

The Monsters We Are: The Monsters We Become

Author: Beren (Beren@dtwins.co.uk) (beren_writes at LJ)

Website: <http://www.plotbunny.co.uk>

Fandom: Weiß Kreuz (Knight Hunters)

Pairing: Aya/OMC, Yoji/Schu, Aya/Crawford

Rating: NC17/18

Disclaimer: This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by Takehito Koyasu and Project Weiß. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

Warnings: dubious consent, vampires

Setting: This is set in the first series between the time when Aya's sister is kidnapped by Schreint and when Schwarz take her for Eszett.

Summary: When Aya wakes up to find that he is dying, his first instinct is to believe he has been kidnapped by a madman who wants to watch him die, but when he wakes up again, not quite alive, but definitely not as dead as he expected, everything changes. When his captor involves his friends and his enemies things become even more complicated.

Author's Notes: Thanks to Soph and Laura for the beta. The beginning of this has been languishing on my hard drive for years and I finally decided to finish it :).

Word count: 33,700

Chapter 1 Tod und Leben (Death and Life)

He hurt. It was not so much a gradual realisation for Aya as something that lanced into his brain all at once and he found himself sitting up, gasping and hunching over. Small shots of pain were lancing through his arms and legs and the whole of his torso was cramping as if he wanted to be violently sick, but there was nothing there to come up. So debilitating were the muscle spasms and pain that he found he could not resist when strong arms wound around him and pulled him back again a firm, muscled chest.

"Do not struggle, My Beautiful One," a deep voice whispered in his ear, "the pain will fade. Dying is always painful."

As if to back up the man's words an invisible fist seemed to close around his heart and Aya found himself struggling for breath. He moaned out his pain and his fear as he realised that he was indeed dying and there seemed to be nothing he could do about it. How he had come to be in another man's bed and what was killing him were remote questions in his mind as he fought desperately to stay alive.

"Ssh, My Pet," the man holding him spoke again as in a last ditch attempt to breathe he tried to pull away, "it will be over soon."

Inside Aya was screaming that he didn't want to die, but gasping for oxygen that did not seem to help even when he managed to take it in, all he could do was lie in what he assumed were his killer's arms. One limb still held him, but the other moved and he felt fingers running through his hair. It was such a gentle gesture and so at odds with what was happening that Aya would have laughed if he'd been able; he had fallen victim to a madman.

He could barely breathe at all now and he could feel his body beginning to shut down. The pain was fading as promised and he was becoming light headed and losing touch with reality. For some reason his erratic heartbeat was loud in his ears; he could hear every falter and missed beat as the vice like grip tightened

around it. Every second of life seemed to stretch out and the whole world appeared to slow down as he finally gave up the struggle.

It was surreal and amazingly peaceful now that the pain was gone and he found himself listening carefully as the last of life slipped away. His heartbeat faltered once, then twice and then the world slowly faded away.

Life returned like a bolt of electricity running through every nerve in his body and Aya found himself being held tightly as he shook from head to toe.

"Relax," his captor whispered in his ear, still stroking his hair, "it is shocking at first, but you will adjust in a moment."

So far the man had been right about everything else and fighting seemed futile, so Aya did as he was told. It took a few seconds but slowly he felt his body coming back under his control. Everything was so completely overwhelming that he just lay there, even after he knew he could move, and tried to comprehend what had happened.

He had died, of that much he was sure, but it didn't seem to have lasted very long. Only there was something wrong; he knew it as positively as if someone was shouting it at him and it took him a while to realise what it was; he wasn't breathing. Not only that, but the heartbeat he had heard so clearly as it slowly gave up was so slow as to be almost completely absent.

"Fascinating isn't it," the owner of the arms said, a little more loudly this time; "realising that you are alive, but not quite alive. Most master vampires make their children sleep through their death, but I like mine to feel every moment; it is a truly unique experience, even for our kind."

Aya did not know what to do, he only gathered enough brain power to pull away and turn. He had been so busy dying that nothing else had really mattered, but he was paying attention now. Neither he nor his companion were wearing anything at all and he realised he was sat in the middle of a large bed, surrounded by silk sheets. His companion was not a large man, but the self proclaimed master vampire was bigger than he was; slightly broader across the chest and, by Aya's guess, several inches taller as well. His killer had long black hair, pale, snowy skin and an incredibly beautiful face, which was almost feminine in its fine features. When Aya reached the creatures eyes he knew he was lost.

"Welcome to my world, My Pet," the vampire said, smiling a smile that brought no warmth to those eyes at all. "I am Minoru and you are now mine."

If there was one thing Aya hated it was being claimed; he was his own person, but as he looked into deep, black eyes he found he could not protest. That cold, selfish gaze held him and he felt something in the back of his head, something that zapped his will.

"You have spirit, Pet," Minoru said, kneeling up and leaning towards him; "something I admire and enjoy, but you cannot fight me. I am your maker and your master and I will do with you as I please."

Attempting to pull away was one of the hardest things Aya had ever tried to do, but he almost managed it, except a hand took hold of his jaw and held him fast.

"You will learn soon that obedience is far more pleasant," Minoru told him, voice almost icy. "When you obey I will give you what you need; I will pamper you and pleasure you. All that I require is your compliance."

Aya took a big breath and became confused again as he awkwardly began to breathe; he didn't understand what was happening.

"Your body is remembering," Minoru said, eyes still boring into his; "we do not need to breathe as humans do, but our bodies remember what it was like and do it anyway. You will eventually learn how to stop if you want to, how to make even your heart silent as you stalk prey."

He frowned and tried to make sense of everything in his head, but this was all too much for even Aya's rational brain. None of this could be real; surely it was all in his mind.

"Next comes the hunger," Minoru spoke in a deep, enticing voice. "Can you feel it crawling around your belly, My Pet? It comes quickly the first time."

Aya didn't want to listen to anything his killer had to say, but he did feel an emptiness inside. He was used to being hungry; sometimes the others despaired of him when he literally forgot to eat, but this seemed more than that. Once he noticed it, the feeling seemed to demand his attention and he couldn't think of anything else.

The hand that had been holding his jaw in a vice like grip released him, but he didn't move as he felt his senses stretching out, trying to find what he needed.

"Blood," Minoru whispered to him and he had no choice but to believe as he realised that that was what he was searching for. "I am going to give you a gift, Pet; I am going to give you what you need and then you are going to give me what I want."

Aya would have argued, but when Minoru held out a wrist, holding it in front of his face, all he could do was stare at the little blue lines he could see that pulsed under the skin so very slowly. His achingly slow heartbeat sped up in his ears and it was as if his whole world narrowed down to the blood vessels in front of his eyes.

"Feed, Little One," Minoru urged him, "show me the creature that lurks beneath the surface."

The urge to obey was almost overwhelming, but Aya tried to resist. He did not want this; he was no one's pet. He wanted to pull away, but it was so hard and he only managed to drag his eyes away from Minoru's wrist for a moment. The instant that his gaze snapped back into place he felt pain in his gums and after that nothing existed except the limb in front of him, so he reached out. His fingers curled round the offered wrist and all he could see, all he could hear was the blood pumping under the pale skin.

Opening his mouth, he leant over the wrist and slowly bit down. He didn't really think about what he was doing, he just followed his need and he heard a breathy moan from Minoru just before blood hit his mouth. Once that happened his entire connection to reality dissolved as he tasted age and power and it went to his head like overly strong wine. He couldn't think anymore and all that mattered was the blood. He gulped it down; one mouthful, two mouthfuls and he wanted it

all. Nothing else existed except the blood and he would have done anything to get more.

When the wrist was wrenched away from him he snarled and tried to grab it back, but he was uncoordinated and he felt as if he was drunk or high. He wanted more; he wanted to feel the liquid velvet sliding down his throat, but he had no ability to make it happen.

"So wild, My Pet," Minoru said with a laugh, "I knew you would be. When I have tamed you, you will make the perfect enforcer; all beauty and pent up rage."

Aya didn't know what an enforcer did and at that moment he didn't care. He was beginning to realise that the hunger was gone, but that didn't mean he didn't want more, only now he did not have the drive to get it. He was confused. When Minoru leant into him, he just sat there and when a mouth covered his own he did nothing to stop it, in fact, on instinct, he kissed back.

Even that felt different; he was being kissed, but there was an edge to it that he had never experienced before.

"You are fire," Minoru said, pulling back and smiling a lecherous, wicked smile; "I'm going to enjoy you."

Aya couldn't think; his head seemed to be filled with fog swirling with wants and needs he could not control. As he was pushed back onto the bed he went and as Minoru's body covered his own he let it happen even though it felt strange. Part of him knew this was not what he wanted, but it was such a small part and the rest could not resist. Minoru had all the power and Minoru's lips on his neck, kissing him, made him arch up against the force holding him down as his nerves sang in pleasure.

Suddenly his mind flashed with an image; it was dark, he was in his mission clothes and he was carrying his sword. He hadn't been able to move then either as dark, red tinged eyes had taken away his will. He had felt lips on his neck and then fangs digging into his skin and he hadn't been able to fight. He couldn't fight now either.

As hands roamed over his body he knew this wasn't what he wanted, but it was such a remote thought that it had no bearing on what was happening. The touches felt good and his body was responding and the part of his mind that was in control could not conceive that this might be wrong.

One long fingered hand moved down over his stomach, sliding over his flat belly and lacing through the thatch of hair between his legs, curving round his rapidly hardening cock. His legs fell apart and he moaned as those fingers held him firmly, stroking his length and sending wonderful feelings through his body.

"Such beauty," Minoru whispered to him as the vampire stroked him hard. "I knew I had made the right choice when you came as I first bit you."

Aya didn't remember that clearly, but he did remember the pleasure/pain combination that had taken his mind away. Now it was all pleasure, but he still couldn't think.

"Have you ever been had by a man, My Pet?" Minoru asked him, cupping his balls and jiggling them just a little. "Have you ever submitted?"

Those fingers moved back further, ghosting over his hole and making him shiver.

"Ah," Minoru said, pushing one finger against him a little more firmly and making him moan, "I think not."

The power to speak was as gone as his power to resist and Aya could only close his eyes and feel.

Minoru continued to play with him, caressing him and kissing him and touching him in ways he had never been touched before and all he could do was respond. In the back of his mind there was a tiny voice screaming for him to resist, but the pleasure far outweighed that.

For a few moments Minoru was gone from his side and in those few seconds he almost clawed back some of the reality that was beyond him, but Minoru was not gone long enough. As soon as those hands and those lips touched him again he was lost.

"Such a beautiful creature," Minoru spoke to him softly, caressing him now with fingers slick with something; "so fragile looking and yet concealing so much power."

The fingers touching him slipped backwards again and slid between the cheeks of his arse and spreading him, only this time one did not ghost over his hole, it pressed into it. He moaned and lifted his hips, not sure if he was trying to move into or away from the touch. The other touches, no matter how intimate, had been less intrusive, but this one was different and it made the little voice in the back of his mind that much louder.

"Relax, My Pet," Minoru instructed, hooking a leg over his so he could not move away; "you are going to like this."

Aya didn't think he was, but Minoru's voice was hypnotic and the finger moving into him was insistent and he had no will to make his body fight. The confusion and doubt was beginning to overcome the pleasure with this completely unfamiliar feeling. Then that finger brushed something inside of him, something that sent intense sensations through him, bringing the pleasure back in a flood. He bucked and moaned and all resistance died again even though he heard Minoru laughing at his reaction.

"How long have you denied yourself?" Minoru asked, moving that finger in and out of him, slowly brushing that spot over and over again. "You react to pleasure like a starving man to food, My Pet."

Thinking was too difficult and Aya definitely didn't want to think about that so he pushed it away. When two fingers were pushed in instead of one he did not even try to resist, he just let it happen, allowing his body to adjust and his brain to melt into the pleasure that came after the initial discomfort. The demon beside him was the lesser of two evils when compared to the demons in his own head.

He lay there and let his body be prepared, unthinking and unresisting until Minoru knelt up, moving between his legs and leaning over him. Only then did he have a moment of clarity as this creature who had taken his life loomed over him, cock hanging heavy and proud between long, athletic legs. He knew then that the last thing he had to take was about to be taken, but he did not resist. There had been too much pain lately and he could not take anymore and to resist meant pain; to submit meant pleasure.

He pushed all thought from his head and even though it hurt as Minoru pushed into him, it was a kind of pain that was easy to bear. It was nothing, especially when that cock pushed past that place inside him that made all other sensations seem small. He let his mind go and all there was, was sensation. His body soon became used to the cock up his arse and he felt full, but it did not hurt, in fact it felt far better than he could have imagined. When fingers wrapped around his cock again he was more than ready to submit to the release of orgasm and it felt good even though it was almost as if he was an observer in his own body.

He came hard with a cry, gripping the sheets and almost tearing them as sensation exploded through him. Even Minoru pounding into him until the master vampire came with a shout of his own could not bring him down. The fog in his mind was not so thick now, it was beginning to clear, but he didn't want it to. He couldn't cope with all of this, not yet, and as Minoru pulled out of him and let his legs fall to the bed he just lay there. Thinking was too hard and the lethargy of post orgasm called to him, so he reached for it.

Aya had trained himself well to ignore what he didn't want to think about; he would not have slept for years otherwise, and he retreated now as well. Reality would still be there when he had the energy to deal with it and he slipped into sleep hoping futilely that, maybe, he would never have to return.

====

"Wake up, My Pet."

Aya did not want to leave the world of darkness, but Minoru's voice called to him and woke his silent mind.

"I know when one is new one can sleep forever, but I grow bored," Minoru would not let him escape back to dreams. "It is time to begin your new life."

Reluctantly Aya opened his eyes and found himself lying on his side in the same bed, half covered in a silk sheet. Minoru was standing beside the bed looking down at him, dressed in a white yakuta. What had happened, where he was and why he was naked in bed all came back to Aya at the same time, but he did not move. He was not a rash person and he did not know if he could win a fight or even attempt one so he remained still.

"You hide your fire behind a wall of ice very well," Minoru said, seemingly amused by his reaction. "At least you seem to understand who is in control here."

Remaining silent, Aya slowly sat up.

"The bathroom is through there," Minoru told him, pointing to a door; "clean yourself up and then get dressed; I have something to show you."

Then Minoru just turned and walked out of the room leaving him alone. Clearly the vampire was interested in something else now rather than his body, which was at least one blessing, but he was under no illusions that Minoru would not want more sex at some point. He had trained his body to obey his will long ago and what he had to do with it was irrelevant. He felt used, but he refused to acknowledge it; he could bide his time and when the chance came to escape he would take it. If he had a chance to kill Minoru on the way that would be a bonus.

Climbing out of bed, he ignored everything else and walked into the bathroom. There was a large bath and a shower and he turned on the shower quickly and stepped in. It was pointless to waste time; he did not want Minoru's wrath coming down on him when it could be avoided, so he washed quickly, from his hair to his toes and then turned off the water.

Being practical was the only way he had survived after his parents' deaths and being practical was the only way to survive now as well. He dried himself off, put the towel back where he had found it and walked naked back into the other room. When he saw Minoru standing in the doorway, he was not overly surprised.

"You hide your fear very well," Minoru said as Aya calmly walked to the bed where clothes were waiting for him and began to dress.

"Panicking is unproductive," he told his captor, arranging the garments he had been given.

It seemed Minoru did not want him in traditional garb, since his clothes consisted of a pair of silk trousers and a soft shirt.

"Leave the shirt undone," Minoru told him as he went to button it, and so he did.

Minoru was wearing sandals, but he hadn't been given any, so he assumed he was going to be bare foot. Maybe having his prisoners half dressed made Minoru feel more secure; Aya didn't really care, he was simply calculating what he would need to get away. Of course that begged the question was it possible to get away from a vampire, but that wasn't something he could answer yet.

Minoru led him out of the bedroom and along a small corridor and as they walked a scent tickled Aya's nose. He didn't really know what it was at first, but it slowly dawned on him that it was something all too familiar: it was the scent of human beings. The closer they came to what Aya assumed was the source, the more layers the scent had as he discerned individuals, but it was all too unfamiliar to be understandable.

"Your senses will continue to sharpen," Minoru told him, as if the older vampire knew exactly what he was thinking. "Each day will bring new abilities; you are only a day and a half old, after all."

Aya stopped walking as he tried to work that out.

"A day and a half?" he asked, not really wanting to talk to the monster who had made him, but needing to understand.

He remembered dying all too clearly, but he had thought it had been no more than a few hours. Minoru looked at him with that same superior expression he had seen almost constantly.

"You have slept like the dead," Minoru told him, grinning at his own joke; Aya didn't find it very funny.

They reached another door and Minoru opened it, gesturing for Aya to go in first. Saving defiance for when it could be useful, he did as indicated and padded past the vampire into the new room. What he saw made him come to a complete halt.

On the far side of the room there was a small cell block, like in an old fashioned western movie. There were two cells made from long iron bars, joined by a small

corridor. There was a locked door into the corridor and then a locked door off of it into each cell. Inside each cell along the wall was a bench and on that bench were two sets of unconscious people. Inside one cell, neatly propped up against each other and the wall, were the other members of Weiß and in the second cell was Schwarz.

"What have you done?" Aya asked, feeling shock and horror through every fibre of his being.

"You need to learn, Pet," Minoru said, walking up behind him and placing a hand on the back of his neck; "your old life is over and your new one is beginning. This will help you let go."

Aya was more horrified than he could express.

"What's wrong with them?" he asked, needing to know if this could be undone.

All seven men were out cold, but he couldn't see injuries on them and he could hear their hearts beating.

"I have fed them my blood," Minoru told him and smiled when he looked around. "It has placed them in my power and unless I give them more they will die. When given enough, vampire blood changes a human into a vampire, when given just a drop it is like a slow poison, an instant addiction. They have maybe six hours left before it will begin to kill them."

"Why?" Aya really didn't understand.

