him. "Maybe some time you can come here not on business." He said. "Shoot some hoops or something."
Nagi's smile changed ever so slightly. "I don't know that there would ever be time. But thank you for your invitation."
"Sure." Kai said. "Ah...Good luck." He added. Then decided to opt for walking away with his hands in the pockets of his american made jeans.
"What a strange fellow." Omi said quietly.
Nagi almost said something, looking at him in his blouse and skirt and pink sneakers, then skipped it.
Omi realized something and then frowned a bit again. Really, he was getting to be too much like Crawford! You could never tell what was on his mind, but it was alway something you just knew was so very wrong in humor. "Nagi!" He stamped his foot and pouted.
"I'm not saying a thing." Nagi said, putting his own hands in his own packets and heading for the parked car.

Yohji sat down on a small hillock of grass covered boulders that had obviously piled up in an alluvial fan a long time ago in this glacier carved land. Hike was right. Cigarette.....no.....no cigarette. He had deliberately put them in the suitcase and left them there.
Schuldig was still not up to par from his little 'vacation'. He had had to rest several times in the hour's walk and was not happy at all. Especially about being teased about being carried so that they could move faster.
Brad looked around. There were the rocks, the points lined up. This was it. It had been some time since he'd been here. Eleven years. And it had been 'worked' since then, but not, apparently, in more recent years. The ground was well settled and the turf of grass and wild flowers looked like old growth.
"So." Schudlig said, looking around. "Where is it?"
"Under Kudoh's ass." Brad said calmly.
Yohji blinked, then got up as if something had bit him. He looked at the over grown pile.
"Cairn." Brad said. "Tomb." It was there before. They just opened it up and used it."
"How did you find out about it if this artifact is so important?" Ran asked.

Brad smirked. "The nature of the artifact itself." He said coolly. "Schuldig. Go stand on it, where Yohji was sitting. You see, that's a natural seat for someone who's had a long hike. Especially....a long hike with a shovel and a body bag." His voice was ice now. "They never were concerned to make it.....easier...for anyone on this detail."
Schuldig hesitated, then went to step up onto the rocks, helping himself with a hand up, and stood where Yohji had sat.
Crawford merely looked up at him.
Schu felt it gathering, then it struck. As if something had spun up from the ground and enveloped him.
He covered his ears.....but there was no sound.....
His mind.....
For a moment.....he thought he'd lost his mind!
There was no sound.....no feeling....no emotions....
Silence.
He took a deep breath....and looked around. He could hear...there was the distant cry of a hunting eagle...Aya kicking some rocks aside...
But nothing in his mind. Without being in physical contact with Brad.
"So what is it?" he said. (Yohji give me a hand, I don't want to jump...)
Yohji just stood there as if he hadn't heard.
"Yohji?" Schuldig said.
"What?" the blond asked.
"Help me down!"
"What are you so mad about!" Yohji moved to offer him a hand.
"I asked you to help me!" He got down carefully.
"I'm helping you, you idiot." Yohji said mildly.
"I mean mentally!"
Yohji looked into his eyes. "I didn't hear you, Schul."
He froze and listened. Nothing! There was nothing!
Brad came to take him by the shoulders from behind and walked him a few steps away from the cairn. "Don't panic. Just relax. " He said calmly.
About two yards away, Brad let go of him and took a few more steps away from him.
The noise came back. He gasped a little and then shook his head as if that would clear his mind. And he could feel his mind grasping at the rungs of this fragile rope ladder to his version of sanity and clinging to it. He looked at Brad.
"What the fuck was that?"
"Failure." Brad said. "The 'off switch' Esset never wanted anyone to know existed."
He frowned. "I saw them test it one time. Hauled one of the pregnant ones out here. Before she was brought out here, the baby tested a full range of psychic abilities. They shoved her onto the rock and she screamed." He spoke very quietly but clearly, remembering it. "She hemorrhaged. Her power came back. The

baby died. They took that chance with a very strong Psi. But they proved a point. What ever is in there, it will wipe out an infant paranormal. And shut off the powers of a fully developed one. The only thing they didn't bother to test was the effect of long term contact of an adult with it."

Schuldig looked at the cairn.

He shivered and wrapped his arms about himself. Then, Ran was there, to hold him to him, warming him...

"Okay so there it is, big deal." Yohji said. "To hell with it. Let's go."

"No." Brad said with a sigh. "I'm afraid we have to dig it up and keep it. It's too damned dangerous a thing to leave laying there. And sooner or later, Kirchner would have figured it out."

"But our powers..." Schuldig said.

"We can destroy it then!" Ran stated. He wasn't going through another incident like the tablets again!

"That depends on if it can be destroyed." Brad said. "And I intend to use it as a weapon."

Chapter Thirty Nine
"A Mystery Seen Through"

They returned the next morning with proper equipment for this grave robbery. A rented jeep with a winch set up, shovels and some pick axes. At least this time it wasn't to actually dig a grave, Brad considered with some mild relief.
One of the many reasons he preferred his own methods. An open kill, the body left for other's to deal with. Killing had never bothered him. It was handling the dead meat afterward.
The day was again clear and sunlit. Schuldig lay on his back in the meadow grass, head pillowed on his arms, looking up at the blue of the sky.
Brad sat a few feet away, watching Yohji and Aya work on the cairn. Lean hard bodies moving with a certain grace only men working had, the rhythm of physical labor.
"It seems unfair to make them do all the work." Schuldig said to his thoughts.
Brad's mental laugh taunted him. "Does my guilty have a conscience?" He inquired coolly.
Schuldig found a pebble to throw at him, hitting him with a sting right over the heart.
"Brat." Brad said.
"Is this why you didn't allow the boys to come? That thing being so powerful?"
"Partially. That, and the contract."
"How are we to transport it?" Schuldig rolled up on his side, head on his hand to look at him.
"That depends on how strong it really is and what size it may be."
"Can't you 'see' it?"
"No." Brad said. "It's filling the cairn right now, but that doesn't mean a thing, that may just be it's power aura."
"Ah." Schuldig said.
"Damn it!" Yohji swore.
Someone had re-sealed the cairn's entrance stone with modern mortar. It was time for the pick axes.
Aya sighed and wiped the sweat off his face with a handkerchief. He'd given up his shirt an hour ago. He'd left his jewels locked up in the room, only the nose stud and the earring on to catch the sunlight, he never took those off if he could help it at all.
Yohji handed him the other pick axe and paused to look at him. Well.....some things were worth quitting smoking for. He paused to pick up his water bottle and drink deeply of it, then set it aside near his own shirt and got back to work, glancing at the other two in the grass in the distance.
"He can't hold out much longer." Yohji muttered.
"Stop it, Yotan." Aya said.
Schuldig laughed.

