

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

VILLAINS

Andrea Speed

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

VILLAINS

By Andrea Speed

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

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Photo Description

Two manga-style young men on the verge of a kiss. One has white hair, while the other has his face partially hidden by a hood, although his eyes seem to have a reddish tint.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I know that everyone believes that I'm the monster, and that He keeps me on a leash. I don't mind; it's funny how everyone is deceived by our act and while they look at me with fear and loathing, His secret is safe. No one is going to know that behind his innocent look and smile there is a soulless and sadistic man. I love Him the way He is and even if He isn't capable of love, I know that I'm the most valuable person in his life. He trusts me, He cares about me and He wants to be with me. And it's enough.

Sometimes, I wonder—am I monster too?

***Please no: BDSM*

Sincerely,

Anna

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, urban fantasy

Tags: superhero, supervillains, genetic engineering, mad scientist, crime boss, action/adventure, alternate universe

Content Warnings: violence, cursing, bombing

Word Count: 7,315

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The funny thing to Kaede was how accustomed you could get to hate. In fact, now he found it kind of amusing.

Not the spitting or the thrown objects, but the sneers and evil looks, the muttered curses behind his back. Then one day, he wasn't sure when, they made him smile and chuckle. Why that turn happened he had no idea. You'd think all this negative energy would have beaten him down, as it had threatened to when he was a teenager, but now he almost welcomed it. As Kaede Hayashi, he was never going to get any other reaction anyways. Might as well see the comical side of it.

His first few days in Apex, he successfully hid in the shadows, as Ash had advised. Ash liked to lurk in the darkness, and people often didn't know he was there, even though he was within arm's reach of them. Kaede used to tease him about it, suggest that maybe there was something supernatural in his abilities, but they both knew there wasn't. They were an unusual pair, as Kaede was all nature, and Ash was all nurture (sort of). Maybe that's why they were so perfect together.

Kaede was enjoying the view of the city from the roof. Kamani Towers was the tallest building in Apex, and Kaede owned the entire penthouse level, as Kamani Corp was one of his father's secret holdings. Considering dear old dad was dead, they were his, but he found it hard to think that way. After all, how many times had his father faked his death? Three times? Four? Something like that. And they were all totally believable, until he suddenly sprung up again, working his technical magic. That was one of the perks of being a brilliant but completely insane scientist. Or, as the tabloids called him, Doctor Terror. Create one designer, flesh-eating microbe, and no one ever forgave you.

The city looked like stars at his feet, the beautiful lights of so many dying dreams only now reaching Earth. He was so far above the streets, the noise of cars barely registered.

Kaede was aware he was no longer alone a few seconds before he bothered to speak. "Social call?" he asked, not bothering to turn and look.

The self-styled “superhero” who called himself Dark Justice made a noise somewhere between a scoff and a grunt. “I bet you want a thank you, don’t you, Hayashi? I bet you think you’re being a good guy.” He used a voice modulator to give him a deep, threatening voice, and it was all Kaede could do not to laugh. Did he really think that and the dark cowl covering everything except his eyes and mouth was enough to disguise the fact that he was actually Anthony Moreau, wealthy industrialist with a shit ton of daddy issues? Who else could have afforded so much custom molded body armor and experimental tech? Dark Justice could literally have been no one else in all of Apex, and yet the press treated him like his identity was such a big mystery. Then again, he did own the newspapers, didn’t he? And the biggest TV station in the area. Being obscenely wealthy had its privileges.

Dark Justice appeared in front of him, looking almost twice as wide as the average person in his black body armor suit, and he towered a foot over Kaede, although he was sure Moreau’s boots had subtle lifts in them. “I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, DJ.”

From the way his steel-gray eyes moved beneath the cowl, Kaede knew he’d annoyed him. He really didn’t like to be called DJ. “Right. Four high-ranking members of the criminal underworld have died violently since you came to Apex, and you have nothing to do with any of them.”

“Why would I? Sounds like it’s doing you a favor, and I’d never do that.”

