The Measure of a Man (2006)

by JennyB

Summary

Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.' After a rather unique incident one night at KaibaCorp, both Seto and Jounouchi discover a new respect for each other, and ultimately, learn a little bit about themselves in the process.
"It sounds cool, Nii-sama, but I don't understand why you want to start another tournament so soon."

Kaiba Seto sighed in frustration. "It's not a tournament like you're thinking, Mokuba. It's going to involve Duel Monsters, yes, but this is going to be done on a whole new level. It will be more exclusive, the game will be slightly different, and it's going to use virtual reality technology that has never been experienced by anyone." He poked at the bowl of noodles and vegetables in front of him with his chopsticks and made a face. Some time ago, he had acquiesced to Mokuba's demands of having a 'family night' that involved the younger sibling choosing the evening meal, after which they would watch television together, or play a game, or go out – basically, it was the raven-haired boy's way of keeping his brother from working seven nights a week. And on this particular Sunday night, it was Chinese. Not the well-prepared, authentic, gourmet dishes that Seto often enjoyed while entertaining clients. No, this was the fast food, trendy, Americanized shit that the vendors tried to pass off as 'food'. He glanced up at his brother and watched in a combination of awe and disgust as the young boy shovelled his meal into his mouth as fast as he possibly could. He reminds me of Jounouchi, the brunet thought absently, and then immediately pushed the thought from his mind with a sub-vocal growl. He'd been thinking about the lanky blond a lot lately, often in ways that left him feeling both deeply aroused and highly concerned. The idea of him and Jounouchi as lovers, let alone friends, was preposterous. The blond was nothing more than a random plaything – someone whom he could rile up in an instant and then watch in amusement as he floundered in frustrated indignation. Jou was a petty nuisance at best; a random diversion in an otherwise structured day. Never mind that his confrontations with the blond were far more frequent than 'random'. At this, he gave an audible snort of contempt.

Mokuba looked up from his bowl. "Did you say something, Nii-sama?" he asked thickly through a mouthful of lo mein noodles. He caught the disapproving stare his brother levelled at him, and after quickly chewing and swallowing, he wiped his mouth with his napkin and looked for a quick way to change the subject. "So, what makes this new VR technology so different, anyway?"

"Do you remember when we were in Noa's virtual world?" When Kaiba saw the raven head nod, he continued. "It really was incredible – never before had I seen anything so realistic. Well, after witnessing it for myself, I knew it would be possible to recreate such a world using our existing pod technology, and then improve upon it. And, I've done it, Mokuba. The most realistic virtual reality simulator ever created. It's near perfect. If I took you while you were sleeping and put you inside the program, I doubt you'd know it was a hologram."

Mokuba furrowed his brow in concentration. "So how are you going to incorporate Duel Monsters into this tournament?"

The brunet smirked. "This time, not only do you have to worry about your opponents, but you also have to worry about the wild monsters roaming free."

"Wild duel monsters in a `real world' setting? How cool is that? Can I try it, Nii-sama?"

"When it's ready, I'll let you try it. I still have a bit more work to do on it, but it will be up and running before the weekend. Tomorrow, there will be a press release announcing the tournament, which will begin in two weeks."

"But what will you do if you don't have it working in time, Seto?" the young boy asked as he broke open a fortune cookie and read the tiny, printed message, a small grin on his face.
"I don't believe in `what if'; I follow `what is'. It will be operational by the start of the tournament. Now, what do you have planned for us this evening?" Secretly, the brunet hoped it was watching television or a movie – at least that way, he could drag out his laptop and work on some of the other KaibaCorp business that needed attending to.

"Well, Nii-sama, I'm thinking the arcade. My fortune says, `Luck is on your side today,' and I'm feeling lucky!"

Seto let out a heavy sigh. He hated the arcade. It was always crowded, some small child always managed to spill something on him, and the games bored him to tears. Reticently, he nodded to his brother. "Let's go, then."

"Seto, wait! You didn't read your fortune!" Mokuba replied, hurriedly handing the small, wrapped cookie to the brunet.

"Are you joking? Scientists have been trying to foretell the future for millennia; what makes you think that a cookie holds the key?"

"Come on, Nii-sama…it's just for fun."

Rolling his eyes exasperatedly, Seto took the proffered dessert from his brother and broke the cookie in half. "This is completely stupid," he muttered as he pulled the slip of paper out. He saw Mokuba looking up at him, his slate-grey eyes wide in anticipation. Clearing his throat, he read, "'Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes.'" Kaiba snorted in amusement as he crumpled the slip of paper up in his fist and then tossed it onto the table. "Ridiculous," he muttered as he led Mokuba from the room.

The next morning, five sets of eyes were staring intently at the small television on the Mutou's kitchen counter. Sugoroku had been happily watching the morning news while his grandson entertained his friends over breakfast, but when the news anchor stated that Kaiba Seto would be making a surprise announcement, everyone had jumped up from the table to crowd around the screen.

"Good morning," the brunet began crisply. "KaibaCorp is constantly striving to be on the cutting edge in video gaming technology, and with the development of our new KC-238VR projection system, we are changing gaming as you know it. With this system, we are able to produce a virtual environment so realistic, it feels like the actual world. To celebrate this new development, KaibaCorp will be hosting a special Duel Monsters invitational tournament, which will showcase this incredible technology. Invitations have been sent to fifty selected participants, and entry will be restricted to the first forty that register and pay the 50,000 yen entrance fee. This, in turn, will be offered up as a grand prize for the winner. For those who believe this will be another Battle City, you are sorely mistaken. Prepare for a game unlike anything you have ever seen before."

The anchor returned and began talking about other news in the business world, and the four teens quietly made their way back over to the kitchen table. "Man, this sucks," Jounouchi grumbled as he reached for another homemade cinnamon roll. "Rich boy'll do anything he can to screw me," he muttered around a mouthful of pastry, a faint blush colouring his cheeks as he realized the potential double-meaning of his statement. Swallowing his bite, he continued his rant, punctuating the air with a stab of his roll. "I mean, in Battle City, he tried to keep me out of his tournament by deliberately rating me low, and now here, he's..." Suddenly, Jou's eyes went wide, and he trailed off, his face colouring near crimson in embarrassment. He didn't want his friends to know that he couldn't afford the entrance fee, and he certainly wasn't going to ask them for help.
"Jou, I'm sure Kaiba sent you an invitation. After all, you and Yugi were both finalists in his last tournament," Anzu said gently. "I mean, I know you and Kaiba have had your differences, but I don't think he'd be that blatantly unfair."

"Yeah, well then you just don't know him," the blond groused as he stuffed the last bite of his breakfast into his mouth. "Have you not noticed that I've never beaten him at anything? Not one time? Mark my words; he's going to do something shitty. Just you wait."

"Pessimist!" Anzu hissed as she gathered up the plates and set them in the sink. "Maybe if you weren't so negative all the time, you'd see that the world isn't out to get you, Jounouchi!" she scolded him as she headed for the bathroom to brush her teeth.

"Screw you, Anzu," Jou muttered under his breath once the petite brunette had left the room. His normally friendly, amber eyes were clouded with hurt and irritation. Granted, none of his friends, save for Honda, were privy to the details of his life, and he liked it that way. But sometimes, especially on days like today when Anzu was on his case, he wanted to grab them and show them just how bad his situation was. Maybe then he would get some understanding.

"Hey, Yugi," Honda cut in, grabbing Jou by the elbow and steering him towards the door. "Jou and I will wait for you two outside. We're going to get some fresh air." Once they were outside, Honda turned to the blond and said, "Ok man, spill. What's really got you in such a pissy mood today?"

"You know damned well what it is, Hon'. Even if Kaiba proves he's not a complete asshole and sends me an invitation to his tournament, you and I both know there's no way I'll come up with the entrance fee."

"I could loan it to you. You could pay me back --"

"No!" Jou interrupted resolutely. "I've made it this far by not mooching off my friends, and I'm not about to start now. I appreciate the offer, but there's got to be some other way."

"Why don't you talk to Kaiba?"

The blond looked at his friend like he had three heads. "Are you fucking insane? What am I going to do? Stroll up to him and say, 'Hey, Kaib', bitching tournament you've got. Think we could work out a payment plan over the next year?' Get real, Honda." Jou kicked an empty soda can off of the sidewalk and watched as a bus ran it over. "Besides, I'm the last person on earth Kaiba Seto would be willing to do a favour for."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I think you are at least before Pegasus, the Big Five, Marik, Bakura, probably Otogi..."

"Get bent, Hiroto," Jou smirked as he elbowed his friend in the gut. "You know what I mean." He paused for a moment and his grin slowly faded into a wistful smile. "Why do I have to have a crush on him of all people? God, I must have been a real pain in the ass in my last life to have this much bad karma heaped on me."

"You mean, more so than you are now?" Honda taunted, easily dodging a half-hearted swing from the blond. "Seriously, dude, the heart wants what it wants, and the only thing you can do is hang on for the ride. For your sake, I hope it's a good one."

"That's comforting," Jou said wryly as he leaned against his best friend. "Remind me next time not to get a pep talk from you." He trailed off once Yugi and Anzu joined them outside, and as the group began walking, the conversation quickly slipped into the everyday, inane banter that existed between
them.

The foursome arrived at school just as Kaiba Seto was getting out of his limo. It was a rare occasion that he arrived when they did; unless he had a morning meeting, he was usually at school much earlier than them. He slowly let his cold gaze travel over the other students, letting it linger for a fraction of a second longer on Jounouchi than anyone else. The faintest trace of a smirk curved his lips upwards as he began to make his way towards the building. Passing by the group, he let his gaze fall on each of them in turn as he murmured, "Yugi, Anzu, Honda…and the rest."

"I do have a fucking name, too, you know!" Jou scowled. "Come here and I'll pound it into that arrogant, rich-boy face of yours!"

"Whatever," Seto replied, not even bothering to look back at the blond.

Jou's expression contorted into a look of pure fury. "Screw you, Kaiba!" he shouted after the brunet.

At this, Seto paused. Turning to the blond, his smirk widened as he let his gaze travel slowly up and down the lithe form in front of him. "Sorry," he drawled. "I don't do charity work." With that, he turned his back on Jou and climbed the steps to the school.

Instinctively, Honda grabbed onto Jou and held him back, but he needn't have bothered; the blond was stone-still in his arms, his mouth open in shock and his cheeks slightly flushed. "Let it go, man. You know he's just trying to get you all riled up before class."

"Yeah, he sure is," Jou agreed absently as he watched the brunet saunter into the school, his gaze trained on the well-toned ass in front of him. He was pulled from his reverie by an elbow to the ribs from Honda. "Ow; what the hell?" Jou muttered, glaring coolly at his friend.

"Get a grip, Jou," Honda hissed through clenched teeth. "You're staring, and you're drawing attention," he warned, subtly gesturing with his head towards Anzu and Yugi.

"Huh?" the blond replied dumbly before turning to regard his other two friends.

"Jou-kun, are you alright?" Yugi asked him, a definite note of concern in his voice.

Jounouchi grinned sheepishly at his small friend and ran a hand haphazardly through his already unruly blond locks. "Oh, uh, sure Yug', just didn't sleep well last night and it's been kind of a rough morning, you know?" Not wanting to stick around any longer to provide his shortest friend with more opportunity to ask questions, Jou bounded up the school steps two at a time and headed for his homeroom.

The morning passed by quickly enough for Jou. He'd had art history first period and then gym; neither of which he shared with any of his friends. However, as much as he loved the two classes, he found the idea of having phys ed right before lunch to be a gross inconvenience. By the time he finished whatever sport they were doing, ran any assigned punishment laps for the day, showered, and redressed, he was left with a scant ten minutes to grab something to eat and wolf it down before the afternoon session. As it was, he found that the combination of the exercise, the rapid-fire ingestion of a meal, and the subject matter of the ensuing classes often caused him to doze off or lapse into a deep daydream. His first class of the afternoon, chemistry, he shared with Anzu and he didn't really mind it too much. The experiments were at least mildly interesting, and since he got to work with her (and often copy her observations and results), he had something to keep him awake and focused. But algebra, his last class of the day, and the only one he shared with Kaiba, Yugi and Honda, was hell. By the time he flopped down at his desk, he was completely bored, and both his
patience and his attention were worn thin. To make matters worse, he sat one seat forward and one row over from the frigid brunet, which meant that he was forced to endure an hour and a half of lowly whispered, sarcastic comments. Sometimes they were directed at his classmates and, quite often, the sensei, but most of the time, they were focused on him.

Today was no exception. Half an hour into the lesson, his mind drifted back to Kaiba's upcoming tournament. The brunet had to invite him to participate. Slouching further down in his seat, Jou feigned dropping his pencil on the floor so he could chance a peek behind him. The brunet was sitting stiffly at his desk, his arms crossed in front of him, a blank expression on his face. The blond noticed that Kaiba's notebook was closed and he had yet to even break the binding on his textbook. He could probably do this shit in his sleep, Jou mused as he picked up his wayward pencil, flushing slightly when the impassive, sapphire gaze dropped momentarily to him. "Problem?" Jou growled.

The brunet gave an amused snort. "Nothing a paper bag over your head wouldn't solve…"

"Yeah, `cause then I wouldn't have to look at you, ya ass," Jou retorted, a little louder than he had intended.

"Jounouchi!" the sensei called out sternly. "Is there something you'd like to share with the rest of the class?"

The blond whirled around in his seat, feeling his face heating slightly as a few scattered sniggers and twitters of laughter were heard from around the room. "Uh, no, Sensei. I just dropped my pencil and was…"

"Well then, since you're obviously working so diligently, I expect to see your finished assignment on my desk before the end of the period. And if it isn't, well then, you can stay with me after class until it is."

At this, Jou blanched. He couldn't afford to be kept late tonight – not when he needed to get home to check the mail before his dad arrived. Studiously, he bent his head over his paper and began furiously solving the equations. He heard the smug chuckle from over his left shoulder and he bristled inwardly, gripping his pencil tighter between his fingers. He could feel Kaiba's piercing stare on him, and he clenched his jaw tightly and closed his eyes. He wouldn't give in this time…he wouldn't give the brunet the satisfaction of getting him tossed into detention yet again.

He heard Kaiba whisper, "Brilliant. That pathetic display might have worked on a four-year-old. Loser." Despite himself, Jou could feel his anger building, and when the barb was followed up with a contemptuous snort, the last remaining thread of his self-control snapped with a vengeance. Turning angrily, he snarled, "Get bent, you fucking prick! Maybe if you didn't have your head so far up your ass –"

"Jounouchi!" the sensei scolded, interrupting him. "I'll see you after class! One hour!"

The blond felt as if the wind had just been knocked from his sails at this proclamation, and when he saw the angry frown on her face, he knew he'd not be able to charm his way out of this one. Dejectedly, he returned to his questions. Fucking Kaiba, he thought to himself as he worked through another problem, no longer in any great hurry to finish them.

When the bell rang, Jou remained in his seat as his classmates all filed out around him. Finally, it was just him and his teacher. Sadly, the blond looked down at his sheet and saw he had but two questions to finish. He had been so close. Why did the brunet always have to be such a jerk? Sighing, he finished the remaining work and then pulled out a blank sheet of paper to do some figuring. His biggest obstacle would be getting the entrance fee, and he decided that his remaining detention time
would be a good opportunity to devise a plan. "Ok, I've got… 10 000 yen in my account. Guess I won't be buying those new shoes this month… I think I can pick up a couple more shifts at the coffee shop, and if I do a couple of the extra paper routes in the morning, that should bring me up to 30 000 yen…Damn it!" He dropped his head onto his desk in defeat. There was no way he was going to come up with the money in time, no matter what he did. "Shit," he muttered quietly. "It's not fair…"

"What's not fair, Jounouchi-kun?" his teacher asked as she sat down at the desk in front of him, smiling kindly.

The blond raised his head, surreptitiously covering his note with his elbow as he looked into her soft, hazel eyes. "N-nothing, Sensei. I was just thinking."

She nodded and picked up his completed assignment, raising an eyebrow as she looked over his paper. "This is very good, Katsuya," she complimented. "I really hadn't expected you to complete this; not because I don't think you're a good student, but because I know you spend far too much time focusing on Kaiba-kun." At this, the blond pinked slightly in a combination of pride and embarrassment.

"But Sensei," Jou protested, "Kaiba doesn't –"

The small woman held up her hand, cutting him off. "I'm not stupid, Jounouchi-kun, despite the fact that many of you consider me sub par." She smirked slightly when Jou's eyes widened in surprise. "In fact, I'd be willing to bet that the animosity between you and Kaiba-kun is merely a cover for something deeper. It's a fine line between love and hate…" Again, she cut the blond off before he could argue. "I'm not suggesting that, Jou-kun. All I'm saying is that maybe you need to look beneath the surface, find the root cause of the behaviour between the two of you." She smiled again and patted his arm. "I know that my class would certainly be less problematic if you did." She stood up and looked at the clock; he still had twenty minutes to serve. "Go on, Jou-kun. Get out of here. And please, for God's sake, try to stop disrupting my class?"

"Yes, Sensei," he replied, giving her a small smile as he began packing up his things. He knew that his teacher had cut him an enormous break by dismissing him early, but by this point, he might as well have stayed for the full time. His father would be home by now, and if, by some miracle, he had received an invitation, it would have long since been destroyed…along with any bills or other correspondence. Jou gave a derisive chuckle as he began the walk back to his place. His father, his common sense having been destroyed by his long-term love affair with the Messieurs Daniels and Walker, believed that if he didn't open the mail and simply burned it, he would not be liable for anything contained within it. "You can't make me pay it if I don't know about it," was his philosophy. Unfortunately, that rule was blindly applied to government subsistence cheques and family allowance payments, and on more than one occasion, Jou had found himself down at the county offices pleading for a re-issuance – after paying the required administrative fees and surcharges, of course.

As he passed by the arcade, the blond slowed his pace. Peering in the window, he saw that it wasn't very busy and, a small smile creeping across his face, he reached for the door handle. Nothing seemed to cheer him up like blasting a graveyard full of zombies did, and right now, he was itching to do battle. Jou stepped inside, and immediately, he could feel his mood lifting. The aroma of pizza, popcorn and bubblegum assaulted his nose, and as he breathed deeply, he could feel his worries slipping away. He quickly purchased some tokens from the machine and stepped up to play 'Undead Warrior IV'. With a cursory crack of his knuckles, he began doing battle with the evil, zombie creatures. It wasn't long before he had cleared level ten, and was on his way to breaking his own high score. And then he heard the voice; that annoying, irritating, sexy tenor that could only belong to one person. Scowling, Jou peered around the machine and saw Kaiba Seto talking to his younger
brother, and then he muttered an irritated curse when he heard his player get killed by a rogue wraith.

"Fucking perfect," he grumbled. "I come here to get away from him, and look who shows up."

Without a second thought, he grabbed his backpack from where he'd stowed it on the floor and turned to leave. With a little luck, he could get away without having to deal with the brunet.

He had just about made it to the door when he heard Kaiba drawl, "Out without the rest of the Friendship Posse? What's the matter? Trouble in paradise?"

Jou paused and stiffened slightly at the question, and then pushed open the door without a word or a backward glance. He had gone perhaps twenty feet when he felt a strong hand on his arm. Turning, he met a questioning sapphire gaze, and despite his irritation, Jou couldn't help the slight flip-flop he felt in his stomach as he stared back defiantly. "What do you want, Kaiba?" he demanded harshly. "I've got better things to do than talk to you."

"Like what?" the brunet demanded coolly.

"Up yours, Kaiba," Jou muttered as he roughly jerked his arm free. "I've had enough of your crap for today."

At this, Seto quirked an intrigued eyebrow. It wasn't like the blond to walk away from a fight. "Hn," he mused. "Remind me what I did so I know how to shut you up quicker in the future."

The blond growled warningly and ran his hands through his hair in exasperation. "You're such an asshole; do you know that? You shoot your mouth off about how you don't want me around, and yet here you are, busting my chops about shit after I leave you alone like you want. Make up your mind."

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm simply curious as to why you chose to simply up and disappear as opposed to irritating me with your inane gibbering."

"You know what, Kaiba? It's your lucky day. I'm through with that and I'm through with you, so that means you don't have to worry about me participating in your shitty tournament after all."

Seto's eyes went wide in surprise. Of all the words he ever expected to come out of Jounouchi's mouth, those were probably the last he thought he'd hear. Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, "What? Why?"

Jou shrugged dejectedly. "Battle City sucked," he replied simply and turned away again.

The brunet frowned slightly. He'd been expecting Jou to be one of the first to sign up, along with Yugi. The short duellist had registered that afternoon, but surprisingly, the blond had not. And that simply did not sit right with him. As he watched Jounouchi stuff his hands in his pants pockets and walk away, the gesture pulling the fabric of his trousers taut across his ass, the brunet licked his suddenly dry lips. One way or another, he had to get the blond registered in his tournament. Tonight. "Jounouchi, wait."

Jou sighed in exasperation and turned back to Kaiba. "Now what?"

Seto's mind was working overtime. Duelling was Jou's life; there had to be a reason why he hadn't paid the registration fee and... Sapphire eyes glinted in sudden understanding. The other tournaments had been either by invitation or based solely on duellist ranking – there had never been a cost involved. Idiot, he chastised himself as he glanced at the impatient-looking blond. He had to play his hand carefully if his plan was to succeed. "I'm sorry to hear you feel that way. I guess I'll ask someone else, then. Someone with more talent, anyway." Kaiba turned his back to Jou, taking a few
slow, deliberate steps towards the arcade. He had to fight to restrain the smug smirk that threatened to break through when he felt the blond's hand on his arm.

"Hold up, Kaiba. What the hell are you talking about?"

The brunet gave a noncommittal shrug. "I need a favour."

At this, Jou laughed outright. "A favour? From me? Whatever, Kaiba. Like I'm going to humiliate myself or do a bunch of shitty slave labour for you."

"It's not 'slave labour'; I need someone to help me beta test the new VR pods. And I wouldn't expect that person to do it without compensation. If you had agreed, I would have been willing to waive the entrance fee to the competition. But since you have no intention of participating –"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jou interrupted, his face breaking into wide grin. "So I'd get to try it before everyone else? I'd be the one with the sneak peek at this kick-ass new technology? Hell yeah, I'm in!" Suddenly, his grin faded and his expression grew wary. "Wait a second. Is it dangerous? I mean, why me, Kaiba? You looking for someone expendable?"

"Don't be stupid," the brunet growled, his tone belying the secret satisfaction he felt. "I won't send Mokuba in because I need an objective opinion; preferably that of a duellist. And since you've proven that you're not completely without talent, and you're not afraid to tell me what you think – even when I don't want your opinion – I thought of you. So…what's your answer? I don't have all night to wait for you to uncover the mysterious, hidden conspiracy."

Jounouchi stared into the impassive, sapphire gaze, searching for any hint of deception or malice. "Alright, Kaiba. You might be a prick, but I've never known you to lie to me. When do we start?"

"I have a few minor details to finish. Unless I tell you otherwise, we'll do it on Thursday night at 5:00. Don't worry; I'll feed you for your trouble. You can pick up your security pass at reception when you arrive. And bring ID."
Chapter Two

On Thursday night, Jounouchi approached the mirrored, glass entrance doors of the KaibaCorp building with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Kaiba had not said anything to him about cancelling their appointment, but he couldn't quell the small feeling of doubt in the pit of his stomach or silence the niggling thought in the back of his mind that kept telling him that this still could be some sort of trick. Then again, the brunet had kept his word about entering him into the tournament; the blond had seen his name displayed on the list of `registered duellists' that the paper printed daily. It hadn't even been a week, and Kaiba already had his forty confirmed participants. Jou couldn't help the small smirk that crossed his lips. Somehow, he figured that the brunet had planned for that to happen. Taking a deep, calming breath, he pushed open the doors and strode over to the reception desk.

Jou's face fell when he saw a heavy-set, cantankerous looking, middle-aged security guard seated there. Plastering a cheerful smile on his face, he said politely, "Excuse me, but I'm here to see Kaiba. He said I could pick up a security pass here tonight."

The guard looked up at him from the sports magazine that he'd been flipping through. "Kaiba-sama is a very busy man, and doesn't usually have his friends `drop by'; especially after hours. And there ain't no pass here, kid." His sad, watery blue eyes dropped back to his magazine.

"What?" Jou exclaimed incredulously. "Are you sure? He told me it would be here."

"Gee, let me check for you," the guard muttered as he blindly patted the top of the desk, his eyes never leaving the article he was reading. "Yep, still nothing."

A low, irritated growl rumbled deep in the blond's throat. "Fuck this and fuck him," he mumbled, stuffing his hands in his jacket pocket as he turned to leave.

"Jesus Christ, Ari!" a shrill, female voice rang out. "I ask you to cover for me for five minutes, and look at the crap you're causing!" Jou turned around and saw a short, thin woman in her early fifties striding to where the portly guard sat. Her brow was creased in an angry frown and her lips were pressed together in a thin line. "Get your fat ass out of my chair and get back to doing whatever the hell it is that you do! That's the last time I ask you for a favour! If Kaiba-sama knew that this was how you treated the people who came through his door, he'd have a fit!" She gave the man a hearty swat on the arm as he passed, drawing a small chuckle from the blond.

The woman looked up in surprise, and then her expression transformed into a warm smile. "Oh good; you are still here. What can I do for you, Hon?"

Jou worried his lip for a moment, debating on whether or not he should bother explaining himself again, and then stepped back to the reception desk. "My name is Jounouchi Katsuya," he began. "I was told that there would be –"

"A security pass for you, yes; Kaiba-sama mentioned that you'd be stopping by. I'm sorry you had to deal with this oaf first, but when you get to be my age, you need to powder your nose a lot more frequently." She winked at the blond, who flashed a brilliant grin at her in return. "Did you bring some identification with you, Sweetie?" Jou nodded and handed her his student card. She studied the picture, and then looked up at the blond. As she handed him back his ID, she turned to the guard. "Escort Jounouchi-san to Lab 31-Alpha, as per Kaiba-sama's orders." Handing the blond a clip-on tag that read, 'Visitor', she winked at him and wished him good luck as he trotted after Ari.
The pair walked in silence as they turned down corridor after corridor, eventually coming to a set of steel doors which slid open to reveal an elevator. God, I sure hope Kaiba's going to walk me out when we're done; a person could get lost in this place, Jou mused as he leaned back against the plush interior of the car. He hummed absently to himself as he cast a glance at his escort, noting with wry amusement how the man remained stiff and motionless as they travelled. Hn, the 'rod up the ass' must be a condition of employment for the high security jobs, he thought, biting his lip in an attempt to stifle his snicker. When the guard turned to cast a dubious glance at him, the blond quickly feigned a minor coughing spell, looking up apologetically and murmuring, "Allergies."

The guard shook his head and resumed his sentry-like posture, only moving when the elevator stopped and the doors opened. The two were deep in the lower levels of KaibaCorp, where all the Research, Development and Testing laboratories were located. Jou gaped as he looked around. Everything was gleaming white and immaculate, and every room had a heavy, steel security door with no windows. "Jesus, I'd bet this place has more security than a military base!" Jou breathed lowly as he squinted slightly against the bright, fluorescent lighting reflecting off of every surface.

"Smart boy," the guard said finally, turning his head just enough for the blond to see the condescending smirk on his face. "Well, here you are," he announced, stopping outside a nondescript metal door that looked just like every other nondescript metal door they had passed. The only clue as to what lay behind it was a small, typed placard that read, '31-Alpha: KC-238VR – Testing. Restricted Level IV or Higher.' The large man reached out his hand and jabbed the intercom call button with his beefy thumb.

A few moments passed with no reply, and Jou was about to suggest that maybe he wasn't there, when Seto's curt voice replied, "What?"

"Great, Jou mused forlornly. He sounds pissed already, and he hasn't even seen me yet."

"Your...colleague...is here, Sir," Ari answered, giving Jou another reproachful stare, his smirk widening when the blond shifted uncomfortably.

"My what?" Seto demanded tersely, his voice full of impatience. There was a brief pause, and then the door slid open. A look of comprehension crossed his face as the brunet's gaze shifted from the guard to Jounouchi. "Oh right. Him."

"Nice to see you, too," Jou grumbled, a petulant frown on his lips. "If you're going to start right off with that attitude, I'm going home. I'm doing you a favour, and I don't need your crap."

An arrogant smirk crept across Seto's face as he dismissed the guard with an absent wave of his hand. "And last I checked, I was doing you a favour by letting you into the tournament gratis. But that's fine; if you no longer wish to help me, simply drop your registration fee off with Kiko on your way out, and we'll call it even."

The blond's eyes widened slightly, and he quickly stammered, "No, no, I'm still here to help you. I just think a little respect is in order, is all."

"Hn," Seto drawled, his voice cool and smug. "Respect is earned, not given. Now come on; we have a lot to do." Turning his back on Jou, he returned to the lab, not seeing the finger the blond sent his way.

"Prick," Jou muttered as he followed the brunet inside, giving a small jump when the door slid shut behind him. "Christ!" he yelped, flushing in embarrassment when he met the amused sapphire gaze.
"A little jumpy, are we?" Seto taunted as he settled himself behind the large computer console, dimming the lights in the control room to reveal four white, egg-shaped pods in the adjoining area.

"Oh wow!" the blond exclaimed as he gazed eagerly through the glass, practically bursting with excitement. "That is just so...boring." Jou's shoulders slumped slightly as he turned back to the brunet. "Are you fucking kidding me? Those are the same pods that we used back when we went up against the Big Five for your sorry ass."

"Whatever," Seto replied dismissively, quickly typing a few lines of code. "The new pods are still in our receiving warehouse and will be installed prior to the tournament. They don't serve any real function other than to give the user a comfortable place to sit. You'll find that the actual technology is much different from what you remember, and for testing purposes, these pods are more than adequate." He smirked jeeringly at the blond and added, "Besides, why waste first class on second-rate, ne?"

"Get bent, Kaiba," Jou growled as he dragged a small laboratory stool that he'd spotted in the corner over to where the brunet sat and perched himself huffily upon it. "Always with the insults and the snotty comments. Would it kill you to be civil just once?" When Seto didn't respond, the blond frowned petulantly and crossed his arms in front of him, scowling at the other teen. For a few minutes, the pair sat in silence, the faint whirring of cooling fans and the steady click of keys the only sounds. Slowly, Jou's frown faded and, as he watched the brunet's fingers fly across the keyboard, he cocked his head to the side in curiosity, studying the intricate lines of type that appeared on the large monitor. He was about to ask if he should maybe come back in a while when his belly let out a loud, obnoxious gurgle. Flushing slightly, he leaned forward and pressed his hands against his abdomen, trying to force his stomach back behind his kidneys to muffle the sound.

Seto turned to the blond, one eyebrow arched in disbelief. "Oh right. I promised to feed you, didn't I?" Wordlessly, he swivelled around in his chair and retrieved a large paper bag from the desk behind him, dropping it unceremoniously into Jou's lap. "I'm afraid I couldn't get a trough; try not to get crumbs into the circuitry."

"Aren't you eating?" Jou asked, ignoring the barb and carefully unpacking the meal the brunet had procured for him, his eyes glinting in delight as he recognized the name of the restaurant.

"Perhaps later," Seto replied tersely, pausing in his typing just long enough to frown in concentration.

"Suit yourself," the blond replied with a shrug, his mouth already watering as he unwrapped the grilled chicken club sandwich. Halfway through his meal, Jou looked up to see Seto watching him, a slightly amused expression on his face. "What?" he demanded thickly around a mouthful of bread.

"Nothing."

Jou narrowed his gaze slightly as he washed down his bite with a large gulp of soda. "The fuck it is. It's never `nothing' with you." His scowl deepened as he locked eyes with the brunet. "I'm sure it has something to do with my infamous appetite, ne? Well, you try being me; I can't help it that I have a high metabolism. And yeah, I may be a street rat from the wrong side of the tracks, and I didn't go to the fancy-schmancy etiquette schools that you did, but I do have some fucking table manners!"

"You finished?" Seto asked when Jou had finished ranting, his smirk widening when the other simply nodded cantankerously. "Good," he continued as he handed the blond a paper napkin. "You have mayonnaise on the tip of your nose, Emily Post."

Mortified beyond words, he swiped furiously at his face, his cheeks heating in embarrassment.
"Thanks," he muttered sheepishly. "And, uh, sorry about going off on you just now." There was an awkward pause where neither said anything, and then Jou began again, his voice decidedly defensive. "But I mean seriously, Kaiba; what the fuck did you expect me to think? You've never said anything to me without tossing some lame-ass insult my way!" He finished off the last bite of his dinner, and then glowered at the brunet. "So, are we going to do this tonight or what?"

Wordlessly, Seto nodded as he slipped out from behind his console and opened the door to the pod room, gesturing for Jou to follow him. Once inside, he handed the blond a white, spherical helmet that was littered with sensors, electrodes, and bands of LED's, all of which were connected by an intricate roadmap of wires to the VR pods. "The final stage will be to cover the wiring with conduit, but as it is, it has no effect on the functioning of the system. It's purely a cosmetic thing." He saw the uneasy expression on Jou's face, and immediately added, "It's perfectly safe. I've been in and out of the virtual world dozens of times." When the golden eyes regarded him with the same amount of wariness, Seto sighed heavily and gave his head a small, exasperated shake. "I didn't realize you were such a pansy, Jounouchi. Do you need me to go with you and hold your hand so the big, bad Duel Monsters don't scare you?"

"Fuck you, Kaiba; I'm not scared of the VR shit. I've been in the VR world too, you know. It's just a bit unnerving to know that you're going to be messing with what's in my head." He carefully put on the helmet, gasping softly when the device automatically began to adjust to the size of his skull.

"Yes, because there's so much in there to lose, ne?" Seto taunted as he helped Jou to climb into the pod, and then he paused to make a few final alterations. "You're going to feel a bit disoriented when you arrive, but that should pass in a matter of moments. Just don't fight it and give your body a chance to adjust." He closed the Plexiglas cover and returned to the control panel. "Alright, Jounouchi…downloading to VR in 3…2…1… initiating start-up sequence."