"What is so funny?" Brad asked calmly, knowing Schuldig had picked something up his own ears hadn't.
"Nothing, mein Mann. Nothing." Schuldig informed him with an impish smile and a light tone.
Brad's eyes narrowed.
Un-hunh. Nothing.
That meant sex, with Schuldig. It always did.
Well he was just as bad off. Unable to help with the work, he had to sit here and watch, his libido aching. Schuldig laying about didn't make things any less torturous. Last night he'd been relegated to the floor, Schu taking the bed, Aya the sofa and Yohji the armchair. No one had dared sleep with the other, because they couldn't trust their own bodies, not after this long.
He sighed heavily.
"You wanted us to quit." Schuldig reminded him, laying on his back again, drawing a knee up, seemingly to get comfortable....
Brad looked at him. "Stop tormenting me." he warned.
Schuldig shifted, eyes half closed, biting his lower lip, tilting his pelvis.
Brad looked away, annoyed as hell. The whore was just too good at it, even after all these years.
Schuldig snickered meanly. Two sadists....would never make a right? Oh, but he and Bradley were so right. He had what he wanted, the man loved him.

Yohji huffed out a breath of air, having hooked the winch cable on to the cover stone. He looked over at Aya, then motioned him to start it and mopped the sweat off his face..
Aya started up the engine and got out to turn the winch on.
Slowly, ever so slowly the stone shifted then started to move. Yohji considered giving it a push but then realized the winch was there to do the work, and to let it. He was tired as hell. He walked over to look down at Brad, who had fallen asleep in the grass and now opened his eyes as the sun was blocked.
"It's moving off." Yohji said, but knew Brad had already figured that out.
"I hope it's small." Brad said.
"I hope it doesn't kill us." Schuldig said dryly.
There was a loud 'clink' noise as the stone shifted and fell off it's supports and cracked into three uneven pieces.
Aya turned off the winch, then the engine and went to unhook the cable. Yohji went back again to look into the cairn. The sunlight revealed only a lot of dusty something right under the open hole, but nothing beyond it.
"Get the flashlight." Aya said.
He walked over and got it out of the box of tools, and tuned it on, shining it down the hole. It wasn't that deep, maybe about eight feet. He laid down on the rocks to look in better, flashing the light about inside. "I'm not seeing anything but a load of crap with dust on it." He said.

Aya relayed the message with a shout.
"I can't read your minds!" Schuldig yelled back. "You're too close to it!"
Yohji sat up. "Go ask how the hell we figure out what it is. There's nothing but bundles of garbage down there and a few pots."
Aya walked over and knelt down, pretty much aching from the morning's work. "Bradley, how the hell do we know what this thing is?"
Brad looked up at him.
Aya leaned over to look down at him, bracing on his hands. "Yohji says all he sees in there are bundles and pots and dirt."
Brad reached up to trace a finger through the sweat on the man's bare muscular chest, stopping at a nipple, and put it to his mouth to taste. "I can't see the future of it enough to tell you how to even begin to look."
Aya's nipple hardened from the brief touch and he wanted more, but damn it...."Something finally got the best of Bradley Crawford." he said mildly. "Imagine that."
"You always get the best of me, Lovely." Brad said. "Back to work."
Aya's lips parted and his jaw shifted, but then he re-considered and shut his mouth with narrowed and arrogant purple eyes. He got up to his feet and looked down at the man, and deliberatly put his hand down to shift his goods in his jeans, making it very clear he was hard. "I want over time for this, Lover." He said, and walked back to the cairn.
"Bitch." Bradley said mildly. Then sighed.
"Taught him everything he knows." Schuldig purred.
"He's too good a student." Brad complained.
"Let us smoke." Schuldig countered.
"Oh, I'm fine." Brad said calmly. "How are you holding up?"
"Just.....Peachy." Schuldig said.
Yohji and Aya got the rope out of the tool box and Yohji took the initiative to lower himself into the hole. Once down inside he started to go through the mess. The pots crumbled at a kick, the bundles turned out to be rags on bones, some aryan's ancestors gone to their glory. Bones and pots, some bits of metal and beads.....where the hell was it if it was modern? That mortar was modern? He looked around the walls, stone slabs like the cover stone. Must have been hell to move them.
He made the circuit twice before he saw it. On the very floor itself. Under the dirt that had sifted in. His feet had shifted the dirt. He brushed his boot sole over it some more.
Another patch of mortar around a stone. This one smaller.
He looked up. "Aya, tell them I think I've got something here! A patch job in the floor of the cave! About two feet across by maybe one! And drop me a pick axe!"

Aya helped him, grabbing the handle on the other side and lifting the box out.

It was like a strong box, a key lock and handles on it. Nothing special, even.
"At least it's small enough to carry." Yohji said.
Brad and Schuldig had taken the jeep to go back to town. The idea being to find a lead shield and see if that would work. That had been almost two hours ago.
"Open it." Aya said.
Yohji pulled out his lock picks and found one that went into the lock easily. It took a bit of fiddling about, but he got it to click and opened it.
Inside there was a roll of papers, not too brittle with age, all in german hand writing.
And under it.....was the strangest thing.
"Hunh." Aya said.
"Maybe he could see it and just didn't know?" Yohji said.
It was a gem, amber colored, about three inches at it's longest point, cut like an oval diamond and set in a frame to make a broach of it, looking oriental, like the carvings on the tablets had been.
Aya touched it, looking it over, feeling the facets and the bevels without lifting it from the padded interior. "It could be a diamond." He said.
Yohji picked it up and held the flashlight on it. The facets refracted the light all over the inside of the cairn in golden glows.
Then something happened. The skin of his back prickled almost as if it were about to catch on fire.....
He dropped it back in the box.
"Damn!" Aya said.
Yohji looked at him sharply.
"Did you feel it?" Aya asked.
"My back...it burned, like Brad's was doing before a quake."
"Mine too." Aya frowned. "It must be paranormal."
There was a sound of a horn honking.
Yohji boosted Aya up out of the hole and waited while he went to consult about the damned thing.
Aya came back lugging a roll of something like tinfoil. "This was all they could come up with." He handed it down awkwardly.
"Lead foil?" Yohji asked as he felt it's weight.
"Yeah. Brad said to put the thing in it and wrap it it really good." Aya said.
"Hand me up those papers. They might have something in them."