Moreau continued glaring at him from beneath his silly little mask, probably trying to intimidate him, but he was about as intimidating as a marshmallow Peep. “What are you doing up here, Hayashi? Without your watcher.”

Kaede smirked at the would-be hero. He thought he knew, but he only knew what Kaede and Ash wanted known. The truth was theirs alone. “What am I, a child?”

Moreau’s grim mouth turned down into a heavy, manly frown. “You’re a rabid dog. I know you’re not Terror’s son. You’re his clone.”

Kaede snorted and shook his head. “Humans can’t be cloned.”

“Humans can’t make gene-specific, flesh-eating bacteria either, but somehow your so-called father did and took out half of Newport.” Moreau grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him violently close, so Kaede’s chest was pressing up against Moreau’s body armor. Kaede wondered if he was going to kiss him, and then wondered what Moreau would do if Kaede kissed him. Moreau had the whole industrialist, ladies’ man thing going

on, the kind that was so goddamn overblown that, combined with his overdone machismo, it screamed "closet case". "I don't know what game you're playing, Hayashi, but I'm watching you. I'm going to make you regret ever setting foot in my city."

"Have you considered breath mints?" Kaede wondered aloud. Although really, his breath could have been worse. Mainly it just smelled like he was slamming kale smoothies and protein bars all evening (which he might have been).

Like Kaede knew he would, Moreau shoved him back violently in disgust, making him stumble, but Kaede kept on his feet. "If I were you, I'd leave now while you still can."

There was a droning noise in the background, getting louder, and Kaede knew it was the modified helicopter that Dark Justice occasionally used. It didn't land, it just swooped in close to the roof, and Moreau used a modified grappling hook to attach a line to the open door before the chopper flew away, taking DJ with it.

Seriously, you needed a pilot's license to fly a helicopter, and you needed all kinds of permits to fly in the city, keep it, and land it. Why hadn't a single blogger figured out his secret identity? It was crazy. Maybe his father/progenitor dumped IQ blunters in the water. Or maybe Moreau did. Keeping people stupid did seem to behoove superheroes and politicians alike.

"If you gave the signal, I would have ended him," a familiar voice said.

Kaede smiled, and turned to face Ash. If Moreau thought he disappeared in shadows, he was a rank amateur compared to Ash, who seemed to melt into and out of darkness as if he dissolved into it. In fact, Ash had appeared on the roof as soon as Moreau had, but Moreau had never noticed him. All Kaede would have had to do was give him a hand signal or say his name, and Moreau probably would have been dead before he even registered that Kaede's "minder" was looking on.

Ash pulled back the hood of his black jacket, revealing his shocking white hair. Sometimes he'd dye it for camouflage purposes, but it never stayed for long. It was as if his hair rejected the chemicals, and it was possible that's exactly what occurred. Ash was human, or at least seemed that way, but his twisted past obscured much about him. Which was surely by design. "Why would I want him dead?" Kaede asked. "He's hilarious. Can you believe he thinks I don't know who he really is? Or that I'd be afraid of him? He's a clown who doesn't realize he's a clown."

Ash's expression was impassive, but then again it usually was. By nature he wasn't ever overly expressive or effusive. His hazel eyes, which occasionally took on an almost reddish-brown tint in the right light, remained clear and, as always, intense. "He's still a pest. I don't see how you can find all of this funny."

"Because it is. I don't care about any of it," he said, and suddenly realized that was true. He didn't care about the so-called superheroes or tabloids or vicious rumors about him, or the truth about his "father" (or whatever he actually was). "The only thing I care about is you." It was corny, yes, but that didn't make it any less true.

He pulled Ash in for a kiss, and Kaede felt his warm arms encircle him. It was like coming home.

Maybe Ash was why nothing else mattered, and everything seemed ridiculous. They hadn't spent a day apart since they'd first met four years ago, and Kaede only realized he'd been missing something vital in himself when he understood that Ash was his other half. Together, they were both whole. He'd never actually bought into love as even a concept before Ash, but now he didn't see how he could live without it. Or without him.

