

VG

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A Variable Geo fanfiction. It follows the events in the life of Naoki Hayami, events which for the most part are neither fortunate nor pleasant. It is long, it is complicated, and it is at times somewhat disturbing--please pay attention to the warnings.

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1 - Prologue

Disclaimers: The only characters in this entire story that do not belong to me are Reimi, Washio, Kaori, Miranda, Chiho, the Master, the Prime Minister, and the board of VG directors. EVERYBODY else is my own, including Midori, Reimi's daughter. The idea of VG itself does not belong to me, but I have expanded and explained it greatly, as is my wont. The opening and closing songs before each part are from the anime.

Warnings: This is big! Those of you who haven't noticed the warnings next to the name, take heed of them here. This is a heavy-duty fanfiction. There is violence, there is sex, there is rape, there is nudity—LOTS of nudity. I try to keep the description under control, but description is my natural forte. If you have issues with wrestling, violence, torture, torment, and/ or gay sex (both consensual and not) then you may have issues with this fanfic.

The warnings have been given. Let the fanfic begin!

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Prologue

After the rather untimely termination of the last Variable Geo tournament (nobody was sure exactly why the tournament had ended without the declaration of a winner—there were rumors about aliens, but that was surely as ridiculous as the rumors that Jahana Reimi's deceased mother Miranda had had something to do with it,) angry letters from fans and participators of Variable Geo began to pour in from all over the globe. Women said that they had been denied their chance to win ten million dollars and choice real estate and they had entered fair and square (or not) and had fought their way to various points and suffered various indignities and now the tournament was cancelled?! Men said that VG was the best thing since the Internet and now they had nothing to watch on T.V. Several lesbians said that it was the best kind of job in the world whether you won or lost—the friends you made and the marvels you saw could stay with you for life—and why in hell was the Jahana Company discontinuing it?

As letters became more and more dire and more and more dangerous (Reimi's secretary opened one soaked in ether and was knocked out cold for two days) Jahana Reimi—who was very busy with her company and her husband and her five-year old daughter—finally could not take the pressure any more, and six years after the end of the last VG tournament the Jahana Company announced the revival of the sport.

The first year went perfectly, just as planned. However, slowly at first, a trickle of letters began to come to the Jahana Company asking—why were men not allowed to participate?

The trickle did not stay a trickle for long. After the second year went by an all-out ocean that made the letters about reviving Variable Geo look like a swimming pool in comparison came crashing into the Jahana Company. Women said that they were getting very tired both of seeing other women strip and of their husbands watching it and it would serve those same husbands right if there were some hot men in the tournament to make them become jealous of their wives. Men said that the tournament was sexist and obviously biased against men, and therefore Reimi must be the same way because she was the head of it. Many gay men said that they were jealous of their lesbian friends who got to fight for money

and have such a good time, and several more lesbians said that their gay friends were going crazy imagining a VG bout with men instead of women.

There was no time for the letters to get dangerous. The sheer number of them was so great that Reimi had to give in before the third year of VG was over, simply so that her employees were not swimming around in the great masses of accumulating letters. So at the end of the third VG tournament it was announced that, in the fourth, men would be allowed to participate.

The world that day went into paroxysms as though in labor. Many of the people who had sent letters to Reimi had never really thought that she would concede to their demand. But Reimi was older now, not quite as robust as she used to be, and fully fed up both with the letters and with her daughter, who was only nine and already wanted to join VG.

Surprisingly enough, the fourth tournament passed and not one man entered.

At this Reimi snapped. She forced herself onto every T.V. and radio channel that had any association with VG in any way and passed out a very annoyed message to the globe—if no men entered the stupid tournament than she would recant her earlier decision to let them join! It was bad enough that they had demanded it in the first place but they had and they'd got it and by God they'd better take advantage of it!!!

Two hundred men signed up that day.

So the fifth tournament went by, and the year turned, and became a new year. Although having men participate was still looked at askance by some, and was uncomfortable for many, it was slowly becoming integrated into the conception of the sport.

And so the sixth VG tournament began.

2 - The Enlightenment of the Gods, Part One

The Enlightenment of the Gods, Part One

Opening Song: I Want to Be a Wind

Kako to mirari o narabekaete mo
Kotae wa mitsukaranai kara
likagen joonetsu gomakasanaide
Saisho no steeji ni katooy
Chansu wa itsudemo
Shinjiru kimocho no
Tsuyosa ni hirei suru
Nido te naide, kaze ni naritai
Kizutsukeau yori mo atsusa kisotte
Kimi o makikomu, kaze ni naritai
Owari no nai yume o ima
Oikaketau ne

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Cream was a little, not-much-talked about place hidden in the shadier section of the city. With a brothel on one side and a tattoo parlor on the other, it was hardly the kind of place most people ever visited anyway. Anyone who did visit did so with as much secrecy as they could muster.

Cream was a place where you could get a small selection of food, a passable selection of drinks, and a wide selection of men. It wasn't exactly a restaurant, and it wasn't exactly a brothel, but something in between, with a mildly dinner-and-a-show atmosphere that was darkened and sharpened by its mostly male attendance.

For all that it was small and shady and the kind of place nobody wanted to be seen going to, a fair amount of people went—not for the drinks, and definitely not for the food, but for the boys, who were expensive but almost always worth it.

This was definitely the reason Yano Tsuyosa came.

* * *

"The VG Champion returnsh," said a man at the bar, surrounded by mountains of empty glasses, swirling the contents of another in his hand. "Whatcha back for?"

"How long have you been drunk?" Tsuyosa asked.

"A week and a half." The man raised his glass in celebration and dumped the liquid down his throat. "I think I pashed out yeshterday...or that two days ago? Don't matter, I'm shtill going shtrong."

"You astound me, Genda-san," Tsuyosa said, sitting down next to him. "I don't see why a man as rich as you are is drinking himself to death in a place like this..."

"caush I can," Genda Akio answered, swinging his hand purposefully at the shelves behind the bar on the off-chance that the bartender had turned into one of them, managing to knock over four empty glasses at once. "Could drink here the resht of my life. Will, too. You wait...shomeday I'll be all alcohol

and not water and die, and then I'll be with Shakra again..."

"Ah yes, your wife." Tsuyosa quietly beckoned the confused—looking barkeep towards Genda. "I suppose drinking yourself to death is one way to go."

"Shome people ush gunsh," Genda proclaimed dramatically, "shome people ush pillsh, but I, my friend, ush alho—aklo—alokol. Three more Shupesheals, shir, and another bottle of sake. Be with my wife in no time."

"I'm sure," Tsuyosa said.

"Something for you, sir?" the barkeep asked.

"No drinks." Tsuyosa smiled slightly. "Bring me your newest kid...I'd like to try him out."

"He's quite expensive, sir," said the bartender, leering unpleasantly.

Tsuyosa folded his arms and leaned them forward onto the counter. "You know me. Since when has money been an issue with me?"

"Well, you won't regret this one, sir, and no mistake," the barkeep said. "He's just come in a few days ago, and he's a keeper. Stacked something insane, that one is, puts you in mind of that surfer star Ryusaki."

"That good, huh?" Tsuyosa mused.

"I'll get him, sir." The old barkeep hurried off.

"I don't undershtand you," Genda said conversationally. "Watsh the appeal? Ev`time you come here, you end up shpending...shpending..." He gulped down something from a random bottle, probably about as unsure about what it was as Tsuyosa, "shpending the night with a boy."

Tsuyosa grinned at Genda. "I'm sick and twisted and sadistic that way."

"Ish...ish...it makesh no shensh," Genda grumbled, knocking over a few more glasses for emphasis.

"I love it," Tsuyosa murmured. "Having sex with a hard, innocent young boy, dominating him until he knows his body doesn't belong to himself anymore. Until it's mine."

Genda looked Tsuyosa up and down with a serious expression slurred by drunkenness. Tsuyosa was in his late twenties, with straight brown hair that fell to his collar and dark brown eyes, lit to glittering with a rising anticipation. He was tall and heavily muscled, his skin pressed against his light shirt and jeans with the volume of muscle that filled it. If you looked up "male" in the dictionary, there could be no better picture next to the definition.

Genda shrugged and turned back to his drinks. "You need to get a girl, shir."

Tsuyosa decided to ignore this. But then there was a clumping on the stairs, and the barkeep came back into view, literally dragging with him a boy, and Tsuyosa's attention immediately focused.

The boy whom the barkeep had by the arm was of only average height and average weight, probably not even quite twenty yet. But he was indeed, as the barkeep had said, a keeper. Tsuyosa could tell now even with his clothes still on. His muscles were wiry, but hard and lean, marking ridges in his tight T-shirt as he tried to resist the man pulling him to the bar. He had short, unruly hair that was mostly red, but at the same time streaked with amber and honey and scarlet and gold and crimson, forming a shining, colorful mane that Tsuyosa itched to drag his fingers through. Some person, either practical or provocative, had forced him to wear jeans a few sizes too small, so the muscles in his legs were clearly visible as he tried to stand his ground. And most promisingly of all, despite the best efforts of the jeans and the shirt to hide it, there was a hugely distended bulge in the jeans that looked like it might be enough for several people to enjoy, even if Tsuyosa was one of them.

"Excellent," Tsuyosa said softly, feeling a familiar, throbbing ache in his groin. "Have fun, Genda."

"U2," Genda answered, busily decimating a shot of The Special and not really paying any attention.

"Oh, I will," Tsuyosa murmured, standing up. "I will."

The barkeep shoved the boy forward. "Satisfactory, Yano-san?" he asked, glaring at the boy. "His name's Naoki. Take`m upstairs and do whatcha like, short o` castrating him of course `cause that

makes him useless to us.”

Tsuyosa was about to say that there were much better things to do with a boy like this than castrate him when somebody blared, “Yano-san? Ya-no-san? Yano-san the VG Champ?”

Tsuyosa looked around, and saw somebody he didn’t know standing up at a table. His friends were trying to pull him down, but it looked like he’d had one drink too many for tonight, because he shook them off like flies and stomped over to Tsuyosa.

“Yes?” Tsuyosa said.

“Are...you...that...Yano...san?” the man asked slowly and clearly, as though Tsuyosa was hard of either hearing or understanding.

“Yes,” Tsuyosa said.

“I’m in VG too,” the man said, hitting himself on the chest. “VG Senshi Ikeda Kyuso. I’ve always wanted to see if you’re really tough as you act, or just another pretty face.”

Tsuyosa concealed his annoyance at being interrupted as best he could. “Forgive me for saying this, Ikeda-san, but I really don’t give a damn what you want to see.”

“Oh yeah?” Ikeda pulled out his gold-colored VG card and brandished it in Tsuyosa’s face. “What if I say I’m gonna challenge you, huh? Huh?”

“I’d really rather you didn’t, seeing as I have other plans at the moment,” Tsuyosa replied evenly.

“Yeah, I see,” Ikeda said, looking Naoki up and down in a blatantly voyeuristic way. “How `bout this, then. We fight over the kid. Winner gets him all night.”

Tsuyosa was about to say no and drag Naoki out of the room before Ikeda could actually directly state his challenge, but then he paused. Fighting always got his sex drive going. Especially depending on what he could do to the other guy. The idea of having this Naoki was devilishly tempting, but having him while warmed up from a fight?

What an interesting prospect.

“All right,” Tsuyosa said.

The barkeep looked a bit nervous. “Ah, um, gentlemen, um, there is no VG ring in here...”

“That’s okay,” Tsuyosa said, indicating a wrestling cage that was currently standing woefully empty, everybody having abandoned wrestling for VG years ago. “We can use that instead.”

“Good,” Ikeda rumbled, brushing past Tsuyosa and heading for the cage. “I’ll lend you a thought when I’ve got that boy between my thighs.”

Tsuyosa didn’t say anything to this. He cracked his knuckles and gave Genda his wallet and VG card. “Hold onto these.”

Genda was downing his third shot of The Special and probably wouldn’t have heard a brass band, let alone Tsuyosa.

“Ready?” Tsuyosa asked, stepping into the cage.

“For that boy,” Ikeda answered, charging.

Tsuyosa sized up Ikeda in a heartbeat as the man ran at him. It was obvious from Ikeda’s build that he was an ex-wrestler who went to VG when his sport became obsolete. Tsuyosa had fought more of these than he bothered to count. He knew that Ikeda was ready to sweep his arms out to grab Tsuyosa whether he tried to evade right or left, grab him and probably put him into a suplex. So Tsuyosa went neither right nor left. At the last possible second, he went down.

Ikeda suddenly found his legs in the air and his head cracking against the ground as Tsuyosa kicked his legs out from underneath him. The ex—wrestler saw stars, and shortly he probably saw suns and moons too as Tsuyosa kicked him unmercifully in the balls. Ikeda doubled up, hands between his legs, gasping like a beached fish.

Tsuyosa stood there momentarily, wondering if this had ended the fight or not. But then with startling speed and strength and a far more startling recovery, Ikeda swept out his arm and knocked Tsuyosa

over.

By the time Tsuyosa got back on his feet, Ikeda was back on his, clearly in pain but strong enough to continue. Tsuyosa was mildly surprised, but not at all put out. That kick he had planted in the man's groin had gotten his blood pumping, and he could feel his pants start to bulge. This would be a good warm-up indeed.

He went down and out to evade Ikeda's next charge, dropping to the ground and rolling out of the way. Ikeda's momentum took him forward a few more steps, and by that time Tsuyosa had gotten around behind him. Tsuyosa punched him in the small of the back and sent him reeling into the side of the cage—then the VG champion jumped into the air and delivered a powerful spinning kick between Ikeda's shoulder blades.

Ikeda was slammed up into the cage with a roar of pain. He whirled around, his nose broken and bleeding, and Tsuyosa landed another kick, this one into his solar plexus. Winded, Ikeda fell back and slid down the side of the cage. Just because he could, Tsuyosa kicked him in the groin again, this time much harder.

"Had enough?" Tsuyosa asked with mock solicitation.

"Have you?" Ikeda countered breathlessly, and with another inhuman effort he raised his fist and punched Tsuyosa between his legs.

The only reason Tsuyosa did not rip Ikeda apart with his bare hands the second he got his breath back—something he was entirely capable of doing—was that the sudden, unforeseen danger to his balls had set his blood on fire. Tsuyosa was aroused now, both as a fighter and as a man, and Ikeda's usefulness as a warm-up was at its end.

Ikeda lumbered to his feet, swaying slightly, breathing hard, but clearly still ready to fight.

"You're lucky," Tsuyosa said, very softly, "I'm not going to kill you for that."

And suddenly Tsuyosa's body became wreathed in golden fire, and in the space of a single breath he spun around once and slammed his fist into Ikeda's side with the force of a bullet train.

Ikeda was slammed so violently against the floor that he probably suffered a concussion, at the very least. This was Tsuyosa's Hellfire Lariat, his specialty, his signature move, and so far, nobody in VG had ever stood up to it and won.

Cream burst into cheers. Everybody in the entire bar (except Genda) had been watching the fight, and almost to a man they had been on Tsuyosa's side the entire time. Tsuyosa had not been crowned the VG Champion of the previous year for nothing, and they all knew it.

Leaving Ikeda where he lay for his friends to pick up, Tsuyosa left the cage and walked back to the barkeep and Naoki, rubbing his balls lightly through his jeans to make sure that Ikeda's glancing, but powerful, blow hadn't done anything...interfering. It hadn't—his gut still ached from the contact, but his balls just felt electrically sensitive, which very well might prove to be a bonus instead of an obstacle.

"I claim my prize," Tsuyosa said, looking at Naoki.

The boy looked back at Tsuyosa, his face carefully expressionless, but his eyes both angry and afraid. Tsuyosa noticed that his eyes were purple, like large and beautiful amethysts, and sensed that beneath the anger and fear, there was a glimmer of grudging admiration.

"Enjoy `im," the barkeep said, pushing Naoki towards Tsuyosa.

Tsuyosa grabbed Naoki's arms, and almost shivered at the feel of the muscles beneath his skin. This body, this strong, slender, beautiful body, was his now, to do whatever he wanted with. All night long.

But then Naoki spoke, hurriedly and loudly.

"I challenge you too."

A hush fell inside of Cream.

“What?” Tsuyosa asked, sure he had misheard.

“I challenge you too,” Naoki said again, his voice clear in the silence. “To VG. For the right to have me.”

Tsuyosa stared at him for a moment, and then, suddenly, the logic fell into place, and the VG champion could have applauded the boy for it. If Tsuyosa refused, he would get Naoki, but lose his reputation—a Champion turning down a challenge from a prostitute couldn’t hold the respect of the title if the story was bruited about. Ikeda he could have denied—Naoki, he didn’t dare. But if he accepted, he would have to fight Naoki—and if he wanted him in good condition for the night, he couldn’t hit him too hard, while Naoki would be under no such restraint. Therefore, he would have to let Naoki win, in which case the boy got to stay alone with himself, and Tsuyosa lost his night.

It was well-thought out. There was only one flaw. What the kid obviously didn’t realize was that Tsuyosa knew a few different ways to win without hurting him—and one of them was right up this alley.

“All right, kid,” Tsuyosa said easily. “I accept your challenge.”

Naoki’s eyes widened. Tsuyosa could tell he hadn’t been expecting such quick acquiescence.

“Shall we?” Tsuyosa asked, and he steered Naoki towards the cage where Ikeda still lay unconscious. Ikeda’s friends jumped up and hurriedly towed him out of the way.

“Ready?” Tsuyosa asked.

Naoki clenched his fists, inhaled deeply, and flung his hands open towards Tsuyosa.

From Naoki’s heart exploded a blazing scarlet phoenix made out of chi, the same force Tsuyosa tapped into for his Hellfire Lariat. But this was on a whole nother level. The phoenix blazed like a funeral pyre and flew at Tsuyosa, letting out a challenging screech. Tsuyosa dodged, but the phoenix’s head turned, and its beak lightnined down to peck Tsuyosa’s leg.

It hurt quite a lot. Tsuyosa now had to applaud not only the kid’s idea, but his experience. Where had he learned to shape chi like this? He’d better finish this quickly, before the phoenix pecked something vital. To either his life or his fun.

Ignoring his leg, Tsuyosa got up and ran towards Naoki. As he expected, the phoenix soared overhead and landed between the two of them with another screech. Tsuyosa fainted to the left, and just after he took one step he threw himself backwards onto the ground.

Naoki and his phoenix had both taken the bait. The phoenix’s beak hit the floor where Tsuyosa would have been if he had taken one more step. But Tsuyosa rolled, somersaulted, and was back on his feet, behind the phoenix and in front of Naoki.

The phoenix’s head pulled up and turned around, but it was too late for Naoki. Tsuyosa almost flew forward—Naoki stepped back and hit the side of the cage—he tried to get out of the way, but Tsuyosa grabbed him by the front of the shirt, pulled himself so close that their faces almost touched, and shoved his hand down Naoki’s pants.

It was one of the better experiences of Tsuyosa’s life. His fingers closed around the redhead’s briefs like a contracting cage, and Naoki’s face slid from fear into astonishment with a startled groan. Tsuyosa squeezed, and the phoenix disappeared, Naoki unable to concentrate on it anymore as a hard, aching, fiery pain filled his groin.

Tsuyosa bore down, squeezing tighter and tighter, feeling the briefs turn to elongated stone beneath his hand. Naoki’s legs gave out, and if Tsuyosa hadn’t been holding him up, he would have fallen. Tsuyosa felt animalistically desperate to rip off Naoki’s clothes right then and there, or to let his fingers slide through the distended sides of the briefs to touch hot flesh, but he controlled himself by watching as guilty pleasure turned to throbbing pain on Naoki’s face.

With a colossal effort of will, Tsuyosa finally let go of Naoki completely. The boy, caught by surprise,

fell to the floor, his body limp, his pants straining to hold back their considerable contents.

Tsuyosa composed himself with another colossal effort and addressed the crowd, watching like eagles.

“Naoki challenged me to VG,” Tsuyosa said, and everybody strained to hear. “In VG, this would have been considered a Level 2 Victory.”

The crowd was silent, but rarely was silence so loud.

“I know you know what this means.” Tsuyosa looked down at Naoki, who had managed to get on his knees, huddled over in a ball, shivering uncontrollably. “I’d like you two—” Tsuyosa pointed at two young men, “—to help me, please. I don’t think he can get up right now on his own.”

The two men ran to the cage, greed bright in their faces. Tsuyosa beckoned them in, and told them to take Naoki’s arms and help him out of the cage. They did so, and held him up in front of the bar. Everybody watched, not daring to breathe in case this changed the situation, which was about to turn paradisiacal.

Tsuyosa strode up and ripped Naoki’s shirt off.

The silence shattered into shouts of glee as Naoki’s chest—and the bulge in his pants—were finally, gloriously visible. Naoki let out a little cry, and tried to wrench himself away from his captors as he realized what was going to happen, but he still hadn’t recovered from what Tsuyosa had done to win, and the two men held him tightly, keeping him on his feet.

Tsuyosa licked his lips at the sight of the bulging jeans, and finally relieved them of their burden by ripping them off Naoki as well. The shouts rose in volume—the barkeep was fluttering about, looking like he wanted to stop Tsuyosa from turning Cream into a strip bar but also looking greedily happy about the publicity this would surely draw, and even quietly lusting at the sight of the overflowing—though no longer quite so distended—briefs Naoki had been forced to wear.

Brown eyes met purple. In Naoki’s eyes Tsuyosa read a plea, a plea for Tsuyosa to not finish what he had started. That Naoki had lost his body to Tsuyosa was bad enough. But for his body to become public knowledge to every person in Cream...Please, Naoki’s eyes begged, please stop it. You have me already. Stop it. I’m begging you.

Tsuyosa read the plea, and let the moment spiral on horribly. Everybody was quiet, knowing, waiting for what was coming next.

Tsuyosa looked at those pleading violet eyes, and gave them a small smile and the smallest possible headshake before he tore away Naoki’s underwear.

Naoki cried out as his endowments spilled out into open air, but he was drowned out by a tidal wave of cheers and catcalls from the onlookers. The bartender had not been kidding when he mentioned how well—stacked the boy was—his torture-induced erection was gone, but even without it Naoki was at least six inches long without any excitement, hanging over perfect balls the size of juicy cherries, wreathed in a corona of hair as beautiful as that on the boy’s head. The mere realization that he had been groping this package made Tsuyosa harder than ever.

But there was something that called to him even more than Naoki’s incredible endowments. The VG Champion bent in close to his prize and held up his face. Naoki’s eyes had lost all of their anger, all of their fire, even all of their desire. They were jewels of fear.

“You’re mine,” Tsuyosa whispered, so that only Naoki could hear him.

That night was as close to rape as Tsuyosa ever came in all his life. Naoki fought, struggled, pleaded, threatened, but beneath Tsuyosa’s expertise and strength the boy was powerless. Tsuyosa satisfied himself with Naoki’s unbelievable body all that night, exploring every inch of him with his eyes and tongue and fingers until he knew Naoki’s skin better than his own, until Naoki realized the futility of his resistance and let Tsuyosa do what he wanted, until, as the VG champion had told Genda, Naoki knew

that his body didn't belong to him.

And having left himself burned into Naoki's mind, body, and soul, Tsuyosa left him naked and motionless on the bed with this for a farewell; "Thanks for your body. I enjoyed it."

This was the sadism of the VG Champion Yano Tsuyosa.

* * *

A Month Later...

Nijihiro had left his job at Bubblegum Ice Cream Parlor and was walking down the street singing Aqua to himself when Jin tapped him on the shoulder and proceeded to knock him about two buildings down the street. Nijihiro woke up a short while afterwards flat on his back with Jin standing over him, looking furious and fiercely joyful.

"You've joined VG," was Jin's first statement. "You've joined VG. Do you know how long I've waited to be able to do that? I'm challenging you, by the way. You're gonna get it now, you fruit."

Nijihiro looked at Jin for a very long, disoriented moment. Jin was short and solidly built, not even really stocky, but very well-muscled. He was wearing the only thing he ever wore outside of school, which was a cosplay costume of Jin Saotome, complete with floor-length scarf, spike-ridden shoulder pads, and bared pectorals. He looked something between handsome and ridiculous, particularly from Nijihiro's angle down on the sidewalk.

"Why do you always call me a fruit?" Nijihiro asked, more to buy time for him to get his balance back than because he didn't know the answer. "Is there a reason, or is it just lack of originality?"

"Because you look like a fruit," Jin said. "Some spray-painted peach, or something." He pondered. "Maybe a banana. Yeah, a banana. You're a spray-painted banana, Nijihiro, and that's why I call you a fruit."

"Fascinating," Nijihiro drawled, sitting up and blowing strands of his hair—down to his waist and dyed every color of the spectrum—out of his face. "Now remind me why you're dressed up as a stripper?"

Jin flushed. "Jin Saotome is not a stripper!"

"How can you say that? When he taunts, he takes off all of his clothes!"

"Hey, at least I don't use Roll!!"

"I can beat your butt with Roll-chan any day of the week, and you know it!"

"Only if you've got Psylocke and Tron Bonne to back her up!"

"Is that what this is about? My using Roll-chan to kick your butt every time you challenge me at Marvel vs Capcom II? Fine, I'll just use Morrigan next time and kick your butt doubly hard!"

Jin started to launch into a scorching retort, but suddenly stopped. "Wait a minute! This isn't about Marvel vs Capcom! This is about VG! You've joined, I've joined, and now I can fight you MYSELF at LAST!! And when I Level 1 destroy you, you'll embarrass yourself in front of the entire city and make this the best day of my life!"

"I think you just want to see me naked," Nijihiro said.

"You're hentai, and most of what you think would shame a yaoi fangirl," Jin retorted. "Like your little fantasies about Yano Tsuyosa."

Nijihiro shot to his feet, his usually brown eyes turning orange with anger. "HEY! Do NOT drag Tsuyosa-san into this!"

"You've never even met him!" Jin bawled, ignoring the crowd of curious people that their shouted argument was attracting. "And you have some...some crazy long-distance crush on him!"

Nijihiro's now-orange eyes flashed. "It's better than having a crush on a stripping video game character!!"

Jin went scarlet. "I DO NOT HAVE A CRUSH ON A VIDEO GAME CHARACTER!!!!"

“What the heck is going on?” a girl whispered to her friend.

The other girl shrugged. “Lovers’ quarrel?”

Jin heard this and rounded in the general direction of the girls. “WE ARE NOT LOVERS!!” Nijihiro made a graphic gagging sound. “I’M TRYING TO CHALLENGE HIM TO VG, BUT HE KEEPS BACKING OUT!!”

“If you wanted to challenge me to VG, you should have just said that, instead of going off on this whole thing about Roll-chan and Tsuyosa-san and...spray-painted bananas!” Nijihiro flared. “I will take you on anytime, anywhere, at anything, and I’ll win every time! I could beat you at VG with both my hands tied behind my back!”

“Yeah, well, I could beat you up with my hands and my feet tied behind my back!” Jin yelled. “You want me to ‘just say’ it? Fine, I’m ‘just saying’ it! I CHALLENGE YOU TO VG!! VG Senshi Suzuki Jin!”

Jin pulled a gold VG card out of a pocket on the front of his Saotome-style jacket and clicked the top corners. The card sent out an electrical signal, and a console post slid up out of the street near him. Too impatient to even go over to it, Jin threw his card into the confirmation slot.

“Confirming VG status...” said the post in a mechanical voice. “Confirmed. Standby.”

Jin threw a glare at Nijihiro. Nijihiro took the hint, pulled his own VG card out of his pocket, and clicked the corners.

“VG Senshi li Nijihiro,” he said, and slid his card into the post that appeared next to him.

“Confirming VG status...Confirmed. Standby.”

Just up the street, at the street intersection, the lights began to flash yellow, the sign of an impending VG match. All cars slowed to a stop. When the motion sensors detected stillness in the intersection, they sent out their own signal, and the street in the intersection folded away into four sections to reveal a rising VG ring.

Every VG fighter in the city had a certain television channel tuned to their signal from the VG status posts. When Jin and Nijihiro had confirmed their VG status with the posts, both of their respective channels immediately began to broadcast footage of the ring chosen for their battle, recorded by video cameras attached to the stoplights.

* * *

“Mr. Prime Minister,” said the Prime Minister’s secretary, “there’s a VG match coming on.”

“Really?” the Prime Minister asked wearily. “Put it on.”

The VG logo flashed onto the sixteen TV screens that usually showed security footage. However, when it turned a few seconds later to the footage recorded by the cameras, the Prime Minister sighed in exasperation.

“Another gay match,” he grumped, turning back to his papers. “Why Reimi would let VG become mixed-gender...it’s ruined it, half the time it’s just man-on-man, and even when it’s a man and a woman the woman usually wins...screen the VG matches and only tell me if there’s a woman in them!”

“Yes sir,” the secretary said, thinking that there was definitely something in the female employees’ accusations that the Prime Minister was a chauvinistic pig.

* * *

Jin and Nijihiro got into the ring, both with a bit of difficulty because it was designed for people with longer legs than either of them had. Nijihiro made it over without mishap, but Jin wobbled and almost strangled himself with his scarf before a helpful bystander untangled him. Nijihiro snickered.

“No holds barred!” Jin shouted, to cover the mishap up.

“Is strangulation by scarf considered a hold?” Nijiuro asked, to uncover said mishap.

Jin flushed red all the way down to his visible collarbones. “SHADDUP!! HIYAAAA!!”

Totally typically of Jin, he broke into a headlong charge. Nijiuro indulged him by running to meet him—then, at the last second, he jumped and flipped in midair and kicked Jin in the back, his feet suffused in rainbow chi, shouting as he did, “Starlight Rain!”

Jin stumbled and tried to regain his footing, but stepped on his scarf and got his head yanked back, completely destroying his balance and sending him flat on his stomach. Quite a few of the people standing around the ring to watch the match (mostly girls, but more men than you might have thought would gather to watch a VG match between two boys) laughed.

Jin’s face was turning burgundy as he got to his feet and rounded on Nijiuro. “I HATE it when you yell out your attacks like that! It’s DUMB! Do you think I’m so stupid I have to have warning of what you’re gonna do?!”

“I thought it’d probably help you, yeah,” Nijiuro shrugged.

Steam practically shot out of Jin’s ears. “I DESPISE you!”

“I don’t like you either,” Nijiuro said lightly. “Here, try this one.”

Nijiuro ran at Jin, who looked astonished for a moment, then tensed, clearly ready to counterattack. But when he was still several feet away, Nijiuro flipped into the air and shouted, “Solar Rain!”

Immediately Nijiuro’s entire body flashed with blinding iridescent energy. Jin was not alone in finding his vision replaced by rainbow sunbursts, but he was alone in feeling something white-hot streak down the front of his chest.

Jin fell back, and felt his scarf fall away. Rubbing his eyes furiously, he looked up and nearly exploded as he saw Nijiuro holding his scarf, with a teasing look on his face.

“YOU—YOU—YOU-” Jin spluttered, his vocabulary devoid of words to properly describe Nijiuro, especially once he realized that that white-hot streak (Nijiuro’s feet again, charged with even more of his chi than before) had sliced open the front of his jacket.

“YOU RUINED MY COSTUME!!!” Jin erupted, getting back onto his feet, trembling with barely suppressed rage.

Nijiuro raised his eyebrows as he tied the long white scarf around his waist like a sash. “I’m sorry. I thought Jin Saotome was supposed to blow his clothes off while he fought.”

“YEAH!! BLOW THEM OFF!! AS IN I TAKE THEM OFF!! NOT YOU!!”

Nijiuro paused. “Wait. Is that supposed to mean that you’re going to take your clothes off?”

“YES! NO!! THAT IS—I—WILL YOU JUST SHUT UP?!?!?!?!?”

Nijiuro was ready. When Jin ran at him this time, he (unknowingly) did the same thing Tsuyosa had done against Ikeda Kyuso, dropping to the ground and rolling out of the way. However, Jin wasn’t accepting this. He jumped after Nijiuro, and more by luck than judgment landed right on top of him, entangling them both in Jin’s scarf and Nijiuro’s hair.

“Gimme back my scarf!” Jin shouted into Nijiuro’s face.

“Jin, this is a little public,” Nijiuro said, because Jin was lying down on top of him, his bared chest pressed against Nijiuro’s shirt, their faces nearly touching and the rest of them definitely doing so.

Jin flushed, but didn’t get off. “Shut up! You’re just trying to embarrass me so you can get away!”

“Well, yes, but mainly I just really don’t like being caught in a compromising position with you on global TV,” Nijiuro groaned.

Jin remained quite still on top of Nijiuro for a second while this sunk in. Then with a kind of strangled yelp, he half-jumped off Nijiuro and half-threw him away from him, his chest heaving rapidly, a blush staining his skin to the collarbones.

Nijiuro sat up and threw his hair out of his face. “Okay, Jin, I’ve had just about enough of this now.

Sorry, but...”

Nijihiro ran towards Jin again. Before Jin could even really react, Nijihiro flipped forward and ended up in a handstand.

“Iridescent Wheel!” Nijihiro shouted, and he spun both his legs together, streaming prismatic energy in his arc, to land a chi-enhanced slamming kick to Jin’s side.

Jin flew about six feet, hit the ground, and skidded right towards the edge of the VG ring. The Jin-supporters in the crowd gasped and screamed, but Jin didn’t manage to stop himself in time. His head and shoulders slid into open air over the edge of the ring, and he only stopped the rest of his body from following by grabbing the bands that fenced off the ring.

Nijihiro got back to his feet, Jin’s scarf becoming entangled in his hair, and looked over at the VG scoreboard hanging nearby.

BEEP BEEP BLIP BEEP...LEVEL 3

“DAMMIT!!” Jin roared, still hanging partially outside of the ring. “DAMMIT DAMMIT DAMMIT!!!”

Nijihiro grinned brightly and struck a pose, giving the crowd around the VG ring the V-for-victory sign. “Yes!”

The pro-Nijihiro fans (most of the girls) screamed their approval. The pro-Jin fans (the rest of the girls and almost all of the boys) booed and blared militantly.

Nijihiro’s grin turned wicked as he turned his attention back to Jin, who had fought his way back into the ring.

“My poor, dear Jin,” Nijihiro said with mock sorrow, “it appears you have lost on Level 3 in the match that you challenged me to. You know what you have to do now—should be easy for you, considering your costume...”

“Dammit!” Jin yelled. “Why—what—oh, DAMMIT!!!”

“Yes, you’ve said that several times,” Nijihiro waved. “Less cursing, more stripping. You remember what Level 3 entails, right?”

“I KNOW!!” Jin bellowed at Nijihiro, and very quickly, as though trying to get it over with, he threw off his jacket, ripped off his gloves, kicked off his boots, and with another muttered, “Dammit,” tore off his pants.

It took a lot of willpower for Nijihiro not to stare at Jin’s body, particularly at his truly Jin-Saotome-style loincloth. But for nothing in the world would Nijihiro admit that he was in any way attracted to his worst enemy, so instead he let his hair fall over his face and twirled his finger. “Let the nice people see you, Jin. They want to see more than I do.”

Grinding his teeth together, Jin forced his hands out into the air and turned around slowly, uncomfortably aware of the hundreds of pairs of eyes taking in every detail of his still-heaving chest, his well-worked arms, his sinewy thighs, and of course, the slightly-too-revealing loincloth.

As soon as Jin’s back was turned to Nijihiro, the rainbow-haired boy finally let himself look at Jin. Somehow it made his stomach churn, and gave him the sudden impulse to Do Something. With Nijihiro, action usually followed impulse. So he unwound Jin’s scarf from his waist and ran up behind him.

Jin suddenly saw the world turn white as Nijihiro whipped the scarf over his eyes, wound it tightly around his head, and tied it into his hair.

“MMPH?! MMRPH!!!” Jin said indistinctly, gagged by his scarf. “MMRPHMM—MRRUMPH!!!”

“Have fun, Jin,” Nijihiro called, and on an even more sudden urge he leaned forward and kissed Jin just beneath his left ear.

Jin froze for a full thirty seconds, turning pure burgundy all the way down to the band of his loincloth. It took those thirty seconds for the catatonic shock to hit, and then Jin suddenly started roaring so loudly that even gagged it was possible to tell exactly what he was calling Nijihiro.