From the comfort of his pod, Jou shivered as what felt like gallons and gallons of ice water surrounded him, slowly covering his body. Suddenly, something that felt like a large hand covered his mouth and nose; he tried to move away from the suffocating presence, but his body refused to respond. He then tried to call out to the brunet, but his voice remained obstinately silent. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he felt himself fall flat on the ground, his fingers and cheek resting on something cool and soft. His head was spinning, and when he tried to sit up, he groaned loudly and dropped flat on his back. Slowly, the revolutions began to stop, and as he blinked his eyes open, he started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Seto asked, his voice echoing through the VR world.

"Unless you planned for it to be this way, your colour scheme is all fucked up."

"Impossible!" Seto replied. "My colours are flawless."

"Well, maybe in your world they are, but here, I'm looking at a green sky, pink grass, and red and yellow trees." Jou chuckled, "Hey, maybe you're colour blind, Kaiba!"

"Don't be a dolt," the brunet snapped, typing furiously on his monitor for a few moments. "Does that make it any better?"

"You've changed the colours around, but they're still not right."

"God damn it," Seto cursed, angrily throwing his wireless mouse across the room. "Alright, stand by for a minute." In frustration, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and let out a deep sigh. "Ok, I can fix this, but I have to do it from the inside. Give me a second to get myself downloaded, and I'll join
you. One hour should be sufficient time, ne?" Ignoring the slightly panicked protests from the blond, he grabbed his portable VR interface, donned his helmet, and via remote start, began the download sequence. Once he had overcome his disorientation, he quickly located Jounouchi. Sure enough, the blond had been correct. "Shit," he muttered under his breath.

Jou jumped in surprise, whirling around to see Seto standing behind him. "Jesus! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?" he demanded, clutching desperately at his chest.

"Maybe if you'd been listening instead of braying like a jackass, you'd have heard me approaching." His scowl deepening, he began hitting various keys on his interface, his lips curving up into a satisfied smirk when the colours righted themselves. "Better?"

The blond nodded as he looked around. With everything restored to the proper perspective, the view was, in a word, breathtaking. "Holy shit, Kaiba! This is...incredible! You really outdid yourself designing this place!"

"I didn't design it. It's a real place." Seto smiled softly in fond remembrance as he once again looked upon the snow-capped mountains, the lush, verdant pine forests, and the rolling foothills covered with sweet grasses and wildflowers. He took a deep breath. "Can you smell the flowers?"

For a moment, Jou looked at him as if he had lost his mind, but when he bent down to sniff at a chickweed plant, his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Yeah, I can smell the flowers. And they smell good!"

The brunet gave a small chuckle. "Well, that's hardly a scientific description, but I'll take it. Come; we have more testing to do." Seto tapped a few keys on his interface, and then looked up at Jou, a small smirk on his face.

"Ok, what's next, Kaiba?" the blond asked, suddenly wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Ugh; I think the smell part of your program might be on the fritz. Something stinks like a dead animal."

"Oh no; I think it's working just fine," the brunet retorted, his smirk widening.

Jou was about to call him a liar when he felt a presence behind him. Turning around, all the colour drained out of his face as he found himself staring into a pair of angry, red eyes. "Battle Ox!" he squeaked, his body momentarily frozen in fear as the creature gave him an enquiring snuffle. After a moment, his legs suddenly found the ability to function and he took off full-tilt towards Seto, garnering an extra burst of speed when he felt the creature snort a breath of hot air across his heels. "Kaiba, call it off! Call it the fuck off!" he shouted, his eyes wide in terror. "I didn't bring anything to defend myself with! For the love of God, call it off!" Jou felt the beast's paw make contact with his side, and he tumbled clumsily to the ground. Rolling onto his back, he watched the monster lunge for an attack, only to dissolve into a swirl of pixels just before the jaws made contact.

"So, what do you think?" Seto called out to him. "Was the experience realistic to you?"

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Jou yelled back, panting breathlessly as he sat up. "That thing nearly killed me! Are you fucking insane?!"

"Hn, Duel Monsters appear very lifelike," Seto replied with a self-satisfied smirk as he typed a few notes into his interface. "Ok, Jounouchi, that one was the most intense. This time, we're going to test your sense of taste."

Reluctantly, Jou got to his feet, his heart still hammering in his chest as he glared at the brunet. Muttering half to himself, he groused, "You'd better not be expecting me to eat dog shit or
It turned out that Seto wanted Jou to taste a variety of food and drink that would be available to players throughout the duration of the game. After answering a myriad of questions with respect to flavour, texture, temperature, and overall enjoyment, the brunet was more than satisfied with the results of the test. As Jou was finishing off a handful of candied peanuts, Seto commented, "That will do. You may not have the most discriminating palate, but you do know what you like." There was a small beep, and with a frown, the brunet looked down at his interface. "Damn; the Weather Advisory is saying that there's a storm moving into the area. I think we'll do one more test, and then we'll call it a night. Thank you for your assistance, Jounouchi. I appreciate the help."

The blond's head snapped up to regard Seto, his mouth hanging open in stunned disbelief. Composing himself, he managed to mumble, "You're welcome, Kaiba." A small flush heated Jou's cheeks as a tiny smile crept across his face. "Truth be told, I actually had fun doing this with you tonight; well, maybe not that part with the Battle Ox."

"You know it wouldn't have really harmed you…" "Yeah, I know that…now." He smiled at the other teen, shifting uncomfortably when the piercing, sapphire eyes lingered on him just a little too long. Dropping his gaze, he picked absently at some fuzz that had accumulated on the sleeve of his jacket and muttered, "It's weird; when you're not focused on being a pompous ass, you're actually not that bad to be around. I kind of liked it."

"Well, don't get too used to it. I have no intention of becoming a regular member of the 'Superfriends'."

"Up yours, Kaiba. Fuck, you can't even be civil to me for five minutes, can you? I mean, I pay you a compliment, and suddenly you turn right back into the asshole we all know and tolerate!" Jou retorted with a snort. "Besides, don't flatter yourself. We don't want a rich, spoiled, pampered prick hanging around all the time anyway!"

The brunet's expression turned glacial as he scowled at Jou. "You don't know a thing about me or what I've had to deal with in my life, so before you start tossing around accusations –"

"Get the fuck over yourself!" Jou interrupted, meeting Seto's glare with an equally fiery one of his own. "Yeah, you're right. We don't know anything about you, but it's not for lack of trying! How the hell could we? You refuse to let any of us in!"

Seto's VR interface beeped again. When he looked back up at Jou, the coldness was gone as he stated simply, "The storm has changed course. It's practically on top of Domino. We need to go now."

"Typical!" Jou huffed in disgust. "You can't think of anything good to say, so you change the subject and walk away all superior-like! Well, not this time, Rich Boy!" Before Seto could react, Jou charged him, tackling him to the ground and knocking his VR interface from his wrist.

"Have you gone completely mental?" Seto wheezed as he tried to dislodge the blond juggernaut that was currently sitting on his chest and making it extremely difficult for him to breathe. "If we don't leave now, we run the risk of being stuck in here! Now get off of me, Baka!"

"No! Not until you answer my question. Why do you keep pushing us away? What is it about us that you find so horrible? Do you hate us?" Jou relaxed his hold on Seto's shoulders and dropped his gaze. "Or, is it just me you can't stand?"
Capitalizing on Jou's momentary lapse in concentration, Seto gave the blond a rough shove, sending the shorter teen tumbling backwards and off of his chest. Quickly getting to his feet, the brunet retrieved his interface and hurriedly began the remote upload sequence. In the few seconds between command initiation and upload, he scowled reproachfully at the blond. "Maybe some day when you can act like my equal, you'll earn an answer to that question." There was no chance for Jou to give a response, for at that moment, everything transformed into a rapidly swirling kaleidoscope of colours, sounds and textures as the computer began reintegrating them back into the real world.

Outside KaibaCorp headquarters, the wind was gusting fiercely as lightning flashed like strobe lighting and thunder echoed violently through the evening sky. The large power transformer on the roof had already borne the brunt of several aggressive lighting strikes, the lightning rod having long since been blown down. Rain teemed down in buckets, drenching anything that remained outside for more than a few seconds, and already, several power lines had been downed throughout the city. Another cluster of lightning split the inky sky, and this time when the bolt hit the transformer, it blew the power for the entire building, sparks and small pieces of metal raining down from the roof on the unsuspecting traffic below.

As backup generators immediately sprang to life, the electrical surge sped through all the electrical conduits for the building, devastating surge protectors but thankfully protecting the valuable computers and other electronic gizmos – save for in one small laboratory deep in the basement. Behind the locked door of Lab 31-Alpha, computer monitors went dead, wiring burnt, and plastic housings melted, filling the air with a thick, acrid smoke as the powerful electric current managed to get through the faulty surge protector and wreak havoc on the sensitive circuitry that lay beyond it. For a fraction of a second, all was eerily dark and quiet, save for the faint glow from the still-smouldering display terminals and computer panels. Suddenly, the emergency halon fire suppression system took over, rapidly choking off the flames. Meanwhile, in the second room, a single LED sprang to life.

Slowly, Seto blinked his eyes open and sat up inside his pod. It had been a hell of a bumpy ride back – and though he was safe and sound back home, something had left him with an unsettled, anxious feeling. As his eyes gradually came into focus, he frowned. He could see the soft, golden glow from the emergency lights and he could taste the Bittrex in the air – something must have tripped the building fire extinguishers. And then he saw the smoking remnants of his greatest virtual reality simulator from behind the hazy glass in the first room. "How the hell could this have happened?" he muttered numbly to himself as his eyes roved over the extensive damage that had been done to his lab. "I had fail-safes and backups and protective devices in place all the way! This is not possible!"

In frustration, he ran his hands through his hair, his eyes widening in fear when, instead of the sleek, smooth tresses he'd woken up with that morning, he felt a tangle of soft, fluffy hair instead. Swallowing harshly, he squeezed his eyes shut; when he opened them again, he looked down at himself, feeling the panic rising when he saw himself dressed not in his own well-tailored clothing, but in sneakers, blue jeans, and a t-shirt. "This is not happening," he groaned, his blood turning to ice as he finally heard himself speak in a voice he knew only too well. Trying to force down his mounting alarm, he, on a whim, glanced to his left, his stomach turning when he saw himself lying in the other pod.
Chapter Three

When Jou came to, the first thing he was aware of was the splitting headache pounding ruthlessly into his skull. Groaning as he rubbed at his eyes, he wanted nothing more than to get out of the VR pod and find some aspirin. Maybe Kaiba had some he could use… He sat up abruptly, promptly whacking his forehead into the aluminum reinforcing beam that ran across the top of the pod. "Ow, fuck!" he growled as he rubbed his head, immediately tensing when his voice sounded a lot deeper and more serious than he remembered. His heart clenching in fear, he looked down to find he was wearing a black wool suit, and then slowly turned his head to the right. His stomach sank when he saw himself sitting on the edge of the other pod, legs swinging slowly back and forth, and the furious, amber eyes glaring right back at him. "K-Kaiba? Is that you?"

"No, I'm the Irony Fairy. Of course it's me; don't be an idiot."

"But, how did this happen?" Jou asked as he climbed out of his pod, testing out the balance of his new body.

"I don't know," Seto replied evenly. "I need to do some further investigation, but my best guess is that there was an error during the upload."

"Do you fucking think so? God damn it!" For a moment, Jou fell silent, and then he rounded on Seto, his eyes flashing angrily. "This is all your fault, Kaiba! You've always got to go one step farther, do everything better than everyone else!" His scowl deepened. "Oh no, it's perfectly safe!" he mimicked. "Fuck you, Kaiba! You'd better fix this – I don't want to be you for any longer than I have to be!"

"Yes, and I'm just thrilled at the thought of being you," Seto snarked back. "It's what I've always dreamed to be – short and gawky."

"You're only three inches taller than me, asshole!"

At this, Seto's lips curved up into a dark smirk. "You'd be surprised what a difference three extra inches can make," he replied lewdly. Ignoring Jou's indignant huff, he hopped off of his pod and went back into the main lab, poking through the still-smoking debris, and sorting pieces into what could be salvaged and what was garbage. "Damn it," he cursed softly. "It looks like everything was blown out by a massive power surge – probably a lightning strike. I don't understand how this could have happened…" He stood up and, with an impatient sigh, pushed the blond bangs from his eyes. Grumbling, he turned to Jou. "Haven't you ever heard of a barber?"

"Bite me, Kaiba. For your information, the 'tousled' look is in!" Jounouchi broke into a wide, crooked grin, which seemed oddly mismatched with the brunet's features.

Seto scowled irritably as he carefully made his way back to his computer console and retrieved a small tool kit from one of the desk drawers. Pulling out a fine tipped screwdriver, he began removing the back panel. "God, I hate seeing myself wearing your mindless expression." He picked up a pair of wire cutters and began the arduous task of removing the delicate electronics.

"Can I help?" Jou asked, sobering his expression and crouching down beside Seto.

"Can I help?" Seto sneered, parroting the other teen. "Unless you're familiar with virtual technology, I highly doubt it."

Jou sighed and watched in silence while Seto worked. He permitted himself a small smile as he
watched his likeness unerringly work with the small components, effortlessly switching out broken parts for new. He had never really pictured himself doing anything so…cerebral, and he kind of liked it. His smile widening, he imagined himself working in some technical field, heading a small research team, the other members coming to him for help with their problems. He was shocked back to reality when an Allen key went whipping by his head. "Not going so good?" he remarked dryly.

The blond head peeked up from the mess of circuits and wires. "I'd take 'not so good' at this point in time," Seto sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration. "The equipment isn't really a problem – it's just going to take time to sort through everything and put it back together. The program will take a little longer, but fortunately, I've kept backups and will only have minor changes to make."

"Ok, so I'm stuck in your spoiled ass for a little longer. What's the problem?"

"The problem, idiot, is that to reverse…this…I have to figure out what caused it to happen in the first place. I'll stay here and work all night if I have to."

At this, Jou flushed slightly. "Uh, Kaiba, not that you're going to care, but if I don't come home tonight, my dad'll kill me. I'm already pushing curfew as it is."

"So?" Seto replied. "Go home. It's not like I need or want your assistance."

Jou sighed sadly as he felt the stab of pain through his heart. Not one hour ago, he had felt like he'd actually been a worthwhile contributor… Dully, he glanced over at the other teen and said, "Not for nothing, Kaiba, but I think my dad would call the cops if I showed up like this, ne?"

Seto glanced up and watched as the now-brunet shifted nervously from foot to foot. Rolling his eyes, he said, "Fine; I'll call your father and tell him you're spending the night at my place." When Jou let out a small whimper, he sighed in exasperation. "Now what?"

"I'm not allowed to stay over at friends' houses on school nights. When I do, it's only because…" He trailed off and shook his head, his face paling slightly. "Never mind. I'm just not allowed."

"Let me get this straight – you're telling me that you expect me to go home to your house and pretend to be you, just so you don't get in trouble with your father?" When he saw Jou nod, he scowled and said, "Your problems aren't my concern."

"Kaiba, please!" Jou begged, the expression on his face hinting that there was more going on than he was willing to divulge. "It's not that I want you to see what a shit hole I live in, I just…I'd hate to see you have to take my punishment if he finds you before we're able to switch back."

Golden eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Jounouchi, you have exactly five seconds to explain yourself to me, or you can forget about it."

As his cheeks flushed in humiliation, Jou dropped his gaze to the floor and muttered, "Let's just say that the majority of my bumps and bruises are not caused by my own lack of grace…" He once again met the stony gaze and added defiantly, "Or, from you."

"Jounouchi, if he's abusing you –"

"NO!" Jou interjected, shaking his head rapidly. "I know what you're going to say, Kaiba, so save the lecture. As much of an asshole as he is, he's the only family I've got…and besides, I'll be out of there as soon as this school year is over. I just obey all his rules and stay out of his way, watch what I do and say around him, and it's fine."
"It's NOT fine!" Seto shouted back at him. "Damn it, Jounouchi; are you listening to yourself? You sure as hell wouldn't put up with that crap from your friends, and I know first hand that you don't take it from me! Pathetic; I thought you had more self-respect than that." He snorted in disgust when Jou once again refused to meet his gaze. Growling low in his throat, he hissed through clenched teeth, "Fine. I will stay at your house tonight and masquerade as you. And, as much as I want to, I won't call the authorities and report your father for what he's done. But I promise you, if he lays one hand on me, I will not be a doormat and simply take it."

Jou nodded stiffly in acquiescence. "Thanks, Kaiba. I really appreciate you doing this for me. I swear, it's just for the one night – I sleep over at someone's place near every weekend, so Dad won't care about tomorrow."

"Whatever," Kaiba snorted, not at all comfortable with the notion of staying over at the Jounouchi homestead. "Just try not to make me look like a jackass, ne?"

Seto stood in the entry foyer of Jounouchi's home, staring in disbelief. He'd long ago figured out that the blond did not have a lot of money, but as he looked around the tiny apartment, he was surprised by just how much he had grossly overestimated Jou's status. Save for an old armchair that was missing a leg and was propped up with a telephone book and a mismatched, threadbare sofa, there was no other furniture that Seto could see. The kitchen was small, and there were no doors on any of the cupboards. Not that it mattered, since any dishes the Jounouchi's owned were currently sitting clean in the dish rack. He stepped further into the room, wrinkling his nose in disgust as he was overcome with the smell of stale cigarettes, old beer and cheap whiskey. From here, he could see the small colour television that had been set up on an old TV tray, the rabbit ears having long ago been broken off to be replaced with a bent, wire coat hanger. The dial, too, was missing. In its place was a pair of channel locks; one handle had been partially broken off, and the whole apparatus was fastened together with a wide rubber band. The 'coffee table' consisted of a small, wooden shipping crate, and was currently littered with nudie magazines, empty bottles, and a metal hubcap that had been turned into an ashtray and was near to overflowing with ashes and butts. "Christ," he muttered to himself, and decided to find Jounouchi's room. The sooner he could go to sleep, the sooner morning would come, and he could leave. Turning around, he ran smack into the elder Jounouchi, ricocheting off of him and momentarily losing his balance.

Catching himself, he looked at the blond man standing before him. He was a little taller than Jou, and probably a good fifty pounds heavier, if not more. Seto could see where his blond nemesis had gotten his unruly mop of hair, but as he met the cold, glassy, hazel-coloured eyes, he knew the warm, amber colour had to have come from the mother. For some reason, this thought pleased Seto; at least Katsuya wasn't the spitting image of his father.

"You looking down your nose at me again, Boy?" the older man demanded, his words slightly slurred. "You'd better not be, or you'll be out on your ass like your whore of a mother was."

Seto arched a brow at the other man, noticing how his temples were greying and his skin was gaunt and ashen. Somehow, he doubted that was how things had gone down when Jou's mother had left. Not really sure of how to reply, the teen settled for simply staring impassively back at the drunken man.

The elder Jounouchi frowned slightly at his son's lack of response. He was jonesing for a fight, and that was always a sure-fire way to get him to react. He glanced at the small clock on the stove, and a cruel smirk illuminated his features. "You're also late," he sneered, giving the teen a sharp jab to the shoulder with his finger.

Seto looked disdainfully down at the beefy finger that had prodded him, and then glanced over at the
clock. "Two minutes," he said coolly. "You're going to argue over two minutes?"

The stocky man felt a thrill of pleasure run through him at his son's impudence. "You watch your tone with me, Boy!" he hissed, giving the blond another hard poke. "I set a curfew, and you had fucking better respect it." His grin widened at the petulant look on the younger male's face. "So, what are you going to do about it, K'suya?" He reached out and slapped his son's face, leaving an angry, red handprint on the smooth skin.

"Don't touch me," Seto growled dangerously, his eyes narrowed coldly. "The last person who was brazen enough to touch me is now rotting in a grave."

"So," Jounouchi Ichiro laughed, his eyes glinting malevolently. "It looks like my pussy of a son has finally decided to grow a set and be a man, ne? Tell you what, K'suya; I'll give you one shot for free." When Seto did nothing, the older man smirked. "Yeah, just as I thought; I'd have been better off having your mother blow me – could've saved myself eighteen years of misery, ne? You're nothing but a worthless, pathetic dog. No, scratch that; at least a dog has some use, and when you don't want it any more, it's easy enough to get rid of."

Seto's blood ran cold as he heard the words so similar to those he'd spoken to Jounouchi on countless occasions spill forth from the other man's lips. Numbly, he recalled the way Jou's eyes would go dull and lifeless for a moment, as if his, Seto's, comments were confirming some deeper, unknown secret. Now he understood why – and he was just as guilty as the senior Jounouchi for wearing away and destroying the blond's sense of worth. He shuddered inwardly as this new knowledge flooded him with an intense sense of embarrassment. Looking into the mocking, hazel eyes, he was hit with a sudden realization that, while he couldn't change what had been done in the past, he could definitely start to atone for his actions in the here and now. Taking two steps towards the older man, he drew back his fist and punched Jou's father square in the nose, catching him completely off guard and sending him staggering backwards against the wall. "Baka! Don't you ever call me…me that again!"

Seto hissed, glaring down in disgust at the other man.

The stocky blond removed his hand from his face, laughing hysterically when he saw that it was covered with blood. "It seems the inu has teeth after all. About God damned time, too." With a growl, he launched himself at the smaller male, shoving him forcefully backwards, and causing him to lose his balance and tumble to the ground, striking his hip on the corner of the wooden crate. Biting his lip against the pain, Seto fought to keep his face neutral so as not to tip off the other man. "You need to learn a lesson, Boy," Jounouchi Ichiro spat. "You're long overdue, and you've forgotten your place." He grabbed the teen by his shirt lapels and hauled him forcefully to his feet, laughing as the boy tried to pry his hands off. "First, this one is for disrespecting your father." He hauled off and backhanded Jou's father square in the nose, catching him completely off guard and sending him staggering backwards against the wall. "Baka! Don't you ever call him…me that again!"

Seto hissed, glaring down in disgust at the other man.

"You're a fucking mouthy brat tonight, ain't you?" the elder Jounouchi growled as he delivered a well-placed punch just south of the blond's ribs, dropping him clumsily back to his knees. "So much the better for me. I'm going to have fun breaking your spirit." He went to deliver a kick to his son's gut, but his foot connected with nothing but air.

Again, Seto managed to get his feet under him and wavered unsteadily, clutching his aching side and panting for a breath. He wondered where the hell the older man had learned to fight, because even
when ripping drunk, he was able to hit hard and fast, and with near-flawless accuracy. "Never…
ever happen," he rasped, his eyes blazing with hatred for the other man. "And that…that was the
last shot you will ever get on me, I swear it." Having gained a basic idea of the senior Jounouchi's
fighting style, he waited for the stocky blond to charge him; when he did, Seto grabbed his wrist, his
fingers unerringly finding the pressure points on the man's hand and dropping him to his knees. He
saw the flash of fear in the other's eyes, and he smirked coldly. "Surprised, Father?" he sneered, his
expression deadly. "Bet you didn't know that I had studied kyusho jitsu, did you? The 'death touch'
is not something that is readily taught, but let me assure you, I was a very apt pupil." He pressed a
little more forcefully, grinning sadistically when the man let out a small whimper. "It hurts, doesn't it?
'Death touch' is a really bit of a misnomer; still, how does it make you feel to know that if I move my
fingers slightly, I can render you unconscious…or make your body think it's having a heart attack?"

"K'suya!" the man pleaded, "I'm your dad for fuck's sake!"

"Yes," Seto hissed. "And that fact didn't stop you from doing what you did to me, did it?"
Momentarily forgetting where he was and to whom he was speaking, he continued, his voice
growing colder and harder, "Wasn't it you who taught me all about an eye for an eye, and to show no
mercy, Father? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you, you worthless bastard!" He heard
the choked sob, and when he looked down, he saw the pained tears shining in the hazel eyes –
whether they were from the physical discomfort or from genuine remorse, Seto didn't know, and
quite frankly, he couldn't care less. "Pathetic," he spat as he released the man's wrist. "I'm going to
bed. And mark my words, if you ever touch me again without my permission, you will die."

Leaving the whimpering man curled up on the living room floor, he headed down the small hallway
to Jounouchi's bedroom. It was an easy guess which of the three doors was his – the blond had
plastered a large poster of the Flame Swordsman on it. Taking a deep breath, he stepped across the
threshold, expecting to find more of the same squalid living conditions. When he flicked on the light,
he was pleasantly surprised. The air didn't reek of cigarettes and alcohol, and despite the shabby
furnishings, the room was clean and tidy – hardly what Seto had expected considering the blond's
typical, lackadaisical appearance. Jou's bed consisted of an old mattress on the floor, but it was
covered with clean linens and was made. There was no armoire or dresser, but Jou had taken old
milk crates and covered them with bits of fabric to make 'storage totes' for his clothing and other
personal effects. Arching a brow, Seto had to admire the blond's creativity and resourcefulness. The
closet held nothing except for Jou's three school uniforms, which had been carefully hung up, and in
a small shoebox in the corner was his beloved duelling deck. Beneath the window sat two large
cinderblocks with a long, thin piece of particle board spanning it. Judging by the pile of textbooks
and miscellaneous notebooks, it was some sort of makeshift 'desk', the floor serving as the 'chair'.

Sighing, Seto sat down on the mattress and took off his shoes. He couldn't fathom how the blond
managed to make it through day after depressing day with such dogged optimism and a positive
attitude. He changed into the pyjamas Jou had set out on his pillow, wincing slightly as he stretched.
"Damn it," Seto hissed. "It's been a long time since I've felt that kind of pain…" Wearily, he turned
on the small lamp that sat beside the bed, but when he got up to turn off the overhead light, he
bumped into the mattress, exposing the corner of what turned out to be a small, red notebook.
Curiously, he bent down and retrieved it, arching an eyebrow when he saw that it was Jounouchi's
journal. Part of him knew he shouldn't read it, but it wasn't like he had been snooping. Besides, in
the last few hours, he'd come to see Jou in a completely different light. Maybe this would provide some
additional insight. Stretching out on the bed, he flipped open to the first page, noting that the blond
had begun writing just before Duellist Kingdom.

He glossed over the parts where Jou had written about his friends, or about the particularly enjoyable
lunches the cafeteria had served, but by the time he returned the book to its hiding place two hours
later, he'd learned two very important pieces of information. First, Jou's kowtowing to his father
stemmed from a combination of taking the blame for their situation, a systematic destruction of his sense of self-worth, and a near-nightly beating. Second, and surprisingly, more troubling for Seto, was Jou's recent `coming out' coupled with an apparent infatuation with someone in his class. He would have to remember to address that little tidbit in the morning. Reaching over to turn out the light, he tried to get comfortable as he idly mulled over the potential candidates in his head. Drifting into sleep, his last conscious thought was that, whoever he was, he was now a rival.

Jou watched nervously out the window as the Kaiba estate grew larger and larger in his field of vision. He had only been to the place once before – but that had been a few years ago, and he had only been permitted to stand in the foyer. Worrying his bottom lip with his teeth, he wondered how many servants would be roaming about. More importantly, he had no idea how the hell he was going to convince them that he was Kaiba Seto, and not some low-brow hooligan – especially when he had no idea where anything was or what Kaiba did to occupy his free time. *If he even has 'free time',* he thought absently.

Jou felt the limo stop and, forgetting to wait for the driver to come around and open his door, he bounded up the front steps only to curse loudly at the top, and then run back down to grab the briefcase he'd left in the backseat. Giving the chauffeur a sheepish grin, he crawled across the bench and grabbed the large, aluminum attaché. "Fuck, this thing weighs a ton," he muttered as he entered the house, setting the briefcase down just inside the door. Straightening up, he glanced around, his jaw dropping as he was once again reminded of the simple elegance of the furnishings. He was staring in awe at the Swarovski crystal chandelier when a polite cough drew him from his gawping. Flushing slightly, he looked over to see a petite, middle-aged woman with greying hair watching him, a concerned expression on her face.

"Is something unsatisfactory, Kaiba-sama?" she asked him. "If so, I'll instruct Naomi to be more thorough tomorrow."

"What?" he blurted out, recovering quickly. "No, everything is very, uh…satisfactory," he replied, inwardly groaning at how lame he had just sounded. He noticed the woman was now staring at him expectantly, and Jou blanched. "Um…was there something you needed?" he asked, wincing slightly when the older lady arched a brow at him. With a scowl, he mentally cursed Kaiba. *He'd* at least had the courtesy to prepare the other teen for what to expect; if he fucked up, Rich Boy had no one to blame but himself…

"Kaiba-sama?" she began, her voice full of concern. "Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

"Yeah…why?" he answered, eyeing her warily and secretly praying he was pulling off the brunet's icy expression.

"It's just that, well…" She dropped her gaze to the floor and fiddled nervously with the hem of her apron. "Every night for the past three years, I've stayed until you've come home, just in case you should require anything before I take my leave…" When Jou said nothing, she looked back up at him and asked, "Do you?"

"Uh…no…thanks," he said, wishing that the woman would just go and leave him the hell alone.

"Very well, Kaiba-sama. Yoji left a plate for you in the refrigerator, should you desire it. Moku-chan is in his room. His homework assignments have been completed, but I told him that you would want to check them yourself. Good evening, Kaiba-sama." She bowed deferentially before she left, leaving him still standing in the entryway.

*She must be some kind of nanny for the kid,* he thought to himself as he toed off Seto's expensive
Gucci oxfords without untying them, wriggling his toes against the cool tile. Christ, those are uncomfortable, Jou thought absently as he shrugged out of the long, wool trench coat. Frowning, he looked around for a closet, and finding none, he guessed that the brunet must hang everything up in his bedroom.

"Oh fuck, his bedroom!" Jou moaned lowly, feeling a slight thrill run through him. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined seeing it, much less sleeping in it! Folding the coat over his arm, he set off up the stairs in search of Kaiba's room. After finding three closets, two bathrooms, an office, and two guest bedrooms, he finally located what he believed to be the brunet's room. As he flicked on the light, he could only stare in silent awe. The room itself was probably bigger than his whole apartment, and it was luxuriously appointed in rich ebony and deep, shimmering blues with subtle hints of silver and pewter. Almost reverently, he opened the closet door and hung the long coat up, breathing in deeply as he caught the faint, lingering scent of Kaiba's cologne.

Undoing the top button on his shirt, and stripping off the tie, he began rummaging through the closet for something to wear. After today, he wanted nothing more than to shower, slip into something comfortable, and then flake out in front of the television with a big bag of chips. He was fairly certain that the Kaiba's would have a big screen TV somewhere, and if he couldn't find chips, hell, at this point, he'd even settle for a rice cake. After a few minutes of searching, he managed to locate a black cashmere track suit and, tossing it haphazardly onto the bed, he started to unfasten the belt buckle on his pants. He was just about to push the trousers down over his hips when a wicked grin broke out across his face. For him, opportunity didn't knock very often, and after checking and double-checking that the door was indeed locked, he hurriedly kicked off his slacks and boxers and stretched out on the bed.

He felt his cheeks heat as a small voice chastised him about what he was planning to do. It was just a deep need to satisfy his own curiosity; to confirm what he'd imagined in his dreams, he argued back, his fingertips lightly skimming across the velvety skin between his thighs. He felt a rush of electricity ripple through his body, and his troublesome conscience was instantly banished to the furthest recesses of his mind. His heart beating furiously, he licked his suddenly dry lips and slid his one hand under the hem of his shirt, lightly ghosting across the taut abdomen as he felt his body responding to the gentle touches. Slowly, he brought his other hand up to the now-rigid column of flesh, his fingers trembling as he grasped the firm shaft, a long, low moan escaping him when he felt the heat radiating from its thickness. Moving his hand in a series of long, firm, languid strokes, he gasped in pleasure, partly from the tingling sensations coursing through him, and partly from the sheer size of the cock in his hand.

Parting his legs slightly, he allowed his free hand to travel further up his torso to tweak and roll his semi-erect nipples while his other hand began to pump harder and faster. Closing his eyes, his breath now coming in harsh, tremulous pants, he fantasized that he was pleasing the stolid brunet, imagining that his own gasps and mewls were actually being torn from Kaiba's throat as he showed him just how talented his hands and mouth really were. "Oh fuck," he breathed, as he felt his stomach tighten and a fiery warmth began to spread through him, his body arching slightly off the bed. And then suddenly, he loosed a sensual growl as he came forcefully into his fist, his other hand clawing frantically at the sheets as his body shuddered with a series of intense aftershocks. Finally, with a soft, satisfied sigh, he blinked his eyes open, spreading the rapidly cooling essence along his palm with his thumb. Carefully, he sat up and padded into the bathroom, wiped his hand into a tissue and then tossed it into the toilet, but not before laving a rogue drop from his thumb. With a dark chuckle, he licked his lips and then reached out and turned on the shower.

While he waited for the water to come up to temperature, he moved to stand in front of the mirror, a smile breaking out across his face when he saw the slight flush to his cheeks, the dishevelled hair and the lust-darkened sapphire staring back at him. "Holy shit, you're gorgeous when you look like that,"
he murmured to his reflection. "Even more so when you actually smile; you should try it sometime." He stared at his image a moment longer, and his smile dissolved into a sad, somewhat wistful expression. "Not that I'll ever see it. Well, not from the real you, anyway." Seeing that the steam was beginning to rise from the shower, he unbuttoned the rest of his shirt and allowed it to slip soundlessly to the floor. His teenage hormones flaring once again, he decided to sneak a quick peek at the completely naked form, and was momentarily frozen with shock. Hurriedly, he grabbed the hand towel off the counter and swiped at the condensation that was gathering on the mirror, his eyes wide in disbelief.

Along the brunet's left side, starting just below his ribs and wrapping around his flank to his back, was a long, thin, scar. Jou knew exactly what had caused such an injury, his own body having been used as a canvas for a myriad of abuses over the years. Swallowing thickly, he turned slightly so he could see his back, his mouth dropping open in disbelief when he saw about a half dozen similar, angry marks and numerous, faint, shimmering, 'ghost' scars. "Kaiba, what the fuck happened?" he whispered, his fingers skimming lightly along the marred flesh. "Christ, no wonder you spazzed out on me earlier about my dad!" He stepped back into the bedroom, intent on calling his house, just to check on the other teen, and then paused, setting the phone back on the cradle. "Fuck," he groused as he sat down on the edge of the bed, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "What am I going to do? Call him up and tell him I understand why he said what he said? He'll either deny everything, or get all pissed off. Or both."