After a few moments, Ash broke away from the kiss and buried his face in Kaede's hair, which he loved to do. Once, in a rare burst of poetry, Ash told him his hair always smelled like rain. Despite his naturally taciturn nature, Ash always held him and kissed him like he was holding on to him for dear life, and in bed snuggled up against him like he was afraid to let him go. Kaede never minded at all. "All is in readiness," Ash whispered in his ear. Their bodies fit together automatically; Kaede felt himself melding to him, drinking in his warmth and strength. On the surface, Ash was always placid, but he felt as taut as a coiled spring. He was a sleeping tiger.

Kaede stroked his hair, which felt silkier than the average person's. Just another mystery. "I thought it would be," he replied. "You never disappoint me."

Ever since they met, Ash had been the North Star of his life. Kaede couldn't see that ever changing.

To the outside world, Ash was Ashburn Croft, a professional "minder" hired by his father's estate to look after his affairs. There was an unspoken assumption that he also kept a leash on Doctor Terror's quiet but inherently

suspect “son”, Kaede, as Kaede was assumed to be as potentially lethal as his infamous father. Kaede cooked up a fake identity that would hold up to intense scrutiny, casting Ash as a Londoner who went to school in France and university in America, so he had an unusual, cosmopolitan background. And he was an orphan, of course, with no living family.

The truth was much more tragic.

There was a small island in the Indian Ocean named Devishna that wasn't on most maps, or Google Earth, or anywhere of note. Just five and a half miles across, it was entirely privately owned by a company called Global Science Dynamics Limited. Which, of course, meant it was a shell corporation for his father, Doctor Goro Hayashi (a/k/a Doctor Terror). There, he experimented on genes, and it was rumored he started work on the flesh-eating bacteria there, but it was never proven. There were also rumors he had somehow acquired alien DNA, but again, never proven. (When his father abandoned a place, he adopted a scorched earth policy. Literally. The only thing on Devishna now was a four mile wide crater full of ash.)

What was known was his father bought children, mainly street urchins from India, Indonesia, and former Eastern European countries, where life could be very cheap indeed. He used them as lab rats for his experiments in altering DNA in living subjects. He wasn't completely heartless. Those that lived and seemed otherwise healthy were sent to a religious order in Indonesia to be raised by the brothers and sisters there.

The religious order was an apocalypse cult, of course, awaiting the day the world would end, and training the children to live up to their new genetic potential as living weapons. This order, known as Tabaah Karna (Karna for short), was considered a terrorist organization by many governments in spite of their intense secrecy, and one night there was a massive, violent raid on the compound. The fight was ugly and became an international incident, with an official death toll of twenty-two, and many children were supposedly smuggled out of the compound before the raid. The unofficial, true story had a death toll of thirty-three, with most of the raiders killed or seriously injured by the children they were supposedly rescuing. Some of the children were killed, but most scattered to the four winds. His father hired people to find them, although that proved to be a losing proposition, as the children didn't really have proper names, just the designations given to them by their head trainer, and were taught to disappear. Still, one investigator got lucky and found a boy nicknamed Ash in Laos, where a Caucasian with honey-colored eyes and bone-white hair

couldn't help but stick out. His father arranged for a close associate and his wife to take the boy in, but Ash was fourteen at the time, and the habits he'd learned with Karna were ingrained. It was why he was so taciturn, why expressing emotions of any kind was hard for him. In Karna, emotional displays were strongly discouraged, and silence was valued above everything but discipline. Also, he was indeed a human weapon, and his father had to spend a lot of capital to make sure no one ever picked up on that.

Kaede didn't meet Ash until they were both nineteen, when his father, concerned for Kaede's safety at college, sent Ash to be his bodyguard. (His father's many enemies would have loved to have gotten at Doctor Terror through his son. Kaede always knew there was a target on his head, which was part of the joy of being the son of a supervillain. That and the hatred and revulsion he sparked in people who didn't know him at all.) While it wasn't exactly love at first sight, he was intrigued with the quiet, odd-looking boy right away, and soon they became inseparable in a way his father never could have foreseen. They'd been together ever since.