Schuldig eyed the lead foil wrapped bundle warily.
"Can you still read our minds?" Yohji asked.
"It's like static." Schuldig said. "Like an old radio coming in badly. But I think if we were to get a lead lined case of some kind meant to carry radioactive material, that might do the job."
"What is the limit to it's range, Schuldig?" Brad asked from twenty feet away.
Schuldig started to walk slowly back from it, then stopped. "I can't hear the

static here. But their minds are still fragmented. Aya, come over here."
Aya walked over to him.
Schuldig caught his arm and drew him a few more feet away.
"Here." He said to Brad, letting go of his arm.
The man looked at the distance. "About twelve feet?"
"Here I can hear him very clear, even without touching."
Brad frowned. "That's about the distance from the bottom of the cairn to the few feet way it takes to get out of it's range without the lead foil."
"Oh but I can still pick up something with the lead foil, it's just really garbled." Schuldig stated.
"It's still dangerous." Brad said.
Yohji walked over to him, looking into his eyes through the glass lenses. "I know you don't like having your power shut off, but you have to trust your ability to defend yourself without it."
Brad put a hand on his shoulder, then leaned closer to kiss his cheek briefly.
"Let's see about getting that container. There must be a nuclear lab with loose security somewhere in Germany." He smiled slightly.
Schuldig laughed. "I can loosen up anything." he grinned.

"How romantic is a train?" Schuldig snuggled closer to Brad.
"Back off, Schu." Brad warned.
"Oh come off it, mein Mann, this is Germany, why....we could even get married here." Schuldig purred, being a damned pest on purpose.
Brad caught up the hand on his thigh, Schuldig's left one and made sure the gold band was where the red head had it in his eye sight. "What is that?"
Schuldig sighed and put his head on Brad's shoulder. "It's not the same."
"You just want to make sure you are the only one entitled to anything, don't you?" Aya accused from the seat opposite him.
"Aya." Brad warned.
Aya was still seething from the kick in the shin he'd gotten for trying to take the seat Schuldig was now in.
Yohji was stuck with the damned carrying case for the container, disguised as a medical equipment case, full of all things, frozen sperm bound for a clinic in Austria. Damned Schuldig and his bright ideas. One more ice cream joke and he was going to shoot him in the foot!
He looked at Aya, who was going to spend the whole trip glaring at the other two if something wasn't done about it. He reached up to tug the ear tail on his side and the glare was turned on him full blast.
"I'd marry you, Ran." He said softly.
Aya rolled his eyes and sulked.
Yohji took his hand up and kissed it lightly. His hand and the hand he held both bore the rings Crawford had given them as well. His gold, Aya's platinum. Like Schuldig's, they were engraved with one simple word inside. Forever.

Brad kissed Schuldig's head under his chin. (What are those two thinking?)
Schuldig didn't even bother to look at them. (Aya wants me out of the way so he can sit here and Yohji wants Aya right where he is, but wants him to pay attention to HIM.)
(I mean what are they thinking besides the immediate moment.)
Schuldig 'looked'. (They are tired and want to be held in one bed as it should be, Bradley. They want to go home and for this to be over with. They're worried about us and the gem, how it might hurt us.)
(Is that all?) Brad wondered.
(All you're getting.) Schuldig thought at him.
Brad smiled a little. (There was a time when you'd have handed me their entire minds in detail.)
(That's what you think.) Schuldig laughed mentally. (I would have made you beg for details for being such an ass to me, you were so damned mean all the time. Not even letting me touch you when all I wanted in the world was to be close to you.)
Brad didn't like to be reminded of that time. But he supposed his love had a right to do so.

"Kirchner." Nagi said under his breath.
"Hai." Omi said. "What is he doing here?"
"Trailing us again. He must have something up his sleeve."
"Damn it, can't we even have a night off!" Omi demanded.
They were in a club that catered more to their age group then the one their elders went to. The whole thing with the speed gangs had finally go to be too annoying and they wanted to have their fun for a change.
Omi had put on black net stockings and a pink leather miniskirt and was basically driving Nagi to the breaking point with his dancing when they'd noticed the blond man by the wall of the club.
"I think he wants us to see him." Nagi frowned.
"Why be so stupid?" Omi said sullenly.
"So we would go running to Brad."
"I wonder how the vacation is going." Omi moved closer to him, instinctively giving the foreigner an eye full for his spying.
Nagi put his arms about the other youth's waist and kissed him. "I think it's going great, don't you?"
Omi smiled. "What can he do in this crowd that we can't counter act. Nail him to that damned wall and lets get out of here." He took Nagi's wrist. "You concentrate and I'll guide you so you can hold him as long as possible."
It worked pretty well, them being a block away in the car before Nagi lost his psychic grip on the man.
Kirchner fumed at the impertinence of the brat.
"You know, it's scary, but he kind of reminds me too much of Schuldig." Nagi

frowned.
"Well, sure, he's his uncle or something."
"What I mean is....he could be more of a problem then he is right now. Schu always had some long range plan on when he stalked someone..."
"Un-hunh." Omi frowned slightly, concentrating on the road and traffic.
Nagi's mouth twitched and he decided it was best to give up that train of thought.

Schuldig went to look out the windows of the hotel room. Brad had really laid out the money this time. Rococo trim, gold veined mirrors, like a palace apartment more than a hotel suite.
Too bad he had to be stuck in it with one sulking Aya, one nicotine starved Yohji and one sex starved Schuldig.....He looked over at him. Hitting the booze already.
Brad had the shot of whisky he'd poured himself then had another.
Schuldig looked out over the city. It was a beautiful view. Vienna at last! The last time he had been here had been just another job. This time he wanted to be a total tourist and look at and do everything. As he had once chided Brad, you have not lived until you have put this town to bed.
It was too romantic to spend worrying about a stupid deal made in haste. He walked over to him and put his arms around him from behind and lay his cheek on the broad shoulder. "Bradley."
"What, Schuldig?" Came the growled response.
"Never mind the stupid deal. Yohji and I won't ever smoke again, I promise."
"Schuldig!" Yohji protested.
"I can't go any longer, mien Mann, I want you to make love to me." He pleaded softly.
Brad looked at Yohji.
Yohji met those eyes and drew a deep breath and let it out slow. Three days. Three damned days.
Schuldig's hands felt for the belt buckle on Brad's trousers.
Brad kept looking at Yohji, in that almost accusing way.
"Pleeeease, Bradley....." Schuldig begged.
Yohji frowned. Then gave up. "I wont smoke any more." He said.
"Oh, thank god!" Aya exclaimed and went to help Schuldig by pulling out the knot on Brad's damned tie.
Brad escaped them both to go to the blond and embrace him, kissing him fervently. "For me, Kudoh. Promise me."
Yohji held onto him. "Yes." He said, pressing his cheek to Brad's.
Brad squeezed him tighter and made a pleased sound, then kissed him again and looked into those green eyes. "Aya!" He stated.
Aya frowned, knowing what was coming.
"Make Yohji happy." Brad said quite clearly.