He was so shocked and appalled that when Minoru cupped his face with one pale hand he didn't try and resist.

"To teach you, Pet," Minoru told him. "We are going to play a game. I call it friends and enemies. I will save all of them but one; that one you will feed from and drain. You have to choose which one will die. If you do not choose I will and I will let them die slowly. In the end there will be one left and if you are very good I will let you keep them as a familiar."

Aya honestly could not understand it; that someone could be that cruel so carelessly amazed him. He had killed some nasty people in his time, but Minoru was rapidly climbing to the top of that list.

"I can't," he said, even as he let his eyes run over his friends and Schwarz.

The other assassins might have been his enemies, but the idea of choosing one and feeding on them filled him with horror. He just couldn't do that.

"I can't," he repeated in little more than a whisper.

"Oh but you can," Minoru said, voice low and murmuring in his ear, "and you will; that is what this game will teach you. When the hunger starts to crawl around your belly you will come here and you will choose."

"I would rather die," Aya said, and he meant it.

Minoru laughed at that.

"Not an option, Pet," the older vampire said, "not an option at all. Did I mention that death from withdrawal is agonising? I've never had to let more than one die before my children begin to choose. I can keep the other half aware indefinitely and it can take days for a human to die for blood withdrawal. First they have a fever, burning them from the inside; then the pains start, just little ones to begin with, occasionally making them moan, but eventually the moans become screams. It's the pain that kills them; in the end their hearts just stop. An addicted human must have more blood every twenty four hours or be turned into a vampire to survive."

Aya's mind was blank with shock. This was all too much and on top of everything else he was dealing with it made him light headed. When he swayed Minoru pulled him to his chest and held him firm.

"Perhaps it is too soon," Minoru said, caressing his hair as if he really was a child; "you need to be stronger."

As he was turned and led out of the room, Aya did not argue, but he did try and regain his control. Everything was almost too much for him and it had eaten through his normal defences, but as Minoru led him, he clawed onto his own self will. The anger that lived at the core of his being had kept him going for so long and he fed it, feeling its icy fury seeping into his cells and giving him strength. It seemed to amuse Minoru when he pulled away and began to walk on his own, but it was all he had and he let the anger swirl and take away everything else. He followed Minoru back into the bedroom with his habitual scowl firmly in place.

"Don't look so angry, My Pet," Minoru told him, smiling at him and then walking over to a sideboard that held a decanter and two glasses; "this is the best way. When they are dead your past life will be gone and you will understand that there is no going back."

Under the surface Aya was seething. When it came to himself he could ignore many things, brush aside many injustices and focus on what was practical, what was needed, but not when it came to those he cared about. Very few people made it close enough to him for him to open up enough to give a damn about them, but Weiß had and he did not want them to die. Just because a vampire had chosen him, a sick and twisted vampire who clearly liked power games, they were condemned to die and that was not right.

He remained silent and just watched as Minoru poured the red liquid from the decanter into the glasses. It was too thick to be wine and a moment after it was poured the scent hit his nose and made his teeth itch; it was blood. He felt his senses spike and he almost stepped forward without his conscious consent as the blood took all of his attention.

"You can't resist it at the moment," Minoru said, obviously enjoying his lack of control; "you are too new. Come here, Pet, and I will give you what you need. We can leave the game for another day."

Minoru held out the glass to him and he felt like an addict being presented with his addiction of choice. Just standing still was so incredibly hard and his control on his emotions was slipping again. Minoru laughed at his stubbornness.

"I knew you were strong," the vampire said, still holding out the glass; "I felt it the first time I saw you. There is something very different about you, My Pet, almost as different as those four in the cells. I tasted it in your blood and I can

see it now. I don't know what it is, but it makes you far more fun than any of the others have ever been."

The smell of the blood was driving Aya crazy. He couldn't stop it when his fangs descended in his mouth. He wanted to force them away, but he did not have the control to do so.

"Give in, Pretty," Minoru taunted him; "you have no choice."

The fact that he could not resist made him even angrier. Aya could deal with choosing not to resist; he could rationalise that, but the fact that he simply couldn't fired a fury in him he could not explain, and unlike the anger he often hid behind, this was uncontrollable. He could not help himself and he walked over to Minoru all but shaking with rage, yet still he took the glass.

Minoru turned away from him to pick up the other glass and Aya couldn't help feeling the disdain of the other vampire. His maker thought him so weak that he just turned his back on him with no thought about it. The anger boiled inside Aya like it had only done on a few occasions before. He raged for the fate of his friends, for the selfishness of this creature in front of him, for his lack of control, even for having been used like a cheap whore as his mental walls failed him. He could feel his wall of ice melting and with it went any ability he had to control what he was about to do.

There were good reasons Aya held himself away from his emotions, very good reasons. He had discovered soon after his parents' deaths that if he did not hide his emotions away they were more powerful than he could deal with. When they took him over logic and practicality meant nothing and he turned into someone more dangerous than he ever wanted to be.

The rage gave him just the tiniest bit of control over at least one thing and he threw the goblet against the wall, where it smashed with a loud crunch of glass. Minoru actually looked shocked then, turning to him with a surprised look on that aristocratic face. Reason was out of Aya's reach and he could not care what would happen, all he could do was feel.

He needed blood; he wanted it more than just about anything and he used that along with the blinding rage. Minoru had shown him how to get blood in his first few minutes of new life and without a thought he pounced. He moved so fast he was sure his maker did not even see him coming and he wrapped himself around the other vampire with all the strength he had, fang slicing into Minoru's neck without resistance.

Minoru snarled then and screamed trying to pry him off. He felt claws ripping into him and strong hands trying to push him away, but he held on with a strength he had never known he had. He drank, taking in the blood and power that was Minoru. His maker was attacking him, causing him pain and doing terrible injuries, but it seemed that as fast as Minoru could hurt him, his body healed. He did not know if this was normal or if this was the strangeness Minoru had felt and not understood, but it gave him power.

He was like an animal trapped and knowing that this was its last life or death struggle and he fought. There was a pressure in his mind, the child bond, but it could not break through his fury. His anger was like a shield and he drank and drank, taking everything he could from his creator. Pain was irrelevant, fear was irrelevant, all there was, was rage and hunger.

Eventually he felt Minoru stumble and begin to fall, weakening under his attack, but he did not let up. They landed in a heap of limbs, but he did not release his hold for a second. He could feel the power in the blood seeping into every cell in his body and as he became stronger so Minoru became weaker. The attack against him lost its ferocity and eventually Minoru was lying under him, unmoving, just sprawled on the floor.

He could hear Minoru's heartbeat slow and weakening; he could feel it running through him almost as if it was his own, and only when there was not a twitch from the vampire beneath him did he pull back. He looked down into almost dead eyes, seeing the spark of life just clinging on and his rage was almost complete. With a yell he lifted his arm and brought it down, claw-like hand slicing straight into Minoru's chest. He did not know what instinct drove him, but his fingers closed around the other vampire's heart and then he pulled with everything he had.

In the end, with vampire strength it was ridiculously easy to pull the still beating heart from Minoru's chest. It beat once and then twice in his hand and then it was still and the creature below him died with little more than a gurgle.

For a few moments Aya just knelt there over the body, breathing hard even though he didn't need to. There was the taste of blood in his mouth and he could feel it running down his chin and he could only imagine what he looked like. The heart in his hand became hard and when he closed his fingers on it the whole thing crumbled like soft stone. He just watched it fall, totally unable to scrape two thoughts together to do anything else.

The effects of drinking the blood of such a powerful vampire were making themselves known and he felt like he'd been on very strong alcohol, but without the complete lack of coordination. Yoji had managed to get him drunk once over the course of their acquaintance and he'd almost taken a header down the stairs; at least he didn't feel like that. However, his thoughts were pretty random and that one brought back the memory of his friends in the cells; his dying friends.

He pushed himself off Minoru's corpse, using the bed to stand himself up and then he ripped his bloodied shirt off and did his best to wipe himself clean. His body responded to him fast, faster even than it had before and he felt powerful and just a little bit invincible, but that didn't distract him from his purpose. There was only one way to save the others and thanks to Minoru's game he knew exactly what it was.

Staggering out of the door, he headed back to the cells.

The smell of human filled his senses, making him even giddier than he already felt, but he would not let himself fall. He had slept for a day and a half without realising it and he did not dare let himself rest in case he slept for as long again. His friends only had six hours left and he was not going to let them die.

There was a vague memory in the back of his mind that he desperately chased down. It had been stirred by what he had done to Minoru and he remembered fangs in his neck and a mouth drinking down his life until it was almost gone. He remembered being forced to drink in return, a coppery, salty taste that was nothing to the way blood tasted now and then the world had gone away until he had woken to the pain. Minoru had given him all the pieces and he knew how to make his friends like himself.

Staggering through the door, he made himself focus on his chosen task and he scanned the room until his eyes fell on the keys to the cells. They were hung on a hook just out of reach of anyone in the cells and Aya pushed himself off the doorframe, making his way towards them and using the wall to guide him. The longer Minoru's blood coursed round his body, the more inebriated he felt and he had to concentrate hard to keep his mind on what he was doing. It was as if he kept forgetting what he was doing and the wall gave him an anchor to keep him on the right path.

Once he had the keys he had to focus enough to open first one cell door and then the second one into the space where his friends were. Neither Ken, Yoji nor Omi reacted to any noise he was making and when he sat down on the bench next to them and reached out, Omi's hand was cold and almost lifeless.

"I'm sorry," he said even though he knew they couldn't hear him, and then he pulled Omi towards him.

He was not hungry; he had just gorged himself on Minoru's blood, but the sweet smell of human blood still made his teeth itch. A new addiction to deal with that at least worked in his favour now. Omi looked so pale in his arms, almost grey and it was as if he could feel the life draining away from his friend. He could definitely feel the taint of vampire power in the body in his arms and it hardened his resolve.

Blurred memories were not akin to proper instructions on how to do something, but he had no choice, so he lifted Omi, let his fangs descend and then bit down on the vulnerable neck. The moment blood hit his tongue he knew how out of his depth he was; he felt his power surging through him and the addiction took over. He drank like he was dying and this was his last meal and he could barely think about anything else. He wanted to drink for ever with Omi's heartbeat ringing in his ears and it was only the stuttering of that sound which dragged any part of his mind back from where it had gone.

He dragged his mouth away, moaning his distress to the world in general. His head was spinning and he could feel Omi dying and it was so difficult to think he almost didn't know what to do. For a few seconds he just stared down stupidly at Omi's pale features looking at the deep red blood all over Omi's neck. Only as the sound of his friend's heartbeat faltered again did he manage to push himself into action and he just did the first thing that came to mind. With one fang he ripped a jagged hole in his own wrist and, completely oblivious to the pain it should have caused, he thrust the bleeding limb against Omi's mouth, willing the blood to flow.

He kept feeling the wound trying to close, but a tiny part of him that was actually in control wouldn't let it and he felt it the moment Omi swallowed. It was like heat through every cell of his being and power flooded out of him into Omi. The sensation of the person behind the young face; the mental presence that was suddenly clear to him was mind blowing and again he was forced to hang on to his purpose with all the will he had.

This time when Omi's heartbeat fluttered he felt his power surge to hold it and it was as if Omi entered some sort of half life state. Aya couldn't explain it and he didn't really understand what was going on, but he could only assume he had been in this state before Minoru had woken him to feel his own death. Omi's breathing did not stop and his heartbeat was slow, but steady and Aya could feel his vampire power sustaining whatever was going on. He didn't know how long it

would take or when Omi would properly become like he was, so all he could do was continue with his task.

Ken was next and Aya gently placed Omi back against the wall before moving on and pulling Ken into his arms. This time he did not hesitate he just lent down and bit the ex-soccer player. It was just as bad as when he had bitten Omi, but he was more prepared this time and he managed to drag himself away before he took too much. When his blood flowed into Ken's mouth all he could do was drag that little piece of his mind away from what was happening as the rest of him was drowned by what he was feeling. Very little of his mind was still functioning and he just moved on instinct, putting Ken down and going on to Yoji.

He would not let them die; that was the only thought in his head and he kept going like an automaton. His rational mind was so far buried that when he finished with Yoji all he knew was to seek out human life and he couldn't stop. There were four other lives close; he could feel them and they were slipping away, so he just kept going.

====

Chapter 2 Lebenskraft (Life Force)

Ryuu walked into Minoru's lair with no more than a disdainful look at the human guards. He knew that his brother vampire would not like being interrupted while with a new child, but Minoru was far too indulgent for Ryuu's tastes anyway. He did not hold with the games that Minoru played and he rarely bothered to hide his dislike of the other vampire. If they had not been children of the same sire they would have been at war many times over by now, but loyalty to his sire was one thing Ryuu would never forget no matter how distasteful he found his blood brother.

The first thing he smelt when he walked into Minoru's rooms was death; true death not of a mortal and it drew him up short. He was over a century older than Minoru and hence, was more powerful, which meant in a fight he could easily beat his brother, but the scents reaching his nose spoke of a problem with the turning. It was possible Minoru had frenzied when trying to create another child and that made him more dangerous.

"Minoru, show yourself," Ryuu demanded without moving further into the lair.

If the turning had gone wrong Minoru would need help regaining his equilibrium and Ryuu would offer that at least; it was his duty. If his brother had not been such a conceited individual there would have been others to make sure these things could not happen, but it seemed that Minoru had finally discovered his folly.

When there was no response after nearly a minute Ryuu reached for the katana at his waist and drew it in one smooth move. He was willing to help his brother, but he was not about to put himself in danger. The smell of blood was so prevalent in the lair that it was difficult to identify where any particular smell was coming from and so he followed logic rather than his senses to try and find Minoru.

The cells were the most likely place for something to have gone wrong; facing a new vampire with killing those he had known could have caused him to frenzy and in turn encouraged the same reaction in Minoru. If Minoru had killed his new child it would have put him in a blood rage and he would have killed everything living around him.

The sight of a blood-haired, semi-naked young man lying in the entrance to the cells flanked on either side by what were clearly newly turned vampires caused him to stop again. Ryuu had heard that his brother had found another pretty thing that he wanted to turn into a vampire, but the situation did not seem to be like that at all. The power radiating off the red head spoke of a mature vampire and with seven newborns there had to be more around as well. Whatever games Minoru was playing, Ryuu liked them less and less by the second.

The redhead seemed to be out cold, but Ryuu approached carefully anyway and was rewarded for his caution when given time to fall back into a defensive stance as glowing lavender eyes flicked open. Power flooded off the stranger in an uncontrolled wave as the redhead came to his feet, snarling and placing himself in the doorway to the cells.

Ryuu had never felt another vampire throwing around power in such a transparent manner unless in frenzy and he remained very still to find out what the stranger would do. It was clear the redhead was not completely in control, which made him wonder what had been going on here, but he hoped he would not have to dispatch the vampire in front of him before he found out.

"I won't let you hurt them," were the rather unexpected words that the redhead finally spoke, voice clearly tinged with power.

The sound seemed to surprise the stranger if his expression was anything to go by, which Ryuu took as a positive sign that this was not a genuine challenge.

"I have no intention of doing so," Ryuu replied, lowering his sword, but not releasing it from the two handed grip so that he could react if necessary, "I am Ryuu, Master of Tokyo East. May I enquire as to who you are?"

"Abyssinian," was the almost remote reply; it was clear the redhead was still dazed.

It was not unusual for vampires to take on a title that was not their real name, but Ryuu had never heard of an Abyssinian. He wondered where Minoru had found such a powerful and beautiful ally.

"I came seeking Minoru since there are matters which require his presence," Ryuu continued, "I was led to believe that he was creating another child, but it seems that more has been going on here. It is possible one or more of those involved has frenzied; can you tell me how many of you there are?"

Now Abyssinian looked confused and Ryuu could not help wondering what had happened to the other vampire to throw him so out of kilter. It was not normal for one with that much power to lose control.

"Just me," was the short reply.

Ryuu's instinct was to confront such an obvious lie, but he sensed nothing but truth from Abyssinian. It began to dawn on him that Minoru may have been more of an idiot than Ryuu had ever given him credit for; it appeared as if he had tried the impossible. Turning seven new vampires, even with two masters, was unheard of; no one could do that without some serious consequences. It did rather explain Abyssinian's state, however.

"Where is Minoru?" Ryuu was losing patience with the whole situation; it was another of Minoru's games that others were going to have to clear up.

"Dead," was the one word reply that drew him back from thoughts of how he would like to teach his brother a lesson.

Abyssinian's stance was very defensive and Ryuu shifted his grip on his sword in case this came to blows. That Minoru had been playing with fire again was not hard to believe, but that the other vampire had finally lost was rather a shock. He could not say he would mourn the loss, but it took him a few moments to gather himself.

"How?" he asked, wishing to understand exactly how Minoru had met his fate.

There was silence for a while and Ryuu almost stepped further back when he saw Abyssinian's already glowing eyes take on a tinge of red, but the other vampire fought back the blood lust and the red disappeared again.

"I killed him," Abyssinian said in a perfectly cold tone.

Possible plots and all sorts of political games raced through Ryuu's head as he looked at the stranger in front of him who claimed to have killed his brother. None of this was making sense.

"Why?" he asked.

Challenges between master vampires were not uncommon, but they rarely resulted in death. Abyssinian must have been very serious in his political aspirations or had a very good reason to kill Minoru. It could have been revenge of course; Minoru had upset a great many people over his long life.

"He wanted me to kill my friends," Abyssinian said in an almost challenging manner.

Now it was Ryuu's turn to be confused; it seemed a very odd reason for challenging a master vampire. Leaving the city and going somewhere else would have been a much wiser move and vampires were very practical creatures. It sounded like the kind of thing Minoru would do to force out a possible rival, not the kind of thing that would lead to this.

"Which friends?" he asked, needing to know more to understand what he was being told.

"Them," was the curt reply and Abyssinian indicated the right cell where three of the new vampires were still slumbering unaware of what was going on around them.

