



*Damn, this monkey suit is itchy. I hung back and nursed my drink, trying not to fidget. With luck, I wouldn't pick up the wrong glass or say the wrong thing before Rico could finish taking care of biz.*

*Across the room, he looked like he was born to this, smiling and making just the right kind of bow to Mr. Takahara. I could tell it was right because Takahara was smiling too, his whole face lighting up like Rico was his long-lost college buddy or something, even though I knew they'd never met before tonight. I could see Rico's lips moving and hear the smooth Japanese words coming out of his mouth over the radio link. I didn't know what he was saying, but it must have been the right thing. Takahara nodded, smiled again, and surreptitiously reached into his jacket pocket, pulling something out and handing it to Rico under cover of offering him a napkin. They made small talk for a couple more minutes and then Rico was back, motioning for me to follow him out of the room.*

*I was impatient for some action, but Rico shook his head. I admit it—I'm pretty much a one-trick pony. I hurt things, either with a gun or up-close-and-personal. Rico, he's not so good at causing pain, but he makes up for it by knowing how to do all kinds of other things. Things like speaking five languages, being able to talk his way out of fights (I don't see the fun in that, but I have to admit it's saved our skins more than once), and knowing how to patch people up when they got hurt. He even knew a little bit about magic, despite being every bit as mundane as I was. "He tell you where?" I whispered as we left the main party area and headed toward the back of the rambling old mansion.*

*Rico just nodded. I must have smirked or something, because he grinned at me and said, "Bored yet?" I just followed him, both of us taking care not to be seen. A couple of turns later, and we'd reached a locked door down a side hallway. "Keep a lookout," he told me, then took a small electronics kit from his pocket and knelt down by the door. In a few seconds the lock made a soft beep and the door clicked open. Rico slotted the chip Takahara had given him into the old-fashioned cyberterminal on the room's desk and was downloading the paydata to his commlink. All we had to do now was go back to the party, say our goodbyes, and get out before anybody was the wiser.*

*Two shadows appeared around the corner out in the hall, and the muted sound of their booted feet was joined by the clicks of automatic weapons being readied. "Incoming!" I subvocalized to Rico, drawing my own silenced pistol. I wasn't worried—after a night of feeling like the only one without a dance partner at the high school prom, I was finally getting the chance to do what I was good at.*