Ash wasn't like normal people. He was human *ne plus ultra*, the best genetic engineering technology could buy. For instance, his muscles were twice as dense as a normal human's, and his lungs and bloodstream processed oxygen more efficiently. He could have shattered every athletic record known to man, but that would draw attention to him, and that's what couldn't happen. He wasn't some bulky 'roid monster; he looked quite willowy in fact. So slender, you'd think there was no way in hell he could bench press over seven hundred pounds, or palm strike his way through a cement wall, or best adult Marines in hand-to-hand combat when he was thirteen years old, but he was able to do all of those things. His fine-boned features and large eyes made him look pretty and almost delicate, and certainly on the good side of harmless, but that just showed how much thought the engineers put into their work. After all, a human weapon that looked like one had limited usefulness. One who looked like the dreamy junior captain of the swim team could go absolutely anywhere.

Sometimes, when Ash was asleep, Kaede would study him. His beautiful body looked normal in every way, from the sinuous curve of his spine to the firmness of his chest. It looked like he had no body hair at all, but he did. It was so pale you could feel it more than see it, not so much white as almost translucent. Kaede had asked him about the whiteness of his hair, but Ash had no idea why his hair was this color, any more than he knew why his trainer in Karna had dubbed him Ash. From the few files he'd been able to recover about

his father's activities on Devishna, there were mentions of unexpected side effects and unavoidable consequences, and Kaede had decided that's what Ash's hair color and eyes were: a side effect of what was done to him. Kaede hated the thought that anything was done to him, especially by his own goddamn father. But the past was gone, and all they could concentrate on now was the present and the future.

Kaede very rarely saw his father when he was a child. He was mainly raised by a series of nannies and minders in many different places (and under many different names) across the world. It was the problem of being the son (or clone) of a famous supervillain. But Kaede had come to realize his distant, almost mythical father was a selfish monster who forgot he had a son most of the time. Still, there had to be some good to extract from his madness. Ash was probably the best thing that ever came out of it, although he'd be damned if he ever shared that with the rest of the world.

Since it was a busy day with a lot of important work ahead, they showered together, as was their custom. The shower in this suite was so large they could have fit a football team in with them, and still had room for a couple of referees. Kaede and Ash joked about it a bit. Father's "safe houses" (or suite, in this case) were always rather grandiose, for no reason. From what Kaede had been able to piece together about his father, he'd been alone most of his life, mainly surrounded by employees and weirdly groupie-like hangers on, most of which were junior scientists who thought he was god. He wasn't. Doctor Terror was just an obsessive scientist who alienated a lot of people, shot himself up with an experimental serum he created that was supposed to boost intelligence, and succeeded. But while Terror increased his own intelligence fourfold, he also made himself more than a little insane. Or, as he wrote in one of his journals, "madness is a slight drawback".

They made breakfast in companionable silence (silence was Ash's default state), and shared the newspaper while they ate. It was good to keep an eye on what the local press would or wouldn't say about the local gangland killings and about Dark Justice, as well as any notices about Kaede. The paper had been underplaying the gangland slayings, reporting them as homicides without launching into too many details. Kaede wasn't sure if they were withholding details because the police asked them, or because Moreau told them. He'd probably never know which.

Once they had loaded the breakfast dishes in the machine, they did a final check on the equipment they'd need for the plan, which was probably a

needless redundancy. But with a plan that had so many moving parts, it never hurt to be absolutely certain.

Then Kaede donned his disguise and uniform. Along with being a scientist, dear old dad was an inventor, inventing thousands of technologically advanced items in his mania. One of those things was a device that worked with a 3-D printer, creating a perfect, skin-tight mask that could transform your face seamlessly. You had to provide the hair if you wanted to change that, but his father had a collection of many realistic wigs. Why, he didn't know, but it didn't matter, and to be completely honest he didn't even want to think about it.

Kaede transformed himself into an older Caucasian man, wearing a public works outfit. If Moreau was having the building surveilled, they'd pay no attention to him, especially since Ash was heading out first, undisguised. Ash never had any problems shaking tails, so he liked being used as bait.