The whole situation was not adding up and an impossible idea began to form in the back of Ryuu's mind.

"Who made them vampires?" he asked, not for a moment believing what his thoughts were whispering.

"I did," Abyssinian replied.

"And the others'?"

"I did," was repeated, but Abyssinian seemed somewhat confused about this.

The impossible was beginning to look less and less remote.

"Excuse me for being rude," Ryuu said carefully, because what he was about to ask was tantamount to outright insulting, "but what is your line?"

Abyssinian looked at him blankly.

"Who sired you?" Ryuu tried again.

Still nothing.

"Who made you?" he tried as a last ditch attempt.

"Minoru," was the reply tinged with resentment.

"When?" Ryuu was not sure he really wanted an answer.

The look he received from Abyssinian was confused and not very comforting.

"What day is it?"

Definitely not the question Ryuu wanted to hear. It had to be a lie, it simply had to be, but he had the gift of truth saying and he could find nothing in Abyssinian's tone that spoke of falsehood. The vampire in front of him could not be less than a week old; it was impossible.

"How did you kill him?" Ryuu needed to understand this; it was too important not to and his earlier question was now irrelevant.

It was clear the Abyssinian did not know how to take the question and seemed reluctant to answer, for which Ryuu could not blame him, but this was necessary.

"I swear I am not here to hurt you or yours," he said plainly, "but I must know what happened."

Still there was no response and Ryuu found himself becoming somewhat annoyed; he did not like situations he did not understand and this was definitely one of those.

"I drained him and then ripped his heart out," Abyssinian spoke just before Ryuu was about to demand an answer.

Ryuu let his sword fall to his side, since that decided everything really. It was not orthodox; it sounded completely crazy even to him, but Ryuu knew that whoever this man had been he had been turned by Minoru and had then successfully challenged his sire and killed him.

"Did Minoru explain anything about our ways to you?" he asked, almost sure he already knew the answer; Minoru had liked to keep his children as ignorant and helpless as possible for as long as possible.

There was no reply from the new vampire, but Ryuu took that as an affirmative.

"Minoru was Master of Tokyo West and my blood brother," Ryuu explained as if Abyssinian had replied, "my thanks for ridding the world of the creature I was bound by honour to support."

That made the other vampire appear first surprised and then suspicious. Whoever Abyssinian was he was not a trusting sort.

"Shouldn't you be bound by honour to avenge his murder then?" was the rather sensible question.

At that Ryuu smiled; such a mortal notion.

"Minoru was challenged and lost," he replied, letting his amusement at the situation show rather than his worry, "honour has been satisfied. Technically you are now Master of Tokyo West."

Abyssinian clearly did not believe that, but did not go so far as to say so. The glow of his eyes was, however, dying which indicated he was either tiring or becoming more comfortable with the situation.

"I don't want to be Master of anything," Abyssinian finally said, "I just want them safe." He pointed at the three new vampires in the left cage. "And them," he added looking at the four in the other cage in clear confusion.

Ryuu knew Minoru's methods; he had seen the friends and enemies game more than once and it did not take much to figure out that if the three in one cage were Abyssinian's friends then the others would have to be his enemies. Whatever had happened it had left Abyssinian with a child bond to his enemies, something which had to be very confusing.

"Tokyo West cannot be without a leader," Ryuu said, wishing to make the situation clear to the other vampire, "and you may abdicate in favour of another if you wish, but I would suggest waiting until you are aware of all the possibilities. Your victorious challenge against Minoru will protect you for thirty days."

"And them?" Abyssinian asked, glancing behind himself again.

"They are new," Ryuu decided that explaining everything was the least he could do for the vampire who had finally dealt with his brother, "and until the child bond is weak enough to allow independence they are protected as if they were part of you."

The last of the light died in Abyssinian's eyes and he suddenly looked very tired.

"Safe then?" the other vampire's voice had lost its firmness.

"Safe," Ryuu affirmed with a nod, "you have my word."

It seemed to be enough for Abyssinian and, as Ryuu watched, all the strength just seemed to flow out of the other vampire. It was like watching a flower wilt as first Abyssinian's head lolled forward slightly; then his knees weakened so that he was only standing because he was holding himself up using a bar of the cells; and slowly Abyssinian began to pitch forward. It was not the most graceful fall, but Ryuu had seen worse as the other vampire ended up lying almost in the same position as when he had first come in.

The whole situation was a mess and Ryuu began to try and figure out what to do about it as he sheathed his sword. Seven new vampires would need careful handling and Abyssinian might have been powerful, but he obviously had no control. Absorbing another vampire's power by draining them dry and then killing them was one way to increase in strength, but a younger vampire had to be insane to challenge an older one openly. Age brought power and in a direct challenge that usually indicated the victor. How a new born had destroyed Minoru was a question that would cause many vampires to lose sleep.

====

It had to be a nightmare, some fevered dream because of an injury or drug some enemy had pumped into his system; what he remembered could not be real, Aya was sure of it. Vampires did not exist; it was as simple as that. When he opened his eyes and allowed himself to take stock of his surroundings, Aya found out how very wrong he was.

To start with he was not alone. He was in a large bed in a large opulent room and there were the rest of Weiß and the whole of Schwarz with him. All the others seemed to be touching him somehow and they were an odd pile of bodies with him at the bottom. In such a position it was difficult not to notice that they were all very naked. If there had been an imminent threat Aya would have known what to do, but waking up in a pile of naked people had him completely at a loss. The only plus he could find about the whole situation was that he seemed to be a hell of a lot cleaner than he had been when he passed out.

Experimentally he tried to move his right arm from where Omi was curled around it. This resulted in Omi's grip becoming tighter and Aya failing to move more than a centimetre or so. It was very disconcerting and he considered forcing the issue, but he really didn't want to end up in the middle of an awake pile of naked people just yet if he could avoid it. He could just imagine how Yoji would react to their current predicament and trying to fight off a pissed off playboy as well as Schwarz was not an idea that appealed in the least.

He tried his left arm instead, the top of which Schuldig appeared to be using as a pillow. There was a noise of protest from the telepath, but Aya managed to pull his arm free and without waking completely Schuldig decided to use his chest as a pillow instead. It was somewhat of an out of the frying pan into the fire situation and he had an arm free now, but he was still completely surrounded.

"They will sleep for a while yet unless you wake them," a voice sounded from somewhere to the left and Aya looked over to find the man he remembered speaking to before. His memory was somewhat fuzzy over the details, but he could recall that the man's name was Ryuu.

He had noted then and he was taken again by how striking the man was. Where Minoru had been dark this man was light with long silver hair and pale eyes the colour of a husky's. There was no evidence of a weapon this time, which was at least a blessing.

"What's going on?" Aya asked, trying for cold and uncaring, but knowing he missed his aim badly.

"You seem much more lucid now," Ryuu said without answering the question, "do you remember our last conversation?"

The memories were not completely clear, but Aya remembered enough to know that he wished he didn't and he nodded.

"This is one of Minoru's guest rooms," Ryuu continued as soon as he gave the affirmative, "or yours now, I should say. I had you all bathed and brought here from the lair after you passed out."

Aya let his eyes run around the room again quickly, taking stock of it properly this time. If this had been a mission he would have been dead a hundred times over, but he just didn't seem to be able to focus on the problem at hand with any clarity at the moment. Everything was too distracting.

"Why are we all in the same bed?" he asked, sure it was probably a silly question as far as the other man was concerned, but needing to ask anyway.

"Parting a sire and child within the first day can cause discomfort to both parties," Ryuu explained without seeming to mind the duty. "The child bond between you and yours has been magnified for you because there are so many and it would not allow us to separate you without causing considerable distress to all of you, so you were placed here together. It has been an exhausting experience for all of you."

There was something that the other man was not saying, but Aya was not sure he wanted to know exactly what that was. He was already dealing with so many things and his mind still shied away from admitting the he was not in fact looking at a man, but a vampire. He knew no one in the room was breathing; it was an absence of noise that was all too obvious, but he could not quite bring himself to think the truth yet.

"Are you hungry?" the question caught him off guard and Aya realised he had been staring at the ceiling for a while.

He wasn't quite sure what Ryuu was asking, since things were far more complicated now, but his stomach gave a very human sounding growl causing the other vampire to smile at him.

"I will take that as a yes," Ryuu said and moved towards him. "Let me help you out of your predicament."

Aya accepted the help gratefully as with some careful manoeuvring and assistance from Ryuu he slowly began to free himself from his clingy pile of vampire children. It took them a good fifteen minutes, but eventually Aya found himself sitting on the bed free of the others.

"Do not try and move too far away," Ryuu said as Aya went to stand up, "it will cause you some distress for a while yet. The bonds pulling you in seven different directions will be very uncomfortable. I will bring you a robe."

Sometimes Aya could be stubborn to the point of pigheadedness, but this time he did as he was told. He could feel the difference even now he was simply not in physical contact with the pile and he did not wish to find himself in a heap on the floor. Being reliant on the other vampire was bad enough, let alone showing that much weakness. He was much happier after Ryuu passed him a robe and he was no longer naked.

"The young ones have been fed while you were asleep," Ryuu began to say and then smiled to himself, "or, excuse me, in your case, younger ones; you radiate

such power that it is difficult to remember you are so young yourself. None of them have woken up properly yet, but they were compliant enough for us to make sure the hunger did not cause them discomfort. You, on the other hand would not accept anything, so I would suggest you drink the blood before you attempt to eat any of the food. Our systems react far better to normal food once our other needs have been seen to."

Ryuu placed a large tray full of different dishes onto the bed beside Aya. There was also a glass of red liquid that made his nose twitch.

"How long have we been asleep?" he asked, reaching for the glass without protest.

He was still very unsure of the situation, but he saw no point in ignoring his body's needs.

"Approximately twelve hours," Ryuu replied, sitting down on a chair just to the side. "I am sorry, but I do not know how long you were lying in Minoru's lair before I found you."

Aya was going to reply, but, as it was, he took a sip from the glass first and he totally forgot what he wanted to say. Every single thought flew out of his head and he almost dropped the glass. When he came back to himself Ryuu was standing directly in front of him, holding his hand that held the glass to stop it falling.

"Take it slowly," Ryuu told him, even as he looked round in panic and saw the pile of men on the bed moving.

He felt an amazing amount of relief when none of those sleeping actually awoke.

"What was that?" he asked, since it did not feel like when he had fed before, even when he had drained Minoru.

"You experienced a power spike," Ryuu told him, carefully releasing him and letting him sit on his own again. "Minoru's power is now yours, but you never had a chance to even learn how to handle your own and it is a matter of adjustment. All vampire power reacts to blood; it is a fundamental rule of our nature, you just have to be ready for it. Before you take your next sip, brace yourself; eventually it will become second nature."

Aya nodded; it made a vague amount of sense. Willing himself to stay focused, he lifted the glass to his lips again. He felt the power rise in him as soon as the blood touched his lips and his thoughts tried to fly apart, but he wouldn't let them and he grimly held himself in check. It was hard, but then very little was easy if it was worth doing and he knocked back the rest of the glass in one swig. He almost lost his grip, but held back the power just.

"An incredible will," Ryuu observed calmly; "I can see what attracted my despot brother to you. You will make a formidable master vampire."

For a moment Aya just sat there, but he felt the anger bubbling in side of him.

"I don't want to be a master vampire," he said in a viciously low hiss; "I want to go back to my life. I don't want to be weirdly bonded to people I should hate. I want to be able to save my sister. This is not my life."

He knew it petulant and childish, but he couldn't help the outburst. Usually he hid behind the mask of cold bastard, but that just wasn't working at the moment.

"I can't change any of it, can I?" he said after a few moments.

Ryuu appeared sympathetic and gave him an almost sad nod.

"My brother was a despicable creature," Ryuu said in a very calming tone; "he enjoyed games. Had he not been my blood brother I would have destroyed him long ago, but honour is the only thing that keeps our society functioning. Without declaring war between my side of Tokyo and his there was nothing I could do to stop him."

"He enjoyed destroying lives," Aya responded, trying to push his anger back down; "lives are not games."

This time Ryuu did not reply for a long time.

"I know," the other vampire replied, "but we must all live with the tiles we are dealt."

That was something Aya knew all too intimately already, but he didn't have to like it. He picked up one of the bowls from the tray and began to eat without really taking any notice of what he was eating; he didn't care, he just needed the food.

"You could look on this as a chance to start again," Ryuu said in what was a gentle tone; "you are Master of Tokyo West, whether you like it or not, and that is a very powerful position from which to start even if you do not choose to maintain it."

Aya really didn't want to be master of anything; he just wanted to keep his sister safe and now all these other urges were piling in on top of that as well. He felt the need to protect the others on the bed and it was filling him with conflict.

"I don't understand what it means to be Master of Tokyo West," he finally decided he might as well learn as much as he could. "Surely no one will accept me even if I wanted the position."

At that Ryuu smiled again.

"No one would dare challenge you," the older vampire said, tucking his silver hair behind his ear; "you have done the impossible; you have killed your sire and successfully created seven vampire children without destroying yourself. Your position would be secure even without the thirty day window of safety. Minoru's lieutenants are now yours; they will obey your orders as if you were Minoru, I just don't suggest you trust any of them."

"I don't know how I did either of those things," Aya admitted and he wasn't sure why he did, but he felt like he could talk to Ryuu; he really had little choice given that Ryuu was his only source of information.

"It makes no difference," Ryuu told him in what Aya thought was an honest way, "you still did it. There is something highly unusual about you, Abyssinian, and none of us know what it is."

"Aya," he said, before he really considered why, "my name is Aya."

He was not sure why he trusted Ryuu; there was no reason for him to, but when he looked in the other vampire's eyes he saw the opposite to Minoru and he could not argue with it. His instincts about people had always been good, but he didn't usually trust for a long time.

"Thank you, Aya," Ryuu replied, as if he understood that knowing that was a privilege. "Perhaps now would be a good time to ask questions?"

That was a bit of a joke; Aya had so many questions he didn't know where to start. He looked down at his bowl of food and then at the empty glass he had drunk first.

"Do we have to kill?" he asked as what he was jumped to the forefront of his mind again.

"No," Ryuu replied, clearly feeling his discomfort; "Minoru liked to, but it is not necessary. There are those who willingly come to us as donors and blood is available in bottles as well. We have laws to prevent mortals from finding out about us, but killing is only a last resort for most of our kind. It is too messy, enough reason for some, and others of us find it wasteful and unpalatable."

That at least made Aya feel a little better; he was already a killer and he did not like the idea of having to add to that just to sustain himself.

"We are predators, Aya," Ryuu told him gently, "but our prey does not have to die."

He nodded, showing his understanding.

Crawford shifted on the bed as if dreaming and Aya found his eyes checking over the man without his conscious consent. They had only ever been enemies, but he couldn't help himself and it annoyed him.

"You will feel protective for some time," Ryuu said and he realised he must have been showing what he was feeling all over his face. "The child bond exists to prevent vampires killing those they make. The process pushes a vampire to extremes and without the bond a maker would be as likely to kill their child as to protect them. It will fade to less noticeable levels in a few weeks."

"But not completely?" Aya asked, catching the omission in his companion's explanation.

"No," Ryuu confirmed, "not completely; it will never disappear completely, but as well as placing a burden on you it does give you a measure of control. No vampire is ever completely free from their maker unless their maker is dead. Most of us do not wish to be."

It was not a reprimand, but Aya could not help wondering what made him so different. He had felt the power of Minoru's control, but it was as if it had only affected part of him. It made him feel alien even in this strange new world that had been revealed to him. That thought led him on to the four members of Schwarz; they made everything that much more complicated.

"Those four are talents," he said, indicating the enemy assassins; "will becoming vampires change that?"

Ryuu did not seem overly surprised by the revelation, which was at least one thing.

"Unlikely," was the calm response; "becoming a vampire can trigger latent talents within normal humans, but does not tend to affect such things in those already so gifted. Age will probably enhance their talents, but time does that with most things when it comes to us."

That set Aya's mind turning as he considered the conundrum in front of him; Schwarz and Weiß had never been friendly and the whole situation was going to have to be handled carefully. He had no idea what he could or could not control with the child bond and he only hoped it worked better on Crawford and his team than it had on him.

"If it makes you feel any more secure," Ryuu said and he realised he had become lost in his thoughts again; "I have never heard of a vampire able to resist the child bond as you did."

Aya appreciated the effort, but still continued planning how to mitigate as many of the risks as possible. An all out pitched battle between Weiß and Schwarz would not be good for any of them. The morbid part of his psyche did point out it might be better just to get it over with and let Schwarz kill him, but he didn't listen to that little voice very often and ignored it easily.

"Thank you," he said and rather surprised himself; he was not usually known for his manners, since he had put those away with his innocence. "What happens now?" he added as he tried to plan what to do next.

"No one will bother you for a few days," Ryuu told him; "it is not done to impose on a maker with a new child, but after that Minoru's lieutenants will want to meet you. I will tell you more about them closer to the time if you are willing?"

Aya nodded; spreading out the information was only sensible.

"They will probably test you in their own ways, but I will give you advice on how to deal with them when the time comes," Ryuu assured him. "For now I would suggest you concentrate on your own clan."

Aya nodded again and sorted out the questions in his head accordingly; he needed to learn and he needed to learn fast, so he organised his thoughts. It was just like a mission, all about the details, and he began to ask what he needed to know.

====

Ryuu had given him any information he had asked for and then suggested he get some more rest before leaving to return to his own duties. He had promised to return in a few hours and Aya was trying to feel confident, but the older vampire's presence was calming and without it he was brooding. He was a natural brooder, always had been, and it rarely helped, but he couldn't change his nature.