With a frustrated growl, he decided to take a page from Kaiba's book and think before he reacted. Returning to the bathroom, he stepped into the shower, permitting himself a contented sigh as the heat penetrated his tired muscles. He sniffed tentatively at a bottle of body wash, applying a liberal squeeze to a cloth when he recognized the scent. As he bathed, he thought about what he could possibly say that wouldn't result in further alienating himself from Kaiba. However, the harder he thought, the more of a blank he drew. Dejectedly, he stepped out of the shower and dried off, and then slipped into the soft cashmere clothing. He padded out into the hallway and headed downstairs, managing to find the kitchen fairly easily.

After giving Yoji's leftovers a cursory scan, Jou returned the plate to the refrigerator. It smelled ok, but at the moment, he wanted something that he could easily recognize. He rooted around in the fridge for a few moments, and when nothing of interest caught his eye, he turned his attention to the cupboards. His search for potato chips came up empty, but he felt the thrill of victory when he located a box of Honeycomb cereal – probably Mokuba's breakfast. It was only a brief search before he found the den, and Jou was practically salivating as he stared at the large LCD TV in front of him. Grabbing the remote, he flopped down on the sofa, the cereal box cradled in one arm as he flipped through the channels. Eventually, he settled on some action flick. He was only half-watching the movie, the remainder of his attention divided between not getting crumbs all over the furniture and on dealing with his current situation. Jou was just stuffing another handful of cereal in his mouth when he heard Mokuba calling for him. A couple moments later, the raven-haired boy popped his head into the den.

"Nii-sama! There you are! I..." The young boy stopped and stared open-mouthed at the teen sprawled out along the sofa. Slowly, his slate grey eyes travelled along the overly relaxed and very casually dressed form, flicking up momentarily to note the extremely dishevelled hair before meeting the questioning, sapphire gaze. "Seto, are you alright?" Mokuba asked lowly, the concern evident in his voice.

For the second time that night, Jou found himself responding with a wary, "Yeah, why?"

"Well, it's just, I can't remember ever seeing you walking around in bare feet...and you look like an old man dressed like that. You could have at least put on a t-shirt..." Mokuba glanced up at his older
brother's hair again, and then suddenly blurted out in disbelief, "Are you eating cereal right from the box?"

For a moment, Jou blanched, and then in a blatantly Kaiba manoeuvre, turned the tables on the young boy. "What's your point?"

Mokuba's eyes widened in surprise at the abrupt question, and as he dropped his gaze, he said, "You're just acting weird, Nii-sama. Well, for most people, what you're doing is normal, but it's weird for you. I'm sorry; I'm just worried about you."

At this, Jou couldn't help but laugh. "I'm fine, Mokuba. Let's just say that I'm not quite myself today."

At this, a very Kaiba-esque smirk crept across the young boy's features. "Oh, that's right...you were working with Jounouchi tonight!"

"And what the fu...what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, Nii-sama," Mokuba sing-songed. "I'm just surprised that you chose him to help you, that's all. How did it go, by the way?"

"We had some surprising results. And there's nothing wrong with Jounouchi once you get to know him," Jou replied defensively, his mouth turning down into a scowl.

Noticing his brother's petulant expression, the younger Kaiba sighed, knowing that the matter was now closed. "Well," he began hesitantly, "Maybe you should spend more time with him; you're certainly a lot more relaxed than I've ever seen you." The raven-haired boy eyed the brunet curiously for a moment, and then asked, "Can I watch TV with you for a bit?"

"Sure," Jou replied as he sat up and shuffled over to make room for the younger Kaiba, smirking when Mokuba nestled into his side and grabbed the box of cereal from him. The movie was nearly over when the smaller brother stood and stretched lithely.

"This was fun tonight, Nii-sama; it's nice spending time with you and not having you work. Just...work on the wardrobe, ne?" Laughing as he hugged his brother, Mokuba stifled a small yawn.
"Good night, Seto. I'll see you in the morning."

"G'night, kid," Jou replied absently, once again stretching out on the sofa. Idly, he flipped through the channels again, thinking about his evening, and wondering what Kaiba was doing just then. He hoped that, for once, his father wasn't being a complete asshole; it was bad enough the other teen was being forced to stay there, let alone have to deal with the elder Jounouchi's random acts of violence. And then suddenly, a thought hit him. Damn it; no wonder Kaiba never changes with the other guys in gym, and why he's always wearing long sleeves and buttoned up shirts and shit! He let his hand slip under his shirt and idly traced along one scar. Given my past, no one would ever suspect...but Kaiba? He must hate himself for letting this happen to him; I know I hate what my dad's done to me.

Turning off the television, Jou made his way back to the brunet's room, still musing to himself as he flopped down on Kaiba's bed with a scowl. I mean, he's got an image to protect...if news of this ever got out, I can only imagine the media circus that would result. And I know he gets pissed off at the idea of being looked at with pity; I remember him going ballistic on that reporter who wrote that news article about his 'overcoming the tragedy of being orphaned'. Sliding between the sheets, his expression turned pensive as he allowed his eyes to fall closed, suddenly wondering if the real reason
Kaiba Seto was so arrogant and outwardly hostile was because he was self-conscious.
Chapter Four

As consciousness slowly started to creep into his mind, Seto became vaguely aware that something didn't feel quite right. Gradually, the sleep-induced fog began to clear and, with a start, he sat upright in bed, letting out a small, pained groan as his ribs and hip protested the sudden movement. "Damn it; I'd hoped it had all been an elaborate nightmare," he groused as he ran his hands through his hair. A glance at the cheap, plastic alarm clock showed that it was nearly 6:00, and with a slight wince, he got to his feet and indulged in a lithe stretch, somewhat surprised at how comfortable Jou's bed was, and how well he had actually slept. He took another look around the sparsely furnished room, and after a minute, he managed to locate a clean towel and a small case that contained Jou's other toiletries. Tucking them both under one arm, he set out to find the bathroom.

He had a fifty-fifty shot of guessing the right door, and unfortunately, both were closed. He glanced at the one across the hall and then at the one at the end of the corridor and, deciding to follow Jounouchi's example of trusting in blind luck, he chose the far door. Slowly, he turned the knob, giving a small sigh of relief when he saw that he'd guessed correctly. After fumbling in the dark for a moment, he located the light switch, and a deep scowl crossed his face when he saw the faint purpling marring the blond's cheek and the tiny cut on his lip. "Shit…" Turning his attention to the toiletry case, he pulled out a toothbrush and began to brush his teeth, finding it somewhat amusing that he was using Jounouchi's things on himself. After rinsing, he slipped out of his pyjamas, his eyes narrowing in hate for the blond's father when he saw not only the fresh bruise on his hip and the one just below his ribs, but a myriad of others in a grotesque rainbow of colours. *No father should treat his son that way. After Gozaburo…* Seto's thoughts halted abruptly and his eyes went wide as he was struck by a horrifying thought. He knew what secrets the blond had to hide, and, it stood to reason that by now, Jounouchi knew his. "Damn it!" he cursed aloud, knowing that he'd have to get to school early enough to talk to Jou.

He was just finishing up in the bathroom, having spent a good ten minutes trying unsuccessfully to tame the wild, blond hair, when he heard the telephone ring. When four rings passed by unanswered, Seto grabbed the handset in the kitchen. "Hello?" He couldn't help the wince when he heard Honda's laugh over the other end.

"Hey, loser," Honda taunted playfully. "What's with the formality? No 'Jou's House of Porn' or 'Bubba's Bovine Love Shack and Creamery'?"

"Sorry," Seto replied, trying his damnedest to keep the sarcasm from his voice. "Rough night last night."

"Ah, gotcha," the stocky brunet replied sympathetically. "The old man or the prick?"

Seto knew exactly to whom the latter referred, and he couldn't help feeling a bit unsettled by the fact that he was being painted with the same brush as the elder Jounouchi. Scowling, he gripped the phone tighter. He had no idea why this was bothering him so much; hell, twenty-four hours ago, he couldn't have cared less what the blond thought of him. Then again, twenty-four hours ago, he'd barely known Jounouchi – or rather, known anything about him. He was pulled from his musing by Honda's concerned voice.

"Jou? You still there, pal?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Jesus, you sound like a zombie this morning. You sure you're ok? Anyway, get ready; I'll be over in
about ten minutes. Yugi called – Gramps made French toast for breakfast."

"What?" Seto replied, trying to process Honda's rapid-fire, seemingly random conversation. "Wait, no!" he interjected, cutting the other off in the middle of a dissertation on maple syrup. "I have to get to school early."

At this, Honda burst out laughing. "You? Early to school? Ok, now I know you're not ok! You sure you don't have a fever or anything?"

"Will you shut up for five seconds?" Seto snapped, a sense of satisfaction washing over him when the stocky brunet fell silent. "There's just something I have to take care of."

"Oh yeah?" The question held a note of irritated suspicion. "What the fuck is so important that you're going to run off and not tell your best bud about it?"

"I have to talk to J…Kaiba."

"Kaiba? Well, that explains it," Honda griped good-naturedly. "With the way you've been acting this morning, I figured something happened last night that got your panties all in a twist. You bang him or something?"

Seto made a face and stared incredulously at the telephone. "Are you an imbecile?"

At this, Honda burst into laughter. "Holy shit, you're getting better at your impersonations, I'll give you that. For a second there, you actually sounded like him. You've been practicing, ne?" He gave another small chuckle, and then said, "Ok, fine. I'll tell the rest of the guys one of the sensei's had you come in early this morning or something. Good luck, pal." Without waiting for a reply, Honda ended the call.

Returning the phone to the cradle, Seto rubbed the bridge of his nose. He could feel a headache coming on and it wasn't even 7:00 yet. Knowing he needed to hurry if he was going to get to school on time, he returned to Jou's room and quickly changed into his uniform, scowling at both the untailored fit and the lack of crispness. After fussing with it for a few moments, he ceded that his appearance was as good as it was going to get. He pulled out a piece of paper, intent on writing a note to the elder Jounouchi to inform him that he'd be away for the remainder of the weekend. He wasn't really that surprised when he saw that the handwriting was his own and not the blond's illegible scrawl, but it had been worth a shot. Crumpling the note in his fist and depositing it into the wastebasket, he gathered up Jounouchi's books and headed for the foyer. As he slipped on a coat, he heard a small cough from the living room. Turning around, he saw the elder Jounouchi sitting on the sofa, a penitent, and somewhat apprehensive, expression on his face. Seto smirked inwardly when the older man caught his eye and immediately dropped his gaze. "Just so you know, I'll be gone for the remainder of the weekend." It was not a request for permission, but a statement of fact.

The stocky man nodded uneasily, still refusing to meet his son's eyes. "Ok, K'suya. And uh, I didn't get a chance to go to the store yesterday, so I left some money for you on the counter for lunch…"

Giving the older man a cold smile, Seto pocketed the money, and then slipped on Jou's running shoes and set off at a brisk walk for the school.

Twenty minutes later, he was leaning against the fence surrounding the school yard, slightly winded and eternally grateful that the blond was in decent shape. It had been quite the long haul to get to the school; no wonder Jou was nearly late every day. He glanced at his wrist, growling slightly in irritation when he realized that the blond didn't wear a watch, and then looked up at the clock tower. If everything had gone ok last night and Jounouchi had managed to actually rouse himself this
morning, he should already be inside. And he'd have about forty minutes to speak with him. He stepped into his homeroom classroom, and his jaw dropped when he saw Jou.

The brunet was leaning back in his chair with his feet up on the desk, and he was currently in the process of blowing a bubble from the large wad of gum he was chewing. It looked as if Jou had at least tried to mimic Seto's usual hairstyle, but the end result was still quite dishevelled and tousled. The same held true for his state of dress – it looked proper, but slightly more casual and lacking Seto's usual polish. When Jou heard the door open, he glanced over and waved.

Seto rolled his eyes and crossed the room, turning a chair around and facing Jounouchi as he sat down. "You're looking quite relaxed this morning."

"Yeah, well, I figured it'd be you. You're the only one crazy enough to come to school this early and – Holy fuck!" He dropped his feet back to the floor as he reached out and brushed his fingers over the bruise on the blond's face, his own immediately flushing in shame and embarrassment. "Oh Christ, Kaiba, I'm so sorry!"

The blond slapped his hand away, his mouth curving down into a small scowl. "Don't worry about it."

At this, Jou dropped his gaze. "Don't say that," he murmured softly. "I know about –"

"No, you don't know!" Seto hissed, interrupting him. "Nobody knows. And once we switch back, you'd be wise to forget what you think you saw."

"I won't forget," Jou said softly, a hint of defiance in his voice. "But, I do understand some things a bit better." He stared into the angry, amber eyes and said bitterly. "Don't worry, Kaiba. Your secret's safe with me; not that I'd planned to shout it from the rooftops in the first place. I might be a stupid mutt, but even I know better than that!"

"Damn it, you're not stupid, Jounouchi!" Seto snapped back. "Why do you insist on letting everyone think you are? That can't be personally satisfying."

"What the fuck would you know about it?" Jou retorted irritably. "You're a frigging genius with a known, well-respected name. You didn't start here already at a disadvantage because you come from the `wrong side of the tracks'. You don't have teachers looking down on you because you're not the brilliant scholar they all dream of teaching. And, to top it all off, you don't have your old man telling you every day that you're worthless, while an insensitive prick…" He hurriedly trailed off before he could finish his thought, but one look at the awkward expression on Seto's face told him that he'd already made the connection. "A tiger can't change his stripes, Kaiba. Might as well just be what I'm expected to be and save myself the additional humiliation." Jou smirked cynically. "But, you'll see that for yourself – especially from Ishikawa…bastard." He sighed resignedly, and then, as if to change the subject, he asked, "What the fuck do you do here this early anyway?"

Seto shrugged. "Read, work on KaibaCorp business…whatever needs to be done. Which reminds me, you wouldn't have checked my voice mail; let me see that briefcase." He slid the attaché up onto the desk and retrieved his phone, scowling when he saw several empty candy bar wrappers stashed inside.

Jou flushed slightly in embarrassment while the other retrieved his messages. "Yeah, well, I was running late this morning and didn't have time to eat breakfast, so I found those in the limo. I was just waiting to get to a garbage can before throwing out that stuff."

"Please tell me you haven't eaten…" He trailed off to count the wrappers. "…Six of these since you
woke up." He set his phone down on the desk and stared intently at Jou.

"Relax, Kaiba; it's not like I sit around on my ass all day. Besides, you could stand to put on a few pounds anyway."

"It's not the calories I'm concerned with!" Seto replied, eyeing Jounouchi with concern. "Look; you're still you and are capable of doing what you know, but you have my limitations. I have an intolerance to chocolate."

"Whatever," Jou replied. "You're just pissed because I ate a bunch of your candy."

"Don't be foolish; those are for Mokuba for when we go on long trips. I'm telling you, you're going to be sorry if you keep that up. I can give –" He was cut off with an imperious wave.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll keep that in mind. I…" Jou stopped when the brunet's cell phone began to ring. Coching his head to the side, he looked up at the other teen.

"Well? Answer it! I can't very well do it!"

Hesitantly, Jou picked up the phone. "Hello?" he said softly, ignoring Seto when he rolled his eyes in disbelief. "Um, sure…That should be ok. Thank you." Once he had disconnected the call, he looked at the blond. "What?"

Seto scowled distastefully. "First of all, I would never answer a call with a whiny 'hello'. You're in a position of authority, so start acting like it. Second of all, what did you just agree to?"

"That was your secretary, I think. She said that the meeting with…uh…Toshi –"

"Toshimitsu?"

Jou nodded. "Yeah, that's it. She said that the meeting has been rescheduled for today at 5:00. She said that he wouldn't reschedule, and that if we didn't meet, then it was no deal."

In exasperation, Seto ran his hands through his hair. "Oh my God…Toshimitsu Kotomi isn't a he; she's the biggest bitch I've ever entered into negotiations with. She's been deliberately stalling on a joint project for the past six months, and now she's finally ready to meet. Damn it…Alright, I'll think of a way to cancel until I get my own body back."

"Come on, Kaiba, let me try."

The blond let out a bark of laughter. "You're kidding, right? You want me to let you, who knows absolutely nothing about the contract – or business for that matter – sit in on what could be one of the major deals of the quarter for KaibaCorp?"

"You just said you didn't think I was stupid. And really, I'm good at reading people. If this broad is as big of a bitch as you say, I doubt she'll let you reschedule anyway, and I know I can do this! Please?"

The pleading look on Jou's face bordered on pathetic and, letting out a heavy sigh, Seto murmured, "I can't believe I'm really going along with this…" He met the deep, blue eyes and said, "Fine. You can try, but you need to be properly briefed so that you don't make a complete ass out of yourself and inevitably, given our unique situation, me. We'll meet at lunch to discuss it."

The brunet nodded, "Ok, but make sure you don't get slapped with any extra laps by Tomo-sensei… it's hard enough to shower and change and have time to eat!"
Seto scowled. "Right…phys ed. I have it first period with your idiot friend Honda, and then physics. Just sit there, stay awake, and don't say anything, and the sensei won't bother you."

"Physics?" Jou moaned. "That's all that `a body in motion stays in motion' and shit, right? Yawnsville! At least I have art history, which is interesting!"

Seto snorted. "Yes, and it's so useful in everyday society, too. Unlike physics, which can only be used in engineering design, IT applications, electric power generation…"

"Yeah, I get it, smart ass," Jou interrupted. "I didn't say it wasn't useful, just that it was boring! But, a big, computer nerd like you probably thinks it's great, ne?" He sighed as the first warning bell rang. "Fuck, fine…I'll suffer through ninety minutes of physics. Just hope that your sensei doesn't hold a surprise test today, or you're going to wind up with an `F' for sure…"

"I'm sure you wouldn't let that happen," the blond said with a smirk as he hefted Jou's satchel over his shoulder. "If you do, I will get even. And I'll do my best not to call your sensei a moron when he begins his riveting dissertation on how the comic book as an art form has changed our way of life."

"Fuck you, Kaiba," Jou replied as he threw an eraser at the blond. "I'm carrying a four-point in that class, so don't be a dick and deliberately screw it up."

"I'm not that spiteful, Jounouchi," Seto replied coldly as he closed the door behind him.

By lunch, Jou's head was ready to explode – both literally and figuratively.

First period phys ed had been…interesting. Honda had kept giving him really odd looks, and he'd found it extremely strange to not be able to slip into casual conversation with the stocky brunet. It had been particularly difficult to maintain his façade when, during a game of soccer, Honda had deliberately hard-checked him, growling out, "If you hurt him, I'll kill you," as he passed by. As the end of the period approached, he'd become aware of a sharp, persistent pounding at the front of his head.

When he'd finally hit the showers, it had become an intense throbbing that thrummed in agonizing synchronicity with his pulse. The hot water had done little to alleviate his discomfort, and he'd hoped that the acetaminophen tablets he had surreptitiously acquired from his own locker between periods would help. He had deliberately timed his arrival to his second period class for when the final bell rang, and he'd winced as the ear-splitting noise erupted shrilly behind him, sending a fresh wave of pain through his skull. Ignoring the disapproving look from the sensei, he'd made his way to the only empty desk left, which he'd secretly prayed belonged to Kaiba. The physics lecture had been worse than he'd expected. As the rest of the class had sat there furiously scribbling notes while the instructor led them through a series of problems on thermodynamics, Jou had stared blankly at the long, drawn out equations on the board and had tried to will away what was quickly becoming an excruciating migraine. Never in his life had he experienced such incredible pain and, as he suffered in his own, personal hell, he found that he had become hypersensitive to the normally insignificant things around him. The soft hum of the ventilation fans sounded like a jet engine, and the harsh, fluorescent lighting was making him feel nauseous.

Jou had to fight back a whimper when the bell rang for lunch, and for the first time in as long as he could ever remember, he was not in the mood to eat. All he wanted to do was find a dark corner, curl up, and die. Slowly, he made his way into the corridor, cringing at the cacophony of shouting, slamming of locker doors and heavy-footed shuffling through the halls. Deciding that the quietest place in the school would undoubtedly be the library, he began moving in that direction. On his way, he passed by the cafeteria, and as the aromas infiltrated his senses, he felt his stomach lurch.
Suddenly feeling very queasy, he headed for the nearest bathroom.

Jou heaved a small sigh of relief when he saw no one was there and, unceremoniously dropping the brunet's briefcase on the linoleum, he dropped to his knees in one of the stalls and proceeded to retch violently. A piercing stab of pain surged through his skull, and with a low moan, he rested his forehead on the cool porcelain for a moment, waiting for the throbbing to ebb so he could think about standing up. Curling himself around the bowl, he idly wondered if this was some form of karmic retribution for him having been a curious puppy the night previous and 'exploring' in forbidden territory. When his vision had refocused, he shakily got to his feet and, as he was heading for the sink he heard a humourless chuckle.

Turning, he saw Seto leaning smugly against the wall, his arms crossed in front of him, a dark smirk on his lips.

"Are you ready to listen to me yet?" Seto asked, picking up his briefcase from the floor.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Jou replied with a groan, cupping a handful of water in his hand to rinse his mouth, and then spitting it down the drain.

"I tried to tell you earlier that you were going to get sick, but you were too pig-headed to listen to me."

"Yeah, well I figured `sick' like a stomach ache or something. Jesus, Kaiba, how do you stand these? I feel like shit…"

"I don't `stand' them – I react to them exactly as you have. But, I take medication when I feel one coming on and hope that I've treated it in time." The blond propped the attaché case up on another sink and pulled out a small vial. "I tried to offer you one of these to stave off the migraine, but when you refused to hear me out, I figured that this was probably the only way for you to learn."

Jou looked at himself in the mirror, grimacing slightly when he saw the dark circles under the sapphire eyes and how the normally-pale skin looked even sicklier. "Fuck you, Kaiba," he murmured. "No one likes a know-it-all…God!" He brought his hands up to his temples as if trying to relieve some of the pressure.

Seto's smirk faded as he watched the pitiful sight before him. He himself had been in that very position on countless occasions, and he knew that the pain could be near-unbearable. Plus, judging from Jou's behaviour, he had never had the `pleasure' of experiencing such a headache. Popping the cap off the bottle, he took Jou's hand and tipped a pink pill into the palm. "Take that right now," he said softly, returning to his briefcase and pulling out a sheet of paper. While Jou downed the capsule, Seto jotted a note, and then folded it and handed it to the other teen. Staring impassively at him, he said sternly, but gently, "Now, you're going to do exactly what I tell you. First, you're going to go to the cafeteria and eat a bowl of miso soup. Nothing else. And don't add anything to it, either – no salt, no pepper, no soy sauce. Just the soup, as prepared. Then, you're going to hit the number two speed dial on my cell phone. That is the line to my driver. Don't give him some pansy explanation. Simply say, `School, ten minutes' and hang up. Finally, take this note to the office, give it to whatever inept secretary is working, and tell her you're leaving for the afternoon. Don't answer any questions or wait around. When the car arrives, get in, tell Kaga to stay because you're waiting for someone, and take a nap. I'll come find you when school is over." Concernedly, he looked into Jou's eyes and asked, "Do you understand? If you do this, I promise you'll feel better."

"Yeah, but we were supposed to go over that meeting during lunch."

Seto clenched his jaw and counted to ten. "Jounouchi, in your present condition, you are hardly in a position to listen to me. If you're going to be effective, do what I tell you. I'm only trying to help
"Besides, we'll have time this afternoon. Right now, it's more important that you feel better." Placing a hand on the small of Jou's back, he steered him to the door and gave him a gentle prod in the direction of the cafeteria. He got the other teen settled at an empty table in a fairly quiet corner, and then went to stand in the steam line. He selected the soup for Jounouchi, and a roast beef sandwich for himself, along with two bottles of water. Using the money the blond's dad had left for him, he paid for the meal and then returned to Jou's side, ignoring the strange looks Honda, Yugi and Anzu were giving him from their corner. "Here," he said as he pushed the bowl towards him.

"Thanks," Jou said gratefully, giving the blond a small smile. "Where the hell did you find money for lunch?" he added softly as he noisily slurped a few spoonfuls of the broth, shrinking back slightly in his chair when he caught the other's disparaging gaze. "Sorry…"

Seto shrugged noncommittally as he unwrapped his sandwich and took a bite. "Your father left it for you on the counter this morning."

At this, Jou choked on his soup, staring wide-eyed at his lunch mate. "Are you shitting me?" he gasped loudly, hurriedly grabbing a napkin to wipe his chin.

"Will you keep your voice down?" Seto hissed irritably under his breath, glaring at the few students who had looked over upon hearing Jou's boisterous outburst. The first warning bell rang, and he sighed heavily when the other dropped his gaze, a slightly mortified expression on his face. "Don't worry about it right now, Jounouchi. It'll only make your head hurt more." When he still received no reply, he said, "Look, I have to get to class. Where am I going?"

Still refusing to meet Seto's eyes, Jou murmured, "Chemistry. Ishikawa's class… I sit next to Anzu."

The blond rolled his eyes and had to fight not to make some acerbic remark. "Alright, then. Finish your lunch, and then go catch a nap. I'll see you at the end of the day."

Jou nodded absently and sadly stirred the soup in his bowl with his spoon, finishing it up after everyone else had cleared out of the cafeteria. He quickly made his phone call, and as he was walking to the office, he came to only one conclusion: in his own body, at least he had only been an embarrassment to himself.
Chapter Five

As Seto headed off for his class, he found himself actively seeking out Mazaki Anzu for the first time in his life. Spying her just outside the cafeteria doors talking with Honda and Yugi, he plastered a ridiculous grin on his face and headed towards them.

When he was within earshot, Anzu and Honda abruptly stopped speaking, and Yugi beamed benignly at him. "Hi, Jou-kun!"

"You didn't have to stop talking on account of me," Seto said coolly, inwardly smirking at the discomfited expressions on the other three faces. Anzu was the first to recover.

"We're sorry, Jou. It's just that, well…" She chewed her lip in thought, as if trying to find the right words.

"You're just acting really weird," Honda interjected, loosing a small grunt when he was elbowed in the gut by the petite brunette.

"Define `weird'," Seto retorted, crossing his arms across his chest and gazing impassively at the trio.

"Well, how about that for starters?" the stocky brunet replied, gesturing animatedly at the blond's posture. "And the last time I saw you button up your uniform jacket, it was because Otogi had given you that big hickey at Ryou's party!"

Seto bristled at this news, his eyes narrowing into cold, hate-filled slits. A pang of jealousy washed over him as the harsh truth behind Jou's somewhat cryptic journal entries hit him with full force, leaving him feeling strangely numb and empty inside. "Ryuji," he snarled under his breath, extremely put out by the fact that his main business rival had managed to claim the affection of the one who should, by rights, be his. Growling out a very Jou-like, "Go to hell, Honda," he stormed off for Ishikawa-sensei's chemistry class, a rather surprised Anzu trailing after him.

"Jou, wait!" she called, catching up to him just outside the classroom door. "I'm really sorry; it was rude of us to be talking about you behind your back like that, but we were really worried about you! I don't think I've ever seen you so…distant and closed off. It's almost like you're on another planet!"

Softening her voice, she asked kindly, "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Biting his cheek against the caustic remark that was on the tip of his tongue, he shook his head. Anzu sighed. "Ok, Jou. You know I'm here if you change your mind." She brushed past him and sat down at her desk, smiling when the blond joined her. "Well, at least you're not so angry with me that you're going to work with someone else today."

Seto clenched his jaw and managed to murmur, "We are friends, ne?" He saw Anzu nod, and then fell silent when the instructor held up a thick stack of paper.

"Today, we'll be continuing our work on balancing chemical equations. They begin easy enough, and get progressively more difficult. If you don't make it to page five by the end of the period, I'd suggest moving to something a little more…remedial." The instructor made a point of letting his gaze linger slightly longer on the blond than on anyone else, leaving little doubt in anyone's mind as to whom he was referring.

"Asshole," Seto muttered to himself as he was handed the fifteen-page booklet, ignoring the surprised gasp from Anzu. Scowling, he began the tedious chore, irritably flipping through the pages.
as he worked through the exercise. After one particularly furious stroke with his pencil, he felt a gentle touch to his arm. "What?" he snapped brusquely, turning to the petite brunette at his left.

"This isn't the first time we've done something to annoy you, but Jou, why are you so angry?" she asked, frowning when she saw the amber eyes frost over. "Jou, Honda told us everything that's been going on at lunch; please don't be mad at him. Did something happen with Kaiba?"

"Honda talks entirely too much," Seto replied snarkily. "I really just don't feel like discussing this, Anzu," he continued, his voice softening at the girl's wide-eyed expression. At least not until I figure it out for myself, he added to himself, almost as an afterthought. When she once again nodded and resumed her work, he continued to plod absently through the exercise, his mind working furiously to answer the small brunette's question. Why was he so angry? Why, indeed. It wasn't as if he'd ever seriously considered the possibility of being with the blond, despite his countless dreams to the contrary. Nor had he ever shown Jounouchi the slightest indication that he was even remotely interested in him. The fact that he had gone out of his way to get Jou registered in his tournament was a sheer act of goodwill, and nothing more. Besides, not that he'd given it much thought, but the blond wasn't really his type; they were far too different. Until you look below the surface and see just how alike you really are, a small voice in his head reminded him.

Giving an audible snort, he pushed the voice from his mind and the stack of paper to the corner of his desk. Let Otogi have him; I don't care, he thought coldly, folding his arms on the table top and bringing his head down to rest on his forearms. But the truth was, he did care, and the harder he tried to convince himself otherwise, the more his heart ached. Given his track record, Seto could understand, and to a certain degree, even accept, why the blond would choose someone else over him, but the fact that it was Otogi of all people had him beside himself. Inwardly, he seethed as his mind so helpfully conjured up images of the raven-haired CEO claiming the blond's lips in a kiss, and then giving him that phoney, smarmy smile as he lecherously pawed at Jou's body. Seto knew the blond had a good physique, and he could feel his cheeks heat as he thought about the quick peek he had had that morning. However, his arousal quickly transformed to disgust, and a sour expression settled on his face when he realized that Otogi probably had intimate knowledge of just how good it was, too.

"Jounouchi!"

Seto was startled out of his musing by the teacher's voice in his ear and the soft titters of laughter that subsequently erupted throughout the classroom.

"I thought I had made myself perfectly clear at the beginning of the period that you were to be working through the assignment I had set, and not wasting time sleeping," Ishikawa-sensei hissed in his ear, his dark eyes blazing with a triumphant fury.

"I wasn't sleeping, Sensei," Seto replied, unfazed by the instructor's actions. "And I've finished your assignment."

"When I made my comment about getting to page five, I didn't mean to stop there!" the older man sneered as he picked up the booklet and began thumbing through it, his face blanching as he went through page after page of correct answers. "You've finished all fifteen pages!" he exclaimed incredulously.

The blond surreptitiously rolled his eyes. "That's what I said, Sensei. I finished your assignment. I guess I'm not as `remedial' as you thought, ne?"

The class fell into an incredulous silence at their classmate's brashness, and Ishikawa gave an awkward, embarrassed laugh. "No, I suppose not," he replied with forced joviality. "I'm looking
forward to seeing good things from you on our next test. Yes…” Pretending to see a student in need of assistance on the other side of the room, he moved on with as much decorum as he could muster.

"Jou, I've got an A in this class and am only on page eleven," Anzu whispered when the teacher was once again out of earshot. "Tell me how you managed to complete that assignment when you're only carrying a B-minus."

"I've been seeing a tutor," Seto replied with a blasé shrug, a smirk creeping across his lips when she demanded to know who. At that point, the period ended and once he had stuffed everything back into his satchel, he winked enigmatically and said, "My little secret." Before Anzu could question him further, he disappeared into the hallway.

As soon as he was out of Anzu's sight, his smirk faded, and he thought about his upcoming mathematics class with Honda and Yugi. It was going to be just as awkward, if not more so, than the class he'd just left. By the time he had managed to fight through the crowd of students, he was nearly late. In his own body, everyone moved for him. As Jounouchi, he'd had to contend with being shoved and jostled as he had inched his way through the busy corridors. He was quite frustrated by the time he reached the classroom, and he very nearly sat at his own desk, catching himself at the last minute and dropping into Jou's instead. Glancing over at Honda and Yugi, he gave them a nod of greeting and saw the brunet's posture relax and the smaller teen give him a brilliant smile in return. Secretly, he hoped that the gesture would placate them and keep them from bothering him any further.

Trying to ignore the two unwavering gazes that continued to study him as though he were some sort of laboratory animal, he forced his attention to the sensei's lecture, which, for him, was an equally daunting endeavour. Clenching his jaw, Seto exercised Herculean restraint and had managed, by the end of the period, to keep his snide comments about the instructor to himself and not threaten to gouge out Yugi and Honda's eyes with a spoon if they didn't stop staring at him. As the bell rang dismissing him for the day, he sighed in relief, never more glad to have a day of school over with. Hefting his satchel over his shoulder, he turned around and nearly tripped over the other two boys.

“What?"

A brief frown of confusion crossed Yugi's face before his characteristic, kind expression returned. "Jou-kun, you're supposed to be going to Honda-kun's house tonight, remember?"

Seto's eyes widened at the news. "Honda, I can't. There's something I have to work on at KaibaCorp that –"

"That's it, Jou!" Honda growled, grabbing his best friend by the collar and giving him a small shake. "I don't know what happened last night, but I never thought I'd see the day you'd blow us off for fucking Kaiba!"

The blond struggled free of the stocky brunet's grasp, and as he shoved him forcefully away from him, Seto glared coldly into the frustrated, hazel eyes. "Idiot!" he hissed. "Do you always have to act like a cave man? I mean, Christ, it sure didn't seem to bother you when we talked this morning!"

Immediately, Honda backed off and looked at the blond with a small, sheepish smile. "Yeah, I know. But I also know how he is, and I just worry about him hurting you. I guess I overreacted a bit."