Yohji was quite happy. Aya had obeyed orders to the fullest extent possible. Every move, every sound he made, calculated it seemed to make Yohji about as happy as a man could be made. The way he wrapped his legs around him, the way he held on and drove up against him with every thrust, the way he opened his lovely eyes and looked up at him through his lashes as he came, that made Yohji ecstatic. When Aya wanted to, he could make Yohji feel like he was in heaven.
Brad had Schuldig gasping with every move, no longer afraid to use his strength on him. He'd bring him that close, then stop, almost out of him, making him suffer, biting or hitting him to distract him, then push in again, aiming for the spot that made him moan. He kept this up for a good fifteen minutes, keeping him just on the verge of coming.
"Bradley, quit it!" Aya complained after he'd gotten Yohji off him and caught his breath. He wiped his face with his palm and brushed his hair out of his eyes so he could look at the man, so intent on torturing Schuldig.
Brad looked at him, and smiled cruelly, sensually.
Aya sighed deeply, knowing he was next. Three days with out, Brad was in the mood for complicated pleasures. He drew his fingers through his own come on his belly and put them to Brad's mouth, rewarded by having them sucked clean.
Brad let go of them to kiss Schuldig, finishing in him. Schuldig's moaning rose to yowl of pleasure.
He held onto him tightly, gasping, wanting to keep him there, inside him, trembling.
Brad kissed him over his face and shoulders until he came down from his orgasmic high, slowly drawing out of him when Schu finally let him.
Aya thought something wild came into the green eyes at that time, something like an animal always looked out of them when Schuldig had got what he wanted. Something wild and beyond human had done it's job, made itself known. Then it went back into hiding only slowly, taking minutes. That creature glanced at Aya as Brad moved off Schuldig, making Aya feel....only a bit uneasy, and somewhat privileged, because it was willing to share it's prey with him. This time.
Always this time. Maybe not the next time.
Brad moved on to Aya with an enthusiasm that might have surprised an expert in human sexuality. He kissed him hungrily, running his hands over the fine boned, wire-muscled body of the japanese.
Aya cooed, enjoying the lustful attack.
Yohji watched. He always did when he wasn't too tired. The changes in Aya fascinated him. With him, Aya was so self confident and in control, making him feel as if one wrong move would get him thrown off. And on occasion.....had.
With Brad, Aya was willing to put up with anything forced on him, even what he hated most, being ordered to lay on his front with his wrists held over his head. He would turn right over and grab the head board without a word of complaint, while Brad had teased him by running just the tips of his fingers

over his lower back and buttocks until he'd squirmed and begged to be entered. That sort of thing from Schuldig or Yohji would have gotten the response of a wild cat, a good clawing swipe of a be-jeweled hand and a hissing, abusive swearing at.
Brad kept up the caresses until he, too, was up again. It never took him long, with his talent, anticipation was almost as good as viagra. On his other side, Schuldig drifted in a daze of satisfied sexual release.
Yohji considered something carefully, then reached to caress Brad's upper arm. "Bradley?" He asked softly.
Brad looked at him, in the middle of raising up Aya's thigh to get into him. "Yes?" He said coolly.
Yohji realized Brad already knew what he was about to ask and smiled wryly. Also that he was at this moment changing his mind. The man knew everything. It wasn't fair.
"Do him from behind." Yohji said, chancing it anyway. "Let me hold him."
"Yohji!" Aya protested angrily.
Brad looked down at him, considering this, caressing the pierced nipples with thier diamond studded rings on the firm mounds of muscle. Having them cut into him was half the pleasure of holding Aya.....
He looked at the blond again. Then sat up and getting a grip on Aya's arm, moved him over onto his side, so that Yohji could embrace him again.
Aya frowned and gave Yohji an 'I'm going to kill you look' while Brad made him put his right leg over Yohji's hip and moved into position again.
Yohji kissed him anyway, then gasped just a little in shock as Brad's hand grasped him from between Aya's legs, and briefly, the silken skin of the man's hard on was held with his own returning erection in a gentle caress. Then Brad moved away and eased into Aya, sighing softly with pleasure at how slick he was. Schuldig had confided to Yohji once that Brad had had too many woman to take his time with men. He liked them to be just as ready.
As Brad moved into Aya, stroking him inside, Aya was forced by default to hold onto and kiss Yohji with more enthusiasm then he normally spared for him. Sweet revenge.
And Brad knew it. The perversity of it turned him on even more. He kissed the back of his neck and murmured in his ear. "Be nice to him, Princess. He loves you. It should be Yohji in you now, doing this, not me."
"Bradley." Schuldig laughingly protested. "You're asking to get murdered in your sleep!"
Brad laughed, and loosing it, got a grip about Aya's waist, squeezing him painfully tight and banging into him as brutally as he could until he came, moments later, sinking his teeth into his beauty's shoulder.
Then he yanked out of him and slapped him on the ass in dismissal. "Come here, Yohji." He ordered, breathing hard, covered in sweat, pushing back his hair.
"Not if you're going to treat me like that." Yohji declined ruefully.

Brad gave Aya a push. "Move. No, Love, I want you on your back, so I can make love to you nice and slow."
Aya snarled in frustrated rage.
Brad swatted him again to make him move faster, then guided Yohji closer and slid down him to kiss his thighs lingeringly, and then his genitals.
"Why are you so mean to me!" Aya demanded, by now pushed well past being afraid of what Brad could do to him.
Brad half sat up and looked at him. "How often are you mean to Yohji, Aya? How often do you push him away and slap at his hand? How often do I have to order you to be good to him? Look at his chest! Doesn't seeing that scar do anything to you? The fact that they had to pull a bullet out of his heart meant for you?
"
"I never asked him to be in love with me!" Aya hissed angrily.
"How often have I seen you hold him and lay your head on him? Take him a cup of coffee, put extra food on his plate, smile at him when he's not looking? Can't you admit that you love him!" Brad said coldly.
Aya winced, tears welling. Rather then answer, he got off the bed and went to take a shower.
"Well, that was incredibly romantic and special." Schuldig started to get up as well.
"Stay put." Brad ordered, sinking down again to lay his head on Yohji's flat stomach. "Let him think about it." He kissed the smooth skin and then looked up at Yohji. "Still in the mood, Kitten?" He asked softly.
"Does it look like I'm not?" Yohji asked.
Brad smiled at the evidence, then caressed it. "Sometimes I get just a tiny little twinge of guilt." He said, moving to get between Yohji's long legs.
"Yes, but then you smack me and feel all better again." Schuldig commented.
"Too true." Brad sighed with an evil smirk.