He had tried to sleep, but his mind was working too fast, so he had been sitting in one of the western style chairs just watching the pile of bodies that constituted his clan. Since he had killed his maker he was head of his own clan, something with its own set of complications if Ryuu was to be believed, but something that made certain aspects of his position easier as well. He owed allegiance to no one

which meant he didn't have to worry about the protocol of such things, but it also meant he was on his own. Ryuu seemed to like him, but he was well aware the older vampire had other priorities than him.

It had to be the hundredth time he was going over things in his head when he felt something moving at the back of his mind. When he glanced up at the bed he saw that Omi was shifting a little and he realised his youngest friend was only just drifting below waking. He had decided that talking to each one of those on the bed separately was the best way forward and would hopefully stop group apoplexy, so he uncurled from the chair and walked the short distance before sitting down on the mattress. He really wasn't sure about the whole child bond thing, but he felt for his connection to Omi and then just thought about urging his friend to wake up. It didn't take long.

Confused blue eyes blinked up at him and then a frown appeared on Omi's face to go with the expression in his eyes.

"Aya?" the youngest member of Weiß asked before glancing at the rest of the bed.

Aya saw Omi's eyes open in shock as he took in the pile of bodies on the bed and then the teenager was looking back at him.

"What's happening, Aya?"

There was such trust in the gaze looking at him that Aya felt like a fraud. They may have been dying, but Aya was all too aware that he had done this; he had taken the choice away from every one of his team mates and the members of Schwarz as well.

"I'm sorry, Omi," he said, meaning every word; "this is my fault."

Omi frowned again.

"We were on a mission," Omi said slowly, clearly trying to sort out his memory, "and ... and there were people waiting for us. Why?"

"Someone wanted me and they took us all," Aya said honestly; if it had not been for him none of this would have happened, "and Schwarz as well. He wanted me to kill you all and I..."

His words ran out and he had to look away. He wanted to confess, but he didn't know how to tell Omi that he was something that existed only in myth and legend. Vampires did not walk around modern Tokyo, not in their old reality. He tried to find his usual mask of disdain, but it appeared to be missing.

"Aya," Omi's voice was gentle and it surprised Aya into looking back at the youngest Weiß, "it is not your fault that someone chose to target you. Please tell me what happened."

"Minoru," Aya forced the word through his teeth, "his name was Minoru."

"Was?" Omi asked, seemingly far calmer than Aya had expected.

"I killed him," Aya replied and could not keep the satisfaction out of his voice.

He did not relish killing even though he did it for a living, but destroying Minoru was second in his heart only to killing Takatori.

"Good," was Omi's opinion on the matter.

Aya tried to find the words he really did, but they just weren't there and he fell back on what Ryu had told him. He looked into Omi's eyes and he felt for the child bond. His instincts seemed to understand where he did not and he reached out along the bond and simply showed Omi the truth. He showed him everything from first seeing them in the cells, through almost killing Omi, right up to taking them into his arms and draining each of them dry.

"Scheiße," the loud exclamation from beside him broke Aya out of his connection with Omi and he turned in time to see Schuldig sitting up and clutching his head, "not so loud."

Whatever he had initiated with Omi it was clear to Aya that it had caused Schuldig some discomfort, and unfortunately he was not prepared for an awake German telepath. It took the other assassin a second to realise that something was very strange, but then piercing blue eyes were looking directly at Aya. He watched instinct cut in as Schuldig simply reacted as he saw two Weiß and Aya felt a presence invade his mind. Schuldig was not aiming for subtle and it was a blunt force attack that Aya knew should have sent his mind reeling.

As it was it hurt, but he sensed something inside him rise to meet the threat. He felt his fangs shifting in his mouth as power flared throughout his body and his vision brightened as if the room was in full daylight rather than low torch flame.

"Enough," he all but growled and forced the attack back on the telepath.

In that instant he knew Schuldig's mind was completely vulnerable to him down the child bond that connected them, a telepath's mind being far more open than that of a normal human's, but he held himself back. He was annoyed at Schuldig's attempt, but part of him felt irritatingly protective as well, which was incredibly confusing. For his part, Schuldig was sitting there with a completely stunned expression on his face.

The incident did, however, have the worrying effect of making such a fuss that everyone else on the bed began stirring as well. Aya's plan to wake each person separately in a controlled manner went out of the window as every single person still lying down moved. When he saw Nagi focus on him and react in shock he knew he had to do something before the telekinetic panicked and did something dangerous. The fact that the other members of Schwarz could be problematic did occur to him, but Nagi was his biggest worry.

He did not wait for his words to run out as he had done with Omi, he just opened the connection between himself and Nagi and threw everything he could at the boy. He vaguely heard Schuldig moaning in pain, but there was no time to be subtle and after all the pain the telepath had caused him in the past he did not feel overly sympathetic; there was only so far that the child bond affected him.

For this to work everyone had to understand and as he communicated with Nagi he held nothing back. If nothing else Aya had always been practical and he put aside personal considerations to make sure they did not all end up properly dead before the situation could become clear. It worked as he saw Nagi relax slightly; not completely but enough that Aya was sure nothing would happen yet. At that moment he was very glad Ryu had helped him to extricate himself from the pile

of bodies and given him a robe; he had not been able to move away from the bed, but it gave him an advantage over every one else.

"This has to be the craziest nightmare yet."

It was Yoji's voice that broke the silence.

"If this is a nightmare then you and me are having the same one," Ken decided before he looked up at Aya.

With the danger of the situation Aya had not dared to let his vampire power fade and Ken's eyes opened wide in shock and horror. He had yet to see himself with his vampire traits revealed, but Aya was beginning to think it was striking from the way the others were reacting. The effect of all seven waking in less than calm circumstances was quite disorientating for Aya as the child bonds with each of them flared with anxiety from most of them and equally emotive sensations from the others.

Yoji swore very colourfully when the playboy of Weiß sat up and saw who he was in bed with, but he fell completely silent when he looked at Aya. It was more unsettling to see Yoji lost for words than any of the imaginative curses the assassin had been using before. Aya was used to Yoji being a loud mouth; he was not used to Yoji losing the ability to speak. He was too unsettled by the turmoil from the child bonds to use the connections to his advantage and he had no words so he just sat there.

"Vampire," Farferello was the one who voiced what everyone else had to have been thinking.

The insane assassin sounded somehow pleased and Aya was not sure if he should be offended. Then Farferello seemed to realise something else as Aya found himself looking at a fully revealed vampire with one glowing eye and long white fangs. The whole thing seemed to delight the berserker and the man laughed and rolled onto his back, totally uninhibited. For a moment Aya was jealous.

"We're all vampires," he said, putting his own vampire traits back in the box.

"And naked," Yoji added, apparently recovering enough to be sarcastic, "you forgot naked."

"That's not my fault," Aya replied, since he was not taking responsibility for that part.

He had not asked Ryu to have them all bathed and then not give them any clothes.

"But the vampire part is?" Ken sounded very confused.

Aya wasn't quite sure what to say, after all it was true.

"Why are we undead, Abyssinian?" Crawford sounded as cold as usual on the outside, but Aya could feel the anxiety his child was not showing the rest of the world.

"He did it by accident," Nagi finally chose to enter the conversation with his quiet, interested tones.

"You don't make a vampire by accident," Schuldig said in a petulant manner; the telepath seemed to be sulking.

"Apparently you do," Crawford said and Aya found questioning eyes looking at him.

When he glanced around every one except Omi and Nagi was looking at him the same way.

"After two I don't remember very much," he said shortly, "and I couldn't stop. You would be dead by now anyway."

"They're the enemy, Aya," Ken sounded confused and exasperated, "couldn't you have done something when you woke up."

Normally Aya was a very difficult person to fluster, but today was too much and he did not know how to answer all the questions. His friends seemed disappointed in him and most of the enemy was glaring at him. It felt like the world was closing in on him and he wanted to just run; he hadn't felt like that since Aya-chan had been first hurt.

"Aya sired all of you," he had never felt such relief as when he heard Ryuu's voice, "and the child bond demands that he protect you. Until that has run its course there is nothing any of you can do to free yourselves."

Aya disagreed with that point of view since there was one way; he had demonstrated it with Minoru.

"But he killed his sire," Schuldig seemed to be sorting out some of the information he had mentally overheard.

"A feat which should have been impossible, I assure you," Ryuu said and seemed amused by the observation.

Crawford's hand went out and touched Farferello's shoulder almost instantly.

"You die," was the simple pronouncement from the precog before the other assassin sat back without question.

Aya couldn't shake the feeling Farferello had just been interested in trying for the sake of it and that was the last straw for him and he climbed off the bed and walked away even though his instincts screamed at him that he should be doing no such thing. He swore quite colourfully, but he was more annoyed with himself than anyone else.

"Does this often does he?" were the conversational words from Crawford that brought him back from where his mind had been heading.

"No," it was Yoji who spoke and he sounded confused, "not usually."

"Don't push him, Yoji," Omi said quietly and Aya gave his friend a look of thanks.

Yoji looked like he was about to argue, but Ryuu stepped forward and only then did Aya realise the older vampire was carrying an arm load of yakutas.

"I believe you may feel more at ease with these," Ryuu said, as calm as ever and placed the robes on the bed.

Yoji grabbed one instantly and stood up, shrugging it onto his lean frame quickly. If asked before, Aya would have thought Yoji would have been the least uncomfortable with being naked, but clearly something about the situation had their playboy spooked. Possibly it was the semi-hardon that Aya saw being quickly covered; Yoji was nothing if not very, very straight.

At least everyone covering themselves up gave Aya a little breathing space and he did his best to calm himself down, but there were emotions flying at him down the child bond from seven different directions and he was having a little trouble keeping himself on an even keel. It didn't help when Crawford chose to walk towards the other side of the room and Aya suddenly felt a very distinct desire to walk back from his side. Luckily for him Crawford stopped, looked put out, but turned and walked back.

"That," the precog said carefully and clearly, "was unpleasant."

"There being so many of you has increased the effect," Ryu said as if he was the fount of all knowledge; "it will dissipate slowly over the next few days."

"We're stuck in here with them for days?" Schuldig sounded indignant.

"Hey," Ken replied, hands on hips and bristling for a fight if Aya was any judge, "it's not like we find your presence overly entertaining either."

"At least I don't have stupid bits of rubbish floating through my head all the damn time," Schuldig spat back.

"Mind your own business and you'll be fine," Yoji joined in.

"It doesn't work that way, Dumkopf," was the instant response.

Farfarello began to laugh and Aya couldn't take it anymore.

"Enough!" he roared, power lancing down the child bonds and reverberating through his voice.

Everyone cringed, including Ryu and Aya felt like he was coming undone at the seams. He'd been a vampire under three days and he was supposed to be a master vampire and it was a little too much for him. His instincts were flying in a hundred different directions and everything seemed just slightly surreal, so much so that he didn't even realise he was falling until his legs were collapsing underneath him. It was more than a little surprising to find that it was Crawford who caught him before he hit the ground.

One of the things he hated most in the world was feeling helpless, but the room was spinning and the only thing preventing him ending up in a heap was Crawford. He didn't like it, but it wasn't as if he could do anything about it.

"I can drop you if you would prefer," Crawford said, clearly guessing what he was thinking and he growled in the back of his throat, but did not try and push away as he wanted to do.

"Aya," Omi sounded worried when he appeared on his other side and what perturbed Aya somewhat was that he had not noticed Omi's approach.

"If you would be so kind as to bring him over here," Ryu said and Aya would have objected if he'd been able to see straight, but as it was he found himself in the chair before he could complain.

He blinked and tried to keep Ryu in focus as the older vampire bent over him.

"It is what I feared might happen," Ryu said while giving him the once over, "you are expending too much energy, Aya."

Since Aya had been mostly sitting down and doing nothing he couldn't understand how that could be right.

"He only walked across the room," Ken pointed out so he didn't have to voice his own opinion.

"Creating another vampire is not a singular act," Ryu said, standing up and giving Aya some breathing space; "it is ongoing. Aya is partially maintaining you all while you continue to change and it is taxing his reserves."

That made more sense, but Aya didn't like it. He liked it even less when Ryu rolled up his sleeve and presented him with his wrist.

"Do not look at me like that," Ryu said, seemingly amused by his reaction; "another master's blood is the only thing that will help you. By all means refuse if you would prefer to fall on your face every time you stand up. Now that your clan are awake they are demanding more energy from you and it is not going to improve for at least another day."

Aya glared since he was feeling petulant, but when Ryu raised an eyebrow at him he reached out and took the offered wrist. After their talk earlier he knew that Ryu was being incredibly generous, but the way the room was lurching was not helping him to feel grateful. It didn't really help either that he was aware all eyes were on him, but he did his best to remember that being practical was the only reason he was still alive and he let his fangs descend.

Ryu's blood was rich and deep and gave him an entirely different feeling to Minoru's; there was the same age and power, but it was calm and controlled. Reality flipped out for a little while as his own power tried to spike and couldn't, but was met with Ryu's to bolster it and he came back to himself only to find that the whole thing was over. Ryu was crouched down in front of him looking directly into his face and he could still taste blood in his mouth, but he definitely no longer had his fangs in Ryu's wrist. It was very disconcerting.

"Feeling better?" Ryu asked in a sympathetic manner.

Aya just blinked, but gradually began to realise that he did indeed feel more with it.

"Yes," he replied slowly, "thank you."

"You're welcome," Ryu replied and smiled. "I think it will be better if I remain here for now. I shall send word to one of my lieutenants."

"That's not..." Aya began to say, but Ryu silenced him with a look.

"You are possibly the most stubborn man I have ever met," Ryuu told him, much to Schuldig's amusement it seemed because the telepath began to laugh, "and it is necessary. Now I think it is time to make sure everyone else is fed as well."

Discretion being the better part of valour, Aya chose not to argue and he let Ryuu organise everything to his heart's content. He just sat still and watched everyone being presented with food and a goblet of blood. Their reactions were interesting if nothing else.

Farfarello fell on the blood like it was the best thing he'd ever seen and had to be admonished by Crawford with a 'Don't play with your food'. Aya wasn't sure he wanted to know what Farfarello would have done if the instruction hadn't been given and, as it was, drank it very noisily and with far more relish than Aya thought healthy.

Crawford sipped his cautiously and then polished the rest off as if it was nothing more than a glass of wine. Aya could feel more coming from Crawford, but he was not about to embarrass the man by saying so.

In contrast Schuldig looked at his dubiously and then moaned very loudly and said something in German that Aya didn't understand when he finally took a sip. It seemed the telepath liked the effect the blood had on him a great deal.

Nagi simply looked at his goblet and then knocked it back in a calm and efficient manner. The boy blinked a bit afterwards, but that was the only outward sign everything was not normal.

Weiß were no less divergent in their attitudes either. Omi sipped his and then grinned before drinking it down like fruit juice. It was clear he liked it.

Ken looked like he expected it to taste horrible and hence appeared shocked when he took his first swig and it wasn't. Then he drank the rest slowly as if savouring every mouthful.

That just left Yoji who watched everyone else before he even picked up his goblet. Yoji being the careful, cautious one was unusual, but Aya had learned that it meant Yoji was at least taking everything seriously. The first thing Yoji did after the initial sip was blush and Aya felt the burst of arousal that came from his team mate. Before he even tried to process that his eyes zeroed in on Schuldig who had to have picked up Yoji's reaction, just by a different route.

"Don't," he sent at the telepath silently, "please."

He did not make it a command, he did not want to have to, but he was willing to if necessary. That Yoji appeared to be hardwired was not really a huge shock, after all sex had always seemed to be on Yoji's mind, but Aya did not want Schuldig embarrassing Yoji in front of the others. He looked Schuldig directly in the eye and the German looked back, defiance showing, but eventually the other man nodded. If the others noticed anything about Yoji's behaviour they did not voice it either, which Aya counted as a victory.

The current group was not going to be comfortable, but it seemed they were all practical when they had to be. That was going to have to be enough for the time being.

=====

After being fed everyone began to look sleepy again, something which Ryuu assured them was perfectly normal. Aya did not object when some of the others demanded sleeping rolls so they didn't have to all end up in the same bed again, even though he suspected it wouldn't last. After a quiet discussion with Ryuu where the other master vampire urged him to sleep as well, he climbed onto the bed and lay down. Omi was the only one who joined him, lying down so they were back to back, and he felt Omi fall asleep almost immediately. The others all had their bed rolls and there was a lot of shuffling going on and Aya just waited. He was well aware he was not going to be able to sleep until all the others had drifted off and he knew this wasn't going to work.

Surprisingly it was Farfarello who moved first, climbing onto the bed and settling down at the end like some human sized dog just lightly touching Aya's feet. Ken came next, lying next to Omi and throwing an arm over so that his fingers just brushed Aya's arm, and he was followed by a mentally swearing Schuldig. It seemed the telepath liked to share his pain and Aya just gave him a glare until the man settled down. Nagi soon wormed his way onto the bed between Schuldig and Aya, wiggling until he found a comfortable spot. Aya was interested to notice that Schuldig did not complain in the slightest and let Nagi settle where he wanted.

That just left Crawford and Yoji and Crawford eventually climbed onto the bed as if that was what he had meant to do all the time. For all Aya knew it was and Crawford had only been pretending to hold out for his team. That left Yoji and it was another ten minutes before the playboy of the group finally gave up and moved onto the bed. Aya pretended to already be asleep when Yoji lay down behind Ken and threw an arm across the top of the bed so that his hand rested in Aya's hair.

Only when Yoji finally drifted off did Aya let himself relax completely and he let go of his hold on the real world. Ryuu had promised to watch over them and it was so tiring just staying awake so falling asleep was surprisingly easy. His dreams were blissfully blank.

What woke him was distress and it turned out to be from a very unlikely source. When he opened his eyes they had all moved into more of the pile they had been in when he first woke and his eyes zeroed in on Crawford. The precog's face was twitching in his sleep and Aya knew instinctively that something was not right. As he watched more than Crawford's face began to twitch and it did not look like the precog was just dreaming, in fact it looked like he was having some sort of fit.