"Don't worry about me; I can handle him," Seto replied calmly, somewhat insulted by the accusation, and secretly wishing that the fin-head would just shut up so he could get to the car and brief Jou. He was already nervous enough that the other teen would be left to deal with the 'Black Widow of Yamamoto' more or less on his own. If Jounouchi wasn't properly prepared, not only would the meeting be like leading the lamb to the slaughter, but it would be a major hit to KaibaCorp for the
next quarter. He was struck by a sudden idea. "Besides, I made a promise, and you know Jounouchi Katsuya doesn't back down from a promise, ne?" Puffing himself up self-importantly, Seto added, "So, now you see why it's so important that I go to KaibaCorp."

"You want us to go with you, you know, for moral support?" Yugi asked, completely buying into the blond's routine.

"No, I'm good," Seto said. "Besides, I think that would just piss Kaiba off. And you know how he is when he's in a bad mood."

"Yeah, that's true," Honda agreed. "Alright man, good luck. But if you're not at my place by eleven, you'd better shack up with Lover Boy."

Seto gritted his teeth at the mention of Otogi and forced a smile to his face. "Hn. I'll try to remember that." Giving Honda a slight shove as he walked past him, he headed outside to the waiting limo. He remembered to wait for Kaga, and after giving the large, blond man Jou's name, he was shown into the back of the car. As he slid across the seat, he saw that Jou was now awake and, save for a slight peakedness, he looked considerably better. "How's your head?"

Jou wavered his hand slightly as he took a small sip of water. "It's ok, I guess. I don't feel like my head's going to cave in, but I feel like I've been run over by a truck. And I'm starving."

Seto leaned forward and pulled some cheese and crackers from the fridge. "We'll get you something more substantial later, but this should do for now."

Gratefully, Jou ate the proffered snack, his eyes fixed on the blond seated across from him. "How was school this afternoon?"

"It was alright, I suppose. I made Ishikawa look like a bigger idiot than he already is, which was fun. Incidentally, you now have a chemistry tutor."

Sapphire eyes went wide in horror. "What? Who?"

"I don't know; that's just what I told Anzu when she questioned me on how I'd managed to finish the set assignment during class time." His smirk widened at the look of abject terror on Jou's face. "Relax, Jounouchi. I'll make sure you aren't left hanging because of something I've said, even if I have to teach you myself. For now, however, let's get you up to speed on this contract."

Jou tried his hardest to concentrate on what Kaiba was saying, but there were so many names and dates, and he was getting more and more confused. The only things he knew for certain were that Kaiba needed her to commit to the proposed project start date, and that he was willing to cede no more than thirty percent of the net profits to her company. He swallowed harshly as the limo pulled to a stop outside the corporate building, nervously stepping out onto the sidewalk. "I don't know if I can do this, Kaiba," he whispered.

"It's a little late now!" Seto hissed back at him through clenched teeth, grabbing him by the elbow and steering him wordlessly into the building. Once inside the CEO's office, Seto began rummaging through a hidden wardrobe. "You can do this, Jounouchi," he called out to the room, his voice slightly muffled through the paneling. "This isn't the sort of plan I would normally endorse, but if I didn't think you were capable, I wouldn't have even considered it." He jammed a midnight blue suit into the other teen's hands and led him to his office ensuite. "Change."

"But, Kaiba, I-"
He was cut off by Seto shutting the door in his face. While he waited, the blond logged onto the computer in his office and quickly searched for any additional information or last minute changes Jou would need to be aware of. Finding none, he quickly prepared a security pass for himself so he could at least start doing some work while Jou was negotiating. Finally, he took a moment to stretch in his office chair, glancing expectantly towards the door when he heard it open. Jounouchi was wearing the suit trousers and the shirt, but he had the jacket draped awkwardly across his arm. "There was a tie."

"I know," Jou muttered forlornly. "The only time I ever wore one, it was one of those clip on deals," he continued, his face heating in embarrassment.

"I see," the blond replied softly, his tone one of comprehension, not condescension. Taking the tie, he led Jou to one of his visitor's chairs. "Sit." When the brunet had complied, Seto moved behind him and, slipping the thin piece of fabric around Jou's neck, quickly tied a perfect Windsor knot. Coming back around, he fastened the top button on the white dress shirt and slid the tie into place. "There," he said gently, and then disappeared into the bathroom, returning with a hairbrush. Carefully, he brushed out the auburn locks and when he had finished, he smiled at Jou. "You look ready to take her on."

"Thanks," the brunet mumbled dejectedly.

Seto arched a brow. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Jou shook his head. "It's nothing."

"Jounouchi, don't lie to me. I can tell it's not 'nothing'; you look like you've just lost your best friend, and quite frankly, that's a shitty position to put yourself in when you're about to enter a negotiation."

"You wouldn't understand."

"Damn it, Jounouchi, I 'understand' a lot more about you than I had ever thought I would, so don't even try to pull that crap on me." The voice was calm and even, but it was obvious Seto's patience was wearing thin.

"Oh, that's right," Jou muttered self-derisively. "I forgot; you're perfect at everything. Nothing is ever hard for you."

"How dare you!" Seto hissed angrily, his eyes narrowing spitefully as his last thread of temperance snapped. Before the brunet could react, the seething teenager was in his lap and had him pinned to the chair, his smaller hands fisted in the immaculate cotton shirt. "Your situation is neither uncommon nor unique, Jounouchi, so spare me the 'tortured soul that's left to suffer in silence' routine."

"But it's not the same; you wouldn't understand."

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"But it's not the same; you wouldn't understand."

Interrupting him with a warning growl, Seto snarled, "If you say I wouldn't understand one more time, I'm going to have your tongue removed. What is it that I'm not going to understand, exactly, Jounouchi?"

As his eyes welled with tears of self-loathing, Jou dropped his gaze, refusing to look into the golden eyes that were glaring furiously, albeit candidly, at him. "One night," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "For you, all it took was one night to show him I had some worth." Lifting his head, he asked sincerely, "What was it my old man saw in you in one night that he hasn't managed to find in me in eighteen years?"
Seto's eyes widened momentarily in surprise at the question, and then his rage returned with a vengeance. "Let me get this straight; make sure I don't misunderstand you," he sneered. "You're upset because you think that I managed to get your father to like me better than you? That somehow, he saw me as a person and not a punching bag?" When he heard Jou's small gasp, he snorted contemptuously. "Jesus Christ...why are you so fixated on having his approval? I told you yesterday that respect is earned, not given; just because he's your father, you don't owe him a God damned thing! Let me fill you in on something, Jounouchi. Your father is the same sadistic bastard he's always been; nothing's changed. He and Gozaburo are one and the same. I know you know my secret; you know that my stepfather beat the shit out of me every single day I lived under his roof. It wasn't because I was a bad child and required discipline. He did it because he was an asshole, and, quite frankly, because he could. For years, I took whatever he meted out, and I said nothing. And I did that because I had long ago sworn to protect my brother at all costs, even if it meant subjecting myself to whatever cruel punishment or torture he could dream up." With a callous laugh, Seto continued, "I suppose that if it hadn't been for the fact that one day he went against his word and in a fit of anger hit Mokuba, I would still be complacently abiding by our agreement – in much the same way you do."

Having vented the majority of his anger and frustration, Seto managed to reign in his emotions. Relaxing his grip on the other, he slowly got to his feet, his body still trembling slightly from the adrenaline shock. "I know you're not stupid; I'm sure you can piece together what eventually happened as a result, and how I wound up in the situation I'm in now," he said lowly. "The only difference between you and me is that I shifted the balance of power in my favour. I showed your father, quite explicitly, that if he ever lays a hand on this body again, I will kill him." Turning on his heel, Seto gave the brunet a soft smile. "It's not that the ends justify the means in any case, but who knows what kind of person I would be today if I'd been raised by a different family. The same holds true for you. You are a strong person...until you start listening to, and believing, the crap that man has fed you for your entire life. And, I'll be the first to admit that I haven't exactly been 'helpful' in getting you to move past that, but I can admit when I'm wrong." He stood once again in front of the other teen and carefully smoothed out the wrinkles from his shirt, and then straightened his tie. Holding the jacket open for the brunet and assisting him as he slid his arms inside, Seto said, "You're an interesting person, Jounouchi. Far more so than I would have ever thought."

Jou looked at him through glassy eyes, a tremulous smile on his lips. "You really think I'm strong?" he asked.

"It shouldn't matter what I, or anyone else for that matter, thinks. The only one you have to prove anything to is yourself." He smirked at the brunet before adding sincerely, "And yes, I really do."

"Thanks, Kaiba," Jou said. "I'm sorry for...well, that...just now. I think...no, I know I can do this."

"Good," Seto replied softly as he reached out and tilted the brunet's chin up. "Kaibas don't look down for anyone. Neither should Jounouchis."

Flushing slightly at the implied praise, Jou squared his shoulders and drew himself up to the brunet's full height. He caught a glimpse of himself in the full-length mirror Kaiba kept in his office, and he smiled. "So, how do I look?"

"Commanding," the blond replied. "It suits you. I'm going down to the lab to see what I can repair. Aiko will let you know when Toshimitsu and her colleagues have arrived. Until then, try to relax, stay focused, and remember, you're not alone in there." He smirked wryly. "At the very least, I'm with you in body."

Giving Seto a brilliant grin, Jou felt the last of his nervousness melt away at the other's joke and, as
unfunny as it had been, the words had been strangely reassuring. A quick glance at Kaiba's desk clock told him he'd have fifteen minutes at most to wait and, settling into the comfortable, leather desk chair, he thought to himself, *I was wrong, Kaiba. Things have been hard for the both of us.*

Jou jumped slightly when the intercom sounded and a soft voice announced the arrival of the Toshimitsu delegation. After acknowledging Aiko, he felt a fresh wave of anxiety wash over him. Breathing deeply, he stepped out into the hallway and allowed the petite secretary to escort him to the boardroom. When he entered, his face fell. He saw that the dozen or so attorneys and advisors Kaiba had told him about were milling around, as were an equal number for the other side. Seated at the far end of the conference table, a sour expression on her face, sat Toshimitsu Kotomi. Just by looking at the middle-aged woman, Jou could instantly tell she was uncomfortable being there. And, when he saw the uncertainty in her smoky, grey eyes, he had a feeling her aggressive, hard-ass reputation was more a result of her thinking she had to prove herself to a myriad of condescending, patronizing males rather than her being a ruthless, cold-hearted viper. If that was true, it would explain why she kept delaying – she wasn't entirely sure how to handle Kaiba Seto, and stalling was the only way she could maintain control over the situation.

He decided that the best way to deal with her would be to make her feel comfortable, respected and intelligent without making her feel like an inferior. Smiling warmly, he took two steps toward her when a man with yellowed teeth and wearing far too much cologne inserted himself between them.

"My name is Nakamora Jiro, Senior VP of Research and Development. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us on such short notice, Kaiba-san," the man oozed ingratiatingly. "Toshimitsu-san appreciates it."

Jou frowned. "I'm sorry, but Toshimitsu-san can speak, can't she?" He saw the woman's head perk up at the question.

Nakamora blanched momentarily, and then slid the sycophantic smile back into place. "Of course, Kaiba-san," he replied. "However, as Senior VP –"

"Yes, you said," Jou interrupted impatiently. "But, I thought I was meeting with her." At this, Toshimitsu cracked a smile.

"Well, you are," the older man said offhandedly. "However, my role here is to –"

Again, Jou cut him off. "Great. Excuse me." Ignoring the mortified expression on Nakamora's face, he stepped around the grey-haired gentleman and moved to where the woman sat. Bowing slightly, he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Toshimitsu-san."

"Likewise, Kaiba-san," she replied softly, gesturing to the chair beside her. Her voice was gentle and clear, and when she spoke, Jou could see some of the doubt leave her eyes. "You're not quite what I had expected; this is not normally how business is done."

As he sat down, he turned to see all of Kaiba's suits staring at him in open-mouthed disbelief and he smiled. "I know I don't like it when people talk about me as though I'm not in the room. I figured you'd appreciate the same courtesy." He saw the woman nod nearly imperceptibly, and he relaxed slightly. He had been right.

"Kaiba-sama, this sort of behaviour is highly unconventional…" one of the brunet's advisors murmured lowly in his ear.

"If you don't like it, then you can leave," Jou replied coolly. "In fact, why don't you all leave? If I need you, I'll page you or something."
"But, Kaiba-sama, I strongly recommend against –"

The brunet glowered at him. "Did I stutter? Or didn't you understand me? Get. Out."

Without another word, the KaibaCorp executives filed out, each one giving him a look that ran the gamut from pity to incredulity to slightly put out. As the last one pulled the door shut, the dark-haired woman turned to Jou and said, "You've put yourself at a disadvantage by dismissing all your allies…"

At this, Jou shrugged, "Maybe, but they're really not doing that much in the first place. Besides, that one guy was really starting to piss me off." He flushed as he realized what he'd just said, and he quickly stammered out an apology.

Her grey eyes sparkling, Toshimitsu laughed. "Kaiba-san, I have three boys, and the youngest one is probably just a few years younger than you. It's nothing I've not heard before."

Smiling sheepishly, he said, "Sometimes my mouth just gets away from me, but thanks." When she nodded, he leaned back in his chair and added, "But, you didn't come all this way to hear about that, ne? How about you tell me what you want from this, I'll tell you what I'm looking for, and hopefully, we can reach an agreement we'll both be happy with."

Two hours later, completely exhausted, but smiling, Jou escorted Toshimitsu and her entourage from the boardroom. After showing them into the elevator and thanking her for her time, he turned to go back to the brunet's office, only to be stopped by Kaiba's head advisor.

"I don't appreciate you utilizing such unorthodox bargaining strategies without first discussing them with me," the older gentleman said brusquely.

For a moment, Jou was gripped with fear. He hadn't expected a backlash from the executives – at least not before he could talk about what had happened with Kaiba. Knowing he needed to act, he narrowed his eyes and replied, "I don't have to discuss anything with you. Last I checked, I was the president of the company, and how I get the deal done isn't as important as getting the deal." Jou saw that the other man was about to protest and, holding up a hand to silence him he said, "All of you had your heads so far up your collective asses that none of you could see that all she wanted was to be treated like a person and not someone who needed some stuck up asshole to speak for her. If that's the kind of advice you give, you can keep it. I did well enough on my own." As he thrust a copy of the terms of the agreement at the man, he snapped, "Here! Make sure you show the shareholders that when you're telling them about how the big, bad CEO hurt your feelings. Grow the fuck up!"

Brushing past the man, he strode into the office, slamming the door behind him.

Heaving a tremulous sigh, Jou sank into the plush office chair, trying to get his frantically beating heart back under control. Slowly, a grin spread across his face and, after a few minutes, he picked up the folder containing Kaiba's copy of the contract and headed for the elevators.

After wandering aimlessly around the labyrinth that was the Research and Development department, he accidentally stumbled across the VDT terminals that had been set into the wall. Using the `map' feature, he was quickly able to locate Lab 31-Alpha, and upon entering, he smiled to himself. Seto was crouched behind the display console, a pair of goggles pushed up on his forehead, his brow wrinkled in frustration as he stared down at a circuit board. "Hey," Jou called out quietly.

The blond head jerked up at the voice, and a small smile crept across his lips. "Finished already?"

"Kaiba," Jou said softly. "It's been over two hours."
"Really?" Seto replied, his dubious look turning into a small frown. "Well, if you wore a watch, I wouldn't lose track of time," he added mock-petulantly. He saw the sapphire eyes peering intently at him and, worrying his lip slightly, he asked, "So, how did it go?" Wordlessly, Jounouchi crossed the room and handed Seto the folder he'd been carrying, and then stepped back. Amber eyes quickly scanned the contents of the document, and then looked up in amazement. "Jounouchi…"

Giving his counterpart a small smile, Jou murmured, "She signed it, Kaiba. And she agreed to everything."
"Jounouchi, I'm beyond amazed by what you've done here!"

Flushing slightly at the accolades, Jou murmured sheepishly, "Yeah, well, I don't think your suits were all that impressed, especially after I kicked them all out of the meeting and flew solo." He saw the amber eyes narrow slightly, and before Seto could interject, he continued, "I told you that I can read people, ne? Well, the room was packed with all these stuffed shirts, and everyone was talking for Toshimitsu, but no one was talking to her, and I could tell she didn't like that. She's really not that bad of a lady, Kaiba. She just wants to be treated like any other head of a corporation would want, and not have some sleaze talking on her behalf like she's incompetent. She wants the respect due her position, just like you would want if you were in her place. Hell, you'd demand it." He paused, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth. "I'm sorry if I screwed up."

"Jounouchi!" Seto exclaimed incredulously. "You accomplished in two hours what my entire advisory team has been trying to do for a half a year. I'll admit, your method was definitely unique, but you got results. I hardly consider that screwing up."

"Yeah, well…I'm sure that your main man with the giant stick up his ass would disagree."

"Fukui? Why, what did he say?" The blond's lips curved down into a small scowl.

"He just thought that I should have discussed my strategy with him first. Was I supposed to?"

Seto snorted in disgust. "He's getting far too comfortable in his role; I am not required to take his counsel, nor do I need his permission to take any course of action. Did you say anything back to him?"

"I told him it was your…er, my company, and to grow the fuck up."

"Really?" the blond remarked conversationally, a hint of amusement in his voice. Dropping his eyes to peruse the document in more detail, he asked, "So, what did you have to concede to her?"

"Well, she wanted to choose three of the five senior engineers for the project team, and she insisted on getting weekly updates from you. Since she was so willing to take only thirty percent of the profits and agreed to send people to start work within the next two weeks, I thought it was a small thing to give up. Did I do ok?"

A self-satisfied smirk spread across his lips. "Ok? Other than her having the majority of technical experts, I've got everything I wanted out of this deal. God, I could kiss you!"

"What?" Jou exclaimed as his eyes went wide and he took an involuntary step away from the blond. "Christ, no! Do you know how wrong that is?" he blurted.

Seto's comment had been purely innocent, rhetorical even. But, Jou's near-instantaneous, outright rejection, coupled with the physical and emotional stress of the past twenty-four hours, touched off a wave of jealous anger the likes of which Kaiba himself had never before experienced. "Oh, right. I'd forgotten about 'Lover Boy,'" the blond sneered coldly, his amber eyes narrowing as he reiterated the words Honda had used earlier.

Jou stared at him in bewilderment. "What the fuck are you talking about, Kaiba? I'm just saying it'd be too weird – like kissing myself, or my twin!"
Letting his hurt get the better of him, his only thought, however irrational, was to retaliate and wound Jou more than he'd allowed himself to be. "Whatever, Jounouchi. I know about your secret flame. Honda reminded me, and pretty much everyone else in the hallway, all about Ryō's party and how you and Otogi were practically devouring each other! So don't insult me by pretending to be stupid!"

"He what?" Jou demanded, his cheeks heating in embarrassment as his voice took on a decidedly hard edge. "That asshole! I'm going to beat the shit out of him for even mentioning that again! He knows damned well that the only reason I got that hickey in the first place was because I fell asleep, and Otogi was loaded, and... wait a second." He trailed off, looking suspiciously at the other teen. "Did you read my journal?"

"What?" Seto replied brusquely, his cheeks flushing slightly.

"You did! I can't believe that you of all people would snoop through someone's private stuff like that!"

"I didn't snoop!" the blond countered, his blush darkening. "And I resent the accusation!"

"Now who's insulting whose intelligence?" Jou demanded. "So what; the information magically downloaded to your brain? Or you learned it by osmosis? You'll have to teach that trick to me, since it never works when I've got a test!"

"Well, it certainly wasn't on purpose! Maybe if you didn't leave things hidden in places where anyone with an IQ greater than four would find it, it wouldn't have happened!"

"No one told you to keep reading it once you figured out what it was, though!"

"Well then, that must be a side effect to being in this body!" Seto argued back. "It makes one prone to do stupid and irrational things!"

"You're such a bastard, Kaiba!" Jou shouted, tears of anger and humiliation threatening to spill. "I mean, I get the insults. And I get the fact that you hate being me. But for you to bring up that party, knowing what really happened, in order to put me back in my 'place', that's pretty fucking low – even for you."

"No, Jounouchi, I don't know what really happened. All I know is that –" Seto never got to finish his statement. Instead, Jou gave him a hard shove, and he went stumbling backwards, tripped over an opened toolbox and smacked his forehead hard into the edge of the desk.

"Get bent, Kaiba! All day, you've been treating me like you actually gave a damn, got my hopes up, and then..." Jou trailed off, his eyes widening as he realized what he had done. "Oh shit, Kaiba! I'm so sorry! I forgot that I'd actually be able to move you!" He stepped over to where the blond was sprawled on the floor and offered him a hand up.

Irritably, Seto swatted the proffered assistance away and got to his feet on his own, ignoring the small gash over his eyebrow that was slowly trickling blood down his cheek. Levelling a furious, amber gaze at his counterpart, he hissed venomously, "Right now, I'd strongly suggest leaving me alone, because if you stay in my presence much longer, I'm going to seriously hurt you."

Startled by the eerie, overly-controlled rage, Jou nodded. "How much time do you want?" he asked lowly.

Sliding the goggles down his forehead and leaving a gruesome, crimson streak on his face, Seto turned his back to the brunet and replied coldly, "I'll find you." He heard the door close behind Jounouchi, and as he picked up his cordless soldering iron, he tried to still his body, which was
trembling slightly in a combination of adrenaline and fury. As he fumed silently, he started reattaching the necessary parts to the circuit board he'd been working on. When he was finished, he pushed his goggles up again, wincing as the small wound was reopened. The blond set the board on top of the console, and glanced briefly over at the folder Jounouchi had brought him. His anger quickly cooling, he felt another sharp lance of pain tear through him as he recalled their most recent conversation. When he got to the part where Jou had implied that Seto had only pretended to care, for a moment, the sombre teen wished it was true. At least if he'd been pretending, his emotions wouldn't be interfering with his work, which was, quite frankly, proving to be a major inconvenience.

With a sigh, he picked up the next board and began examining it for damage, all the while replaying everything from the day over in his mind. Suddenly, he was struck by a thought. Otogi wasn't in any of Jounouchi's classes, and the journal entries had been very specific about that. As he mulled over the possibilities, Honda's childish comment from the end of the day stuck in his mind. Obviously, whoever he was, Honda knew his identity... All of a sudden, it was as if one piece of the puzzle had shifted and everything clicked into place: Honda's cryptic remarks, Jou's unusual comments – if one took the time to consider the 'clues', they all pointed to one person and one person only. Knowing he wouldn't get any further work accomplished that night, he set his tools aside and removed the goggles from his head. "Jounouchi, I know who it is," he murmured aloud to the empty room. "It's me."

Jounouchi was sitting behind Kaiba's large office desk, his arms folded on top of the blotter, his head resting on his forearms. The television was tuned to his favourite program, but he watched it unseeingly. Instead, he kept thinking about the events that had transpired down in the lab, and every time he saw the irate expression and heard the cold, emotionless voice in his head, his eyes would prickle. And, when he saw himself besting Kaiba physically, rather than feel exhilarated, as he had once imagined he would, he felt hollow and empty. Once again, the tears would spill, running in warm rivulets down his cheek to drip unassumingly onto the desk. Finally, with a sigh, Jou would force his attention back to the television for a few minutes until the whole cycle would repeat itself again.

Jou heard the office door open and, glancing briefly in that direction, he saw that it was Seto. Flicking his eyes back to the screen, he fought back the fresh wave of bitter emotion that threatened to break. He heard the door close, then footsteps crossing the carpet, and finally, the sound of running water in the small ensuite. After a few moments, Jou heard the footsteps again, and he knew that the blond was standing about five feet from him, watching him. He could feel the assessing gaze on him, but he didn't dare move for fear that he'd start sobbing. He was run down and exhausted, and he definitely didn't want to give Kaiba the satisfaction of knowing he'd broken him.

Seto knew that Jou was aware of his presence; he'd seen him glance over when he'd walked in the door, and in that brief glimpse, he knew that the other teen had been just as affected by things as he had. "Jounouchi, we need to talk," the blond said softly. When the brunet didn't acknowledge him, didn't even look at him, he picked up the remote from the corner of the desk and turned the television off.

"I was watching that," Jou remarked quietly, hoping the low volume would mask the huskiness in his voice.

"Catch it on a rerun." The blond dragged the visitor's chair right in front of the desk where Jou sat and, settling himself into it, he said again, "We need to talk." Still, the other refused to respond. "Jou, look at me." His voice was still calm and even, but there was a slight gentleness to the tone.
Slowly, Jounouchi lifted his head and, keeping his chin propped up on his arms, he turned to face the other teen. His gaze flicked up to the wound he had caused, and his eyes welled up once more. "Kaiba, I – I'm so sorry," he said sadly. "After everything you...we've both been through, I shouldn't have –"

"Jounouchi, no," Seto interrupted, holding up a finger to stave off any protest. "I'm the one who needs to apologize." He had to bite back a smirk when he saw the dubious arch of an eyebrow. "Your reaction was understandable, and I don't blame you for getting upset with me. The reason I got so angry wasn't because of that. It was because you made me feel..." He trailed off, searching for the right words. "I really don't know all the details of what transpired that night, but it was obviously something very upsetting for you. Honestly, I may torment you to get you riled up, but I wouldn't do something that deliberately cruel. I told you once today, I'm not that spiteful." He smiled softly. "I meant what I said earlier about finding you to be an interesting person, Jounouchi. And again, the ends don't justify the means, but at the time, I was hoping to find something of substance that would help me to better understand you. I really wasn't interested in the inane, gossipy bits."

"Why?"

Seto frowned slightly in confusion. "I've never really cared for gossip."

"No! I didn't mean that!" Jou shook his head in frustration. "I meant, why do you want to understand...me?"

At this, Seto felt his cheeks heat. "Believe it or not, I've always had a passing curiosity in you and your band of friends. But, in the last day or so, you've challenged my perceptions and changed my thinking on some things. Important things. On the surface, we seem like two completely different people, but inside, we're more alike than I would have ever thought possible. And, in more ways than I would have ever cared to admit." He studied the other's face for a moment, and still seeing the wistful melancholia, he sighed heavily. "Come on then; I've had enough of this place for today. Let's go home."

Wordlessly, they headed for the lobby, and it wasn't until they were in the back of the limo heading for the Kaiba estate that Jou murmured, "Kaiba, I'm sorry."

"I've already told you that you have nothing to apologize for," Seto replied, watching as, once again, Jou's eyes filled with tears.

"It's not just that, it's everything," Jou muttered, staring down at the well-manicured hands in his lap. "If I hadn't been so stupid and stubborn, this wouldn't have happened in the first place, and then, today I go and do something dumb, again without thinking. If I hadn't made you mad, you'd have probably had that thing fixed."

"I may be a genius, but I can't work miracles. Given the amount of damage to that equipment, there was no way I would have had everything working tonight. Tomorrow, I may have it done, but realistically, I'm guessing we're going to be this way until at least Sunday. And that's only if I've figured out what failed. I refuse to subject either one of us to that without knowing where... where I made the mistake." His smile faltered a bit at the admission of his error, and he continued, "So, in the interest of fairness, you're not allowed to take all the blame. Besides, it's been ok being you. Beyond the utility factor of having smaller hands to get into the tight areas, I've been able to watch this absolutely stunning brunet and not have to look for a mirror."

Despite himself, Jou managed a small chuckle. Kaiba was certainly arrogant when it came to his skills and abilities – and with good reason – but he was not a narcissist; he had never seen the CEO
give more than a cursory glance at himself in a mirror. "Thanks, Kaiba." Settling back in his seat, he
gave the blond a grateful smile. Whether the other was being serious, or was simply trying to make
him feel better, it didn't matter to Jounouchi. The point was, whether Seto was willing to admit it or
not, he did care.

When they arrived at the estate, Kaga opened the door for them and, as they were ascending the
steps to the front door, Seto asked, "Are you hungry? We never did get you anything besides those
 crackers earlier."

Jou gave him a sheepish smile. "Well, now that you mention it, I really could go for something.
Just..." He trailed off, flushing slightly. "Forget it. It's not important."

"Tell me," Seto insisted. "Obviously, it is important, or you wouldn't have broached the subject."

The colour in his cheeks deepening, the brunet cleared his throat and said, "I don't want to sound
ungrateful or anything, but do you have anything... normal... to eat? I saw that plate of stuff your
chef left in the fridge last night, and I had no clue what it was. I mean, it smelled ok, but haven't you
ever heard of like, chips?"

The blond laughed. "Yoji would be beside himself if he knew you had turned your nose up at beef
bourguignon. And there are chips...you just have to know where to look for them." He gave Jou a
cryptic wink, and then stepped aside as the front door was flung open and Mokuba came tearing out
of the house to hug the brunet.

"Nii-sama! I finished all my homework and Emi-san told me it was all perfect! I was wondering, can
we watch a movie again tonight?" As he gazed adoringly up at the brunet, he caught a movement out
of the corner of his eye, and he turned to face the blond. Smirking, he greeted the other teen, and
then glanced from one to the other, his grey eyes twinkling mischievously. "I'll tell Emi-san she can
go, and then I'll get the movie set up; don't be too long, ne?" Before either one could say anything,
he was gone.

"What was that all about?" Seto asked, arching a brow at the brunet.

"Beats me; he's your brother," Jou retorted, hesitating just inside the doorway. "So uh, I guess we
should get changed, ne?" Suddenly, with Seto standing behind him, he felt even more out of place
than he had the previous night.

"Well, go on," the blond prodded. "This is supposed to be your house."

"Right." Silently, Jou climbed the stairs, his face heating further when he got to the top and tried to
remember which room belonged to the brunet.

"Turn left, fourth on the left," Seto murmured.

"I knew that!" Jou exclaimed indignantly, before relaxing visibly in gratitude for the reminder. "But,
thanks." Outside the door, he dropped his gaze and said, "Do you... I mean, maybe I should sleep in
one of the other rooms."

Rolling his eyes, the blond opened the door and shoved the other teen inside, pushing the door
closed behind him with his foot. "Are you insane?" he demanded in a harsh whisper. "You don't
have guests over, give them your room, and then stay in one of the other rooms! God, what is wrong
with you?"

"Jesus, Kaiba, don't you find this all just...weird? I mean, you're here, but you have to act like a
stranger in your own house, while the stranger, me, is in your personal space! It's hard for me to get
"Yes, Jounouchi, I find it weird, but I also know that I can't change the situation right now, so I suck it up and I deal with it. The less time I spend trying to understand the small oddities, the less time I spend worrying about it." He went to the bureau and, after rummaging around for a couple of minutes, he pulled out a pair of black sweatpants and a dark grey t-shirt. He spotted the black cashmere track suit Jou had worn the night before carefully folded up and sitting on a chair, and as he stood up, he pointed to it. "What the hell is that?"

The brunet gave him a confused look. "It's clothes?" When he received a withering glare in return, he said irritably, "Fuck, I don't know. I needed something to put on last night, and I found that in your closet. Why the hell do you keep it if you're not going to wear it?"

Seto smirked at him. "I keep it because once a year I take the things Mokuba and I no longer wear and donate them to charity."

"Oh, well that's fucking perfect!" Jou groused. "No wonder the kid looked at me like I had three heads last night!"

Chuckling, Seto picked up the cordless phone from the bed and tossed it to Jou, who caught it easily. "I'm sure you must know somewhere to order from. Decide what you want to eat, and I'll find you something to wear." Once again, he began rummaging through the bureau, and as he heard Jou speaking, he added, "No chocolate." Giving an amused snort when he was flipped off in response, he pulled out a pair of black flannel lounge pants and a slightly large royal blue Henley shirt. "So, what are we having?" he asked when Jou ended his call.

"You know, you really are an asshole," Jou muttered, his sparkling eyes belying his tone. "After today, there's no way I'm even thinking about chocolate. Hell, you've probably put me off the stuff for good." He smiled at the blond and took the offered clothing. "This one is special – I had it at Anzu's house one time. She's always trying to get us to eat weird shit, but that time, she picked a winner. It's got a white sauce on it, and grilled chicken and caramelized onions and sautéed mushrooms and spinach, and it's to die for." When he saw that Seto still looked unconvinced, he gave him a pleading look, and with his most charming smile, he asked, "Come on, just give it a try? For me?"

"Fine, I'll try it," Seto relented. "Just…stop looking so pathetic." Scooping up the other bundle of clothing in his arms, he called over his shoulder, "I'll be in the room across the hall when you're ready."

Twenty minutes later, both were showered and changed and, after a brief argument about Jou's adamant refusal to go into the brunet's wallet, and Seto's subsequent, impatient huff as he pulled a handful of money out so that the delivery boy could be paid, they had joined Mokuba in the den to watch the movie he had selected. Like Seto, the young boy had wrinkled his nose and looked up questioningly when he saw the contents of the box.

Trying to keep the frustration from his voice at having two finicky, unadventurous Kaiba brothers to contend with, Jou said lowly, "Jounouchi chose it and he promises that it's delicious. I think we should all try it."

Dubiously, the raven-haired boy looked from the blond to the brunet. "You try it first, Nii-sama."

"Fine; give me a piece on that plate," Jou replied. When Mokuba handed him the dish, he took a large bite, chewed it for a moment, and then swallowed. "It's very good, just like Jou said."
Tentatively, Mokuba shovelled a piece onto his plate and, after seeing the brunet take another bite, he took a tiny taste, his eyes lighting and a smile curving across his lips as he chewed it. Quickly, he grabbed two more slices and then flopped over onto his belly on his TV pillow as he started his movie.

"Come on, Jounouchi, don't be shy," Jou murmured teasingly as he put a piece on a plate and handed it across to Seto. "Trust me," he murmured, his voice low enough that Mokuba wouldn't hear.

When his scowl didn't seem to faze the other, the blond took the offering and, remembering his promise, somewhat reluctantly tasted it. Like his younger brother, Seto was pleasantly surprised by how good it was and, settling back into the corner of the couch, he contented himself with watching the movie. At some point, he became conscious of a weight against his side. Upon further investigation, he realized that not only had he unknowingly moved over to press himself against Jounouchi, but the other had stretched his arm out along the back of the sofa and had draped it across his shoulder. Flushing slightly as the warmth from the other radiated through him, he realized he didn't mind the presence beside him. In fact, he kind of liked it. Dropping his head to rest on Jou's chest, he returned his attention to the television.