Aya sat looking at the container case on the coffee table in the suite's living room.
Schuldig walked out, hair still towel dried damp from the shower. He sat down beside Aya on the sofa, looking at the case as he moved close and put an arm around him, then kissing him on the cheek. "I think you'd better be nice to Yohji all the time from now on, Sweetest."
Aya's mouth twitched, wanting to scowl out of habit, but his soul just wasn't behind it. "Am I really that mean to him?" He leaned on the german, glad for his comforting arm and the scent of his body.
"Yes." Schuldig said seriously. "It's a habit with you. You focus all your frustrations on him rather then get openly angry with me and Brad." He brushed strands of maroon hair back into place with his finger tips, looking at the japanese tenderly. "And because you know he'll just accept it from you. Because he loves you so much. It's twice as cruel, Aya. I don't know why Brad picked now

to make that clear to you, but you'd better really think about it. And do something to change it."
"Why now?" Aya asked. "Schuldig.....Is something wrong with Yohji?" he frowned now slightly, worried.
"Not that I know of." Schu said. "But Brad is shutting me out of his thoughts a lot lately and he seems to think now was a good time to deal with this. It could just be that he's having some time for himself, sorting out this mess he's in. I don't know. Just stop habitually shoving Yohji away."
Aya put both arms around Schuldig and kissed him, then rested his head against the copper flamed one. He sighed softly.
Then he asked it.
"Does Bradley really love me?" He whispered very quietly.
"Yes." Schuldig said.
"Don't lie to me, Schuldig." He begged.
"I'm not lying, Aya. But he loves Yohji, too, and you know how he is." he stroked the younger man's head gently and kissed his cheek.
Aya suddenly wanted to go to bed and just sleep. He was so tired now. He looked at the case again. "When are we going to be rid of all this, Schu? When is Esset finally going to be dead and gone forever?"
Schuldig frowned at the case himself. "Soon, Sweetheart." He said. "Come back to bed. I'll make Bradley be nice to you." He said with a smirk in his voice.
Aya smirked. "Don't bother." He said, kissing him. "I'll just hit him up for another trinket tomorrow when he's tired of having me cold shoulder him."
"Aya!" Schuldig protested in mock dismay, then laughed with him.

Chapter Forty
"The End, The Beginning"

"Why are we putting that thing into that man's hands?" Aya asked, enunciating each word as calmly and quietly as possible, despite a sudden growing need to grab Bradley by the head and bang it against the wall to try and knock some sense into him.
"Because." Brad told him. And that was all he told him. Deliberately. Sadistically, with no intent of elaborating.
"Schuldig." Aya moaned. "Make him stop!"
Schu took Aya by the shoulders and made him go sit down on the arm chair. "He knows what he is doing. Now behave."
The medical carrying case was now boxed up in run of the mill cardboard, a package to go by air, to Japan, addressed to Araki Masanori, to hold until their return.
Yohji felt at his shirt pocket....then gave up. No cigarettes. How many times a day was he going to find himself doing that?
"There is a reason I don't tell you everything and you will live with that reason." Brad stated.

He picked up the phone. "Moshi, moshi?"
"Araki?" Came that familiar voice
"Crawford, how is the vacation?" He sat back in the comfortably but thinly padded chair in his office, looking out the window at the fine day.
"Amazingly quiet." Brad's voice said dryly.
Araki laughed. How the man could handle that 'household' of his was beyond him.
"Then why bother to call me? Are you homesick already?" He chuckled. The man had always hated to leave Japan.
"I have a package to ship home." Bradley informed him. "I would like you to accept delivery of it. I'd rather not trouble the boys with it. It is of a rather sensitive nature and I'd rather not involve them."
"So.....what is in this package, my friend?" Araki said casually, but with an undertone of guardedness.
"Something that in the wrong hands----could be very dangerous to me." Brad said.
"You're the only one I can trust with this, Masa. I don't want the boys to even know it exists. The last thing they need to know right now, is that I might be in danger."
"And where will it be sent from?" Araki had no problem with this, simply concern for Crawford.
"Vienna. Once this is out of my hair, I can relax a little and enjoy this trip. Thank you, Masa, I appreciate this."
"We've been friends too long to be counting favors, Bradley. You enjoy your time off."

"Remember." Bradley warned. "Some one might try to get a hold of this package, so be very cautious."
"I will make certain nothing happens to it." Araki stated. What ever it was, if Crawford wanted it safe, it would be kept safe. That.....and he wanting nothing to happen to the man. "Enjoy your vacation." He said again.

Brad hung up the phone with a self satisfied little smirk.
"Bradley." Schuldig said. "What are you up to?"
"Masa will take care of the package." Brad looked at him, then reached to catch him by the wrists, to pull him close, holding his hands down by his sides. "Now let's get you that diamond." He said, looking into the green eyes he knew so well.
"What are you up to?" Schuldig repeated, determined.
Brad kissed him, not letting his wrists go until he felt him relax into it, kissing him back with a questioning tongue at his lips. Then he let go to allow him to put his arms around him and press close, moaning softly.
"Hi, guys!" Yohji said to remind them they weren't all alone.
"You two, the post office." Brad said. "You come with me to the jeweler's." He kissed Schu again.
"I don't want....." Schuldig held on.
"But I want to." Brad insisted.
Schuldig would rather have had sex then and there, but....
"Get the package, Yohji." Ran stated.
Yohji sighed and ambled over to pick it up. "Brad, are we really on vacation now?"
"Yes, Love." Brad said, turning Schuldig around and urging him to the door by his hips. "But that doesn't mean drop your guard."
"You're going to relax and have some fun?" Yohji double checked.
Brad looked back at him. "Yes." He said warningly.

"I don't think he even knows what fun is." Yohji said outside the post office, looking around at the fine day, hands in pockets and realizing....he hadn't a care in the world that was necessary to care about right now.
"What is fun, Yohji?" Ran asked. "Here we are, in a foreign country, barely speaking the language, and nothing to do but wonder around and look at old things or go clubbing. And it's too early to go clubbing." He frowned slightly.
"Then we will wonder around, and look at old things." Yohji pushed his sunglasses up his nose and walked down the steps.
Ran followed him, wondering where this was going to lead.

Certainly Aya's tastes were more exacting, but Brad knew by now what was what with a diamond, and the amber colored Marquise cut pendant nestled perfectly on his darling's chest.
"Danke, mein Mann." Schuldig said softly.

"It’s as off color and precious as you." Brad murmured in his ear, then stepped back to sign the slip for the credit transfer.
Schuldig looked in the mirror at it. It felt very strange to be wearing something like this. He was used to Aya, but this was very strange. At least he’d got his way and had only a moderately sized one, just about the half of his thumb, and so rich in color it would never be thought of as a ‘real’ diamond. The jeweler had been rather surprised at the request, but oddly enough, had happened to have some in stock due to a fashion designer’s consignment after a photo shoot.
The dirty job of spending money done, Brad came back to take him by the shoulders and look at him in the mirror. "Don’t let this get out of hand, Baby."