Kaede then went to the Lincoln Avenue Apartments, which was almost smack dab in the center of downtown. He used a thermal scanner to get an exact number of people in the apartments, and went to work.

He went to the landlord, and informed him there was a gas leak, and they needed to evacuate people and pets from the building right away. Kaede had perfect fake credentials ready, in case the man ever asked for them, but he never did. He must have looked convincing enough, or used the correct words to scare him, or both. Between them, and a guy who worked for the landlord, they were able to cover all the floors in no time. Once the building was evacuated, he used his thermal scanner to confirm it, then went to the second floor to plant the bomb.

He'd studied the structural integrity of the building, and computer modeled it just in case. In the second-floor elevator shaft, this type of bomb would create a flashy explosion and send lots of debris all over, which was exactly what he wanted. He needed chaos, but he saw no reason to kill any of these people. Their only crime was living downtown.

Kaede left through a rear exit, and shed his disguise along the way, dumping the face mask and hair in one garbage can, and taking off the coverall and throwing it in a dumpster behind a fast food place. Underneath he wore dress pants and a T-shirt. He stopped in a clothing store downtown to buy a suitable button-down shirt, jacket, and shoes. He left his public works hiking boots in an alley, to be found by some lucky homeless guy.

Kaede had timed it all perfectly, as the bomb went off a minute after he found the used car Ash had bought and left in a pay parking lot the day before.

Driving away, he could see the large plume of black smoke still unfurling in his rearview mirror.

Superheroes being unbelievable fame whores, in spite of “secret identities”, he knew Dark Justice would be there, and while there was no one to rescue from the apartments, there would be several car crashes and other extraneous damage, including a fire. Moreau would be forced to help, freeing him and Ash from his scrutiny for several hours. He'd probably want to pin it on him, but he couldn't, because Kaede made an exact replica of a bomb used by the Lewis gang when they used to blow up safes and bank vaults. Since the Lewis gang was all in jail, DJ would probably assume Kaede had done it to taunt him. He would be correct, but the poor, dumb bastard could never prove it, and the cops would be left chasing their own tail.

Kaede drove out towards the waterfront, and left the car abandoned behind a run-down old bar known for biker gangs and aggravated assaults. He had no doubt it would be stolen within twenty minutes.

In theory, it was a short but dangerous walk to an abandoned cannery near Pier 31, but despite his youthful, somewhat-fey appearance, it wasn't dangerous for Kaede. He wasn't Doctor Terror, he hadn't injected some hyper-neuronal stimulant into his gray matter, and he wasn't even in the same galaxy as Ash, but he was far from helpless. You couldn't be the child of a supervillain without picking up a few things.

Although he arrived on time, Snow's gang was already in the warehouse, and he was frisked with needless roughness by two of his no-necked goons, who glared at him like a couple of hicks from the trailer park suddenly let loose in the big city. “I don't like guns,” he told them, and their puzzled, disgusted expressions were almost quaint.

He was cleared to enter the warehouse, where Cyrus Snow, the current underworld kingpin, sat at a metal table with four of his most thickly muscled men. There was a single open chair at the opposite end, where, coincidentally, a bright lamp was aimed like a spotlight. So much for being a welcomed guest.

As soon as Kaede took the seat, Snow sat forward, and asked, “Should I thank you for wiping out all my competition?”

Kaede scoffed and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. The packaging was all in Japanese, but if you caught a whiff of them, you'd smell clove and a hint of almond. They weren't tobacco cigarettes, as he'd never understood how anyone could smoke them. They tasted terrible. “First Dark Justice assumes that, and now you. I don't suppose you and he are close.”

That provoked a dark, gravelly chuckle from Snow. He had a long, thin, knife blade of a face, which his dark, receding hairline just emphasized, and dead shark eyes spaced a bit too widely on either side of a slender nose. He had no idea why, but Kaede had yet to encounter an attractive crime boss. It was the rare job that didn't welcome the pretty.