When the movie ended, Mokuba popped up, and as he turned around, a wide smirk spread across his face when he saw the two older teens cuddled together on the couch. "Well, I'm off to bed," he announced brightly, giggling when the two quickly moved apart, their cheeks pinking brightly. "I guess I'll see you at breakfast, Nii-sama," he said impishly. "You too, Jounouchi." Scampering from the room, they could hear his footsteps echoing on the stairs, and then the sound of his bedroom door slamming shut.

"The Devil-Child is going to pay when I get my own body back," Seto muttered lowly, getting to his feet and indulging in a small stretch. "Good night, Jounouchi."

"Wait! Wh-where are you going?" Jou asked as he sat upright, tucking his feet underneath him.

"Convention dictates that when one says 'good night', they're usually going to sleep."

"Oh. Well, I was wondering… I mean, unless you don't want to…" He flushed deeply, and then said lowly, "I kind of liked just sitting here with you like that."

A small smile crept across Seto's features. "Jounouchi, would you like to watch another movie?"

Looking into the golden eyes and smiling gratefully, he said, "Yeah, that'd be great! And, did you mention something earlier about chips?"

"I might have," the blond replied slyly as he moved in front of the large movie cabinet that sat next to the television. Standing on his toes, he felt along the top edge, giving a small, satisfied smile when a soft click sounded through the room and a side compartment opened. Reaching in, he grabbed a bag of chips, and then nudged the door closed with his hip.

Jounouchi laughed when he saw the mischievous glint in the other teen's eye. "Kaiba, I had no idea you were so sneaky – or such a junk food junkie!"

Seto's smirk widened as he opened the bag and poured the contents into a bowl. "Given Mokuba's resourcefulness, I've had to resort to this. He's always found his way into locked cabinets, and fortunately, he hasn't figured this out yet. I mean, it's not that I never let him have snacks like this, but he's a kid – and one with no sense of moderation." He handed the bowl to Jou and then eyed the collection of DVD's. He held up two movies and nodded when Jou chose the one in his left hand.
As he loaded the disc, he chuckled softly and said, "As for me and junk food – people just assume I don't eat it, but honestly, I am a male teenager, ne?" He joined the brunet on the sofa, but rather than hit play on the remote, he turned to the other. "Jounouchi, I think that after your performance today, you've earned an answer to your question."

Jou furrowed his brow in confusion. "What question?"

With a sigh, Seto replied, "You asked me last night, when we were in the virtual world, if I pushed you away because I hated you. I don't hate you. Not by a long shot." Grabbing a handful of chips from the bowl, he started the movie and then leaned back against the sofa cushions, his gaze fixed on the large screen as he ate his snack.

For a moment, the questioning, sapphire eyes studied the blond's profile. Jou knew there was more to the answer than what Kaiba had provided, but from the determined set of his jaw and the unwavering, unreadable expression, it was obvious that, at least for the time being, the matter was closed. "Oh," he answered quietly, unable to take his gaze off the other as he tried to discern some clue as to what Seto was thinking. Finding nothing, he turned his attention to the movie. "Thanks. I'm glad."

Wordlessly, they watched in companionable silence and, long after the bowl had been emptied and set aside, Jou hesitantly took Seto's hand in his. A soft smile curved across his lips when the other didn't pull away, but rather intertwined their fingers and squeezed gently, the impassive golden gaze never once faltering, never showing any sign that anything different had happened at all. And, before the movie had ended, the brunet was sleeping peacefully against the other's shoulder, the blond head resting comfortably against him, their hands still joined together.
Chapter Seven

The next morning, Seto awoke with a start, feeling slightly disoriented, but surprisingly refreshed. Stretching lithely, he heard a soft groan, and as he glanced toward the source, he saw Jounouchi curled up against the opposite arm of the sofa. Settling back into his corner, he watched the other sleep for a few moments, a soft, genuine smile spreading across his features. "God, what have you done to me?" he murmured absently, hesitating briefly, and then stroking a hand reassuringly through the other's hair. After a couple more minutes had passed, he sighed and gave the brunet a prod in the side. "Get up. I have a lot to do, and we need to get going."

At this, Jou let out a soft moan and mumbled, "Ok, Love," before snuggling deeper into the cushions.

Feeling his cheeks heat, Seto hauled off and gave the brunet a hearty slap on the ass, chuckling softly when Jou yelped and sat upright.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" Jou griped as he gingerly rubbed the area, an irritable scowl on his face.

"We slept in; it's nearly 8:30. We need to get ready to go to KaibaCorp, and meet Mokuba for breakfast at 9:00."

"Slept in? Jesus, Kaiba! What time do you normally get up on the weekend?"

The blond shrugged as he got to his feet. "Around 7:00. Now, get up."

Grumbling as he hauled himself off the couch, he and Seto made their way to the brunet's bedroom. Standing petulantly in front of the closet, Jou frowned as he watched the other teen peruse its contents. "Tell me you don't wear a suit and tie when you go in on a Saturday," he complained.

Rolling his eyes, Seto pulled out a pair of casual, slim-fitting black cotton trousers and a black, sand-washed silk dress shirt. Handing them to Jou, he stated, "No, but as the president of the company, I do have a certain, professional image to maintain." Crossing to the bureau, he located a pair of jeans and a lightweight, oatmeal coloured crew-neck sweater. Setting the garments on a nearby chair, he quickly stripped off his t-shirt, pausing at Jou's startled gasp. "What?" he demanded.

Blushing furiously, Jou turned his back to him and said, "I'm sorry; I didn't know you were changing right here."

Giving his head an exasperated shake, Seto sighed heavily and replied, "It's your body, Jounouchi. I'm sure you've seen it hundreds of times by now." Hurriedly pulling on his sweater, he strode over to the obviously-flustered brunet and, gently resting his hand on the other's arm, he said quietly, "Remember what I said about not worrying about the small oddities that make up our situation? This is one of them. I mean really, it's not like I'm going to ogle you in my body, ne?" Before he could even suppress the thought, his mind quickly added, *But that doesn't mean I won't ogle you in your body...*

At this, Jou gave him a sheepish smile. "When you put it that way, it does seem kind of stupid, doesn't it?"

"I can't believe I'm saying this to you, but stop overthinking things." The tiniest hint of a smile crept into his eyes, immediately easing the sting of the barb. "Just...pretend you're in phys ed. or something, ok?"
"Fuck you, Kaiba," Jou muttered back, his eyes glinting teasingly as he turned his attention to getting dressed. When he was finished, he glanced at himself in the mirror and smiled. Kaiba definitely looked hot in suits, but when he was dressed more casually, he was positively sexy. With good humour, he allowed Seto to fuss over his appearance as he groomed the auburn tresses into his normal style. In turn, Jou gave the blond mop a quick ruffle, effectively undoing the result of a good ten minutes worth of effort and earning a tetchy scowl from the other.

Mokuba was already seated at the dining room table when they finally made their way downstairs, and as he looked up from the bowl of cereal he was in the process of devouring, he smirked. "So, what do you two have planned for today, Nii-sama?" the raven-haired boy asked, the devilish expression on his face belying the near-angelic tone of the question.

Casting a quick glance at Seto and seeing the imperceptible nod, Jou replied, "We have some things to do at KaibaCorp."

"Uh huh," Mokuba replied, his smirk widening. "Shall I tell Yoji to make extra for dinner tonight? Or should I just spend the night at Kinjo's?" he giggled as he picked up his now-empty bowl and headed for the kitchen. "Nice outfit by the way, Jou," he added with a wink. "It looks better on you than it does on Seto."

While Jou's mouth dropped open in shock, Seto glowered at the retreating form. "I didn't think he paid attention to what I wore," he muttered lowly as he sat down at the table and picked up a piece of toast and covered it with plum jam.

Hesitantly, Jou sat down opposite him and, taking some toast for himself, he shrugged. "Kids notice the strangest shit. I mean, once, before my parents split up, Shizuka didn't notice for three days that my mom had gotten her hair cut short, but she noticed right away that I'd stolen a few of the chocolates she'd gotten for her birthday." He chuckled to himself as he took a bite of his breakfast. "I mean, her hair had been like, down to her waist, and she got it cut totally short like Anzu!"

The blond gave an amused snort as he finished eating. "I suppose we all have our moments where we're either hyper-vigilant or completely oblivious to the things around us, ne?" He finished his coffee, and then asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess. Not that I'll be of any real help to you anyway." With a dejected sigh, Jou gathered up the dirty plates and cups in his hand and carried them into the kitchen. Then, he wordlessly slipped on the long, black trench coat he had earlier laid across the living room settee. Looking up, he saw Kaiba leaning against the newel post at the bottom of the staircase, his arms folded across his chest as he stared pensively at him. "What?"

"Jounouchi, do you know how to drive?"

"I don't have a license. I mean, besides the fact that I just turned eighteen in January, I can't afford a car, let alone insurance, so why bother, ne?"

"That's not what I asked," Seto replied impatiently. "I asked if you know how."

"Well, yeah, I guess so. Honda's been teaching me, and –"

"Great," the blond interrupted. "We'll drive ourselves today, then. Let's go." He led Jou out to the garage, grabbed a set of keys from a rack, and tossed them to the brunet.

Jou looked down at the key fob in his hand and let out a groan that was half-pleasured, half-whimpered when he saw that Seto had selected the Lotus. Following the other to the Elise 111R, he
unlocked the doors and carefully slid behind the wheel, his hands running lightly across the sleek leather and polished aluminum interior. "Kaiba, I told you already, I don't have a license!"

"Maybe Jounouchi Katsuya doesn't, but Kaiba Seto does. And, since you've just told me that you know how to drive, I fail to see the problem," he stated, gazing intently at the other.

"I…but…fine!" Jou stammered exasperatedly as he turned the key. "But you're not allowed to make fun of me, or say anything about my driving! Deal?"

"Agreed," Seto replied with a smirk, reaching up to push the button on the remote for the garage door opener when Jou started to back up and hadn't yet done so. "I know it's just a car, but try not to rack it up, or at least wait until you hit the street, ne?"

"Kaiba!"

After a few minutes of driving, Jou began to relax, loosening the death-grip he had on the steering wheel and settling back against the ergonomically designed seat. Slowly, a happy grin broke out across his face and he said, "This thing is way better than Honda's mom's Pyzar."

"I'd imagine so," Seto replied with a smirk. "And you're not a bad driver, Jounouchi. Either Honda is a very adept instructor, which I seriously doubt, or you're a quick study."

Blushing with pride at the compliment, Jou's grin widened as he glanced over at his passenger. "Thanks, Kaiba," he said softly, almost shyly.

"Jou, look out!"

Eyes widening in panic, Jou jerked the wheel to the left, passing a delivery truck that had suddenly stopped in the centre lane, his heart hammering in his chest as he flushed beet red in embarrassment. "Sorry," he mumbled, his mortification changing to irritation when he heard the other chuckle. "What the fuck's so funny?"

"Hn," Seto replied, his eyes twinkling impishly. "Maybe a couple of lessons under my tutelage would be beneficial." He had been expecting to be told off; at the very least, he'd expected a string of obscenities. He was taken aback, however, when he heard the hushed, "Are you being serious, or are you teasing me again?" Glancing over at the brunet, he cleared his throat and, cursing the heat that flooded his cheeks, he answered, "If you're interested, then I'm being serious."

"I'd like that," Jou said finally, that same, shy timbre creeping into his voice. It wasn't until they were pulling into the KaibaCorp parking lot that Jou spoke again. "Kaiba? About yesterday…you know, when we were watching the movie –"

"Jounouchi, stop," Seto interrupted him, holding up a hand. Turning to gaze unseeingly out the side window he said quietly, a slight note of melancholy in his voice, "Please, don't ask me about that. At least, not while I'm still in this body."

As he shut off the engine, Jou gave a small, surprised gasp of understanding. "Kaiba," he began hesitantly, only to see that the blond had already exited the vehicle and was heading toward the building. Hurriedly climbing from his seat and catching up to the other, he asked lowly, "What if you can't do it? What if we never switch back?"

"I don't want to think about that possibility. In fact, it's not even an option." Wordlessly, he headed for the elevator, his impasive, resolute expression signifying once again that no more was going to be said on the matter.
Giving a small nod, Jou followed the blond, settling onto a stool with a heavy sigh as he watched Seto pick up his goggles and soldering iron and resume his work. He tried to sit as quietly as he could, silently observing how the nimble fingers moved across the tiny circuitry, attaching various parts with unerring precision. After about twenty minutes had passed, Jou felt his eyes getting heavy, and unable to resist the siren's song of sleep, he rested his head on his arms and nodded off.

Some time later, Seto became vaguely aware of a gentle, rhythmic sound as he soldered a capacitor into place. Glancing over at Jou, he smiled when he saw the chestnut head resting against the smooth, polished surface of the desk. His smile faltered a bit when he heard a particularly loud grunt followed by a string of mumbled, incoherent babbling. Great, he thought wryly. Now I'm going to wonder if I'm the one who snores, or if it's just him. Sighing, he turned back to his work, trying not to let the close proximity of the other affect him. This really has to be boring for you, he mused as he once again peered over at the brunet before sliding another completed board into position. When you wake up, I promise I'll find something for you to occupy your time. With a low, pleased chuckle, he picked up a board that, miraculously, hadn't been destroyed. Slipping it into position, he realized that this was the final component of the console's internal circuitry. Holding his breath in anticipation, he pressed the power switch.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, a small LED began to blink, starting the complex algorithm which prompted the other electronic components into action. Nervously, he glanced at the monitor, a smug smile crossing his face when the display blinked on, followed by:

> KaibaCorp Research and Development
> KC-238VR
> System Initialized…
> 
> Enter Command Prompt:

"Yes!" he crowed as he retrieved a CD from the desk and carefully loaded it. A few keystrokes later, the lengthy reinstallation process had begun.

"Hey, what's going on?" Jou asked sleepily as he lifted his head.

"The console has been repaired, and I've started to reload the program. It's probably going to take a few hours, though."

"Hey, that's great, Kaiba!" Jou replied as he stretched the kinks from his back. "Do we have time to grab some lunch, then?"

"Lunch?" the blond echoed incredulously. "What time is it?"

"Ten to two."

"No way!" Seto replied, grabbing the brunet's wrist and glancing down at the TAG Heuer chronograph. His eyes widened in surprise – had he really been working for four hours?

"Way!" Jou snarked back, jerking his arm free. "Fuck, I have been able to tell time since the first grade, you know!"

"No, it's not that. It's just… I didn't think I'd been at it for that long." Exhaling heavily, he slowly tugged the goggles from his head and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "Fortunately, the hub wasn't damaged nearly as bad, and the pods are virtually unscathed." He moved to put his glasses back on, only to feel Jou's hand on his arm.
"Kaiba, you need to take a break – away from here. Come on, there's a diner across the street that makes awesome sandwiches."

"I don't have time for this, Jounouchi."

"Quit being a stubborn ass, and come on. You fixed that mess in a little more than seven hours, and you just said that the other parts weren't going to take as long. Besides, you've got to wait for that program anyway, right?"

"True, but I can get a head start on the other components." He paused when he saw the brief flash of disappointment on the other's face.

"Oh, yeah, I guess so," Jou replied flatly. "I'll just run over then, and –"

"Jou, wait," Seto interrupted. "You know, I think a little walk, some fresh air, and a change of scenery would be a good idea." He smirked inwardly when he saw the other teen's face light up in a happy smile. "How do you know about Suisha's?"

At this, Jou chuckled softly. "You mean, other than the fact that you bought me dinner from there on Thursday night? Hell, it's one of the places me and Yug' and Honda like to go; we're practically 'regulars'."

"Hn. And how did you three manage to stumble upon it?"

Jou's smile wavered as they walked through the deserted lobby toward the front doors. "At the time, we were trying to avoid you, and it was the first door we saw…" He winced silently when he saw the blond stiffen slightly.

"Oh."

"Kaiba, I'm sorry…"

"Don't apologize. I'm sure you had your reasons." The words came out sounding bitter and somewhat frosty as he attempted to mask the hurt Jou's revelation had caused.

The brunet sighed. "Yeah, and at the time, they probably seemed like good ones, too. All I remember is that on that day, I had just had enough, I already felt like a giant loser, and wasn't in the mood to argue with you." Wordlessly, they crossed the street and slipped inside, neither saying anything until the waitress took their orders. Desperately trying to find something to say to end the uncomfortable silence, he murmured, "Kaiba, please…that happened over a year ago. Will you tell me why you're so mad at me?"

"No."

"No, because you don't want to, or no, because you think I'm a piece of shit and are ignoring me?" After a moment, he could feel the coldness of Kaiba's stare on him and he shivered involuntarily.

"Neither," Seto said finally, his expression softening. "I'm not mad at you." When Jou turned disbelieving eyes to him, he sighed heavily and said, "I'm just being contemplative. I've got a lot on my mind right now." He studied the other teen plaintively, and then stated quietly, "You're not a loser, Jounouchi. I hope that by now, you've realized that."

The brunet's eyebrows arched up in surprise, a slight flush breaking out across his cheeks as he smiled. "Yeah, I think I'm starting to see that." He looked up as the waitress returned, setting the grilled vegetable and smoked mozzarella sandwich in front of Seto and the roast beef au jus in front
of Jou. After thanking the server, he stared at his sandwich broodingly.

"What's the matter?"

"I was just wondering…want to trade half for half?" Jou chuckled humourlessly. "I know it's kind of stupid, but when we all go out, we…" He trailed off when he heard the amused snort from his dining companion. Looking up from his plate, he watched as Kaiba deftly put half of his sandwich onto a small saucer and pushed it across the table to Jou.

"Mokuba likes to do the same thing," Seto said with a half-grin. "And frankly, so do I."

They had just paid the cheque and, while Seto waited outside the café for Jou to go back and leave the tip on the table, he heard a very familiar voice say, "Holy shit! Jou? What're you doing here, man?"

Groaning softly, Seto turned around to see Honda and Yugi coming down the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. Managing to plaster a weak smile on his face, he waved, the grin faltering slightly when they jogged over to where he stood.

"God, you look like hell! What's that prick making you do?" Honda demanded worriedly, his concern morphing into an irritated scowl when Jou came outside. "Oh…you're still with him," he stated coolly, glancing over at the tall brunet. "Well, whatever it is, it's over. You've more than helped him with whatever the fuck he's up to, and now, you're ours. You got a problem with that, Kaiba?"

Completely clueless as to what Honda was referring to, Jou furrowed his brow in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I said," Honda reiterated, taking a step toward the brunet, "Whatever bullshit thing you've got Jou doing, it's over. He's been more than cooperative, and now, he's spending some time with his pals."

Inwardly, Seto cringed. He wanted nothing more than to get back to the lab and finish working. In fact, probably the last thing he wanted to do at this point was spend any time in the presence of Yugi and company. "Actually, Honda, I'd like to finish up what we were –"

"Come on, Jou," Honda murmured lowly as he draped an arm across the blond's shoulder. "You don't owe him anything. Yugi and I were just heading to the theatre to catch 'Demon Zombie Slayer III'. Lucky we ran into you, ne? So let's go; you've been jonesing to see this for weeks now!"

When Jou heard his friends' plans, his eyes widened slightly, and then were filled with a wistful melancholy. Frantically, his mind scrambled for a way to wheedle an invitation for himself, but before he could say anything, Seto spoke up.

"Fine, but only if J…Kaiba can come, too."

"You want Kaiba to come with us?" Honda asked unenthusiastically, casting a wary glance at Yugi.

"Don't be like that, Honda-kun," the shortest teen chided kindly. Looking up at the blue-eyed brunet, he asked, "Would you like to come with us, Kaiba-kun?"

Pretending to think about it, Jou shrugged and said, "Whatever."

"Great!" Yugi beamed, giving a tug on Honda's sleeve as they resumed walking, leaving Seto and Jou to follow behind them. The walk proceeded in silence and, when they arrived at the theatre,
Honda immediately dragged the other brunet off to the concession stand to buy snacks, leaving the other two to find seats. As they slid into a nearly empty aisle at the back, Yugi sat down and turned to the blond. "So, how long have you been seeing Kaiba-kun, and when were you planning on telling us?" he teased, a demure smirk on his lips.

"Yugi, we're not seeing each other," Seto replied, blushing when the short teen snickered.

"Right, Jou-kun; neither are Honda and I," he stated with a slight grin and an impish wink. "It's ok; you can pretend if you want to, but I trust what I see, and I know there's something going on between you. And honestly, you two do look good as a couple." He leaned back in his seat and propped his feet up on the back of the chair in front of him.

For a long time, Seto sat there, staring at the diminutive teen before dropping his gaze to his hands. "And you'd be ok with that?"

Yugi giggled and turned his large, amethyst eyes to the blond. "With you and Kaiba-kun? God yes! He's lucky; I know the amount of love and support and loyalty you'll give him, which I think he really needs. And, if he returns that and makes you happy, well, you deserve that happiness, too. I mean, I know that you're my best friend, but sometimes, you need more than what a best friend can provide, ne?" He smiled softly and laid his hand on the blond's arm. "Besides, I know you wouldn't completely ditch us, either. Who knows, maybe he'd even be willing to associate with us if he had a reason."

"Hn…maybe," Seto replied, once again falling into silent rumination.

While Seto brooded, Jou was trying desperately to answer Honda's openly hostile questions without telling the stocky brunet off or giving him a well-deserved punch in the face. Honda had always tried to act like the 'over-protective big brother', despite his being younger than Jou. And, more often than not, Jou found himself not only feeling like he was perpetually eight years old, but also incompetent.

"What are you really doing here, Kaiba?"

"In case you forgot, he asked me to come, Baka!"

"Yeah, and you've always been so willing to do whatever Jounouchi asked of you in the past, too!" Honda's eyes narrowed hatefully. "I swear to God, if you're only doing this to humiliate him –"

"Maybe you should trust Jou's instincts, Honda!" Jou interrupted. "He's a big boy and capable of making his own decisions, ne?"

Hazel eyes stared suspiciously into sapphire blue. "Do you care for him, Kaiba?"

"When it comes to my best friend, I make it my business," Honda replied, his voice equally as brusque as he paid for his snacks and followed the other brunet to their theatre.

"Well, maybe if you could learn to keep a secret, you'd know!" Ignoring the huffy snort behind him, he stepped into the darkened theatre and, after his eyes had adjusted to the lower light level, he spied Yugi's spiked hair. He waited for Honda to go in first, sighing in relief when he saw the stocky brunet edge past Seto and seat himself on the opposite side of Yugi. Carefully, he made his way along the row, settling into the seat beside the blond. He handed over a drink and settled the bag of
popcorn between them. He took a handful and, not thinking, asked teasingly, "Miss me?" As soon as
the words had left his mouth, he froze, his cheeks burning as he dropped his gaze, his friend's
questions once again at the forefront of his mind. *God damned Honda!*

Smirking at how easily Jou always seemed to get himself flustered, Seto leaned over, and dropped
his voice to a mere whisper. "What do you think?" he replied, taking great pleasure in watching Jou
fidget nervously, and finding himself for the first time in his life stupidly wishing that he could hear
other people's thoughts. Just then, the lights dimmed and the movie began.

Half an hour into the film, Seto bit the inside of his cheek to stifle another yawn. As he'd expected,
the movie was predictable and clichéd, and while the director had tried to make an effort at creating
suspense, the final result was hackneyed and unoriginal. Rolling his eyes when the large-breasted,
blond actress mused aloud that a midnight skinny-dipping session in the town reservoir sounded like
an excellent idea, he glanced at the pair making out to his left, and then at the figure seated on his
right, totally oblivious to his friends and thoroughly engrossed in the movie. Temporarily pushing
from his mind the pedestrian acting, the amorous couple beside him, and the monumental task that
was still awaiting him at KaibaCorp, Seto settled back in his seat and realized that, at that moment,
there was no other place he'd rather be.

When the movie ended, Seto found himself wondering two things – first, how they had managed to
stretch such an abomination into nearly two and a half hours, and second, how the production
company had made enough money to think that the story warranted not only a second, but a *third*
installment. As he got to his feet, he stretched the kinks from his back, and followed Jou, first into the
aisle, and then outside. Once on the sidewalk, while they waited for Honda and Yugi to join them,
he felt a hand on his arm.

"Kaiba, I just wanted to say thanks," Jou said softly, dropping his arm back to his side. "I know
you've got a ton of shit to do, and that was probably the last way you wanted to spend a few hours,
but thanks for pretending you were having a good time with my pals. We are a pretty tight group,
and do hang out a lot." He looked up when his two friends finally came outside, and he frowned
when he saw the way Honda scowled at him.

"We're going to grab some dinner," the fin-haired brunet said stiffly, turning his gaze to the blond.
"You can come with us if you'd like."

Jou tensed, his hands balling into fists at his best friend's implication. He took a step toward the
shorter brunet, but before he could say anything, Seto interjected.

"Thank you, but I have other plans," he answered tersely, shoving his hands into his pockets and
starting to walk toward KaibaCorp.

"Jou-kun!" Yugi called after the retreating form and, when he didn't get a response, he slapped
Honda hard in the arm, his lips turned down in a small, petulant frown. Turning to the blue-eyed
brunet, Yugi said softly, "I'm sorry for Honda, Kaiba-kun. He can be an *idiot* sometimes."

"Yeah, I can see that," Jou growled as he glowered at his hazel-eyed friend. "Thanks for the movie,
see you around." Turning, he headed in the same direction Kaiba had gone, silently thanking every
deity for the brunet's long legs to spare him the indignity of running after the other. Finally, he fell
into step beside the blond and muttered, "I'm sorry Honda's being such an asshole. If I was me, I'd
have knocked that fucker on his ass for that."

Seto slowed his pace and, glancing sidelong at Jou, he smirked. "If I'd have known you wouldn't
object, I'd have done it." Once again bringing his gaze forward, he sighed softly and said,
"Jounouchi, don't take this the wrong way, but save for Yugi, and depending on my mood,
sometimes Anzu, I can't stand your friends. I didn't agree to this for their benefit, but I knew you wanted to go. And, even though I lost three hours of working time, it really wasn't that bad. In fact, I'd almost go so far as to say it was a worthwhile trade-off." That said, the blond turned to punch in the access code that would let them into KaibaCorp after hours. As the door swung open, Jounouchi never did see the small, satisfied smile on the other's lips.
Chapter Eight

Seto sighed inwardly as he and Jou walked the deserted corridors back to Lab 31-Alpha. It was strange – when Jounouchi had first suggested taking a break, he had been reluctant to leave. And now, after spending the afternoon in the other's company, it wouldn't have taken much convincing on Jou's part to get him to stay out. Exhaling heavily, he entered the lab and glanced over at the hub. He knew that he had to get back to work, but for the first time in as far back as he could remember, he didn't really want to. He heard Jounouchi come in behind him and, turning to the brunet, he saw the previously animated teen's expression sober, and watched Jou's shoulders slump slightly as he made his way back to the stool in the corner.

With a dejected grunt, Jou plunked himself onto the cushioned seat, only to look up when he felt a pair of eyes watching him. Meeting Seto's gaze, he said, "If I'm bothering you, then I'll go wait somewhere else until you need me." As an afterthought, he mumbled, "Not like you will, though…"

"Jounouchi, you're not bothering me," Seto said quietly. "In fact, it's kind of nice to have the company while I work." Leaning over the desk, he flipped a switch which lowered the glass that divided the two rooms. "There, that's better."

"Oh, come off it, Kaiba," Jou replied irritably. "I fucking slept all morning, and other than annoy you with what are probably really stupid questions, I haven't done anything. I sit and I watch, and then I get bored and doze off. That's it."

"Maybe," the blond said. "Although, if you could keep yourself awake for five minutes, you might learn something." He chuckled softly at the withering glare he received in return. "Honestly, Jounouchi, you're a presence here. I'm not…alone." He gave Jou a small smile, and then dropped his gaze under the guise of picking up his tool kit. "Maybe I'm just getting used to having you around, ne?" Clearing his throat, he said, "I need you to do me a favour. The modifications to the main program are on my laptop in my office. It's in the aluminum attaché case you've seen me carry. Go get it, and bring it back here. You're going to upload the program modifications.

Jou's eyes widened in shock. "But, Kaiba, I don't know shit about computers! I mean, I've played games on Yugi's, and I send instant messages to my friends, but that's about all I can do!"

Seto rolled his eyes and had to force down an impatient huff. "You're literate, aren't you? As long as you can read and follow instructions from me, you'll have no trouble. Now, go get my laptop." He met Jou's eyes and added softly, "Please." Smiling to himself at the look of surprise on the brunet's face, he put on his goggles and started to remove the cover panel from the hub. As soon as he heard the door slide closed, he set down the metal dust shield and checked the console to see how much time was left on the program installation. With a pleased smirk, he saw that there was only about another fifteen minutes remaining, and that, thus far, there hadn't been any errors or problems with the reload. Satisfied, he returned to the hub and knelt down in front of it to pull out the damaged circuit boards, only to let out a soft gasp of surprise, his hand frozen in mid-air. There was a small gap where he had previously installed a surge capacitor, and the accompanying surge arrestor was not the one he had initially used. Frowning, he quickly removed the component, his scowl deepening when he realized that not only was this mystery part used and obsolete, but also faulty. Sitting back on his heels, he followed the circuitry and realized that this was how the damage had occurred. As the controlling centre for the simulator, all of the fail-safes were routed through the hub. Apparently, the power surge had dispersed in the console, which explained why it was the most heavily damaged. He heard the door open, and was momentarily surprised when he saw not Jou, but a bright-eyed, thirty-something, red head in a lab coat. "Who the hell are you?"
The young man laughed softly as he stepped into the lab. "I could ask you the same thing. My name is Matuhari Chiri, project lead in the cybernetics department. You can call me Matti."

"I'd rather not," the blond replied coolly.

The red head looked slightly taken aback and, frowning in thought, he said, "I thought I knew all the engineers on this project, but I can't say I've seen you before."

"It's a temporary assignment." Getting to his feet, Seto said, "I didn't think anyone else was here."

Smiling, Matti sat down on the stool. "That makes two of us, then. I just stopped in to do a couple of quick things to get my project back on schedule." Glancing around, he let out a low whistle. "Man, what a mess. I don't envy you."

"It hasn't been that bad," Seto replied brusquely, not in the mood to engage the young engineer in conversation. "The console is repaired, and the rest should go fairly –"

With a laugh, Matti said, "I'm not talking about the damage – any engineer worth his salt should be able to fix this up relatively quickly. I'm talking about having to work under the close, personal supervision of Kaiba. He's uptight on the best of days, and from what I hear, he's a real asshole to work with in person. I can only imagine how pissed he is about this, and I bet he's really riding your ass to get it done, ne? God, I'm glad he's too stupid to know much about cybernetics." He chuckled softly. "It keeps him from bothering with my department, you know?"

Scowling further, Seto hissed, "I'd be careful what you say about Kaiba Seto. He has ways of finding things out, and I'm sure he'd be none too pleased to know you felt that way. Did you ever think that maybe he just wasn't interested in something that inherently dull?" Ignoring the affronted look from the other, he continued, "Besides, insulting the one controlling the finances is not a good way to keep your project funded."

The red head snorted. "Right, like he's going to find out. He may be devious and cold-blooded, but there's a lot that goes on down here that he doesn't know about." Standing up, Matti crossed over to where the blond was working and knelt down. "In fact, some of the things we do to further our own research occur right under his nose." Reaching into the pocket of his lab coat, he pulled out the missing parts and set them into place. "Can I borrow that soldering iron? Thanks," he said as he picked it up and quickly reattached the parts.

Already angry, Seto's rage quickly spiralled up to furious incredulity as he watched the engineer work. "What, exactly, are you doing?" he demanded, his tone glacial.

Matti looked up and with an offhanded shrug said, "I'm returning what I'd borrowed. The warehouse was out of stock, so we used what we could find."

"Poor planning on your part doesn't constitute an emergency on my part!" Seto snapped. "Not only did you remove an integral component for this project, but you substituted in this shitty, obsolete part!" Throwing the faulty arrestor across the room, he narrowed his eyes and in a voice dripping with malice said, "That's deceitful, and could be interpreted as sabotage."

"Lighten up," Matti replied with a laugh, though his eyes had lost the playful sparkle. "You sound like Kaiba, and that's not a good thing if you don't want people to fuck you over around here. You're new, so I'll cut you some slack and let you in on a little secret. Research and development is one of the most cutthroat departments in the company. I mean yeah, we're all working for the same team, but at the same time, it's a competition to see who will get the go ahead for the next great idea. You don't have to worry about it; this is Kaiba's pet project, so it's guaranteed to go to completion. For the
rest of us, it's kill or be killed, and if that means borrowing a component to keep my work on schedule, I'm going to do it. Everyone does. And no one says anything because that's just the way it is."

The blond loosed an enraged snarl. "And because of you, now I have to fix this!"

"Keep telling yourself that, if it makes you sleep at night," Matti scowled coolly. "But, you're not pinning this train wreck on me. Maybe your team shouldn't have left the equipment powered up during the storm. Only a complete idiot would have done that. Check with those guys, ne?" Getting back to his feet, he stormed to the doorway, pausing just before stepping out. In a voice that was hardly benevolent, he said quietly, "I'm sorry your project got toasted, but I'd sooner see yours trashed than mine scrapped."

As the door slid closed, Seto let out an infuriated roar as he viciously tore his goggles from his head and threw them at the wall. Short of beating the conniving, little bastard to within an inch of his life, the blond knew that he'd get no satisfaction while he was trapped in Jounouchi's body. It was little comfort to know that he'd have to bide his time for now, and as he paced the room like a caged animal, his body trembled with undirected wrath. All this time, he'd been feeling guilty for their situation, blaming himself for the mistake, and wondering where he had erred. And, every time he thought about how none of this would have happened, had it not been for the interference of an incompetent engineer, he found himself feeling even angrier. His eyes blazing, he whirled around when he heard the door open, pausing briefly in his tirade when he saw that it was Jounouchi.

"Kaiba? Everything ok?" the brunet asked as he carefully set the laptop case down on the desk. When he saw the deranged expression but received no response, he took an involuntary step towards the door.