Of course, Nijjiro wasn't there anymore to listen to it. Right after he had fallen prey to that unusual impulse to (shudder) kiss Jin, he ran off the VG ring and somehow managed to disappear into the crowd of people. You'd think a boy with waist-long rainbow hair wouldn't be difficult to find, but Nijjiro was a master at escaping, and soon he had made it into an alleyway which he knew from experience most people paid very little attention to.

Safely hidden for a minute, Nijjiro leaned against the wall of the alley, just to calm himself down. He couldn't believe what he had just done. Not the scarf—he'd been doing things like that to Jin since elementary school. But kissing him? He might have been vulnerable and muscular and practically naked, but he was still Jin, and Nijjiro should have been able to remember that. It wasn't like he particularly liked Jin, or anything. So why—

No. Oh God. No.

"Hey."

Nijjiro almost jumped out of his skin. Standing in the alleyway was a boy around his age—no, a little older—dressed in worn-out, holey jeans and a threadbare, overlarge sweatshirt. The sweatshirt was too large for him, swallowing his torso in fabric, the collar somewhere around his shoulders, leaving his face the sole property of his unruly red hair and violet eyes.

Ooh. Violet eyes.

"Um, hi," Nijjiro said, poised for flight but held by interest.

"You seem decent at VG," the boy said bluntly.

"Yes, I guess," Nijjiro said, wondering where this was going.

"I need help," said the boy.

Nijjiro hesitated, then stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Li Nijjiro."

The boy hesitated longer, but eventually took Nijjiro's hand gingerly. "Hayami Naoki."

"Okay," Nijjiro said. "What do you need help with, Hayami-san?"

"I'm looking for Yano Tsuyosa. Do you know who he is?"

"Do I know who he is?!" Nijjiro lit up like a bonfire, making Naoki start. "Are you kidding?! I just idolize him! He's so cool! He's the VG Champion! He's like a male Jahana Reimi! I love him!"

Anybody on the planet could have seen Naoki flinch at every sentence Nijjiro gushed in Tsuyosa's praise. However, Nijjiro had flown away to Seventh Heaven on the subject of his idol and long-distance crush, and therefore was not on the planet to see that Naoki obviously didn't share his viewpoint of Tsuyosa.

"You know him, then. I want to fight him. Where can I find him?"

"You want to fight him?" Nijjiro repeated incredulously. Then a sneaking suspicion crossed his mind.

"Wait. Are you in love with him?"

"No," Naoki said flatly.

"Oh. Okay. Then, are you some VG prodigy? Trying to take his place as VG Champion?"

"No."

"Then why do you want to fight him?" Nijjiro demanded. "I can't think of any other reason if you don't want either him or his title!"

Naoki fixed Nijjiro with a hard amethyst glare. "It's none of your business."

Nijjiro glared right back, his normally brown eyes turning to the color of steel. "It is so my business if you want me to help you!"

Naoki did a double take. "li-san, your eyes are turning gray."

"My eyes change colors. Deal with it. Why do you want to fight him?"

"Look, I...have reasons. Personal reasons." Almost unconsciously, Naoki ran his fingers through his hair, making it even more unruly than before. "Just...leave it at that, okay? I don't want to talk about it."

Nijjiro considered pushing the matter, but rather wisely decided not to. It was the "personal reasons"

that did it. Few people know more about personal reasons than boys who dye their hair all the colors of the rainbow.

“Anyway, where can I fight Yano Tsuyosa?” Naoki asked.

“Are you in VG already?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Curiosity shifted Nijjiro’s eyes from gray towards green. “What restaurant do you work for?”

Naoki hesitated for a moment, then muttered, “Cream.”

“Never heard of it.”

“You don’t want to. Can you just tell me how I could find Yano Tsuyosa?” There was a note of something almost like desperation in Naoki’s voice now. “It’s important to me. Just accept that. Please.”

Nijjiro threw his hair back off his shoulders. “Yes. Yes I can. You have to win a regional VG tournament to qualify for the nationals. You have to win the nationals to qualify for the finals. And you have to win the finals to fight Tsuyosa-san. That’s what you have to do—win the Japan final VG tournament, and you get to fight Tsuyosa-san. That’s the only place you’re sure to find him. Otherwise, he could be anywhere. And that’s anywhere on the whole planet—he likes to travel, and he took his real estate in Germany so he can go all around Europe. I think he’s only in Japan about one month out of the year. Total.”

“The nationals,” Naoki repeated to himself.

“The nationals,” Nijjiro confirmed. “It drives me crazy, that he’s so close, and yet so far.”

“Yes,” Naoki said quietly. “Me too.”

There was a brief, slightly uncomfortable pause. Then Nijjiro cleared his throat. “Are you...from around here?”

“Not really,” Naoki said in an offhand way.

“Do you have anywhere to stay?” Nijjiro’s eyes were fading back to their usual brown. “Do you have family here, or friends, or something?”

“No, not really,” Naoki replied, still very offhandedly.

Nijjiro looked at Naoki closely, then grabbed him, pulled him into the alleyway, and spun him around.

“What are you doing?!”

“Just stay here,” Nijjiro said impatiently. “I couldn’t see you well before, the sun was getting in my eyes. Just stay still! I’m just trying to look at you!”

He did so. Naoki was about a head taller than Nijjiro, his scarlet hair streaked with colors that were obviously as real as Nijjiro’s were unreal. His violet eyes were hard and wary, and so were the lines of his body, every muscle tensed, ready to fight. Nijjiro wondered why he was so suspicious of him, wondered with a pang if it was his hair—and all that entailed.

Pushing that old hurt aside, Nijjiro continued to appraise Naoki. Disregarding his obvious tension, he was a very handsome young man, even despite his hobo’s attire. Nijjiro was pretty sure the clothing wasn’t picked by choice, though—Naoki looked like he had fallen on hard times, if there had ever been good times for him.

That pretty much clinched it. The hard times, not the handsomeness.

“You can come stay with my family if you want,” Nijjiro offered.

Naoki’s responding look was not encouraging.

“You look like I’m going to rape you,” Nijjiro said impatiently. “Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I’m going to jump you at midnight.” He didn’t think. “Besides, even if I wanted to I couldn’t, because I sleep with two of my sisters and one of my brothers and if I tried anything my mom would know before I even got out of bed.”

Naoki now looked as though he wasn't sure whether to laugh or run away until he reached Osaka.

"C`mon," Nijiuro urged, grabbing Naoki by the arm again and trying to pull him back onto the street. He almost flipped over onto his back; Naoki wasn't budging. "No, really! Mom'll love you, she loves having people over, and we can afford to give you room and board for a little while...oh, come on, stop being stupid! You just told me you don't have anywhere else to go! Were you telling me the truth or not?!"

Despite this show of confident irritability, Nijiuro noticed that Naoki was looking baffled, and not by his brilliant oratorical skills. Naoki looked baffled in the same way you would look baffled trying to figure out how to explain to a cat why you were taking it to the vet. It was therefore rather surprising when Naoki finally shook himself and said, "I...all right. Uh...thanks, for letting me stay with you."

"Sure," Nijiuro said, recovering quickly. "Don't worry about it. C`mon, let's go before Jin gets that scarf off and he comes after me."

"Jin is the guy you were VG-ing with?"

"Yes." Nijiuro led Naoki down the street, away from the VG ring and the audience, which was slowly filtering away now that the fight and stripping were over. "He'll be furious I won, and apoplectic I tied his scarf around his head. He'll probably be over today to try and challenge me to a rematch...I must ask Himeko-oba to answer the door today..."

"Why does he bother?" Naoki asked as Nijiuro dragged him down a side—street. "You won, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but he and I have had this thing going on since elementary school," Nijiuro explained. "I used to play tricks on him, and he used to try to beat me up. Except my siblings didn't really like that, so after the first time, he never managed it again. I guess that's why he's trying to beat me in VG now."

"Before you did VG him, he said something about being happy if you got a Level 1 loss..."

"Yes, well...he really hates me," Nijiuro said lightly.

Possibly because he had made such a point about personal reasons earlier, Naoki let this go without saying anything. In fact, neither of them said anything more until they were standing in front of the house in question.

3 - The Enlightenment of the Gods, Part Two

The Enlightenment of the Gods, Part Two

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It was a smallish and rather shabby house that clearly could not have belonged to anybody other than Nijjiro. The roof was sprawled with sleeping cats of every color and kind, clearly having decided that the red-tiled roof made a fine place to take a siesta. The house itself had been painted a quiet, unobtrusive white, but somebody had begun to paint over the white with periwinkle and simply never finished it. The lawn was no longer a lawn, but something closer to a wild savannah, covered in feathery yellow grass a few feet high, the stalks of which rattled against one another in the slightest breeze and produced an unearthly, whispering percussion that was disconcerting, to say the least. The only parts of the lawn not covered in this dying orchestra were a path up to the front door and a large patch in front of the right side of the house. However, this patch was not bare, for all that it was even more dead than the sea of grass.

This patch of cleared ground was what screamed that this was Nijjiro's house. Plunged into the dirt like some new breed of unearthly flower were almost two hundred plastic pinwheels, all of different colors, some patterned, some solid, some with four petals and others with up to twenty. The same breeze that provoked the rustling of the grass stirred through the pinwheels as well, creating a tickety-tickety-tickety sound that at the same time clashed against and meshed with the cadence of the grass. It was positively eerie.

Just before he touched the front door (which was navy blue, standing out like a shout against the rest of the house and everything around it,) Nijjiro stopped and said, "Hey."

"Yes?"

"Okay. Um. Look, I want you to be forewarned," Nijjiro said. He was playing with his hair restlessly, braiding lemon and azure streaks around one another. "I have a big family. And we all live here. So don't be surprised that there isn't much room or that it's pretty loud. And...and..." His voice faded away.

"And what?" Naoki prompted.

"And you might wanna stay close," Nijjiro sighed. He pushed open the door.

The inside of the house was even crazier-looking than the outside. The front door opened into the entry hall, and off to the left was a paper door positively quaking with the noise coming from the other side of it. Nijjiro kicked his shoes off onto a mountain of footwear next to the front door and slid open the paper door while Naoki removed his own.

The paper door led to what was clearly the living room, crammed with what seemed like Nijjiro's entire family, playing a ferocious game of mad, free-for-all Nertz. The chaos was astounding.

"HEY EVERYBODY!!" Nijjiro shouted over the ruckus.

"NIJJIRO!" shouted a woman in her early forties, her brown hair cut short and sticking out all around a heart-shaped face that blazed with triumph as her long fingers threw cards onto the table. "I'M BEATING THE PANTS OFF THEM! SIDDOWN AND GET READY FOR THE NEXT GAME!"

"WHAT?!" shouted the girl next to her, her hair thrown up in a hasty ponytail that was coming loose and spilling blonde strands over her face. "DON'T LIE TO NIJJIRO, MOM! I'M WINNING AND YOU KNOW IT!"

"LIKE HELL YOU ARE!" the woman hollered back at her.

“NERTZ!!!” a little girl roared louder than all of them, throwing down her last card decisively.

This was the cue for everyone to start shouting at the little girl, and for several people to throw their cards down, and for the woman who had claimed she was winning to throw the pillow she was sitting on at the little girl. The girl retaliated, and shortly an all-out pillow-fight broke out.

“Ow!” Naoki said as a pillow hit him in the face.

You wouldn’t think anybody could have heard him over the hullabaloo, but Naoki’s unknown voice somehow reached every ear present. In a stunning two seconds, the entire room fell silent as every one of Nijihiro’s present relatives twisted around to gape at the stranger Nijihiro had brought home.

“Now that you’ve all shut up,” Nijihiro said into the silence, “this is Hayami Naoki. Hayami-kun, this is my family.”

“Oooh, -kun!” said a girl with long, beautiful brown hair.

“Does he have a brother?” asked the girl sitting next to her.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Nijihiro said. “He’s in VG.”

A respectful murmur went around the room.

“Let me give you more specific introductions,” Nijihiro offered, towing Naoki forward by the arm again. “This is my aunt, Kaoru—” this the woman with short brown hair who had first hailed Nijihiro “—and her husband, Daisuke—” a man sitting close to her, with similarly-colored hair, smiled at them both “—their eldest daughter Maki—” the blonde girl spared Naoki only a cursory glance as she attempted to rebind her ponytail “—and only son Letsuna—” the only other blonde person in the room, a boy like a whipcord with spiky hair and an unbuttoned shirt “—my older brother Fuma—” a very tall boy giving the impression that he had been folded over to fit into the room “—my older sister, Shiho—” this the girl with beautiful brown hair, longer even than Nijihiro’s “—my—”

“I’m Nijihiro’s sister, Yuna,” said the girl sitting next to Shiho. She looked a lot like Nijihiro, with brown hair caught up in a ponytail with a saucy violet ribbon, dressed in a swirling violet dress that had clearly seen better days. Oddly enough considering the heat of the day, there was a black velvet scarf around her neck.

“And I’m his brother, Hiroji,” said the boy sitting next to her. He also looked a lot like Nijihiro, except his brown hair was short and spiked, and his nose had an obscuring bandage across it. He was wearing a voluminous white shirt with a green stripe across it and baggy jean shorts.

“No you’re not,” Nijihiro said crossly. “THAT is Yuna, and THAT is Hiroji.” He pointed at the boy first, then the girl.

“NIJIHIRO!!” the girl—who wasn’t a girl—screamed. “You didn’t have to tell him!!”

“I wanted to see if he could tell,” the boy—girl?—grumped.

“You’re taking unfair advantage of him,” Nijihiro said, throwing a glance at Naoki. He didn’t look like he was going to faint or anything, so Nijihiro plunged ahead. “That’s my youngest sister Haruna.” It was the little girl who had won the Nertz game. “That’s my other uncle, Eichi.” A man with a very thin face and a look of perpetual tiredness bowed formally to Naoki. “And all of those boys are his and my aunt Himeko’s sons—Shirai—” a very handsome boy with black hair and glasses looked up from picking up cards “—Kaii—” a short boy with his black hair kept out of his face by a white headband “—Azumamaro—” he had been the first one to jump to his feet and join in when Kaoru had thrown her pillow and was bouncing on the balls of his feet, clearly impatient for the fight to resume “—and Niou.”

Niou was a small, kitten-like boy with huge amber eyes and short, soft black hair. He had taken cover behind his brother Shirai when the pillow-fight started, and now he ran around him and grabbed Nijihiro around the waist, which was as high as he could reach.

“Nii-san, didja VG? Didja? Didja win? You didn’t get hurt, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I did VG,” Nijihiro said, remembering. “Where’s Himeko-oba? I want her to answer the door.”

Fuma, Nijjiro's folded-over brother, groaned. "Jin finally found out you joined VG, huh?"

"How did you know?" Nijjiro asked dryly.

"Jin's the only idiot dumb enough to follow you back to this house after trying to beat you up," Hiroji—Yuna—the one who looked like a boy, at least—said. "He's a glutton for punishment. Or maybe he's in love."

"Disgusting idea. Where's Himeko-oba?"

"Why aim small?" Kaii, the short boy with the headband, shrugged. "Ask Chihiro to open the door."

Nijjiro raised his eyebrows. "Chihiro's up? It's still daylight."

"Chihiro's awful mad," Niou informed Nijjiro and Naoki solemnly. "Somebody threw rocks at her window and woke her up."

"Oh, God," Nijjiro said.

"It was that guy who lives across the street," Shiho of the long and gorgeous hair said. "He threw rocks at her window from the sidewalk—"

"—and all of a sudden, Chihiro comes down the stairs like a thunderstorm," Fuma continued. "Well, of course we all got out of her way—"

"Bit of a nasty shock for him," Shiho said wickedly. "You know she's got those black drapes over her window, he probably didn't even know she'd left her room and all of a sudden the door bursts open and out comes Chihiro—"

"She came back a few minutes later," Kaii chipped in. "She had a load of hair in her hand."

"He's just lucky his head wasn't with it," Shiho said.

"Or whatever it was she pulled it out from," Fuma said innocently.

Shiho smacked him.

"Bastard," Maki said unexpectedly, finished tying up her hair. "He deserved it."

"If he threw rocks at Chihiro's window, he's too dumb to deserve air," Nijjiro said. "She's one of my other cousins," he added to Naoki. "She sleeps during the day and stays on the roof all night looking at the stars. I think she wrote to the Prime Minister to petition the dimming of city lights so people could stargaze when they wanted to..."

"Light upsets her," Niou said sagely.

"Pretty much," Nijjiro agreed. "Where's Mom?"

"Your mom, or my mom?" Niou asked.

"Mine."

"The kitchen."

"Figured." Nijjiro grabbed Naoki by the arm again. "C`mon, I want you to meet my mom."

"You sure he's not your boyfriend?" Kaoru teased.

"Not yet," Nijjiro said, and he pulled Naoki across the room into the kitchen amid a great "Oooohh!" from all his family at once.

"Mom?" Nijjiro called as he opened the door.

The kitchen looked horrific and smelled fantastic. It was a semi-large room crammed with cupboards, shelves, drawers, a huge and ancient refrigerator, and a colossal sink like a lake dropped away in the counter. The walls—what little you could see of them—were covered in absolutely horrendous faded, lime-green wallpaper which looked especially terrible contrasted with the vaguely pink tiles of the floor. From the stove came the thick, steaming aroma of ramen, boiling in a cauldron-like pot which a woman was stirring.

"Himeko-oba!" Nijjiro exclaimed.

The woman stirring the pot stopped stirring. Then, ever so slowly, she turned her head—just her

head—to face Nijihiro and Naoki.

With her heavy-lidded eyes, her long, coiling black hair, and the steam of the ramen wreathing her pale, triangular face, she looked like a witch.

“It smells delicious,” Nijihiro said, although he looked slightly nervous. Naoki looked like he was reconsidering his idea of running to Osaka.

“Nijihiro!” exclaimed a voice.

From behind the witch-like Himeko poked the heads of an older woman, her hair rich auburn but streaked with grey, and of a little girl, her hair tied in a thick auburn braid that the woman’s might have looked like when she was her age. Both of them were holding knives, and it quickly became obvious that they had been chopping meat and other things to add to the ramen.

“Mom!” Nijihiro ran forward—fortunately remembering to let go of Naoki first—and embraced his mother, careful to avoid the knife. His mother was not a tall woman, but Nijihiro was still shorter than she was. “I brought somebody.”

“He’s tall!” said the little girl, looking at Naoki with large black eyes. “Is he your boyfriend, Nijihiro?”

“No, I’m not,” Naoki said.

“Oh,” the little girl said. “I’m Hikaru.”

“I’m Hayami Naoki.”

“k.” Losing interest, Hikaru went back to the carrot she had positioned on a cutting board in front of her and took aim.

WHACK!

The decapitated head of the carrot ricocheted off the side of the sink.

“Not so hard, Hikaru sweet, you’re going to cut the cutting board,” Nijihiro’s mother said, letting go of Nijihiro. “Hayami-san? I am Ii Ayaka, Nijihiro’s mother.”

“Nice to meet you,” Naoki muttered, bowing to her.

“Likewise,” Ayaka said. “This is my youngest sister, Himeko.”

The witchy woman had returned her attention to stirring the ramen and did not say anything, or even acknowledge that she had heard them.

“Mom, can Naoki stay with us for a while?”

Ayaka looked from Naoki to Nijihiro. “For dinner, or longer?”

“Longer. He’s in VG, and he came all the way here to enter the nationals, but he doesn’t have anywhere to stay—”

Ayaka looked shocked. “Oh my! Certainly, Hayami-san, stay as long as you like!”

For a brief moment, something indescribable fluttered across Naoki’s face. It was gone quicker than it had appeared, and Naoki dropped into a very deep bow.

“Thank you,” he muttered, his red hair falling into his face.

“Natsumi’s coming to dinner tonight as well, so we’d better eat in the backyard,” Ayaka murmured to herself, tapping her mouth reflectively with one slender finger as she returned to the leeks she had been chopping. “There’s not enough room otherwise...”

Hikaru took aim.

WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!!

Bits of carrot flew everywhere as Hikaru went at the hapless vegetable with a vengeance. Nijihiro picked a chunk out of his hair and said, “Well, we have to go talk to Chihiro, I need to ask her about something...”

“Be careful,” Hikaru said, slashing away at the pathetic remains of the carrot with a look of determination on her face. “Somebody woke her up.”

“I know,” and Nijihiro and Naoki ran for cover as Hikaru finished with her carrot and advanced on a tomato.

* * *

The upstairs level of the li house was surprisingly quiet. Although there was mild background noise from downstairs, the second floor was mostly silent. Nijiuro, steeling himself to beard Chihiro in her den, was therefore taken by complete surprise when somebody grabbed him and pulled him into the bathroom.

It was Naoki. He shoved Nijiuro towards the towels, closed the door, then turned around and advanced on him.

“What are you doing?!” Nijiuro demanded.

“Explain to me what was going on downstairs,” Naoki said vehemently. “Your aunt looked ready to eat me alive. So did that blonde cousin of yours. And why did everybody think I was your boyfriend? And what’s with this crazy cousin we’re going to see who sleeps all day and rips people’s hair out?! And what’s going on with those two of your siblings who you said—”

“Okay,” Nijiuro said, laying his fingers on Naoki’s mouth, “shut up. You’re getting loud, and you’ll wake up Sakura.”

“Sakura?” Naoki demanded.

“My aunt Kaoru’s youngest daughter. Listen, you want to know what’s going on with all of us? Okay. Here’s the explanation.”

“An explanation would be nice,” Naoki said sarcastically.

Nijiuro took a deep breath. “Out of my siblings, Ashotei’s away at college, Fuma and Shiho are in love, I’m—” he stumbled over the hated word, “—gay, Yuna and Hiroji are both transsexuals and switch identities because they can’t switch genders, and Haruna is just a tomboy. Well, at least, we think she’s just a tomboy.”

He paused to check Naoki’s reaction. There was none. Naoki seemed to have frozen completely.

“My aunt Kaoru’s kids: Maki and Hikaru are lesbians, Yue’s bisexual and probably Himeko’s long-lost child by mistake—though she’s not here right now, she spends all day at the library, she wants to get a degree in molecular biology if she gets to college next year—letsuna’s a sk8tr boi, and Sakura is named after my mom’s oldest sister, who died four months after our Sakura was born.”

Because he seemed to have temporarily deprived Naoki of speech, Nijiuro plunged on. “And finally, with my aunt Himeko—Shirai’s bisexual and has a boyfriend, Chihiro’s nocturnal and homicidal and wants a telescope, Kaii’s going to enter VG the second he turns sixteen, Azumamaro can’t sit still for more than seven seconds, and Harunobu and Niou are twins. You haven’t met Haru yet either, he’s probably out in the back feeding the cats.”

Naoki blinked. Then he blinked again. Then he said, “Anything else?”

“Yeah, my dad ran out on my mom and got divorced in Russia, and Natsumi—the woman who’s coming to dinner tonight—is her girlfriend. Mom’s bisexual too,” Naoki added to clarify.

Naoki stared at Nijiuro, then capsized rather than sat down on the edge of the sink. “When were you planning on telling me all this?”

“After I asked Chihiro to answer the door in case Jin comes,” Nijiuro said. “I wasn’t going to leave you hanging too much longer. Oh yeah, and the whole boyfriend thing...I’m not really sure where that came from. Probably just my family being my family.”

“Your family is one screwed-up family.”

Nijiuro took umbrage at this. “Yeah, I guess. But we have fun and love each other anyway, and you know, I happen to think that’s more important than being socially correct.”

“I guess,” Naoki said, though he didn’t look convinced.

“Are you through?” Nijiuro asked. “Cause I need to go ask Chihiro to open the door.”

"I did have other questions," Naoki admitted, "but I don't remember what they were now..."

"Okay, then if we're done." Nijihiro went around Naoki to the door and pulled it open, then let out a very small scream.

Standing in the doorway, long black hair falling over her face and obliterating her right eye from view, stood a girl dressed in a shabby black nightgown. It was a good thing one of her eyes was hidden from view, because twice the heat in her pitch-black glare probably would have burned a hole right through Nijihiro's head.

"Chi...Chihiro!" Nijihiro said weakly. "Uh...um...uh..."

Nobody could unhinge Nijihiro like Chihiro could. As soon as she started glaring, he went to pieces. Now, as soon as her eye flashed furiously once at his mouth, he shut up.

"Too...noisy," Chihiro growled, very slowly and very dangerously. Her eye flashed at Naoki as well. "I'm trying to sleep...and you...start...shouting."

"Uh, Chihiro, can I ask you someth—?" Nijihiro began lamely.

Chihiro glared Nijihiro into submission.

"I...want...to...sleep. Got it? Sleep. Now. Nice and quiet. Keep...it...that...way... or...else."

Naoki watched Chihiro lean closer to Nijihiro's face with every word, until he fell backwards onto the floor looking like he might turn into oozing jelly at any moment.

"Good," Chihiro muttered, and she yawned hugely and turned around to leave.

It was the worst possible time for anybody to knock on the door. Chihiro was facing the staircase, which was facing the door, and the loud banging coming from it made her stop dead in her tracks. What's more, a fight broke out in the living room at that moment for no discernible reason, and the screams and shouts were clearly audible. Chihiro seemed to feed on all of this noise, growing in size and stature and surrounded by furious pulsating energy you could almost see as thunderheads and electricity.

"SHUT UP!!!!!!!!!!!" she expostulated, and she flew down the stairs without seeming to touch any of them and almost yanked the door off its hinges.

Jin never had a chance. Chihiro was on him in a nanosecond, hands curved into claws, fury rolling off her like heat from a smoldering car-wreck, her billowing black nightgown and flying black hair giving her the appearance of the Grim Reaper tackling a victim. The door slammed shut behind her.

At Chihiro's roar, the fight had stopped immediately. The living room was quieter than a grave—after Chihiro slammed the door, there wasn't even the sound of breathing.

"That was...quite freaky," Naoki said.

"That was what happens when Chihiro gets woken up in the middle of the day," Nijihiro said, his legs still jelly and unsuitable for standing. "She can usually sleep through anything, but boy, when something wakes her..."

Naoki started to leave the bathroom, but Nijihiro—still on the floor—grabbed him around the leg. "Where the hell do you think you're going?!"

"Downstairs?"

"While Chihiro's on the warpath?! Are you nuts?!"

"She's outside now..."

"Do you know when she's coming back in?"

"No. Do you?"

"No, and we're staying right here until she does! Good God, I don't think you realize how dangerous she is!" Nijihiro used Naoki's leg to pull himself to his knees. "You said my aunt Himeko looked like she wanted to eat you alive?"

"Yes..." Naoki said slowly.

"If Chihiro was looking at you that way, you'd have been in that pot before you could say 'VG.' ACK!"

Here she comes!"

Nijihiro yanked Naoki into the bathroom and closed the door just as the front door opened. A moment later there was the sound of stomping footsteps going up the stairs, followed shortly by the slamming of a door.

There was a long silence.

"Is—?" Naoki began, but Nijihiro laid his fingers on his mouth again, raising his eyebrows in a way that clearly said, Shut up, you idiot!

Both boys waited for several long, breathless minutes.

"Okay, now stay quiet," Nijihiro whispered. "Once she goes back to sleep, we can make all the noise we want downstairs and talk pretty normally upstairs...but while she's still awake, stay quiet!"

Naoki was clearly wondering what had possessed him to accept Nijihiro's offer of his home, but he obediently followed Nijihiro silently out the door, down the stairs, and into the living room—thankfully without incident. If Chihiro heard them, she paid them no mind.

"What happened?" Nijihiro's sister Shiho asked them as soon as they made it back into the living room.

"Jin knocked, and Chihiro killed him," Nijihiro said succinctly.

"Why on earth was Jin knocking on our door?" Kaoru asked.

"I VG-ed him on the way over here and played a little trick on him after I beat him up," Nijihiro explained. "So..."

"I see." Kaoru's husband, Daisuke, had collected the packs of cards from Shirai and was absentmindedly stacking them on the floor. "So now he's dead out in the front yard, huh?"

"Probably."

The kitchen door opened.

"What's going on?" Ayaka asked, poking her head out. Everybody noted the tomato bits splattered over her face and silently thanked God that they were not in the kitchen while Hikaru was "helping."

"Was Chihiro downstairs?"

"Briefly," Fuma said.

"She killed somebody," Shiho clarified.

"Oh dear," Ayaka said, not sounding surprised. "Who?"

"Suzuki Jin," Nijihiro said.

"Oh, Suzuki-kun? That poor boy," Ayaka said without much sympathy. "Nijihiro, go bring him inside, I don't want dead bodies in our front yard when Natsumi gets here..." And she closed the door again.

Nijihiro groaned. "Ugh. I don't want to drag him in. I just beat him up. Fuma, you get him."

"I don't think so," Fuma said.

"Fine. Be that way. letsuna?"

The spiky-haired boy, his shirt still unbuttoned, shook his head. "Hell no."

"Shirai?"

Shirai sat on his hands with a wicked smile. "He's not my responsibility."

"He's not mine either!" Nijihiro looked around. "Yuna? Hiroji?"

"Mom told you to do it," Yuna—the real Yuna—said.

"Have fun." Hiroji blew his (?) brother a kiss.

"I hate you all," Nijihiro told them.

"I'll help you," Niou volunteered.

"Leave Hayami-kun with us," Shiho said, smiling flirtatiously. "We'll take good care of him." She and Hiroji snickered together.

"Speak for yourselves," Maki muttered ominously.

Nijiuro blew strands of crimson hair out of his face. “Fine. FINE. Hayami-kun, stay here and be careful. Remember, if you say no twice, it’s rape.”

“Oh, he won’t be saying no,” Haruna said innocently, and she joined in the roar of laughter that greeted her remark.

Nijiuro rolled his eyes and left the living room.

* * *

There was a large Jin-shaped patch of smashed grass in the front yard, so it was pretty easy to tell where Chihiro had thrown him. Nijiuro and Niou beat a path past Nanami-obâ’s pinwheels into the grass, which wasn’t really dead, it just liked to fake it. Even the grass at the li house went against traditional conventions.

Whatever Chihiro had done to Jin, it was pretty bad. He was unconscious in the grass, his Jin Saotome costume even further destroyed by Chihiro’s half-inch-long talons, halfway between a spread-eagle and a fetal position. He was still breathing, and he wasn’t really bleeding too much, but he would probably be black-and-blue all over by the next day. Hopefully Chihiro hadn’t broken anything.

“Ohhhh,” Niou said, looking wide-eyed at Jin. “Is this Jin?”

“Uh-huh,” Nijiuro sighed. “I’ll take his right arm, you take his left. Okay, heave—”

After a not insignificant amount of trouble—Jin was not light, and unconscious bodies are notoriously uncooperative—the cousins managed to wrestle Jin mostly upright and drag him back through the grass to the front porch and through the front door.

“Where should we put him?” Niou asked.

“In my room,” Nijiuro groaned, bowing to the inevitable. “It’s closest...”

They maneuvered Jin into the room shared between Nijiuro, Shiho, Hiroji, and Haruna and got him onto Nijiuro’s bed. Nijiuro surveyed him—he was bleeding from several of Chihiro’s slashes, and his costume was beyond repair.

“Niou, get a bowl of water and a cloth from the kitchen,” Nijiuro said. “I don’t want him bleeding everywhere...”

Niou nodded and raced out of the room.

After a moment’s hesitant thinking, Nijiuro slowly slid off Jin’s gloves and boots, pretty much the only parts of his costume that had remained undamaged. Both his scarf and headband were gone, probably lost in the grass or to the wind. His jacket was thick and pretty much undamaged as well, except for being severed down the front—which was of course Nijiuro’s fault, not Chihiro’s—but his pants had been torn to ribbons. Chihiro had gone for the legs with an instinctive sense of their vulnerability. Nijiuro pulled Jin’s arms out of his jacket and, trying not to think about it too much, peeled away his shredded pants.

Niou came back in, proudly carrying the items Nijiuro had asked for, and put them on one of the two tables in the room.

“Thank you,” Nijiuro said.

“Welcome. Gotta go.”

Nijiuro looked at his cousin, confused. “‘Gotta go’? Go do what?”

“Clean up after Hikaru. Tomatoes,” Niou explained, and left.

That did make sense.

Nijiuro picked up the cloth and dipped it in the water. He wrapped it around his hand, about to wipe blood, grass, and dust off Jin’s body, but then stopped.

A miniature battle was going on in Nijiuro’s head at that moment. His brain was ordering him to leave the cloth where it was to avoid overt contamination by Jin’s idiocy. Some other, smaller, yet more persuasive voice was coaxing him to let their skin touch.

The idea held considerable appeal.

Nijiuro dithered for a moment, but eventually, as usually happened in Nijiuro's brain, common sense lost out to impulse. He unwound the cloth from his hand and laid it—and his hand—over one of the Chihiro—caused scratches.

Unexpectedly, just the brush of his thumb on Jin's chest sent a feeling similar to an electric shock through his arm.

Suddenly furious with himself for no reason he wanted to explain, Nijiuro concentrated solely on the wounds as he came to them. By focusing on parts of the whole, he was able to keep that persuasive little voice silent—until he reached Jin's loincloth, the only piece of clothing he hadn't taken off him.

The little voice was back, much louder, much more persuasive, and this time much more dangerous—strip him naked.

Come on, who's going to see?

Your family already knows you're gay.

They'll just think it's natural.

If they ever even find out.

Just keep it a secret.

He won't ever know.

Nag, nag, nag.

It was exactly what Nijiuro had been afraid of. And even scarier was his inability to resist it.

Carefully Nijiuro unwound Jin's loincloth, and for the first time in his entire life he let himself look at Jin all over, completely naked. There was a familiar-unfamiliar boiling feeling just below his stomach, dripping down like spilled tea—he could hear his heartbeat resounding oddly loudly in his ears—

Then he realized it wasn't his heartbeat, but somebody knocking on the front door, not the hammering that had been Jin's knock but a soft tapping, and then the sound of the front door being opened and Ayaka's joyous greeting echoed by a low, husky voice.

Natsumi was here. It had to be almost dinnertime.

* * *

They ate in the backyard, as Ayaka had arranged, as the sun set ahead of them, casting wonderful fiery shadows across the world. Chihiro had been awakened by Natsumi's knock, but as Natsumi had brought anpan and it was so close to dinnertime, she forgave her.

Ayaka, Natsumi, Fuma, Shiho, and Niou had brought out every bowl and plate in the house, and Maki and Shirai had staggered out carting the huge cauldron of ramen. They ate picnic-style, there being more than enough ramen for all of them even despite the li's huge size and huger appetites. Kaoru ate three bowls, Maki four, Kaii six, and Haruna the card-winner, whose small size seemed only to make everything else about her so much larger, a staggering nine. The joint cooking of Ayaka, Hikaru, and Himeko was deemed a success as the entire family laughed, yelled, fought, and joked until late into the night, pulling Naoki and Natsumi—the two technical outsiders—into it until even they had forgotten that they weren't blood relations to the lis.

Natsumi turned out to be an older woman about Ayaka's age who had surely once been a radiant beauty and had not lost all of it yet. Her hair was completely grey, but as long and thick and beautiful as it must have been when she was seventeen—her eyes were gems framed by fabulously long lashes and her voice was a dusky, sultry, husky murmur with a music to it fully as irresistible as that of Daisy Buchanan's from Fitzgerald's famous novel The Great Gatsby.

She had been an actress of some small repute once, but show business ended up breaking her instead of making her. The loss of her career left her working as an assistant in a florist's shop to make

ends meet. The owner, a strong-willed woman who had struck out to start the little shop on her own, fell in love with her, and the emotion was returned and changed into a blossoming relationship. Natsumi worked in that florist's for thirteen years, until the owner was killed in a car crash and the store went bankrupt.

Natsumi had met Ayaka soon after this, while she was still reeling from the double loss of her love and her job, and Ayaka had helped her to realize a talent for painting she had never known she possessed. Ayaka had lent—given—her money to buy paints and canvas even though she couldn't afford to, and by some incredible luck Natsumi had become an artist, struggling, but somehow able to support herself.