"Crawford," he said, reaching out and hoping that he was misinterpreting what he was seeing.

That caused Schuldig to shift and when Crawford rolled onto his back and just kept twitching, Aya knew something was wrong.

"Schuldig," he said, shaking the telepath and sitting up.

Schuldig was groggy when he opened his eyes, but, as Aya moved, Schuldig seemed to realise something was wrong and turned.

"Scheiße," Schuldig said very loudly as soon as the telepath saw Crawford and the man rolled onto his knees leaning over the precog.

Aya could feel that Schuldig was doing something so he did not interrupt, but he was becoming more worried by the second.

"Bradley don't you dare," he heard Schuldig say.

What made his anxiety spike was the fear he felt coming from the telepath.

"What is it?" he asked, needing to know what was going on.

"He's lost," Schuldig said, glaring at Aya as if this was his fault. "I've never seen it this bad."

"Lost?" Aya didn't understand. "Lost where?"

"In time," Schuldig replied as if it was obvious. "He didn't foresee this; it's wrecked his timeline and it's rebuilding in his head, but he's lost it. I have to get him back or he could stay lost for good."

Aya had never thought of being precognitive as being a dangerous talent, but he did not argue with Schuldig.

"How?" he asked simply and Schuldig looked surprised as his acceptance.

"I need to find him, guide him back to now," the telepath told him, "but he's not there. So much is changing he's too far gone."

Aya could still feel Crawford, but it appeared Schuldig could not and Aya looked over to where Ryu was watching them with a worried frown. The others were waking around them, but Aya ignored them; he could sense Crawford slipping away.

"Use me," he said, making a split second decision, "I can still feel him."

He held out his hand, placing the other on Crawford's twitching arm. Now Schuldig appeared even more shocked, but it only took a second for the telepath to make his choice and Aya felt his hand grabbed in a vice like grip. He did not resist as he felt Schuldig's mind invade his own and arrow along the child bond. The fact that he was dragged along with Schuldig was not something he had expected, but he couldn't stop it and he found himself in a mess of confusion. It was like thousands of wires all tangled together with flashes of things leaping out at him from all angles and the only firm thing was Schuldig's unwavering presence.

Keeping his mental eyes on Schuldig was the only thing keeping his sanity together and he followed the telepath doggedly. He could sense that Crawford was close, but he had no idea how Schuldig was following the trail, as far as he was concerned it was a continually changing maze.

"Brad," he heard Schuldig call out and then he saw it, a figure through the chaos.

The thing was it wasn't the figure of the severe bastard of a man Aya had come to respect as an enemy; this figure was a young boy, no more than ten or eleven. The boy was standing in the chaos staring at it as if he could see to infinity.

"Brad," Schuldig repeated while Aya just tried to hang on, "look at me."

The boy did not move and just continued staring straight ahead.

"Bradley," Schuldig said again, more firmly.

"Can we go and get him?" Aya needed something to focus on so he asked a question.

"He has to come to us," Schuldig replied in a very short tone.

The wires and the flashes seemed to be closing in and Aya was not sure how much more he could take. If this was what Crawford lived with he had a new respect for the man.

"Brad," Schuldig continued to call and Aya knew he had to help.

Not really knowing what he was doing, but following half understood instincts he used the supernatural power now within him and joined it with Schuldig's. The next time Schuldig called Crawford's name it reverberated around like a never ending echo and at last Crawford moved. The boy turned and looked at them, big eyes blinking behind huge glasses and Schuldig held out a hand.

It was agonising to watch as the boy slowly turned and faltering step by faltering step, gradually approached them. Only as Schuldig's hand finally grasped the little boy's did Aya feel any relief as all and as Schuldig pulled the boy in close, so he wound his arms around them both. It felt like the only thing to do even though he was definitely not a touchy feely person.

When he opened his eyes next it was to the real world and he immediately wished he hadn't. His head pounded as if he had been drinking heavily for days and even the low light in the room really hurt his eyes.

"Bradley, you better be listening to me," Schuldig sounded about as with it as Aya felt, but also seemed to know how to cope.

"Schuldig, shut up," was the terse response from Crawford, which gave Aya more relief that he felt was probably healthy given that the man was the enemy.

Lines were definitely blurring and it was all too much to think about right at that moment.

"Aya, are you okay?" Omi was leaning over him looking worried.

When he had ended up lying down again he wasn't sure, but even that took too much brain power to think about.

"Sleep now," was all he said, feeling the need in every cell of his body.

He hadn't meant it to be anymore than an indication of what he intended to do, but his instincts appeared to have other ideas as he watched Omi's face go from alert to lax and sleepy in a heart beat. The fact that Omi just lay down on his chest and went straight to sleep might have seemed odd if he had had that much ability to think left, but all he felt was the peace of his entire clan dropping off. It didn't take more than thirty seconds for him to close his eyes and join them.

====

Chapter 3 Klan (Clan)

When Aya woke up properly his head still hurt and he was very warm because there were seven people almost lying on him. Feeling more than a little peevish, he sat up, regardless of what it did to those around him and then climbed off the

bed. Ryuu just seemed amused at his annoyed expression and didn't comment as he marched to the bathroom. A shower seemed like a really good idea and he was pissed off enough not to give a damn about the fact that the child bond did not like being quite that far away.

"Bastard!" was Schuldig's unhappy mental comment and Aya just sent back white noise.

The fact that it felt perfectly normal to do so perturbed him for a few moments, but then he climbed into the shower and turned it on and the hot water made him forget everything else. It was wonderful and if he'd been a more hedonistic person he would have stayed there for hours, as it was he allowed himself to indulge for long enough to wash his hair and his body and then he stepped out.

After drying himself off and re-robing he stepped back into the other room mentally prepared to face whatever life had planned for him next. What he didn't exactly expect to find was four of the others sat outside the door against the wall in a neat row.

"My turn," Yoji crowed and darted into the bathroom the moment Aya was clear of the door.

Aya lifted an eyebrow and then looked at Schuldig, Omi and Nagi who, it seemed, were waiting in line. There was still a throbbing behind his right eye, but the scene of domestic harmony was at least a little amusing. He didn't smile, but he could tell Schuldig had picked up what he was thinking.

"Given all the lovely images you were broadcasting," the telepath told him with a grin, "we all want a go."

He could have reacted to that, but Aya was way beyond anything like embarrassment, so he just rolled his eyes and turned his back on the German. Almost instantly his eyes fell on the small piles of clothes set out on the far table and he recognised his own things to one side.

"I took the liberty of sending someone to acquire some of your belongings," Ryuu said as Aya walked over.

Aya gave a nod of thanks and immediately repossessed his own clothes. It was just some underwear, a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, but they were his and it made all the difference. Being in control was important to him and he slipped on the underwear quickly before discarding the robe and pulling on the jeans. It wasn't really much and Ryuu kept telling him that everything that was Minoru's was now his anyway, but it felt good. He was just putting his head through the t-shirt when he felt something coming from Yoji. Pausing he tried to figure out what it was in case it was something important, but then he saw Schuldig grinning and the penny dropped.

Normally he would have rolled his eyes and ignored it, after all it wouldn't have been the first time he had caught Yoji wanking in the shower, their playboy never did understand the word 'private', but his mind had been on Minoru and the feelings from Yoji brought back what the monster had done to him. He ruthlessly pushed aside the memories of being used and of how his body had responded and seemed to enjoy it, but not before he shuddered violently from head to foot. He could not show weakness, not now, and he drew his cold shield around him as well as he could. However, when he looked up he saw something passing between Schuldig and Crawford and he realised he had been too late.

"You need to feed," Ryu said, walking up beside him and conveniently covering for him with the others.

Aya just nodded and followed when Ryu led him back to where there were now two comfortable-looking chairs. He was not sure what Ryu had been doing while they were all asleep, but the other vampire appeared alert and strong, so he had to assume what he was about to do would not affect his companion. Pretending that the others weren't there for a while, he took Ryu's wrist when it was offered and almost immediately sank his fangs into it.

This time the experience was not as mind blowing, but it was still heady and it took him a little while to recover once he was done. It unsettled him to be so dependent on another, but he could find no falsehood in Ryu. The Master of Tokyo East was old and powerful, but he seemed to be a genuinely good man as well.

Only once he was finished did Aya pay any attention to the rest of the room. Crawford was watching him with a contemplative gaze, sans glasses, which made it all the more penetrating, and Aya couldn't help wondering what was going on in the precog's head. It didn't seem likely that what he had glimpsed was normal and from what Schuldig said it seemed to imply that the chaos was caused by a totally unexpected event, but he did wonder how it was possible to deal with such knowledge. Crawford still appeared a little ruffled around the edges, which Aya found perturbing for no reason he could fathom, but it was clear the precog was recovering.

Aya was not a naturally sharing person, not anymore, and he kept his own council, expecting those under his command to obey orders without asking stupid questions, so he kept his thoughts to himself. He busied himself with doing nothing, diligently, while the others sorted themselves out. It wasn't until everyone had traipsed through the bathroom, dressed themselves and been fed that he had to deal with anything.

Everyone was on edge, Aya could feel it and he felt the sharp spike of anger from Omi. Usually Omi was calm and collected; the best adapted to their lifestyle if the truth was known, but the whole vampire situation had unsettled Omi in a big way. They were all in shock and coming to terms with too many things, which had them all ready to blow.

"Get out of my way," he heard Omi snarl, quite a change from before having had a shower.

Aya turned and saw Omi facing off against a startled looking Nagi, which, given how the pair had been sitting quietly beside each other perfectly happily earlier, made Aya sympathise with Nagi's shock. Something was definitely wrong and Aya was beginning to feel it.

"I am not in your way," Nagi pointed out reasonably, since it was true, there was plenty of room around both of them.

It looked as if Omi was in fact picking a fight, a very un-Omi like thing to do.

"Yes you are," Omi said with all the rationality of a vengeful ghost.

That was it for talking it seemed as Omi lifted his arm to strike. Luckily for them all Nagi appeared so shocked that he did not defend himself and Aya sprang into

action. He ran across the room, grabbing Omi's wrist and throwing an arm around the younger man so that he had a firm grip on him. Omi instantly began to snarl and struggle and Aya could tell his friend meant it in the strength behind the movements. It was like trying to hold a writhing beast and he had to cling on very hard. What came at him from Omi was confusion and anger and rage and it didn't seem to really have a proper source.

He knew he had to do something before Omi could get away from him, so he acted on instinct. Pushing back mentally against the anger coming at him, he did his best to find the icy calm he used to hide his feelings and project it as Omi. There did not seem to be any rationalising when it came to what Omi was feeling, so all Aya could do was try and put out the flames.

It took time, but slowly Omi began to stop struggling, until eventually Aya had an armful of confused, limp young man.

"Omi," he said quietly, ignoring everyone else for now, "are you alright."

"I..." Omi tried to turn and he let him, seeing confused blue eyes looking up at him.

Clearly Omi was as confused about this as he was.

"Come and sit down," it was Ryu who came to their rescue.

Aya didn't know what else to do, so he guided Omi to the bed and sat them both on it, trying to work out what had just happened.

"Blood rage," Ryu said, crouching down and looking at both of them carefully, "it occasionally happens in the young after feeding."

Omi was even paler than being a vampire had made him.

"I am sorry," Omi said, eyes cast downwards in shame.

"It wasn't your fault," Ryu assured the young man and then looked at Aya; "it can happen to anyone. I should have thought to warn you all to watch for it given the trying circumstances, it is I who should be apologising. It would be best if you all attempt to remain as calm as possible for a few days at least, especially when having just fed."

For a moment Aya felt like laughing. Calm; just perfect given the fact that they were two groups of people who usually tried to kill each other. It was not surprising one of them had cracked given the situation and he couldn't see it becoming any easier. Aya's headache came back with a vengeance.

=====

"We must learn to be a team."

The words brought the whole room to a standstill and the fact that it was Crawford who had spoken seemed to have stunned everyone. Aya wasn't sure he had heard correctly. The group had been tolerating each other for a couple of days now, but that was about as far as the interaction went. Everyone was being very careful and there had been no other occurrences of a blood rage, but it had been close a couple of times.

"Don't know which universe you're living in," Yoji said, voicing his opinion as usual, "but last time I checked, we're mortal enemies. We may be stuck together at the moment, but the prospect of spending eternity with you lot is not a nice one."

"You think it's so appealing from our side either?" Schuldig said, clearly just as shocked, but not as dismissive.

For a little while Aya just looked at Crawford.

"Why?" he finally asked.

He had no idea where they would go from here, but he hadn't really expected Schwarz to want to do anything but leave as soon as possible.

"Because together we win," Crawford said simply, "divided we die."

It was said with such certainty that Aya didn't even bother to question it, he simply knew it was true.

"There are bigger things going on than the games you have so far seen," Crawford continued. "None of us can escape from these events and to survive we must be united."

"Why?" he said again.

Crawford looked at Schuldig and then Aya's mind was suddenly full of images. He saw his sister and Weiß and the essence of something evil and he felt death; then he saw Schwarz and felt the same essence and yet more death, but then he felt rather than saw something come together and he felt the essence lose its strength. It wasn't exactly specific, but it made the point. Then he caught up with what Schuldig had just done and scowled.

"Stay out of my head," he said in a tone he hoped matched his mood.

For a fraction of a second Schuldig might actually have looked scared, but Aya chose not to take revenge; not that he was above revenge, but he couldn't be bothered to deal with the fallout.

"Do not blame, Schuldig," Crawford said firmly; "I needed you to understand. I take it you do understand?"

'Smug bastard' were the words that came to Aya's mind, but they too would be unproductive.

"Yes," he said coldly, "I understand, but that doesn't change the fact we hate each other."

Crawford just shrugged.

"Hate is a very strong word," the older man pointed out; "you hated Reiji Takatori, I think perhaps you merely severely dislike us."

"I hate him," Omi said, pointing at Farfarello.

It was difficult for anyone to forgive the murderer of their sister.

"That's alright," Schuldig said with a cold smile, "Farfie prefers it that way."

The whole idea of making them one team threatened to bring back the headache Aya thought he had finally managed to shift; the universe really seemed to hate him.

"We know who has your sister," were the words from Crawford that made him totally forget about any headache, "She is the key to releasing unspeakable evil into this world and our only way to make those who believe they control us vulnerable. If we do not work together we will end up working against each other and the evil will win. No matter how bad you believe we are, the power behind Eszett is far worse."

"Where is she?" Aya demanded instantly, his mind zeroing on only that one thing.

"Safe, for now," Crawford replied, which did nothing to settle Aya's thoughts; "those who have her will not harm her."

He really didn't give a shit that those who had his sister weren't going to hurt her, all he wanted was Aya-chan out of danger.

"Tell me where she is," he said, voice going low and dangerous; "I can make you."

He could see his team mates preparing themselves for whatever was coming and he could feel the tension in the room going up.

"I know you could," Crawford said in the same steady tone, "but why would you? None of us can leave here yet; we are all crippled by the need to be close to each other. I will tell you who has your sister and where they are keeping her, but not until you decide to act rationally."

Aya stood there and glared; he was not about to leave the fate of his sister in the hands of Schwarz.

"Aya," surprisingly it was Ken who spoke and he whipped his gaze around to glare at his team mate; "I hate to say it, but he's right. If we leave here we'll be targets that can barely fight back."

"I will not leave my sister in danger," Aya all but snarled.

"She is safer where she is than anywhere you could put her," Crawford said, sounding completely sure of himself. "Eszett and Kritiker believe we are all dead," something they had discovered from information from Ryuu, "the moment you reveal that we are not we lose the advantage. There is to be a ceremony at a certain time on a certain date in a certain place. Eszett want your sister for that ceremony and they will make sure she is safe until that time. If she vanishes there is nowhere you can hide her that they will not look. You risk not just yourself, but all those around you."

It was quite a speech, not that Aya was really listening. His sister was the most precious thing to him in the entire world and no one told him how to take care of her. He was about to move when Omi was standing right in his way. That was when he made the mistake of looking into Omi's eyes and found out that he wasn't the only one who was learning about the whole vampire situation. Omi projected at him through the child bond and because he hadn't thought to protect himself from his friend it hit him full force; an amazing wave of calm. It was his

own technique, turned back on himself, only with far more force. He almost staggered. It was like a bucket of ice water and it sent his mind into turmoil.

"Aya," Omi's voice sounded like it was coming from a distance, "Aya, can you hear me?"

"Omi, what the hell did you do?" Yoji sounded concerned, which meant there was something to worry about.

"I just tried to calm him down," Omi said and Aya blinked, trying to clear his head; "he was going to do something stupid. I thought I just did what he did for me."

The annoyance that caused in Aya at least gave him something to hang on to.

"We should send someone to get Ryuu," someone else said; "he doesn't look good."

"Ryuu has his own business to attend to," that was definitely Crawford, "Abyssinian will be fine."

One day Aya was going to knock the smugness right out of the precog or at least have a damn good try.

"I want Ryuu back here," he decided to step in; "it is time to meet my lieutenants."

The time for waiting was over; he needed to take back control. The news of his sister brought it back home that the world had not stopped just because they had all changed. If they needed to be a team, so be it, he could live with that, but he was damn well going to be in charge.

====

Ryuu had suggested he dress up for the meeting with Minoru's lieutenants, but Aya had other ideas; he wanted to see how they would react if he just looked ordinary. Ryuu had come when he had called and asked him to, but it had taken a day to set up the meeting. Aya would not tell anyone else, but he thought that was a good thing, because it had given him time to collect himself. Taking some of the others to the meeting with him had occurred to him, but he had eventually decided to go with just Ryuu to find out what would happen. He could always send a mental call to any of his clan and they would come running if necessary.

"Ryuu," a large looking vampire dressed from head to foot in leather said as soon as they walked through the door.

Aya already knew he would be meeting Minoru's three main lieutenants and he knew each of their names, but not which was which, although he could guess.