Schuldig smirked. "One is enough." He said coolly. He buttoned his shirt over it. "Now what?" He met those cocoa colored eyes in the mirror.
"Any where you want." Brad said.
"The whole city. Top to bottom, everything. And no complaining about how your feet hurt."
Brad smiled indulgently.

The military surplus catalogue was swiped out of his hands as he sat on the sofa pursuing it.
"Nico! Listen to me!"
He sighed. "I am listening. I was listening.....and listening, and listening...."
She swatted him up side his blond head. "Do not be impertinent!"
"Or what?" he inquired. "You’ll have Uncle Marco kill me and send me to the dog food plant?"
She caught him by the ear and made him look up at her. "You’re a very rude little boy, Nico. Some day, being smart isn’t going to save you!"
"Ouch!" He complained, wincing at the pain.
She let him go. "We will see how very smart you are."
"So what’s the big deal, anyway!" Her twenty-one year old, just graduated from college, cousin asked coolly, his ear stinging. "Some guy doesn’t want to date you. Get over it! Get another guy! Move on!"
"You weren’t listening." She accused.
"Well, no." He admitted. "It got boring after you said something about him having two eyes, one nose and a mouth or something." He took back the catalogue.

She held up her left hand. "Do you see this finger!" She demanded.
"No. If you mean the missing one." He said, brown eye ingenuous. "Which, I assume you do, given your tendency to over dramatize everything."
"Now pay attention, Nicholas." She hissed at him. "You say you want to make a big mark in this game. Taking out this man will make you. If you really are smart enough to take down Crawford with all your so-called genius, then I will

believe you can do what you say!"
"Of course I can." Nico said. "How smart can some jerk criminal be?" Well despite the fact that the man was smart enough not to want Paola.....
Paola momentarily considered pulling her hair, then his, then tried reason.
"Nico, my dear." She said very sweetly. "Read the god damned file!" She yelled at him.

"There you are, Nicky, darling." She tossed her keys and purse on the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room in the little box of a Vegas apartment.
He looked up. One thing about Mags. She pushed it to the hilt. Red hair, red lipstick, forties vintage style clothes, et al. He secretly referred to her as 'my nutcase girlfriend'. "And where were you?"
"Out." she said with an innocent smile.
He sighed. He swore to god she'd been hit on the head with a VHS of Hayworth's "Gilda" as a child and the damage was permanent.
He got up to walk over to her, looking her in the eyes. "Mags? Earth to Mags?" He pressed a finger to her nose. "Come in, Mags."
She laughed. "What?" She dropped the act.
"Did you get the parts?" He asked, as if to a small child.
"Yes, Nicky." She sighed.
He kissed her on the lips, despite the blood red lipstick. "Good girl. Where are they?"
"In my purse." She said, thinking how funny he looked with red lips now.
He grabbed it up and opened it, looking in, then made a sound of annoyance, dumping it out on to the counter. Handkerchief, compact, lipstick, cig case, lighter, wallet, change purse, small pistol, small plastic box with micro chips in it.....which he grabbed and kissed with a little more passion then he'd kissed her, then opened to inspect the contents.
She ruefully smiled and put everything back into the handbag, which...oddly enough....actually held everything. "So where were you?"
"My crazy Cousin Paola's." He said, going over to where his computer was partially disemboweled.
"And?" She prompted.
"We have a job."
"Oh, Nicky!" She exclaimed, back in full 'Rita' mode. "That's just wonderful!"
"Call for pizza, will you, Mags?" He drawled, already half way back into his own little world. "And tell Mark to get his butt over here right after work."

It had taken nearly a week for the package to arrive. Masa made sure to put it in the cubic meter sized safe under a certain room's floor boards and ordered the household guards to keep an extra caution up because of it, but not why. It was fairly small, and heavy. His curiosity was one thing, but his loyalty to his

friend was another.
As long as he'd known Crawford, the man was involved in things that were simply outside the range of normal business. Things happened around Crawford that would give a sane man the urge to avoid him and his strange dealings. But in this business.....who was he to think strange of his friend's odd life style and the peculiarities that surrounded Crawford?
That night he was troubled by odd dreams. As if his mind was again set on remembering every thing that had ever passed between him and Bradley. And by what was in the package. Something terrible....he was certain of it....something horribly dangerous to his American.....
Until he woke with a start, to Kai's shaking him.
"Masa!" He said, worried. "Why such bad dreams about that gaigen?"
"What?" Masanori said, still not quite out of the dream yet....
"You keep saying 'Brad' over and over." Kai complained. "What are you dreaming!"

He sighed. "Nothing, Kai, it's nothing. Just bad dreams. I keep feeling that a friend's life is in trouble, but it's all nonsense." He shook his head. "Go back to sleep."

Kirchner opened his eyes.
What ever was in that package...He grinned to himself. So that was why Crawford had gone to Europe.
To simply walk in and lay hands on the thing would be to easy.
How much better to be there when Crawford arrived to collect it, and take it right out from under his nose?
He laughed heartily at the idea. Then changed his mind to an even better plan.
To be there WHEN he arrived to collect it, with what ever it was in his hand.

Nagi sat up, glaring at the alarm clock. Why was it going off?
"Nagi..." Omi complained.
He turned it off, wracking his brain.
Oh, yeah.
Brad and the guys would be home soon. The week and a half was passed. He'd set the alarm to go off when their flight should have arrived. And then stayed up a bit too late....
"Mmm....Go back...sleep." Omi muttered, pulling him closer and nuzzling into his neck.
He thought about it. Then fought the urge. "No....." he sighed, escaping with difficulty. He wanted to be up when Brad came home. He had to go make coffee and get a snack ready. Schuldig had said Brad had been very good this time and gotten plenty of rest and relaxation. He would make certain Brad was glad to be home, since it meant returning to work.
He went down stairs to the kitchen. There were fresh sheets and all on the bed, and new flowers through out the house, which he knew Aya would fuss over but he