It was not long after this that Natsumi had found her second love in Ayaka.

"Ahhh," Yue—Kaoru's second daughter, an extremely Gothic girl who refused to wear any color other than black—said with great satisfaction. "Sunset ramen."

"What a lovely name," Chihiro said dreamily, licking her spoon reflectively. "You'd think they'd make something with that name...I'd buy it."

It was astonishing what the fall of the sun and a couple bowls of ramen could do to Chihiro's mood.

"Gochisosama," Fuma said to his mom. "It was great."

"Scrumptious," Yue added.

"Delicious," Haruna supplied.

"Wonderful," Yuna contributed.

"Tasty," Kaii recommended.

"SILENCE," Shiho suggested. "Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I can't see anymore, it's too dark—"

"Too dark!" Chihiro cried, scandalized.

"—so I suggest adjourning inside for cards," Shiho continued.

"And tea," Yue said.

"And anpan," Natsumi said.

"And blankets," Ietsuna said.

"Well, if you'd button up your shirt for once in your life," Maki said.

"And you'd probably better check on Jin," Ayaka said to Nijjiro.

"Why?" Nijjiro demanded.

"To make sure he didn't die from everything Chihiro did to him," Kaoru said.

"I'll check him," Hiroji volunteered. "He's hot."

"How can you say that?" Kaii demanded. "He's the enemy. Remember second grade?"

Kaii and Hiroji started arguing, but Nijjiro wasn't listening. His brother's words had struck a chord deep in Nijjiro. A chord that reminded him of Jin's state of dress—or in this case, his lack of it.

"All right, all right!" Nijjiro said, pretending to be irritated but getting to his feet a little too quickly. "I'll go check on him. If I leave it to you guys, he'll stay on my bed until he rots..."

"Take your time!" Shiho said.

I shouldn't, Nijjiro thought to himself as he went inside.

* * *

"Hey," Jin said when Nijjiro walked in. "That girl's a demon. She should join VG, she'd flatten everybody she came up against."

"You're awake!" Nijjiro said, surprised.

"And naked," Jin added dryly. "Just my luck to get stuck in your house, in the buff."

"You looked worse a few hours ago, believe me," Nijjiro informed him. "It's pretty late—how long have you been conscious?"

“Maybe half an hour,” Jin shrugged.

“That long? What did Chihiro do to you? How’re you feeling?”

“Still alive, somehow. Chihiro, huh? She clawed me to pieces, pummeled me a couple few times, threw me into the grass, and kicked me in the balls for good measure.”

“I see. Oh God. The idiot guy across the street woke her up today, so she was out for blood.”

“She got that,” Jin said ruefully.

“You should have said something if you’ve been awake for—”

“It’s been an interesting half an hour,” Jin waved. “I’ve been looking. This’ your room?”

Nijihiro looked around.

It was not technically his room, since he shared it with his siblings Shiho, Hiroji, and Haruna. Already not the largest of rooms, it had been divided up into quarters, giving each inhabitant a very small space to live in that somehow turned out to be enough to convey a slice of their four different lives. There were two tables in the room, one between Shiho’s immaculate navy-blue futon and Hiroji’s rumpled lavender one, the other between Haruna’s completely unmade red futon and Nijihiro’s Jin-supporting white one. On Shiho’s side of her table was a small, ancient jewelry box containing her most precious possessions—a pair of tiny diamond earrings that had once belonged to her grandmother, Nanami-obâ. They were so precious to Shiho that she rarely even wore them, but kept them locked in the jewelry box and wore the key around her neck on an old shoelace.

Aside from the jewelry box, Shiho kept a few pictures of various family members, each framed on a different one of Shiho’s birthdays. Recurring among most of the photos was the closeness of Shiho and Fuma, climaxing in a large charcoal sketch Natsumi had drawn of the two of them, depicting Shiho sitting on Fuma’s lap in the backyard. This was almost on the same level to Shiho as her diamond earrings, and she had it pinned next to her futon so that she could look at it whenever she wanted. (Ayaka was planning on framing it for Shiho’s next birthday.)

Hiroji’s side of the table held most of the things he needed to make he a she—a brush, a comb, some cotton, his scarf when he wasn’t wearing it, even a tiny amount of makeup, which none of the Iis used on a regular basis because they couldn’t afford to—and also a small hodgepodge of carefully saved shojo manga. Hiroji was an avid manga reader, a trait he shared with Haruna, as her half a table also boasted a limited selection of titles beside a soccer ball and several large rocks. Most of the Iis collected things—Haruna collected rocks. She liked to throw them at people.

Nijihiro’s tableside was mostly dominated by his own collection of bottles of hair dye, the more bizarre the better. The only things not dye-related around Nijihiro’s green futon were two antiquated Aqua CDs and a poster of Tsuyosa pinned to his wall.

“This’ my room,” Nijihiro confirmed. “I share it with Shiho, Hiroji, and Haruna, but yeah, this is my room.”

“Huh. It’s different than I expected.” Jin let his eyes roam over the ceiling from wall to wall. “I’ve never seen your room. I’ve never even been inside your house.”

“That’s because we hate each other.”

We do, don’t we? I know we do. I can’t really feel it right now, but we do.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

They sat quietly for a moment, then Nijihiro threw his hair back out of his face and said, “Um, so, do you hurt anywhere?”

“Everywhere,” Jin said. “Pretty much.”

“I’m really sorry about Chihiro almost killing you,” Nijihiro said. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized he probably should have offered to help Jin get dressed. No matter—Jin was certain to ask for that, first thing.

But...

“Yeah, could you lift me up a little?” Jin asked. “I’ve been trying to look at that picture over there, but my neck hurts when I try to turn it...”

Nijihiro helped him up, and Jin studied Shiho’s prized sketch in silence.

“They look nice,” he said awkwardly.

“Natsumi drew it,” Nijihiro said. “My mom’s friend. It’s my sister Shiho and her...” he hesitated, “boyfriend, Fuma.”

“Your mom’s friend’s a great artist,” Jin said as Nijihiro started to lower him back down. “Ow! God!”

“Sorry,” Nijihiro said hastily.

“It’s not you, it’s my balls,” Jin muttered. “I thought your cousin busted `em when she kicked `em. She didn’t, but...God damn...”

Nijihiro paused. That little persuasive voice was back. But it wasn’t being little now. It was shouting at the top of its lungs, and for a brief moment Nijihiro tried to fight it. But that one little voice was stronger than a Titan and more tempting than the forbidden fruit of Eden, and before Nijihiro could really stop it, it had taken control of his mouth.

“I...could...maybe help you,” Nijihiro said hesitantly.

“Huh?” Jin asked, looking a little wary.

“If you increase blood flow, bruises go down faster,” Nijihiro muttered, brushing pink streaks of hair out of his face. “So...maybe...that would make...you might feel better if...”

“Why not?” Jin asked.

Nijihiro blinked. “Huh?”

“Go ahead. Try it.”

The voice had stopped talking through Nijihiro, and immediately the rainbow-haired boy felt guilty. “You understand what I’m—?”

“You’re gonna grope my nuts.” Jin shrugged. “You don’t join VG if you care about something like that. I’ve lost on Level 1, I’ve had to do it to myself before. Besides, if you think you can stop my balls aching, you can do whatever the hell you want.”

Nijihiro opened his mouth, but couldn’t really think of anything to say, except, “I’m surprised you trust me.”

“So`m I,” Jin sighed. He moved slightly, and winced. “But...I do. So do something.”

Nijihiro swallowed, feeling the pounding, boiling feeling return from his stomach downwards. His pulse was slamming in his ears as he reached out jerkily, expecting Jin to stop him or slug him at any minute—but Jin just lay still, even when Nijihiro’s fingers finally touched him.

The skin of Jin’s balls was silky to Nijihiro’s touch, but sore and throbbing to Jin’s, so when Nijihiro made a first, indelicate, massage-like motion, Jin yelped. Nijihiro jerked his hand away, blood rushing into his face, wondering what the hell had possessed him to suggest this.

“Sorry,” Nijihiro said hastily. “I—”

“Oh, God,” Jin muttered, “do that again.”

Nijihiro blinked. “What?”

“You’re right. It feels better. It hurts, but then it feels better. Do it again.”

For one brief second, Nijihiro considered backing out. But the feeling of another boy’s skin thrilled his fingers to the marrow, and he knew it was way too late to stop. And what’s more, he knew he didn’t want to.

More observant about their tenderness now, Nijihiro softly—softly, softly, ever so softly—kneaded Jin’s balls, focused absolutely on this unfamiliar skin. Every movement, every feeling, every centimeter of his body that touched Jin’s sent a tingling feeling like the preliminary stages of vomiting up Nijihiro’s chest, but vomiting just feels wrong. This tingling feeling just felt right.

Maybe a little too right. Without conscious control, Nijihiro’s fingers bit harder, the softness more

fleeting with every breath Nijjiro took. Jin clung to the covers of Nijjiro's futon, bunched arm muscles betraying his pain, but Nijjiro was beyond caring. Jin's shuddering groans fed Nijjiro's lust, making his movements harsher and stronger, which made Jin's groans louder, which started the circle over again. Thirty seconds after Nijjiro had started, both of them were flagrantly aroused and rapidly losing control of themselves.

"I should never have let you do this," Jin gasped. "You're getting off on touching my nuts."

"I'm getting off on this?!" Gold and silver strands of hair were falling into Nijjiro's face, but he wasn't about to raise his hands to push them away. "Look at you!!"

"You're kneading like I'm bread dough. Any guy grabs my nuts like this and I wanna know why he was expecting any different."

Nijjiro's hand squeezed hard, knowing it would hurt Jin, not caring that it would hurt Jin, caring only for the growl dragged forth from deep in Jin's throat. "I thought you were straight."

"Never," Jin groaned. "You want my balls, Nijjiro, they are yours."

This was more lust talking than Jin, but it made little difference to either of them. The words sent a clenching flame up Nijjiro's chest, and dragged him forward and down, to lie across Jin's chest, his hands having lost all of their former wariness. Jin arched against Nijjiro, drawing strength from the pain, and their faces came close. So close. Nijjiro's eyes had turned to pure gold, and Jin held them with his brown ones, their mouths coming closer, breath hot on each other's face. Nijjiro was this far from climbing on top of Jin and not getting off until fantasies he had never even dreamed about became reality, but the instant before Nijjiro had lost it enough to try and rape Jin (or get raped by Jin, they both had a certain appeal) there was a clanging, crashing clatter from just outside the door. Somebody had just dropped what sounded like a stack of plates and all of the chopsticks.

Immediately Jin and Nijjiro ripped themselves apart and away. Nijjiro's first thought was, Oh my God, Niou was carrying that stuff and he looked in and saw me grabbing Jin's balls, but the door was still closed, and from the yells that were exploding just outside it had been Hikaru carrying the utensils, and now Maki was yelling at her.

Jin, who had regained temporary if painful control over his muscles thanks to first Nijjiro and now Hikaru, dragged his knees up to his chin in a rather belated attempt to hide his full-blooded arousal and said, "Um."

That one syllable was enough to crash the full enormity of the situation down on Nijjiro's head. With something between a gasp and a sob, Nijjiro shot to his feet.

"I'm sorry!" Nijjiro wailed, and he ran out of the room through a startled Maki and Hikaru, away from his rival, his friend, and who he had just realized was incredibly more than that—not just his crush but his passion, his desire, the one who could even be his life.

* * *

Nijjiro left his house and ran into the night towards the back alley of the nearby boarded-up building that had once been the florist's Natsumi had worked at. It was the place he went to whenever there was too much in his house for him to deal with, and reflexively he went to it now, even though what he couldn't deal with was not in his house, but in his mind.

He knew he was gay, he knew he liked men, even deep down if he had chosen to admit it he knew he liked Jin more than any other man he had ever met, but Nijjiro's greatest fear had always been that someday he—the only straight-out gay boy in his family—would succumb to the unique legacy that had been passed to him—the lust of a man with the commonly-seen promiscuity of a homosexual. Ever since Nijjiro had been ten years old he had been afraid that someday he would lose his better judgment and let lust push him into sex, or, eventually, even rape.

Few people hated stereotypes more than Nijihiro. As long as he had had this fear he had also resolved that he would never let it become a reality. In a way, you could say that his fear was of becoming the stereotypical homosexual—amoral, indecent, oversexed, and ready to ravish any man in view. It was the antithesis to everything Nijihiro valued—his family, his ambitions, his plans for the prize money of VG, and most particularly his dream of a true, pure love with a strong, shining diamond core.

A love maybe to share with Jin.

Except he had just almost raped Jin.

Nijihiro buried his face in his hands and let himself cry.

* * *

“Hello, what have we here?”

Nijihiro jumped, and the sudden fright in the middle of his muffled sobs gave him the hiccups. Hiccupping and trying not to—although at least he had stopped crying—he looked up at the people who had cornered him behind the old florist’s while he wasn’t paying attention.

This was the second time in a single day that Nijihiro had found himself in exactly this situation, and this time he had a feeling that he wasn’t going to get off as easily as he had with Naoki. For a start, all five of them had variously blatant looks of anticipation on their faces.

“Hey, babe,” said one of them, leering unpleasantly.

Did I just happen to run into, like, the only marauding gay guys in this city, or do they just think I’m a girl? Nijihiro wondered, although he didn’t say anything.

“Pretty girls shouldn’t cry,” another said, even more unpleasantly. “Lemme...cheer you up a bit.”

Well, that answers that question.

“There’s one easy way to cure hiccups,” said one of them, and before Nijihiro could react (hiccups slow your reaction time) he had grabbed Nijihiro’s chest in a place that, had Nijihiro really been a girl, probably would have sent the pervert into his element.

As it was, it sent him somewhere else. A good fright is supposed to be able to both start and stop the hiccups, and in Nijihiro’s case it now stopped them. Nijihiro backhanded the guy to the ground, and only realized afterwards that his hand was blazing with his rainbow chi.

“Don’t touch me, you jerks!” Nijihiro yelled, holding up his hand threateningly.

“She’s in VG!” one of them yelped.

“She’s not a she!” the one Nijihiro had backhanded informed the others. “It’s a guy!”

“WHAT?!”

“Your loss,” Nijihiro said, adopting the teasing tone he often used with Jin. “Just think, you go looking for a girl and you get me instead. You’re lucky though. I feel like playing rough tonight.”

“You wanna play rough?” another of them demanded. “I recognize your chi—you’re that VG pansy Nijihiro! My dogy little sister is practically in love with you! Bet your idea of ‘rough’ is sleeping with your—”

Nijihiro flicked his fingers at this obnoxious loudmouth and sent a blast of concentrated chi at him. It knocked him down, and sent him skidding into the back wall of the florist’s.

“If I’m a pansy,” Nijihiro mused, “and yet I can beat you up—what does that make you? A dandelion?”

“Goddamn bastard!” roared the only guy who hadn’t spoken yet, a big, strong-looking young man. He rushed Nijihiro, swinging wildly, but Nijihiro breezed around his fists, brushing nonchalant aquamarine hair out of his face while he moved. Then his feet burst into colored flames, and Nijihiro launched a roundhouse Iridescent Wheel into his foe’s chest. The “big, strong-looking young man” was slammed into the ground and lay there, groaning.

“A daisy?” Nijihiro continued as though nothing had happened.

“Goddammit!” moaned the guy Nijjiro had just flattened.

Nijjiro blew him a kiss and turned his attention to the other contenders. He threw blasts of chi-fire at one (usually he called it Aurora Rain, but these jerks didn’t deserve to hear the names of his attacks) and knocked the other two away from him with another Iridescent Wheel. To add injury to insult—because the one he had Aurora Rained was hopping around with his arms blazing non-hot rainbow fire, shrieking and trying to put it out—Nijjiro threw out a Starlight Rain, charged with much more power than the one he had used on Jin, catching the guy in the chest and the side of his head. He was slammed into the ground with Nijjiro standing on top of him, and did not move when Nijjiro jumped off his prone body.

“Who’s next?” Nijjiro asked playfully, only the sparks in his orange eyes betraying his consuming fury. “Or is this enough ‘fun’ for one night, you cowardly, mealy-mouthed, sick, twisted—”

His words escalated into a yelp.

The one he had knocked down with his first Iridescent Wheel had gotten his breath back, and Nijjiro had backed just a step too close to him. Suddenly the small boy was grabbed from behind, his arms pinioned to his sides, one hard arm closing off his windpipe. Nijjiro choked, unable to breathe, and the flames wreathing his hands died away.

“Not so smart anymore, pansy,” the guy gasped against Nijjiro’s neck. “You can give it but you can’t take it. Where’s your fancy fire now, huh? Huh?”

“Fag,” spat out the guy who had mentioned his sister. “Homo. Wonder how my sister’ll take it when she finds out I beat up her precious queer VGer.”

“Can’t act so tough now, can ya?” demanded another of them.

“Hold him,” growled the one who had tried to feel Nijjiro up, and he landed two rapid-fire punches to Nijjiro’s stomach.

Only the fact that his captor dropped him to the ground after this stopped Nijjiro from passing out. A flood of air into his ravenous lungs made him cough, almost choking on the air he was trying to breathe.

A barrage of kicks totally knocked that choking, hard-won air out of him again. Being so small and light, Nijjiro was actually kicked from one to the other like a soccer ball, most of the kicks landing in his stomach, sides, and back. It was excruciating. Every few seconds his assailants paused, to let Nijjiro catch his breath just a bit and keep him conscious, and then laid back into him. This went on for a full minute, and by the time they finally stopped, Nijjiro was limp on the ground, racked by shuddering gasps for air, feeling like one huge, throbbing bruise.

“Hold him down,” the strangler told his friends, cracking his knuckles.

Between the four of them, they held Nijjiro down easily, one to each of his arms and legs. Nijjiro couldn’t have struggled beneath them even if he had had the breath to try, but he could still think, and all he could think was one phrase; I am so dead.

“Hold his legs apart,” the strangler said, looking at Nijjiro with a kind of sadistic fury in his eyes, fueled by an involuntary flinch from Nijjiro. “Yeah, that’s right, queer. I’m gonna break your balls—if you even got any—and then we’ll see how many bones we can break too. You’re gonna wish you never came near us, let alone messed with us.”

Nijjiro was already wishing that. His eyes had lost all their fighting orange, and had darkened to a raw black. Some tiny, unflappable part of his mind observed that it was probably payment after what he had done to Jin’s balls—first setting Chihiro on him, then going all berserk on them himself—but still! Knowing he deserved it didn’t make it any less terrifying!

The sound of footsteps caught the strangler’s attention, but before he could turn to look, a running black shape landed a crushing kick to the side of his head.

Never in his entire life had Nijjiro felt more relief than he did then, seeing that single guy flying through the air, landing on the ground, not to get up any time soon.

It was over in seconds. Nijjiro just closed his eyes and stayed perfectly still, and—THUNK! THWACK! SMASH! CRASH!—soon there were four goons slumped lifelessly over his arms and legs—but then his rescuer was shoving them off, and from the soft cracking of knees, Nijjiro could tell that whoever it was, they were kneeling down beside him. He opened his eyes again to thank whichever relative had saved him.

And froze.

It was not one of his relatives. It was not even Naoki. In fact, it was not anybody Nijjiro had ever seen in his life. And for just a moment, Nijjiro wondered if he was any better off now than he was before. But for just a moment.

This person was also male. He was tall, with forest-green hair that could probably touch his nipples, and dark, dark skin that clearly took up all the space available underneath his ripped tank top and faded jeans. The muscles of his legs, particularly in his kneeling position, strained the seams of his jeans—that kick that had taken out the strangler must have rivaled that of a horse.

But it was his eyes that assured Nijjiro that yes, he was safe in this stranger's company. His eyes were the very definition of Asian—beautiful, almond-shaped, blacker than the sky—and so clearly concerned that it was almost funny. Nijjiro felt like laughing, but had the uncomfortable feeling that if he started he might not be able to stop.

“You okay?” Tall, Dark, and Handsome asked.

“Y—yeah,” Nijjiro answered shakily.

“Can you stand?”

Nijjiro tried, but winced just trying to lift up his hand. Immediately his savior leaned over, grabbed his hands, and helped him gently to his feet. Nijjiro stood in front of him, looking at his dark, shadowed face, and felt the guilty urge to jump him, even bruised and aching as he was.

This traitorous impulse on top of everything else that had just happened was too much. Nijjiro dropped against his rescuer's chest and burst into tears—not the restrained, silent weeping of before, but miserable, desolate sobs. Knocked back a step physically and surely more than one step mentally under Nijjiro's collapse, the poor rescuer had no idea of what to do except to awkwardly put his arms around Nijjiro in return. It was a kind, innocent, awkward gesture, and it just made Nijjiro cry even harder.

“What's wrong?” Tall, Dark, and Handsome asked finally, uncomfortably.

“Oh my god, I'm sorry!” Nijjiro backed away from him, trying unsuccessfully to fight back his tears. “It's just...just...”

I am never going to see this guy again, will I? I can tell him everything and it doesn't even matter...so...so...

Nijjiro inhaled. “There's this guy who I've known since elementary school and we've been fighting ever since we first met and I thought I hated him and I know he hates me except I just realized a little while ago that I actually really like him and might even love him but this afternoon he found out I joined VG and he challenged me and I beat him on Level 3 so I made him strip in front of everybody and then I tied his scarf around his head and kissed him and if he didn't hate me before he definitely hates me now because even after that he came to my house to challenge me again and my cousin almost killed him 'cause she scratched him and punched him and threw him and kicked him in the balls and then I was trying to take care of him except I stripped him instead and then when he woke up after dinner I groped him and now he's got to REALLY hate me and I want to kiss him or jump him or something every time I see him or think about him and I think I'm going crazy or losing my mind or something because I can't control myself and I got into that fight and those guys were going to...to castrate me, and I was so scared and...and...and...oh, GOD!!!”

Despite his best efforts, Nijjiro broke down further. Every sob sent shaking lances of pain throughout his body, and it hurt so much he couldn't stand, but fell to the ground, still blurting out his feelings,

because once the words had started coming they were impossible to stop.

“Half of my relatives are either lesbians or bisexuals or transsexuals and switching identities, and my dad ran away and now my mom has a girlfriend and you have no idea how weird that is, and my aunt’s dying and my brother is going to marry my sister and...and I’m in VG! How can I participate in any more fights like this?! And I have to, `cause if I don’t win then we’re all gonna lose our home because we don’t have any money...and I don’t even like VG, everybody calls me a fruit just because I’m in it, and I am, but they don’t have to say it, and it hurts...and why does everybody have to hate me for it anyway?! It’s not like I asked for it! And I don’t want it until I think of Jin and then I want it more than anything in the world and I want it with him except there’s no way he’ll even VG me anymore after everything I did to him this time...”

“My God,” the guy said bluntly. “That sounds even worse than my life.”

“I’m just...I can’t take this,” Nijiuro confessed. “Having all of them depending on me, waiting for me, hoping that I’m going to win VG for them, needing me to win VG for them...I hate fighting, almost everybody else there has a reason for trying to win that’s at least as urgent as mine, but if I can’t win it for them then we can’t go on, and our...my whole family is depending on me and Ashotei, and it’s just...I just...I...God, thank you, thank you so much for rescuing me...”

There was a silence, punctuated by Nijiuro’s shuddering tears. Then, finally, his savior asked quietly, “Do you...want me to...hold you again...or something?”

Nijiuro looked up at him for a moment, his eyes dark, desolate navy blue, and with a choking cry, he fell back against him.

They stayed there, kneeling in the florist’s alley, Nijiuro shedding tears into his rescuer’s shoulder, him waiting quietly for Nijiuro to cry himself out. The moon wept light down upon the two of them, casting their shadow across the alley and over the comatose bodies of Nijiuro’s attackers. Outside the alley, people walked and talked and went about their nightlives. Inside, behind the rows of buildings, the only audible sound was Nijiuro’s uncontrollable crying.

Many minutes later, Nijiuro could finally pull himself together, and eventually lay, shuddering from the occasional, now-silent sob, in the warm, strong circle of the other boy’s arms.

“Thank you,” he repeated very quietly.

“No problem.”

“I should go home,” Nijiuro said.

“You should.”

Even in the exhausted, listless state that follows excessive crying, Nijiuro felt that this was a strange reply—but he was too tired to think about that.

“I...well...just...thank you, that’s all I can say. Over and over and over.”

“I thank you for your thanks.” The reply was almost ironic. “Be careful.”

“I don’t live far,” Nijiuro said. “I’ll be careful.”

4 - The Enlightenment of the Gods, Part Three

The Enlightenment of the Gods, Part Three

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It was very late when Nijiuro came back to his house. The windows were awash with light, and Nijiuro was certain that a very loud card battle was going on inside. But he didn't feel like joining in, not tonight. Especially not if Jin was still there.

A cat lying on the front porch, carefully off to the non-opening side of the door, looked up as Nijiuro stepped onto the porch and yawned disdainfully at him. Nijiuro looked down at the cat, recognizing it as Kin, one of his cousin Haru's favorites. Kin was a fat silver tabby, filled with disdain for everything that wasn't edible—except for Harunobu, whom he adored.

Kin got ponderously to his feet and trotted off the porch and around towards the backyard. On a whim, Nijiuro followed him. He didn't really want to answer the myriad questions of his relatives tonight, and the back door would go unnoticed easier than the front.

However, he was not the only one in the backyard.

A throng of cats, none of them the lis', were in the backyard. Alley cats, house cats, pampered cats, suspicious cats, cats with no owners and cats with ten owners, all weaving themselves about in a great feline pavane around the back porch. A loud purring issued from many feline throats at once, and nocat attacked another, even those that anywhere else would have attacked first and asked questions never. Haru was out, and the rules were different now.

Harunobu was Niou's twin, and shared the same short, soft black hair and large, amber eyes. However, there the resemblance ended. Haru was taller than Niou and more solidly built, although at the age of nine he was still too small to be called solid. He had none of Niou's kitten-like softness, and his eyes were harder and more wary—but around cats, and indeed any other animal, fish, or insect, Haru's kindness was second to none.

It was almost a ritual that whenever he could Haru snuck food into the backyard to feed the animals of Japan. Cats had come—or so their tags said—from Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Asahikawa, even as far away as Iriomote Jima, perhaps passing the word of the strange cat-feeding boy by some unknown cat-relay and deciding to come see him for themselves. Haru loved cats, all cats, even the scruffy, angry cats that wouldn't let anyone come within fifteen feet of them, and most cats loved Haru too—and even those who didn't would still come to be fed by him.

Haru was there on the back porch, surrounded by cats, letting them eat leftover meat from the ramen from his hands. He didn't look up as Nijiuro came around into the back yard, but spoke to him as he stroked cats under the chin or down the back, wherever he thought they would like best.

"You're back."

"Yes, I am," Nijiuro said.

Haru didn't ask any questions, merely continued to feed the congregation of cats. But then, when Nijiuro waded through the current of cats up to the back door, he said, "I wouldn't."

Nijiuro paused, and looked quizzically back.

"Ayaka-oba and Natsumi," Haru said by way of explanation.

"They're not playing cards?"

"They were, but Maki accidentally poked Ayaka-oba in the eye during Nertz."

“Ah.”

“Jin’s left,” Haru added.

Nijihiro’s stomach twisted. “Really.”

“Right after you did.”

“I had to think,” Nijihiro explained.

“Oh.”

Haru knew all about having to think. This was an explanation he would accept.

“If you wanna go in without seeing anybody, try the roof,” he said, bringing more meat both cooked and raw out of his pockets.

“The roof?”

“Chihiro’s up there, but nobody else should be upstairs at all. Except maybe Kaoru-oba checking on Sakura.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Did you VG somebody?” Haru asked quietly.

Nijihiro paused. Haru didn’t usually ask questions of anybody. “When? Just now?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Oh.”

They were both quiet for a moment, surrounded by the meows and purrs of cats. Kin hopped up onto Haru’s lap, which as far as he was concerned was his by right, and curled up for a snooze.

“Night,” Nijihiro said finally, clambering painfully onto the railing of the back porch.

“G`night,” Haru answered as Nijihiro made his wincing way onto the roof.

Chihiro was indeed on the roof. She spent all night on the roof, staring up into the sky, marking constellations and recording the stars on tremendous sheets of butcher paper that she stole from school. Nijihiro had a difficult time climbing up the roof—it was an easy roof, and he was used to it, but his body hurt so badly it was quite difficult—so Chihiro probably knew he was there even before he could see her.

She didn’t say anything until he reached the apex of the roof, where she was, dotting her paper with stars and labeling them all in neat, Lilliputian kanji.

“I saw you coming,” she said abruptly.

That was unusual. From the roof, Chihiro could see the entire street, but rarely did, because her attention was usually completely absorbed in the sky above.

“You were looking?” Nijihiro asked, feeling flattered.

“Jin left to go after you,” Chihiro continued. “But he went the opposite direction you came back from.”

“Really.”

“He was only wearing his jacket and his pants. He was carrying everything else with him, and going really fast.”

“He didn’t find me.”

Chihiro drew lines between several stars and labeled the constellation Cassiopeia. “He was worried.”

Nijihiro’s heart leaped, and then sank. “He was probably just trying to kill me.”

“Possibly.” Chihiro wasn’t looking at her cousin, but up at the sky, searching for Bellatrix. “He didn’t yell any death-threats, though.”

Nijihiro didn’t say anything. Chihiro’s veiled questions were not unexpected, but he didn’t feel capable of answering any of them. He started moving towards Chihiro’s window, from which the roof was easily accessible and decessible. Then Chihiro asked a question outright, fully as unusual for her as it was for Haru. “Are you okay?”

Nijihiro paused, then answered truthfully, “No, I’m not.”

Chihiro bent over to label Bellatrix's new position, and her black hair fell over her face. "If you ever need somebody killed, all you have to do is say the word. I'm there."

Nijihiro stopped, and looked back up at her, surrounded by her extensive maps of the heavens, concerned for him and trying to mask it, and felt such a surge of love for her, for his entire family, that despite all their idiosyncrasies and all their problems and all their dependence upon him he wouldn't have traded them for anyone else, even if it had meant he wouldn't have to VG ever again.

He smiled, feeling partially like laughing and partially like crying. "Thanks, Chihiro."

Chihiro didn't answer him, but returned to the sky, eyes roving to search out where Procyon was tonight. Nijihiro climbed in through Chihiro's window, her black drapes brushing his face like soft, fluttering hands.

* * *

Earlier That Day...

Endo Eiko stared with undisguised dismay at her brother, searching for a way to take his words as a joke, even though she knew they weren't.

"Do you accept?" Endo Shiro demanded.

"Shiro, why..." Eiko began awkwardly, searching for a polite way to phrase her question. But Shiro cut her off, pulling out his VG card.

"I just joined VG, Eiko. I've been training, working on it, and I can use my chi now. I want to fight you. Now. Come on."

Eiko dug her fingers into her long, luxurious golden hair and stared dispiritedly at her brother. Shiro was a decent height for a Japanese male, about five feet seven, but she, Eiko, was six feet, six two in the heels she was wearing now, and almost twice as wide as he was. It was one of nature's little jokes, that Eiko was a carbon copy of their father—tall, solidly built, with a lion's mane of thick golden ringlets—and Shiro looked very like their mother—average height, slender, with long, straight, silvery hair like a fall of moonbeams. Eiko could gain weight off a single grain of rice, whereas Shiro could eat a buffet and not gain a pound. It was Eiko's dearest wish that she had her brother's metabolism. But at least she had a figure. Shiro looked like a stick.

"Shiro—" Eiko tried, but before she even opened her mouth she knew it was no good. Shiro had a mulish expression on his face exactly the same as the one that had been on their mother's face when she divorced their father ten years ago.

And she couldn't turn him down. Even aside from the fact that her reputation as a VGer would be ruined and she'd probably be fired from her waitressing job at Kira-kira Umi—the sushi and karaoke joint she and her brother were standing in now—Shiro would never forgive her for turning his challenge down.

The question was, would he forgive her when she won?

"All right, Shiro," Eiko sighed, pulling her own VG card out of the back pocket of her sky-blue, white-ruffled waitress dress. She shined it against the sleeve of her black blouse and clicked the corners. Kira-kira Umi was fully equipped to handle a VG match, and Eiko was its star champion.

The console posts on the edges of the Kira-kira Umi VG ring beeped once as Eiko clicked her card. She and Shiro walked over to the ring and slid their cards into the posts at almost the same time.

"Confirming VG status...Confirmed. Standby."

The cameras above the ring switched on and focused. The televisions in Kira-kira Umi, all set to Eiko's channel, switched to the familiar VG Standby icon—an interwoven V and G—and the restaurant's chatter of contented, sushi-eating customers died down, turning into an anticipatory whisper that ran about the place.

"VG Senshi Endo Eiko," Eiko said.

“VG Senshi Endo Shiro,” Shiro replied, igniting mutters around the room. “Well then. Don’t hold back, sister.”

Eiko sighed again. “All right, brother.”

She pointed her fingers at him and unleashed a fireball of sparkling, translucent chi.

Shiro barely got out of the way in time. The fireball hit the side of the arena and burst into sparkling flames that dissipated into the air. Around Kira-kira Umi, cheers went up. Most of the people who came here came here often, and Eiko was their darling. With her golden hair, black blouse, and voluptuous figure, she was attractive to men—with her sarcastic tongue, no-nonsense attitude, and fighting prowess, she was endearing to women. Sad to say, there was not a single Shiro-supporter in that restaurant, and both Eiko and Shiro knew it.

Shiro vaulted around the arena, dodging every blast of chi his sister threw at him. Eiko watched him carefully, noting his evasion for every shot. He had gotten better since the last time she had seen him—he had been trying hard. But trying wasn’t good enough in VG.

Eiko used her left hand to throw another fireball at her brother, then slashed her right hand off to the side, in the direction she knew Shiro was about to dodge. A gout of brilliant fire arched through the air and caught Shiro in the chest as he avoided the fireball—Eiko’s chi sent needles of pain into Shiro’s ribcage and broke the bonds of the molecules of his jacket. In other words, the jacket came to pieces.

Shiro recoiled, having trouble breathing because of the stabbing pain in his ribs, and the front of his jacket fell away from his shirt, drifting to the arena floor as shreds of cloth that came apart mid-drift. Eiko’s heart ached, but she knew Shiro was going to have to lose sooner or later—she couldn’t let him beat her, or else she’d be ruined—so she wove her hands through the air, gathering two huge orbs of her chi, and tossed them into the air, one at his waist, one at his feet.

The two spheres hit Shiro bang-on and exploded. Shiro crashed to the ground, his feet and ankles stabbed with pain, his shoes coming apart, and his stomach roiling like a fire hose. The ribbon tying his hair in its braid disintegrated—his silver hair came loose and fell over him like a funeral shroud.

Pushing this terrible image out of her mind, Eiko looked up, and smiled at the people in the restaurant. Inside, she was writhing in guilt. There hadn’t been any way out of it, no way to avoid humiliating her brother—right? Of course. But what if there was a way? What if she just hadn’t thought hard enough, or smart enough? Could she have avoided this?

The scoreboard above the VG ring hummed to itself, then came to a verdict. It beeped, and one of the squares lit up.

LEVEL 1

Eiko stared, open-mouthed in horror, at it. Oh God. Level 1. Why hadn’t she been thinking?! Why hadn’t she let Shiro land at least one hit on her?! He would NEVER forgive her for this. NEVER.

She looked down at her brother, and saw that he was staring up at her through the curtain of his hair. He knew, even without looking, what level he had lost at. The cheers resounding through Kira-kira Umi told him that.

Painfully he dragged himself to his feet. Eiko tried to go forward, to help him, to say something, anything, to him, but her feet were frozen to the floor. Alone, Shiro stood up, and looked around at his sister’s restaurant.

One idea was resonant in everyone’s shouts and thoughts—Strip! Strip! Strip! Strip!

Shiro bit his lip, and swallowed. A crimson flush was rising in his face, down his neck, and—as became obvious when he fumbled open the buttons of his shirt—over his chest, too.