"Abyssinian," Ryuu ignored the other vampire, "may I present Juro, your War Master, Miyu your Master of Spies and Akemi, your Master of Ceremonies. Lady and gentlemen, may I present Abyssinian, the new Master of Tokyo West."

It hadn't been too hard to work out who each was given that he had known Miyu was the only woman, and Akemi was in a dress even though he was male. He didn't think any of them liked him much, but where as Miyu seemed cold and aloof and Akemi appeared amused, Juro barely gave him a second look.

"Is this some game to expand your empire, Ryuu?" Juro threatened, moving forward. "I still haven't heard to my satisfaction how this child killed Minoru. I want answers and I want them now."

That was enough of an indication for Aya and he knew just how to handle it. He hadn't brought a weapon with him, but Minoru had liked swords and there were several on the wall. Without hesitating he plucked one from its sheath and brought the blade round so it was millimetres from Juro's neck while, at the same time, letting his vampire power flare. He had quite good control of it now, he had been practicing since his near meltdown, but he wanted to make a point.

"You will speak to me," he said, his tone dripping with ice.

Vampires were stronger and faster with age and he was pretty sure he not only shocked, but scared the hell out of the War Master as well.

"Do not make the mistake of underestimating me like Minoru did," he said in a perfectly calm and controlled manner. "In case he forgot to mention it, I am an assassin and I will not hesitate to kill you if you threaten me or mine. Are we clear?"

Juro stared at him for a little longer and then lowered his eyes.

"Forgive me, Master Abyssinian," Juro said and Aya removed the sword.

"Ryuu has been kind enough to give me instruction on all the things Minoru did not bother to tell me," Aya said, accepting the apology and moving on, "but it is not half of what I need to know to understand Tokyo West. I expect you three to provide the rest."

"And if we would rather not?" Miyu asked, just as icy as he was.

"You have the right to leave," Aya said simply and Miyu inclined her head, a small smile playing at her lips.

"My, my," Akemi said almost instantly, "that is tantamount to high praise from our Miyu, Master Abyssinian; I congratulate you."

"Abyssinian or Aya will do," Aya said simply and put the sword back on the wall, "I do not stand on ceremony. I am not going to pretend I planned this situation, we all know that would be a lie, but I will not sit back and refuse to deal with it. I killed Minoru, and for your information Juro, I drained him dry and then ripped out his heart, which makes me Master of Tokyo West. Whether I decide to keep the position remains to be seen, but until I make that choice I will tolerate no insubordination."

He reigned in his power, hiding it back inside and then made himself relax. These people had been Minoru's lieutenants, but that did not necessarily mean they were as bad as their master had been. From what he had learned from Ryuu, vampires were incredibly practical and tended to simply deal with situations as they found them rather than worrying about them.

Akemi stood from where he was leaning against the table in the room and walked forward, every movement purposeful and proud. Never once did the Master of Ceremonies look away from Aya and he felt as if he was being assessed very

carefully. It was actually quite difficult not to fidget, but he held himself still and gazed calmly at the other vampire.

"I think," Akemi said, giving him a rather obvious up and down with his eyes that was more sexual than tactical, "I like you. Please do not hesitate to let me know how I can be of service, Aya."

Then Akemi gave a little bow. Aya did his very best not to blush at the way his name was all but purred at him. It seemed Akemi was not backward in coming forward. In the end he just nodded his head while wondering what sort of ceremonies Akemi was actually good at and Akemi backed off.

"Do you expect us to become involved in the ridiculous crusade you have set your life to?" Miyu asked, having retreated back behind her cold mask.

Aya was surprised, but then realised he should not have been, since the woman was the Master of Spies. She clearly knew a great deal about him.

"I am not even sure I desire to remain involved in that," he replied honestly, since he had not decided anything yet.

Minoru had changed his life irrevocably and he had had little time to make plans as yet. The fact that half the time all he seemed able to think about were the others made it hard to sort out long term ideas.

"As I said, I do not know what I will do yet, but there is one thing I require of you," he continued.

"Your sister," Miyu said, as if it was obvious.

Aya almost bristled, but he had to deal with Crawford all the time now and he was learning not to react to such things.

"My sister," he replied with a nod, "and I do not wish to drag the vampire community into this."

From the little he had been able to drag out of Crawford, involving the vampires at the current stage would be disastrous. This conclusion, however, gained him some surprised looks; clearly all three were aware of the situation. He wasn't about to mention that he wouldn't trust them with his sister anyway, but it wasn't his only reasoning. He had not made a commitment to these people yet and he didn't know if he was going to, so he could not expect them to do the same for him.

"As soon as my team are ready, we will deal with it," he said simply; "until then I want someone watching the people holding her, that's all. If anything changes I want to know."

"That's all?" Juro sounded honestly shocked.

"This has nothing to do with any of you," Aya said firmly, "I will not ask you to become involved, but I cannot be out there watching her until my clan is recovered."

Miyu looked at if she was reassessing him again and then she nodded.

"I already have people doing so," she said in a tone that made him think she expected him to have known that and was not impressed that he didn't.

For a few moments Aya met the female vampire's gaze and just held it, before inclining his head just slightly.

"I apologise for underestimating you," he said simply and managed to cause the very small smile to flutter across Miyu's face.

It was more than clear to him that they were sizing him up in exactly the same way he was assessing them and there were surprises from both sides. From the glance he sent at Ryu he wasn't able to tell much, but the Master of Tokyo East hadn't intervened, which he thought was a good sign.

"Now," he said, looking to each of his lieutenants in turn, "I want to know how this organisation works."

He did not intend it to be a short meeting.

====

It was beginning to worry Aya that the child bond, which should have faded to almost nothing, still hadn't. He didn't feel the drain on his energy as much, but the others were an open book to him. The fact that Omi and Nagi seemed to have bonded was a good thing, but the excitement coming from them at having found someone else who knew what they were talking about was a bit distracting. Their almost confrontation seemed to be completely forgotten. Farfarello was there at the back of his brain like a dark presence and he knew without a doubt if he said 'kill it' the man would jump to his command. It was a little unsettling to say the least. Ken was bouncing between happy and confused and Aya was watching his comrade carefully, but he didn't think he would need to intervene. Crawford was there, all calm and control, which helped balance out the frenzy of energy that was Schulgig, but couldn't help with one thing; one thing that was getting harder and harder to ignore.

Yoji was his main problem, or rather Yoji's libido. As far as Aya could tell, Yoji was one huge mess of sexual tension. Whatever made vampires the way they were seemed to have tapped directly into Yoji's hormones and set them to on, permanently. Either that or Yoji had always been far more of a sex maniac than Aya had ever given him credit for.

The problem was, the only one who seemed to be able to go off on his own for any length of time was Aya. The others began to feel uncomfortable if they were on their own any distance from the group for anymore than a few minutes at a time. It was no where near as bad as it had been, but it meant they were stuck for a while longer yet. That in turn meant Yoji had no outlet for his sexual frustration, which was spilling over into Aya and driving him mad. He'd spent so long ignoring his hormones that he wasn't overly sure what to do with them and the whole vampire business wasn't helping as it upped the whole thing as well.

"So, Kudou," he heard Schuldig's voice from across the room and glanced up from the report he was reading, "you look tense."

The telepath was standing over Yoji where the other man had been using a laptop. The expression on Yoji's face was priceless, as if he wasn't quite sure what the telepath was getting at.

"What do you want?" Yoji finally said.

"I could help you with that," Schuldig said with a leer and Yoji's expression curled in distaste.

The thing that caught Aya's attention, however, was that he could feel the distaste coming from the playboy, but it wasn't as firm as Yoji's expression might have suggested. Yoji's hormones were not in agreement with his brain as far as Aya could tell.

"Go away," Yoji said flatly; definitely not Yoji's best comeback line and revealing his uncertainty to anyone who knew him.

That just made Schuldig smile broadly.

"I know what you're thinking," the telepath said in a far too bright tone.

"And I know how to kill you in under three seconds," Yoji replied, a much better retort the second time.

Schuldig laughed and Aya wasn't sure if Yoji would actually attack. When Schuldig leant forward and whispered something in Yoji's ear the playboy blushed and Aya felt the arousal that shot through the blond man. It was clearly an unconscious reaction and Aya saw Yoji going for his watch and the wire it hid, but it was a reaction nonetheless and one which seemed to satisfy Schuldig who backed off before there was bloodshed.

"Interesting."

Aya turned and looked up to find Crawford gazing in the same direction he had been.

"Going to tell me if they are going to kill each other?" Aya asked, going back to his report.

"It's about fifty/fifty," was the short response and then Crawford was gone again, doing whatever it was Crawford did.

Deciding that it was not worth his sanity, Aya went back to reading and trying to ignore the pent up ball of hormones that was their resident playboy.

=====

Nagi had started a betting pool on how long it would take Yoji to give in to Schuldig; Aya had refused to take part, but he did know the moment it happened. It had been four days since Schuldig's initial advances and the telepath was nothing if not persistent. The child bond had reduced over those four days, but that didn't mean that Aya didn't feel all his blood rush south, or that his knees didn't go weak and it didn't save him the embarrassment of almost falling into Akemi's lap while they were discussing vampire etiquette.

There was such a surge of lust from the two that it literally swept every other thought from his head.

"Are you well?" Akemi asked politely, but he saw the other vampire's nostril's flare as well and he was sure he had to be giving himself away.

The problem was he couldn't put too words together as he tried to gather himself.

"Maybe you should sit down," Akemi suggested and before Aya could do anything about it he found himself grabbed and then he was sitting in Akemi's lap whether he liked it or not.

That got his brain going and he leapt up with a very undignified yelp. Akemi was not subtle in his advances and Aya found himself the subject of a very suggestive grin. He had come up with a strategy for dealing with his very forward Master of Ceremonies, but his brain was not on top form thanks to Yoji and Schuldig, so he floundered. About all he could manage was retreat.

"I ..." he said, trying to maintain at least a little bit of dignity, "need to go."

Then he fled and couldn't help hearing Akemi laughing lightly as he left. By the time he made it back to his own wing he was fuming.

"You know, letting them work it out of their system is probably a better idea," Crawford said, intercepting his course. "They are likely to make our lives hell if interrupted, besides which, their bickering was becoming annoying."

Aya was livid; he had been trying to work to understand the situation they were all in to give them all a fighting chance of surviving and all his reprobate children were thinking about was sex. The least they could have done was waited until a more reasonable hour to satisfy their lusts, since they were well aware that he couldn't help picking up strong experiences from them.

"They..." he started to say, trying his very best to keep himself separate from what Yoji and Schuldig were up to.

"Are most likely wrapped around each other so completely you would have to separate them with a crowbar," Crawford provided rather unhelpfully; the last thing Aya needed was a full mental image.

Unfortunately, Crawford's little speech was enough to bring rationality back into the equation and it won out over anger. With a growl that was more at himself than anyone else he turned and stalked down the corridor to find himself something to do that did not require thinking too hard. He would find a way to pay them back one way or another, it would just be a cold revenge at a later date.

====

"Do you ever think of anything else?" Aya asked, exasperated at what he felt coming from Yoji.

Schuldig and Yoji have reappeared after three hours of what Aya guessed was constant sex, and they'd only done that because they were hungry. The pair had so far managed to eat, but Aya could see and feel that Yoji was already eyeing up Schuldig again. Quite a difference from when the playboy wouldn't even look at the telepath.

"He can't help it," Schuldig said, sounding far too pleased with himself.

"I can't?" Yoji said, as if that was news to him.

Aya suspected that he was going to hear something conceited from the self-centred German next, and he was surprised when it didn't come.

"No," Schuldig said, standing up from where he had been sitting next to Nagi and wandering over to throw himself down next to Yoji, "you're an empath."

Aya was almost as surprised as Yoji looked.

"But wait," Yoji said after a moment, "I'm not, I don't know what you're feeling."

Schuldig's grin should have been disconcerting.

"You're not that kind of empath," Schuldig said and Aya noted that everyone was paying attention now; "you're a sexual empath. I wasn't sure before, but I am now."

It was abundantly clear that Yoji had no idea what to say to that.

"What's a sexual empath?" Omi asked and managed to sound innocent doing it; typical Omi.

"Probably exactly what you think," Schuldig said, enjoying himself, or so it seemed. "A sexual empath is sensitive to the sexual needs of those around him; he can also manipulate them with enough practice."

Yoji appeared stunned.

"And you didn't bother to tell me this, why?" Yoji said, sounding more than a little peeved.

"As I said, I wasn't sure before," Schuldig said, eyeing up Yoji in exactly the same way Yoji had just been eyeing him up, "and then I was hungry. I was thinking of mentioning it when we'd finished eating."

Aya was impressed with the way the telepath had Yoji completely wrong footed; it was probably the only way Schuldig had managed to get Yoji into bed in the first place.

"Is that how you managed to convince me?" Yoji all but accused.

"Nope," Schuldig said, wicked smile fully in place, "I just waited for what you've been picking up to get too much for you and then took advantage."

Yoji looked like he was trying to be annoyed, but Aya knew some of Yoji's bedroom conquests had been seduction jobs, so he didn't think Yoji had much room to talk. Since Yoji didn't look too angry he concluded that Yoji was thinking along the same lines.

"You've probably always been over sensitive to sex," Schuldig continued with a grin, "and the whole vampire business kindled the full gift. That would explain why you are such a man whore."

Surprisingly Yoji smiled at that, but it wasn't an overly nice smile.

"Says the man who likes to beg," was Yoji's comment.

"Too much information," Ken said in a rather desperate tone, "way too much information."

That just made Schuldig laugh and eye up Yoji in an even less subtle manner.

"If you attempt to copulate there," Crawford said in a very cool tone, "I will have Nagi drop large amounts of very cold water on both of you."

Schuldig's answer to that was to blow Crawford a kiss and then stand up and hold his hand out to Yoji. Yoji ignored the hand, but did climb to his feet himself.

"We're just going to go and work out all the sexual tension Kudou is carrying around," Schuldig told the whole room, as if they didn't already know, "Auf wiedersehen."

Aya considered walking out and shooting himself in the head; it would be quicker than the death Yoji and Schuldig seemed to have planned for him.

====

Yoji and Schuldig were at it again and Aya was sure he was being punished for his past crimes. Getting it out of their system had so far consisted of no one seeing Yoji or Schuldig for two days; they hadn't even emerged for food after the first time. Yoji's sexual tension was nothing to the feedback Aya was getting with the pair of them going at each other like bucks in heat. He had taken refuge away from the others, hoping that his discomfort was not as obvious as he thought it probably was, but trying to ignore their resident sex maniacs was not working at all. He had taken to pacing the small study and he was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn't even notice anyone else was there until he had been pushed up against the wall and said person was kissing him.

He was so shocked and his hormones were so relieved that he didn't even try and resist and it was only when his assailant pulled back that he realised it was Crawford.

"You won't like what you do if you wait much longer," Crawford said simply, "and there was a ninety percent probability that if I had just told you that you would have walked away anyway."

That answered both his questions without him needing to ask them, useful, but also annoying. He wanted to push Crawford away and could have done so easily, but he didn't and that unsettled him even more.

"Schuldig told me that Minoru used you," Crawford said calmly, if a little breathlessly, "and I would not attempt to force you ..."

"You couldn't," Aya said shortly.

"...but I would suggest we think of this as satisfying a mutual need," Crawford continued as if he had not interrupted. "Schuldig also has a nasty habit of broadcasting when he is enjoying himself."

Aya didn't move as he allowed his thoughts to catch up with his body.

"I don't trust you," he said, voicing his biggest problem with the suggestion.

Yoji might be having no problem putting aside past issues with Schuldig to satisfy his need for sex, but Aya had never been one to sleep around and there were certain prerequisites he needed to feel comfortable.

"You should," Crawford said, still holding him against the wall and looking him directly in the face; "as long as you are loyal to us, Schwarz will never betray you."

The child bond had dimmed somewhat since the first days, but Aya could still feel things from the others easily and he searched for falsehood, but he couldn't find it. Of course Crawford might just have been a very good liar. As it was he did not resist when Crawford bent forward and kissed his neck before biting almost hard enough to break the skin. He was like the majority of the human race, extreme pain did not turn him on, but the nip of teeth sent shots of arousal right to his cock.

"Why?" he said breathlessly even though his hormones wanted him to just give in.

He had spent too long fighting for control of himself and he could not just let go no matter how badly he wanted to.

"First reason," Crawford said, not stopping what he was doing and carefully beginning to unbutton Aya's shirt; "you die, we die."

"What?" he just about managed to say, but found it difficult to think as Crawford licked a stripe over one of his nipples.

His arousal really was out of control, with the feedback from Yoji and Schuldig as well as what Crawford was doing, he could barely hold his thoughts together.

"You," Crawford said, leaning back again so they were eye to eye, but continuing to play with the chosen nipple with his fingers, "are as extraordinary, if not more so, than your sister. The reason we all die if we separate is that you die. What you did in making us is impossible, but something about you makes it possible, but we will be tied to you for years if not decades."

That information almost brought Aya's mind back on line properly.

"You see that?" he asked, needing to understand.

"I see parts," Crawford replied, ruthlessly twisting the nipple in his fingers and making Aya moan quietly; "my far sight is never complete. I see enough to know, but that is not all, Ran."

Aya would have objected to the use of his real name except that Crawford chose that moment to bend his head again and apply teeth and tongue to his other nipple as well as continuing with his fingers on the first. It was almost too much and almost stepped over the pleasure pain threshold, but skirted the edge and made him whimper.

"Do you know what it is to be a slave?" Crawford asked, taking his mouth away just when Aya thought he couldn't take any more.

The way his thoughts were all in a tangle, Aya didn't understand what the other man was getting at.

"Schwarz were slaves," Crawford told him, other hand slipping down and finding the fly of his jeans. "All of us were ripped from our lives and taken by Eszett, trained to be killers without conscience or remorse and for a time some of us were; until we became a team. Only then did we glimpse possible freedom."