Taking a few deep, calming breaths, Seto managed to get a handle on his emotions as he gazed fixedly at the other teen. Jounouchi. Out of everything that had happened over the past two days, spending some time with him had been the one acceptable consequence. Temporarily quelling his anger at Matuhari Chiri, he stormed over to where Jou stood, grabbed him by the sleeve, and dragged him forcefully out the door, muttering, "Need coffee; not a word until then." Other than a startled curse when the blond hauled him off to the vending machine, Jounouchi managed to stay quiet while Seto bought his coffee and drank it. Finally, he threw the cup into a trash can and sank down onto a nearby bench, beckoning to Jou to join him. When the brunet was seated, Seto proceeded to tell him about the engineer and what had caused the accident. "I told you that I had failsafes for fail-safes. I don't make mistakes."

Unsure of what point the other was trying to make, Jou simply nodded in agreement. When a few minutes passed and Kaiba didn't elaborate, Jou asked in confusion, "So, why are you so pissed off, then?"

The blond stared at him as if he had three heads. "You're joking, right? You mean, beyond the fact that my employees have the audacity to tamper with my projects? How about how I've been blaming myself for all of this? I've been wracking my brain, trying to determine where I made the mistake! Do you have any idea what that feels like?"

"I get you," Jou said quietly. "The reason you've been decent to me lately is because you felt guilty about it. You thought that somewhere you'd fucked up, and for whatever reason, you felt like you had to make it up to me." With a sigh, he continued, "Yeah, Kaiba, I know real well what that's like...God knows I do it on a near-daily basis, and I have lots of people standing in line to remind me of that fact, too." His eyes grew sad, and he continued, "Sometimes, I'm so sure I'm right about something that it's a real kick in the ass when I find out that I was completely wrong." He gave a
humourless chuckle. "I guess the more often you make a mistake, the easier it becomes to accept it, and hell, once or twice, you can even learn from it. But, I suppose now that you know this mess isn't your fault, you can go back to being a perfect, arrogant asshole, right?" Jou gave a self-debasing snort, and as an aside he added, "Fuck, I knew it was too good to be true."

"Did I say that?" Seto said coolly, his lips turning down into a scowl. "Jesus Christ, do you always have to be so melodramatic?"

"Fine then, Kaiba. What are you saying?" Jounouchi looked expectantly at the blond, his eyes a mixture of hope and apprehension.

Amber locked with sapphire, and for a brief moment, Seto contemplated telling Jou everything. But then, the barriers went back up, and turning away, he said, "I need to get back to work."

Jou watched the other walk away, and frustrated beyond belief, he shouted after him, "God damn it, Kaiba! Why won't you talk to me? You drag me out here like the fate of the world depends on what you've got to say, and then you clam up and leave me standing here confused as hell. All this mysterious bullshit of yours is starting to annoy the hell out of me!"

The blond paused and let out a heavy sigh. Head up, his back defiantly to the other, he replied quietly, "This is ridiculous. We can't even have a 'normal' conversation without it deteriorating to something involving insults, misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Why the hell would I try to discuss something more serious with you?" He clenched his hands into fists as he squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed harshly, trying to regain his composure. He heard Jou's footsteps approaching him, and Seto turned to face him, his jaw set determinedly. "Not one word!" the blond said curtly, holding up his index finger to silence him. When Jou's mouth snapped shut, Seto turned to face him, his jaw set determinedly. "Not one word!" the blond said curtly, holding up his index finger to silence him. When Jou's mouth snapped shut, Seto gestured between the two of them and said, "I don't know when and I sure as hell don't know why, but this is different – not the fact that we're in different bodies, but everything." Cursing the light tinge of colour that crept across his cheeks, he muttered, "I can't tell you what I think in words, and I definitely can't show you through actions; you've already been quite explicit that that would be too 'wrong' and 'weird'. So, until either I fix us, or you get over your 'weird-phobia', I really don't have a lot to say!" Turning on his heel, he returned to the lab, leaving Jou staring in disbelief after him.

Finally shaking off his shock, Jounouchi arrived just as Seto was unpacking his laptop from the case and setting it up on the desk. "Kaiba, I was thinking about what you said, and –" Again, he was silenced, this time with a finger pressed gently, but authoritatively, against his lips.

"Jounouchi, shut up. Talk about the repairs, school, hell, even your idiotic friends, I don't care. Otherwise, zip it. Do we understand each other?" When the brunet nodded, he removed his hand and powered up the computer. Quickly, he linked his laptop to the VR console and opened up a file for Jou. "Alright. What I need you to do is type what you see in this white window exactly as written into the black window. Please try not to make a mistake, or I'll be up all night troubleshooting the errors." He picked up his previously-discarded goggles from the floor and, setting them back into position, he resumed work on the hub. The repairs went surprisingly quickly, and as he was setting the last board into place, he became aware of the painfully slow click of keys. Frowning in curiosity, he peered up at Jounouchi, smirking when he saw how the other teen's brow was furrowed in deep concentration as he used his two index fingers to first locate and then press the necessary keys. Chuckling softly, he remarked, "Jesus, that's just sad… If I really typed that slowly, we'd still be working on the original duel disk."

Surprised, Jou looked up and scowled at him. "Well, fuck! It's not like I have one of these stupid things, and besides, half of this shit is symbols! You've got all these slashes going in different directions, and squiggles and hats –"
"Tildes and carats."

"What?" Jou snapped impatiently.

"That's what they're called," Seto replied casually. "The `squiggles' and `hats', as you call them."

"Whatever they're called, they suck!" the brunet huffed. "I told you that I wasn't good with computers…"

Seto smirked as he stood up. "Jounouchi, calm down; I'm just looking to get you riled up – and you make it so easy. I've known you for what? Two years? Have you not figured it out by now that I'm not being serious? How far along are you anyway?" He crossed the room and peered at the screen, making a pleased sound when he saw the rows and rows of perfectly typed code. "Very nice; you're about two-thirds of the way through, ne?"

"Yeah, but you'd be done by now. God, this is making me go cross-eyed!"

The blond nodded smugly. "Of course I would be. But then, I think in code and know how to type. If you want a five-minute break, I can finish that up for you."

Jounouchi snorted in amusement. "You really are an arrogant prick, you know." Laughing outright when he saw the blond's indifferent shrug, he teased, "Alright, Genius, get over here and make me look bad. You know you want to."

Taking Jou's chair, Seto cracked his knuckles and then began quickly typing the remaining lines, barely needing to check the original document. He glanced up at the brunet, smirking at Jou's dumbfounded expression. "Honestly, Jounouchi, this isn't that difficult. You just need practice."

Returning his gaze to the screen, he narrowed his eyes in concentration and, after typing in the last line, he entered a few more commands and uploaded everything to the console. "Excellent," Seto murmured, when the transfer went cleanly. Quickly, he severed the link between the console and the laptop, and then slid out of the chair and returned to the hub. Deftly, he reattached the back panel and, after taking a deep breath, he flicked the device on. When the hub had successfully run through its start-up sequence, Seto turned to Jou. "Bring me the CD in the blue case that's in the top drawer," he stated, moving to the front of the device and accessing the drive.

The brunet brought over the disc and watched Seto load it and start installing the program. "Is it working?"

"Two down, one to go," Seto replied. He turned to see Jou heading back to his corner. "Where are you going?"

"I didn't want… I mean, I was just –" He saw the blond's lips curve upwards, and he paused. "Quit screwing with my head!"

Torn between laughing and feeling the tiniest bit guilty, Seto pressed on. Clearing his throat, he asked, "You took electronics in first year, ne?"

Jou eyed him warily. "Yeah… why?"

"Good. Then you know how to solder."

"Again, yeah… why?"

Rolling his eyes at the other, Seto pointed to a spare set of goggles hanging by the door. "Put those on and get over here," he demanded, smirking at the surprised expression on Jounouchi's face. "I
might need your help with this part."

Arching a dubious eyebrow, Jou slipped on the goggles and joined Seto by the VR pods. He waited patiently while the blond removed the back cover, and even managed to paste a weak smile on his face when Seto seemed particularly pleased about something. Peering into the compartment, he had no idea what the other teen saw; everything looked like one big mess of circuit boards, wires and miscellaneous parts.

"This is great. We might actually get out of here soon," Seto stated. "Ok, here…" He handed his soldering iron to Jou, starting slightly when the other immediately dropped it. "Problem?" he asked sardonically.

"Yeah, funny!" Jou quipped. "Honda did the same thing to me – those fuckers are hot!"

Seto smirked as he bent down to retrieve the tool. "The school's equipment is seriously lacking." When he stood up, he took the tip and pressed it into the palm of his hand, chuckling at Jou's wince. "It's a cold heat soldering tool. It cools off within five seconds of use."

"Oh."

"So, now that you know I'm not out to burn you, let's try this again." He handed the device back to Jounouchi and, standing on his toes, he shone a flashlight into the compartment. "Being somewhat shorter, I can't reach the back. But, since you can do the work, I don't have to waste time looking for a stepladder."

"Will you quit ragging on me about my height?" Jou grumbled as he peered inside. "And what the fuck am I looking at?"

The blond smirked, and then using the light as a pointer, proceeded to talk Jounouchi through several repairs. Satisfied, he took the soldering iron back from Jou and set to work on the small control panel. Finding nothing inherently wrong with it, he began running a brief diagnostic. "Shouldn't be too much longer."

Jou watched Seto work for a few moments, and then, with a heavy sigh, he returned to the desk. Bored, he turned his attention to the laptop and, after checking to see that the blond was otherwise occupied, he hesitantly picked up the mouse and started searching for games. Finding the installed applications less than appealing, he soon found his way to the Internet, a devious grin on his lips.

Seto was vaguely aware that Jou had walked away from him, but he knew that the other teen was still in the room. Contented with that fact, he completed his scan and, finding nothing inherently wrong, he reattached the panel and powered up the device. "Jou?"

When he received no answer, he raised his head, smiling to himself when he saw Jou hunched over the laptop, totally engrossed in some game. Seto could hear the faint sounds of laser fire, and as he watched the brunet unconsciously lean to one side or the other to 'dodge', he assumed that the other was under imminent attack; he had seen Mokuba behave in much the same manner more times than he dared count. Quietly getting to his feet, he removed the CD from the hub's drive and slipped it inside the one attached to the main pod control. Then, he made his way back to the main console and began the lengthy process of transferring everything to the other two components. Once that was underway, he packed up all of his tools and, when Jou still hadn't acknowledged him, he moved behind the brunet and silently watched him manoeuvre his character through some dank, underground cavern. He soon realized that Jou was playing an online war game, and he smirked when he saw the other teen's handle. Leaning lightly on the back of the chair, he all but purred in his ear, "GoldenLover_125?"
With a startled shout, Jou slammed the lid on the laptop closed, and whirled around to face the blond, his cheeks flaming red. "K-Kaiba…I'm sorry. I know I should have asked first, but –"

His smirk widening, Seto held up a hand. "It's fine…although, I am curious about your name…"

"Katsuya?" Jou stammered, chuckling nervously. "Yeah, it is a bit different, ne? It's from some distant relative on my dad's side of the family…"

The blond shook his head. "Quit acting stupid. You know damned well what name I'm referring to."

"Come on!" Jou whined, rolling his eyes in exasperation. "I didn't pick it!" When Seto merely folded his arms across his chest and looked expectantly at him, the brunet sighed heavily. "Honda's an asshole. He's the one that registered our team, and since…" He paused, glancing briefly at the other teen and flushing slightly before continuing. "Since he paid the online registration cost, he said he got to pick my screen name. Bastard picked 'CommandoStud' for himself, and I got…that. The '125' is my birthday." He saw Seto's look, and he elaborated. "You know, 1-25? January 25th?" Giving him a wry smirk, he added, "I suppose it's better than his first choice."

"And what was that?"

His cheeks now crimson, he dropped his gaze to his lap. "I'd, uh…really rather not say," Jou replied.

"Hn. Now I'm definitely curious," Seto drawled, arching an intrigued eyebrow at the brunet.

Completely mortified, Jou muttered, "Can we drop it, please? Maybe one day I'll tell you…if we ever get switched back."

Sobering slightly, Seto nodded. "Fair enough. And you know, I will hold you to that."

"Yeah, I know. Mind like a steel trap and all that shit. So, when can we try?" He pulled the laptop to him and, making sure that Seto wasn't expressly watching him, he started closing the various windows.

"I've started the data transfer to the hub and the pods, and that's going to take a few hours. And, rather than hang around here, we might as well head home and start again in the morning. I'd like to spend some time looking over the information that had been uploaded to the KC mainframe prior to the accident. Maybe I'll find some information that can help me recreate –" He paused when he saw Jou agitatedly jabbing random keys and clicking the mouse in frustration. "What are you doing?"

"The God damned thing froze on me as I was trying to shut all this shit down, and now it won't do anything!" he griped. "Worthless piece of shit!"

"That is top of the line equipment, thank you very much," Seto said evenly through clenched teeth. "Let me see it." He dragged the device over to him, a small scowl on his lips. "Computers freeze all the time; you probably overloaded the memory with your game and whatever else you were running. We'll just reboot it, and it will correct the error and sort itself out. I…" The blond stopped short, amber eyes wide as he was hit with a flash of inspiration. "That's it… Oh my God, that would probably work! Jesus, the answer is so simple, and it's been staring me in the face all along!"

"Kaiba, what –"

The blond made a grand, sweeping gesture between them. "Jounouchi, don't you get it? It wasn't the storm that caused this…well, not directly, anyway. When some of the circuits were destroyed, the program lost part of its memory while we were being reintegrated back into the real world. The program did the best it could with what it had, but somewhere along the way, we got mixed up. We
are the result of a computer error."

"So, if this is a mistake, how do we fix it?"

"Simple. We go back to the VR world and, before we come back, we reboot the system." Seto gave
the other teen a small smile.

Jou frowned. "Why does that look of yours not give me a nice, warm, fuzzy feeling?"

"I have the utmost confidence that this will work. It's just…" Staring impassively at the brunet, he
said candidly, "For five seconds, the system will be completely shut down, and if something were to
go wrong during that time, I have no way of predicting what the outcome will be."
Chapter Nine

It had been a quiet night for both teens. Mokuba had, in fact, stayed over at his friend's house for the night, and while Seto had perused data files, Jou had tried to keep himself entertained with the television. He was more than a little apprehensive about what awaited them, but it wasn't because he didn't trust Seto. He had spent enough time around the other to know that Kaiba wouldn't lie about the chance of success, and that when it came to all things technological, Seto's calculations were unerring. It was the fact that, for five seconds, his entire being was going to be at the mercy of whichever Fate felt like interfering in his life. And the thought of never having his own body back, or worse, being trapped for all eternity inside cyberspace due to some random computer glitch terrified him.

Throughout the evening, he had been unusually quiet, burrowing deeper into his corner of the couch and alternating between watching the television and watching Seto's brow furrow in concentration. He had been immensely relieved when the blond had chosen to set up his laptop and work from the other corner as opposed to his office. Sometime after midnight, he had dozed off, waking in the early morning to find he had a down-filled throw tucked in around him. He raised his head slightly, his eyes widening in surprise when he saw Seto nestled into the other corner, the blond head bowed against the back of the couch. Carefully, he tried to extricate himself from the blanket, only to give an apologetic wince when the sleepy, amber eyes blinked open and met his gaze.

"Morning," Seto murmured thickly as he slowly sat up and stretched.

"Hey," Jou replied. "Sorry I woke you."

"Don't be. I'm a light sleeper to start with, and I've been dozing on and off for the past hour or so."

The brunet nodded, chewing hesitantly on his bottom lip. "You didn't have to sleep down here with me, you know."

"I know. But you looked so peaceful, and I was comfortable." Stifling a yawn, he got to his feet and asked, "So, are you ready for today?"

Giving the other a non-committal shrug, Jou stood and, carefully folding up the throw, he murmured, "Yeah, I guess so." Following Seto to the brunet's bedroom, Jou slogged through his morning routine like some sort of mindless automaton, finally plunking himself into a chair in the dining room and pouring himself a bowl of granola.

Seto watched with mild interest as the brunet would scoop up a spoonful of cereal and then let it trickle back into the bowl, occasionally eating a bite of what was rapidly becoming mush. After the fifth time, the blond had seen enough. "Jounouchi, what's wrong?"

Lifting his gaze from the tabletop, Jou shook his head. "Nothing."

Frowning, Seto gave a small snort. "Don't give me that. Ever since we got home last night, you've been abnormally sedate. What's on your mind? And don't say 'nothing' lest I find myself inclined to agree."

Despite himself, Jou smirked. "I've just been thinking a lot about today and how if something goes wrong, I could wind up trapped inside some computer…"

"Jounouchi, that's an extreme case. The worst-case scenario I can figure is that we'll be stuck as we are. But, I've gone over all the information and thought through every possible contingency. You're
going to have to trust me that I know what I'm doing."

"I do trust you, Kaiba. It's that five second blackout that worries me." He ate another spoonful of granola, grimacing at the soggy texture before pushing the bowl away from him. He let out a sigh and peered into the expressionless, amber eyes across from him. "Are you still going to run your tournament next weekend?" he asked quietly.

"If this works, yes I am."

"Oh." Jou dropped his gaze to his bowl.

"You don't think I should?" The words had a hard edge to them, and came out sounding more like an accusatory declaration of fact than a question. Seto heard Jou gasp softly, and narrowing his eyes, he stated, "Virtual reality is very low risk in the hands of people who know what they're doing. Nothing in life is zero risk, and our 'accident', which is really more of an inconvenience than anything, is the one in a million event."

"But, Kaiba –"

"I stand by my claim, and by my company and the technology it develops. If you have an issue with it, then withdraw. I'm proceeding as planned." The blond's posture was tense and stiff, his mouth turned down into a cruel frown.

"I'm not saying to cancel it altogether! All I'm saying is that maybe you should delay it a bit; you know, make sure that everything is legit!"

"Don't you dare question my ethics, Jounouchi!" Seto all but spat, bristling defensively. "Since the day I first laid eyes on Kaiba Gozaburo, I have been ruthless and aggressive. I do what I have to do to turn a decent bottom line for my company, but I have never made someone a 'test subject' without first going through the process myself!" He snorted disdainfully and sneered, "Besides, you're the last person who should be lecturing me about doing what's legitimate."

The brunet paled. "W-what are you talking about?"

"I know who you used to run with, and what you've done. Quite the sordid past you have…" He watched Jou's eyes widen momentarily, and then cloud with shame as his cheeks pinked slightly. Seto cursed inwardly when he saw the brunet visibly cringe away from him. His anger quickly ebbed, to be replaced with remorse; Jou's mannerisms told him that he'd gone too far. Warming his tone somewhat, he stated, "You got out, and I commend you for that, but when you and I first met, I knew who you were without introduction – in some circles, your reputation still precedes you."

Jou gazed at him through hurt-filled eyes. "You knew? Why the hell didn't you ever say anything? Were you just waiting for the perfect time to throw that out at me?"

The barb stung, and for a fraction of a second, Seto's composure wavered. A small, sad smile flitted momentarily across his features, and he said quietly, "Given my past, it would make me a hypocrite to finger point. The past is the past, mistakes were made. It's over, ne?" Rising to his feet, he murmured, "Call Kaga and tell him we're ready."

Nodding, Jou followed Seto into the living room and, using the extension there, asked the driver to bring the car around front. While they waited, he moved to stand next to the other and gave him a small smile, but the blond refused to meet his gaze; he refused to acknowledge him at all. Together, they walked to the limo when it pulled up, and other than the brunet telling Kaga to take them to KaibaCorp, the ride progressed in excruciating silence. After staring mindlessly out the window for
several minutes, Jou turned his attention to the blond seated across from him. Narrowing his eyes in concentration, he watched Seto as he gazed out his own window, his jaw clenched, conflict and uncertainty occasionally swirling to the surface of the otherwise impassive amber eyes. It was strange, he mused, turning back to his window. He'd always thought of Kaiba as an emotionless freak – a cold, heartless automaton with no real attachment to anything. But, he was beginning to realize that the other teen was just as expressive as anyone else he knew; he was just a lot more subtle about how he showed his true feelings – besides anger, of course.

Jou smirked to himself. There had never been any doubt in his mind about Seto's ability to convey that particular emotion. Sighing inwardly, he took another look at his companion and surmised that whatever was bothering the blond, his comments at breakfast were undoubtedly the root of all angst. He felt his stomach lurch slightly as he realized that, despite their proximity, he had never felt further away from the other teen. And, God help him, he missed it. Taking a deep breath, he turned to Seto and said, "Kaiba, I'm sorry…for all the things I said earlier."

"They're just words, Jounouchi. I've been called far worse." A small flicker of unhappiness briefly broke through his stoic façade. "And I know you disagree with me, but I'm not out to hurt people. Whether you believe me or not, we were in a far worse situation in Noa's world. Do you have any idea how close we were to annihilation? My so-called step-brother nearly wiped us all out."

Moodily, he sank back against the leather upholstery. "That's why my system is better. I took his and improved upon it, made it safer, made it near-impossible to delete people."

"But, doesn't that scare you, Kaiba? Knowing that in the blink of an eye, you could be…gone?" For emphasis, Jou snapped his fingers.

"No. Given the odds of it happening, I'm quite comfortable."

"Jesus Christ, Kaiba; aren't you afraid of anything?"


"Well, what do you fear, then?" When the blond remained obstinately silent, Jou leaned across the compartment and pleaded softly, "Come on, Kaiba! I really want to know!"

"I'm sure you do," the other replied stubbornly.

"For God's sake, Kaiba, friends talk about stuff like this!"

Seto snorted contemptuously. "You sound like Anzu. How disappointing."

"Fuck, fine!" Jou groused in exasperation. "If you don't want to tell me, that's ok. I'll guess." He eyed the blond thoughtfully for a moment before speaking, scowling slightly when Seto merely rolled his eyes and crossed his arms in front of him. "You're afraid of people."

"You're a certifiable lunatic; that's what you are."

"Right. Then how come I've learned more about you in two days than I have in two years? I know some of your secrets, and I'm not going to tell anyone about them. Not because you know mine, or
because I'm afraid you'll send those gorillas in suits after me, but because I think we can trust each other."

Seto saw that they had pulled into the KaibaCorp parking lot, and giving his head a small shake, he climbed out of the car. "I'm through talking about this."

Quickly clambering out behind him, Jou easily caught up to the other teen and, giving him a decidedly shark-like grin, he purred, "Deny it all you want. I told you before, I can read people, and I'd bet you anything I'm right!"

"Shut up," Seto replied, a small smirk creeping across his lips. "You're such an ass."

"Yeah, so I've been told," Jou chuckled as he first led Seto into the building, and then followed him to the lab. "At least you're not pissed at me any more."

"Sorry to burst your bubble," Seto retorted absently as he checked the results of the previous night's data transfer. "Half the time when you think I'm angry with you, I'm not. I'm more annoyed with…"

He trailed off, and saw Jounouchi looking at him expectantly. "Shit," he muttered, half to himself, turning his gaze away from the brunet and scowling petulantly.

"Aha!" Jounouchi crowed. "You were going to tell me something…I know you were. Now, just trust me and spill it. No dodging the question, no changing the subject, none of that other bullshit you usually do."

Seto's scowl deepened as he removed the disc from the pod interface. He stood impatiently in front of Jounouchi, and when the brunet refused to move out of the doorway to let him pass, he had to shimmy himself between Jou and the doorframe. He dropped the disc back into the desk and as he tried to head over to the console, he once again had to wriggle past Jounouchi, who was watching him with this benign expression on his face. He typed in the initiation sequence and, when he turned around and bumped into the brunet, he growled in irritation, "God damn it, fine! Except for times when you infuriate the hell out of me by being a giant pain in the ass like you are right now, I find I get angry with myself for the things I've said or done! And then, I brood about it! There! Are you happy now?"

"Actually, yes," Jou replied, stepping out of the fuming blond's way, a pert grin on his lips. "Thank you. That wasn't so hard now, was it?" He watched as Seto slipped on one of the VR helmets and climbed into a pod, and cocking his head to the side, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" Seto replied curtly as he grabbed the portable VR interface and slipped it over his wrist.

"Wait for me!" Jou called out, hurrying around the desk and down to the pods.

"No," Seto stated sternly. "I'm testing this first by myself. If, for some reason, I've made a gross miscalculation, I don't want to risk further harm to you."

"Kaiba, no! You can't do this by yourself. If you're doing this only because you feel guilty about what I said earlier –"

"I have no compulsion to feel guilty about anything," the blond said quietly, his voice clipped. "I have my own reasons for doing this."

"God damn it, I don't give a shit what your reasons are! We started this together, and we're sure as hell going to finish it together. Now, quit acting like a dick and hook me up." Peevishly, he climbed into the next pod and testily jammed the helmet on his head. "Besides, there's no way I'm letting you
go and get all deleted or misfiled or whatever. If I didn't have your spoiled ass around to torment me every day, I don't know what I'd do.” He saw Seto open his mouth to object, but before the other teen could say a word, Jou narrowed his eyes and growled out a very Kaiba-like, "Do it!"

Seto quirked an eyebrow at the brunet, and then, after giving him an amused snort in return, nodded and added him to the download sequence. "Just like last time…you'll probably feel some disorientation." He closed the cover on his pod and waited for Jou to do the same. "Downloading in 3…2…1…Start up sequence initiated."

Like last time, Jounouchi felt as if he was drowning in a bath of ice water and he struggled to keep the sensations from capturing him. And, when he found himself unable to breathe, he let his eyes slide closed as he tried to fight his mind's natural instinct to panic. He knew it would all be over in a few seconds, and he barely managed to keep a tenuous hold on his mounting hysteria. Again, there was the incredible sense of vertigo, and though he was able to enter the virtual world on his feet this time, the dizziness overwhelmed him and he dropped to his knees. Taking a few, deep breaths, the spinning soon abated. He felt a hand drop onto his shoulder and he heard Seto say, "The harder you try to fight the download, the worse the disorientation becomes."

It took a moment for Jou to process the voice, and when he did, his eyes flew open in surprise. It wasn't his voice speaking to him…it was the deep tenor he knew belonged to Kaiba Seto. He whipped his head around and, despite the wave of nausea that briefly washed over him, he couldn't help but laugh. "You're you again!" Jou exclaimed delightedly as he flopped over onto his back and stared up at the tall, lithe brunet beside him. He ran his hands through his hair and, sighing contentedly at the familiarity of it, he grinned. "And I'm me!"

Seto nodded as he reached down, grabbed the blond's hand and hauled him to his feet. "Yes. Virtual reality is a mental representation of you – the real you. So no matter what you look like in the real world, your mind knows how you should appear here." The brunet glanced around and scowled when he saw that the colour scheme was once again incorrect, as it had been on Thursday night.

"I thought you fixed that, Kaiba," Jou stated.

"I did," Seto replied irritably. "Unfortunately, the corrections I made to the program were destroyed before I was able to save them. I remember most of what I did; if you don't mind, I'm going to take ten minutes and fix this Technicolor nightmare."

Jou nodded silently before walking a few paces away from the other teen and settling himself down onto the grass. Even though it didn't look right, Jou could faintly smell the clean scent wafting on the breeze from the distant boreal forest. He let his eyes slide closed, a small smile curving across his lips as his hair ruffled lazily in the gentle wind and he felt the warmth of the sun on his face. The blond stretched out his legs in front of him, crossing them at the ankle as he leaned back slightly, propping himself up on his forearms. He shivered slightly when a shadow blocked his sunlight, and as he blinked his eyes open, he was startled to see Seto crouched down in front of him, a soft smile on his lips. "Jesus!" he gasped. "You need to wear a damned bell or something!"

"Sorry," Seto replied with a chuckle that was anything but apologetic as he dropped down onto the grass beside the blond. "I fixed the colours."

"Sorry," Jou replied with a chuckle that was anything but apologetic as he dropped down onto the grass beside the blond. "I fixed the colours."

Again, Jou looked around at the picturesque scenery. "Where is this place, Kaiba? You said you'd been here before."

The brunet nodded. "Yes, it's part of a park in the Rocky Mountains. I've forgotten exactly where it is anymore; it's been so long since I was here. I came with my biological parents in the spring before my mother was due to have Mokuba." He sighed as he looked around, a slightly melancholy
expression on his face. "So strange," he mused, half to himself. "I can remember the way the stream cut through this valley, but I can't remember what my father looked like, or my mother's name. I can remember that there are thirty-six distinct species of wildflowers in the park and identify them all by both their Latin and common designations, but I would never be able to tell you what company my father worked for, or even my old address." He drew his knees up to his chest and leaned forward to rest his forearms on top of them. "Maybe you're right, Jounouchi," the brunet said after a while. "Maybe I am afraid of people. With the exception of Mokuba, everyone I've ever loved, or thought I loved, has either been taken from me or turned their back on me. It's safer to remember the emotionless, the pragmatic." Loosing a derisive snort, he slowly got to his feet and, turning his back to Jou, he murmured, "No one has ever had their feelings hurt by vegetation, I suppose."

"Kaiba?"

Seto heard Jou get to his feet, and the next thing he knew, the blond was standing at his side, close enough for him to feel his body heat, but not close enough that they were actually touching.

"You're the smartest person I know, so by now, you have to have figured out who I was talking about in my journal, ne?" The blond's soft alto was unusually low and husky. Without looking, Jou could feel Seto's nod and, giving a stiff, quick nod of his own, he asked quietly, "What do you think about it?"

The brunet took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I think it's good to know that the sentiment is reciprocated." He turned his head slowly to regard the blond from over his shoulder. "Don't you?"

Again, Jou nodded, this time raising his head to meet the intense sapphire gaze. "So, what happens now?"

Seto responded with a wry chuckle. "That, Jounouchi, is the eternal question." A sardonic smirk spread across his face as he turned completely toward the other teen. "Out in the `real world', the best we can do is take things one day at a time and see what happens. But, before we go back, I would like one thing, even if it's only virtual." His smirk faded slightly, a hidden longing surfacing in the otherwise impassive expression. "Who knows; this may be my one and only opportunity, ne?"

The blond cocked his head to the side, giving the other a curious frown. "What is it?"

"This." Seto closed the small space between them as he brought his hands up to cup Jounouchi's cheeks. Lowering his head, he pressed his lips to the blond's, immediately feeling a million tiny sparks ripple through every part of his body as his eyes fell closed and his heart hammered erratically in his chest. Slowly, he pulled away, blinking his eyes open to gaze searchingly into the golden amber before him. He smiled when he saw the pink-tinged cheeks, and as his tongue peeked out to lazily trail along his bottom lip, the only word he could manage was, "Wow."

"I'll say," Jou murmured as he brought his hand up to press two fingers lightly where Seto's lips had been just moments before. This time, it was Jou that traversed the distance between them, letting his hand slide down to twine with the brunet's. "Kaiba, I think I'm ready to go home now."

"I am, too," Seto replied as he gave Jou's hand a squeeze before typing his command sequence into his VR interface. "We will be the last part of the program shut down. Everything around us will fade to black, and then we will go, too. When the five seconds are up and the reboot is complete, I'm ordering a simultaneous reintegration into the real world; I'll see you on the outside." He initiated the command, and then once again took the blond's hand in his. "This is going to be the longest five seconds of my life," he whispered. "Make sure you come back to me, ne?"

As the scenery began to slowly disappear, and the growing darkness began to surround them, Jou
tightened his grasp on the brunet's hand. When all that was left was just the two of them, the blond turned to the other teen and murmured, "Kaiba, I'm scared." The last thing Jou saw before everything went black was the reassuring smile the brunet gave him and the mouthed, "Me, too."

To Jou, it felt like he was on a roller coaster. His stomach lurched and sank, and he became vaguely aware of a rainbow of swirling colours that seemed to blink at him with the intensity of a strobe light. The churning and flashing was beginning to make him feel queasy, but just when he thought he might throw up, everything stilled. For several moments, he laid perfectly still, taking in deep, calming breaths. He heard a soft, gentle hum in the distance and, save for a dull, throbbing ache in his side, he felt fine. Slowly, he permitted his eyes to flutter open, wincing and holding up a hand against the light. Finally, he lowered his hand and waited while his vision came back into focus. He made a mental note to tell Kaiba to dim the lab lights from now on, and gingerly, he sat up. Reaching for the handle to open his pod, he was surprised when it seemed to open of its own accord. Still slightly disoriented, he swung his legs over the side of the pod, leaning forward and resting his head in his hands. It hadn't taken him this long to recover the last time, but then again, last time, he hadn't had to go through a system reboot, either. He felt a pair of cool hands against his cheeks, and when he looked up, he was staring into the most incredible, deep blue eyes he had ever seen.

"Jou, are you alright?"

"Kaiba?" Jou rasped hoarsely. "Tell me we made it back ok and that we're back to normal. Tell me I'm not dreaming."

"I'll do you one better," the brunet said softly. A genuine smile spreading across his features, he leaned down and captured the blond's lips in a sweet kiss.
Jou barely noticed the light drizzle that had started to fall. Standing on the open steps leading to his apartment building, he watched the sleek, black car disappear around a corner, his mind running a gamut of emotions. Hefting his backpack over one shoulder, he exhaled heavily. After overcoming his initial giddiness when he'd realized that he had his own body back, he had waited while Seto had finished up a few minor details with his VR system and shut it down, and then the brunet had asked him if he'd like a ride home. Somewhat disappointed, Jou had accepted and had silently trotted along behind Seto as they'd walked out to the limo, all the while wondering if he'd done something wrong. The brunet had not said a word about what had happened just before they'd left the virtual world, and other than the kiss he'd given him as he'd woken up, Seto had barely acknowledged the other at all.

The blond smiled softly to himself as he finally turned and climbed up the remaining two steps and fished around in his pocket for the door key. Once the two of them had climbed into the car, Seto had immediately drawn Jou tight to his side and they had shared several soft kisses, gradually growing bolder as each learned to read what the other wanted. By the time they had pulled up to the blond's building, Jou had been straddling Seto's lap, his fingers twined in the silky, auburn tresses and the brunet had his hands slipped under Jou's shirt to map every contour of his back while their tongues had duelled furiously for control of the kiss. Very reluctantly – and very aroused – Jou had slid from Seto's lap and climbed from the car, but not before noticing with a small smirk that his companion was in a painfully similar predicament. With a quiet, "See you tomorrow at school," the brunet had waved good-bye and pulled the door shut behind him. This behaviour had troubled Jou somewhat. For a moment, he had briefly considered running after the car to make sure that, given his inherent ability to fuck things up, he hadn't done anything to offend Kaiba. And then, he had remembered where he was. His anxiety rising, he had been unable to do anything save for stand on his front stoop in the light rain and watch.