Eiko couldn’t look. She had to turn away as her brother slowly, reluctantly, pulled off his clothes and stood naked in the arena. She hated her restaurant for cheering. She hated him for challenging her. She hated herself for doing this to him. She couldn’t look.

“Eiko!” Shiro yelled, his voice harsh as a crow’s with unshed tears.

Eiko swallowed.

“Eiko, look at me!”

She couldn’t look.

“Look at me, dammit!”

Eiko whirled around to face him again, keeping her eyes locked on his face, a lump like an apple in her throat. Shiro was glaring at her, his hands at his sides, clenched into fists.

“Eiko, I know you’ve had the better training,” Shiro growled. “I know Dad has more money than Mom, I know you’ve been learning stuff a lot longer than I have, but I swear to you, I’ll get better than this. Better than you. Someday I’ll beat you on Level 1. And this will all be the other way around.”

Eiko couldn’t speak around the apple in her throat. Shiro closed his eyes, and one tear slid down his face as he readied himself for the last stage of a Level 1 loss, readied to humiliate himself in front of all of Japan—actually, all of the world.

In a swirl of golden ringlets, Eiko turned on her heels and left the ring, left Kira-kira Umi, went out into the back and slumped in the alley where she could cry for the little brother she knew—and for the little brother she had just lost—without anybody to hear her.

* * *

At Roughly This Same Time...

Clack, went the bamboo against the rock, pouring water out into the pond.

“Your cousin is here,” the old man murmured around his tea, not taking his eyes off the sparkling little pond in his yard, feeling rather than hearing his trusted agent leaving the room.

Masuda Kasumi was waiting outside the front door, bouncing on her heels in barely suppressed glee. The Master had called for her. Her! She was just a fledgling ninja, and he wanted her! She wondered what dangerous task she would be assigned to complete, what tremendous duties she would be put in charge of, what terrible enemies she would—

The door opened.

Kasumi screamed and threw herself on the girl in the doorway. “Chiho-san!!”

Masuda Chiho fell backwards under Kasumi’s weight, and the cousins fell onto the floor in a hopeless jumble. Both girls were wearing typical ninja garb, tight and black, but that didn’t make it any easier to disentangle themselves.

“You need to learn control,” Chiho said, prying her arm loose from Kasumi’s leg. “What if I wasn’t Chiho, just an imposter?”

“Then you wouldn’t be in the Master’s house. Awww, Chiho-san, I’m just trying to say hi!”

“Then say it, don’t tackle me.”

“Tackling’s half the fun!” Kasumi got up and helped her cousin to her feet. “So what’s going on?! What am I doing?! Where am I going?! Huh, huh, huh?!”

“Why don’t you go talk to the Master and find out?” Chiho replied, closing the door.

“K!” Kasumi was off, tearing down the corridor. Chiho sighed and rubbed her temples. This might be more trouble than it was worth.

“Kasumi,” the Master said to her when she came into the room very quietly, behaving with an uncharacteristic amount of control. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Yessir,” Kasumi said, sitting on her feet and bowing to the floor.

“I want you to investigate the VG tournament,” the Master said.

“VG, sir?”

“Yes. Eleven years ago, the tournament was a cover-up for a secret plot to revive Jahana Miranda, a plot which surely would have succeeded had it not been for the help your cousin Chiho gave us. I cannot help but worry that perhaps this tournament is as rotten on the inside as that one years ago—and it is better to be safe than sorry. I have decided to send you and Chiho to Ariyake Coliseum to enter the tournament.”

Kasumi jolted as though she had received an electric shock. The Master probably noticed, but didn’t say anything about it as he continued.

“Keep a low profile. I will be sending you under the guise of a fake restaurant called Sakuraba’s that has been hacked into the VG computers. Stay in the tournament to keep suspicion away from you, and search the entire area for any hint of any kind of plot that might be going on in the shadows. Be careful and quiet and do everything that Chiho tells you. You will be serving as her messenger back here.”

“Yessir,” Kasumi said, her voice shaking slightly.

“Do not be afraid,” the Master said softly.

“Oh, I’m not, sir,” Kasumi said eagerly. “Thank you so much for—”

“Just remember that for later,” the Master said. “Do not be afraid. Chiho will protect you. Now go, and bring me back good news that I am just going senile, and there’s nothing wrong with VG this year at all.”

“Oh, I will—er, I mean, you’re not going senile, sir. I’ll—yes—I—well, goodbye sir.” And Kasumi left, blushing pink at her idiocy.

Clack, went the bamboo against the rock, pouring water out into the pond.

* * *

The Next Day...

Nijihiro woke up slowly the next day to sunlight pouring in through the window between his bed and Hiroji’s. It had to be later in the day—there was nobody else in the room, and everyone else’s bed was made, to varying degrees. Shiho’s looked new, whereas Haruna’s looked like a bear had slept in it.

Overnight, his bruises had turned into one huge, blackened clump of pain spread unyieldingly over his upper body. It hurt just to breathe.

Although he couldn’t do anything about the dark stains raised all over his skin, Nijihiro did have a notion of how to stop it from hurting so much—a little trick he had learned to use on himself when he was little and would fall and skin his knees. He called his chi to him—even this nonphysical effort hurt his ribs—and sent it blazing through the bruises.

Anybody watching Nijihiro at that time would have seen brilliant rainbow light flash in his eyes and over the bruises, changing them from black and blue to red, green, gold, and violet. Then it was gone, and Nijihiro felt normal again—at least, as normal as he ever did. He knew himself well enough to tell that it was only temporary, though. Any quick or strenuous movement would wear through the chi he was coating his damaged nerves with and stab through with pain; but as long as he was careful, he could act pretty much normal, and nobody would have to know he got beaten up last night.

Until he got into a VG match...

“Healing Rain,” Nijihiro muttered. “Why have I never named that one? I’ll call it Healing Rain. I’m hungry.”

He hadn’t bothered to change into pajamas last night, and he was still wearing his uniform from Bubblegum Ice Cream. It was a crumpled mess, so he took it off and put on his favorite shirt—a long-sleeved white shirt Natsumi had obligingly drawn a group portrait of Aqua on for him—and old, worn

jeans that had once belonged to his oldest brother, Ashotei, who was away at college. They were large on him, even with his belt, though not nearly as big as Fuma's. Fuma's jeans were almost as long as Nijjiro's entire body.

Padding on socks and the flopping ends of the jeans, Nijjiro went out into the hall and almost ran right into Yue, Himeko's Gothic, poetic daughter.

"Hark at Sleeping Beauty," said Maki, who was right behind her. "It's almost eleven."

"Where were you last night?" Yue demanded.

"I had to go think," Nijjiro said vaguely. "Where's Hayami-kun?"

Maki just snorted. Yue was a little more voluble. "He played Nertz with us last night and got flattened, and stupid Hiroji tried to get him to play Strip-Nertz, so he got weirded out and went to sleep in Chihiro's bed."

"Ah." Nijjiro tossed apple-green hair out of his eyes. "Is he up?"

"Yeah, and Hiroji's not making an idiot of himself anymore," Yue said.

"For a change," Maki added.

"Do you like anybody, Maki?" Yue asked.

"Not if they're male."

"Is there any food?" Nijjiro asked.

"Not breakfast," Yue shrugged. "But you can probably get some leftover ramen or the oden from two nights ago for lunch, if you like."

"Natsumi left the anpan, too, but that's not lunch," Maki said.

"Nah," Nijjiro agreed. "Thanks."

"Be careful," Yue warned. "Ayaka-oba and Shiho were working themselves into a volcanic state last night. They were ready to rain magmatic destruction on somebody because you didn't leave a note or anything."

"Magmatic's not a word."

"Shut up. I'm a poet, I'm allowed to make new words. The point is, they'll probably mob you as soon as they see you, so I'd keep my eyes peeled."

"Thanks for the warning." Nijjiro went for the kitchen.

He found Kaoru, Shiho, Hiroji, Haru, Niou, and Naoki in the living room. Kaoru, Hiroji, and Niou were playing Crazy Eights while Shiho read a book checked out from her school's library. Haru and Naoki were absorbed in stroking Kin and a lovely fluffy black female cat with clear green eyes. As soon as Nijjiro opened the door, Niou dropped his cards and ran up to hug him, while Shiho dropped her book and erupted—true to Yue's words—like a volcano.

"WHERE THE HELL WERE YOU?! WHERE DID YOU GO?! YOU SCARED THE LIVING HELL OUT OF US, DIDN'T TELL US WHERE YOU WERE GOING OR EVEN THAT YOU WERE LEAVING, AND JIN NEVER FOUND YOU SO WE WERE WORRIED THAT YOU GOT KIDNAPPED OR MURDERED OR SOMETHING, AND THEN THIS MORNING HARU—" she jerked her head toward Haru, who was ignoring Shiho completely "—TOLD US THAT YOU CAME HOME LAST NIGHT WITHOUT US KNOWING AND WENT IN THROUGH THE ROOF, SO YOU WERE AVOIDING US, AND I WANT TO KNOW WHY THIS INSTANT, MY DEAR BROTHER, OR ELSE I'LL SKIN YOU ALIVE FOR MOM TO DRAW AND QUARTER YOU WHEN SHE GETS BACK FROM GROCERY-SHOPPING!!!!!"

Nijjiro was trying not to wince or gasp at Niou's hug, which was causing the chi-barrier around his bruises to shake and let out little cracks of pain.

"Shiho thought you got murdered," Niou said from somewhere around Nijjiro's waist, "but I knew you weren't murdered."

"No, I wasn't murdered," Nijjiro agreed. "I just...needed to think about some things."

"THOSE HAD BETTER BE SOME DAMN GOOD THINGS, MY DEAR BROTHER."

Shiho only called Nijjiro her 'dear brother' when she was on the verge of strangling him.

"I think—" Nijjiro hesitated, and met Naoki's eyes across the room. He looked curious, and kind of embarrassed to be witnessing a family squabble.

At first, Nijjiro had been fully intending to tell Shiho that he had realized last night that he was in love with Jin, and to try and talk some of his weird, traitorous, contorted feelings out with her. (The whole ball-massaging thing didn't need to be mentioned.) However, that had been with the assumption that that information would not be going outside his family. Somehow, with Naoki in the room, he found himself extremely reluctant to say anything about Jin at all, let alone about his crush on him.

"Shiho, er—" Nijjiro hedged.

"START TALKING."

"I went in to check on Jin." Nijjiro began with the truth. "And he was awake. And really, really mad. Chihiro did some pretty bad things to him."

"He didn't look good," Niou agreed.

"So he challenged me to VG then," Nijjiro improvised. "He's got a one-track mind. And when I wouldn't fight him, he got even madder and tried to attack me anyway. He kind of freaked me out, so I ran to get outside, so he wouldn't destroy the house if he tried to attack me. But when I started running, I...just couldn't stop. I stopped in an alleyway and had to think about stuff for a while. Then I came back."

"What did I tell you, Shiho?" Kaoru asked, sneaking a surreptitious look at Niou's cards. "I told you that when he told Chihiro that Jin was trying to kill him he was being serious."

"Why didn't you just come in and SAY that instead of sneaking in through the roof and freaking us within an inch of our lives?!" Shiho demanded.

"I was tired, and I figured you were all playing cards," Nijjiro said candidly. "I didn't think I could take the energy. I thought about some serious stuff last night, Shiho."

"How serious?"

"Same level as you and Fuma serious."

That got her.

"Well...okay," Shiho said, deflating like an opened balloon. "Okay, I guess I can understand that. Just tell Mom when she gets back, okay? She was having kittens over you last night."

As she spoke, Shiho collapsed back onto the floor where she had been sitting.

"Jin is such an idiot," Haru said, still stroking Kin.

"I'll say," Hiroji agreed. "I remember when Yuna and I beat him up in third grade. He must have been, what, in sixth? And he got his butt kicked by a third- and fourth-grader."

"Hey, Kaoru-oba!" Niou cried, running back to his cards. "Don't peek at my cards! That's cheating!"

"It's not cheating unless I get caught!"

"I just caught you, Kaoru-oba!"

"Curses! Foiled again!"

Nijjiro laughed and went towards the kitchen.

The kitchen was mercifully empty. Immediately Nijjiro let his smile fall away and felt his bruises cautiously. Niou was a sweetheart, he was trying to make him feel better—it wasn't his fault that his hug made things worse.

Nijjiro had just finished reinforcing his chi with another of his newly-dubbed Healing Rains when the kitchen door opened. Hastily, Nijjiro tried to look as though he had just been looking around for the ramen.

It was Naoki.

"Thanks for letting me stay with your family," Naoki said.

"I heard Hiroji freaked you out last night." Nijjiro pulled out the ramen and a bowl, filled the bowl to the

brim with the leftover noodles, and yanked out chopsticks. "I'm sorry."

"S`okay," Naoki mumbled, his face reddening. "Um...look, because you've been really nice to me, and your family too...I kinda feel like I owe telling you this."

Nijiuro paused, this far from his first bite. He was starving, but something in Naoki's voice sounded weird.

"It's about the restaurant where I work," Naoki said almost inaudibly. "Cream's basically...I guess you could call it a brothel. A male brothel. I didn't work there as a waiter or a cook or anything. I was...one of the...boys."

Nijiuro's appetite squirmed and vanished.

"I had a fight with my parents a...actually, over a year ago, and I ran away, and the guy in charge found me and hired me—he said I was going to be a waiter, but when we got to the place, he—"

Naoki stopped, then said with very forced lightness, "Two weeks ago I ran away from Cream too, and joined VG to give myself an excuse to get away from them, and then I made it here."

"Oh...God," Nijiuro said inanely.

"I think if I win, they can't come after me," Naoki muttered.

"Not if you pick real estate in a different country and move there ASAP," Nijiuro said. "Hayami-kun, I'm..."

"I'm not, like, trying to ask you to give up or anything," Naoki said hastily. "I know it's important for you to be in VG too—"

"Yes. Oh, yes." Nijiuro felt tears coming to his eyes like last night and angrily blinked them away. You wouldn't think it considering how often it was happening lately, but Nijiuro didn't cry often, and tried not to be around people when he did. "So that's why Hiroji's been freaking you out so badly."

"I kind of thought you deserved to know," Naoki said. "I'm sorry, I really don't worry here, I trust your family already—I mean, listen, last night, I slept, and I didn't worry that somebody might try to...you know...rape me or anything. And I...I've worried about that, I've dreamed about it, every night, ever since—I was in Cream, and I didn't here." He paused, then said again, as though he had to, "I didn't."

Nijiuro couldn't think of anything to say to finding out that the guy he had invited to stay with his family was a prostitute, so he shoveled ramen into his mouth to stop himself from saying anything stupid.

"If...since your situation is kind of—urgent," Nijiuro said finally when his mouth was empty again, "then I think we should go to Ariyake Coliseum today. After I'm done eating."

"Ariyake Coliseum?"

"It's the HQ for the nationals. I was going to go there today to sign up myself, since this' my day off, but this kind of, um, gives a new urgency to it."

"Thanks," Naoki mumbled, blushing redder. "I'm kind of putting you and your family through a lot, and I'm sorry."

"Well..." Nijiuro began, and then shoved another bite of ramen into his mouth for the same reason as before.

"Thanks," Naoki repeated, leaving the kitchen with the expression of a hunted fox on his face.

Nijiuro lifted another bite to his mouth, then threw it down, his appetite gone. Naoki needed to win. If he didn't, he was going to be dragged back to Cream. How much worse could it be, to be stuck in a place where you were sold until you even dreamed about it at night? But Nijiuro needed to win too. If he didn't—

Nijiuro wanted to scream.

* * *

He didn't scream.

He even managed to go to Ariyake Coliseum with Naoki without saying, “Why don’t you drop out of VG and just run for it?” like he felt like saying. Running away had already proved itself to be a major mistake for Naoki. If he ran somewhere else, he’d probably get cut up and sold on some organ market.

Which would solve Nijihiro’s problem—

Nijihiro refused to think about that. He was a VG warrior, and with that title came a code of honor and ethics, although most people who weren’t in it would probably question how a sport with the goal of forcing your opponent to strip naked could have anything approaching morality. He shouldn’t think about reasons why Naoki should drop out of the tournament. He should be thinking about how he would defeat him when they came face-to-face in the VG ring.

Ariyake Coliseum was a huge, spiraling building, shaped exactly like a giant rose, the effect heightened by its rose-red color. Originally, before Nijihiro had even known what VG was, the Coliseum had been painted the white of sea foam by the then-leader of Jahana and therefore of VG: Jahana Miranda. However, Miranda’s daughter Reimi had ordered the Coliseum painted red when she took over Jahana. Nijihiro had to admit, it gave the place a hard, almost dangerously beautiful appearance that seemed to convey the whole spirit of VG. Red for blood, for bruises, for chi and life and heart. Red for spirit and emotion and feeling. Red for sunburn if you took real estate on the equator. Red for Naoki’s hair. Red for Jin’s face after he lost to Nijihiro at VG, and for his balls after—

Nijihiro reined fiercely at his imagination, which was taking things way too far, and led Naoki into Ariyake Coliseum.

Inside was a labyrinth of sun-filled corridors and spacious rooms. The glass front doors opened into a colossal lobby crammed to bursting with people. Ariyake was the main HQ of VG for the world, and the reasons of the people visiting it probably ranged from signing up for VG to stalking a favorite champion. Men and women of all ages and appearances ebbed and flowed throughout the room, shoving Nijihiro and Naoki this way and that in their single-minded pursuit of their goals.

“Follow me!” Nijihiro called, seizing Naoki’s hand. It did not escape his notice that Naoki flinched when Nijihiro touched him, but was it because of his experience at Cream, or because he didn’t trust—?

“Excuse me!” Nijihiro hollered at the closest information desk, banishing those thoughts swiftly from his mind. “Where do we register for the nationals?”

“Up the stairs to the right, hang a left on the third floor, then right again!” the woman at the desk hollered back at him. “Fourth door down!” The woman grinned. “Good luck, li-san!”

“Do you know her?” Naoki yelled as Nijihiro towed him off towards the stairs.

“No!” Nijihiro shouted back.

“Then—?”

“A lot of women like me,” Nijihiro shout-explained. “They think I’m cute, or funny, or they like my style, or my hair. Sometimes all of the above. Cross my heart. Some girls have actually asked me if I’d consider switching orientations for them.”

They made it to the stairs. Nijihiro took them three at a time, dragging Naoki up after him. This was only possible because there was nobody else on the stairs, everybody who was somewhat sane having partaken of the elevators in the lobby instead. Naoki was too busy trying not to get pulled over flat on his face to spare breath for talking until they’d gotten to the third level, where Nijihiro stopped to throw sky-blue and hunter-green hair out of his face.

“Would you?” Naoki asked finally.

Nijihiro stopped with a single tangerine lock in his hand. “Would I what?”

“Change orientations,” Naoki said. “If you could.”

Nijihiro opened his mouth, then closed it again. He wound his tangerine hair around his fingers, so tightly he almost cut off his circulation. “I...don’t...know.”

“You don’t know?” Naoki repeated incredulously.

“I want to,” Nijiuro said softly. “Sometimes. Sometimes...I feel like I’d like a sex-change operation, you know? Like I want to...to be a girl. All the way, not just in my feelings. But also...I also...sometimes, I like myself just as I am.”

Naoki’s face took on a hard, frozen look without moving a centimeter. “Do you really?”

“Yeah,” Nijiuro said, nervous now for no reason he could name. “I...I guess I...I just...”

He was trying to think of how he could express what he felt for Jin. How he could explain to Naoki that homosexuality wasn’t all rape and lust, that feelings of love could exist, without actually mentioning Jin at all. And then a spear of humiliating hypocrisy stabbed through Nijiuro’s heart. Who was he to talk about love? He had almost jumped a perfect stranger last night, all thoughts of Jin or love eclipsed in an instant by muscular legs and forest-green hair.

Before Nijiuro could figure out anything to say—or even if he should say anything at all—the door slammed open.

A tall, beautiful, voluptuous woman, dressed in a pinstripe business suit and four-inch black heels, was behind it. Her lilac-blue hair fell in waves down her back and in two tremendous curls down her sides—her lips were darkest carmine rose petals in a face sharp, hard, and coldly lovely from the high cheekbones to the sapphire eyes with their long black lashes. One long, slender, graceful, dangerous hand rested on the doorknob still, the long nails painted as red as her lips, as red as the roses for which she was famous.

She was Jahana Reimi. Head of VG and the Jahana Company. The richest, strongest woman in the entire world.

“Excuse me,” Reimi said, and she brushed past Nijiuro to head up the stairs. One lock of lilac hair fluttered out and brushed against one lock of Nijiuro’s hair—then she was nothing but the sound of high-heeled boots clacking against metal as she took the stairs up two at a time.

Nijiuro stayed in shock for a full fifteen seconds, then grabbed his hair, searching frantically for the lock of hair touched by Reimi. But whatever it was, it fell back into the waterfalling rainbow and was lost.

“What are you doing?” Naoki asked.

“Do you realize who that WAS?!” Nijiuro squeaked.

“Jahana Reimi?”

“EXACTLY!! And she TOUCHED me! My hair! But which color was it?!”

“Why does it matter?” Naoki demanded.

“Whatever it is, it’s obviously my lucky color! I need that!” Nijiuro was sorting through his hair in skeins, throwing spare colors across his opposite shoulder like a scarf. “Errgh! Where is it!”

“If you don’t know what color it is, how are you going to find it again?”

Nijiuro paused. The logic was inescapable. He growled and sorted through the rest of his hair in a last-ditch, desperate bid for hope, but couldn’t figure out which color it was Reimi had touched. “Darn it! How many people could that happen to?!”

“I’d bet not many,” Naoki said delicately.

“Exactly! And I wasted that opportunity! I didn’t even say anything to her. Ihhhh...” He blew his bangs out of his face. “But wasn’t she beautiful? She looked like the model for that Aqua song, ‘Roses Are Red.’” Nijiuro smiled to himself and started to sing, very softly, “ ‘Roses are red, and violets are blue/ Honey is sweet, but not as sweet as you...’ ”

Naoki looked uncomfortable.

“All right, all right,” Nijiuro sighed. “Let’s go. We’ve still got to sign up.”

The door had closed behind Reimi when she had let it go. Nijiuro reached for the knob, but it burst open again. Nijiuro jumped back and had his mouth open to berate whoever was on the other side—but

who it was was so unexpected that Nijiuro froze mid-word.

The blood drained from Naoki's face.

Jahana Reimi had been a surprise, but even she could not compare to the shock that was Yano Tsuyosa.

"Excuse me," Tsuyosa said. There were a few things he had to take care of before he could call it a day and leave Ariyake. He usually used the stairs because so few other people did, but this time, for once, there were two boys on them. At least, one of them was definitely a boy. A hot one, too, but there wasn't any time for that right now. Too bad.

Tsuyosa started to move towards the stairs, but then he stopped. His eyes ran over the boy once, twice.

Hot damn. It was Hayami Naoki, the Cream boy with the body that sometimes tormented Tsuyosa in his dreams. Here. In Ariyake Coliseum.

Never before or since had Tsuyosa had the same feelings that he had had with Naoki. After that night at Cream, the VG champion had wanted to make a second visit so badly that it had taken him a week to get over the urge and return to his old self. Thoughts, remembrances...Naoki had been so hard and hot he left burns on Tsuyosa's mind, burns that might never disappear.

Forget everything else. There was indeed time for this boy after all.

"My God," Tsuyosa said. "Well...ohayo."

Naoki didn't say anything. Tsuyosa watched his face, watched his skin drain to white. Hatred for Tsuyosa burned in his amethyst eyes, but underneath the hatred, hidden just below the surface, pulsed fear. Tsuyosa could see it. And beneath the fear...

Tsuyosa let his eyes sink very obviously down to his jeans. Naoki blushed ferociously, and his jeans shifted. Tsuyosa's smile grew. Oh, yes. Naoki's body didn't agree with his brain. It wanted Tsuyosa too.

"Y-Y-Y-Yano-sama!" the other boy stuttered. "Y-Y-You...er...h-h-hi!"

Tsuyosa looked at him, and despite his first impression felt slight interest. Nothing like Naoki, obviously—nothing that exciting—but he had beautiful hair, even weirdly dyed as it was, and a lithe, slender, wiry body. And he was obviously infatuated with Tsuyosa. That was always good for something.

Tsuyosa looked back over at Nijiuro. "So you brought a friend?"

Nijiuro went red and looked down, hiding behind walls of color. "Uh...I'm...I'm li N—Nijiuro. N—N—Nice to meet you."

"Hey." Tsuyosa bowed until his head was on the same level as Nijiuro's, then reached up with one hand and brushed Nijiuro's hair behind his ear. "I like your hair. It's different. Very unique, very interesting."

Nijiuro turned the color of the Ariyake Coliseum and looked down even more ferociously than he had before. "I...I'm...that's...you really think that?"

Tsuyosa couldn't help smiling at the kid's innocent pleasure in the compliment. "I don't say things I don't mean." He looked over at Naoki—the sight of him made his fingers itch, but Tsuyosa held himself back. "So, what are you doing here?"

Naoki didn't answer. He either wouldn't or couldn't, and Tsuyosa had a feeling he knew which one it was. But no matter. There was an easier way to find out.

"li-san," Tsuyosa murmured, and Nijiuro looked quickly up, his eyes brilliant gold in his ruby face. "What brings you here? With Hayami-san, no less?"

"You've met?" Nijiuro asked curiously.

"Yes," Tsuyosa said. "Yes, we have." He cast a slow look at Naoki, who was clearly undergoing a serious physical struggle. "I'm surprised to see him here."

“We’re registering,” Nijiuro said. “For...for the nationals.”

“For the—”

For once in his life, Tsuyosa almost lost his composure. It couldn’t be true. There was NO way that he had heard right. “For the—nationals?”

“Yeah,” Nijiuro muttered.

No way. No goddammed way. Hayami Naoki was ENTERING the VG nationals. He was willingly participating in something that could end up with him naked on global TV.

Forget that. He was willingly participating in something that could end up with him naked in front of Tsuyosa. Again. Could. But Tsuyosa wasn’t in the nationals. He hadn’t been planning on—

“That changes my plans,” Tsuyosa said.

Nijiuro looked up. “What?”

“There’s no way I’m letting this pass by,” Tsuyosa said, taking a step towards Naoki. Naoki took two back, missed a step, slipped, and almost fell. “I’ll have to go enroll in the nationals as well now.”

Naoki and Nijiuro’s eyes both snapped up to Tsuyosa’s instantly. Nijiuro’s were astonished—Naoki’s were flooded with horror.

“Are you serious?!” Nijiuro choked.

“If you’re entering,” Tsuyosa said, pointedly to Naoki, “that’s a chance I won’t miss.”

Naoki tried to move back further, but his foot caught on the edge of the rail—he had backed himself up against it. Much faster than Naoki could move, Tsuyosa took three running steps down to him and seized one of the belt-loops on his jeans, holding him not two inches away. His fingers pressed down against the hardness beneath.

“You should be happy,” Tsuyosa said softly, resisting the animal urge to rip off the jeans entirely. “You came here looking for me.”

Nobody had to tell Tsuyosa this for him to know it was true. Naoki’s eyes were as easy to read as a children’s book.

With a sudden, desperate violence, Naoki shoved at Tsuyosa with all his strength, ripping himself away. Without a backwards glance, he pelted headlong down the stairs with no regards for their position or his own safety—twice he almost slipped and fell, but something kept him upright, upright and still going until he had disappeared beneath the square spiral of iron steps.

Something clacked above Tsuyosa. He turned around just in time for Nijiuro’s backhand to connect solidly with his left cheek.

Tsuyosa’s head snapped to the side, bright rainbow chi-flames biting at his hair. Reflexively, he touched his hand to his cheek, and flinched as the chi nipped into the bone of his fingers before dissipating.

Nijiuro was standing two steps above Tsuyosa, hand still glowing, eyes now a brilliant and furious orange.

“What the hell were you doing?!” Nijiuro shouted, his voice at once furious and wildly disappointed.

Not waiting for a response or a reaction, Nijiuro flung his hair angrily back from his face and ran down the stairs after Naoki. The echoes of his voice resounded in the stairwell, bouncing on and off of Tsuyosa’s ears.

Doing...doing...doing...

Reflectively now, Tsuyosa touched his cheek again, and felt a last spark of fire needle his finger. He rubbed the skin, marveling. For such an effeminate prism of a boy, Nijiuro packed quite a punch.

Tsuyosa rubbed his fingers together, and wondered how that prism of a boy would feel beneath his fingers some night.

* * *

Nijihiro burst out of the door at the bottom of the staircase and looked frantically from right to left. His hair flickered over his face, and he blew it impatiently out of the way. Naoki was nowhere in sight.

Although worry, anxiety, and more than a hint of foreboding was tingling in Nijihiro's stomach, he forced himself to calm down and breathe slowly. In—out. In...out. In...out. In...and...out...

But what the hell had Tsuyosa been doing?! Disappointment curdled Nijihiro's stomach and upset his breathing. Tsuyosa was Nijihiro's idol. He had been for almost two years now. But that idol—Tsuyosa—could he really be so much of a—?!

Think about that later. Breathe...breathe in...and...out...

Nijihiro had found out early on in life—while playing hide-and-seek with Ietsuna and Kaii—that he could throw his chi out into the air around him, and use it to stain the trails of chi that all living things leave behind them different colors to his vision. As the hide-and-seek group grew with the Iis, Nijihiro had slowly learned how to focus just on one particular chi, and stain just that one trail to allow him to follow where one single person had gone.

He did this now, opening his mind to his power and to the air around him. Chi spilled out from him like an expanding sun—it burnt the unneeded chi-trails into translucence and blazed forth over the path of Naoki's chi, turning it...

Nijihiro opened his eyes, and was nearly blinded by the brilliant reddish-gold radiance of Naoki's chi. It was like a molten river in the air, chi so powerful and focused that Nijihiro couldn't even look at it directly.

Nijihiro followed it at a run.

* * *

"Naoki!" Nijihiro panted, wrenching open a broom closet door.

Naoki was there. He was crouching in a little ball in the center of the closet, amid buckets and mops and outdated cleaning machines that nobody had managed to throw away yet. It was dark and dusty and slightly sour-smelling inside, lit above only by one pale, dying light bulb that probably hadn't been replaced in years.

"Close the door," Naoki whispered.

Nijihiro opened his mouth to protest, hesitated, and ended up stepping inside and closing the door. The entire closet faded into weak, washed-out light, leaving sunspots on Nijihiro's vision.

"Naoki-kun..." Nijihiro hesitated again, then plunged ahead. "Naoki-kun, why was he doing that to you?"

Naoki didn't say anything.

"Naoki-kun, please..."

Naoki still didn't say anything, and those little hints of foreboding in Nijihiro's stomach exploded into one great mass of foreboding. Combined with the disappointment Nijihiro felt over the fall of his idol from his pedestal, it was almost enough to make the rainbow-haired boy sick.

"Naoki-kun, was he..." Nijihiro swallowed, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer to this. "Did he...come to...where you used to work?"

A spot of blood dripped onto the floor with a wet slapping noise. It took Nijihiro a moment to realize that Naoki had bitten his lip through.

"I can't get away from it," Naoki whispered dully. "I can't get away from him. I wanted to fight him...wanted to beat him...thought, I guess I thought, if I could beat him, defeat him, then I could..."

He drew in his breath explosively. "But I'm not! I can't be! They both took me, but he won't let go—and if I defeat him in VG—I'll just be playing back to him—whether I win or lose—it makes no difference. Either way...he'll be—"

Suddenly Naoki lunged up, grabbed Nijihiro by the shoulders, and slammed him back against the door. Nijihiro yelped, partially with surprise and fear, and partially with the reawakening of all his bruises.

“Have you ever seen him naked?” Naoki asked, in a low, rough voice, his fingers cutting into Nijihiro’s shoulders, his eyes burning into the black of Nijihiro’s. “You ever seen his muscles? He’s like one of those old Greek sculptures. He’s perfect. He’s hard and perfect and hot and gorgeous all over. I know. He made sure I knew. He took every line of my body and made sure I would remember his—and left me just—a shell, filled with—with him—”

Even more suddenly, Naoki seized Nijihiro’s hand and shoved it down the front of his pants. There was nothing sexual about it, though—the coruscating anger blazing from Naoki’s eyes seared anything vaguely resembling enjoyment out of Nijihiro’s mind. This was nothing like the Naoki Nijihiro had been getting to know up until now—fury breathed off him like heat from a furnace.

“Feel this!” Naoki hissed, forcing Nijihiro’s hand around himself. “Feel this! I’m so hard just from seeing him—talking to him—he touched me and I couldn’t breathe. I got so hard it hurt. Because of one night. One night when he had me and took me and never gave me back. He has me. I belong to him.”

“Naoki—” Nijihiro tried to say, but Naoki was crushing him against the door, his eyes filling with tears that fragmented the blazing violet anger into falling glass shards.

“Feel this!!” Naoki demanded, his voice shaking. “It’s all anybody’s ever wanted from me! Sometimes I tried—sometimes I fought—they’d throw me down, rip off my jeans, take me anyways because of this. And...one time...one time...the one time it ever mattered...I gave it because I didn’t know any better, and I didn’t lose all that bull everybody tells you that you lose from sex. I lost my soul because of him!!”

Naoki blinked angrily, sending glass cascading down his face. Nijihiro tried to say something again—he wasn’t sure what, he wasn’t even sure if Naoki was still talking about Tsuyosa anymore—but Naoki pulled Nijihiro up to him and kissed him hard, on the mouth, his tongue streaming into Nijihiro’s mouth like acid, the first real, deep kiss Nijihiro had ever received—a kiss loaded with more experience than Nijihiro would probably ever have in his lifetime. A kiss so hot it felt like the fires of Hell.

The kiss broke off like a knife, and Nijihiro almost choked, Naoki’s saliva a brand on his lips.

“You want me too,” Naoki growled. “I know you do. Just like everyone else who’s ever done anything for me. You want me now? Take me right now. I owe you for your house, and this is all you want anyways. This is all anybody ever wants. Go ahead. Do it.”

For one, long, horrible, treacherous instant, Nijihiro was unbearably tempted. The voice that had gotten him to strip Jin was back, in its insidious little way, murmuring support and encouragement.

Take him.

Go for it.

He said you could.

He’s right, he owes you.

Go for it.

Take him.

Then the instant was over, with an almost physical suddenness that made Nijihiro reflexively swallow. That would be giving in. Even worse than what he had done with Jin. Demanding sex in exchange for shelter was like...like...

“Mars,” Nijihiro said quietly.

“What?” Naoki asked, thrown for a loop.

Nijihiro carefully and very, very calmly slipped his hand out of Naoki’s jeans, half afraid that Naoki might attack him again. Inside his head, the little voice cursed the loss of the chance to possess such perfect balls, even for just a few minutes, but Nijihiro, completely fed up with that little voice, turned his mental stereo up full volume and blasted out Aqua’s [Back From Mars](#). The little voice was drowned out,

and all at once Nijihiro's brain clicked back into action.

"Back From Mars," Nijihiro said, still very quietly. "It's a song. It's a great song music-wise, but I always hate the ending, because you find out that the girl isn't really going to be a movie star like she thinks. She's been tricked by the guys she's traveling with, and they're going to make her a porno star."

Naoki was still, seemingly unable to react at such a radical change in subject.

"I first heard that song when I was five," Nijihiro said, keeping his voice soft and even. "I had to ask Ashootei what a porno star was. I still remember, that when he told me, I got so mad I punched him. I didn't want it to be true. I didn't want a girl like her to be caught up in something like that."

Cautiously, Nijihiro put his arms around Naoki's shoulders and laid his head against Naoki's shoulder, chest to chest, feeling his heart beat frantically beneath shirt and skin. "I swore that I'd never trick anybody like that girl got tricked. I told you when I invited you over to my house that you wouldn't have to give us anything. There is no way I'd make you sleep with me now, after telling you that. You don't owe any of us anything. And you could never owe anybody you."

Nijihiro was one of those very few, very talented boys who can sing in a falsetto-soprano without sounding like a complete idiot. Very softly, he began to sing the chorus of Back From Mars, his voice as high and sweet as Lene Grawford Nystrøm's own.