Aya knew he was being given information he would never have known if Minoru had not walked into his life, and he tried to keep his mind on it so that he could understand. This was significant; he knew that without a doubt and he wanted to comprehend what Crawford was trying to tell him. It was difficult when Crawford's clever fingers wormed into his jeans and did their best to wipe his mind.

"We wanted chaos, anarchy," Crawford whispered against his ear; "the only way we could be free of our masters and from the confines of normal humans, but that is no longer necessary."

He put his hand on Crawford's wrist, stilling the other man's movements so that he could think.

"But you are not free," he pointed out since they were all trapped in this thanks to Minoru.

"Oh but we are," Crawford said, stilling completely and just standing there; "among vampires we can be exactly who we are; that, Ran, is freedom."

Aya had never thought about it that way, but he released his hold on Crawford's wrist when he realised it was true.

"All that remains," Crawford said, bending his head to nibble at Aya's neck, "is to destroy Eszett."

There were other things to take into consideration, not the least of which was his sister, but Aya gave up fighting the inevitable and let his head fall back against the wall. He needed this and, god help him, he actually believed what Crawford had told him. Some part of him trusted the precog even if his more rational brain needed more and it was enough; enough to let go and get what he needed.

"What do you want?" Crawford asked, continually touching him in ways that made his blood hum with arousal.

Really he didn't know what he wanted, not at a conscious level; not with all that had happened to him and everything that was being fed to him from the others mixing together into one heady mess. All his mind would scream at him was sex and he was beginning to lose control.

"Fuck me," he said as if it was dragged from him against his will.

He could so easily have thrown Crawford back onto the desk and just taken what he wanted; he was strong enough to subdue the other vampire easily, but he did not trust himself. He was wound too tight, needed too much and now he understood what Crawford had meant when he had told him he wouldn't like what he did if he left it too long.

"As you wish," Crawford replied, neither sounding concerned nor particularly excited, and Aya found himself shoved up against the wall again; "in a little while."

Aya did not argue, pushing his need to control down as Crawford stepped into that role. It was hard; he was far too much of a leader, but he knew the moment he took over there would be no going back and the idea of using Crawford in the same way Minoru had used him was almost enough to make him stop the whole thing. Only Crawford's ominous words made him keep going.

As it was, as Crawford continued what he had been doing, Aya felt his vampire nature beginning to rise. He couldn't help it; with everything he was feeling it was impossible to control. When Crawford slowly began to slide downwards, Aya could barely hold on. Crawford didn't so much as look up at him; the precog was so concentrated on his task, but Aya was looking down, shocked and all but overcome with lust.

When Crawford carefully pushed his jeans back and down a little, along with his underwear, and pulled his cock free of its confines, he grabbed for the nearest solid object and hung on. The feeling as Crawford slowly sucked him into his mouth was amazing and Aya managed to forget about just about everything else. It seemed that Crawford went about a blow job as diligently as everything else the man did and, what with everything else going on in his head, Aya had never felt anything like it. The child bond flared between them whether he liked it or not and he wasn't sure if he was surprised to find that Crawford was as turned on as he was. They were in such close, personal proximity that Aya had even less control over the bond than usual and, given that this was definitely a significantly strong experience, he had no defences.

Coupling that with his sexual frustration thanks to Yoji and Schuldig, his last vestiges of control vanished and his vampire surged to the surface. His power flared and he was pretty sure it wasn't just Crawford who felt it, but Crawford definitely did pick it up, because the other vampire finally looked at him. It wasn't just a partial transformation either, when he looked at his hand there were claws where his nails had been and he could feel the long fangs in his mouth. Crawford's eyes fixed on him for a few moments, still eerily intense without the need for glasses, and then the precog went back to what he had been doing.

For a while Aya forgot to be worried or even that he could think.

Crawford's tongue did unspeakable things to him and the suction Crawford alternatively supplied and then denied him had him growling and moaning with equal measure. It was not a matter of maintaining any sense of dignity, it was simply a matter of hanging on as his body chose its own path.

When Crawford finally had mercy and released his cock, he was almost at the point where he didn't care what they had decided and he just wanted satisfaction. He could barely hold himself still as Crawford carefully stood back up; the other vampire seemed to know just what trouble he was having.

"Forgive me for saying so," Crawford said looking him over, "but I would prefer to be out of your reach."

Aya didn't understand until Crawford looked at the desk and then he realised what the precog was suggesting. He hadn't actually thought through how this would work and his experience with men was limited, so he just nodded. Taking that as permission to continue Crawford produced something from his pocket and then began to undress, or at least to remove his trousers and tie. Aya pushed his own jeans and underwear further down quickly before his brain could try and point anything out he didn't want to think about. He was so wired it was quite

easy to not think, but he left his shirt on, in some fit of modesty that he didn't try and rationalise. Then he leant on the desk, assuming the position, as it were.

Crawford stepped up behind him and to his surprise he felt the other vampire plaster himself across his back, hands going around him. The fact that Crawford was naked also took him by surprise, but the fact that fingers curled unerringly around his cock made him fall straight back into the mindset of sex, sex and nothing but sex.

For a while Crawford stroked him slowly, hard cock laying against the groove of his arse and continually reminding him of where this was going. He had never really counted himself interested in the male of the species, but he was beginning to realise that was more to do with social training than actual feelings. The thought of what they were doing excited him in ways he had not suspected.

When Crawford reached for what he had put on the desk earlier Aya realised it was lube. Part of him wanted to laugh at Crawford's complete preparedness while the rest just tried to get ready for what was to come next. He heard the lube being opened and squirted out, but it was still a little bit of a shock when slick fingers slid down over his hole. He couldn't help the shiver that ran through him, but he was glad that Crawford did not comment.

For just a moment, as Crawford's finger's began to stretch him, he flashed back to Minoru's touch, but the child bond flared as if it didn't like that and he sank into the current sensation. Crawford was not exactly gentle, but then Aya was very far from needing gentle and he pushed back, demanding more. It became very apparent almost instantly that Crawford was more than happy to give him what he was attempting to demand as another digit was forced into him.

His fingers curled, digging his sharp nails into the surface of the wood, but he really couldn't give a damn. His need far outweighed anything else now and he wanted to be fucked and screw everything else. Every time he thought he couldn't take the waiting any more, at the moment he was about to snap and try and take over, Crawford would do something else. Aya knew he was being read, knew Crawford was using his gift to be one step ahead, and it was exactly what he needed. It was all too clear to him what he would have been capable of had Crawford not stepped in and he allowed himself to be overcome by what was going on.

Safe sex was not really a concept vampires had to worry about either from a sanitary or rough perspective since they could not catch diseases and they healed very fast. It made sex a lot more straight forward and there was nothing between them as Aya felt Crawford line himself up and begin to push in. The sensation was still strange to Aya, not something he was used to at all, but he did his best to relax and let it happen. However, his body might have been prepared, but his mind wasn't quite and Crawford had to pause.

The strong hands holding his hips let go and Aya found himself being embraced from behind as Crawford leant against his back. It was then that he regretted not taking off his shirt, because he wanted to feel skin on skin.

"Let me in, Ran," Crawford whispered in his ear, almost as if this was some orchestrated seduction. "Give in; you know you want to."

He was too much the control freak, too much a singular entity with no desire to be dependent on any other and his body was reacting to his mind. Most of him wanted the sex, wanted to be taken, to let go, but that part of his psyche which

had made him a survivor would not retreat. The need for sex was overpowering and yet that stubborn part of his mind clung on.

"I will not betray you," Crawford said, voice low, but carrying all the certainty of a scream.

Aya growled at himself as his body still resisted, as muscles that should have been relaxed and pliable tensed and refused to allow Crawford's cock any further into him. It was beginning to look like it would be a disaster as he totally failed to be able to make his body obey his will. The frustration welled up; he had asked for this, he wanted this and yet he could not surrender.

"Sssh," Crawford said, stroking down his side as if trying to sooth a wild animal.

The wood of the table squealed under his claws as he took out his frustration the only way available.

Crawford went to pull out, to do what Aya didn't know, but he didn't want that. His body would obey him; he would do this, it was the only outcome possible and with a snarl he shifted his hips and pushed back as hard as he dared. Pain flared in his arse and one arm collapsed under him as he was suddenly filled and he went to move again, but Crawford's grip tightened.

"Wait," was the simple instruction and from the sounds of it he thought he might have managed to surprise the precog.

The fullness fed the fires of lust in his body and they once again rose up to obscure anything like sense or reluctance, but still Crawford held him. The pain faded quickly, leaving behind only an ache that didn't so much hurt as beg for more. The coppery smell of blood reached his nostrils and did nothing to help his control, but Crawford would not let him move, not without forcing the issue with his superior strength.

He wanted, he needed and when, at last, Crawford moved he finally understood what. He was not in control, but this was not the blind surrender he had given to Minoru and it caused more than the physical pleasure centres in him to fire. Not that he understood what his mind was trying to tell him, but his vampire nature approved of what was happening on levels he could not process. As Crawford moved, drawing physical responses out of him, the child bond flared at well and flooded him with more than just bodily responses. Each moment built on the next and time became a continuing crescendo of experience that was regulated by Crawford's slow, firm thrusts. Aya lost track of everything else.

Sex had never been like this before and he had no idea how much real time was passing.

"I want you to come, Ran," Crawford told him, holding his hips steady and continuing to move in and out of him in a smooth rhythm; "when I touch you, you will do as I ask."

Aya did not have the will to resist as he chased his orgasm like a mad thing. As soon as Crawford's fingers wrapped around his cock and added to the infernal beat singing in his veins, he knew he was lost and his whole body seemed to tighten. It started in his balls, a wild spasm of muscle and flesh, and spread outward, taking with it all the motor skills he possessed. Only Crawford's arm half bracing him stopped him falling forwards as he cried out and shot spurts of milky liquid onto the desk.

Crawford wasn't finished with him yet, though, and he all but collapsed onto the now sticky surface as Crawford released him, only to take hold of his hips once more. The way the other vampire continued to pound in him just prolonged the ecstasy and all he could do was cling on to the desk and ride it out. When Crawford came it was with nothing more than a quiet grunt, hips pushing against him and cock buried deep inside him as familiar tremors ran through the precog's flesh, but what Aya felt made his muscles tremble all over again. The child bond flashed open almost as clearly as it had been want to do in the very early days of the vampire change and Aya felt Crawford's orgasm as if it was his own. Then and only then did Crawford lose the last vestiges of control and slumped forward over him so that they were both almost boneless on the desk.

There were long grooves in the wood where Aya's claws had made short work of the desk and all he could do was lie there and stare at them as the aftershocks slowly dissipated. He could honestly say he had never had an orgasm like it and, from the way Crawford was still leaning over him and not moving, he didn't think Crawford was doing much better than he was. The feedback was still making his nerves jangle and he wasn't sure he could have moved even if he'd wanted to.

As his brain came on enough to reason, he found it somewhat funny that he was breathing hard as well, even though he didn't need to; another reaction his body remembered. He really didn't understand why he didn't need oxygen or why a vampire metabolism required blood or how he could still metabolise food, but it seemed old habits died hard no matter what.

He was nudged out of his musing when Crawford slowly pushed off of him and carefully pulled out. For a fraction of a second he felt cold and bereft before he mentally kicked himself for being such an idiot. He did not need attachments and he definitely wasn't falling into this one; he and Crawford had had a mutual need thanks to their sex mad comrades, that was all. However, he did not refuse the help when Crawford assisted him to stand up.

"Next time," Crawford said, tone as dispassionate as usual, "we should not wait so long. I do not believe claw marks improve the value of antique desks."

Aya just looked at his companion and raised one eyebrow; which made Crawford smile that smug all knowing smile. It was funny how it wasn't quite as irritating as it once would have been.

"I think," Schuldig's mental voice slipped into his brain and, from the change in expression on Crawford's face, the telepath was projecting to the precog as well, "that is known as a psychic bang."

Aya thought of several possible responses and then conjured up the most off-putting image he could think of and sent it at the telepath.

"Mein Gott," came from down the hallway in an almost wail, "you sick bastard!"

Aya found himself smiling.

====

Chapter 4 Eszett Vernichten (Destroy Eszett)

It was really quite scary how well Weiß and Schwarz fell into step and acted as a team; Aya never would have believed it unless he had seen it. Omi and Nagi had Minoru's computer system under their control and although both of them were

swearing about how out of date it was, they didn't seem to be having that much trouble. Aya had had to promise both of the youngest team members that they could design and implement their own system if they chose to stay on.

Aya was slowly getting the hang of how Minoru's operation worked and he had met just about everybody who he needed to know. Juro had a force of people under him who kept order in the ranks, Miyu knew everything almost before it happened and Akemi was an incredibly good diplomat even if he did keep making passes at Aya at every opportunity. The Enforcers, it turned out, was Minoru's and now Aya's personal guard who answered to no one but him. The captain of the Enforcers, Patrick, an ex-American serviceman kidnapped by Minoru during the war, had not been included in the meeting Aya had had with his immediate subordinates because he had not been considered important enough.

Having spoken to Patrick and had Schuldig give him a quick once over, Aya had doubled his pay, improved his living conditions and given him virtual autonomy in how he did things when it came to the Enforcers. He'd also given him strict instructions that terror was not a viable option for anything unless it was a last resort. Ken had taken to spending a lot of time with Patrick and Aya was pretty sure he knew how Ken would fit into the hierarchy if they decided to stay part of Tokyo's vampire community.

The majority of Japan's vampire population were focused on Tokyo with only small, less formal groups outside the epicentre. Aya had been surprised to find out that ruling Tokyo West gave him a great deal of power throughout the rest of Japan as well. He had Crawford digging through all the details; if nothing else the American was incredibly good with the finer points of planning something.

When he had refused to allow his sister anywhere near any type of plan to bring down the trio of deadly talents Crawford insisted were a danger to everyone, not just them, Crawford had not forced the issue. There had been an ominous pronouncement about not being able to control everything and not always getting what you wanted, but Aya was choosing to ignore that. He would not deliberately put Aya-chan in danger no matter the eventual outcome.

They were all much stronger now, virtually independent of each other and Aya thought they were almost ready to move to retrieve Aya-chan. That was why when one of Miyu's people knocked, entered the study, gave him a piece of paper and then hastily retreated he knew it probably wasn't good.

It took him only moments to read the information and then he surged to his feet as white hot anger ripped through him. That was the moment Crawford calmly walked through the door, closed it and locked it.

"You knew," Aya all but hissed at the other man.

Crawford just stood there looking at him. The man's eyes really were quite eerie without the glasses to hide behind, but it did nothing to stop Aya's anger.

"They have taken my sister," he said a growl coming out in his voice as his vampire nature fed off his fury and rose to the surface. "You knew this was going to happen."

"I did," was all Crawford said.

Aya's rage exploded. He crossed the room in a fraction of a second and pinned Crawford to the door by the neck, fingers just millimetres from crushing the life out of the precog. Crawford did not attempt to fight back.

"Tell me why I shouldn't kill you," Aya hissed, fury overcoming anything the child bond might be trying to tell him. "You betrayed me."

"No," Crawford just about managed to say in a choked voice.

Considering the grip Aya had on the precog's throat, it was amazing he managed that. The desire to strike out, to take revenge and to kill was strong, but the way Crawford looked directly into his eyes stopped him. He could feel the fear now; he knew Crawford was actually afraid and it occurred to him that Crawford did not know how this would end and it stayed his hand. Snarling at the world in general, he ripped his hand away and turned his back before his anger could get the better of him.

"If I had told you," Crawford said eventually, voice still husky even after a good half minute of silence, "you would have died."

The 'and all of us along with you' went unspoken.

"You are not omnipotent," Aya said, trying to reign in his anger and make it go cold so he could control it.

"No," Crawford acknowledged in such a tone that Aya turned back and for the first time ever saw something other than smug superiority on the other man's face, "for the future I see possibilities and in all of them you died. You are not ready, we are not ready, and you would have gone no matter what anyone said. They will not harm her, in fact what they will do will help wake her and when they try to use her they will be vulnerable and we will strike."

The part about Aya-chan waking was what stopped Aya dead. He had lived with her being in a coma so long that he had almost lost hope she would ever wake. Crawford's words made him freeze.

"Wake?" was about all he could think of to say.

"Things are not certain," Crawford said with surprising honesty, "but it is highly likely that the forces at play will be enough to bring her back."

Aya was confused, he didn't know what to think. To have Aya-chan back, to see her smile again; it was something he had barely dared to dream.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, more honestly bemused than angry anymore.

"Because for this to happen she will be in danger," Crawford told him, standing straight and away from the door once more; "you would never have allowed it, no matter what the possible benefits. Nothing is certain; the powers in play are too great and you would have still gone to try and take her back. This was the only way."

That made Aya bristle again, but he had far too much to think about to allow his fury full reign.

"Get out," he said shortly and turned his back again; he needed time to work everything out in his head.

When he walked into the room that had fallen into being their meeting room and found everyone already there he knew the others were ready for anything.

"Eszett have my sister," he said simply.

"So what do we have to do to get her back?" was Yoji's calm, but also very simple response.

Aya looked at Crawford.

"In one week's time," Crawford said straight away, "there is to be a ceremony with every member of Eszett in attendance. They plan to bring back their leader from the dead and give him immortality. To do this they need to use Aya-chan; she is the prophesised vessel for the monster's return."

"But when they perform the ceremony they will become vulnerable," Schuldig took up the explanation.

"This will be when we strike," Crawford finished with a finality that begged no argument.

Aya was not happy, but he knew how to focus his anger. This would take careful planning, but he would get his sister back.

=====

Gaining entry to the citadel was child's play. Vampires were nocturnal creatures by choice being sensitive to sunlight, but it was only uncomfortable, not fatal as the movies would have people believe, so the fact that it was daytime was not an issue and, given their sensitive hearing and sense of smell, avoiding the human sentries was simple. It had been agreed that the talents among them would not use their powers overtly, for fear of detection, but on the way in they didn't need them.