Now, as he plodded up the last flight of stairs to his apartment, he felt the familiar wave of nausea overtaking him. Gingerly, he rubbed along his side, wincing slightly as he pressed against the deep bruise. He knew he hadn't earned that one, and realizing that Seto and his dad had gotten seriously into it only made his nervousness spike – especially considering the fact that Kaiba hadn't mentioned anything about it. Swallowing harshly, he stood outside his apartment door, hesitating. He never knew what condition he'd find his old man in when he returned from his 'weekend excursions', and he was hoping beyond hope that his father was out, and barring that, passed out. Quietly, he inserted his key in the lock, and then gently clicked the latch open, stealthily slipping inside and closing the door behind him. For several moments, he stood stock-still, actively listening for any signs of the other man. Something felt different to him; odd, and out of place. Finally shrugging it off, he started to creep along the hallway toward his bedroom, his uneasiness rising when the small hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He was just edging around the corner when he tripped over three cases of pop that had been set outside the pantry door. "What the hell?" he murmured softly as he looked down, grimacing when he heard his father's voice.

"K'suya? That you?" the elder Jounouchi's voice called out.

Jou froze, his eyes wide. His first instinct was to turn around and leave; to go to Yugi's or Honda's for a few hours and come back later. But, before he could make his feet obey his brain's commands, his father had made his way to him from the living room. Jou's mouth fell open when he saw the other man. Not only did he look like he hadn't shaved in two days, he also looked like he hadn't slept. His eyes were red-rimmed and bleary, and his appearance looked even more ghastly due to the slight bruising he had around his eyes and across the bridge of his nose. With a surprised gasp, Jou
dropped his gaze to the floor, lest he set his father off for staring at him.

"Can we talk for a minute?"

In spite of himself, Jou's head snapped up and he gaped in disbelief at the older blond. He couldn't remember the last time the elder Jounouchi had ever wanted to just `talk' to him, let alone, asked to. "Ok," he replied warily, waiting until his father had returned to the living room before cautiously following him, and then slowly easing himself down into the broken armchair.

The elder man sighed heavily and ran a hand agitatedly through his hair, his eyes slightly troubled. "K'suya, I know I haven't been a very good father to you," he began.

Jou dropped his gaze so his dad wouldn't see him roll his eyes in disbelief. Their `talk' was going to be a repeat of the usual, hollow apology. Not wanting to listen to false atonements and empty promises, Jou nodded solemnly and said quietly, "It's ok, Dad; I understand."

"Damn it, Boy, it's not ok!" he growled irritably, clenching his hands into fists. Ichiro squeezed his hazel eyes shut, and visibly counted to ten, slowly blinking his eyes open to once again regard his son. "It's not ok," he continued, his voice noticeably calmer, despite the slight quiver. "I have a problem, and I take it out on you. But this time, I promise, things are going to be different." He looked at Jou and saw the dubious expression on the young blond's face. "K'suya, I'm serious. After what you said to me, the way you looked at me…fuck, I think I've finally had enough. It's all gone – I threw it all away." Nervously, he shook a cigarette out of the package he had sitting on the coffee table and lit it, and then grabbed the partially full can of Coke that was sitting beside it and polished it off.

Frowning in confusion, Jou looked around. All the liquor bottles had been disposed of, as had all the cases of beer that were typically stored on the kitchen floor. Instead, there were about a dozen cases of cola. "What –"

"It's my substitute. I've gone through three cases of the shit already. It's been hard…really hard. But I'm trying this time, K'suya…" Holding his cigarette loosely between his lips, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny, metal disc, fingering it lightly, almost reverently before he leaned over and pressed it into Jou's hand. "It's been forty-eight hours, Boy. They say that if I can make it a week, I'll have beaten the hardest part." He leaned back against the sofa and exhaled slowly, blowing a few smoke rings before taking a final drag and crushing the butt out in the now-empty hubcap.

Jou looked down at the sobriety chip he held in his fist, his eyes welling with pleased tears. "What was it that made you change your mind?" he asked finally, looking into the older man's face. He saw his father's cheeks pink slightly before he dropped his gaze to the floor, hastily reaching for another cigarette. "You know what, Dad?" Jou said quietly. "It doesn't really matter why. I'll do what I can to help you; all you have to do is ask me." He handed the disc back to the older man, a small smile on his face. "I know it's hard, and I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Boy," the stocky blond replied tremulously as he hurriedly pocketed the coin as though it were some grand treasure. "One day at a time, ne?"

Jou nodded and got to his feet. "I'm going to go do some homework for a bit, and then I'll make dinner, ok?"

"No…you do your homework; I'll take care of it."

The teen paused, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. He was about to protest, but his father shooed
him off with a wave of his hand, grabbing another two cans of Coke and turning on the television. Still somewhat stunned, he grabbed his backpack and entered his room, smiling softly to himself when he saw the way Seto had meticulously folded his pyjamas and carefully centred them on his pillow. Kicking off his shoes, he stretched out on his bed and pulled out his math textbook. He worked diligently for a few minutes and then pushed it aside, reaching instead for his journal.

Seto sighed as he absently picked at his dinner. It was another Sunday night `family night'; Mokuba had ordered the special chicken pizza the other teen had introduced them to, and he had unknowingly selected the movie that Seto and Jou had watched together late Friday night. Only half paying attention, he found himself missing the blond; the meal and the entertainment only intensifying the feeling of loneliness. Another sigh escaped him as he thought about the other teen, and he glanced longingly at the empty corner of the couch. Suddenly, he picked up the cordless phone from the coffee table and, after a quick call to directory information, he dialled Jou's home phone number, hoping that he wouldn't get the elder male.

Jou picked it up after the third ring. "Olga's S&M Therapy Clinic – Come When It Hurts," he stated lazily.

For a moment, Seto stared at the phone in disbelief, and then smirked as he drawled, "Kinky. Will you whip me back into shape?"

This time, it was Jou who was shocked into silence. "Fuck you, pervert."

Glancing over to see that Mokuba was still engrossed in the movie, the brunet purred, "Pervert? Hn...sticks and stones may break my bones, but cuffs and straps excite me." He couldn't help but chuckle softly at the surprised gasp on the other end.

"Who the fuck is this?" the blond demanded.

"Come on, Jounouchi; you're telling me that after this weekend, you still don't know the sound of my voice?" He shifted slightly away from the television when Mokuba lifted his head and turned around to face him, pinking slightly when he saw his brother's impish smirk.

"K-Kaiba?" Jou stammered, immediately blushing crimson. "Uh, sorry about that; I wasn't expecting you to call...not that it's not a nice surprise to hear from you."

"Are you saying I shouldn't have?" Seto flushed further when the raven-haired boy hit 'pause' on the movie, and then turned around to clutch amorously at his heart as he exaggeratedly fluttered his eyelashes at him. Giving his brother a warning glare, the brunet cleared his throat and added, "I just wanted to call and see how your night was going."

"Oh," Jou replied, "It's been...interesting." Briefly, he told Seto about the conversation he had had earlier with his father, and the older man's subsequent commitment to staying sober.

"Well, I hope he finds success with that," the brunet replied finally, silently hoping that the older blond would finally conquer his demons, and wishing he could ignore the cynical voice that insisted it would only be a matter of time before the elder Jounouchi had a relapse.

"Thanks, Kaiba," the blond replied gratefully. "I hope so, too. So, school tomorrow...how do you think I should act?"

"Act? You don't have to `act' any way. Just do what it is you would normally do..." He trailed off when Mokuba sniggered loudly and fell back on the carpet in peals of laughter. Glowering, Seto snapped his fingers as he pointed emphatically at the door. Suddenly, he found himself with an earful
from his whining sibling, who was staunchly protesting that he was only trying to watch a movie. Acquiescing to the raven-haired boy's griping, he tried to return to his conversation, only to see Mokuba making elaborate kissy-faces at him. "Excuse me for a minute," the brunet growled into the phone before covering the mouthpiece and informing his younger sibling, in no uncertain terms, that one more outburst and he would be grounded from everything for the next two weeks. When the younger Kaiba scowled at him and grudgingly returned to his movie, now playing it at a considerably louder volume, Seto rolled his eyes irritably and took the telephone across the hall and into his office. He would deal with his brother later. Dropping into his desk chair, he muttered, "I'm sorry about that…"

Jounouchi snickered loudly. "It's ok…the kid's just being a kid, ne? Don't be too hard on him for doing what just comes naturally."

The brunet gave a wry snort of amusement. "Hn…and does your sister go out of her way to annoy you, too?"

The blond sighed softly. "I don't really get to see Shizuka that often, but yeah, when we're together, she makes sure to get her digs in on me when she can. She tells me she wouldn't tease me if she didn't like me…so I'm thinking she must like me a hell of a lot!"

"Her theory is sound; reminds me of something I said to you once," Seto chuckled, falling into an awkward silence. Finally, when several moments had passed where neither of them spoke, he said, "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"And what happens tomorrow?" Jou asked quietly, his heart suddenly thundering in his chest. "With us, I mean?"

If the brunet hadn't been paying attention, he would have missed the second part of the question. He swallowed harshly, suddenly feeling very nervous. "What do you want to happen, Jounouchi?"

"What? I-I don't know!" the blond stammered, obviously flustered by the question. "Well, I do know, but I'm not the one with the reputation to protect. You know how I feel, Kaiba… It's up to you."

Seto sighed heavily. "Why don't we see how tomorrow goes and take it from there?"

"Yeah…I guess that makes sense," Jou replied, unable to hide the twinge of disappointment. "Just… what am I to you?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?" the brunet demanded, his voice taking on a slight edge. "Fuck, relax!" Jou grumbled defensively. "I was just wondering what you think we are; are we friends, or are we…never mind," he sighed. "I'm just being an idiot again."

Seto growled warningly. "You're not an idiot," he snapped. "It's just…I'd rather talk about this face to face," he explained, his tone somewhat softer.

The blond swallowed harshly and nodded, even though he knew the other couldn't see him. He was unable to quell the slight queasiness he felt in his stomach as his mind instantly presented him with the worst case scenario of what Kaiba would say to him. Not wanting to think about that possibility, he quickly changed the subject. "So, is there anything else you need me to help you out with, or did you get everything wrapped up today?"

A small, vindictive smirk crept across Seto's lips. "No, I think we're set. And the only thing I need to do tomorrow at KaibaCorp is have a discussion with a certain cybernetics engineer. Once I'm
finished with that, I'd like to begin your chemistry tutoring, if you're available."

"Aw, fuck, I'd forgotten about that," Jou grumbled as he immediately reached for his notes and saw the assignment Seto had completed on Friday. "Holy shit! I don't even know how to do this stuff! I suppose Ishikawa's having a test or something this week?"

The brunet snickered. "He didn't set an exact date, and yes, you do know how to do it. I know you have a decent grade in that course; you just need to find a way to relate to the material."

"Yeah, well, right now, I've got to go through this assignment and change it into my handwriting. Thank God you press lightly with a pencil…"

"Yes; as a higher life form, I tend to not fist my writing tools and scribble like a primate."

"My handwriting's not that bad!"

"I never said I was talking about you, did I?" Seto stated as his lips curved upwards, his grin widening when he heard the exasperated curse from the other end.

"Fuck you, Kaiba," Jou replied good-naturedly.

"Hn, not tonight. Ask me again tomorrow." He chuckled outright this time at the stunned silence. "Good night, Jounouchi." After the blond had slammed out a good bye, he ended the call and returned to the den. The raven-haired boy was now stretched out on the sofa and was fighting a losing battle with his eyelids. "Come on, Mokuba; let's get you into bed."

Struggling to his feet, the younger Kaiba rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "Are you really angry with me, Nii-sama?" he asked softly.

"I was…"

"And now?" Mokuba pressed as he slowly trudged up the stairs toward his room.

The faintest trace of a smile crept across Seto's face. "I've decided my energy would be better spent getting even. One day, you will bring a date to the house…and I'll be there." Satisfied at the petulant moue he earned in return, he shut the door to his brother's room and headed for his own. Entering, he realized that he had not slept in his own bed since Wednesday night, and he was looking forward to it. He quickly undressed and headed into the adjoined bathroom, turning on the shower and standing for several long moments under the hot spray, replaying the events of the past few days over and over in his mind. Only when the water started to turn cold did he hurriedly wash himself, shivering slightly as he rinsed the shampoo from his hair. After drying off, he slipped on a pair of pyjamas and slid tiredly between the sheets; however, despite his weariness, he found himself unable to turn off his mind.

For a long while, he lay wide awake and pondered Jou's earlier question: 'What am I to you?' He knew in his heart what he wanted to say; it was just a matter of convincing his mind to find the right words.

The next morning, Jounouchi was sitting in the Mutou's kitchen, absently poking at his scrambled eggs with his fork. He'd been deep in thought since he'd awoken, and he was trying to settle the nervousness in his stomach. For the first time in his life, he was dying to get to school so that he could see the brunet, yet at the same time, he was dreading their meeting. It wasn't because he was worried that things would regress back to what they had been; he knew that that would never happen. It was because he was worried that Kaiba, after having had some time to think about things
by himself, would throw down the dreaded, *I think we should just be friends*. He sighed softly and pushed some more of his breakfast around on his plate, trying to tell himself that he would gratefully accept whatever was offered him.

A soft giggle from his left drew him from his musing, and he glanced up to see Honda tenderly feeding Yugi a bite of toast, following it up with a gentle kiss to the lips. Jou gaped in disbelief when his small friend giggled louder, and he dropped his fork with a clatter when the short teen climbed into Honda's lap and kissed him deeply. "Jesus Christ! Hon', you and Yug' are…" He trailed off, giving his head a small shake. "Why the hell am I always the last one to find these things out?"

Yugi stifled another snicker against the brunette's chest. "Jou-kun…I told you on Saturday when we were in the movie theatre. Remember?"

"What?" the blond exclaimed. "I never…" He trailed off abruptly when he realized that Yugi had to have been speaking to Seto at the time. "Oh yeah, right, Yug'…" He chuckled sheepishly and ran his fingers through his hair. "Guess I've had so much on my mind this weekend, I just...forgot."

"Yeah? Or is Kaiba trying to convince you that you'd be better off without us?" Honda interjected. "I mean, it's been what, two days since you've hung out with us?"

"What the fuck is your problem anyway?" Jou snapped as he narrowed his eyes and glowered at his best friend. "I can understand you telling Yug' and Anzu that I like the guy; I don't appreciate it, since it was supposed to have been a secret between us, but I can understand it. What I don't get is why you're being such a dick about this! I mean, up until last week, you seemed like you were cool with all of this. But fuck, man…you're being hostile and, well, rude! Is it any wonder the guy doesn't want anything to do with us?"

Honda snorted contemptuously. "Right, Jou. Open your eyes. All of a sudden, Kaiba's had a change of heart, he suddenly cares..."

"That's pretty harsh," Yugi murmured quietly. "I don't think Kaiba-kun would do something that nasty."

"Well, I don't want to see Jou get hurt any more by something that rich prick does!"

"You don't know him as well as you think, and I'm not a fucking baby – I'm older than you, and I think I'm old enough to make my own decisions. All you're doing is making yourself look like an ass." Angrily, the blond snatched his plate from the table and scraped the remains of his breakfast into the trash before stacking his dish in the sink. "Come on; we've still got to pick up Anzu."

By the time the foursome arrived at the school, Jou was in a foul mood. He and Honda were barely talking to each other, Yugi was running interference, and Anzu was scolding all of them for being immature. Glancing up at the clock tower, he saw that there was barely five minutes until classes began, and he figured he would now have to wait until lunch to speak with Kaiba. Trudging sullenly onto the grounds, he turned around to tell his friends he'd see them later, only to have his words catch in his throat when he saw the sleek, black car pull up to the curb. Resting against the concrete banister, he watched as the tall brunette climbed from his car and scanned the area like a king surveying his realm. As soon as the sapphire eyes landed on Jou, Seto smirked and made his way toward the group of friends.

Nodding in greeting to the other three, the brunette stopped in front of the blond. "Jounouchi," he murmured before he set his briefcase down and then leaned forward to rest one hand along the roughened cement on either side of the blond. Whispering lowly, for Jou's ears only, he drawled, "So, was there something you wanted to ask me this morning, or will it wait for later?"
The blond's heart was hammering violently in his chest as he breathed in the scent of Seto's cologne and felt the warmth of his body radiating against him. Swallowing harshly, he contemplated the brunet's question, drawing a total blank about what it was he was supposed to ask.

"Hn," Seto purred as he straightened up, a decidedly wolfish smile on his lips. "Too bad you've forgotten...I probably would have said yes..." Giving him a teasing wink, he picked up his attaché case and headed for his homeroom.

With the brunet's departure, the lust-induced fog slowly lifted from Jou's eyes and he suddenly understood what Kaiba had been talking about. "Oh hell!" he muttered lowly, a wave of arousal flooding through him, and a blush staining his cheeks when he heard simultaneous giggles from Yugi and Anzu. Turning to his friends, he was about to tell them to shut up when the first warning bell rang. Calling out a quick, "See you at lunch," he ran up the steps to his homeroom, for once grateful to be heading to class.

When Jou arrived in the cafeteria at noon, his friends were already halfway through their meal. For a change, he hadn't been assigned any extra laps, and he was excited to have a decent amount of time to eat. Before sitting down, he looked around for Seto and, not seeing him, he settled into his seat and pulled his lunch out of his backpack. "Hey, guys," he greeted jovially. He received equally cheerful responses from Yugi and Anzu; Honda responded with a somewhat petulant grunt. "Jesus, Hon'; how long are you going to stay pissed at me?" he groused.

"Until you apologize for being a total dickwad this morning," the stocky brunet replied coolly.

"Me?" Jou exclaimed incredulously. "You're the one who's been acting like a total ass munch! If you think I'm going to apologize for what I said, you're fucking crazy!"

"Jou-kun, Honda-kun, stop it!" Yugi interjected. "You two are supposed to be best friends, and here you are, arguing over a guy!"

"Not just 'a guy', Yugi," Honda replied. "Kaiba."

"You know what? Fuck you, Honda." Jou stood up, grabbed the remnants of his lunch and jammed it back into the bag. "I thought that you'd be supportive, but instead, you're acting like some jealous asshole. What is it that really has you so pissed off? Is it because, for once, I actually succeeded at something on my own, without your help?" Heatedly, he grabbed his backpack and headed outside, ignoring Anzu's surprised gasp and Honda's entreated requests to come back. Huffily, he sat down on the front steps of the school and finished off his sandwich while he watched a few of the other students start up an impromptu game of basketball. He was reaching into his backpack for his apple when he felt a presence drop down next to him on the stairs. He turned, half-prepared to tell Honda to leave him the hell alone, and was met, instead, by a pair of impish, sapphire eyes.

"So, did you remember what you were going to ask me yet?"

At this, Jou blushed slightly and gave Seto a pert smirk. "Yeah, I remembered. About two seconds after you left this morning. Were you serious about saying yes?"

A demure grin crept across the brunet's lips. "Maybe. But my whims are like the weather – unpredictable and changeable." His grin widened at the blond's sullen pout. "Hn. It's not my fault you're a victim of your own bad timing." Seto reached over and stole the apple from Jou's hand, giving it a cursory polish on his sleeve before taking a bite out of it. "I thought a lot about your other question last night," he said quietly after he had finished chewing.
"What other ques – Oh!" Amber eyes widened in comprehension. "And?"

Not meeting the blond's gaze, he replied, "I like you, Jounouchi. You've managed to worm your way into my heart, and I kind of like how it feels. It's comfortable. I was hoping you'd be interested in spending time with me on a more personal level."

Jou couldn't help the amused smirk that slowly spread across his face. "Are you asking me if I want to date you?" When the brunet simply nodded and took another bite from the apple, he chuckled outright. "Well shit, Kaiba…with a romantic proposition like that, how could I say no?"

Seto turned his head slightly and fixed Jou with a nonplussed glare. "Smartass," he drawled as he reached down and twined his fingers with the blond's. "I should be home by 5:30, and we can begin your lesson. Do you need me to send a car for you?"

"Car? What? Uh, no, I'm good. Thanks."

"If you say so. But, here…" Not releasing his hold on Jou, Seto stuck the apple loosely between his teeth and used his free hand to pull a card from the inside pocket of his uniform jacket, which he handed to the blond. Taking the fruit from his mouth, he continued, "That's my contact information. My cell phone number is on the back. If you get waylaid and need a ride, call. Right now, I've got to go."

"Why? There's still twenty minutes left before the afternoon session."

The brunet smirked. "I know. But I'm supposed to be doing a make-up test for my economics class that I missed on Friday."

Jou's brow furrowed in confusion. "So, why aren't you doing it?"

Chuckling darkly, Seto replied, "I'm finished it. I knew it wouldn't take me the entire period to complete, so when Kuroda slipped out to for something to eat, I came to find you. I just have to make sure I'm back in the room before he is. What a joke." He leaned over and brushed a soft kiss across Jou's lips, and then gave his hand a small squeeze before releasing it and standing up. "I'll see you later this evening. Thanks for lunch." Taking a final bite from the apple, he nodded in gratitude, and then disappeared back into the school.

For a few minutes more, Jou sat on the front steps of the school, a slow, lazy smile spreading across his face as he realized the full magnitude of what had just transpired. Practically bursting with joy, he picked up his satchel and headed to his next class. If anyone had bothered to look really closely, they'd have seen he was floating…

Chemistry had been relatively uninteresting. Other than Ishikawa-sensei giving him a small smile as he turned in his assignment, the teacher had more or less left Jou alone for the period. Anzu, on the other hand, had pestered him relentlessly for details – after giving him the requisite tongue-lashing for being a typical male idiot, of course.

The blond had been somewhat disappointed when Seto was absent from their algebra class, and he had mindlessly listened to the lecture, jotting down a few notes to help him with his homework later that night. After the bell rang, he was packing up his notes when he heard a small, nervous cough behind him. Turning around, he saw Honda standing there, a somewhat penitent expression on his face. "If you're going to lecture me some more, you can shove it," he said with a scowl.

"Actually, I'm not," the stocky brunet replied quietly. "You were right, Jou. I mean, we've always been there for each other, and looked out for each other, but I…I went too far. And I acted like a
total ass." A hesitant smile curved across his lips, his hazel eyes full of remorse. "I hate fighting with you; are we cool?"

The blond nodded, and he threw a friendly arm around Honda's shoulders as they walked out of the classroom together. "Yeah, you sure were an ass, and yeah…we're cool." Once they were outside, Jou grinned at his friend. "I have to go for tutoring at 5:30, but until then, you can fill me in on how all this shit started between you and Yugi."

The brunet smirked. "It's kind of a long story. It all started on Friday night when you took off after school to go to KaibaCorp…"

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Kaiba Seto smiled to himself as his car turned into the residential area where he lived. It had been a good day. Things between Jounouchi and him had been sorted out, and giving his watch a passing glance, he knew that the blond would be at his house by now, waiting for him. He had also dealt with a more pressing problem that went by the name of Matuhari Chiri.

Initially, the slender redhead had been quite pleased to have been called for a personal meeting with the CEO; however, when Seto had pulled the faulty surge arrestor from his pocket and had set it on the desk in front of Matti with a glacial, "Explain," the young engineer had quickly broken into an uncomfortable sweat.

Seto had to admit, he had taken a certain amount of sadistic pleasure in watching the other man blanch before he had tried to stammer out an excuse. But for him, the biggest thrill had been when he'd dismissed the redhead, citing corporate sabotage, and informing him that after the engineering board was through with him, he'd be lucky to ever find work in the field again.

When security had arrived to escort him from the building, Matti had angrily snarled that everyone else engaged in parts swapping, all the while cursing a blue streak about 'that blond engineer' who had ratted him out. The brunet had given him a decidedly shark-like grin and had all but purred, "Perhaps…but you were the one stupid enough to get caught. And for the record, nobody told me anything…I watched you do it with my own eyes." Naturally, Matuhari had assumed some sort of hidden camera, and that suited Seto just fine.

The brunet felt the car come to a stop, and after exiting the vehicle, he made his way into the house. Once he had dismissed Emi for the evening, Seto made his way toward the den, his heart lightening when he heard two voices drifting down the hall – his brother's and Jou's. For several moments, he watched the two playing their video game, both of them completely oblivious to his presence.

Finally, he cleared his throat, chuckling softly when both heads snapped around in near unison. "Emi tells me you have homework to finish, Mokuba, and Jou and I need to begin our lesson," he stated as he slipped off his suit jacket and removed his tie.

Sighing heavily, the raven-haired boy nodded and shut off his game. "We'll play again later, Jou," he murmured softly as he got to his feet, giving his brother a hug as he passed by the brunet and headed for his room.

Seto sat down on the edge of the sofa, a devilish smirk spreading across his face when the blond moved and sat down beside him. Slowly, he shifted his position, capturing the other teen's lips in a tender, hungry kiss. Encouraged by the soft whimper he earned for his efforts, he deepened the embrace, gently pressing his weight against Jou and leaning him back into the cushions. He'd get to the chemistry lesson in a few minutes. Right now, he had the blond in his arms, and for the first time in a long time, everything in his world was perfect.
Chapter Eleven

Jounouchi was lying on his back, staring serenely up at the late afternoon sky. He had his hands folded under his head, and his amber eyes lazily scanned the heavens, imagining various forms in the white, fluffy clouds. A contented smile crept across his lips as he indulged in a small stretch, and he shifted languidly on the large blanket, the tips of his sock-covered feet brushing against the soft grass. He had been there for almost two and a half hours, and he knew intuitively that his time was nearly up. Like clockwork, he heard the approaching footfalls of the other teen, but he didn't move. It wasn't until he felt the slightly cooler shadow against his cheek that he finally glanced over at the tall brunet standing next to him. "Hey," he murmured huskily as he propped himself up on his elbows and patted the plush fabric next to him, a sultry grin spreading across his features.

"Hey yourself," Seto replied as he joined the blond, contenting himself for the time being with leaning over and brushing his lips across the other's. "I'm sorry about that. I know I'd promised no work today…"

"That's ok," Jou answered as he sat up fully and reached for his shoes. "You can make it up to me later," he added, giving the brunet an impish wink.

"Oh?" Seto remarked as he arched a brow. "And what did you have in mind for your remuneration?" he drawled, leaning a little closer to the smaller teen.

The blond shrugged, his grin widening. "I don't know…I'm sure you'll think of something…" He grunted softly as he tried to jam his foot into his still-tied sneaker, wiggling it back and forth as he forced the stubborn article of clothing to comply to his will. He gave a cry of triumph at his success, and glanced up to see the dark, sapphire eyes watching him with wry humour. "What?"

"You'd probably have an easier go of it if you'd untie them first," Seto commented as he reached for Jou's other shoe, only to have his hand swatted away.

"Don't you fucking dare!" the blond scolded as he snatched up his runner. "It took me forever to get these worked in to where I like how they feel when they're on, and if you untie this one, I'll have to start all over again. Besides," he continued, repeating the same procedure with his other foot, "I've never really been one to do things the easy way."

"You don't say," the brunet retorted dryly, smirking when he saw that Jou was now slightly flushed and panting softly from the effort. "Colour me surprised."

The other teen smiled. "Smartass." He stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned back on his hands. "Oh, I forgot to tell you; I talked to Yugi this morning."

"Hn. Has he decided what he's doing with his prize money yet?"

Jou nodded. "Yeah; today Gramps is taking him downtown and they're adding it to his trust fund. He figures he's got nearly enough saved up for his entire university term, now."

"How responsible of him. And here I'd hoped he and Honda would use the money to elope and move to some secluded island far, far away…"

Despite himself, Jou sniggered under his breath. "Sorry, Seto…Honda's too much of a homebody to agree to something like that, and Yugi wants to travel before he settles down. Now if I'd have won, that would have been a different story." He sighed wistfully, and then with false enthusiasm chirped, "But, I guess second is nothing to sneeze at."
"You would have been third had I participated."

The blond had just opened his mouth to spout off indignantly, when he saw the tiniest hint of a smirk bend the brunet's lips upward. Realizing that Seto was only teasing, he shot back, "Yeah probably… but only because I'd have let you win just to keep you happy." Grinning, he took the other teen's hand in his and scooted closer to him.

"Whatever you need to tell yourself," Seto replied, giving the smaller hand a gentle squeeze.

Laughing, Jou leaned his head against the taller teen's shoulder and said, "Yeah, I know. Maybe one of these days, I'll actually beat you too, ne?" The pair fell into silence for several long moments, and as Jou cast his glance once more to the lush valley stretched out before them, he sighed, "God, I love this place."

"I do, too," Seto agreed. "It's easy to lose oneself in the tranquility and peace."

His voice filled with longing, Jou continued, "I wish we didn't have to go back. I don't think I've ever felt this content."

The brunet chuckled softly. "Well, sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you can't stay here forever, you know."

"Hn. Watch me," the blond replied defensively.

A dark smile graced Seto's features and, turning to Jou, he stated matter-of-factly, "I don't think so. I've spent two weeks planning for tonight, and I'll be damned if you're going to stay here instead."

"Two weeks? Shit…” He propped himself up on his knees and met the intense, sapphire eyes. "Sometimes the best things in life are spontaneous." Grinning wickedly, he quickly closed the distance between them, one hand twining in the soft, auburn tresses as he kissed the brunet soundly. Pulling away, he slowly licked his bottom lip, his grin widening at the slightly stunned expression on the other's face. "See?"

"Indeed," Seto replied, his eyes darkening with desire as he gazed wantonly at the blond. Giving Jou a decidedly shark-like grin, he stated, "So, then what you're telling me is that you don't want the surprise I've prepared. Fair enough."

"I didn't say that!" Jou cried forlornly, his pout quickly transforming to a small scowl when he heard the brunet snicker under his breath. "You son of a bitch!" the blond growled as he tackled Seto to the blanket, straddling his stomach and then kissing him aggressively, his tongue eagerly mapping every surface of the brunet's mouth. He was pleased when he pulled away from the embrace and managed to elicit a small, needy whimper from the other teen. "Why the fuck do you do that all the time? Aggravate me like that?"

"Because I can…because I enjoy it…because I find the sight of you like that very arousing…” He rested his hands on Jou's hips, sensually kneading and massaging the soft flesh as he gazed into the fiery, amber eyes. A sultry smile crept across his face and, when Jou mewled softly and permitted his eyes to sink closed, like a flash Seto reversed their positions, easily capturing the blond's hands in his and pinning them roughly over his head.

Jou struggled briefly, but the larger teen's body was holding him down and he found it difficult to move – not that he was that keen on going anywhere at the moment. He tipped his head back and let out a low, pleasured groan when he felt the brunet's prominent erection pressing against his thigh, his own cock swelling to full hardness when Seto began lightly rubbing his one knee against his groin.
Eyes burning with lust, the brunet lowered his head and placed a series of soft, feather-light kisses along Jou's neck and up to his ear. "God, I could almost take you right here," he purred lecherously, sending a tremor of delight up the blond's spine. "Almost."

"God, Seto...please," Jounouchi rasped, his breath coming in harsh, ragged pants as he tried in vain to feel more of the other's body. They had been dating for a month now, and they had yet to do anything more substantial than blindly grope one another through their clothing. He shivered a little when he felt the brunet shift his position slightly away from him, freeing his wrists. The sun was setting, and he was beginning to feel the chill in the air. He wanted the warmth of the other body back on top of him. "Please," he begged, his overwhelming desire making him forget for the moment how desperate he sounded.

"No, not here." Seto got to his feet and closed his eyes, taking several deep, calming breaths before he turned back to Jou and extended a hand to him.

The blond took the offered assistance and reluctantly got to his feet, wincing a little as his need rubbed teasingly against his jeans. Sighing heavily, he bent over and retrieved the blanket, carelessly folding it up and draping it over his arm. "Alright; let's go."

"Hn. If I wasn't so sure of myself, I'd almost think you'd prefer this to me." He gestured vaguely at the area before he took the shorter teen's hand in his and squeezed it gently.

"Don't be an ass," Jou replied with a grin. "You know that I'd go anywhere with you." Giving him a small tug, the pair headed across the meadow. Eventually, they could see a log cabin in the waning daylight, soft tendrils of smoke spiralling up from the chimney. "Did you start a fire in the fireplace?"

"Mm hmm. I figured you might be chilled after spending the afternoon outside. The weather is still a bit cool..."

Jou nodded in agreement. "Yeah, but it wasn't too bad out in the sun." They walked in silence for a few moments before the blond asked, "So, when did you remember the name of this place anyway?"

"I didn't," Seto replied sardonically. "I remembered it was on the western side of the mountains, and I began surfing the Internet and calling every park in the region, describing the area. It didn't take very long to find the correct one."

"That's a little obsessive compulsive, don't you think?" Jou asked with a snigger.

The brunet looked at him tartly. "Perhaps. But I knew how much you wanted to come here, and since my memory was unreliable, that seemed like the most efficient way for me to find out."

Jou felt a small lance of guilt when he heard the slight twinge of hurt in the other teen's voice. The taller teen had obviously gone to considerable lengths to find the place – and not for his own sake, either. Had that been the case, Seto could have sought the area out any time prior to now. No, everything had been done solely for the blond's benefit. As the brunet had said, he had spent two weeks organizing this weekend getaway to celebrate their one-month anniversary, and as was his wont, Seto had wanted everything to be perfect. He had obviously thought out every aspect of the evening in meticulous detail, wanting to make the actual day as memorable as possible. In an effort to lighten the mood, he slipped his arm around the taller teen's waist and asked, "Can I have a hint about what we're doing tonight?"

The brunet glanced sidelong at the other and smirked. "I'm feeding you."
"Feeding – that's a bullshit hint, Seto, and you know it!" the blond groused tetchily as he pulled away.

"You asked for `a hint'. You didn't ask for `a good hint'," the blue-eyed teen replied smartly. "Next time, be more specific."

Amber eyes narrowed slightly before Jou snorted in amusement and shook his head in disbelief. "No one can work a technicality like you," he muttered affably, nestling back into the other's side. Giving him a teasing prod in the side, he continued, "God, I never figured you for the sentimental type; celebrating anniversaries and milestones and all that shit."