"I am coming back from Mars,
Where they drive in fancy cars,
And the King, he is okay,
He is coming home today,
I am coming back from Mars,
Where there are no cheap cigars—"

Suddenly, Naoki broke down. He didn't burst into tears—abruptly all the tension and wariness and barely-held-back hatred in his body seemed to fall like weights into his shoes, and he fell down against Nijihiro, holding him tightly as a lifeline. Nijihiro missed a line of the song in Naoki's sudden movement, but kept going.

"Meet the stars..."

Nijihiro let the note draw out, thrilling to the thrum it sent through him and Naoki.

"They're from Mars..."

Nijihiro let this note die away, and rearranged his head onto Naoki's shoulder, holding him as a friend, as he had been held just last night. Naoki didn't say anything, but held onto Nijihiro with a kind of desperation, as though if he let go, he would get swept away back into the world he had come from and was trying so hard to escape.

Nijihiro sifted one hand—NOT the one that had been in Naoki's pants—up through the silky planes of Naoki's hair and began to scratch his head lightly. Naoki jumped at first, but slowly began to relax into it. It felt good.

Still scratching Naoki's beautiful red-and-gold hair, Nijihiro said softly, "Let's go home. Worry about the nationals later. Worry about him later." He didn't have to specify who he was—they both knew. "For now..."

Naoki sighed against Nijihiro's hair. "Let's go. Let's...go home."

* * *

"I'm sorry," Naoki said.

"For what?"

"We were supposed to register today, and we didn't, because of...because of me."

Nijihiro looked at Naoki. “You mean you’re still registering for the nationals?”

“Yeah.”

“But I thought...” Nijihiro broke off, no longer entirely sure what he thought.

“I still kind of have this crazy feeling that if I beat him in VG, then some miracle will happen and everything’s going to turn around,” Naoki muttered. “It sounds—really dumb. But...even if nothing happens, at least...at least I tried, right?”

Nijihiro was quiet for a minute, but finally the question he had to ask burst out. “And...if you lose?”

Naoki didn’t answer, which was answer enough.

“Sorry,” Nijihiro said, shamefaced.

“Nijihiro,” Naoki said suddenly, “if I win, you can have the money.”

Nijihiro stopped dead. “What?”

“If I can have the real estate, and I can beat Tsuyosa, then I swear, I’ll give you the money,” Naoki said, very quickly. “I don’t need it. And you—it’s not just that you need it, you—I want you to have it. After what you and your family have done for me. You—deserve it. And I’ll give it to you. If I win. Promise.”

Nijihiro stared at Naoki for a minute, so dazzled that he couldn’t even think, and then dropped into a bow so low his hair almost touched the ground.

“Thank you...thank you so much,” Nijihiro whispered. “I...you...you don’t know what that means to me.”

“Probably as much as getting out of Japan would mean to me,” Naoki confessed.

“You can have that if I win,” Nijihiro promised. “If I win—somehow—then, I promise you, that you can have the real estate. Anywhere you want.”

“You don’t have to—” Naoki started to say, but Nijihiro cut him off.

“You don’t have to either. But you are. So I am too. Just...just your saying that to me means to me...probably what our taking you in means to you.” Nijihiro thought this over for a moment, then smiled embarrassedly. “Considering how different our situations are, we seem to be on some pretty similar parallels.”

“So—no matter which one of us wins, neither of us gets left behind.” Naoki smiled too, as much with relief as anything else. “That’s...good.”

“Good?” Nijihiro flipped carnation and lemon locks out of his face with his usual flair. “Are you kidding? I’d call that bloody fanfrickintastic!!”

* * *

End Episode One

* * *

Variable Geo Image Ending

Nijihiro and Naoki

Eiko

Tsuyosa

Jin

Naoki and Nijihiro

5 - The Relationships of the Gods, Part One

The Relationships of the Gods, Part One

I Want to Be a Wind

Kako to mirari o narabekaete mo
Kotae wa mitsukaranai kara
likagen joonetsu gomakasanaide
Saisho no steeji ni katooyo
Chansu wa itsudemo
Shinjiru kimochi no
Tsuyosa ni hirei suru
Nido te naide, kaze ni naritai
Kizutsukeau yori mo atsusa kisotte
Kimi o makikomu, kaze ni naritai
Owari no nai yume o ima
Oikaketau ne

~~*~*~*~

Monday morning...

Sunlight winked off the forty-two rows of windows inlaid into the walls of the monumental Jahana Group Building. The place was easily one of the tallest skyscrapers in the vicinity, towering at twenty-one massive stories and surrounded on all sides by a small forest of planted trees imported from Europe. They were an ubiquitous drop of green emerald in the center of the city of Tokyo. Statues graced the small courtyard in front of the building with their white-and-gold marble presence, and displayed prominently just above the first story of the building was an ornate golden mural, covered in fanciful shapes and spirals.

“Madame Reimi?” Reimi’s husband, Washio, typed a last key on his computer with a flourish and turned to look at her. “We’re good to go.”

Reimi smiled at him, a gentle, loving smile that looked almost out of place on her cool, regal face. She thought it was cute that he still called her Madame Reimi—though only at work. At home, it was another matter. “Then let’s get started.”

Washio nodded, giving Reimi his own smile, and tapped something else on his keyboard. Immediately the myriad of communication screens lining the wall of the small office flashed into life.

“Good morning, Madame Reimi!” chorused a host of images appearing on the screens.

“Good morning,” Reimi returned. “Now...let’s begin with your reports.”

“Most of the countries that were formerly receiving VG transmissions from us have taken the new footage willingly,” wrinkled old Mr. Kawakama of Nagoya butted in quickly. He was always the first to speak. “We’ve also expanded, quite surprisingly, into Cambodia, Thailand, and Zimbabwe. I suppose—” Mr. Kawakama went even more wrinkled than usual, “—we have the...er...new fighters to thank for this.”

“However, your decision to include men has also caused some problems, Madame Reimi,” added Mr. Yoshida of Osaka. “Not to criticize you, of course, but most of the Middle East refuses to take the

footage now that men are involved.”

“What’s our payoff so far?” Reimi asked, her eyes narrowing. “What percentage of previous popularity are we operating at?”

“Well, country-wise, we’re only operating at 88% of previous broadcasting,” Mr. Otomo of Fukuoka said, adjusting his thick glasses pompously. “Several countries aside from those in the Middle East have refused to take the new footage, although they have offered to broadcast the female contestants alone.”

“On the other hand, if you look at the true popularity of VG,” put in Mr. Royama of Kitakyûshû, “we’ve actually benefited from having men involved. Our range of viewers has increased dramatically—in countries such as the United States, we have literally doubled the popularity of VG.” He cleared his throat meaningfully. “In fact, if you crunch the numbers, we’ve actually gone up from the 100% of twelve years ago to 102% in the present time.”

“I see,” Reimi said, smiling slightly.

“However,” Miss Daishi of Kôbe cut in, “as far as monetary gain goes, we have fallen behind. We were already behind eleven percent when we started up again, and the decision to include men has dropped us a further four.”

“It should be noted, however,” Mr. Royama said blandly, “that even without the fifteen percent, we are still performing admirably and are in no need of funds.”

“There is certainly no lack of money where VG is involved,” Mr. Yoshida agreed.

“However, the drop of income is worrisome,” Reimi said. “I’ll see what I can do with the Middle Eastern countries. Mr. Otomo, feel free to relay their complaints to me as soon as possible.”

“Certainly, Madame Reimi.”

“Now, about the upcoming nationals tournament...”

* * *

Reimi sat back in her seat with a sigh. “Well, things aren’t falling apart. That’s good.”

“Things won’t fall apart,” Washio said stoutly. “Everything’s going just fine.”

“Do you think it was a good idea to let men participate?” Reimi asked, her eyes closed.

“I think it was the right thing to do,” Washio replied.

Reimi smiled slightly. “Maybe...maybe. Washio, would you leave me for a moment?”

“Certainly, Madame Reimi,” Washio said, clearly puzzled. He rose to leave. Reimi caught him by the wrist as he went by and reached up to brush her rose lips gently against his—then, her smile eclipsed by a brief sigh, she dropped back into her seat.

“Just for a moment. I’ve been feeling tired lately.”

“Don’t overdo things, Reimi,” Washio murmured.

“I’m not spreading myself too thin,” Reimi assured him. “I just need a quiet moment alone.”

Washio left.

Reimi leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes again. She sat silently for a minute, then for two. Contrary to what she had told Washio, she was not resting. Every fiber of her nerves was standing to attention. She waited.

And then—

“I hear you, Midori.”

Jahana Midori stopped dead halfway into the room, letting out a groan. She looked very much like Reimi, with long, flowing, lilac-blue hair and a gorgeous creamy complexion, but her eyes were her father’s, huge and chocolate brown, filled with a sweetness that even her annoyance at being caught by her mother couldn’t extinguish. She was eleven years old now, and forever trying to sneak into places Reimi didn’t want her to go.

As usual, looking at her, Reimi felt a pang in her heart. Midori was so sweet and energetic and mischievous. If Reimi's mother, Miranda, had let Reimi go about her own way in the same way Reimi let Midori go about hers, would Reimi have been like Midori, carefree and kind instead of scared and cold and, eventually, violent?

"How do you always hear me, Mom?" Midori asked, little-girl voice resigned.

"It's hard not to in such a quiet room with only one door," Reimi pointed out. "You're not allowed in here, Midori, you know that."

Washio often called his daughter Midori-chan. Reimi could never bring herself to. She didn't even know why—she just couldn't.

"I know," Midori muttered, "but I like listening to you talk to them."

"You like hearing about VG."

"Yeah, that too," Midori admitted.

Reimi sighed. "Midori, I have told you over and over again—"

"Not until I'm sixteen." Midori finished the sentence with the weary practice of one used to finishing such a sentence. "I know, Mom. But can't I pleeeeeease—"

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say!"

"It doesn't matter," Reimi said. "I know that the answer is no."

"What if I was asking to eat Brussels sprouts?"

"I know you weren't, and therefore the answer is no."

Midori sighed. "Yeah, I wasn't." She paused. "But can't I fight—"

"No!"

"Just once, Mom! PLEASE? Once? Against anybody you want!"

"No."

"Can I fight you?"

"NO!"

"Anybody!"

"NO-body!"

Midori sighed dismally. "All right. Fine."

"Midori, I don't think you realize what VG is like," Reimi said. "You can get hurt—and you will, if you fight. You're too young. I will not let my daughter be exposed—"

"At this age," Midori finished.

Reimi sighed. Midori sighed, and turned to leave.

"Midori," Reimi said softly. "I don't want you to fight the way I did."

Midori paused at the door, then let out her breath in a rush. "I know, Mom."

* * *

Monday evening...

"What CD should I put on?" Kotaro asked, opening the stereo and taking out his MEIYO CD.

It was the last twenty or so minutes of work at Bubblegum Ice Cream Parlor, where Nijihiro worked. At Bubblegum, there was one utterly archaic stereo which had been blasting out music at the place for at least thirty years and often began skipping songs unless you kicked it, which was why it was on the floor behind the counter.

This late, there weren't many people looking for ice cream, especially not at a place famous for bizarre flavors such as white chocolate macadamia, kahlua and cream, pumpkin pie, and of course, bubblegum. Although Nijihiro worked early on weekends, on weekdays like this he went to school in the

morning and worked at Bubblegum until late into the night. Then, usually, he spent all of Sunday—his day off—sleeping.

“AQUA!!” Nijiiri shouted, waving his Aquarium CD aloft.

“You always say Aqua!” Kotaro retorted, reaching for another MEIYO CD.

“That’s `cause they’re good and you know it! AQUA! AQUA!!!” Nijiiri kicked Kotaro out of the way and went for the stereo.

“Like hell!” Kotaro yelled, shoving his CDs into Shiro’s hands and tackling Nijiiri.

Nijiiri and Kotaro fought on the floor for a few fast and furious seconds, with Shiro off to the side looking half amused, half worried. There was no need to worry, however. Nijiiri cheated by kissing Kotaro on the cheek, and then while Kotaro spluttered and cursed, Nijiiri shoved his CD into the stereo and hit Play.

“Mwahahahaha!” Nijiiri shouted as Aqua’s Happy Boys and Girls started up.

“You’re DISGUSTING, man!” Kotaro scrubbed at his cheek with his sleeve. “God...now I wanna scrub my skin off, or something...”

“Be grateful. I could have kissed something else.” Nijiiri gave Kotaro a way too innocent smile.

“I don’t know why I work with you,” Kotaro grumbled.

“Aww, I love you too.”

“At least skip over this one,” Kotaro said. “This one is just stupid.”

“Is not.” But Nijiiri obligingly skipped—and the stereo skipped the next one too, landing on number three.

“Hiya, Barbie,” said the stereo.

“Oh, GOD,” Kotaro moaned.

“Hi, Ken!” the stereo and Nijiiri both said to each other.

“You wanna go for a ride?” the stereo and Nijiiri both offered.

“Sure Ken!”

“Jump in.”

“I’m a Barbie girl...”

Kotaro leapt forward and whammed the Skip button. The stereo, catching his urgency, skipped itself as well.

“Hey!” Nijiiri protested as the sound of crickets came from the stereo instead.

“I HATE that song!” Kotaro explained, at a rather loud volume. “It’s DUMB and it’s ANNOYING!!”

“You wouldn’t know a good song if it bit your leg off,” Nijiiri sniffed.

“This one’s probably the only good one on the CD,” Kotaro said. “Doctor Jones, right?”

“Sometimes, the feeling is right, you fall in love for the first time...” the stereo sang.

“I thought you liked Roses Are Red,” Nijiiri said.

“Oh yeah, that one too.”

“Oh well. This one’s good.” Nijiiri joined in with the CD. “Summertime love in the moonlight...Ai-piyaiyou, ai-piyaiyae. Ai-piyaiyou, oh...”

The music stepped up, and Nijiiri began weaving from side to side, raspberry and lilac locks brushing over his smile. Kotaro rolled his eyes, but didn’t try to stop him.

“Dance with me?” Nijiiri offered.

“Hell no,” Kotaro said amiably.

“Fine, be a stick-in-the-mud.” Nijiiri turned to Shiro instead. “Dance with me, Shiro-kun?”

“Um...” Shiro demurred.

“C`mon, it’s too much fun not to!” Nijiiri pleaded.

“I don’t really...”

“Please, Shiro-kun!”

“Well...I...”

There was no outright refusal in Shiro’s voice, so Nijiuro jumped in before he could change his mind, dragging his coworker off into the ebb and flow of the music.

“Kick him, Shiro-kun!” Kotaro shouted helpfully. “Or better yet, kick the stereo! Break his CD!”

“First person to lay any body part on that stereo with the intent of harming my CD loses said part!” Nijiuro yelled over his shoulder at Kotaro.

“You’re gonna kill Shiro-kun, Nijiuro!”

“As if, we’re just dancing!”

“Which is really wrong, by the way.”

“Why don’t you shut up and make yourself useful by stopping up a sewer drain or something?”

“C’mon, Shiro-kun, tell Nijiuro it’s wrong and stop spinning with him!”

Shiro was too busy trying to keep his balance as Nijiuro whirled him crazily about to say much of anything.

“You’re both crazy,” Kotaro muttered.

“You should lighten up and try it for once!” Nijiuro cried, spinning wildly. “Whoops—! Sorry Shiro!!”

Caught off guard as Nijiuro spun, Shiro flew forward and hit the side of a table. He overbalanced and fell partially across it, and something gold fell out of his shirt pocket and clanked against the table.

Something the familiar gold of a VG card.

“What is tha...?” Nijiuro gasped. “Shiro-kun! You’re in VG?!”

Hastily Shiro grabbed it and shoved it into his pants pocket instead.

“Shiro-kun!” Nijiuro belatedly let go of Shiro’s hand. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Or me either?” Kotaro had gotten to his feet and come over to see. “How long have you been a VG Senshi, Shiro-kun?”

“About...a month,” Shiro muttered, coloring.

“That long?!” Nijiuro demanded. “That’s almost as long as I’ve been one! Shiro—”

Shiro didn’t say anything.

“Shiro, why didn’t—”

“Because I’ve only lost,” Shiro said, bluntly and quickly. “The boss chewed me out earlier today because so far, I—so far, I haven’t won a match.”

There was a very nasty silence.

“Not one?” Nijiuro repeated somewhat stupidly.

Shiro didn’t say anything.

“Have you lost...um...” The words sounded almost foreign from Kotaro’s mouth. “Have you lost...badly?”

Shiro still didn’t say anything, but the flush rising in his cheeks answered for him.

The silence spiraled horribly, until the stereo finished with Doctor Jones and plunged blithely into Heat of the Night. Nijiuro, more to do something than for any particular reason, stormed over to the stereo and hit the Skip button.

“I don’t like that one very much.”

Kotaro moodily snatched up three cones with one hand—it was a knack he had which Nijiuro was always trying to master and so far had only failed miserably to imitate—and splashed ice cream over them. “Here. I’ll pay later.”

Nijiuro hit Skip again and shook his hair back from his face as Lollipop (Candyman) began to blast out of the stereo. “Now that’s appropriate. Gimme one.”

Kotaro threw one at Nijiuro, and just as Candyman began in earnest Nijiuro attacked his white chocolate macadamia ice cream with single-minded determination. Kotaro bit off the bottom of his cone—he preferred sucking the ice cream out the bottom as opposed to licking it off the top—and handed the last to

Shiro. Shiro bit into it.

Nijihiro laughed somewhat awkwardly. "I can't understand how you can do that. It makes me spasm."

"You spasm whether he's biting ice cream or not," Kotaro said.

"True," Nijihiro agreed. "Spazzing is healthy."

"Compared to what? Smoking?"

"Indeed." Nijihiro almost lost ice cream down the side of the cone, but caught it with his tongue.

"And—oh, and basketball, too."

"What's wrong with basketball?" Kotaro demanded.

"I hate it and spazzing is healthier," Nijihiro declared.

"I think Shiro's biting ice cream makes more sense than you do," Kotaro muttered.

"Everything makes more sense than I do."

They left it at that for a minute and went at their ice creams in silence. Candyman slowly wound down to its close, and stopped—and then the door opened just as the next song, Roses Are Red, began to play.

Nijihiro looked up and choked on his ice cream.

"THERE you are!!" Jin expostulated.

Nijihiro lost control of his ice cream, and about half of it fell off the opposite edge and splattered over the floor.

"Jin?!" Nijihiro grabbed for napkins. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING HERE?!" Jin roared. "Why didn't you TELL me you came back that SAME NIGHT?!"

"What same—? What are you talking about?!"

"Whaddaya mean, what am I talking about?! After you—" Jin changed his sentence at the last minute, "—freaked out and ran out of your house, your family was freaking out even worse!! I went out to look for you and spent FIVE HOURS on the street in a ripped-up Jin Saotome costume LOOKING FOR YOU and you don't even bother to tell me that you went back just fine and LEFT ME OUT THERE?!?!"

That made Nijihiro feel guilty, which in turn made him mad. "I never ASKED you to look for me at all! It's your own stupid fault for staying out—why the hell would you stay out five hours looking for me?"

"Because I was worried! Your family made me worried! They were so worried it made me worried!!"

"You don't even like my family!"

"Sure I do! YOU'RE the only one I have a problem with! The rest of your family's fine!"

"They used to beat you up in elementary school!!"

"Your mom never did."

"What?! She concussed you with a frying pan in second grade!"

Jin opened his mouth, but then paused. "I don't remember that."

Nijihiro considered this. "Well, I guess that's not too much of a surprise...you were so morphined up afterwards you thought your mother was me..."

"Why are we talking about your family anyway?!" Jin demanded. "This is about you—"

Jin stopped, obviously fighting to say something, then reached out and grabbed Nijihiro by the shoulder instead.

"Ow! Hey! What are you doing?!"

"We're going outside!" Jin dragged Nijihiro towards the door. "I can't think with your stupid music playing!"

"Stop it! OW! You're going to rip my shirt!"

Jin kicked the door open and wrenched Nijihiro around out into the street outside of Bubblegum. Inside,

Kotaro and Shiro watched, Kotaro with eyebrows raised, Shiro with his brow furrowed.

“Listen to me,” Jin growled very quietly. “You know perfectly well why I was worried.”

“Your balls?” Nijiuro said, not bothering to keep his voice down.

“YES,” Jin said, no longer keeping his voice down either. “You were this close to doing something and then you freaked out and ran away. I was worried I’d traumatized you or something.”

“Traumatized me?!” Nijiuro snorted. “Oh, please. What, did you think you were the first naked guy I’ve ever seen?”

“No, but—”

“I was in VG for a little over a month before you found out. Or what, did you think I was such a bad fighter I’d never gotten a Level 1 victory?”

“No,” Jin snapped. “But I was pretty sure I was the first one you ever touched before.”

There was nothing Nijiuro could say to this, mostly because it was the truth, so he ignored it. “Why is anything I do cause for you to worry about me at all?! And what do you mean, I was ‘this close to doing something’?!”

Jin dropped his voice to a sharp whisper. “Nijiuro, you were lying on top of me with your hands all over me, and your eyes were gold.”

Nijiuro, just opening his mouth to argue, froze.

“You know how many times I’ve seen your eyes turn gold? Twice. Once when you saw the VG finals match last year between Jahana Reimi and Yano Tsuyosa and she blasted his clothes to shreds with one hit, and once when I was playing Soul Calibur as Kilik. You think I didn’t see you watching me do that? You think I haven’t heard you telling your girl friends that Kilik reminds you of a younger Yano Tsuyosa? Well, guess what, Nijiuro, I have. But, I’ve never seen your eyes go gold looking at me before. And then, when your sister dropped all those dishes—”

“Cousin,” Nijiuro interrupted automatically.

“Your cousin—I don’t give a damn who it was!” Jin snarled. “When your cousin dropped all those dishes, your eyes went so black they didn’t look real anymore. You were scared out of your mind. And then, when you looked back at me and said you were sorry, you know what color they turned then? Blue-purple.”

Nijiuro swallowed.

“I have never seen your eyes turn purple,” Jin said. “ANY shade of purple. And your eyes only turn blue when you’re sad. Really sad. And I’m not talking blue-purple like Reimi’s hair blue-purple. I mean like...like...” Jin fumbled for a word. “Indigo-purple! DARK! You were hurt, Nijiuro! And it worried me!”

For over a minute, Nijiuro couldn’t think of anything to say. As far as he knew, his eyes had never turned purple before. Ever. And furthermore, the fact that Jin had kept such close tabs on his eyes—he even knew what their colors meant!—was unnerving. Did he—? But even if—but then—

“Nijiuro?”

Nijiuro and Jin both jumped. Naoki had come up behind Nijiuro without either of them noticing. Ayaka had finally persuaded him to ditch his old clothes for jeans that used to be Ashotei’s (they fit him much better than they fit Nijiuro) and one of Daisuke’s shirts. He was also wearing a jacket Nijiuro recognized as Fuma’s. Typically li-eclectic combination, Nijiuro thought, a bit hysterically.

“Who are you?” Jin demanded rudely.

Naoki stared at Jin, but Nijiuro decided to step in before any sparks flew. “Hayami Naoki, this is Suzuki Jin.”

“Jin?” Naoki raised his eyebrows. “The one you beat the pants off of—” although he didn’t say it, the word literally hung in the air before him, “—in VG that first day we met?”

Jin went scarlet.

“Naoki-kun’s also in VG,” Nijiuro said, purposely using the -kun to tick Jin off even further. “And

guess what? He's staying at my house right now."

Jin blushed so ferociously that Nijjiro couldn't help wondering just how far down he was turning red. "Nice...to...meet...you."

"Yeah," Naoki said, clearly not buying it. "Look, Nijjiro, I came to walk you home...your sister was worried because Fuma couldn't do it, so she asked me to...are you done working?"

Nijjiro looked reflexively for a watch, remembered he had given it to Hiroji two months ago, and looked inside of Bubblegum instead. Kotaro and Shiro were still watching him, but the clock had hit eleven-thirty. Nijjiro waved at Kotaro and Shiro, made an apologetic face, and then turned back to Naoki.

"Yeah, I'm done."

"Wait a minute," Jin said. "Nijjiro—"

"Jin, I'm sorry you stayed out for five hours!" Nijjiro snapped. "I'm sorry I didn't come tell you yesterday that I was fine! But I really don't want you to have to worry about me! So please, can we drop this?"

"No," Jin said mulishly. "Nijjiro—"

"You didn't traumatize me or anything," Nijjiro interrupted, "so you don't have to worry about that either, okay?!"

Jin opened his mouth to say something, then closed it abruptly, turned around, and ran off down the street. His long white scarf whipped behind him like a banner, almost glowing in the night.

"Traumatize you?" Naoki asked.

"About when he tried to attack me," Nijjiro lied. "When I went to check on him after dinner. Remember? And he was mad, too, because he stayed out late looking for me because Mom was so worried about me, but I just came back and he stayed out looking."

"Ah."

Nijjiro threw scarlet and azure hair out of his face and started walking towards his house. Naoki caught up with him and walked beside him in silence for a little while. Then he asked, "How late did you say he was out?"

"Oh..." Nijjiro tried to keep his voice light. "A few hours."

"Didn't you say five?"

"...Yeah, I did. So?"

"That's a long time to be looking for you," Naoki remarked. "He must've been pretty worried himself."

"Not really," Nijjiro said. "He just wanted to fight with me."

* * *

Shiro left Bubblegum at 11:37. Kotaro had left three minutes earlier, leaving it to Shiro to lock up. Not that he really minded that.

It was Nijjiro Shiro minded. Usually Shiro didn't have a problem with Nijjiro—he was kind of too energetic for his own good, but that was his own problem, nothing of Shiro's. But just now, first dragging him into the dancing, then finding his VG Card, and then getting dragged outside into a conversation—actually, it looked more like a shouting match—with not one, but TWO very sexy guys?

People like Nijjiro have everything, Shiro thought moodily, closing the door and locking it. He can act however he wants and nobody cares. He wins in VG and gets a raise at work. He challenges people all the time and he actually wins. He's always hyper and outgoing and emotional and everybody seems to like him!

Shiro dumped the keys in his pocket and kicked a nearby rock, sending it spinning down the sidewalk. He complains about his family being huge and loud sometimes—I'll trade him any day. If he wants

small and quiet, he should try my house. It's just me and Mom, and we spend as much time away from each other as possible. I hate her, her and her constant nagging about me and every single thing I do. I breathe wrong to her.

Bet Nijjiro's family loves him, just like everybody else, down to those two hot—Shiro kicked the rock between his feet—gorgeous—he kicked it back between his feet even harder—sexy—he kicked it against the nearest building, and it ricocheted off and came back to him—men!!

Shiro kicked the rock so hard it flew down the sidewalk and out of sight.

There weren't many people out on the street at this time. This was a more shopping-oriented area of the city—no nightclubs or late-night bars—and almost everything was closed. Shiro was alone under the streetlights, with only the muffled roar of nearby traffic to break the nocturnal silence. It probably wasn't a very safe place or time to be walking home, but honestly Shiro didn't care. Who was going to try and kidnap him? Even if they did, his mom wouldn't pay a ransom or struggle to get him back. She probably wouldn't even notice unless they sent her a note, and if they did, she wouldn't care. She didn't want him, any more than he wanted her. Whatever showed up, it couldn't make things any worse.

It was this attitude of Shiro's that resulted in his making the biggest mistake of his life.

"Hey, you."

Shiro stopped.

Leaning in an alley just ahead was a man, a rather well-built man, with glimmering brown eyes and ruffled blonde hair, wearing a slick tank top and baggy, multi-pocketed jeans. Shiro gave him a cursory glare, then started to move on.

"I've seen you on T.V.," the man said. "You're in VG, right?"

Shiro stopped again, then turned around very slowly and deliberately to face him. "Yes. Why?"

By the man's second sentence, Shiro had already drawn the conclusion that he was a relatively new VG-er, still uncomfortable with both the fighting and the stripping, attempting to cut his teeth against other poor inexperienceds like himself. Depression rolled through Shiro's slender shoulders like a stinging wave at the remembrance that, although he and Nijjiro had been in VG for almost the same amount of time, Nijjiro was a burgeoning star, while he was—

The man's next sentence took him completely off guard.

"I'd like to help you."

The idea of a total stranger offering to help Shiro—especially after seeing him lose at VG—was a concept so foreign to Shiro, he couldn't grasp it at first.

"Help me," he repeated blankly.

There was a catch. There had to be a catch. What did this guy want in return? Money? His mother wouldn't give him an allowance. Sex? From him? Yeah right. Well, what the hell else could he want?

"Why?" Shiro demanded.

"I think you have potential." The man stretched, gorgeous muscles rolling like well-oiled ball-bearings beneath his skin. "I'd like to help you realize it."

Shiro laughed harshly. "What potential could you possibly see in me?"

"Potential above and beyond that of your sister," the man said, folding his arms above his head to stretch them further. The movement yanked up on his tank top, revealing that his jeans were pulled down a good inch lower than most people would dare to wear them. Shiro locked his gaze on the man's face, certain he was trying to seduce him, and equally certain it was working damn well.

Then his words sank in. "Above my sister's?"

"Your sister has incredible potential in the field of chi," the man said. "On the other hand, with the right kind of...help, you can surpass her. Not only her. Anyone you come up against."

The man brought his arms down to his sides again swiftly, arresting his tank top somewhere around the bottom of his stomach, and shoved his hands into his pockets. His jeans crept down another

centimeter, and despite his best efforts, Shiro couldn't help watching them do so.

"You could have Yano Tsuyosa naked at your feet," the man said softly.

Shiro's eyes widened. The idea of Level 1-defeating Yano Tsuyosa—leaving him stripped of his title, his reputation, his clothes, before all the world—it couldn't be possible. It was about as possible as winning the lottery.

But winning the lottery was possible.

"That's impossible," Shiro said slowly.

The man took one of his hands out of his pocket, and showed to Shiro a small Advil bottle. He opened it, and shook out a single, round, white ball into his hand.

"This," the man said, holding it up for Shiro to see, "will unlock your potential."

"A pill?" Shiro snorted, the wistful fantasies of watching Yano Tsuyosa writhe in front of him blown to shattereens. "Please, how dumb do you think I am? There are thousands of supposed VG-stimulants out there. Either they don't work, or they make you so sick you can't VG until the effects wear off anyways. If that's all you've got, I'm leaving right—"

"I don't think you understand," the man said quietly. "This does work. You know Komiya Hayato?"

Shiro knew of Hayato. He was generally believed to be the surefire winner of this year's VG tournament. His fighting style was intense—some of the people he had fought were so battered afterwards they had trouble performing for their Level 1 Loss.

"Are you trying to say Komiya Hayato takes those?" Shiro snorted again. "Yeah right."

The man brought his other hand out of his pocket and held a piece of paper out to Shiro. "Look at this."

Shiro reached out and snatched the paper from him. It was a receipt, and at the bottom, in bold, blocky kanji, was Hayato's signature.

"What is this supposed to prove?" Shiro snapped. "I have heard of forgery, you know. You can take those pills and shove them—"

"Try one," the man urged. "A test run. Free of charge. If you still don't think they work, you're welcome to leave, no strings attached. If you change your mind and decide you want them, we can work out a price. And I can assure you, there are no lasting side-effects."

Shiro raised his eyebrows. "Lasting?"

The man smiled, showing teeth. "Two traits easily observable in Komiya Hayato. This pill shortens your temper, making you more violent and prone to lash out easier than usual. Komiya-san is quite the violent fighter, is he not? And as for the other...as long as the pill taps into your potential, you'll be one hot-`n-heavy bastard." The man slid his free hand up underneath his tank top and scratched his chest, displaying the entirety of his flatly muscled stomach. "Komiya's semi-permanent erection is my doing as well."

"So you're saying this wonder-drug makes you stronger than Tsuyosa, better at chi than my sister, madder than a rhino, and harder than a rock?" Shiro shook his head and repeated again, "Yeah right."

"Try it." The man offered the pill he had tipped out earlier to Shiro, then took it back, dropped it back into the bottle, and held out the bottle instead. "Take one. Any one, so you don't think it's one real one in a bottle of duds. No charge. No conditions. No tricks. Just swallow one, and see if you think it works."

Shiro looked at it. The truth was, he was horribly tempted to. The chance of it actually working, of it making him able to beat Tsuyosa, to beat Eiko, was irresistibly alluring. It even beat the far more likely chance that the pill would just knock him out and allow this guy to take him and do whatever he wanted with him. And as for those side affects...a hot temper and a lasting erection? How bad could that be?

If the idea of being knocked out and stolen away had meant more to Shiro, he might have made a different decision. But it didn't. And he didn't.

"All right," Shiro said, picking a random pill out of the bottle. They all looked the same—like small white

marbles—and they probably all tasted like cough syrup, too, Shiro thought as he swallowed it.

The cough syrup taste faded quickly from Shiro's tongue. He stood there, waiting.

"Give it a minute to be absorbed," the man said quietly. "Just a minute..."

This was a hoax. Such a hoax. So dumb. Probably once it hit his stomach he'd throw up, and the whole thing would be over.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven," the man counted off. "Six, five, four, three, two...one."

Quite suddenly, totally unexpectedly, the entire world leapt. Shiro yelped and fell to the ground, feeling as though the ground underneath his feet had just done a jumping pirouette. Then something in his vision shimmered—and the world leapt into focus.

But what focus! This was focus so finely tuned that every crack in the sidewalk was visible. This was focus, not only in his eyes, but in his ears, bringing the sounds of the faintest breeze to his attention. Focus so fine, the throbbing ache burning down his groin was enough to paralyze him.

"Listen to me," the man said, and his voice came to Shiro's mind as though through a thick, colorful mist. "This is what you'll feel when you take these pills. Can you feel anything?"

Shiro opened his mouth, but at first couldn't seem to say anything. Then, after he thought he had said it, he heard his voice, also through a colorful fog; "Yes. Oh, God, yes."

"Call up your chi," the man said, and Shiro, looking up much slower than he thought he usually did, saw that they were now very close. The man had moved closer to him when the world had jumped. "The same way as usual, but call it up. See how much you can summon."

Shiro stood up. The world was solid again—more than solid. It almost seemed to hold his feet gently, waiting to toss him in the right direction. It made Shiro dizzy—the world itself was helping him now? What had that pill done?

Conjure up his chi, the man had said. All right. Easier said than done. But again to Shiro's surprise, his chi came easily to his fingertips. Too easily. So easily that his fingertips blazed with it in just a few moments. The heat of his chi was starting to hurt. Reflexively he threw it away from him.

A searing, blazing, sparkling blast of chi erupted from Shiro's hands. The mass of energy roared into the street and slammed into a light post, snapping it like a twig. The post slammed into the street, burning all over with his chi. His chi. Except it was black, black as a raven's plumes when before it had only ever been translucent, like his sister's.

Hands touched Shiro's shoulders. Shiro knew without turning around who it was, and wondered how he could be so sure.

"Aim," the man whispered into Shiro's ear, rubbing his hands slowly down Shiro's shoulder blades and around to the front of his chest. "Aim for that piece on the street. Call your chi up again—just as much as you'll need to shoot it over that building. Think carefully, and aim."

Shiro didn't even feel the man's hands slide down his ribs, but his body did, and rose to it, arching into these warm, masculine hands. Shiro raised one hand, focusing entirely on his chi, and called it together into a lance—just enough to shoot it over the building. Then he fired.

A spear of black chi arrowed out, hit the remains of the light, and sent it blasting up into the air, right over the building.

"Excellent," the man murmured, undoing the buttons on Shiro's pants. "Now come over here and practice on these trash cans."

Shiro willingly followed the man back into the darkness of the alley. He needed practice. Focusing on the first can, he brought together a tiny dab of chi—just the smallest possible flame—and flicked it at the trash can. The tiny flame drilled a hole right through the solid metal. Ecstasy filled Shiro's mind.