The lights illuminated the table and a few inches of space beyond it, but no more, casting the rest of the cannery in shadow. Still, Kaede was aware of shapes moving in the dark, shifting restlessly from foot to foot, moving heavy guns from one shoulder to another. Snow had probably assumed he was coming to kill him, even though Snow had arranged the meeting. How many men were here, including the ones outside? At least a dozen, all armed with the biggest weapons they could carry.

Not nearly enough.

"Hardly," Snow said. He clasped his hands together on the table, and Kaede noticed he had a pinkie ring the size of a cherry tomato. Super tacky, and made worse by the fact that the garish gemstones in it were probably real, and he probably thought it was cool. "But there have been a lot of deaths since you came to town."

"Do I look that dangerous to you?" he replied, fishing his lighter out of his pocket. There was derisive sniggering from the dark, confirming locations of gunmen, and Snow smirked at him.

"Nah, can't say you do. But you mad scientist types rarely look that bad."

"Who said I was a mad scientist? That's my father, not me. Speaking of which, I don't suppose there's any chance you'd give me back the sonic blaster, is there?"

"The what?"

Kaede dug a cigarette out of the pack, and placed it between his lips, taking his time to light it before responding. "Come now. The sonic blaster, stolen from a high security vault by the Resalos, but intercepted by you in transit. I dare say neither of you knew exactly what you had, but since it's my father's invention, it's mine now. Return it and I leave."

Now Snow laughed, a genuine gut buster of a chortle. He slapped the table before he calmed down. "You got stones, Hayashi, I'll give you that. Comin' here, all by yourself, unarmed, and demanding I give you something. You got guts."

Kaede inhaled deeply, and let out a large plume of smoke. It had an aftertaste like spice cake. It was very pleasant. "Who said I came here alone?"

Snow shook his head. "Got lookouts on the roof. They saw you walkin' in. Really ain't that smart to walk this area alone. Or to come in here alone."

"Are you insinuating something?" There were almost always lookouts or snipers on the roof. Crime bosses could be so boringly predictable.

Snow smiled, but the grin was sharp and oily. "Your father was a big brain, and odds are you are, too. Even if you ain't, you got access to his stuff, right? I'm thinkin' this could be the start of a beautiful friendship."

Kaede exhaled another plume of smoke. It dissipated slowly in the light, a gray-white fog moving across the table. "Whether I like it or not?"

The left corner of Snow's mouth hitched up even higher, showing one of his eyeteeth. "Now yer gettin' it. Just think of what we could accomplish. We could get rid of that fuckhole Justice once and for all."

Now it was Kaede's turn to chuckle as he tapped ash on the cement floor. "You aim very low, don't you?"

Snow's grin faltered. "What?"

"How much do you know about my father? I'll assume you know what everyone else knows. Which is fine, because the authorities would rather downplay all the significant strides forward he made. He was the pre-eminent genetic engineer of our time. Not just in creating flesh-eating bacteria that will only activate in people with certain genes, but in various other substances as well. In fact, he created special toxins, and also created cures to them, which he tested on himself. After rigorous, illegal human trials, of course. The thing about these cures is they were genetic. He inserted genes in his own DNA that would essentially deactivate all these designer toxins he created, so they could never be used against him. He inoculated me as well." The thug on his immediate right started to cough, followed by the thug on his left. Kaede pulled in and then exhaled another large plume of smoke. "In essence, I can breathe poison, and it has no effect on me at all. How about you, Mr. Snow?"

Snow's blue eyes bugged out as Kaede's words sunk in, so much so that Kaede could count the broken capillaries that decorated his whites like discarded ribbons. All the other gun thugs at the table were coughing, except the two closest to Kaede, who had slumped to the floor, no longer coughing. Or moving. Their lips were a peculiar shade of blue.

Snow reached under his jacket, obviously going for his gun, so Kaede threw the table on its end, propping it up as bullets slammed into the scarred metal. He threw his cigarette away and lit the whole pack on fire before tossing it towards the center of the room. The faster the smoke filled the place, the better. Kaede was proud, because while the toxin was his dad's idea, putting it in smokable form, in a Japanese clove cigarette pack, was all his. He saw movement from the corner of his eye, pulled a coin out of his pocket, and carefully threw it at the shadowy target, never touching its edge.