didn’t care, the shopping was done, everything was perfect. All he had to do was turn on the coffee maker and pour hot water over the tea when they came in the door.
He had all the new inquiries neatly sorted out into arrangements of type and date, and the reports of how the speed gang wipe out job had gone. It would be some time before the gangs reformed out of new members. Only the most cowardly had managed to survive. All the bills were taken care of, everything was done.
He was sitting in the kitchen blinking at the faint touch of dawn’s gray in the sky when he heard the door open. He got up and pressed the button on the coffee maker, then went out to greet them.
"Hey, brat." Schuldig said by way of greeting as he slipped off his shoes.
"Whore." Nagi said coolly. "Welcome home. How was the flight?"
"Boring, monotonous, bumpy over the sea, and thankfully, over with." Brad gave him a tight hug, then let him go, heading for the kitchen and the smell of fresh coffee. "Have things been quiet here?"
"Kirchner keeps hanging around. But he never does anything." Nagi said. "It’s nerve wracking."
"I think he intends it to be." Brad said, a little bothered about this. Nagi had not said a word to him about it in phone calls.
Ran hung up Brad’s over coat and then his own. "When do we get that package from that Yakuza?" He asked.
"Not yet." Brad called back over his shoulder. "It’s quite safe where it is."
Yohji sighed, looking around. It was good to be home.....but.....
"Stop it, Yohji." Schuldig warned. He’d ordered Nagi to get rid of all the cigarettes in the house, even the ones he himself had hidden away.
"It’s going to be hard, Baby. Some of my best memories here involve having a smoke with you on the balcony. Now what excuse do we have?"
Schuldig smiled, moving to kiss him. "Sex." He said.
"Ah." Yohji said as if finally seeing the light.
"So, basically if we want to fuck on the balcony from now on we just say, let’s go outside and fuck on the balcony?" Ran said.
"Get in here!" Brad yelled from the kitchen.
"Talk about a mood breaker." Schuldig muttered.
Yohji looked at Ran. Which he had been more this little vacation then ‘Aya’, out of bed. It had done him some good as well. To just detox from the stress.
Brad was sitting at the table, while Nagi got the coffee. He had his glasses off and on the table before him, rubbing his face tiredly. He’d slept again on the jet, but still, he would have liked to have more. And was going to get it after this little meeting was over. He took the cup Nagi put in front of him and had a sip. "It’s a good thing Starbuck’s basically took over the world. Will you go shake Omi out of bed, Nagi, we have to have a little meeting here."
"He’s really tired." Nagi told him.
Brad looked at him with a wry smile. "No excuses. Now go get him or I’ll send

Ran to do it."
"Oh, let me." Ran said. "I know just how to scare him sleepless for a week....."

"No!" Nagi protested, and went to wake the other youth up.
"How?" Yohji asked, mildly curious.
Ran smiled over his cup of tea, once again choosing to stand, leaning back on the counter. Being stuck sitting on long flights always made him prone to standing. "I'm not telling you. Schuldig, don't you dare."
"Oh, Sweetest, that's evil!" Schuldig purred at his idea.
Yohji sighed heavily and leaned his forehead on Brad's shoulder. "I want a cigarette." He said.
"I know, Love." Brad said. "It's going to be difficult."
Ran looked at Omi as Nagi marched him in and sat him down. "How can you wear Hello Kitty and be so debauched, Omi?" He stopped just short of saying 'chan'.
"I like Hello Kitty." Omi said, putting his head down on his arms on the table.
"Have you no respect for a Japanese cultural icon?"
"I'm asking if you do." Ran said.
"Can we get this over with?" Schuldig asked. "I want sex and I want sleep, since I can't smoke." he glared at Yohji.
Brad put his glasses back on and sat back, sipping his coffee. "I've had a vision." he said calmly. Then grinned.
"Why do I have a cold chill every time he says that?" Ran asked, then looked at the bottom of his empty tea cup and tried the small pot Nagi had used to brew it in. There was another cup.

Kirchner had had no trouble at all getting hold of the package. The boy was so accustomed by now to do what ever he ordered, it took little more then a few minutes to have him bring the package out to the wall along the west side of the property and heft it over.
He took it over to the car and got in, setting it on the seat next to him. What ever it was, Crawford had made certain Araki would guard it.
He considered taking it back to the hotel, but with Crawford's talent, it was best to deal with it immediately and be prepared. He took out his pocket knife and slit open the taping.

Schuldig opened his eyes with a big grin. "Pop goes the weasel." He said, that being his only comment on the vision he'd shared from Brad's mind with the others.
"You're certain that it's actually happened?" Ran asked, ever the skeptic.
"Very." Brad stated.
"What an idiot." Ran sipped his tea.
"Nagi, phone." Brad said.
Nagi got up and went to get the cordless off the wall and hand it to him just as it rang, then sat back down to resume laying his head on Omi's shoulder.

"Good morning, Masa." He said, mildly amused.
"Damn it, Bradley! Someone's walked right into my compound and taken your damned package!" Araki was angry as hell.
"Call off the panic." Brad advised gently. "I knew that was going to happen."
"You set me up to dishonor?" Araki was shocked.
"No, old friend, I set up my target to be destroyed." Brad spoke soothingly.
"Masa.....Anger leads to bad decisions made in haste, who taught me that?"
"What the hell just happened, then!" Araki demanded. "My guards saw nothing! Kai's been out in his shorts barefoot and muddy and doesn't remember a thing! The tatami are up in the safe room and the safe is open! Kai doesn't even KNOW the combination to that safe! No one knows that number but ME!"
"Masa!" Brad said sharply. "Calm down!"
There was hard breathing on the other end of the line as Araki tried to decide what to yell at him next or not at all. He hated it when Crawford threw his own rules at him. And yet it amused him to have him do so.
"Along what appears to be the west wall of the property you will find a car, gold colored, I don't see the make. Inside it is a mess. You would do well to have it towed off and sunk off the coast. You understand? Don't even try to open the damned thing, just sink it. There is a very dangerous biohazard involved."
"Kami Sama." Araki said.
"Very much so." Brad said. "Make certain your men understand. Sink the car at sea."
"Hai." Araki said.
"You haven't disappointed me, Masa. You've done me a great service. Now go wash that pet of your's feet off and put him back to bed." Brad just had to tease.
Araki hung up on him.
He laughed and handed the phone back to Nagi.
Ran set the empty cup aside and walked the few steps over to take Brad's hand, tugging gently. "I think putting someone to bed is a very good idea."
Brad looked up at him, curious for once.
But it happened, he saw the change now, subtle as it was. It was in the man's eyes as the slight smile on those silvery lilac tinted lips joined the very rare hazeled brown blue that made plum purple.
Schuldig got hold of the back of Brad's chair and pulled it out, unsettling a half asleep Yohji. "Nagi, get Omi off the table, we need it." he teased.
"Damn it, Schuldig." Nagi said, knowing damn well he was lying.
"I'm going, I'm going...." Omi got up and draped his arms about Nagi's shoulders. "Back to bed, Koi. I want to sleep for a week."
Trapped between Aya and Schuldig, Brad realized something.
"Eh, mien Mann, do you remember?" Schuldig purred near his ear, catching that thought.
He held Aya tighter, running a hand down his back, enjoying the fit of his smaller body into his own. He took the un-adorned right earlobe into his lips

and inhaled the sweet scent of cologne and flesh, growing hard immediately. He managed not to bite that bit of sweetness off, letting it go to kiss Aya's neck just below it.
Aya shivered, wanting him now, right now.
"He finally remembered." Yohji said, amazed.
"MMmmm, Bradley, buy me something nice and expensive for our anniversary." Aya purred. "So you don't forget next year."
"Only you could work a loss of something for profit so damned long past expiration, Princess." Brad scoffed.
Aya smiled wickedly up into his eyes. "Punish me. Fuck me senseless." He purred.