Not just his mind. Although his brain was too full of sights, of sounds, of the heady flames of chi and

the incredible sense of triumph at having so much chi so perfectly under his command, his body was under another power. The drug-seller ripped Shiro's shirt off his chest, stripped him nearly naked without Shiro's mind noticing a thing. But his body noticed, and rose on a wave of ecstatic heat filling his skin, buoying his entire body up like a balloon—held to earth only by the searching, invading hands of the drug seller. Every nerve of Shiro's body moaned with passionate delight as the fiery touch of strong, masculine hands seized control of him—but the electrical inferno of nerve signals never reached Shiro's brain, locked as it was in the misty exaltation of success, success at long last. He didn't even feel it when the man first thrust into him, taking, marking him as violently and completely as Tsuyosa had Naoki just months ago.

And so Shiro stood in the darkened alley, showering black chi into the alley, burning scorching holes in the trash cans, the cement, the walls of the neighboring buildings, as the man who had lured him into the fog of the drug took his payment in hard, virgin sex that Shiro neither consented to nor knew about.

* * *

Shiro woke up in his bed the next morning, with no memory of how he had gotten there or of what had happened after he had left Bubblegum. The bottle of pills in his hand refreshed his memory somewhat. He guessed he had been satisfied with the effects of the pill, and paid the man for this first bottle. He wondered vaguely what the price for it had been, and when he found his wallet on his bedside table, empty, he figured he knew what he had paid.

If he had only known what else he had paid.

* * *

Wednesday

"Got it," Nijihiro said, coming out of Ariyake Coliseum and holding out Naoki's VG card. "You're registered, I'm registered, it's all good."

"They bought it?" Naoki stashed his card away in his pocket.

"That you were coming, you just sent your VG card ahead so I could register for you? Of course they did. I told you, it happens all the time. If you're worried you might not get to Ariyake in time to register, you send your card to a friend of yours and they'll do it for you. All of your info's on this card, and it's firewall-protected and who knows what else. It's not like somebody could fake it and enter you without your permission."

"Okay, okay, I get it." Naoki almost smiled, something he'd been doing with increasing frequency. "Arigatou, Nijihiro."

"No problem. Now that I have incentive to get you to win, I'm gonna make certain-sure you do. Or I do." Nijihiro paused. "Naoki, if we end up in the finals together and we have to fight each other...what...well, I mean...how..."

Naoki looked at Nijihiro and answered his stumbling question. "We'll go all-out against each other. No holding back. Whichever one of us is stronger is the one who should go on. That'll be the one with the better chance of winning for both of us."

Nijihiro mulled this over for a few seconds, then nodded. "Yeah. I guess so. Come to think of it, I've never seen you fight. Are you good?"

"Not really," Naoki said lightly. "Tsuyosa killed me."

Nijihiro winced inwardly. Bad conversation topic. "Well, Tsuyosa's one of the best. Have you ever fought anybody else?"

Naoki shrugged. "Not really. I guess one or two other people. When I...left my parents' house, I

enrolled in VG because I thought it might be a good temporary job. Then I got the other one, but at least I kept the card.”

Worse and worse. Nijiuro struggled for a change of subject. “So...do you like to read?”

Naoki snorted. “You need to work on your topic transitions.”

Nijiuro flushed. “Yeah, well...do you?”

“Yeah, reading’s fine. I don’t usually have much time to, though.”

“What kind of books do you like to read?”

Naoki considered. “I like mythology a lot. Myths are pretty cool. Weird, but cool.”

“Like Amaterasu and the whole rock thing?”

“Yeah, but other countries’ myths too. Norse myths are weird. Like this one where the goddess Freyja found this necklace called Brsingal, that dwarves had made, and wanted it so badly she slept with the dwarves who had made it to get it.”

Nijiuro shuddered. “Uckh. I’m not a jewelry person.”

Naoki raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Shiho’s the jewelry girl in my family. Well, and Hiroji, but he’s just a freak. I think jewelry’s kinda ridiculous.”

“Really? Huh.”

Nijiuro glared. “Believe it or not, I’m not totally effeminate.”

Naoki coughed. Nijiuro was ready to kick him, but then Naoki pointed further down the street and said, “Hey, is that a VG match?”

A huge crowd was congesting the intersection Naoki was pointing to. It had to be either VG or a car accident, and the cheers from the crowd made it pretty obvious which one it was.

“Yeah, it is!” Nijiuro broke into a run. “C’mon, let’s go see!”

“Why?” Naoki inquired.

“I try to keep on top of VG matches. The more I watch, the more I know about fighting and how other people fight, and the better I’ll do later.”

Naoki coughed again.

Nijiuro stopped running and glared back at him. “I only like seeing some of them naked.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I knew what you meant! Now shut up and get over here!” Nijiuro ran up to a girl on the outskirts of the crowd, and stood up on his tiptoes next to her. “Who is it? When did it start?”

“li-kun!!” the girl squealed. “Oh—the match? It’s just starting—Minami Reijiuro versus Fujisaki Shuji!”

“I’ve never heard of either one of them.”

“They’re both new. Here, stand here, it’s easier to see.” The girl moved out of the way, almost bumped into Naoki, and whirled around with an apology on her lips. It died into a blush when she looked at him. Naoki looked uncomfortable and took a step away, on the pretext of trying to get a better view at the VG ring.

It looked like a one-sided match. One of the two fighters, a young man with spiked russet-brown hair, wearing a white button-up shirt with the sleeves ripped off and black pants, had the other, dressed in form-fitting black leather, in a headlock. The one in leather didn’t even seem to be fighting back, even as he was driven down to the ground by his opponent.

“Who’s the one who’s losing?” Nijiuro asked.

“Minami-san,” the girl said, wrenching her eyes away from Naoki with the sound of ripping paper. “I think this’ his first match.”

“If that’s all he does, it might be his last,” Nijiuro said. “He’s getting killed out there!”

Fujisaki Shuji grabbed Minami Reijiuro and threw him into a devastating suplex. The crowd gave a collective wince, and for just a moment, Nijiuro saw Reijiuro’s face.

His hair was blonde, the tips dyed black—or perhaps naturally black, bleached but for the tips. He had cinnamon-colored skin, eyes such a shining green that even from yards away in the crowd Nijiuro could see them, and a face...his face. His face was beautiful. Even as Shuji slammed him down onto the VG floor, his face remained unmoving, expressionless, so beautiful it struck down into Nijiuro's heart.

Reflexively Nijiuro's hands flew to his mouth to suppress bile. He knew that that face, the vision of frozen, tranquil beauty even at that moment of severe punishment, was going to haunt him.

It obviously was not haunting Shuji. He left Reijiuro on the ring floor for a minute, took a step back, and brushed his russet bangs out of his face. He unbuttoned his shirt and waved the edges, as though to fan himself. Not every guy can pull off the sleeveless-shirt look, but Shuji could. He flipped his shirt open, showing a chiseled chest with gorgeous coral nipples, and rolled his muscles in a leisurely stretch. The crowd lapped it up. Nijiuro had to admit, this guy was good at publicity.

Reijiuro stood up.

Surprise rolled heavily into the air. Reijiuro had taken quite a beating, and most of the onlookers had been sure he was down for the count. Apparently not. Shuji looked surprised for a moment as well, then readied himself to rush.

Reijiuro pointed his palm at Shuji.

An energy blast the likes of which Nijiuro had never seen exploded out of Reijiuro's hand and engulfed Shuji completely. It was blood-red, a searing stream of so much chi that it was a wonder Reijiuro could still be alive after using it. It slammed into Shuji, devoured him in crimson, lifted him off the ground, sent him spinning through the air, drove him heavily into the floor.

The full scope of that energy blast was impossible to describe. Nijiuro could only gape. He was only called back to himself by the sound of the scoreboard above, which had decided that this was definitely a one-hit K.O.

BEEP BEEP BLIP BEEP...LEVEL 3

Shuji lay, seemingly stunned, on the floor of the ring for a moment. Finally, with an effort, he raised his head and saw the score.

"What was that?" Nijiuro asked, astonished.

"I have no idea," the girl gasped, equally astonished. "He didn't land a hit on Fujisaki this whole time...and then, with just one blast...!"

"Amazing," Naoki muttered.

Shuji slowly dragged himself up onto his feet. He should have left his shirt alone when he had the chance—now just the barest ribbons hung around his shoulders. His chest and arms were crisscrossed with dozens of tiny cuts left by the force of the energy blast, which was nothing short of mindblowing—usually chi couldn't break the skin, even if it felt like it could.

However badly he felt, Shuji had still lost on Level 3, and like Jin, he had to pay for his loss. Slowly, probably painfully, he kicked his shoes off and brushed the ribbons of his shirt off his chest. His pants were shredded almost beyond recognition—he just had to undo them, and they fell both down and apart, drifting black ribbons down to the floor. Here again, vanity was Shuji's undoing—underneath his pants he was wearing very tight black briefs, and although his pants had blocked the majority of Reijiuro's energy blast, quite a bit had still seeped through. Most of one side was missing, and as soon as Shuji had stripped himself to here—as far as he had to go—that side broke, and Shuji's large balls burst out into full view. He was wonderfully well-endowed, perhaps not record-holding, but enough to make Nijiuro's chest flare up with that clenching flame of lust. The briefs fell down to his ankle, leaving him completely naked, blushing uncontrollably.

The whistles and catcalls were inevitable.

“Nice plums, Fujisaki!” yelled a jeering voice.

“Do you actually shave those?”

“He does! Look, they’ve got fuzz!”

“Not plums then, peaches.”

“How many guys’ve you let try `em, Fujisaki?”

“I’ll give you fifty bucks for two minutes with `em!”

Shuji was blushing all the way down to his nipples by now, but it was the rules of VG that he had to stay in the ring for at least two minutes, allowing himself to be seen by anybody who wanted to look. That wasn’t the bad part anyway, especially not when your clothes got ripped to shreds like this. The bad part was when the two minutes were over, and you had to leave the VG ring and go into the crowd. In Shuji’s case, butt naked.

Although there were of course national laws against kidnap, sexual harassment, and rape, related to VG or no, the crowds around VG rings were so large and unpredictable that it was impossible to tell whether someone fell against a Senshi with the express purpose of feeling them up or whether they were just pushed. Nijiuro had a feeling that a lot of people were going to be “accidentally” falling into Shuji as soon as he left the ring.

On a sudden impulse, Nijiuro lunged forward into the crowd.

“Nijiuro?” Naoki shouted.

“Hold on!” Nijiuro shouted back as he disappeared. “Be back soon!”

Then he had vanished beneath hordes of people.

* * *

Advancing through a post-VG crowd was a talent perfected by few. There were two distinct tides—the people who wanted to leave to go back to their original business, and the people who wanted to get up to the ring to congratulate the winner and boo—or, more often, “accidentally” feel up—the loser. No matter which way you were trying to go, the other tide worked against you and made it almost impossible to move unless you were at the outskirts of the crowd.

Nijiuro, owing to inherent agility, was one of the few people who could pretty much get wherever he wanted to go even in a crowd of this size. And it was a large crowd. New VG senshi were always wild cards whom anyone with any interest in VG at all jumped at the chance to see in action, to weigh their talent, strength, and expertise against other VG competitors. Two new VG-ers in a single match? It was a bigger attraction than free food at the movies.

Urgency drove Nijiuro forward at a greater speed than even he had ever gone before. As he fought, pushed, slid, slipped, apologized, and snuck his way past other people, he counted down seconds. Not many left in Shuji’s grace period.

A sudden predatory sigh went up just ahead of Nijiuro. Nijiuro jumped into the air, trying to see over the hat of the woman in front of him, and realized he had miscounted the seconds. Shuji was leaving the ring. Reijiuro was already gone.

Adrenaline is a marvelous thing. Nijiuro blasted the last ten feet to Shuji’s location in record time, surrounded by a miasmic fog of taunts and jeers.

“Loser.”

“Wimp.”

“Show-off.”

“Jerk-off.”

“Homo.”

“Fag.”

Rage ignited in Nijjiro's veins, and gave him the impetus to jumpstart a plan. Because, embarrassing and rather stupid as it was, Nijjiro had made it this far without one. But hey, as long as one came in the end, that was all that mattered, right?

Shoving a way-too-eager-looking personage out of the way, Nijjiro stormed up, tossed his long rainbow hair out of his face, and slapped Shuji resoundingly across the cheek.

Everybody around, including Shuji, froze.

"That's for losing!" Nijjiro snarled, imitating Chihiro as best he could.

Then he switched gears, grabbed Shuji around the shoulders—which was a bit of a reach—and pressed their lips together in a sweet, chaste kiss. It was a remarkably pleasant experience, but not one Nijjiro had the leisure of enjoying.

"That's for finally challenging somebody," Nijjiro purred, leaning his head briefly against Shuji's chest. "Too bad you got flattened. But..." Nijjiro lifted his head away, "all that means is I'll have to give you more...private lessons. Hmm? C'mon, let's do something about that bleeding..."

Giving his best Chihiro-glare at everybody in his way, Nijjiro dragged one very confused Shuji out of the masses and into an alleyway with all speed.

"Wha-?!" Shuji began, but Nijjiro clapped a hand on his mouth.

"Shut up and follow me unless you'd rather they had you!"

Shuji shut up.

Nijjiro dragged him down to the end of the alley, looked around, and pushed Shuji behind a dumpster, hiding him somewhat.

"Okay," Nijjiro said. "Safe. For now."

"Who are—" Shuji frowned. "Wait...your hair...are you...?"

"VG Senshi li Nijjiro." Nijjiro nodded, but stopped quickly because looking...er, down...was too distracting. "Yeah."

Shuji's copious blush was slowly fading from his bare body, but at this it flooded back. He shielded himself with his hands as best he could, blood rushing to his face.

"Here." Nijjiro yanked off his jacket and offered it. "Tie it around your waist."

Shuji snatched the jacket gratefully, looking as though he might cry.

"li-san," Shuji muttered, winding the jacket hastily around himself, "why are you helping me?"

"Because I didn't want you getting groped by half of Japan."

"I appreciate it, but I—"

"I don't want you to do anything for me, and don't even thank me yet, because you're definitely not safe yet." Nijjiro glanced down the alley. Thanks to speed and as much confusion as Nijjiro had sown among the crowd, nobody had found them yet, but that was only a matter of time. "I know you'll have to get used to this kinda thing, 'cause it'll probably happen again, but this bad on your first time? That's, like, just cruel."

"You just did that...to help me?" Shuji repeated. "But you're—"

"I know it wasn't a great idea," Nijjiro interrupted. "Sorry, but you're going to have to get used to the press calling you my boyfriend. Or vice versa. For a little while, at least." The mere idea sent panic clenching Nijjiro's stomach. Jin's reaction was going to make Mount Vesuvius look like a firecracker. "I'll deny it, of course, but nobody's gonna believe us for a while, not after—"

"So wait," Shuji broke in. "You don't want...me? In return for what you just did?"

"No! I mean—" Nijjiro reddened. "It's not that I—it's just, I'm so not making you sleep with me because I helped you. That'd just be—"

Shuji grabbed Nijjiro, pulled him in close, and kissed him with a deep, relieved passion. Nijjiro made a sort of indistinct yelp against Shuji's mouth, but Shuji used this as an opportunity to deepen the kiss further. It was hard and hot and bizarre and not at all like Naoki's kiss and not at all like the kiss Nijjiro

had initiated and not at all unpleasing an experience.

“Shu—” Nijiuro tried indistinctly, but even this muffled, half-hearted protest didn’t stand a chance, stifled by Shuji’s tongue.

“Thanks,” Shuji whispered against Nijiuro’s mouth. “I owe you big-time for the Get-Out-of-Jail ticket. Anything you ever need, swear I’ll help you back.”

Then the new VG senshi broke away, ran to the entrance of the alley, teetered there for a moment—obviously steeling himself to face the streets—and ran to the left, as fast as he could.

Nijiuro stayed in the alley, stunned. That was the first time anybody else had ever kissed him and meant it that way. It was—

Totally overshadowed by the uncontrollable, blazing desire to repeat the experience. This time with Jin on the other end.

* * *

A Month Before This Day...

It was late afternoon on the beach, the sands still golden and the waves still blue but the sun far over in the sky, starting to maybe possibly think about dropping down beneath the horizon sometime soon. Some people had just left the beach. Those who hadn’t were drawn to the VG area as though by a colossal magnet. This was certain to be one of the best VG matches of the year.

VG Senshi Miyure Chikao had just challenged VG Senshi Ryusaki Hajime to a match. Both had been in VG for only a few months. Both were extremely famous for their battle prowess, and sported voluminous fan clubs—although the size of their fan clubs had less to do with their VG experience than with their bodies, and the incredible sexiness thereof.

Chikao was a muscleman. He was an ex-wrestler who had ended his career with the sport, but unlike many wrestlers, he made the transition to VG willingly. It was perhaps his willingness to adapt to a sport so similar and yet so different to his first that allowed him to succeed where most wrestlers had failed—that, or maybe it was just his arms. Chikao had shoulders like steel and muscles like rock—every line of his upper body was so sharply defined it could cast its own shadow. His granite-like pectorals chiseled down to abs that might have been sculpted instead of exercised, but despite their size, his muscles were not bodybuilderish; they instead had that firm tone of Grecian perfection, which gives the impression of slenderness despite having considerable volume. In his baggy black-and-orange pants, black-and-brown hiking boots, and black-and-blue fingerless gloves, he was an epitome of masculinity, his incredible torso accentuated rather than hidden by a skintight white tanktop and a dog-tag necklace.

His opponent wasn’t quite as muscular, but neither was he any less masculine. Ryusaki Hajime had long, thick, shining black hair pulled carelessly back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck, raven strands falling around his face and into his dark, soot-lashed eyes. Hajime was no pretty-boy, though—he was tall, almost three inches taller than Chikao, even considering that Chikao was wearing hiking boots and he was barefoot. He was a surfer, one of the best to ever visit this particular beach, and as a result he was nothing but honey-tan muscle from head to toe. On this particular day, he was wearing a knee-length and short-sleeved aquamarine yukata, tied as carelessly as his ponytail around his waist with a dark blue sash. The long line of bare, amber chest was enough to give half the girls in the crowd heart palpitations—and probably did, coupled with his long, muscular legs, still glittering with beads of seawater.

Neither VG Senshi gave their opponent more than a few seconds to consider strategy. Chikao lunged at Hajime, Hajime rocketed at Chikao, and the two of them slammed into each other with a chi-induced crash that sprayed the watching crowd with seawater and sand. They seemed actually an excellent match—Hajime’s chi aquamarine, Chikao’s tangerine; Hajime’s enveloping, Chikao’s striking; Hajime

shoving, Chikao slamming.

Through and around and surrounded by their chi, the two VG Senshi hammered blows against each other like blacksmiths. It was parry and counter and rush and dodge repeated over and over in a seconds-long dance, neither managing to quite land a hit, but each landing closer each time.

It was Chikao who landed the first blow on his opponent. He caught Hajime's fist with one hand; Hajime struck at his stomach with his other; Chikao sidestepped, pulling Hajime critically off balance and just avoiding the blow; and Chikao's other fist backhanded beneath Hajime's and hit Hajime in the stomach instead.

Hajime bent from Chikao's blow, but was not even close to giving up. He slid his free fist over the path Chikao's had taken and landed a blow in Chikao's side. Chikao just had time to wonder what the hell the surfer was doing before the fist he was still holding suddenly bent backwards at the wrist. Taken off guard, Chikao lost his grip, and Hajime seized his wrist, twisted viciously downwards while holding his other fist perfectly still—and like a lever around a fulcrum, Chikao flipped around Hajime's hand and smashed into the floor of the ring.

But that was only half of the move. Hajime yanked Chikao upright again at arm's length, brought his leg up, and landed a solid kick directly to Chikao's jaw. Chikao flew backwards and slammed down on the floor again, feeling like he had just been hit by a steel girder.

Hajime remained as he was, his leg held where he had kicked Chikao with it and his upper body leaning back, the slightest smile curving his lips—and the crowd exploded. The light-blue yukata was falling out of the way, held back by his raised leg, and revealing underneath a flash of tightest, lowest-possible-slung, bulging, bursting black.

Hajime let his leg fall before anybody could get any more than the most tempting flash of blackness, but it was enough. The crowd was in paroxysms.

But the fight wasn't over yet. Chikao got back to his feet, wiping a stream of blood from the edge of his mouth, and shook his short, scruffy, wheat-colored hair out of his face. Then he charged Hajime again.

Hajime brought his hand up as though throwing something, and out of thin air, following his hand, came drops of sea-blue chi which knitted themselves into a wave, a rushing wave of opaque chi that splattered into Chikao's face. It didn't hurt, but it was just like getting a bucket of paint thrown into your face, and Chikao was temporarily blinded.

Then hands seized his arms and twisted them into a lock behind his back. No prizes for guessing who that was. The crowd's shouts grew gleeful. It seemed that this match was just about over.

Chikao allowed himself one quick smile. How right they were, even if it wasn't quite the way they thought it to be.

Using Hajime's hands as a guide and his grip as a brace, Chikao thrust his upper body sharply down—pulling Hajime forward and down across his back—and shot his hiking-booted-foot upwards, directly between Hajime's legs.

Hajime let out a choking gasp. Chikao had not held back—the kick burned up through every nerve he possessed. He started to fall further, but Chikao swung around, seizing Hajime by the front of his yukata, and slammed him against the nearest corner of the VG ring, up against the post. His knee flew upwards and followed his foot's path, right between the surfer's legs.

Despite intense, unbelievable pain, Hajime attempted to fight back, but Chikao was having none of it. He grabbed Hajime by his long black hair and yanked his head upright, while slamming his other arm across his chest, preventing him from bending. All breath gone, Hajime struggled, choking, for air while pain incinerated his entire body, radiating out and up from his groin.

It hurt just to watch. Hajime, pinned up against the pole by Chikao's knee, held up by his hair, Chikao grinding brutally down against the pole with no regards for anything between his kneecap and the metal

itself.

Hurt for anybody except Chikao, at least. Chikao was in seventh heaven. He could feel Hajime's balls, his huge, soft, vulnerable balls, conveniently trapped within the speedo Hajime was wearing, feel the hardness he was smashing into them as he crushed them back against the metal. It filled him with lust and heat and the will to dominate. He bore down harder.

Hajime was clinging to Chikao's arm with both hands, vainly seeking some kind of escape or relief through the contact, but none was forthcoming. Sweat was soaking through the fabric of the yukata, pooling in the sharp cliffs of Hajime's collarbones to slide in rivulets down his chest, to Chikao's arm. The feeling of sweat sliding over his muscles, of Hajime's nails driving into his skin, was too much. Chikao yanked Hajime's head back still more sharply, making the veins in his neck stand out like relief carvings, and wrenched his arm away from Hajime's fingers to untie the yukata, and throw the tie out into the crowd.

The yukata fell easily open, and the crowd went nuts. All Hajime was wearing underneath the yukata was a single, scanty black speedo. The speedo itself was huge, but despite that it bulged, burst, overflowed with its contents, because Hajime was one of the best endowed men to ever enter Variable Geo, and everyone knew it.

Chikao let his eyes roam, from the brimming black package of male genitalia he was still grinding back against the pole to Hajime's muscular amber thighs, forced apart by the intrusion of his knee and quivering with intense pain, up again to the top of the speedo—low-slung by cut and pulled lower by the weight of its contents, and by now so low that if it wasn't for Chikao's knee, Hajime might as well have not been wearing it—to follow a slim path of almost-curling black hair up Hajime's waist and over his stomach to his navel, hair glittering with the sweat still sliding down Hajime's chest like rain. It was irresistible. Chikao leaned forward, bringing all his weight against Hajime's massive balls, and let his tongue lick a long, slow, salty trail from Hajime's collarbone up his heaving throat.

Hajime tried to scream, but he had no breath left to do so, even when Chikao pushed his sweat-soaked yukata off first one shoulder, then the other. Even through the briars of pain whipping through his entire body, Hajime could feel the cloth slide torturously slowly down his arms and off his back, helped along by Chikao until it was all bunched at the base of his spine, caught between him and the pole. Leaving him clothed in nothing but a falling black speedo and Chikao's knee, before the VG match was even over.

Chikao suddenly withdrew his knee from Hajime's groin, letting the yukata fall finally to the floor, and threw the surfer to the ground by his hair. However, he had kept one small token. Hajime landed on his back, tears finally rolling down his face from the pain, not even realizing that the overworked and overfilled black swimsuit had been torn from him in the toss.

Hajime's entire long, luscious, honey-colored body was exposed to the crowd, and the attention of every person was focused on every inch. Hajime's erection lolled back on his stomach like a drunkard, making up for the time it was held down and back by Chikao's knee, and his balls...Hajime's balls were so large that those in the crowd who had not up til now seen them were astounded. Later, teasers in the crowd for the match between Shuji and Reiji would taunt Shuji by calling his balls plums, but that was an exaggeration and they knew it. Hajime's seriously were of such a size, low and heavy enough to hit halfway down his thighs, now clad in nothing more than a light coat of Hajime's fine, curling hair.

Chikao wasn't ready to give up his new toy yet. His own erection hard and pushing against the front of his baggy pants, he tossed Hajime's yukata and torn speedo into the crowd (where they quickly disappeared—NOBODY wanted Hajime to leave this match clothed) and walked up to his opponent, who was vainly trying to regain some vestige of muscular control before—

A heavy hiking boot pressed savagely down on Hajime's balls, and he jerked, arching his back with unconscious desperation, cinnamon-dark nipples hard as his erection. His hair, slick with sweat, lost its

tie and came loose, strands sticking to the hot perspiration streaming down his chest and raining off his back.

The feeling Hajime's balls had made against his knee was nothing compared to this—the feeling of absolute control, watching this gorgeous, defenseless, completely naked man while his impossibly heavy balls pulsed underneath Chikao's foot. Chikao wanted dearly to stomp down as hard as he could, but he held himself back, relishing the torture pouring in tears down Hajime's face. Slowly his foot ground down still harder, and Hajime let out a wordless scream of imploration.

It was like a fisherman and his catch—Chikao standing, triumphant and cool, his arms folded, eyes taking in every detail of Hajime's torture; Hajime arched, writhing, naked, black hair plastered in sweat-sticky streaks across his face and chest and back, hard amber body glimmering all over with sweat and tears—and more, as Chikao forced him into a pain-induced version of a Level 1 loss that stunned the crowd speechless with its volume.

Until—

BEEP BEEP BLIP BEEP...LEVEL 2

Chikao sighed. By VG law, when the computer declared a match over, it was over, and there was nothing you could do about it. If you continued to attack your opponent after the match was ended, you were disqualified, without exceptions.

However...

Chikao took his foot off Hajime's balls, and Hajime finally—finally—curled into a fetal position, shuddering uncontrollably, body racked with spasms of pain.

But the worst was yet to come. Chikao yanked off his fingerless gloves and stuffed them into his pocket, slipped his arms underneath Hajime's curled-up and shaking body, lifted him easily, and threw him over the side of the ring into the hands of a group of teenagers whose eyes glittered with raw animal desire.

"He's all yours," Chikao said to the crowd as a whole, and as the entire crowd imploded in on itself—a thousand hands, each reaching out to seize Hajime's balls for their own—Chikao left the ring, a fisherman throwing his catch to the sharks, licking lines of sweat and semen from his dripping hands with a kind of smug pleasure.

6 - The Relationships of the Gods, Part Two

The Relationships of the Gods, Part Two

~~*~*~*~

It only took Nijjiro about a minute to get over the idea that he had just received his first kiss from a VG Senshi he had saved from a crowd of sharks. However, it took him another three to wrestle his mind away from the sweetness of Jin's skin, and what he wanted to do with—

He only got his mind away when the bruises on his ribs twinged furiously, snapping him out of his trance. Quickly he laid his hands on his sides—wincing at the pain even this light touch fired up—and breathed a “Healing Rain” into his bruises.

Rainbow light flashed over Nijjiro's bruises, making his shirt glow and easing the difficulty of breathing. Nijjiro removed his hands, and let out a quiet sigh of relief when nothing hurt.

Naoki. Oh, crud. He had left Naoki alone in the middle of the street, without even a word about what he was doing. Where was he? Had he left without him?

Nijjiro darted out to the alley entrance and looked around. The VG ring had returned to the street—the VG crowd had dissolved almost entirely, very disgruntled at the sudden disappearance of its loser but wildly spraying about the news that Fujisaki Shuji and li Nijjiro were—

“Nijjiro!”

Naoki was running to him, weaving through a few lingering girls.

“Nijjiro, what the hell happened?” Naoki demanded, coming to a stop at the edge of the alley. “All these people...I heard that...”

“I had to get Shuji out of the crowd,” Nijjiro said, feeling very stupid. “He...I mean, you saw! He was going to get carried away by one of those people waiting for him! I had to do something!”

A very strange expression came over Naoki's face.

“What?!”

“Is Shuji your boyfriend?” Naoki asked.

Nijjiro groaned. “No, but I know that's what people'll think now. I really wish there'd been another way to get him out of there, but I couldn't think of one, so—”

“You made people believe you were his boyfriend just so they wouldn't do anything to him?” Naoki asked, his voice carefully blank.

“Well, yeah. I mean, it'll blow over, and nobody should have to face something like that after their first loss.”

Naoki's face seemed to turn to stone.

Nijjiro could have kicked himself. “Oh God, that happened to you, didn't it?”

“I—” Naoki swallowed. “It doesn't matter. But...God, Nijjiro, why didn't I meet you sooner?”

Nijjiro went scarlet. “What?! No, I—it's not that big of a—I'm not—other people would—”

“You're the first person I've ever met in this city who gives a damn about people you don't even know, without having sex in mind,” Naoki said. “It is a big deal.”

Nijjiro could feel blood rushing to his face, and worse, he could feel the stab of hypocrisy slicing through him again. “It's—I'm—I'm really not that—”

“Forget it,” Naoki interrupted, going red himself. “I'm sorry I embarrassed you—I just—forget it.”

Guilt burned Nijjiro like acid. Naoki thought he was some kind of innocent paragon, somebody pure

and good and untainted. When his thoughts, his feelings towards almost every single man he—

“Forget what?” said a soft, sweet voice.

The first thing Nijjiro thought was that there was a girl behind him. Even though his mind noted the fact that the voice was pitched too low to be a girl’s, it was so sweet and melodic that Nijjiro had already formed a picture of her in his mind before he had turned around—an inch or two shorter than Naoki, with long, honey-colored hair and almond eyes, skin the richest, lightest cream.

He couldn’t have been more wrong if he had tried. The boy standing behind him looked only about Nijjiro’s age, passing his height—and Nijjiro was awfully short—by just two inches. His hair was short, black, and sticking up in every direction—his eyes were almond-shaped, but black as pitch, like his hair. The finishing blow, however, was his skin, which was the darkest shade Asian skin-color goes without looking African. It was a tan any person would die for.

“Never mind,” the boy said, looking rather fixedly at Nijjiro. “li Nijjiro-san, I request a VG challenge.”

His voice was so smooth that Nijjiro almost missed the telltale deliberation to the words, the pauses used by any person unfamiliar with speaking Japanese. He was so busy trying to reconcile this reality of the speaker with his preconception of the voice that all he could do was repeat, rather idiotically, “VG challenge?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “I am Yen Sying.”

Now Nijjiro realized the reason for the pauses. This kid was from China.

“I have come to Japan to enter the nationals, and wish to challenge you,” Sying said. “I must battle three Japanese VG Senshi before I may enter, and I have heard much about you since I came here.”

“You couldn’t enter the Chinese nationals?” Naoki asked.

Sying looked blankly at Naoki.

“There are no Chinese nationals,” Nijjiro murmured. “They refused to reintegrate VG when Jahana Reimi-sama opened the tournament to men.”

“Oh. Sorry,” Naoki said, flushing. “I didn’t...I’m new to VG.”

“Ah.” Sying nodded once. “I understand.” Jet eyes returned to Nijjiro. “As I have stated, I wish to challenge you, li-san.”

Nijjiro had just opened his mouth to accept when he was suddenly and completely seized by utter, ice-cold panic. His bruises. If Sying landed just one hit on his sides, there went his Healing Rain. There was no way he could renew it in a battle. Even if Sying let him, that would be broadcasting his injuries to the world. And if he lost—which he would if Sying hit him at all—then he’d have to strip and show the bruises to the world anyway. He couldn’t do that this close to the nationals. Given just a few more days of continuous Healing Rains, the bruises might start to go down before the nationals. Might. A VG match at this time would ruin that hope—and with it, Nijjiro’s chances of winning the nationals.

But turning Sying down would ruin his reputation forever.

“I...” Nijjiro fought for words, but he had none. “I...um...I...”

“Nijjiro,” Naoki interrupted.

Both Sying and Nijjiro looked at Naoki, confusion showing plainly on their faces.

“Please allow me to challenge you instead, Yen-san,” Naoki said formally.

Sying blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Like I said, I’m new to VG. I’ve only battled three times in my life, and the last was over a month ago. I need practice, and I’d like to show Nijjiro how I fight. It would be a great honor to me if you would fight me.”

Sying gazed at Naoki, sizing him up. Naoki was tall, but his muscle was hidden in the bags of old jeans and overlarge li shirts—his face looked too beautiful to be ferocious, and his shining hair hardly added toughness to his image. Nijjiro held his breath, hoping with all his might.

Finally Sying nodded. “Very well. I will challenge you instead...?”

“VG Senshi Hayami Naoki,” Naoki said, taking his VG card out of his pocket.

“VG Senshi Yen Sying,” Sying said, sliding his own out of the back pocket of his jeans. “May the best man win.”

“Yes,” Naoki said, clicking the corners of his card.

The last few stragglers from the Shuji-versus-Reijiro match were quick to charge back at the promise of another VG match...between another two new VG Senshi! Luck was in the air. Nijiuro, offering up thanks to God that Fuma's jeans were so huge, paused to log a prayer that Naoki would win. If he lost and had to strip—Nijiuro had a feeling that if Naoki never had to strip again in his life, it would be too soon.

Sying leapt over the boundaries into the VG ring with a dancer's agility and began to stretch, rolling every muscle beneath his black muscle-T. Naoki removed his jacket and passed it to Nijiuro without a word, revealing his arms, lean muscles crisscrossed with pearl scars. The crowd roared.

Nijiuro disappeared backwards into people, choosing a spot just next to of a group of drooling girls that had an excellent view of the VG ring without being recorded by the cameras switching on at the traffic lights. Being caught watching this match so soon after the Shuji-Reijiro one...

...might not be such a bad idea. Nijiuro moved forward.

“I will do my best not to injure you,” Sying said kindly.

“Likewise,” Naoki assured him. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

And Sying disappeared.

The crowd practically exploded. This had never been done. Where had he gone? What was he doing? And how the hell had he done it?!

Naoki looked no less confused than the rest of the crowd, but the confusion was wiped from his face when something slammed into his cheek so hard that it sent him flying. He hit the ground hard, and from his new, closer vantage-point, Nijiuro could see blood trickling from Naoki's mouth.

It was like a light suddenly clicked on in Nijiuro's head. Sying had turned himself invisible. How he had done it, Nijiuro had no idea. Presumably by using his chi, but invisibility was supposed to be impossible by any means. Even the top producers of technology—even the Jahana Corporation—had been unable to crack the secret of invisibility.

But that didn't change the fact that something had hit Naoki, and that something could not be seen. It had to be Sying. Invisible.

The same conclusion came to dozens of people in the crowd at almost the same time—and it came to Naoki as well. He got back to his feet, facing away from where he had been struck from, and with sudden, dizzying speed, let out a crushing 360-degree roundhouse.

Something hit the ground with a sound remarkably similar to that made by Naoki when he had fallen, and Sying reappeared out of nowhere, clutching his stomach, where Naoki's kick had presumably landed.

Now the entire crowd understood what had happened. Shouts, screams, and arguments sprang up like wildfire everywhere—in fact, it became impossible to tell what Naoki and Sying were saying to each other. Nijiuro strained, but although he could see their mouths moving, he couldn't hear them.

Then Naoki leapt at Sying. Nijiuro screamed encouragement, but Sying blinked out while Naoki was in midair. Naoki hit the ground and rolled, ending up crouched on the ground, searching frantically for an opponent he could not see.