They weren't really coins. They looked like silver dollars, and were designed to bring no attention to themselves, but they were the secret, Doctor Terror-designed update to throwing stars. They had an edge so lethally sharp Kaede had to keep them in a special "coin purse", designed to keep them from falling through, and were made of an unusual material more slippery than Teflon. It didn't just avoid sticking to things, but aggressively pushed itself away from anything trying to adhere to it. With just a tiny amount of force, it cut through everything: muscle, bones, fat, tendons. He'd had more than a few embed themselves in walls and floors when they finally lost their momentum bouncing around in lead shielding or titanium. And they were so sharp, most people didn't realize they'd been lethally stabbed by the thing pinballing around their system until they noticed all the blood pouring out of them. Kaede couldn't see where he'd hit his target, but he heard the clatter of his gun on the floor as he went down.

Kaede didn't like guns. But he really liked knives.

There was more coughing and more bullets, but now a new noise entered the fray. A sound of dull thuds and the sharp crack of bones, and Kaede knew Ash had arrived right on time.

Ash had actually come here well ahead of everyone else, in a display of his infinite discipline and patience. He waited and scoped out the cannery, counting each and every one of the thugs who arrived, and noting their positions. As soon as the ones on the roof reported Kaede's arrival, Ash would have gone up there and killed them. The ones on high ground you had to take care of first. Next he would have started on the thugs at ground level, as that was the most logical secondary step. Then he'd simply wait for Kaede to make his move, and he'd finish off the stragglers. Ash was wearing a syntech suit, also designed by his father. It was made of a substance five hundred times better than Kevlar at stopping bullets, a synthetic spider silk that was lightweight, but so powerful it could stop a close range shot from a Desert Eagle. Ash, as a Hayashi engineered human, was also immune to the toxins in the cigarettes.

Kaede peeked around the table to see the still living thugs attempt to attack Ash en masse. A good plan really, all they could do since bullets didn't seem to work, but doomed to failure. Ash delivered a palm strike to the throat of one thug, crushing his larynx, while delivering a full-force kick to the chest of another man, collapsing his sternum. One goon grabbed Ash from behind, only to get a sharp elbow to the face that shattered his nose (and possibly his skull—it wasn't only blood gushing from his nose as he fell). Ash then headbutted another man, who collapsed to the ground seizing, and while the remaining man leveled his Uzi point-blank at Ash's chest, Ash grabbed his arm snake quick, and Kaede could hear his bones snap like a dead tree branch as Ash twisted his arm until he dropped the gun, screaming. Ash put him out of his misery with a well-placed kick that most likely pulped his solar plexus on contact. Ash didn't always fight at full strength, because, as he said, "it was too damn easy", but on missions like this, the sooner they were done, the better.

Snow attempted to crawl away, and Kaede saw him. He got up and walked over to him, grabbing the gun of one of his fallen men on the way. By the time he reached Snow, it was easy to kick him over on his back. Although Snow was still alive, his lips were becoming cyanotic, and his eyes were bulging from their sockets due to oxygen deprivation, not shock. "Why?" he wheezed, barely able to manage it.

"I don't like people who steal from me," Kaede informed him. Although he aimed the gun down at Snow's face, he didn't pull the trigger. He just had to wait a few seconds for the poison to finish its job.

With all thugs dead, Kaede discarded the gun and pulled out his thermal scanner to confirm there were no living surprises awaiting them. He then started scanning for the special isotope his father tagged his inventions with, so he could keep track of them no matter where they ended up. Ash came and stood beside him. The syntech suit looked like black ninja gear, as it was surprisingly non-bulky, and had a cowl that covered his forehead, nose, and mouth, leaving only his eyes exposed. And even then, a clear syntech faceplate covered his eyes, which was a good thing, as the plate was splattered with blood. "You okay?" Kaede asked.

"You know that's a stupid question," Ash replied.

Kaede smiled. "I know. But I still have to ask." He held up the scanner towards him, so Ash could see the readout. "It shows the blaster as being outside, behind the cannery."