The plan was simple; infiltrate, set charges in the armoury for remote detonation and then take their places ready for a frontal attack. Nagi had produced plans of the citadel, Aya had not bothered to ask where from, and it had all been considered carefully. Taking on the three master minds behind Eszett at the same time was not the best course of action, but it had to be done. They would be weakest having begun the ceremony.

Omi and Farfarello had taken the armoury, disappearing into the ducts and working together smoothly, even though there was still a great deal of tension between them and at the appointed time it would be ready to go up like a Roman candle. Aya did not doubt this as he led the others into the rest of the building.

They did not speak, communicating in gestures and signs as they went about their business of setting a trap silently. Aya could feel them all as, with the danger, the child bond swam into life, and he knew where each member of his team was without even looking. There were gantries around the platform where the ceremony was to take place and that was where they were going to wait for the prefect moment.

As they reached their destination, Aya came to a halt as a man in a suit stepped out in front of him. They stared at each other for a few moments, both seemingly shocked to see the other, and then the man fell with a grunt, revealing Omi

standing behind him, darts in hand. Aya nodded his thanks and then they were on the move again.

He looked at each member of his team in turn and then acknowledged him before separating and disappearing to the assigned places. Only as Crawford gave him one last look and then vanished into the shadows like a ghost did he move and head for his position. It was near the main arena, almost straight on to the enemy so he could get to Aya-chan and, when he settled in place, for the first time he could see his sister laid out on what could have been called an altar. His instincts screamed at him to move, to go to her and save her, but he had very detailed descriptions of what could happen if he did and Crawford might have been a bastard, but so far he hadn't lied.

It would take a great deal of energy to perform the ceremony and only once it had begun could they act. The others were all in position as well, he could feel them, and he closed his eyes and waited. When the chanting started, he literally had to hang on to the side of his hiding place to stop himself moving.

He would not let his sister go through this alone and so he made himself watch, but everything he saw made it more and more difficult to stay still. They called for something evil to take his sister's body, to transform it and use her being as its own and Aya could feel the evil. It made his bones ache with the death and misery he could sense and he could barely stand the idea of that touching his beautiful sister. All that made him hold back was the knowledge that for her to be safe the things on the platform had to die.

It felt like eternity.

"Now," Schuldig's mental voice sounded in his head.

There was the concussive shake of large amounts of explosives going off as the same instruction went to all of them and Omi set off the armoury and then he jumped. Now was their time and at last he could act.

He did not have to reveal his vampire nature to make the jump and he landed, along with the others in their assigned position on the stage area. There would be panic caused by the explosion and the rats would start deserting, but Aya did not want Eszett knowing about the vampire nation. He did not think the evil around them could take on something as old as the vampires, but it was a war his kind did not need.

"What is this?" one of the three leaders of Eszett demanded.

"Your time to die," Aya said, sword in hand and ready to strike.

There was going to be no ceremony about this, death was the only solution and Aya knew exactly what they had to do. He would have liked nothing more than to slice each of the barely human creatures to pieces himself.

"Schwarz, kill them if you wish to live," was the ultimatum delivered by the woman in the trio.

Farfarello laughed and Schuldig just smirked. It should have been obvious that that was not about to happen.

"We're with them," Crawford said bluntly and put the final card on the table.

Aya didn't wait for any more; he ran forward, eyes only for his sister as the others attacked. Aya-chan looked so pale and almost lifeless, but Aya could hear his sister's heart beating slowly and steadily. He knew he was too focused, that he would have chided the others for being foolhardy had they done the same, but he went straight for Aya-chan. Before he really knew what was happening he was hit by a wall of force and flew backwards into stonework that knocked all the breath out of him. It was stunning and had he been human he was pretty sure he would have sustained very serious injuries. As it was he was dazed and his attacker didn't leave it at that. He was held in place by an invisible force, like a butterfly on a specimen board, as the equivalent of a pin came hurtling towards him.

It was wooden, that much he did have time to realise and it was easily as round as a man's leg and then it slammed into his chest, slightly to the right. All the air rushed out of his body as it crushed his ribcage and sliced into his flesh and he heard someone calling his name, but for a while everything was faint and far away. His attacker clearly thought he was no longer an issue, because the force holding him let go and he slid to the floor, blood welling up and into his mouth and he couldn't move. He was paralysed and nothing made any sense around him and for a while he thought he might be dying, but slowly one thought crystallised in his brain.

They all had their assignments, they all knew what they had to do and he had to get to Aya-chan. Pushing the pain away, he demanded that his body come to his control and he did it the only way he could, he let his vampire nature rise. He could vaguely hear screaming and shouting and he knew the plan was working, but he could not keep his power down now. It still felt like he should be lying on the pavement dying, but he was not about to give in and he forced himself to his feet. The giant wooden stake had fallen away from him when he fell and he was free of it, but he had lost his grip on his sword and he didn't know where it had gone. He had to concentrate very hard to keep his focus on what he wanted to do and he focused only on Aya-chan.

With all three of the heads of Eszett working together the others had their hands full and the woman was looming over Aya-chan. The evil was reaching out to touch his sister again and he saw red, all but literally, and he forgot all about his injury as power surged through him. He crossed the distance to his enemy in moments and, weapons forgotten, reached out with his claws, ripping right into her throat. Blood spurted as she gurgled and he pushed the creature away from his sister, forcing her back against the wall, squeezing hard on the soft flesh below his fingers. She fought him with everything she had, but he stood like a stone pillar in a wind storm, firm against any attack.

As his fingers tightened so his enemy's struggles became weaker and she seemed to shrink, almost shrivelling as the life left her. All he did was watch, almost oblivious to what was going on around him. Only a shot ringing out brought him back and he heard someone call out a familiar name: "Manx."

Pushing his vampire nature away, he dropped his kill and pulled his coat around himself and turned to see the two other heads of Eszett dead and Manx standing on a balcony holding a smoking gun. It was clear that Nagi and Ken had taken out one of the men, but the other had a large bullet hole in the centre of his forehead. Bullets weren't much good when dealing with telekinetics unless you could take them by surprise and, it seemed, Manx had done just that.

"Weiß," Manx called, making her way down to the stage area, "where have you been, what are you doing?"

They were obvious questions, but not ones that Aya could be bothered to answer. Kritiker had used him as a tool and now he would use them.

"Cleaning up," he said coldly.

Kritiker was not something he wanted to deal with, but there was one thing the woman could do for him.

"Take my sister and leave, we have work to do," he said shortly.

The woman looked at him, unused to hearing the whip of command in his voice used against her like that, but something about him must have told her not to argue. She looked around at Schwarz and the rest of Weiß, clearly perturbed, but finally nodded.

"Very well," Manx agreed, walking over to where Aya-chan was still lying, "but we will talk about this later."

Aya did not correct her, but he had no intention of having any discussion with her at all.

"If there is a later," Crawford said in his usual ominous tones.

Manx clearly didn't like that, but did not say anything and lifted Aya-chan into a standing position against her. It looked difficult, but Aya had no doubt the woman was up to the job. If there was one thing he knew it was that Manx was a very capable person and would see Aya-chan safe. That left him and the rest of his clan to deal with the evil all around them.

"We have rats to clear out," he said, refusing to acknowledge the injury that he could feel under his coat.

He turned and headed off the stage area; he was not going to give in until the job was done. He did not acknowledge any of the others, just killed any Eszett vermin that came his way. They were the exterminators and some of the rats got away, but not many. No one who crossed his path lived long enough to even shout in alarm and he moved like a machine until, that was, he heard a short mental message from Schuldig.

"They are ashore," were the three words that meant they could finish everything properly.

It was over now and time for the final solution to the Eszett problem.

"Destroy this place," Aya said now that he knew Aya-chan was safe, "and every last piece of shit in it."

When he turned and looked, Nagi's eyes shone with vampire power and then the ground began to shake. It was the last thing Aya saw as the damage to his body finally caught up with him and he collapsed to the floor. Someone picked him up, but he didn't know who and then his brain shut down completely and all there was, was peaceful blackness.

====

Aya opened his eyes and was a little surprised to find that he was not alone in bed. The fact that he was lying next to Crawford and Crawford was lying on his side with an arm thrown over him, was not really what he had been expecting. Of course he hadn't really been expecting to wake up, so it was a surprise both ways.

"You were delirious for a short while," a very familiar voice said and he turned to see Ryu sitting in a chair beside the bed, "and his presence seemed to calm you."

That was an unsettling thought in itself, so Aya did his best not to think about it. Looking down at himself all that was left of his wound was a large pink patch of skin over the right side of his chest and he could only assume he had vampire healing to thank.

"Just for the record," Ryu said, as if reading his mind, "you should be dead; a wound that size and positioning would have killed most of us, even with our vampire abilities. I believe that most of the vampire population have decided you are immortal in the true sense of the word."

Ryu seemed to be determined to upset his equilibrium with every statement. It was not as if he prided himself on being part of the crowd, but he didn't like being so different.

"How long?" he asked, since it was the easiest question he could think of, and he found his voice husky.

"Two days," Ryu replied with a small smile, clearly picking up on his discomfort.

At least he hadn't been out of it too long and it didn't appear that anything much had changed, which was good.

"Everyone's safe?" was his next question.

"You were the only one with any lasting injury," Ryu said in a tone that suggested he understood the need to know, "although all of you definitely seem to know how to be beaten up."

That was part of the job description, but Aya didn't bother saying so.

"Your sister is currently residing at the flower shop," Ryu continued and gained all of his attention. "As predicted she woke up shortly after the ceremony. She believes you and the rest of Weiß are dead, a situation I suggest you rectify shortly, but she is well and Miyu has people watching her to assure her safety. So far Kritiker have simply been looking after her and have allowed her to remain innocent of what was really going on."

Aya almost sat up at that news, but held himself in check; he wasn't sure he could deal with an awake Crawford as well as what Ryu was telling him.

"Aya-chan is awake?" he said quietly, not quite believing it.

"And very well," Ryu replied with a nod and a smile. "I believe Miyu has photographs and footage for you as soon as you feel up to it."

No matter what Crawford had told him, Aya hadn't really let himself hope and he wasn't overly sure how to deal with the information. His life had been about

revenge and making sure Aya-chan was safe for so long, but it had all been easier than the idea of facing her when she was awake. It was something he was going to have to think long and hard about.

"I will have to thank Miyu," he said, really not sure how he wanted to handle the situation; "she has been incredibly helpful."

"Vampires appreciate a strong leader," Ryu said as Aya was mulling things over; "it is in our nature. The weaker bow before the stronger not because the stronger make them submit, but because that is the safer place. You have shown yourself to be a competent leader and stronger than any even twice your age; no one will challenge you if you choose to retain your position."

That at least gave Aya something else to think about and he had the distinct impression Ryu wanted him to make a decision.

"You think I should stay," he said, reading between the lines.

"I think," Ryu said, smiling more, "that I could do far worse for an ally."

Practical as ever, Aya realised, although he was pretty sure that the Master of Tokyo East did actually like him.

"Who would take over if I abdicated?" he asked, mulling the idea over in his mind.

There were many subjects he had covered with those around him, but that was not a question he had chosen to ask.

"Akemi is the oldest," Ryu replied and surprised Aya since that was not what he would have guessed, "and the most powerful. He prefers to manipulate others rather than confronting them, but if he chooses to take the position the others are unlikely to challenge him. If he does not wish the responsibility then Miyu will."

There were so many reasons for Aya to turn his back on what he had fallen into and just as many for not doing so. Of course there was one big reason that he didn't think he was suited for the role.

"I am an assassin," Aya pointed out, wondering if he could move without disturbing Crawford.

"Then be an assassin," Ryu said as if it should have been obvious; "it is a specialised, but very well paid line of work and as Master of Tokyo West you will be expected to bring in income. Minoru specialised in organised crime and had many connections with the Yakuza, you could go the other way if you so wish, or set up an international flower selling operation if you prefer. What you were is behind you, Aya, what you wish to become is up to you."

It was all very well saying that, but Aya knew it was not that simple. Eszett and Kritiker knew Weiß and Schwarz had been working as one and would not just believe they were dead; neither organisation would let that lie. He did not fear immediate reprisals, but, no doubt, they would be hearing from one if not both organisations in the future. He had no illusions that either was really so damaged they would not rise from the ashes. It would probably be better if he made the first move; Kritiker would most likely accept them as freelance.

That was when it occurred to him that he had all but made his decision. He would need to talk to the others, but he couldn't see them objecting; they were all nicely ensconced by now. They would have the option to go their own ways soon if they wanted to anyway, but he doubted that would happen either. Their attack on Eszett had shown just how good a team they made and with the interesting dynamics going on inside the group he did not believe they would break apart easily.

He still felt protective towards them all in a way he had never believed possible and although it was much fainter than when he had first woken up as a master vampire, it would not go away. If he was truthful with himself he did not want any of them to leave, no matter how complicated the situation was. Staying really was the easiest option, but he needed to talk to everyone before he finally decided.

"You should feed and then return to sleep," Ryu said in a practical tone and broke him out of his thoughts, "and then when this evening comes you will be ready to face the world properly."

There was really no point in arguing with that and it would mean waking Crawford, but at least it was something he was used to dealing with now. Big decisions could wait until he was feeling clearer headed.

====

Epilogue

Aya scrolled through the email on the secure server Omi and Nagi assured him was state of the art. The system the pair had designed and implemented was quite amazing and even though Juro had been rather sceptical about it, even the gruff War Master admitted it made everything a lot easier. In fact it was so useful that Ryu had hired the two computer geniuses as consultants to set one up for him as well.

"Kritiker," Crawford said, walking into the room and up to the desk.

It was not a question, but then Crawford very rarely needed to ask questions.

"It's a reasonable offer and seems to be a valid target," Aya replied with a nod, "but I want our people to check it out first. It feels like there could be complications."

He had approached Kritiker soon after the destruction of Eszett and, although the organisation had been reticent, they had come to an agreement about contracts. Kritiker clearly did not like not knowing about where Weiß and Schwarz now were or why they were a team, but they were not stupid enough to argue with results. So far they had had one attempted infiltration of vampire society by a Kritiker operative, but the man had been caught by Miyu's people, interrogated by Juro's and then adopted by Akemi. He was now happily working for Akemi and Kritiker would never see him again.

"Miyu probably already has people on it," Crawford pointed out and Aya found himself actually smiling.

The master of spies was often even one step ahead of the precog and it had become a game of sorts between them.

Crawford playing a game, a game for fun; that was one thing he never would have considered a few months previously. So much had changed and he knew he was one of the things that had changed the most. Aya-chan was safe and awake, two things he had barely believed possible, and, although he had no contact with her he was happier than he had been in years. Miyu provided him with weekly updates and pictures and it satisfied him. Crawford was still trying to convince him to talk to his sister, but that was one argument Crawford was not winning. The idea of his sister knowing that he was an assassin scared him, the idea that his sister might find out he was a vampire was just beyond bearing.

The group dynamic had settled down as well. Schuldig was actually training Yoji to use his unusual gifts and as far as Aya could tell, the pair were working their way through most of the local vampire population and their mortal hangers on. So far no one had complained, in fact, if the rumours were to be believed the opposite was true, but Aya had made it very clear he would not be pleased if anyone came to him unhappy about the pair's methods.

Ken was training with Patrick and knew far more about the Enforcers than Aya did. It seemed to be just what Ken needed to settle down and Aya had heard talk of a rather different football team being set up. Ken loved his sport and he was spreading that love around. There was a new, very large screen in one of the rooms now that was mostly being used to catch up with various football games. If it kept Ken happy, Aya was not going to argue.

Since Nagi and Omi were virtually joined at the hip with their computer enterprises that just left Farfarello to worry about at a distance and the berserker was definitely an odd one. Of all the people Aya had expected the Irishman to latch on to, Akemi was not it, but more and more often the pair were being seen together. Since Akemi had cut back on making passes at him, Aya had his suspicions that the two had come to an arrangement that satisfied them both. However, given Farfarello's peculiar mindset, Aya was not going to ask about it, ever, if he could help it.

They were all settling in, finding where they fitted best and Aya did not regret the decision to stay.

Crawford walked around the desk and placed a hand on his shoulder while leaning over to look at the screen. That was something else that seemed to be settling in as well, him and Crawford. It was difficult to define what was between them, since they were both such controlled and reserved individuals, but they definitely weren't that way in the bedroom. What had started as a relief of stress for both of them had become a regular thing and so normal for them that they mostly shared a bedroom. Crawford had his own room, as they all did, but he was as likely to use it as Yoji and Schuldig were likely to give up sex.

He and Crawford had become a team within a team and he couldn't fathom it, but he had given up arguing about it.

"It is time to relax now," Crawford said, flicking the screen off with one hand and allowing the one on Aya's shoulder to begin moving downward.

That was something else Aya had almost given up arguing about; when Crawford took it upon himself to make sure he wasn't working all the time. He was not what anyone would call the most fun loving person, but Crawford seemed to be trying to break him from bad habits. If he spent too long holed up in his office, Crawford always came to get him. When he'd challenged Crawford on the matter, Crawford had said something about enjoying annoying him, but he was almost

sure it wasn't really that. As ever though, getting information from Crawford which the man was not willing to give was like getting blood from a stone, so Aya was biding his time. He would get an answer, he just had to plan how.

Catching hold of Crawford's hand, before it could distract him, he sighed and stood up.

"If Miyu has to wipe the surveillance tapes again," he said, keeping hold of Crawford's hand and leading his lover around the desk, "we will have a reputation as bad as our resident sex maniacs."

That made Crawford chuckle and Aya found himself being pulled backwards into an embrace.

"Oh, it we have as much fun," Crawford whispered in his ear, "I think I can live with that."

Aya felt his cock hardening at the very idea. He was beginning to wonder if Yoji wasn't rubbing off on all of them.

The End