Something came down on Naoki's back and smashed him down to the floor of the arena. Before Naoki could move, something hit him in the side again, flipping him over onto his back. Sying materialized, in midair, both of his feet heading straight down for Naoki's vulnerable balls.

Naoki snapped his legs apart as far as they could possibly go, wincing at the pain that cramped through his muscles. But Sying landed, missing Naoki by mere centimeters. Naoki scissored his legs around Sying's and tried to knock him over—Sying let himself fall backwards, slapped his palms down behind him, and backflipped, escaping Naoki's scissor-hold.

"Hey!"

Nijihiro snapped out of the near-trance that came over him while he watched VG matches and spun around. His mouth fell open.

The same ripped tank top. The same faded jeans. The same long, pine-green hair. The same black eyes, dark even against his dark skin.

The man who had saved Nijihiro from the punks in the alleyway was standing right behind him.

"It's you!" Nijihiro said with surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Never mind," the young man said hastily. "Just tell me...is Hayami Naoki up there, in that arena?"

Nijihiro opened his mouth, then paused. Something in those black eyes was putting Nijihiro on his guard. Something was...

"Why?" Nijihiro asked slowly.

"I...want to know." Ghosts were haunting the region behind those eyes. "It is, isn't it?"

"Who are you?" Nijihiro demanded.

"Katsura Setsuna," the young man said, barely focusing on Nijihiro now. "Oh, God...it is...but...how did he...?"

"Katsura-san!" Nijihiro said loudly. "How do you know Naoki-kun?!"

With an effort, it seemed, Setsuna dragged his attention back to Nijihiro. Black eyes met (currently) green ones—Setsuna seemed to be debating with himself, and then he turned his eyes back to the arena.

"KATSURA-SAN!!" Nijihiro said even more loudly. "Answer me!"

Setsuna ripped his eyes away again and gave Nijihiro a slow, steady gaze. There was no coldness in his eyes, but nor was there even a smidgen of warmth. It was a dangerous, calculating stare.

"Don't tell him I was here," he said finally.

A sudden yelp from Naoki and a great "Oooh!!" from the crowd snatched Nijihiro's attention back to the VG ring. Sying had slammed Naoki to the ground between his legs, the zipper on his jeans only about an inch away from Naoki's face.

Nijihiro only looked away for a second, but by the time he looked back, Setsuna had disappeared.

Nijihiro could have kicked himself. Again. He, of all people, knew how fast one could disappear into a crowd of this size, especially if one put one's mind to it. Yet he had given Tall, Dark, and Handsome—Setsuna, that is—a sterling chance to get away without answering his questions.

Well, he'd just have to ask Naoki who Setsuna was after the VG match was over. Assuming that Naoki knew who he was. Maybe Setsuna was stalking him, or something.

Then the crowd roared again, and Nijihiro swung his attention back to the VG ring. Sying had had Naoki trapped in his schoolboy pin—but finally, and probably with a great deal of effort, Naoki had managed to flip both himself and Sying, slamming Sying against the ground hard enough that his legs loosened. Naoki slid out and away.

As Sying blinked out again, getting ready to launch his next invisible assault, Naoki tackled the space he had been in. Sying had had time to turn invisible, but none to move—Naoki landed on top of him. For one bizarre second, Naoki was sitting apparently on midair—then Sying flashed back into sight, elbowed

Naoki in the stomach, and pushed forward, slamming him against the ground with Sying lying on top of him.

Naoki brought his legs together, arresting Sying's knee between them as he tried to knee up and hit Naoki in a delicate area. The red-headed VG senshi pushed on Sying's chest, giving himself a split second of breathing space, and wriggled sharply out of the way, so that Sying's shoulders hit the floor. Then Naoki grabbed onto Sying's hip, pulled with all his strength, and slid out from underneath him yet again, ending up on Sying's back, Sying pressed against the ground.

Sying kicked his legs up and managed to hit Naoki in the hollow of his collarbone. Naoki gasped, and loosened his grip—Sying pulled his arms out from underneath Naoki, reached behind his head, and grabbed Naoki by the shoulders of his shirt. Sying pulled, but fell short at pulling himself completely out from under Naoki. Naoki's shirt ripped.

Naoki kned Sying in the side, but Sying moved forward from his pull just as he did so. Naoki's knee hit Sying's hip. Sying released Naoki's shirt with one hand, twisted his waist at an inhuman angle, and brought his elbow down on Naoki's spine. Naoki yelped, and Sying finally made it out from underneath him. There was a long, loud rip, and Naoki's shirt—which Sying had still been holding onto with his other hand—came away with the Chinese senshi.

The crowd went berserk. Naoki tried to push himself up, but Sying got to his feet first—Nijiuro noticed, irrelevantly, that his jeans were taking a beating from all of this tight wriggling, and were sliding rather badly—and kicked him in the side, rolling him painfully chest-up. Not bothering to pull up his jeans, Sying jumped on Naoki's throat, slamming him into another schoolboy pin, this one substantially less decorous considering that his jeans had lost about an inch in cover. More importantly, this time Sying had his legs doubled back, locking Naoki's arms to the ground and eliminating the possibility of Naoki flipping him the way he had done before.

But Sying had reckoned without Naoki's legs, which weren't just there for show. Naoki swung his legs up, got his knees around Sying's neck, and brought them back down, bending Sying over backwards on Naoki's body. Quickly, before Sying could use his own legs, Naoki bent his arms up at the elbows and grabbed Sying's thighs.

Now, however, they seemed to be at an impasse, spread across each other, each one's head trapped by the other's legs. The crowd loved it, especially with Naoki's shirt in ripped ruins on the ground and Sying's jeans slipping precariously down the maroon boxers he was wearing underneath.

Finally, both VG senshi made their move at the same time. Sying twisted his hands into claws and dug them viciously just beneath Naoki's ribs on either side, just as Naoki thrust his hands between Sying's legs and snapped them sharply apart into his inner thighs.

They both reacted at the same time as well. Sying yelped as Naoki forced his legs painfully far apart, releasing Naoki's head—Naoki yelped as Sying's digging fingers made his legs spasm, releasing Sying's as well. Sying collapsed onto Naoki, then rolled swiftly off and tried to get some distance. Naoki, realizing this, rolled over himself and brought his foot down on the nape of Sying's neck.

Sying collapsed.

Naoki got to his feet and shook his hair out of his face. Bare, beautiful chest heaving with exertion, he—and the crowd—looked towards the scoreboard.

BEEP BEEP BLIP BEEP...LEVEL 3

The crowd roared, half with pleasure, half with annoyance. Sure, stripping down to underwear was great and all—but it was Level 1 and 2 victories that got people's adrenaline pumping.

Sying lay on the ring, breathing hard for a while, then managed to get to his feet. Naoki watched him warily, not sure what would happen now.

"An excellent fight," Sying said, smiling slightly. "You were joking about being out of practice, were you not? I should not have fallen for it."

“No, I actually am out of practice,” Naoki admitted. “If I was ever in.”

“In that case, I ask that you warn me when you are in practice,” Sying said, rolling his shoulder muscles painfully. “I will surely receive a Level 1 loss on that occasion.”

“Sorry,” Naoki muttered.

“I am a VG Senshi. I am used to the exposure of my body.” Sying looked out at the crowd and kicked off his shoes. “Tearing off your shirt was an accident. I apologize.” He unbuttoned his pants, letting them slide to the ground on their own, and then gave Naoki a sudden, teasing, unexpected grin. “Although it was highly pleasurable as well.”

Leaving his maroon boxers alone, Sying peeled off his black muscle-T and—

“Nijjiro!!”

Nijjiro jumped with a squeak and almost fell over. Exceedingly familiar arms grabbed him, saving him from ending up supine on the ground, and instead sent him stumbling into the back of a man in front of him. The man turned around and snarled at Nijjiro.

Jin pulled Nijjiro up and told the man where to stick it. Looking huffy, the man returned his attention to the VG match.

“Jin!” Nijjiro said in a very small scream. “What are you doing here?!”

“I was worried about you,” Jin snapped.

Nijjiro felt something warm in his stomach, but whatever it was, it lit his temper as well. “I told you—”

“Shut up,” Jin said. “Look, I realized something. You said you didn’t WANT me to worry about you. Not that you didn’t NEED me to.”

Nijjiro had to pause a second to remember when he had said anything of the sort. Then he did, and he felt ready to smack Jin for splitting hairs. “I don’t NEED you to either!”

“I think you do,” Jin said.

He grabbed Nijjiro and pulled him close enough to stare into his eyes. Nijjiro went frantically red, remembering what Shuji had done at this same distance, but Jin did just exactly what he was at a distance for—stare into Nijjiro’s eyes.

“Your eyes are blue, turning gold around the edges,” Jin said. “And it’s dark blue. You’re scared of something, Nijjiro. I could’ve told that even without checking your eyes.”

“That’s my business,” Nijjiro snarled, shoving Jin away from him and stomping on that insidious little voice that was trying to whisper advice to him. “Certainly none of yours.”

“NIJI—” Jin only just toned his roar down at the last second. Many curious eyes turned his way regardless. “Did it even occur to you maybe I want it to be my business?!”

“We don’t always get what we want.”

“Don’t give me clichéd crap like that. You gotta have realized...” He stopped, gulped, then shot out the next words like a bullet. “You gotta have realized why I keep following you, by now.”

“Because you’re trying to get revenge, you immature little—”

Nijjiro’s voice died in his throat. He was looking at Jin’s eyes, dark brown, fixated unblinking and unmoving upon his—Nijjiro’s—face, and just as suddenly as he had realized that Sying was invisible, he realized the real reason Jin kept following him. Nijjiro hid underneath a smokescreen of tricks and jokes—Jin hid in a shell of anger and pretended revenge. But what they were hiding was exactly the same thing.

Nijjiro shook his head. “No. You’re playing with me. You’re trying to—to—”

Jin’s face froze. “What?!”

“You can’t—”

“Nijjiro, I thought you hated me, and you only hated me, and if you hated me I knew I had no chance, so I pretended that I didn’t want a chance at all,” Jin said in a rush. “I was mean, I was obnoxious, I was everything I thought would push us apart and keep you away. But rivalry just made us stay together

more often, even if it was just to try and prove which of us was the stronger. I thought, well, now he's gotta hate me; I've become everything he hates, to him. But when you look at me and your eyes go gold, I have to wonder if they're going gold for the same reason they go gold when you look at Yano Tsuyosa. And then I think about it, and I realize it doesn't matter if they are or not. I'm through playing, I'm through hiding, and I'm through lying. I—"

Time seemed to freeze.

The two words Jin was about to speak burned through Nijiro like a comet. For one glorious, euphoric moment, Nijiro wanted to hear those words—wanted them more than food, more than water, more than air. He knew what Jin was about to say. He knew it. He wanted it. He needed it. The simple knowledge of the words buoyed him up through the clouds, far away, out into the stars—a galaxy, a whole galaxy, a galaxy of people and places and things and Jin had chosen him. Nijiro.

Needed.

The stars around Nijiro plunged into darkness, and through Nijiro burned a brighter comet, a comet which seared through every inch of Nijiro with a numb, chilling fire. His feelings for Setsuna when he had been saved by him in the alley. His feelings for Naoki in the Ariyake Coliseum. His feelings just now, when Shuji had kissed him. His feelings for Jin, when he had had him writhing beneath his fingers.

All the same.

Dirty.

Sick.

Damned.

Evil.

Gay.

"NOOOO!!!"

Time shattered back into reality like falling glass. Nijiro only realized he had screamed aloud when he saw Jin stop, an "I" just falling from his lips.

"Stop it!" Nijiro screamed. "You don't—you can't—I don't want to hear it! Don't burden me with your feelings!"

Jin's face blazed red. "Burden you?!"

Every fiber of Nijiro's body shrieked at once, an attempt, a vain attempt to stop the words falling out into the empty air like slashing knives. "I'm in love. I'm already in love. I don't want—"

"With Yano Tsuyosa!!" Jin erupted. "Don't you dare try to push me away because of a man who doesn't even know you—"

"No! I...I have a boyfriend!!"

People were staring now, distracted even from the post-VG stripping by Nijiro's voice, but Nijiro didn't—couldn't—see them. All he saw was Jin's face, every drop of blood draining away from it, until he looked like a corpse.

"You don't," Jin said softly.

It wasn't a statement. It wasn't even a question. It was the pleading of a boy who is seeing his future fall to his feet in pieces, the pleading that begs for someone to tell him that it's not true, that it's all some terrible mistake and that that future is still hanging there, full and bright as the moon...

"Oh, yes I do," Nijiro said coldly, coldly because his body had frozen, and if it hadn't he would have fallen to pieces as well, just like the future he knew had his image even now. "Just wait til tomorrow and you'll hear all about it."

"You can't," Jin said. "You can't have—you're gonna fake it, as soon as I leave. By tomorrow."

His voice was so calm.

"Oh, I am, am I?" Nijiro said, even more coldly, to crystallize the tears trying to fill his eyes. "I'm not going out with Fujisaki Shuji, then? I'm just going to fake watching his first VG match ten minutes ago?"

I'm going to put my image in all the footage of the match, watching him, going up to him afterwards..."

"You can't," Jin repeated, and now there was a catch in his voice. "I would have known it if you were going out with—"

Something in Nijiuro snapped.

"You didn't even know I joined VG until a month afterwards!" Nijiuro screamed. "You don't know anything about me!! Just because I played pranks on you in elementary school you think you know me?! I hate you! Why don't you know that, huh?! And you—you—love me?! You're—you're—" Nijiuro felt the words sever his heart as surely as he knew they severed Jin's, "—disgusting!!!"

Jin's face lost every trace of color it had as these words struck him like lightning. Then he boiled suddenly red, the angry, searing red of lava.

"F*** you, then!!!" Jin yelled at the top of his lungs, his voice breaking.

Jin whirled around and blindly shoved his chi ahead of him. A golden tornado exploded up, knocking people violently out of the way—Jin ran through it as if it wasn't there, and disappeared.

* * *

Naoki found Nijiuro after most of the crowd had drained away, after Sying's strip-tease was over and the few people curious about the row between the two VG senshi in the crowd had left. He came jogging up, wearing his ripped shirt as best he could, although it had been torn through the entire right side and was only barely better than nothing.

"Hey, Nijiuro!" Naoki called. "I won! Can you believe it?! How'd you like it, huh? Was I any good?"

Nijiuro didn't answer. Couldn't answer.

"How much of it did you see?" Naoki inquired. "I saw that Jin showed up again, but I don't know when. You guys started shouting pretty loudly. What did he say?"

It was all he could do just to keep breathing.

"Are you okay?" Naoki asked, proud happiness fading from his face, to be replaced by puzzled concern. "What did he say to you?"

Maybe he should stop. Breathing, that is. It couldn't feel any worse than he did now.

Naoki's face was turning stormy. "Did he insult you? Call you something? Did he challenge you to VG again?"

"Naoki," Nijiuro said, because he had to say something. "Who's Katsura Setsuna?"

Naoki's reaction was beyond what even Nijiuro had expected. He physically recoiled a step from Nijiuro, heaving a deep, painful, sudden breath like that of a dying man. Like the breath Nijiuro had taken after he had screamed no.

"Katsura what?"

"Setsuna."

Naoki stared at Nijiuro, then suddenly, uncontrollably it seemed, shivered. "Why do you—how do you—"

"He was here," Nijiuro said. "Just now."

Naoki stared at Nijiuro, and Nijiuro couldn't keep his mind on himself and Jin. Later he would have to think about it, have to come to grips with what he had just done, but later—not now. Naoki looked just as bad as he had when he had come face-to-face with Tsuyosa in the Ariyake Coliseum.

"Naoki, who is he?" Nijiuro asked. "He helped me out against a bunch of morons in an alley the day I met you."

"No," Naoki whispered.

"He knows you," Nijiuro continued inexorably. "I know he knows you. He was watching your match like

nothing else in the world mattered...”

“No!” Naoki whispered.

“Did he go to Cream as well?” Nijiuro demanded. “Is-”

“No!!” Naoki broke in desperately. “He never went there! I never saw him there! He—he—” Naoki sucked in air with desperate need. “Nijiuro, if you ever see him again, don’t talk to him. Don’t have anything to do with him. Don’t talk, don’t listen, and definitely don’t become friends with him. S—Se—he’s dangerous!”

It did not escape even Nijiuro’s notice that Naoki couldn’t seem to bring himself to say Setsuna’s name.

“But who is he?” Nijiuro asked.

For a long time, Naoki didn’t say anything. Nijiuro stared at him, wondering if maybe he had pushed too far. Whoever Setsuna was, he wasn’t somebody Naoki remembered with any fondness. Could he be—but no—

“Come on,” Naoki said finally, his voice harsh as a crow’s. “It’s getting late.”

Nijiuro realized then that he had definitely pushed too far. He bowed his head, letting pacific-blue streams fall around his face, and silently fell in step beside Naoki, heading back along the sidewalk towards the li house.

* * *

That Same Evening, in a hotel not far from Ariyake Coliseum...

Kasumi fell back onto the bed with a sigh of pure relief and happiness. “Whew! For a minute there, I thought we were gonna be found out!”

“The Master got me into VG twelve years ago,” Chiho said. “I somehow doubt he would have problems making us fake VG cards this time around.”

The older ninja was searching the room methodically, examining every nook and cranny, while her young cousin remained supine upon the bed.

“Why did he make us cards, instead of just signing us up?” Kasumi asked, studying the ceiling, which had a crack in it that looked just like her old goldfish.

“They’re not just VG cards, you know,” Chiho said, shoving the bedside table away from the wall to check behind it. “They’re also communicators, so we can always contact the Master or each other; cameras, in case we find any evidence that’s not easily stealable; decoders, if we run into electronically locked doors; voice recorders, if we need them; and a miniature word program, so we can take notes on them as well. And look at yours closely.”

Already amazed, Kasumi sat up, dragged her “VG card” out of her pocket, and stared at it with the intensity of a laser beam. “...What am I looking for?”

Chiho sighed and moved the table back into place. “How reflective it is. It can double as a mirror. And it’s made out of titanium, not plastic and silicon like most VG cards, so it’s extremely durable. Not that you’d want to try and stop a shuriken with it, of course.”

“Wow,” Kasumi breathed. “That’s amazing! All that, in one little card!”

“That’s including all the stuff normal VG cards have, like the pulse emitter and the long-distance alarm system.” Chiho got up on her own bed and began tapping the ceiling. “And of course, the Master had to make sure that all of our information was programmed into them just the way it would be by the Jahana Corporation, including all the stats for our nonexistent restaurant, and firewall it exactly the same. While making sure that none of the extra features could be picked up by the VG computers.”

“Cool,” Kasumi breathed. Then she noticed Chiho’s business with the ceiling. “What are you doing?”

“Checking to make sure there aren’t any bugs or anything here,” Chiho replied.

“Bugs? So what if there are? Just stomp on `em.”

“Bugs, as in, mechanical listening devices,” Chiho clarified.

“Oh.” Kasumi pondered that. “Why would there be bugs in a hotel room?”

“Not a hotel room,” Chiho said. “Our hotel room. If anybody has a suspicion of what we’re doing and plants a bug here, it could mean the end of our cover.”

“Oh.” Kasumi pondered that as well. “Does anybody?”

“I doubt it.” Chiho fell into a sitting position on her bed with a whoosh. “But I’m checking anyways.”

“I see.” Kasumi’s eyes glittered with zealous idolization. “Chiho-san, you’re so cool!”

Chiho stared at Kasumi, one eyebrow raised. “Uh-huh. Let’s just get ready for bed. We’ve got three VG matches to win before the week’s out if we want to make it into the nationals.”

* * *

Still that same evening, on the li’s street...

Naoki and Nijiuro hadn’t spoken to each other the entire walk back to the li’s house. The confrontation with Jin and the mystery of Setsuna hung between the two of them like a veil of ice-linked snowflakes, preventing anything that might possibly have sprouted into a conversation from coming from either one of them.

In the time it had taken them to reach the li’s street, the sun—perhaps chilled by the wintry wall that had sprung up between them—had hurried its way down behind the horizon. All about them, lights clicked on in houses, throwing the two boys’ separate shadows across the street and sidewalk. The light danced around the shadows, trying to entice them to dance, to play, to warm up even a bit—but their shadows were dark with the cold between them, and refused to play the light’s game.

The li house didn’t look any different from any of the other houses on the street—well, except for the rustling fake-dead grass, and the incomplete periwinkle paint, and the garden of pinwheels still resolutely tickety-tickety-ticketying away beneath Nijiuro’s window. But even aside from all that, there was now something different about it.

Something that came in the air, floating on the breeze like a fragrant rope.

The scent of blueberries and batter.

Nijiuro froze as that unique, special scent brushed his nose. It could mean only one thing—one person.

Naoki nearly jumped out of his skin as Nijiuro broke into a rocketing run, screaming at the top of his lungs. The rainbow-haired boy flung open the front door, and the aroma of blueberry hit him full in the face like a hammer. Not even bothering to take off his shoes, Nijiuro raced through the living room into the kitchen.

“KAEDE-OBA!!!!!!!!!!” Nijiuro shrieked.

Everybody was in the kitchen, squashed together like anchovies in a can. Himeko was over in the corner, trying unsuccessfully to hide happiness behind her usual witchly expression. Chihiro was there, clad in her black nightgown, actually willingly inside the building instead of out on the roof recording the stars. There, letsuna, wearing a closed shirt for once in his life; Hikaru, slashing the air madly with a spatula; Maki, actually looking happy. And in front of the stove, carefully and delicately flipping mounds upon mounds of sweet-scented blueberry pancakes—her specialty and favorite, the food which was only made when she was home from the hospital—was Nijiuro’s Aunt Kaede.

Kaede was Kaoru’s twin sister, and you could tell. They shared the same heart-shaped face, the same long, beautiful fingers, the same enviable slimness that had never yet departed from them. But Kaede was frailer than Kaoru, her bones painfully visible beneath her skin, her complexion so white as to be nearly transparent, her hair prematurely grey and fine as a bird’s feathers. Kaede had been born very sick, with both anemia and multiple sclerosis—although her sclerosis was mild, and in all forty-two years of her life had not advanced much, her anemia was severe, and the combination of the two

conspired to keep her in a dangerously ill state that made it unsafe for her to be home for too long at a time. Even a simple flu could be dangerous for Kaede. And yet, she never spent any more time at the hospital than she could get out of—despite the danger, she preferred to be home, where she could see all of her nieces and nephews and listen to their stories and make them blueberry pancakes.

Kaede turned to Nijiro with a fragile smile as bright as a Christmas tree.

“Nijiro-kun! My champion VG Senshi! How are you?”

“I’m...” Nijiro twinged, both from his bruises and from guilt at lying, but thrust both twinges aside and hugged Kaede carefully. “...fine! How’re you?”

“Over the dratted pneumonia, at last,” Kaede said, squeezing Nijiro with all the strength of her glass-like arms. “Oh, Nijiro...let me look at you! I didn’t see you last time...you couldn’t visit, you were sick...”

“I know,” Nijiro said, feeling the ice in his heart submerge beneath the warmth of Kaede’s love as she studied every detail of him, his long rainbow hair, his eyes—at their brightest, glowing brown—his slender body, loving it all unconditionally.

“But you haven’t seen who else is here!” Kaede added, patting Nijiro’s shoulder and pointing into the mass of lis. “Look!”

Nijiro looked—and screamed again, even louder. A tall, handsome young man—not as tall as Fuma, but still at least two heads taller than Nijiro—was standing next to Ayaka, who was, after all, his mother as well.

“AshootE!!!!” Nijiro flew at his brother and jumped, grabbing him around the neck. “You’re here!! What are you doing here?! You’re at college!!”

“I’m on vacation,” Ashotei said, far too used to Nijiro’s exuberant and rather violent greetings to even stumble beneath his onslaught. “We get the next week off, because of the VG tournament, so I took time off work and drove back to watch you.”

“Me?” Nijiro squeaked, really and honestly surprised. “That far, just because of me?”

“Of course!” Ashotei put his arms around Nijiro and squeezed as hard as he could. “I have to watch my little brother win us ten million dollars, don’t I?”

“OW!” Nijiro yelped.

“Oh, sorry!” Ashotei let go, looking ashamed. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Don’t...worry about it,” Nijiro gasped, letting go of Ashotei, feeling dizzy from a thousand little arrows of pain shooting through his ribs. Healing Rain...gotta get away and re-Rain myself...

“And Nijiro!” Ayaka interrupted, bursting with motherly pride, waving a wooden spoon like a flag. “Oh, Nijiro! Ashotei has a girlfriend now!”

Nijiro forgot the pain. “You do?”

“Mom,” Ashotei muttered, his ears going red. “It’s not that big of a deal...”

“What on earth do you mean?!” Ayaka demanded, smacking Ashotei’s arm with her spoon. “It’s marvelous news! Simply marvelous! Tell Nijiro her name.” Ayaka whirled on Nijiro before Ashotei could say anything. “Her name is Tatsumiya Fujiko, and she’s a chemistry major! She’s in Ashotei’s calculus class—she’s nothing short of brilliant—and—”

“Mom, she’s Ashotei’s girlfriend!” Yuna broke in. “Let him tell Nijiro about her!”

“Oh?” Ashotei was looking at the door, his ears still red, but returning to normal. “Who’s he?”

Naoki was standing in the kitchen doorway, blushing uncomfortably down most of his still-bare chest. He had his ripped shirt wrapped around himself as best he could, but it wasn’t helping much. Looking at him, Nijiro felt again guilty, this time for leaving Naoki completely in the dark in the excitement of knowing Kaede was back.

“Oh, um,” Nijiro said, dragging his brother forward through the crowd towards his friend. “Ashotei, Kaede-oba, this is Hayami Naoki-kun.”

“Naoki-kun?” Kaede left her pancakes and made her way over to Naoki, clutching the counters for support. She studied him with clear brown eyes. “Are you, by chance, Nijihiro’s boyfriend?”

“No,” Naoki said.

“I see.” Kaede chuckled. “I expect you’re tired of hearing that by now.”

“Um...” Naoki hedged.

“I’m sure Nijihiro will have a boyfriend soon, though,” Kaede went on, much to Nijihiro’s chagrin. “Perhaps that one nice boy you were spending so much time with—Jin, wasn’t it?”

Any reply Nijihiro could have made to this—and there weren’t many he thought he could have said with a normal face—was interrupted by Kaoru, Maki, Ashootei, Yue, Daisuke, Eichi, Shirai, Haruna, Hikaru, Ietsuna, Fuma, Shiho, Yuna, Hiroji, Kaii, Azumamaro, and even Ayaka all letting out a great “HA!” of laughter.

“Nice boy?!” Maki hooted, although whether she was laughing at Jin being called nice or the idea that any boy could be nice wasn’t clear.

“He was a raving lunatic and an idiot to boot!” Shiho said succinctly.

“I threw rocks at him when he was hanging around to ambush Nijihiro last week!” Haruna volunteered.

“He hates Nijihiro!” Ietsuna added.

And Ayaka, who was usually a very kind, sweet woman, added with uncharacteristic vehemence, “He tried to come over here and fight poor Nijihiro in second grade! I laid him out flat with a frying pan for even thinking of it!”

“Oh, yeah,” Yuna said. “That was funny.”

“Don’t forget just a few days ago, when he tried to challenge Nijihiro to VG and Chihiro killed him!” Yue put in.

“Yum,” Chihiro said.

“That Jin-boy is in VG now?” Kaede asked.

“Yes,” said most of the list at once—all, in fact, except Ashootei and Nijihiro.

“And Naoki-kun is as well,” Hikaru said. “Is that why your shirt’s all ripped, Naoki-kun? You didn’t lose, did you?”

“Yeah, I VG-ed, but no, I didn’t lose,” Naoki said, looking awkward. “It ripped, in the fight.”

“Ah,” Hikaru said wisely, nodding her head as though she attended to hundreds of VG Senshi with shirts ripped from winning every day. “I can sew it up for you.”

Hiroji and Shiho both blanched.

“Who would like pancakes?” Kaede intervened.

“Ooh, pancakes!” Hikaru exclaimed, completely forgetting about sewing up Naoki’s shirt, charging to the stove with spatula waving. Hiroji and Shiho both sighed with relief.

“Last time Hikaru sewed something up,” Shiho muttered to Naoki, “she managed to sew two of Niou’s fingers and three of her own to it. We had to take them to the hospital.”

“She made Niou hold it while she sewed,” Hiroji explained. He shivered. “Hikaru and needles just should not mix.”

“C’mon, I’ll get you another one of Fuma’s shirts,” Shiho said, reaching for the shirt. “I’ll fix this—”

Hiroji knocked Shiho’s hands away. “I’ll fix it!”

Shiho stared at Hiroji, then shrugged. “All right, fine. You fix it then. I’m not so hard up for sewing jobs that I need another one. Zuma-kun—Azumamaro—ripped his jeans at the knees yesterday,” she added to Naoki. “Again. C’mon, Naoki-kun.”

Nijihiro saw Naoki, Shiho, and Hiroji leave the kitchen, and despite his hunger for blueberry pancakes, he saw his chance for a Rain.

“Sorry, Ashu,” Nijihiro said, using Ashootei’s nickname, “but I’m gonna help Shiho and Naoki-kun...”

“With what?” Ashootei asked.

“Shirt problems,” Nijihiro said, ducking away, through clamor and chaos, to and out the door.

However, Nijihiro had made one fatal assumption—that Hiroji was leaving the room in order to follow Shiho and Naoki. Meaning that when Nijihiro slipped into the room he, Shiho, Hiroji, and Haruna shared, expecting to be able to quickly pull off a Healing Rain and then return to the pancakes, he was scared by Hiroji almost as much as he scared Hiroji.

Both boys only barely stifled screams. “Hiroji!!”

“Nijihiro!!”

“What are you doing here?!”

“What are you doing here?!”

“I asked first!”

“I was here first!”

Nijihiro was about to pull the older-sibling-and-therefore-one-who-calls-the-shots card on Hiroji when he noticed something, something so uncharacteristic of his brother/ sister/ sibling that he completely lost track of the argument. “Hiroji...Hiroji, are you crying?”

“NO!!” Hiroji expostulated, and scrubbed his sleeve over his eyes. “I...something flew into my eye!”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve never heard that one before. Come on, Hiro-chan, seriously! What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” Hiroji muttered. “Nothing. Nothing.”

Casting bruises and caution to the winds, Nijihiro flung his arms around his brother’s shoulders. “Yes it is. I’m your brother. Your gay brother. I can tell.”

Hiroji let his head fall onto Nijihiro’s chest, but the rest of him remained distant, rigid, upright. Cold.

Cold as though he had just been frozen, because if he hadn’t he would have fallen to pieces.

The knowledge of common loss struck Nijihiro’s heart. “Hiro...oh, God, Hiro. You’re in love, aren’t you.”

It wasn’t a question, and Hiroji knew it wasn’t. He dissolved into Nijihiro’s embrace, letting tears come—bitter, hopeless tears. The tears of somebody who has realized that their love has no future.

“Oh, Hiro-chan,” Nijihiro whispered, stroking Hiroji’s long brown tresses. “Hiro-chan...Hiro-chan, who is it?”

“He’s gay too, isn’t he?” Hiroji sobbed into Nijihiro’s shirt.

“What? Who?” But Nijihiro had a sinking suspicion that he already knew who.

“Hayami Naoki-kun.” Hiroji’s breath caught in the middle of his name. “He is, isn’t he?”

“I...”

“I know he is. I knew he was when you walked in the door with him. I thought, ‘Wow, he’s so beautiful...but he’s gotta be gay, oh well.’ But I got to...talking to him...and I...he’s so...nice. Why is he so nice? He makes me feel like a woman, like a real woman, like Shiho or Chihiro or Kaede-oba, in body, not just in spirit. Like when he’s there, I just know that I am a woman, except I’m not. I’m not.”

“Hiro...” Nijihiro started, not sure what to say, but Hiroji was still talking, words destroyed by sobs.

“Isn’t it easier that way? Shouldn’t it be easier that way? Wouldn’t you think...but it’s not, it’s worse, because Nijihiro...” Hiroji pulled back to look into Nijihiro’s eyes, his own flooded with tears. “I can’t be a man. Do you see it? He wants a man, he needs one, and I can’t be one for him. I can’t...I don’t know how I’ve even stayed this way for thirteen years...this isn’t me, Nijihiro, it’s not—”

Without finishing his sentence, Hiroji suddenly clawed blindly at his arms, his chest, his face, scouring bloody trails across his skin.

“I can’t stand this!” Hiroji cried, blood and tears mixing on his face to pour redness down his cheeks.

“I can’t be like this anymore! I want to die—I am dying—I can feel this body dying all around me...!!”

“HIROJI!!” Nijihiro screamed, neither knowing nor caring if anybody heard him. “Hiroji, stop it!!”

Hiroji stopped, his arms falling limply to his sides, nails stained red. Suddenly he looked small and desolate and lost, a little girl lost in a desert which was flaying the skin from her bones. Bloodied tears rolled down his face and stained the white front of his dress.

For Nijihiro's part, he wasn't sure what to do or say, except he had to do something, before Hiroji began to tear at his skin again. Never in all Nijihiro's life had he seen Hiroji lose control so badly. Hiroji was always bright, cheerful, happy-go-lucky and just a little bit flirty. He wanted to be a girl, he crossdressed as a girl, but he was always Hiroji, and just fine with it. This wild, terrible, intense loathing of the body he had had the misfortune to be born in was...was...Nijihiro had never realized the depth of Hiroji's hatred for himself.

"Nijihiro," Hiroji whispered, heartache echoing in every syllable. "Do you know what it's like to know that you can't let yourself love him? Maybe not Naoki, but any other him? Because you know you can't be what he needs?"

Jin's face, every drop of blood draining away from it until he looked like a corpse.

"Yes," Nijihiro said dully. "Oh yes. I know what it's like."

Almost together, both siblings drew in a shaking breath.

"I couldn't tell him," Hiroji said. "I can't tell him."

"Believe me, I know."

"You can't tell him."

"I'll die first," Nijihiro said vehemently.

"Nobody," Hiroji whispered, seizing Nijihiro's arm with his bloody fingers. "You can't tell anybody."

"I won't." An insane boldness came out in Nijihiro. "And you can't tell anybody that I'm...that I feel that way...about Jin."

Hiroji's mouth fell open.

"Jin?" he gasped. "Suzuki Jin? The Jin you hate? The Jin I beat up in third grade?!"

"Shhh!" Nijihiro grabbed Hiroji's hands. "Quiet!"

"I can't believe it!" Hiroji whispered. "That Jin?!"

"I..." Nijihiro blushed furiously. "Yes. That Jin."

"Really?! But...what's...why can't you tell him?"

Nijihiro looked at Hiroji's face—a last few blood-soaked tears streaking his cheeks, his eyes so clear and sad and curious and pure—and felt tears coming to his own eyes.

"Hiroji," Nijihiro said brokenly, "he—everybody—thinks I'm so pure, so innocent, so untainted by the stuff other people do. He thinks I'm pure, I know he does, I can see it when I look at him, and Hiro-chan, I'm not. I think so many things that...I love Jin, I know I do, and I still...Naoki, he...Hiro-chan, I like Naoki so much, as a friend, and I don't want to do anything to hurt him any worse than he's been hurt already, but I look at him and—"

"Nijihiro, you're the best person I know," Hiroji said fiercely. "And Naoki's so hot, you wouldn't be normal if you didn't—"

"But it's not just Naoki," Nijihiro whispered wretchedly. "It's anybody. It can just be somebody I'm walking past in the street—and I want them, without even knowing them at all, not knowing a thing about them except—" Nijihiro shook his head again, harder this time. "What am I doing? This is about you...Hiro-chan..."

Hiroji hugged Nijihiro, pressing his wet cheek against the side of Nijihiro's neck, where he used to fall asleep when he was little. "Oh, God...Nijihiro, our family is so screwed up..."

Nijihiro managed a short, humorless laugh. "Don't I know it."

"Look at the bright side," Hiroji murmured. "When we're all dead and damned and thrown in Hell, we'll be able to throw the biggest literally God-damned party Hell has ever seen."