That was all any of them needed.

"Nicky, your cousin is whacked." Mags was reading the file.
He looked up from his work reprogramming the computer with the new hardware.
"Mark, why are you painting my girl friend's toe nails?"
The tall, lanky black haired youth was sitting on the floor, her foot on the coffee table, toes spread by cotton balls, painting away carefully and with concentration.
"Because I told him to." Mags said.
"Mark?" Nico said, wanting an answer.
"Because she told me to." Mark said.
"You know, I'm trying very hard to take you seriously, Mags, the best you could do is meet me half way." He said in mild exasperation, his excessively retro sixties reading glasses half down his nose.
"But darling, I don't want to be taken seriously." she said with another one of her "for the camera" smiles.
"Can't we all just get along?" Mark said, being an ass.
"Will you paint my toenails next?" Nico asked coolly.
"God no, you have hairy toes." Mark stated, and blew on the wet polish, his breath tickling Mags, foot and making her giggle.
"So what does it say, Mags." Nico made an attempt to bring her back to reality.
She looked at the pictures again, taken with a black and white 35mm film. "It says your cousin is a an obsessive bitch with delusions of grandeur who can't take no for an answer."
"About this Crawford person, Mags." He watched the files load up in the computer all neat and tidy. "Remind me to light another candle to Bill Gates."
"Mmm, Mr. Bradley Crawford's de---lish--ious." Was Mags' opinion.
"Margaret Anne Du Chesney, will you please call home!" Nico demanded, loosing his temper.
She briefly glared at him. "He's an international criminal. Assassin, thief, body guard and recovery agent. He seems to earn most of his money as a go-for for the Yakuza gangs, disposing of their enemies, and stealing back their

property. He’s also actually.....and this is what really gets me.....actually employed by the Japanese Police department.....to deal with criminals they can’t legally pursue or prosecute! Fucking one man C.I.A. Except....for the fact that...he seems to be fucking at least three." She looked puzzled, reading the file.
"Eh?" Nico said, blinking.
"He’s gay." Mark said, putting the last dab of paint on and closing up the bottle of blood red polish. "He’s gay, and your bonehead cousin can’t deal."
"And Uncle Marco let’s her get away with this?" Nico was frankly amazed.
"Nicky, Darling, I think your Uncle Marco let’s Dona Paola be distracted so that HE can run the business." Mags stated. "And I think if we go after this GAWD of a man, we are so much dead meat." She made a kiss at the close up pic of Crawford’s face.
"I’m so jealous." Mark kissed the bottom of her big toe.
She smiled at him. "Look, Nicky, see how boyfriends are supposed to behave?" she said, looking at him proudly.
"Yeah, right." Nico said, not the least impressed. "Mark, beer me."
"Sure." He got up and went to get three cans out of the fridge, stepping over the empty pizza boxes and further empty cans. "Have you got that thing running yet?" He tossed one to Mags, who caught it expertly, and walked over to lean over Nico’s chair, setting the beer down and looking at the screen.
"I may have over stuffed it’s capacity. But we’ll see what happens when I put it to work." Nico sighed and opened his beer.
Mark ruffed up his tawny blond mop. "To the extreme, remember, Pal? Do or die trying." He opened his own brew and guzzled half of it.
"Right now, I’d say the scales are tipped more toward ‘die trying.’" Nico said mildly.
"Oh, for god sakes, what’s life if you don’t live it?" Mags asked. "By the way, in case anyone is interested, tomorrow the rent is due. Time to hit another casino."
"I’m too young to feel this old." Nico commented.
Mark patted him on the shoulder. "It’s either techno crime or ‘do you want fries with that’. S’up to you."
"Because lord knows, he’s too short to be a show girl." Mags sighed.
He shot her a narrow eyed look that had he been told was his only resemblance to his cousin would have made him never do it again. "Mark, hand me the remote...."

"I keep telling, you, bro....it doesn’t work on girls."

Aya turned to press closer to Brad, covered in sweat and cum and not caring one bit.
"Was that good, precious?" Brad asked, kissing him.
"mmm." Aya whimpered, still trembling from orgasm.

Yohji ran a hand down Aya's side and into the crook of his leg and crotch. "I think he's done."
"Just a bit more...." Schuldig said, drawing his hips away from Brad's to put his mouth over Aya's limp organ.
Aya groaned. "Please....no more...."
"Schuldig?" Brad inquired.
(I want to suck him dry.)
"No....." Aya breathed.
Yohji slipping fingers into him, then felt himself growing again. (Schu?)
(Get in to him.)
(What are you doing to us, you pest?) He willingly complied though.
(Hmm.....stimulating your libidinous centers...) His smile could be 'felt' in all their heads as an bio-electrical pulse that left a tingle in their nipples and crotches.
"Ahhh!" Aya protested as Yohji stuffed into his slick and raw entrance, then reached back with one hand to clasp Yohji's hip, the other in Schu's hair.
"Well, I'm not being left out in the cold...." Brad moved down on the bed to position himself behind Schuldig as he sucked on Aya's suddenly recovered sex organ.
"Gott im Himmel!" Schuldig let go long enough to gasp as he was penetrated yet again, then went down harder on Aya.
Brad was quite happy with all the mindless fucking going on. Somehow it was much more easy to relax here at home in his own bedroom. He ran a hand along Aya's thigh and looked at Yohji who was holding Aya from behind and kissing his cheek The term too much of a good thing came to mind just before he gave Schuldig everything he had.
Aya yowled and Brad realized that Schuldig had got so deep into the man's mind, he was responding for Schuldig, his own mind so over loaded...and Schul's mouth being full....
Schuldig swallowed and gasped for air, then nuzzled his face into the maroon patch of curls and cum. Yohji sighed and slid out.
"No more!" Aya gasped, and this time it was an order.
Brad moved back up to kiss him. "Happy, Princess?" He asked softly, caressing the muscles of his chest.
"Yes!" Aya breathed, then kissed him fervently.
Brad drew a deep breath and let it out slow, rolling over to lay on his back and putting his arm up over his head on the pillow. He felt Schuldig shifting to lay on his other side, so that he could sleep touching him, and rest. Yohji would be more than glad to have Aya near for a change.
Just as he drifted into sleep, a passing vision came to mind, taunting at him to pursue it.
A tawny blond with the face of a serious child and a grown man's eyes, true brown eyes, as if looking right at him with an odd interest, but then the vision

showed him it was more looking at a computer screen with information about him on it.
"Hmm." He said, before he fell asleep. What was all that about?

THE END

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