Ash only needed a second to think. "There's a large van parked out back."

“How about that. They haven’t even unpacked it yet.” He pocketed the scanner, and while Ash went ahead, Kaede stamped out the still-smoldering cigarette pack, and picked it up with a plastic bag he also slipped into his pocket. He wanted to leave no hints for the cops. The toxin would totally dissipate within twenty minutes, without leaving a trace of itself. The coroner might judge them all dead from suffocation, and they’d never figure out exactly how it was done. Kaede knew it shouldn’t please him to imagine how confused they’d be, but it did.

By the time he got outside, Ash had the heavy titanium case of the sonic blaster slung over his shoulder, like an unwieldy and overly large backpack. It probably weighed about two hundred pounds, but that was child’s play to Ash. The sonic blaster was exactly what it sounded like. A gun that shot concentrated noise at various frequencies. The lower settings would stun a person and render them unconscious. The higher frequencies would blow out ear drums like cheap speakers, pulverize fine bones, and kill people in a very messy way. The military was working on such a weapon, but most were only capable of stunning people, and were generally mounted on tanks or vehicles of similar size. The sonic blaster was shoulder mounted and technologically years ahead of what any military had.

They briefly discussed burning the cannery down, but Kaede didn’t want to. He wanted Moreau and the cops to be taunted and flummoxed by a crime scene they would never understand, and could never pin on him. Kaede then followed Ash to the car he had stolen earlier, and they returned home, although Kaede slapped on a hasty disguise (of course Ash had one waiting for him), and walked the last two blocks home. Ash ditched the car, and returned with the sonic blaster case wrapped up like a birthday present. You couldn’t say they didn’t have a sense of whimsy.

As soon as Kaede stowed the blaster away in his secret safe, he joined Ash on the couch. The big-screen TV was tuned to the news, which was still reporting on the explosion, meaning no one had found all the bodies at the cannery yet. Considering how police-adverse the waterfront was, people might not actually call the cops for days. That would make the crime scene all the more useless.

Kaede nestled against Ash, who put an arm around his shoulder, hugging him close. He’d peeled off the syntech suit, and was wearing nothing but boxer briefs. The suit was so skin tight, he usually couldn’t wear anything else under it.

Kaede stroked one of Ash's pale, muscular thighs. It felt like he had steel cables under his skin. Kaede wondered, not for the first time, if getting married would blow the whole minder cover story. In a way, he felt like they were already married, they just hadn't bothered to make it official. Sometimes he felt so much love for Ash he thought his heart might burst.

Ash stroked the back of his neck idly. "You're now the crime boss of Apex, you know."

Kaede nuzzled his face into the side of Ash's neck. He had a slow, steady heartbeat at all times. "No I'm not. I don't want the job. Let there be a power vacuum, because the resulting chaos will keep Dark Justice too busy to bug us. Besides, it's too much work, and I'd rather spend the time with you." He lifted his head and kissed Ash softly on the mouth. Ash responded in kind, the rub of his stubble burning Kaede's face.

To be honest, Kaede didn't really know if Ash was even capable of love. But Ash trusted him, needed him, and he neither trusted nor expressed desire easily. In fact, Ash had once told him he was the first man he ever trusted at all. It didn't come naturally to him. Kaede loved him so much that this was good enough. He couldn't imagine a life without Ash.

Ash pressed him down into the sofa as they kissed, Kaede wrapping his legs around him and urging him on. But Ash broke away long enough to look down at him, and trace the line of his jaw with his thumb. "What are we going to do with the sonic blaster?"

Kaede smiled up him, feeling better than he had since coming to this godforsaken city. "Whatever the fuck we want."

The End

Author Bio

Andrea Speed has always wanted to write a superhero novel, but now thinks that this is just the beginning of Kaede and Ash's exploits, as she now wants to write a supervillain novel. She's the author of the Infected series for Dreamspinner Press, the Josh of the Damned series for Riptide Publishing, and the recent Merged for Less Than Three Press, as well as a whole bunch of other things. Guys, she really likes to write.

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