Nijihiro involuntarily laughed. "Shiho and Fuma locked to each other in one corner, Mom and Natsumi

kicking all the cooks out of Hell's Kitchen so Kaede-oba can make blueberry pancakes..."

"Chihiro throwing a fit because she can't see the stars," Hiroji added. "I bet Satan'd cut a hole in the top of Hell just for her."

"Satan? Psh. Chihiro'll scare the Hell out of him. She'll become Satan herself and use him as a dishwasher."

"And you'll be there with Jin, and it won't matter how dirty you are, or think you are, because it'll be HELL!"

Nijihiro let out a sobbing laugh. "And by that time, Hiroji, you'll be a girl. I promise. Even if I have to VG every year for the rest of my life."

"You really hate it, don't you?" Hiroji asked quietly.

Taken aback, Nijihiro quickly shook his head—but not quickly enough.

"You do," Hiroji said, still very quietly, and he snuggled down closer against Nijihiro. "I know you do."

Hiroji's knee dug into Nijihiro's side.

Nijihiro jumped and yelped. Hiroji, startled, let go of Nijihiro.

"Ni...? What...the...?"

Before Nijihiro could move away, before he could stop him, Hiroji grabbed the hem of his older brother's shirt and flipped it up. Nijihiro slammed it down, but as with his headshake, he was too slow. The lurid black of bruises shone dully like the backs of swarming cockroaches, for the split second before Nijihiro had it covered with fabric again.

"What...was...that?!" Hiroji exploded.

"Nothing!"

"Oh yeah, and I've never heard that one before. That's why you've been wincing so much lately! That's why...that's...Nijihiro, when did this happen?! We would have seen the match if it was VG!"

"It didn't...it's not..."

"Somebody didn't..." The light of battle was gleaming in Hiroji's eye now. "Somebody didn't beat you up for being gay, did they?!"

"No! Not because—" And just as the words left his mouth, Nijihiro realized what he had said and could have kicked himself.

"So somebody DID beat you up!!" Hiroji exploded. "Who was it? When was it? God, Nijihiro, why didn't you tell us about it?! I know Mom would've—"

"NO!!" Nijihiro jumped up, ready to grab his brother if he tried to leave the room. "Hiroji, you can't tell ANYBODY!! Anybody at all! Please! They won't want me to VG, and I have to, for all of us! I've gotta win this, or else Kaede-oba...Kaede-oba..."

Nijihiro struggled against the hateful truth, and looking at him, Hiroji fell silent.

"Kaede-oba will die if you don't win VG, won't she?" Hiroji said finally, in a strange voice quite unlike his own.

Nijihiro let out his breath in a long, shaking, nodding sigh, even as his mind soundly berated him. Kaede's fragile and breaking life was a topic not usually discussed with the younger lis—in fact, aside from Nijihiro, the only ones who knew about it were Ashootei, Maki, Fuma, Shiho, and Shirai. Hiroji was only thirteen, too young to know that his favorite aunt was walking the knife's edge along death, and too inundated by the disaster of his traitorous body to have to deal with such knowledge. But at the same time...

"She's much worse than Mom and Kaoru-oba tell us, isn't she?" Hiroji said, still in that same, strange voice.

"Oh yes," Nijihiro said quietly.

"And you have to compete for her, don't you?"

"Yes."

Hiroji paused, then remarked almost inaudibly, "She's much worse off than either one of us, isn't she?"

Nijiuro let out a breath like knives in his lungs. "Yes."

7 - The Relationships of the Gods, Part Three

The Relationships of the Gods, Part Three

~~*~*~*~

Even over the hustle and bustle of the li kitchen as everybody entered a vast free-for-all for Kaede's pancakes—she was flipping them off her griddle with neither hurry nor any particular aim; more than one almost ended up on the floor—the sudden squall from upstairs was audible.

Kaoru, who had just seized a hard-won pancake from between Maki and Haruna (which might have seemed cruel except Maki already had one and Haruna had somehow taken control of three,) let out a half-sigh, half-laugh. “That Sakura of mine. She knows we're having pancakes without her.”

“I'd be angry too,” Kaii said, getting shoved aside by Maki even as he spoke.

“HONEY!!!” Kaoru screeched over Maki and Kaii's heads. “GET ME PANCAKES!!!”

Daisuke, her husband, gave her the thumbs-up. Kaoru thumbs-upped him back, shoved her entire pancake in her mouth at once, and headed purposefully for the door to go to her daughter.

Niou got out of her way, feeling worried. It was not a usual feeling for Niou, so he was struggling with it. As a general rule, Niou didn't worry.

Niou wasn't a very introspective kind of person. As evinced by the terrible sewing incident with Hikaru, Niou acted first and thought later—or, more preferably, never. Being surrounded by a host of domineering people, Niou was used to following the lead of the more intelligent, more talented, or more experienced rather than acting on his own—and did so with gusto. It therefore rarely fell upon him to worry. But he was worrying now.

There was nothing for it. He would have to forgo Kaede-oba's divine pancakes as well. For a nine-year-old, this was a crushing blow, but Niou took heart from the fact that Nijiuro had left the kitchen without any either and hadn't died. Yet.

Niou tramped his way through the other lis until he reached Hikaru, who was serving, cutting, syruling, and eating her pancakes all with her spatula. Syrup was bedecking her hair and ornamenting her ears in large amber droplets. (Niou didn't ask. He had learned a long time ago that it wasn't safe to.)

“Let's go outside and help Haru,” Niou called to Hikaru.

Hikaru's eyes lit up at the word “help.”

“Okay!” she said eagerly, and, now sawing away at her syrup-sopping pancakes with the spatula, she followed Niou to and out the back door.

* * *

Haru was standing out in the backyard beneath the moon, throwing torn-off bits of pancake to the owl.

The owl was sitting on the fence, catching the pancake in its large, vicious-looking beak, shuffling on first one foot and then the other, watching Haru with first one eye and then the other. It wasn't a particularly large owl, but it was there and wild and somewhat dangerous-looking, and Niou was rather leery of it.

Not so with Hikaru, of course.

“Ooh, look at the owl!” she exclaimed, and would have marched right up to it (to...what? Pet it?) had Haru not turned right around and given her a look that clearly said, Take another step and die.

Hikaru stamped her foot, but at least she stopped walking towards the owl. “No fair, Haru-kun! I came out to help!”

A large dollop of syrup dripped off her ear and fell messily to the ground.

The owl eyed Hikaru with bemusement and rather too much curiosity. Niou decided to say what he had to say, and quickly.

“Haru, Hikaru, don’t you think something weird’s going on?”

“Hikaru’s weird,” Haru said.

Hikaru stamped her foot again. “Meanie! I am not! I’m trying to help!” She shoved half a pancake in her mouth using her spatula.

“No, not that,” Niou said hastily, because he knew from experience that Haru was sarcastic and Hikaru was excitable, and when Haru started insulting Hikaru then she started getting violent.

“Everybody else.”

“You have to be more specific than that,” Haru said, flipping pancake crumbs at the owl.

“Well, like…” Niou racked his brain. “Nii-san. He’s not acting…normal.”

Niou usually referred to Nijiuro as Nii-san—a pun off his name and the word for “big brother,” even if Nijiuro wasn’t his brother at all.

“I hate to tell you this, Niou, but Nijiuro never acts normal.” Haru made more of his pancake into an offering which was quickly accepted and squirreled away by the owl.

“Well,” Niou blustered, “he’s acting sad and worried and not energetic like he usually does.”

“It’s the VG tournament,” Hikaru said sagely. “He wants to win.”

“But Mom and Dad and Kaoru-oba and Daisuke-oji and Ayaka-oba—they’re all sad and worried too.”

“Maybe they’re worried about the tournament too,” Haru said.

“Well, I guess they could be,” Niou said, feeling that this conversation wasn’t going too well. “But… I just don’t think they are.”

“Why not?” Haru demanded, hurling pancake at the owl. “It makes sense to me.”

“Me too,” Hikaru chipped in, licking her spatula. “I concur with Haru-kun!”

Niou made a mental note—next time he needed backup, he would not go to Hikaru.

“But don’t you think that there’s something weirder and deeper going on?” Niou attempted.

“Niou, no offense, but you don’t think much,” Haru said, which was the cruel if honest truth.

“HEY!”

“I don’t believe you came up with this yourself,” Haru continued, seemingly deaf to his twin brother’s outburst. “Who was it who said something was wrong with Nijiuro? If it was Hiroji, Zuma, or Kaii, you might as well save your breath—and if it was Maki or Yue, trust me, they were just pulling your leg.”

“Nobody told me anything!” Niou said angrily, although he was blushing. “I just feel it, is all! I know something’s wrong!”

“I don’t trust your danger sense, Niou, considering you let her sew your fingers to Shiho’s skirt,” Haru said, throwing the last of his pancake to the owl and brushing crumbs off his fingers.

Hikaru went purple. The only way to truly insult Hikaru was to criticize one of her helping attempts—so naturally Haru did that all the time.

“I RESENT THAT REMARK, YOU BIG FAT MEANIE!!” Hikaru roared, and with aim much better than Aunt Kaede’s she scooped up the syrupy remains of her pancake with her spatula and flung it like a catapult.

SPLATTER!!

Haru was struck dumb with shock as squelchy syrupy blueberry pancake exploded against the side of his head, spraying streamers of mixed syrup and blueberry juice through his short black hair.

But he didn’t stay dumb for long.

“I’m going to KILL you, Hikaru-chan!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Hikaru brandished her spatula like a sword. “Come and try it, Haru-no-baka!”

“THAT DOES IT!!!!!!”

Niou sighed as Hikaru and Haru collided in World War III.

“I’m going to ask Subaru-kun,” Niou said, although neither Hikaru nor Haru heard him over their frenzied, violent, name-calling, hair-pulling, nose-poking battle.

Hoot said the owl.

“He’s a boy in my class,” Niou said, whether to his un-listening relatives or the un-understanding bird even he was not sure. “He’s really smart. He’ll know.” Niou sighed. “He’ll know what I should do.”

Hoot

And the owl glided off the fence, up and away into the night.

* * *

That Same Night...

Endo Eiko was sitting in her apartment, absentmindedly channel-surfing as she picked at the remains of her dinner. Being the champion VG Senshi of Kira-kira Umi, she often got to take home some extra sushi—however, sushi, even free sushi, could get boring after a while. Which was why she was supplementing it with a mental dessert of some VG matches.

She was currently watching the latest match on Ii Nijiro’s channel—that fight between him and Suzuki Jin. They were such a cute couple. Both of them obviously held back against the other physically, although you’d never have known it from the way they fought verbally. Eiko had seen this match before—she was fond of Nijiro, who usually spiced his VG battles up with some pretty clever one-liners, although his best lines definitely came out in his battles against Jin—but she stuck around for the part where Nijiro stole Jin’s scarf, and the screaming that resulted, before she changed the channel.

She skipped over Ikeda Kyuso’s channel—she couldn’t stand him—and would have done the same for Miyure Chikao’s, except she switched in at the end of one of his losing matches, against, amusingly enough, Suzuki Jin. Suzuki-san was actually a pretty good VG senshi, Eiko reflected—if he wasn’t so in love with Ii Nijiro, or at least didn’t hold back on him, he might have stood a black horse’s chance of winning the VG nationals. However, with Ii-san in the running, Suzuki-san didn’t have a prayer.

Miyure-san was well-stacked, Eiko noted as he peeled—literally peeled, they clung so tightly—off his briefs, even if he was kind of annoying. She didn’t think it was really necessary, for example, for him to wear briefs that tight, nor for him to show off quite so much when it was only a Level 2 loss. Although Eiko had been admittedly prejudiced against Chikao ever since that disastrous match he had had against Ryusaki Hajime a month ago. Ryusaki-san was another one of Eiko’s favorites, and she hadn’t yet forgiven Miyure-san for his utter humiliation and exposure of the gorgeous VG senshi.

Eiko had thought about Miyure Chikao for thirty seconds now, which was pretty much her limit. She changed the channel.

That singer, Kamisaka Makoto, she forgot what band he was from. Beautiful eyes, although she wasn’t too fond of his singing and his quips weren’t as fun as Nijiro’s bantering. He was fighting somebody she didn’t recognize—a Chinese-looking boy with very dark skin. They seemed roughly evenly matched, but not marvelously interesting. She nailed the channel-up button again.

Ishida Ryu. Now here was a looker. Good VG senshi, too, although he could be a little arrogant sometimes. Although with a body like that, he could afford to be a little arrogant. He was also good enough at VG that it was interesting to watch his battling, not just his body, which, as far as Eiko was concerned, was the mark of a true VG senshi. However, she’d seen this match before. Flip the channel again.

It landed on her own channel. She skipped hurriedly.

Some VG senshi loved to watch their own matches. Eiko hated it. She wasn't all that fond of fighting as a whole—it paid the bills and had its moments, but Eiko wasn't sadistic enough to actually enjoy causing pain to other people. Going through a match once was more than enough—watching it again on T.V. held no attraction for her.

Besides, her hair looked horrible on camera.

The next channel was some nobody Eiko had seen on occasion, but never learned the name of. The next was a rerun. The next as well. The next was some green-haired kid. Boring.

That was the problem with Variable Geo, Eiko realized abruptly as she continued to safari through the jungle of channels. Although it was awesome in many ways, it cheapened the idea of the body. The more people saw of the occasional seamsplitter, so to speak, in VG—whether it was Yano Tsuyosa, who could split the seams of his clothes with those muscles, or Ryusaki Hajime, who could split the seams of his pants with his endowments—the less they thought of normal people in normal life. Sooner or later, if VG continued the way it did now, muscles like Yano-san's and balls like Ryusaki-san's would be considered commonplace—meaning that there would be people beyond them, who made them look normal.

The idea was kind of creepy.

But Eiko had no sooner gotten the idea into her head and begun to play around with it than she landed on a completely random channel—and stopped, every thought in her head exploded away by what the television was showing her.

Shiro—Endo Shiro—Shiro-kun—her brother Shiro—was kicking Imaizumi Fumio's @\$\$.

Eiko knew Imaizumi Fumio vaguely, although she had never actually fought him hand to hand. She knew him to be a tallish, gangling red-head with a soft voice, but a killer chi-powered kick that he had dubbed (somewhat unoriginally) the Red Death. Something of a challenge for her, when she had dueled his image in Kaori's Virtual Kaoliseum. And Shiro was wiping the floor with him.

Eiko watched, her mouth just about hitting the floor, as her VG-illiterate younger brother not only read each and every one of Imaizumi-san's moves, but countered them flawlessly without a single excess movement. It was a dance—from Shiro's side, at least. On Fumio's, it was a massacre.

It was over before Eiko could even begin to process what she was seeing. Fumio made a brave attempt to slam Shiro with a Red Death kick, a kick so blazingly fast and strong that most VG senshi couldn't even see it, let alone withstand it. And Shiro slid effortlessly back, down, out of the way, and forward beneath Fumio's guard—sprang up like a bullet—came down knees-first on Fumio's throat and smashed him heavily down to the ground with so much force that Eiko's breath caught in her throat in sympathy.

Shiro stayed kneeling on Fumio's throat for a moment after they hit the floor of the VG ring, but it was beyond overkill. Fumio had stood no chance from the moment Shiro had launched himself into the air. He lay limp and unconscious upon the ground.

Suddenly the T.V. screen dissolved into an interlocked V and G.

Eiko stared at the VG symbol without seeing it at all. Her mind was making a sound like stuck gears. Shiro, fighting? Shiro, winning? Shiro, fighting and winning so violently that his opponent was not only defeated but rendered unconscious in the ring?

Who was this and what had he done with her brother?

* * *

Still That Same Night...

Tsuyosa ran his hand down his own naked body, exulting in the feeling of hard, smooth skin, even if it was his own. Moonlight fell over his upper body, washing his hair with streams of glittering darkness,

casting shadows from the tips of his nipples.

Tsuyosa usually preferred masturbating alone in his room, all lights off, with only the moonlight for company. It was something approaching a ritual for the sex-minded VG senshi, though it was rarely performed, since Tsuyosa rarely spent his nights alone in his home.

But this time—this one, odd, exceptional time—Tsuyosa was accepting company from one object, the sound turned down low but the light forming dazzling pictures that caught his imagination on fire.

It had taken Tsuyosa almost an hour of searching to find Naoki's VG channel. Had it been any other senshi in the world, Tsuyosa would have given up by the ten-minute point and found some other way to spend his time. However, Naoki was unique. Naoki was special.

Dammit, Naoki was practically infecting his body, from the mind down. The mere sound of the syllable "na", just spoken casually in the street, seized every particle of his attention. A simple red shirt standing in a store window wrenched his mind back to a shining wave of coppery red hair. The words "VG" couldn't enter his head, through his eyes, ears, or thoughts, without his fingers sparking with the feel of Naoki's skin. And with every forcible reminder of that one single boy, a most fantastic surge slammed through Tsuyosa's veins. Particularly those in the vicinity of his waist.

Tsuyosa had searched the Internet, the onscreen TV guide, and a list of over twenty thousand names in unbearably tiny print he had had to beg off from a secretary at the Jahana Building for Naoki's name, persevering through the wretched task only because of the thoughts of what he would find if he found it. And finally he had. And it was all he had thought of—and more.

Hayami Naoki's one-and-only recorded VG match, against VG senshi Takamura Hyobe.

Disqualified VG senshi Takamura Hyobe. Because after Takamura-san had landed the finishing blow to his Level 2 victory against Naoki, and Naoki had taken off his clothes and stood naked in the ring, Takamura-san had abandoned VG protocol, thrown Naoki to the floor, and had his way with him right there, out on the street. The perverted, shameless audacity of the action—towards VG, towards Naoki, towards civilization and society as a whole—and the shocking public-ness of doing it where anybody could have seen it made Tsuyosa shiver with longing. It made him want to do something just as shockingly public, and preferably to the exact same person.

Takamura-san never made it to another VG match. The footage was cut off as soon as the rape of Naoki began, and Reimi had, with admirable speed, arrived at the scene and disqualified Takamura-san at once. The Internet rumor went that she actually had to stop the rape by attacking Takamura-san herself, but Tsuyosa doubted that. Regardless, Reimi had saved Naoki then—and poof, exit Takamura Hyobe.

But the footage of Naoki's reluctant and ungodly sexy striptease remained on the air, and Tsuyosa was luxuriating in it. For one who had actually had Naoki, the pixilated image was hardly satisfactory, but Tsuyosa was a practical man. He could appreciate the TV as well as his memory.

And together, well...

Tsuyosa lifted his hips into the air and worked himself into a sweat, passion rolling through him in breathwrenching waves. The Naoki on the screen, the Naoki in his mind, the Naoki on his fingers...

Everything he had and felt burst from him in a torrent, coursing through his body with an impossible heat.

He had to have Naoki again. No matter what it took.

* * *

At the li's house again...

"Hey."

Kaoru looked up from Sakura's bottle and smiled the soft, sweet, non-psycho smile she rarely showed

to anyone other than her husband. “Hey. Coming to bring your poor starving wife pancakes?”

Daisuke bent down and popped a length of pancake rolled around a syrupy mass of blueberries into Kaoru’s mouth. “Yep.”

“Mmm.” Kaoru spoke around her mouthful of blueberry. “You’re the best, honey.”

“I know.” Daisuke sat down beside her and looked down at Sakura. Normally her little face, adrift in pleased sleepiness, could always bring a smile to his face, but tonight he watched his daughter without really seeing her.

Kaoru saw his look, and reached over to touch his arm. “Hey. What’s the matter?”

Daisuke sighed. “What’s always the matter, sweetheart? Kaede’s last operation drained us to the dregs.”

Kaoru got defensive, as she always did when her twin was mentioned. “It’s not her fault.”

Daisuke placed his hand over hers. “I know. I know. But Kaoru...” Daisuke’s attempt at a smile sank into a worried frown, “we’re so low on money right now, we couldn’t spare a yen to throw in a fountain. All of us together can barely support each other.”

Daisuke slammed his fist down on his knee, trembling with long-suppressed emotion. “We have to take the salary from our eldest daughter’s job, which she should be using to be able to move out on her own, and the prizes our next-eldest daughter wins for writing poetry, which she should be able to save for the college she wants to go to, just to cover the rent. The other day, Niou and Haruna brought us change they picked up off the street—and we had to use that for grocery shopping that same day! The money our nieces and nephews pick up off the street, we have to use to buy them food!”

Kaoru sighed as well. Her Daisuke was so proud—he hated being unable to support their family alone, and having to rely on the kids when they were still young enough not to worry about things like rent and food was almost more than he could bear. “In another year, I’ll be able to leave Sakura with Yue and get a job again—”

“Nobody’s hiring, sweet. Believe me, I’ve been looking, trying to find a better job—or any job, any job that I could work another shift at. The only company hiring anybody at all is Jahana.”

Kaoru’s chin went up. “Then that’s where I’ll go.”

Daisuke shrugged wearily. “Sweetheart, you know you hate math, and you can’t operate computers to save your life. They’re looking for damned computer technicians there at Jahana. If they wouldn’t hire me, they won’t hire you.”

“So I’ll learn. I have a year. Besides, Ashotei’ll be able to, once he gets out of college...”

“Ashotei deserves much better than a job at Jahana. Their salary is worth dirt and their recommendations are more damaging to job-searching than no experience at all. He has big dreams, Kaoru, and he deserves the chance to reach them.”

There wasn’t much Kaoru could say to that, mostly because she agreed. “Nijjiro—”

Daisuke’s second sigh was more like an explosion. “Kaoru, Nijjiro is not going to win that tournament.”

“You don’t know that.” Sakura stirred at the vehemence in Kaoru’s voice, and she paused for a moment to compose herself. “He has as good a chance as any of the rest.”

“Darling, you know I love Nijjiro dearly, but he is not going to win. He relies on flash and surprise over strength. That works well enough against random battles in the street, but everyone in that tournament will have studied his style. He’s too popular for them not to have. If he were virtually unknown, he could get away with what he does—but he’s—”

“Nijjiro’s chi,” Kaoru said fiercely, “is strong enough to win him over people three times bigger or buffer. And it’s fueled by his love for us. By his desire to win for us. The least we can do is trust that he knows what he’s doing. He’s not dumb, Daisuke! He’ll have thought up new tricks for something this important! He knows that Kaede’s life might hang on his winning this tournament!”

“Yes, he does.” Daisuke stared brooding beyond Kaoru’s burning eyes, barely hearing Sakura grizzle with annoyance at their simmering argument. “The pressure must be eating him alive.”

* * *

Elsewhere...

Shiro poured his remaining pills out into his hand and counted them with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Four. There were only four left.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he had known he was burning through them much faster than he ought to have considering the tournament was so close, but the feeling of power he had felt as he smashed contestant after contestant within an inch of their lives was irresistible. He had brought every opponent he faced to their knees—sometimes even lower. With the help of these pills, he was turning into a VG wild card. A magazine reporter had even written an article about him for VG Monthly. Shiro did not have a subscription to VG Monthly, but he had bought the issue with that article in it, cut out the article, and hidden it underneath his mattress. He wasn’t sure what his mom would do if she knew about it, and he didn’t want to find out. He doubted she even knew he was starting to become famous.

But his fame only came from the pills, which he was almost out of now.

Shiro sighed, and tipped the pills back into their container. He needed more. After the tournament, he could stop taking them—as VG Champion, he could easily retire from VG and forget about the pills. But he had to win the tournament. He had to beat Eiko.

And having Yano Tsuyosa at his feet was not unattractive, either.

Shiro replaced the little bottle of pills underneath his mattress, beside the article, and picked up his wallet from his bedside table. His mother was a dog, but at least she let him keep his earnings from his job at Bubblegum. Thank God, or else he’d have no money with which to buy another bottle.

He dumped out the yen, intending to count it, and with it fell a little piece of paper.

Confused, Shiro retrieved the paper from where it fell on the floor, and found it to be a small folded scrap upon which the following list was written:

1. Go to where you met me
2. Go down Sakura to Apple
3. Right on Apple down to Persimmon
4. Left on Persimmon down to Hawthorn
5. Right on Hawthorn down to the wash
6. Cross wash to Crow
7. Right on Crow to Morning
8. Go down to end of Morning
9. Ask for the dealer at 2316 Morning

Shiro stared at the paper. Directions. Directions to find the man who had sold him the pills.

Something inside of Shiro clenched uncomfortably at this, but Shiro pushed it away. He had had no idea that he had had this. The man—the dealer—must have given it to him when he had taken his payment for the pills, correctly anticipating his need to find him again.

He had directions, and he had money. What more did he need?

* * *

Disinfectant, probably, Shiro realized when he stood in front of 2316 Morning Street.

2316 was a shady rundown dump. The walls leaned, the roof sagged, and the door didn't look capable of standing up to Shiro's fist as he knocked on it. It looked like the kind of place even rats would blacklist. "You're thinking of crashing there? No, trust me, you don't wanna. That place sucks worse than spaghetti. Now, that bar over on Crow..."

The door flew open.

"Yeah, whaddaya want?" snarled a large, slightly fleshy man with a grimly florid (or was it floridly grim?) face.

Shiro wrenched his thoughts away from the discussions of rats. "I'm...looking for this guy, who...he's the dealer of—"

Distaste showed clearly in the man's face, but he stepped aside and waved Shiro in. "Another one? He's in his room. Downstairs," the man snapped when Shiro hesitated, "don't you remember?"

"I've never been here before," Shiro said, baffled.

"A new one, eh?" The man sniffed disapprovingly. "Well, he's down there, anyways. With another one of you. Keep it down."

The man waited with undisguised impatience for Shiro to inch in through the doorway onto a wooden floor that felt like it could collapse into the basement at any moment, then slammed the door closed behind him.

The dealer was there in his room all right. Just like the man upstairs had said. The man upstairs had, however, forgotten to mention a few important details, such as exactly what the dealer was doing with the "other one of you."

Shiro made it to a vantage point before he fully realized what was going on, but as soon as he saw the tiny basement room—half-filled by the occupied bed—he was rather radically enlightened. The force of this enlightenment jettisoned him backwards a few steps, but with no coordination—his foot landed wrong, and he tripped and fell, landing on the steps with his back against the wall and his eyes facing the bed.

The short, muscular, golden-brown young man thrusting into the dealer with a moan half-triumph and half-submission ripped himself backwards at Shiro's crashing fall, which only served to give Shiro way too much of an eyeful of Komiya Hayato fully naked and fully aroused. It made the silver-haired boy rise in response. He had seen naked men before, of course, and been the naked one more times than once—unavoidable in VG—but this was the first time Shiro had ever seen men engaging in sex. He felt almost sick.

Hayato of course realized his mistake almost as soon as he made it, and grabbed for the sheets beneath him, dragging fabric up to cover himself. The dealer, however, made no such effort—he sprawled lazily over the bed like a cat, leaving himself completely open for scrutiny.

"I remember you," the dealer said, shifting himself slightly. "You're the last one I sold to. What's wrong? Pills are working, right?"

Shiro suddenly realized what the dealer was doing. He was using his nudity as a purposeful distraction, to keep Shiro off-balance and stay in control of the situation. Knowing he was being manipulated gave Shiro the necessary willpower, and he ripped his eyes down as surely as Komiya Hayato had ripped away from the dealer. There might be an inordinate amount of gorgeous flesh exposed in front of him, but he didn't have to look at it.

"Yes," Shiro said. "They're fine. But I'm running low."

"Ah," the dealer said. "I see."

Feet hit the floor. Shiro couldn't help looking up, just in time to see Hayato hastily yank up a pair of faded black jeans. He was blushing furiously from his white-tipped black spikes of hair down to his

sculpted shoulders, obviously vastly embarrassed at being caught in flagrante delecto—certainly moreso than the dealer was.

“I don’t think you two have met,” the dealer said, rising up to a sitting position. “Komiya Hayato, Endo Shiro. Endo Shiro, Komiya Hayato. Shiro-kun’s another user, did you know, Hayato-kun?”

Hayato and Shiro both jerked at the dealer’s casual tacking-on of the –kuns to their names.

“Don’t let this put you off, Hayato-kun,” the dealer said idly. “Just because we’ve been temporarily interrupted doesn’t mean we can’t finish what we started.”

Hayato’s ears burned. Snatching up his shirt, not bothering to put it on, he bolted past Shiro up the stairs and out of sight.

The dealer sighed, and let himself fall back onto the bed. “So sensitive when he’s not drugged up, that kid. He needs looser inhibitions. Or looser balls. Either way. You said you were running low.”

It wasn’t a question, but Shiro nodded just the same, resolutely keeping his eyes down. “Yes.”

“Come over here.”

Again, it wasn’t a question. But Shiro didn’t move.

“Come over here.”

Still Shiro didn’t move. Or couldn’t move. Moving would mean looking, and looking would almost certainly mean a loss on Shiro’s part.

“The pills are in this drawer here, right next to my bed. Come over here and take them.”

Now the opposite became true. Shiro could not not move. This was what he had come for, wasn’t it? Was he a human with a brain, or a wild animal ruled by instinct? An old question, one asked by many people, but rarely under these kind of circumstances.

Shiro stood up, made his way down the stairs with his eyes fixed firmly to his shoes, then looked up.

The drawer was in a small night table beside the bed. Shiro walked over to it, forcing himself to keep his eyes off smooth, slick, lamplit skin with admirable success, and pulled the door open.

A dozen small bottles filled with pills rattled up against the drawer, cross about being shifted.

Shiro breathed an inward sigh of relief, and was just reaching out his hand to take one when the dealer slid his hand up beneath Shiro’s shirt, fingers rubbing tauntingly across his stomach.

“What do you think?” the dealer murmured, letting his fingers play over Shiro’s navel. “Wanna stay? Finish what Hayato started? Take your first man, have the experience for later? I have to say...lying here right now, I’d really welcome some...company.”

Shiro reflexively grabbed the dealer’s hand and shoved him away. The dealer let his hand be pushed away—but then he took revenge. He stood up, moving the entirety of his honey-luscious body into Shiro’s sight.

“Tell me you don’t want to and make me believe it,” the dealer whispered, fixing Shiro with eyes that gleamed like a wolf’s.

Shiro opened his mouth to say something—then, with sudden, unplanned violence, he shoved the dealer back away from him onto his bed.

“You don’t want me,” Shiro whispered back, something—pain?—audible in his voice.

Shiro grabbed a bottle of pills from the drawer, yanked his wallet out of his pocket, and threw it onto the dealer’s chest. Without pausing to see if what he had given was enough, Shiro turned on his heels and ran to and up the stairs.

The dealer lifted Shiro’s wallet up off his chest, and his smile faded away, leaving behind only the wolfish gleam in his eyes.

“Now that’s where you’re wrong,” the dealer said, although there was nobody in the room to hear him anymore. “I want you indeed, Endo Shiro-kun. I want you bad.”

* * *

2:37 A.M.

The street was deserted, populated only by the soft flashings of the traffic lights and the lounging glow of streetlights. A faint mist caught the lights and glittered in the air, flowing through Tokyo like the tide of a diamond sea.

Katsura Setsuna stood at the street corner, not even noticing the dew that formed on his forest-green hair as though he were a statue in a garden. He was staring out into the center of the intersection. The intersection where he had seen Naoki VG-ing.

He had done it. Stuck to it. Even after Setsuna had abandoned him.

It felt like decades ago that Setsuna had first met Naoki, in Kinseisoku, the ghetto of Tokyo. Setsuna had been seventeen, a high school dropout kicked out of his house, reduced to life in a ramshackle apartment run by a perverted landlord who spent his days watching old VG matches on his TV, and Naoki...Naoki had only been fourteen. A beautiful, innocent, inspiring fourteen, stuck in that same apartment building with his spineless mother and alcoholic father, trying to make something of himself.

Setsuna had never meant to get close to him, or even to admit his feelings—fourteen was too young, way, way too young—but he had slipped up. Stared at Naoki across the deserted floor of the apartment building's rickety elevator one snowy morning in February for just a moment too long. Naoki had finally asked why Setsuna was staring at him, and Setsuna, unable to think of an excuse, had blurted out the truth—because Naoki was gorgeous. Naoki had blushed, and ran out of the elevator as quickly as he could, and Setsuna had resigned himself to knowing he had made another mistake.

It was a mistake. But not in the way he had thought then. Because the next time they had chanced to be in the elevator together, Naoki had confessed that he thought Setsuna was gorgeous too. And before the elevator had stopped, Setsuna had kissed him, like something out of some stupid clichéd shonen-ai anime.

For months, that kiss was the only contact they had. But more and more, they made time to run into each other. More and more, they talked, and found in the other a kindred spirit. More and more, they became close. But so quietly, so slowly, that even they barely felt it. Nobody aside from them knew. Nobody aside from them could have known. They never spoke of it, even to each other.

Until Christmas of that year.

In February, the Naoki that Setsuna stared at was a rosebud of juvenile beauty. As the months passed, however, that changed. By the time December hit, Naoki had blossomed, and he was no longer just beautiful—he was sexy. REALLY sexy. And somehow, Naoki and Setsuna ended up alone together, and somehow, Setsuna moved to touch him, and somehow, Naoki did not resist. And somehow, when the sun rose the next morning, it found them asleep in each other's arms, all the interfering things like clothing thrown to the other side of the room. Red hair tangled with green. Like Christmas decorations.

When the new year came, and Naoki came to Setsuna with bottle glass embedded in his arms, Setsuna realized that if he cared about Naoki, he couldn't let him stay here in this godforsaken apartment anymore. Which was why he came up with the plan, the first and only thing in his life he had ever been proud of. It was simple—run away. Run away from Naoki's father and the ruin of an apartment and the life that would dead-end in pain and poverty unless they broke out of it, and start anew, in a new city, with a new job—VG. Reimi had just opened the tournament to men, and even if Setsuna lost in the regionals or nationals, if he distinguished himself in any way he would receive compensation. Not much, true—but more than either of them lived on right now.

The night had come. Setsuna had taken Naoki and left. And they had misjudged terribly. Because Naoki began to panic when they reached the end of the street, and Setsuna moved to comfort him in the surest way he could think of—and Naoki's father had lurched around the corner just in time to see the boy from the next apartment story up slip his hands into his son's pants.

Naoki's father had had a knife, which he carried on him at all times in case mugger dissuasion was ever necessary, and he had done his best to kill Setsuna with it. Naoki and Setsuna had fled into an alleyway, realizing only too late that it dead-ended in a fence. Setsuna had climbed the fence. Naoki had tried, and fallen. Setsuna, straddling the top as best he could, tried to help Naoki up—and then his father had charged down the alleyway like a juggernaut. And Setsuna ran.

He hated himself for doing it. Even now, he didn't understand how he possibly could have done it—how he could have left Naoki on the other side of that fence with his father and a knife. He had loved Naoki. He loved Naoki still. Seeing him today had proved it to him. His heart still ached from that brief sighting, in violent, throbbing waves that pressed on his throat and threatened to squeeze water from his eyes. All he could say in his defense—although he would never say it; he deserved no defense—was that for some incomprehensible reason, even with the proof right in front of his eyes, he could not believe that Naoki's father would hurt his own son. For some inexplicable reason, Setsuna had felt that if he had disappeared, Naoki's father would lose his anger and leave Naoki alone. It was stupid, and he knew it. The scars on Naoki's arms proved how wrong he had been.

Setsuna's life was a chain of long mistakes—drugs, dropping out of high school, and breaking into a convenience store where he was nearly killed by the owner were only some of the items on the list. But of everything, Naoki—from looking at him, to kissing him, to sleeping with him, all the way up to abandoning him to his father's rage—was the worst. It was the mistake that haunted him in the day, that kept him awake at night, that he would do anything to be able to erase, or change, or just in some small way to repent for.

He had hoped for that ever since he had done it, committed that unforgivable mistake. Now, he hoped for something else instead.

He hoped—he wished, he prayed—that he didn't make another mistake.

Because to add another of his mistakes to Naoki's life was more than he could bear.

* * *

End Part Two

* * *

Variable Geo Image Ending

Naoki and Setsuna

Shuji

Nijihiro

Jin

Setsuna and Naoki