Chuckling softly, Seto replied, "Normally, I'm not. But for me, this is a big deal. In the past, I've been lucky to last one week with someone, let alone one month." He smiled warmly and brushed his lips across Jou's. "And, I plan on celebrating many more with you."

"Yeah, well, at least you've dated. This is my first relationship ever."

The brunet stopped and turned to Jou, frowning slightly. "But, I thought that you and Otogi –"

"Fuck no!" the blond interrupted, his eyes wide in horror. Blushing slightly at the scrutinizing gaze he received in return for his outburst, he murmured, "Alright, here's what happened. Ryou's famous for throwing really boring parties, but someone thought they'd `spice up' the last one by bringing a bunch of booze. I don't drink, so while everyone else got trashed, I dozed off in the armchair in front of the fireplace. I woke up a couple of hours later to a very drunk Otogi sucking on my neck and trying to get into my pants. Needless to say, he earned a black eye for his trouble, and he's avoided me more or less ever since. Bastard never even apologized for what he did." Jou sighed softly. "That's why I was so pissed when I heard that Honda had blabbed about it."

Seto gave an amused snort. "Otogi told me that he got hit by a racquetball while entertaining a client. I'll have to make sure I remind Ryuji to keep his filthy paws off of things that aren't his the next time I see him." Taking the blond's hand in his, he led him up the crushed stone pathway to the door of the quaint, two-storey cabin. Giving him a small smile as he unlocked the door, he admitted, "I'm... glad nothing happened between the two of you." Nudging it open with his hip, he pulled Jou into his arms and led him inside. "And, I'm ecstatic that you're mine." Slowly, he lowered his mouth to Jou's, kissing him slowly and deeply, purring softly as his tongue twined with the blond's. Breaking the embrace, he toed the door closed and then led Jou upstairs.

The second storey was really more of a loft, containing the master bedroom and the accompanying ensuite. It was elegantly appointed in rich creams and dark, chocolate browns, and the thick, ecru coloured down comforter on the bed had been turned down invitingly. The back wall was entirely made up of floor to ceiling windows, with a set of French doors leading out to a large veranda. The doors themselves were open, and a gentle breeze was wafting into the room, carrying with it the subtle scents of pine and sweet grasses. All of the lights were off and, in their stead, dozens of small, votive candles had been lit, their soft glow flickering warmly against the lengthening shadows that accompanied the impending nightfall.

Until now, the blond had only had a cursory glimpse of the room; when they'd arrived earlier that morning, he had hastily dropped his bags on the floor and had rushed out the door to explore and bask in the fresh mountain air. Now, as his eyes drank in the romantic scene before him, he felt his heart swell. "Seto," he breathed. "I had no idea you were so –"

He was silenced by a pair of warm lips being pressed gently to his. "You haven't seen the best part yet," the brunet murmured as he gazed into the sparkling amber eyes, taking him by the hand and leading him out onto the back deck.
A small, round café table had been set for two, a pair of wrought iron and cherry wood Havana chairs placed intimately around it. A dining cart sat off to the side, a large, sterling silver cover keeping the contents secret for the time being. More votive candles had been set on the table, surrounding the large, silver ice bucket, and hanging lanterns twinkled merrily in the open air, holding the encroaching darkness at bay and swathing the area in soft, golden light. The faint sounds of a babbling brook could be heard drifting up from the valley, and as the last rays of the sun dipped below the horizon, the majesty of nature revealed itself in a symphony of crickets and bullfrogs, and in the distance, the occasional, forlorn howl of a wolf.

"Do you like it?" Seto asked quietly as he pulled out a chair for Jou.

"Yeah, it's gorgeous out here," the blond replied as he scooted himself closer to the table.

"Good. Moonrise should begin in about half an hour, just over that valley." He pointed in the general direction, and then deftly removed the bottle that had been sitting on ice for them, moving to pour some for Jou.

The smaller teen quickly placed his hand over his glass. "Thanks, but I don't drink."

The tiniest hint of a smile curved across the brunet's lips. "Yes, I know." He turned the label so Jou could see it. "It's sparkling grape juice – alcohol free."

A pleased flush coloured the blond's cheeks, and he beamed adoringly at the other. "Oh, Seto…" He let him fill his champagne flute, and then took a sip, wrinkling his nose slightly as the bubbles concentrated and tickled the tip.

Seto's expression softened further at Jou's display, and after filling his own glass, he retrieved their meals from under the cover, setting a plate of roasted cedar plank salmon with herbed mashed potatoes and grilled vegetables in front of each of them. "I hope you find this satisfactory," he said as he took his seat.

The blond giggled to himself under his breath as he picked up his fork. He'd been with the other long enough now to know that, whenever his speech and mannerisms became overly-formal, he was feeling nervous. "It looks fantastic, Seto," he said reassuringly, eagerly digging in to his meal. "It's delicious!" Jou continued, grinning across the table at his dining companion. "How the hell did you get this delivered? Or do I even want to know?"

The brunet smiled in return, relaxing a little as he picked up his utensils and started to eat. "The executive chef from La Bohème in Domino is on a sabbatical at one of the local resorts. I made a few phone calls…and he arrived to set this up just as I was heading out to fetch you. I would have offered to cook for you, but trust me – it's better for you that I didn't."

With a wink and an impish smile, Jou teased, "Oh…so I've finally found something that the great Kaiba Seto can't do."

"I never said that I couldn't," the taller teen replied with a blasé shrug. "I just didn't think you'd appreciate instant noodles and sandwiches. My culinary talents are somewhat…limited."

The blond blinked in momentary surprise at the other's admission, and then burst out laughing. Seeing the rather wounded expression on the brunet's face, Jou hurriedly said, "No, Seto…I'm not laughing at you. Just the idea of you in an apron and making me a sandwich is very…" He flushed slightly and smiled shyly at the other. "It's cute, and very sweet."

A light tinge of colour crept into Seto's cheeks, and with a wry smirk, he replied, "I'm glad one of us
seems to think so…” Taking another bite of his dinner, he continued, "But, I'm pleased that you're enjoying yourself."

The meal progressed in companionable silence, the two delighting in each other's presence and the enchanting atmosphere. Seto marvelled at how the moonlight was reflected in the twinkling amber of Jou's eyes, and how it played with the platinum highlights in his hair, creating a silvery aura around him and framing his face with a shimmering luminosity that made him look ethereal...angelic. He could feel his body responding to the vision next to him, and swallowing thickly as he pushed his plate away from him, he smiled at the blond and murmured, "I don't think I've ever seen you look as gorgeous as you do right now." Slightly embarrassed by his admission, he grabbed his glass and drained it, secretly wishing that it held something more potent to help calm his nerves.

A pleased blush spread across Jou's cheeks and he flashed the other a brilliant smile. "It must be the company I'm keeping – it brings out the best in me," he answered, reaching out and taking the brunet's hand in his. Leisurely, he finished off his meal and then let out a contented sigh. Casting a quick glance at the other's plate and noting that he'd only finished about two-thirds of his food, he turned his gaze to Seto. "Aren't you going to finish your dinner?"

"No." He smirked when he heard the warning growl from Jounouchi – according to the blond, Seto needed to eat more. The brunet found it highly amusing to torment the other teen by resisting his efforts whenever possible – often deliberately. "I promise I'll eat two desserts," he placated.

"There's dessert, too?" Jou asked, his eyes glinting in anticipation as he turned to glance at the cart. Seto couldn't help the low chuckle that escaped him as he gathered up their plates and set them back on the trolley. "Jean-Phillipe put the dessert in the fridge. Give me a minute, ok?" He leaned down and gave the blond a soft, lingering kiss and then slipped inside their cabin, returning moments later carrying two plates.

"You said you were going to have two!" Jou grumbled when the brunet set a plate with a slice of white chocolate raspberry torte in front of him. "Oh," he muttered sheepishly when Seto sat down and waggled his eyebrows slightly at him, tipping his plate up a bit and revealing two slices of the cake. "This is really good!" he beamed, pausing with his second forkful halfway to his mouth. "Seto, this has chocolate in it…"

"White chocolate is different," the brunet stated as he licked the raspberry coulis from the tip of his fork. "It's the only kind I can have – well, without serious repercussions, anyway." He smirked as he took another bite. "Which you well know, I'm sure."

"Yeah, and I don't think I'll ever forget it, either." Jou smirked ruefully as he pushed his dish aside, absently licking a bit of chocolate from his finger. He crossed his arms on the tabletop, and gazed across at the brunet, watching him as he finished his dessert. As soon as Seto set down his fork, the blond placed the dirty plates on the cart, and then moved over to the other side of the table. Settling himself on the brunet's lap, he wrapped his arms around his neck and smiled at him. "This was really great, Seto. The park, the cabin, the food – everything was amazing." Leaning forward, he captured the taller teen's lips, purring softly at the lingering taste of raspberry. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome," he murmured against Jounouchi's lips. "Here…” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a long, slender box wrapped in silver foil which he handed to the blond. "Seto!" Jou admonished as he looked at the gift, his cheeks heating in embarrassment. "I didn't get anything for you!"

"I know. We had agreed that it was silly to exchange gifts for a one-month anniversary. I just…I
"wanted you to have this."

"You're going to spoil me, you know," Jou said with a grin as he reached for the package, only to have Seto palm it and hold it just out of his range. "What –"

"I just thought of something," the brunet interrupted, giving the other teen a wicked grin. "You never did tell me the original screen name Honda thought up for you…"

The blond whined morosely. "Come on, Seto! Don't make me tell you that!" The other's grin merely widened as he gave the box a small, enticing shake. "I don't care! I don't want it!" Jou averred defiantly, his eyes betraying his words as they shifted to the gift and he gazed longingly at it. He worried his lip for a moment, and then murmured something barely audible.

Seto chuckled softly, his sapphire eyes glinting playfully. "I'm sorry; I didn't quite catch that…"

"It was 'Kaiba's Bitch'!" Jou exclaimed loudly, his face turning crimson in embarrassment as he looked away from the other teen. "I'd just told Honda about…well, that I liked you, and he thought that was fucking hilarious. Prick…"

"Ironic," the brunet murmured with a smile as he turned Jou's chin to him with the tip a finger and handed the present over to the blond. As soon as Jou started to open it, he slid his arms loosely around the smaller teen's waist.

Casting his gaze down to his lap, Jou concentrated on opening his gift, carefully sliding the nondescript, black box from its wrappings. Subconsciously holding his breath, he removed the lid, giving a small, surprised gasp at the contents, and immediately understanding the significance of the other's comment. "God, that's beautiful," he whispered as he picked up the thin, gold chain and held the gold dog tag in his hand. It had been etched in the top right corner with the silhouette of his Red Eyes, and the rest of the field had been artfully engraved in elaborate calligraphy with his full name.

"I'm glad you like it. I thought the gold paired better with your hair colour and skin tone than the silver you wear…" He watched the blond slip the chain over his head before he quickly removed his old one.

Jou lovingly ran his fingers over the worn, silver tag. "I got this one years ago – I found it one day when I was out playing. It's been kind of a 'good luck charm' for me all this time, so I don't want to give it up completely…but I think maybe it's time to retire it, ne?" He winked at the brunet as he set it inside the jeweller's box, and then set the box on the table. Smiling warmly, he ran his fingers along the edge of the cool metal, and then met Seto's gaze. "I love it," he said, and then murmured, "And, I love you." His amber eyes clouded slightly when he heard the other reply, like always, "You too." His expression faltering a little, he nodded and leaned in to press a kiss against the brunet's lips.

Seto purred low in his throat, tightening his grasp around the blond's waist and deepening the embrace. Immediately, his body was flooded with a wave of arousal, and he was inordinately pleased when he felt Jou melt against him, the smaller teen's own need pressing against his belly. Slowly, he slipped his hands underneath the back of Jou's shirt, pressing the flat of his palms against the firm, smooth flesh and delighting in the searing heat he felt radiating from the other's body. He let his fingers skate teasingly across the other's shoulders and down his spine before his hands finally came to rest on the blond's slim hips and he pulled away from the kiss with a smile. "Come on," he said as he reluctantly eased the smaller teen from his lap and got to his feet. "I thought you might like to take a walk along the stream by moonlight." Taking the blond's hand in his, he made his way to the door, only to feel Jou tug back, stopping him. "What is it?" Seto asked quietly when he saw the pensive expression on the other's face.
"Seto, do you…I mean, you love me, right?" When he saw the slight frown crease the brunet's forehead, he immediately regretted asking. "Forget it."

"No, I won't 'forget it'. Why would you even ask that? You know that I do." The words were harsh, but the tone was soft with an underlying, barely perceptible hurt.

"I'm sorry. It's just…well, I'm trying to be better about things, but I guess I'm still a little insecure when it comes to you and me."

Pushing aside his own wounded ego, Seto eyed the other teen studiously for a moment. "Is that why you sometimes tense up when I try to touch you? Are you afraid I'm going to 'love you and leave you'?" When he saw Jou worry his bottom lip and give him the tiniest of nods, the brunet sighed heavily. "Jounouchi, just because I don't say the words, it doesn't mean the sentiment isn't true."

Cupping his cheeks gently in his hands, he brushed the blond's lips in a tender kiss. "If you don't believe me, just look at the back of that tag you're wearing." Dropping his arms to his side, he took a half-step away from the smaller teen, watching him with an encouraging smile.

Arching a brow in curiosity, Jou flipped the tag over. His eyes widening slightly, he muffled a small gasp with his hand as he read, 'I love you with all my heart, mind, body and soul. Yours, Seto.' Grabbing the other and pulling him into an embrace, he murmured, "Why didn't you say anything about this before?"

"Well, I was hoping that you'd discover it on your own, but under the circumstances, I thought you could use a little 'hint'," the brunet said softly as he wrapped his arms around the blond, and then lowered his lips to once again claim the hot mouth offered to him. Melding the smaller teen to him, he explored every dip and surface, purring low in his throat when he felt Jou respond. And, when the blond nipped his bottom lip and forced the kiss back into the brunet's mouth, the last of Seto's self-restraint snapped. With a lusty growl, he pressed his body against Jou's, backing him up to the wall before trailing a line of small, feather-light kisses along his neck and down to his pulse point. Nipping lightly at the tender flesh, he swallowed harshly and, testing the words, he whispered hotly against Jou's skin, "I love you, Jounouchi."

The blond felt his knees go weak and a shiver ran down his spine at the soft-spoken admission. Letting out a noise that was half-laugh, half-pleased sob, he wrapped his arms around the brunet's neck, clinging tightly to him as every last trace of self-doubt vanished from his mind. He dropped his head back against the roughened planks, granting the taller teen easier access to his throat. As he felt the light scrape of teeth across his collarbone, he cried out wantonly, arching into the other's body as a wave of pleasure crested through him. "God, Seto…" Another lusty mewl was torn from him when the brunet nipped hard enough to break the skin, and as Seto suckled hungrily at his mark, Jou fisted his hands lightly in the soft, auburn tresses and whimpered, "Please…"

A low chuckle echoed deep in the brunet's throat as he dragged his tongue from Jou's neck to his ear. "Please what?" he purred as he teasingly rimmed the shell.

"Please take me…make me yours," the blond begged as he writhed needily under the other's ministrations.

At this, Seto paused and lifted his head. Gazing seriously into the lust-darkened amber eyes, he murmured, "Are you certain? I don't want you to do this just because it's something I want." He pressed a hurried kiss to the other's lips, briefly suckling the bottom one before releasing it and then soothing it with his tongue. "I want you to want it, too."

Jou nodded as he stared deeply into Seto's intense, sapphire gaze. "I'm sure. I want it." For once, there was no hesitation, no misgiving in his voice. He let his hands slide from around the brunet's
neck, bringing them to rest on his chest and giving him a gentle push away from him. Almost shyly, he grabbed the taller teen's hand and led him inside, pausing at the foot of the bed and chewing nervously on his bottom lip. Seeing the curious look from the other, he asked quietly, "Is it going to hurt?"

"Yes, maybe a little bit," Seto replied truthfully, a small smile curving up the corners of his mouth when he saw the worry flash across the blond's face. Cupping Jou's cheeks in his hands, he said reassuringly, "It's more of a discomfort, really, and if you relax a little and trust me, you'll forget all about it in no time, I promise." Leaning down, he pressed his forehead to the blond's and whispered, "Any time you want to stop, just say so. No pressure, ok?" When he felt Jou nod, he said, "Give me one minute, alright?"

Again Jou nodded, watching as Seto disappeared into the bathroom and started to rummage around. Unsure of what to do with himself while he waited, the blond toed off his sneakers and sat on the edge of the bed, immediately standing up when he saw the brunet come back and set a small bottle on the nightstand. Jou glanced briefly at it, but before he could ask what it was, Seto had once again drawn him into his arms.

"Don't worry about that…If we need it, it's there," he murmured breathily against Jou's ear. "If we don't, then it sits there, and no harm done…” Lazily, Seto trailed his tongue along his lobe, nipping playfully at the sensitive skin. He was rewarded with a low moan from the other and, with a lusty chuckle that sent a shiver rippling through the blond, he began to kiss his way back down Jou's neck. Slowly, his hands slid down to lightly caress the curve of the blond's ass while he pressed his hips forward, letting the other feel his growing need. As his fingers gradually worked their way back up his body, they caught the hem of Jou's t-shirt and deftly slipped underneath, once again skating teasingly across the heated flesh of his back. Wending his way around the blond's body, he gently raked his fingernails up Jou's torso, brushing his thumbs across the small, pert nipples and drawing out a sensual hiss. Returning his mouth to Jou's ear, he rimmed the shell before purring, "You can touch me too, you know…I promise I won't bite – unless you want me to."

"Oh fuck, Seto…" Jou panted, his ragged breaths passing through his slightly parted lips, his eyes dark with want, his cheeks stained with a lust-induced flush. Swallowing harshly, he slowly unfastened the buttons on the brunet's dark blue dress shirt, jerkily tugging the tails free from his pants before parting the garment and letting his hands rove hungrily over the taut planes of his chest. Ever so gently, he skimmed his fingers along the large scar on Seto's side, and then he met the deep, sapphire gaze. "God, you're gorgeous," he breathed as he pressed a gentle kiss just below his collarbone. Moving his hands further up the toned body in front of him, he hooked them into the shoulders of Seto's shirt and pushed it from his body. As the clothing fell to the floor, he tongued a trail over to one of the brunet's nipples, kissing the tiny, pink bud before taking it between his teeth and tugging lightly.

Seto let out a deep, throaty growl as a ripple of electricity shot through his body. Nimbly, he pulled Jou's t-shirt off, tossing it carelessly away from him before crushing his mouth to the other teen's in a dizzying kiss. One arm slid around the blond's now bare waist, and as Seto's mouth returned to the juncture of neck and shoulder, his other hand skimmed down Jou's body to gently cup his arousal. Returning to his earlier mark, the brunet reopened the wound with his teeth, his tongue soothing the sting of the bite, his free hand snaking up to the button on the blond's jeans and deftly thumbing it open.

Jou cried out as Seto lapped and nuzzled at his collarbone, his own fingers frantically seeking out the brunet's trousers and hurriedly unfastening them. As he pushed both pants and boxers down over Seto's hips, he teasingly wrapped his hand around the thick length and gave a couple of cursory strokes, purring softly as he once again held the velvety-smooth flesh in his hand. A sensual smile
graced his features as he recalled the forbidden pleasure he had indulged in the other night, and he brushed the pad of his thumb across the slit, groaning wantonly as he gathered up the drop of moisture and laved it from the digit.

The brunet’s growl deepened at the intimate touch to his cock, and when he saw Jounouchi’s tongue flick out and lap at his essence, his eyes darkened further with need. As soon as the blond dropped his arm, Seto claimed his mouth in a feral kiss, his hands dexterously pushing down Jou's jeans as he leaned in close, bringing their burgeoning erections together as he gyrated sensually against the other.

All rational thought left the blond as he felt the bare hardness pressing against him for the first time. Starbursts seemed to go off in his vision, and the only thing that mattered to him was his sense of pleasure as it spiralled higher and higher. He whimpered softly, and could feel the tenuous hold he had on his self-control gradually slipping away. "Seto, please," he sighed tremulously against the brunet's lips, his eyes heavy-lidded and glazed with desire.

Seto trembled as he felt the warm, shuddering breath against his cheek. Licking his suddenly dry lips, he rested his forehead against the blond's, his eyes sliding closed as he swallowed thickly and nodded. "Get undressed," he whispered huskily as he stepped back a half-step and quickly removed his trousers and socks. As soon as Jou had kicked off his jeans and socks, the brunet once again drew him into his arms, easing him down onto the bed as he stretched out languidly beside him.

Leaning forward, Seto kissed his way along Jou's jawbone, before once again turning his attention to the blond's sensitive earlobe. Within moments, he had the smaller teen writhing and mewling under his ministrations, and then he carefully traced his hand down Jou's body, sliding it between his legs and teasingly running a finger around his opening.

At the first touch, the blond immediately tensed, and Seto quickly withdrew his hand. "It's ok, Seto," he rasped, his breath coming in heaving gasps. "You just...I wasn't expecting it; that's all."

"I'm sorry," the brunet whispered sensually in his ear before he slowly licked his way down Jou's throat and then back up. "Give me your hand." When the blond complied, he reached behind him for the bottle he had earlier placed on the nightstand. Flipping the cap open, he squeezed a small amount of the slippery, clear liquid into Jou's palm.

"Mmm, cinnamon!" the blond said delightedly as the spicy aroma infiltrated his senses.

"That's not all," Seto murmured quietly as he used his thumb to gently rub the fluid in. "What else do you notice?"

Jou furrowed his brow in concentration. He really didn't notice anything except for the scent… Suddenly, his eyes widened and a small smile spread across his face. "It's warm!"

The brunet nodded. "Yes. I think you'll like how that feels. And, it tastes good, too." Grinning lecherously at the other teen, he slowly licked Jou's palm, grazing his teeth lightly across the skin before sensually tonguing each finger and nipping teasingly at the tips. When he was finished, he lowered his head and kissed him languorously, letting the blond have a taste. As he pulled away, he brushed the bangs from the golden eyes and asked lowly, "Are you ready?" Seeing the small nod, Seto gave Jou a reassuring smile in return and said, "We'll take this slowly, ok?" The brunet squirted some of the lube onto his hand, and as he rimmed the shell of Jounouchi's ear, he rubbed the slick gel along the blond's length, purring ferally as the heated flesh slipped easily between his fingers.

At the first touch, Jou hissed in pleasure and arched his hips off the bed. Concentrating on the carnal bliss coursing through him with every stroke of Seto's talented hands, it wasn't long before the blond was panting harshly, his eyes glazed and slightly unfocused. He was vaguely aware of it when the brunet shifted his position, and as he felt a wash of hot breath across the head of his cock, he cried
out wantonly as the warming gel flooded him with heat, making even his toes tingle.

"Liked that, ne?" Seto murmured, a satisfied smirk on his face as he added more of the fluid to his hand and waited for it to warm in his palm. "You'll like this even better; trust me." Nudging Jou's thigh with his elbow, he moved his hand lower and carefully applied the gel around Jou's entrance. He heard the blond's breath hitch slightly, and as his other hand rubbed soothing circles across his abdomen, he gently worked one finger past the tight ring of muscle and into the searing heat.

Jou grunted softly at the intrusion. He could definitely feel the slick digit inside of him as it moved slowly and deliberately, but it didn't hurt so much as it was unusual. He felt Seto slowly withdraw, only to push back a little deeper, and he moaned softly at the sensations the action elicited. He quickly forgot about the slight discomfort as he reached a new plateau, and within moments, the blond was squirming in delight at the hands of the other teen.

Seto smiled to himself when he withdrew his finger and heard Jou's small whimper of protest. He applied more of the gel to his hand, and this time, pressed two fingers into the tight heat. He could feel the blond tense slightly, and as he continued to lightly rub Jou's belly, he added gentle, reassuring kisses along his hip and thigh. It wasn't long before the blond had settled back into the mattress, and as the brunet carefully scissored his fingers to further stretch him, he whispered approvingly, "That's it, Jou…just relax." When he was finally able to insert his fingers all the way, he lightly caressed the silky lining of the blond's passage, once again turning Jounouchi into a writhing mass at his touch. Purring softly at the vision of eroticism laying in front of him, Seto lightly dragged his fingernails across the smooth skin of Jou's abdomen before he wrapped his free hand around the blond's length. "Do you want me to give you more? Make it feel even better?" he murmured as his breath once again ghosted across the tip of his cock.

"God, please!" Jou panted, his voice thick with desire as he blinked his eyes open and gazed half-lidded at the brunet. He felt Seto's grasp tighten slightly around his shaft, and his hands fist reflexively in the sheets as he swallowed harshly—as if that would quell his mounting need.

Moving his fingers as if searching for something, Seto was rewarded with a keening cry from the blond as he brushed against the small, sensitive protrusion. Having found what he was looking for, the brunet slowly licked his lips and, as he massaged the tiny bundle with his fingers, he simultaneously lowered his head to take the tip of Jou's cock into his mouth. As if sampling a rare treat, Seto languorously swirled his tongue around the smooth, velvety flesh and then teasingly lapped at the slit, relishing in the flavour of the cinnamon combined with the blond's own, unique taste. Finally, with a low, licentious growl, he laved the flat of his tongue over the entire crown with a series of firm, sensual strokes, interspersing playful nips and light grazes of his teeth to the sensitive skin.

At the first touch to his prostate, Jou had arched slightly from the bed, his eyes falling closed as he concentrated on the tingling heat spreading through him. He had thought that he could hold back his release, but as soon as he felt the moist heat of Seto's mouth engulf him, he had cried out the brunet's name and had tensed his entire body as he fought against his impending orgasm. He managed to stave off his climax for about ten seconds; the simultaneous stimulation to his prostate and the skilled mouth upon him proving to be too much for him to handle. "God, Seto…I can't hold it. I'm going to—" Jou's words dissolved into an incoherent scream of pleasure and a string of unintelligible babbling as his vision flashed white and he came forcefully down his love's throat, his hips jerking erratically as his entire body trembled with the force of his release. For several long moments, the blond simply lay there, his breath coming in heaving gasps as he stared unseeingly at the ceiling, trying to get his body back under control. He became vaguely aware of a warm tongue gently licking along his length, cleansing him of all traces of his passion, and he mewed softly at the tender touch. And, as the lust-induced fog began to clear, he remembered what he had done. His eyes sliding closed as he
flushed deeply, he tried to stammer out an apology. "Seto, I'm sorry… I never meant to –" He was silenced by a slim finger pressed teasingly against his lips, and then he felt a weight settle partially on his chest. Opening his eyes, he found himself staring into the slightly amused face of the brunet.

Removing his hand, Seto said gently, "Don't apologize. I encouraged it, and besides, I liked it." Leaning forward, he hungrily plundered the blond's mouth, moaning softly at the combined taste of Jou's mouth with his seed and the lube. As he gently pulled away from the kiss, Seto sensually trailed his tongue along his bottom lip, an impish smirk curving up the corners of his mouth. "Yes, I liked it a lot…and if I'm not careful, I could find myself easily addicted to it, too." Chuckling softly, he brushed the bangs from Jou's eyes and tenderly ran a finger down his cheek, his other hand lazily tickling and stroking along the blond's length, reawakening his arousal.

Jou shifted slightly, and when he did, he groaned softly as he felt the brunet's erection against his side. "God," he breathed as he let his hand slip between their bodies and he lightly palmed the hardened flesh. Meeting Seto's eyes, he asked quietly, "Do you want me to…you know…return the favour?"

The brunet's eyes sparkled and his expression morphed into a full-blown grin. "Nuh-uh," he replied with a small shake of his head. Bending lower to whisper hotly in Jou's ear, he purred, "There's something else I'd like instead…but only if you're still willing to give it to me." He smiled against the blond's cheek when he heard the sharp intake of breath and felt Jou harden completely in his hand. Seto felt the blond nod, and upon hearing the barely audible 'yes', he changed his position, settling himself more on top of Jou's body as he nuded the blond's thighs further apart with his knee.

Seto locked gazes with Jou, he could see the slight nervousness in his eyes. Giving him a tender smile, he reached for one of the blond's hands and pulled him into a semi-sitting position. Twining his fingers with the smaller teen's, he poured a considerable amount of the lotion into Jou's palm. Leaning forward slightly, he gave the blond a soft, lingering kiss and in a sultry whisper said, "Help me prepare." Slowly, he brought their conjoined hands to his shaft, and together they slicked the brunet's cock. After a moment, Seto withdrew his hand, leaving Jou free to tease and explore the smooth skin. When the blond wrapped his fingers around his length and began to pump his fist in long, firm strokes, Seto moaned softly, his need pulsing achingly through his body when he gazed into the hungry, amber eyes, so focused on their task. He permitted Jou to torment him for a few moments more, and then gently caught the questing fingers, prising them from his cock and languidly suckling each digit before releasing his hold. Lovingly, he pressed his weight against the other, easing the blond back down onto the pillow and then trailing a line of butterfly kisses along his jaw line and down his throat.

Seto skated a slightly trembling hand along Jou's thigh, pushing it a little further to the side as he lined up the tip of his cock and began to carefully work himself into the tight, searing heat of the other. He paused when the blond gasped harshly and bit his lip against his pained whimper, but after a moment, Seto felt him relax against him, and he continued. Once he was fully seated, he groaned softly and lightly stroked his fingers along a sweat-dampened cheek. "Are you alright?" he asked lowly.

Jou swallowed thickly and nodded silently as he turned his head to kiss the tip of one questing digit. "Hurts a bit, but the worst is over, ne?"

The brunet chuckled softly as he cupped the blond's cheek, and then let his finger trace down Jou's neck to teasingly circle a nipple. "Well, let's see if we can't make you feel something else instead." Gently, he eased himself nearly all the way out, and then slid easily back inside, a contented purr rumbling in his throat at the pleasurable sensations rippling through his body, and heightened when he heard the erotic cry of the other. He soon found his rhythm, and began to thrust into his lover with
long, deep, penetrating strokes, his mouth lavishing sensual kisses on every inch of bare skin it could reach.

Jou mewled softly as he twined his arms around the brunet and lightly skimmed his fingers along his neck and shoulder blades. As Seto had promised, the pain had quickly abated, and he basked in the feeling of fullness he was experiencing – both physical and emotional. He moaned licentiously, his sounds quickly changing to a keening whine when the brunet altered his position and nudged his sweet spot. Arching his body in delight, he wrapped his legs around Seto's waist and rasped a hungry, sultry, "More!"

A tantalizing shudder wracked the brunet's frame at the other's needy plea, and as his kisses became harder and more aggressive, so too did his movements. Feeling his own release nearing, he snaked a hand between their bodies and began to pump Jou's shaft in time with his hips, every stroke adding to his sense of euphoria. Finally, with a feral growl of the blond's name, he drove in hard and deep, grinding lightly against the other as he filled him with pulse after pulse of his seed, his hand furiously stroking Jou's cock as his tongue ruthlessly claimed the blond's mouth.

When he felt the hot warmth of Seto's release spreading through him, Jou immediately tensed, moaning loudly as he, too, reached his climax, his vision going white, his come splashing against the brunet's body and running in hot, creamy rivulets down his fist.

Seto was the first to recover. Carefully easing out of the blond's still pulsing passage, he turned on his side and lay beside his lover. Grimacing slightly, he wiped his hand on his hip, tenderly brushing a stray lock of hair from Jou's eyes with the other. "How do you feel?" he asked softly as he placed a gentle kiss on the other's cheek.

"Hm…a little sore and very sticky, but otherwise, amazing," Jou smiled as he gazed adoringly into the face beside him. "That was incredible."

"Yes, you were," Seto murmured, his eyes slightly heavy as he smiled at the blond. "Thank you for that gift…I'll always cherish it." Seeing the confused look on the other's face, he chuckled breathlessly and elaborated, "I'm the only one who can ever have your first time, ne?"

Jou pinked slightly, and nodded, his grin widening. His flush deepening, he glanced thoughtfully at the brunet as if contemplating something, and then, before he could stop himself, he blurted out, "Was I at least the best you've had?"

Seto was momentarily taken aback, and then he laughed warmly as he drew the blond into his arms. "Yes. And not only that, but you're the first one that's ever meant anything more to me than just sex." Kissing his forehead, he said, "Before you ask, less than five, and never a 'repeat'." He chuckled softly as he watched Jou's eyes widen as he tried to find a way to splutter out his indignation at the accusation. "You're not fooling me…I know it was going to be your next question."

"Hn." The tiniest hint of a pout crept across Jounouchi's face. "I suppose you think you're so fucking smart, ne?"

"Actually…yes," he replied smugly before he returned to nuzzling against the blond's cheek, tracing across his features with the tip of his nose. "Come on; let's get showered and then we can sleep."

Jou nodded, but didn't move. He glanced over at the brunet and worried his lip for a moment. "Seto?"

"Hm?" The brunet sat up on the edge of the bed and peered at the other from over his shoulder.
"I wish we didn't have to leave tomorrow. I like it here, with you."

"I like it here, too. But, I promise we'll come back and stay longer the next time. Besides, we don't have to leave until late afternoon, so we'll have most of the day…"

"Can we still take that walk before we leave?"

"Certainly." Seto stood, and then offered the blond his hand.

"And can we maybe get some more of that dessert to take home with us?"

The brunet chuckled as he pulled Jou to his feet and wrapped his arms around him. "I think we might be able to arrange that."

A brilliant smile lit up the blond's face and he pressed a kiss of thanks against the taller teen's lips. "You make me feel like I'm the luckiest guy around."

Seto gave him an equally dazzling grin in return. "I'm afraid I have to disagree – I'm the lucky one for having been given the opportunity to see just how much I had been missing from my life."

Beaming proudly through the joyful tears shining in his eyes, Jounouchi kissed him again. "Happy anniversary, Seto. I love you."

"Happy anniversary, Jou. I love you, too." He let the blond slip from his embrace, and as he watched the smaller teen pad toward the bathroom to start their shower, he smiled softly to himself.

The words still sounded strange coming from him, but could deal with it. In fact, he found he liked it.

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